Sing, Pray, Heal: Neo-Kirtan and the Perceived Health Benefits of Westernized Group Chanting

by

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Abstract

"Neo-kirtan," a Westernized version of a devotional call and response singing practice, is growing in popularity outside of kirtan's original South Asian contexts. This research project aims to describe the cultural and musical components of neo-kirtan through ethnographic analysis with individuals ranging from an Australian spiritual community called Shanti Mission, American kirtan artists and Indian teachers from Peedam and Rishikesh. Further, it explores how participants relate to neo-kirtan and reasons they are drawn to it. Perceived health benefits of the practice are discussed using a five-point model of wellness (physical, emotional, cognitive, social and spiritual) with the aim to understand if and how neo-kirtan could be utilized by trained therapists in therapeutic contexts. Emotional wellness is highlighted for being most readily impacted by neo-kirtan and for acting as a tangible linking factor to the other health domains, influencing their benefit. Finally, this research illustrates the significance of contextual factors beyond the music and how components such as intention, group dynamics, training of facilitators and the use of particular mantras and other devices are all perceived to contribute to neo-kirtan's efficacy as an instrument for wellness.

This project is an extension of the conversation around the broad idea that “music is healing.” While research supports ideas that certain music participates in the healing process, not all music is always healing for all people. By examining individual experiences of neo-kirtan I identify some of the specific components that can align it with health and wellness.

Supporting audio-visual files can be found at:

https://era-av.library.ualberta.ca/media_objects/k930bx92j

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Tiffany Sparrow Brulotte. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name "Sing, Pray, Heal: Neo-Kirtan and the Perceived Health Benefits of Westernized Group Chanting," No. Pro00077048, April 3, 2018.

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The journey to complete this research has been challenging, full of steep learning curves, yet inspiring, engaging and personally transformative. I have had much support along the way and there are many individuals to whom I am extremely grateful.

My supervisor, Dr. Michael Frishkopf has been inclusive, positive and encouraging right from the onset. He has struck a fantastic balance between offering independence, encouraging me to explore my own ideas and hypotheses while also providing a wealth of information, suggestions, ideas and resources from his own diverse knowledge base and network.

My committee members have provided skilled expertise in their individual specialties. Dr. Helen Vallianatos graciously took time away from her work as Associate Dean of Students to guide my exploration of the anthropology literature, directing me to many significant and valuable pieces of literature. Dr. Neil Dalal patiently allowed my frequent questions and debates in his class (particularly as I attempt to parse out the appropriation debate) and has helped ignite my interest in academic work pertaining to modern yoga. Dr. Julia Byl has guided my developing knowledge of the ethnomusicology literature and supported an awareness of some of the interdisciplinary work that is happening in the field.

I am very grateful to Shakti Durga for her openness, welcoming my investigative fieldwork within the Shanti Mission community she has been developing. Thank you to Hanumani for offering me a place to stay in Cooranbong and also to her and Ganga Devi for providing such lovely audio-visual recordings included as part of this final work. Thank you Veena Vaani for helping to pave the path for connections at Shanti Mission, for providing additional recordings, charts, ideas and musical insights along the way, and for arranging interview and music opportunities.

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Figures

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Aim

Through ethnographic analysis, the purpose of this work is to look at "neo- kirtan[1]," a form of group chanting derived from South Asian traditions, performed in modern Westernized contexts. In so doing, the following questions have been addressed: How is neo-kirtan practiced and what are some reasons for its increased use outside of India? Are there perceived health benefits associated with this practice and if so, what are they? What factors besides the music contribute to these perceived benefits? As an accredited music therapist, I have also examined perspectives on whether neo-kirtan chanting has the potential to be utilized in therapeutic contexts.

This project is an extension of the conversation centering around the broad statement "music is healing." While several examples of how specific music participates in the healing process exist, not all music is always healing for all people. The purpose of this work then is to distill and clarify some of the ambiguity regarding music's link with the healing process by examining individual experiences of the relationship between devotional chant-based music and wellbeing in turn identifying specific components that can relate neo-kirtan with wellness.

Significance

Neo-kirtan is a relatively recent development and has yet to be thoroughly studied in ethnomusicology or any field of study. Further, this project answers the persistent call to unite the complementary fields of ethnomusicology and music therapy (Swijghuisen-Reigersberg 2017, Chiang 2008). Most modern music therapy practice continues to be based on Western classical music and could benefit from increased understanding of multicultural healing music practices that have existed for centuries (Gioia 2006). Though medical ethnomusicology is a growing component of the field, applied research really requires the expertise of professionals such as music therapists who are trained to employ music safely with vulnerable individuals in ways largely beyond the ethical scope of practice and expertise of musicologists researching health related topics. Writing from a perspective informed by both clinical music therapy and

[1] As the term kirtan is so frequently used in this thesis, I am omitting diacritical markings and italics

ethnomusicology, this research contributes to both fields and lays the foundation for future interdisciplinary participant action research exploring more in-depth therapeutic applications of kirtan. It combines my experience as a music therapy practitioner, training through the University of Alberta's respected ethnomusicology program and supervisor Dr. Michael Frishkopf's focus on music for global human development and connections with the Integrative Health Institute which supports non-pharmacological health initiatives. Finally, this research project invites innovative conversation between clinicians and multicultural practitioners, highlighting and elevating these disciplines as progenitors for the possibilities and uses of intentional music beyond entertainment.

Context

Kirtan is a call-response style of chanting and singing based primarily on Sanskrit mantras and devotional text in vernacular languages[2] found within India and various parts of South Asia (Slawek 1988, 1996, Henry 2002, Novetske 2003, Brown 2014, Widdess 2017, Beck 2018). It emerged in South Asian devotional traditions as a movement countering religious control and ritual, welcoming all castes, genders and voice types to connect with God through devotional practice (Slawek 1988). Though largely associated with Hindu and Sikh religiosity, it is also used in folk healing contexts (Cook 1997, Pakaslahti 2014) and thus parallels can be drawn to other forms of ceremonious vocalizing as well as community music therapy. Music therapy has emerged as a modern profession in which music is used safely and intentionally to address health, and bio-psycho-social-spiritual wellbeing **(**CAMT 2016, Bruscia 2014). Community music therapy further supports health through the contexts of culture and community within a social sphere (Stige 2010).

Over the last few decades, the popularity of "neo-kirtan," kirtan practiced outside of South Asian cultural, religious and diaspora contexts, has been increasing. Neo-kirtan includes a variety of Westernized adaptations, blending different languages, instrumentations and traditions from popular culture. Though it involves a wide range of individuals, most neo-kirtan participants can be considered seekers, coming to it through association with alternative spirituality such as the

[2] Particular languages are location dependent. For example, kirtan in Tamil Nadu would include some devotional lyrics in Tamil as well as Sanskrit

spiritual-but-not-religious paradigm and the modern postural yoga movement. Participants were initially rooted in 1960's counterculture, with a new resurgence of interested musicians, yoga practitioners and spiritual aspirants emerging since the mid 1990s (Vaughn 2010, DelCiampo 2012). Evidence of this rising mainstream awareness is the global upsurge of new age or "transformational" festivals featuring postural yoga and music (Lucia 2018). Prominent examples of this in the U.S. are Bhakti Fest and its sister festival Shakti Fest which both take place annually in Joshua Tree California, drawing thousands of attendees and growing in numbers each year. Other examples of North American festivals include Beloved Festival (Oregon), Omega Chant Festival (New York), Sat Nam Fest (California and Massachusetts). Festivals outside North America include the Bali Spirit Fest (Ubud, Indonesia), Udaya festival (Bulgaria), Yoga Vidya festival (Germany), Y Plus Festival (Shanghai), Sounds of Spirit festival (Switzerland) and Wanderlust Festivals, all held in unique locations around the world. These are but a few of the many spirit-based festivals featuring yoga and neo-kirtan around the globe.

Methodology and Model

This research project is rooted in qualitative methods, with data collected mainly through ethnographic fieldwork.

Participant observation was a primary method I utilized, involving engagement in daily community life, activities, kirtan sessions and workshops using kirtan. Participant observation is a "basic research technique (where a researcher) ...participates in daily routines..., develops ongoing relations with the people in it and observes ... what is going on." (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995, 1). I even participated in musical performances, which can provide contextualized, insider information about a culture (Berliner 1978, Chernoff 1979, Cooley, Meizel and Syed 2008). Participant observation involves researcher immersion and contribution to enacted culture in ways that can seem unpredictable, unstructured and spontaneous though enables absorption with less detachment, ideally leading to depth of understanding, clarity and better grasp of contextual relationships and refinement (Chernoff 1979, Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 1995, Kisliuk 1998, Fetterman 1998, Barz 2008). When practiced with well-developed observation skills, data can be gleaned from both emic (insider) and etic (outsider) perspectives.

The interview is another ethnographic tool I employed extensively, conducting twenty-six semi-formal discussions with kirtan participants. An interview is a co-creative process that can reveal the folklore of people's knowledge and experience (Jackson 1987). Since actions and words can sometimes differ, interviews are best combined with researcher knowledge and experience of the topic, providing both insight into individuals' subjective perceptions and clarification or enhancement of ideas established in participant observation (Jackson 1987, Kvale and Brinkman 2009). A ten-question survey utilizing both a Likert scale and free form answers was also administered, serving to clarify motivation and impact of kirtan, to gather a limited amount of demographic information and to gather key words. In this way, while most of the information gathered was qualitative, some quantitative data pertaining to the application and impact of neo-kirtan was also collected.

The performance of kirtan, music and related events were captured through video and audio recordings as well as through notation and musical analysis of kirtan pieces. Examining music performance through these methods can be helpful for noticing tendencies and patterns and for describing and communicating these observations (Berliner1978, Keil 1979, Friedson 1996, Kisliuk 1998). A multi-sited approach accessing technology and the Internet allowed attendance of online performances, long-distance interviews as well as observing websites, noting wording, explanations and marketing presented there. Such use of technology in fieldwork is a rapidly growing tool of ethnography (Marcus 1998, Cooley, Meizel and Syed 2008, Hannerz 2012). Supporting audio-visual files for this work can be found at https://era-av.library.ualberta.ca/media_objects/k930bx92j.

A Five Domains of Wellness model was used to inquire into the potential benefit of neo-kirtan. This model delineates impact across five distinct yet overlapping spheres including emotional, cognitive, physical, social and transpersonal-spiritual wellness (figure 1). Variations of this model exist across several fields. A similar multi-domain model of health is mentioned in both recent music therapy (CAMT 2016) and the ethnomusicology literature (Koen 2008), providing a frame upon which to focus the lens of wellness through music.

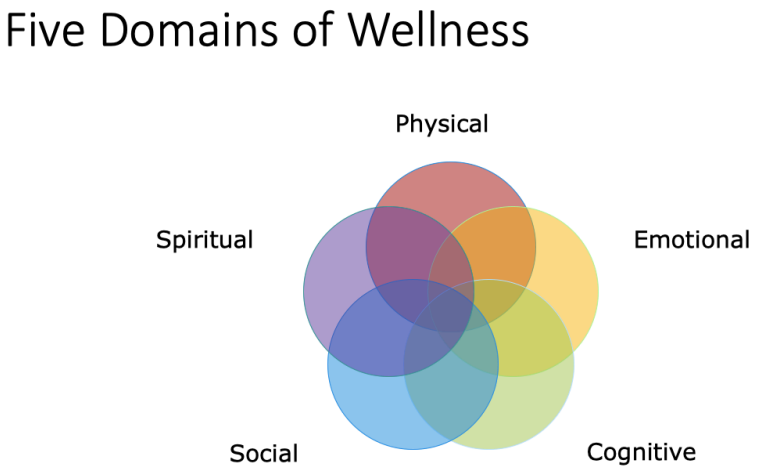


Figure 1: Five Domains of Wellness

Participants

This research involves several kirtan and neo-kirtan participants, including both those who contribute to leading the events as well as those engaging with the music but not necessarily leading. Many of the individuals interviewed requested to be referred to by their spiritual name, given by their teacher or guru as part of becoming a member of their spiritual community. Spiritual names are denoted with an asterisk (*).

The main subjects of are members of Shanti Mission, an Australia based community that accesses neo-kirtan and chanting as a mainstay of their wellness education. All of the Shanti Mission participants involved in this research were either living in the Central coast of New South Wales, a state in South East Australia, or had lived there previously. One person, Sada was originally from the U.S.A. and another, Surya Krishna, was from Canada.

Shanti Mission was founded by Shakti Durga* (figure 2), then known as Kim Fraser, in 2001 as a way to support spiritual seekers around Sydney and the central coast of Australia. Kim had been a practicing lawyer for 16 years prior to her calling to spiritual work. In 2006 she became Shakti Durga, beginning to serve others as a spiritual teacher, or "guru." She had been engaging in personal development work and spiritual practices for several years prior, and has continued to work with teachers from a variety of traditions. One of the first healing methods she studied was

pranic healing, a system which accesses life force energy directed through hands off healing as well as an awareness of *chakras* (energy centers), meridians (energy vessels) and the use of colour therapy - the idea that certain colours create effects on the body and mind. This system was developed by Master Choa Kok Sui (1952 - 2007), a chemical engineer turned healer from the Philippines, who "studied the works of the Rosicrucians, Theosophy, Astara, Huna, Kabbalah and numerous similar systems" ("MCKS Founder" 2019) to develop his methods. Shakti Durga also adapted a process from Barbara and Terry Tebos modelled on transactional analysis, addressing emotions by focusing on the state of the ego, represented by inner child, inner parent and inner adult. Through adopting aspects of Raym's Crystal Dreaming, a guided imaging technique, Shakti Durga's teachings include the ability to address the influence of the past and the potential blocks they create in the present. Shakti Durga first experienced kirtan and mantra chanting with Indonesian master Sri Jayanara and his disciple yoga master Sri Jayashakti at Ashram Munivara in Bali. She then learned more about the traditions of India through Indian spiritual teacher Sathya Sai Baba (1926 - 2011), founder of the International Sathya Sai Foundation. Most recently, with Sri Shakti Amma (1976-), she developed refinement and mastery of ritual and devotional practices. Shakti Durga explained to me that she seeks to modernize the concept of spiritual guide and leads Shanti Mission in a way that is inclusive of both "Eastern beliefs and practices as well as Western paradigms" (Shakti Durga 2018a) such as democratic decisions, personal accountability, positive psychology and energy healing.

Figure 2: Shakti Durga. Screenshot on June 5, 2019 from https://www.shantimission.org/. Accessed with permission from Shakti Durga.

Several of the musicians at Shanti Mission (figure 3) who offer kirtan on a regular basis were observed and interviewed. Maitreya* has been involved with Shanti Mission for over a decade. He facilitates meditations and is one of the head musicians, composing and leading many of the kirtan pieces offered at Shanti Mission. Sada* plays percussion instruments (tambourine and shakers), piano and sings response lines; she has been with Shanti Mission since 2012. Veena Vaani* is a retired nurse and long-time musician who plays keyboard and harp; she tends to accompany Shakti Durga during guided meditations and spontaneous singing discourses. Parvati Sundari,* vocalist and master therapist/healer, leads workshops as well as *satsangs*. Siddhi Shakti* plays percussion such as *djembe* and *cajon* for kirtan and often leads mantras during *pūja* rituals. Ganapati,* composer, guitarist and vocalist, was on hiatus from Shanti Mission when we had our interview though has since returned, offering his music at meditations and kirtan events. Niranjanaaya,* a vocalist, guitarist, bassist is also an accountant and takes care of some of the financial affairs for Shanti Mission. Laxmi Maa,* a flautist and healer, offers her music during bi-weekly sound healings. Surya Rose* offers meditations, healings and sings at *satsang*.

Figure 3: Shanti Mission Musicians. Image by author. June 10, 2018: Cooranbong, Australia.

Other members of the Shanti Mission community were interviewed, many of whom live in and around Cooranbong where Shanti Mission is based (refer to chapter three for more detail). Adi Dass,* a long time Shanti Mission participant and healer, assists with and leads *pūja* rituals as well as meditations. Stellar Maya* has been with Shanti Mission for more than thirteen years; she assists with administrative work, offers healings and teaches many of the programmes Shanti Mission has to offer. Hanumani,* also a long time Shanti Mission member, acts as archivist and

record keeper, capturing many prized moments on photo as well as video. Shanti Bhavan, a social worker, moderates Shanti Mission's online classes and events. "Patches" (pseudonym) is a nurse who offers healings and leads meditations. Mata Kali,* a fire response worker, leads meditations at the firehall and other locations throughout the central coast of Australia. Surya Krishna,* a healer and masseur, lived in Australia for a decade and now resides in Canada. Savitur,* a master healer, specializes in trauma and pain reduction and also leads *satsang* meditations and workshops. Jagatambe Narayani,* a psychologist specializing in anxiety and depression treatment, leads *pūja* rituals at Shanti Mission as well as at Peedam in India. Hamsa Devi* has studied with Shanti Mission for a few years and now also follows Sakthi Amma's teachings.

For comparison and contrast, interviews and observations from events with other neo-kirtan practitioners were also included as part of this research. Krishna Das* (figure 4 left), a well-known New-York based neo-kirtan artist, has been chanting for more than four decades, has fifteen albums and has received a Grammy nomination. He was on tour in Australia while I was conducting this fieldwork so I had the opportunity to attend his kirtan workshop and to interview him. Dave Stringer (figure 4 right), another well-known American neo-kirtan artist based in Los Angeles, offers kirtan in a style that blends Indian *rāgas* (melodic patterns) with the groove and harmonies of American Gospel and Appalachia. He tours extensively worldwide and has written a research proposal with Andrew Newberg, a neuroscientist and Director of Research at the Myrna Brind Center for Integrative Medicine in Philadelphia. Newberg investigates the science of spirituality and consciousness and his books as well as Stringer's interview provided a wealth of knowledge. This research also included interactions with teachers from India. I spent three weeks at Sri Shakti Amma's (figure 5 left) temple in Peedam, located in Tamil Nadu, India. Amma has been one of Shakti Durga's teachers and utilizes devotional practices with mantra in various forms along with service work as a primary mode of practice. I interviewed Yogrishi Vishvketu (figure 5 right), Himalayan Yoga Master and founder of Akhanda Yoga, co-founder of Anand Prakash Ashram in Rishikesh and author of *Yogasana: Encyclopedia of Yoga Poses* (2015). Vishva-ji brings forward ancient wisdom for a modern age with his profound yet accessible approach. He teaches yoga *asana* (postures) and incorporates chanting and kirtan into sessions as well as other meditation and ritual ceremonies.

Figure 4: Krishna Das (left) Image by author. July 15, 2018: Sydney Australia; Dave Stringer (right). From http://davestringer.com/media/photos/ Accessed with permission from Dave Stringer on June 20, 2019.

Figure 5: Sri Shakthi Amma (left). Accessed with permission from Sri Sakthi Amma. Yogrishi Vishvketu (right). Accessed with permission from Yogrishi Vishvketu.

Rishima Bahadoorsingh (figure 6), a devotional singer rooted in the South Asian Indian diaspora in Vancouver, Canada, was also an interview participant. Rishima comes from a long line of devotional singers and has studied classical Hindustani music (more recently Dhrupad), some Carnatic music and Western music. She follows the teachings of Sathya Sai Baba (1926 – 2011), a spiritual teacher from South India and this is the tradition of kirtan in which she now sings. Zoë Narayani* (figure 12) also added her insights to this research. Though originally a trained

Western Classical singer from Australia, she currently lives near Peedam in India under the guidance of her teacher Sri Sakthi Amma and sings primarily Indian devotional music. "Karin" (pseudonym) is a kirtan artist and member of the Hare Krishna community in Sydney; she imparted her knowledge of this community and of other practices from the new age paradigm. Finally, Aaron Lightstone (figure 8), a Toronto-based multi-instrumentalist and music therapist, shared his experience with utilizing kirtan in sessions with a client from the Indian diaspora.

As mentioned in the methodology, keywords, comments and impressions from twenty-one anonymous members of the Shanti Mission community were also captured through their responses to a ten-question survey. Participants were recruited both through personal invitation and through distribution of the link by Shanti Mission in their newsletter and all surveys were completed in July and August 2018. Survey respondents' experience with Shanti Mission ranged from three months to several decades. While several comments and keywords derived from the survey will be shared throughout this thesis, participants will remain anonymous in accordance with ethics requirements.

The majority of my research focuses on Hindu influenced kirtan traditions and their evolutions outside of Indian culture and religious practice. While the Sikh traditions of South Asia also offer kirtan and have subsequent neo-kirtan developments, particularly within the Yogi Bhajan kundalini yoga movement, I have chosen not to include these in this work at this time given the limitations of the scope of this project.

About the Term "Neo-Kirtan"

As a designation, "neo-kirtan" is not currently used extensively amongst practitioners. Though it appears minimally in discourse, when it does, its meaning is unclear. Also, it does not appear in prior scholarship and other academic works have used terms such as "West" or "Western" in their descriptions of kirtan outside of South Asian contexts. The decision to access the term "neo-kirtan" here as an etic superimposition for scholarly purposes arose after much deliberation and conversations with various professors. Labeling inherently implies inclusion and exclusion; drawing clear boundaries with music that involves a wide spectrum of eclecticism and

heterogeneity can be challenging and, in some cases, problematic. However, adopting "neo-kirtan" avoids overusing generalizations implying East and West divisions and acknowledges the differences in style, application as well as contextual and even cultural variations noted across the kirtan offerings investigated in this research primarily in Australia and North America.

A Note On "Vibration"

The word "vibration" occurs frequently throughout this work in various contexts with different meanings. Participants employ neo-kirtan theories of vibration to refer to the vacillations created by sound (or even light) waves as well as to concepts related to an individual's overall attitude impacted by feelings and thoughts and as ways of accessing divine forces. The folkloric mingling of these different meanings for vibration is one that neither physics nor acoustics currently supports through substantiated evidence. One may critique this mingling as a conflation of scientific, New Age and classical South Asian philosophical theories of sound, light and vibration. This conflation is a common occurrence in both New Age practices as well as some modern forms of Hinduism. While the reader should be aware of this issue, the focus of this thesis is the participants' words and perceptions, and therefore does not engage a broader theoretical critique of vibration theories.

Researcher's Positionality

This academic work has been informed and prompted by fifteen years of experience as a practitioner. As both an accredited music therapist, a songwriter and a kirtan artist myself, I have witnessed a wide variety of responses to intentional music and practice. I have been a music therapist since 2003, specializing in neurological rehabilitation and emotional trauma and currently work primarily in hospital settings. While I appreciate the importance of and follow research driven practices, my ideologies as a professional have been pulled equally to intuitive and spiritual approaches as much as to systematic clinical work; both are seemingly important in my view.

Many of the individuals involved in this research are those I first encountered through the various practices I offer. I met Aaron Lightstone during my music therapy training when he offered a workshop about music and technology for therapy. While working on my music

therapy internship I also completed my first yoga teacher training, later traveling to Rishikesh to take advanced yoga studies with Yogrishi Vishvketu. On his advisement at the training's completion, I began leading kirtan and song-writing. For me, these mind-body practices have provided a linking bridge between music therapy training and spiritual healing modalities and I actually approach leading kirtan with some of the perspectives and tools I learned in music therapy. Since then, I have completed two recordings in India and have led a variety of musical performances and regular neo-kirtan within Edmonton, Alberta and many parts of Western Canada. I have performed with several kirtan and devotional artists including Jai Uttal, Karnamrita Dasi, Shimshai and Dave Stringer and have participated in several neo-kirtans in various locations including at some aforementioned yoga and music festivals including Bhakti Fest, Shakti Fest, Wanderlust and the Bali Spirit Fest.

I came to know of Sri Shakti Amma through my late music partner Adam Van Wielingen when we travelled to India in 2011 to record our kirtan album "Sharanam." While en route to Bali to play at the Bali Spirit Fest we decided to go to Peedam to meet Amma; this is also when I first met Zoë Narayani. Interestingly, several of the Shanti musicians were also performing at the Bali Spirit Fest that year and we ended up offering kirtans back to back. Following the festival, I took a workshop led by Parvati Sundari and even travelled to Australia to meet Shakti Durga; as will be revealed, I found their method of offering neo-kirtan intriguing and unique. I first met Dave Stringer also in Bali when I was invited to lead response vocals for his kirtan during a yoga teacher training. We have toured together twice across the pacific northwest. I first met Rishima when she also sang with Stringer when we were in Vancouver. I had neither met Karin nor Krishna Das prior to this research though both were in Australia while I was conducting field research and graciously accepted my request for an interview.

Over time and through various experiences as a clinician and facilitator, questions began to emerge, both as a result of my professional work with others as well as my own personal practice. As much as I consider myself open to experiences and to trying approaches, I have never been one to simply believe anything simply at face value. Further, one of the skills developed within music therapy training is the ability to be involved in practice while also engaging in observation, reflection and critical thinking. Though I have noted various responses

to intentional music within myself and others, I wanted to look more closely at the mechanisms that promote change and explore how others who utilize intentional sound perceive these to function regarding wellness. I also wanted to better understand if and how music does not support wellbeing. I felt compelled to engage in the rigour of research investigation combined with contemplation to seek further understanding, leading me to this master's thesis.

A practitioner-academic model of inquiry, in my opinion, offers many possibilities for research involving devotional music practices and experiences of impact and health. Given this, I am uniquely positioned to conduct this ethnomusicological research, approaching modern kirtan with both first-hand knowledge as well as ability to observe objectively and clinically. While this research addresses primarily the uses and potential benefits of kirtan and music, I am also interested in looking at the ways in which music and neo-kirtan are potentially ineffective or even contra-indicated. This research is my initial attempt to address some challenging questions around the role of intentional music and spirituality in healing, in ways that will be useful for both practitioners as well as academics.

Chapter 2: BACKGROUND

Embodiment, Illness, Wellness and Sound Across Cultures

Inquiry across disciplines is increasingly pointing to the limitations of the binary, mind-body divisive approaches to health that have dominated modern establishment biomedicine since the enlightenment (Kleinman, et al. 1994, Becker 2004, Farquar & Lock 2007, Brummel-Smith 2008, Manderson & Smith-Morris 2010, Collier 2013b). Even though the body is physiological, health cannot be effectively addressed to the exclusion of culture, context and subjective, or unseen components. Cross-cultural inquiry has long presented interdimensional perspectives of embodiment, negating the idea that there is one natural or universal biological experience. The Temiar of Malaysia describe "multiple souls" through which different human functions are animated by a blend physical and psycho-social qualities (Roseman, 2005). In India, *Ayurvedic* (meaning life knowledge) approaches to health view the body as an interaction of elements and meridians while yogic anatomy explains embodiment in five layers (*kośas)*: *annamaya* (anatomical); *prānamaya* (force created through respiratory, circulatory and nervous systems); *manomaya* (psychological) *vijnānamaya*: (unconscious intellect and intuition); *ānandamaya*: (bliss or impersonal flow) (Brummel-Smith 2008, Collier 2013a).

Cross cultural research also describes a range of intersubjective, multi-dimensional experiences regarding perception and expression of illness. In many examples, the boundaries between emotional and physical illness are indistinguishable; physical symptoms incorporate psychological affliction just as emotional pain often presents in the body. This phenomenon was described in Northern India by Pugh (2005), in Italy by Pandolfi (2007) and by Kleinman (1988) with a Jewish-American client. This physiological-emotional link has been confirmed by functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI): Social-emotional (anxiety driven) distress and physical distress symptoms have been shown to share overlapping neurobiological processes (Eisenberger 2012). The social dynamic of one's culture, including economic and political states, can play a role in the accepted expression of illness within a society, affecting whether an illness presents as physiological or emotional: for example, *Nervoso* in shantytowns of Alto Cruzerio (Scheper-Hughes 2007), neurasthenia in socialist China (Kleinman & Kleinman 2007), "spirit affliction" or possession rather than mental illness in India (Pakaslahti 2014) and

differences in menopause symptoms between Japanese and North American women (Lock 2017).

Various theories have emerged over the last century supporting the idea that embodiment and wellness belong not just to the physiological but to interactive multi-layered objective and subjective processes. Merging biological, sociological and psychological components, Mauss (1973) and later Bordieu (1977) accessed the term "habitus" to point to the impact of cultural conditioning on what Mauss called "techniques of the body" (70). These mind-body techniques or customs are pre-objective, subconscious and embedded in culture such that they are taken for granted and not purposefully accessed (Csordas 1990). Scheper-Hughes & Lock (1987) described embodiment as interwoven aspects of the individual "body-proper," the social body and the body politic where the emotions act as intermediaries between these three bodies. De Certeau (2007) explored how constraints embedded in culture are acted out and reconfirmed through individual bodies while Pandolfi (2007) noted how these constraints become patterns that are transmitted intergenerationally. From a more neurological perspective, Polyvagal Theory (Porges 2007) describes illness as the result of stress arising through altered autonomic nervous system regulation resulting from emotional patterning and social behavior. The theory, named for the vagus, a major cranial nerve that regulates bodily state, connects the evolution of the autonomic nervous system with prosocial behavior; neural pathways supporting social behavior are involved in maintaining health, growth and restoration (Sullivan 2018). Epigenetics is also confirming the inter-relationship between biology and culture as events external to the body have been found to create modifications in DNA (Keller 2010, Lock 2017). All of these ideas support the interconnectedness of biological, psychological, social and emotional components as complementary aspects of embodiment, referred to as the "bio-psycho-social" model of body and illness (Engel 1977).

Integrative Treatment Approach Through Music

As models promoting mind-body division seem increasingly unable to fully meet the needs of human health, other approaches in treating illness and disease are being advised. Koen (2018) suggested to view the "individual as culture" and to create a contact zone between client, culture and therapist to unfold healing and health together. Kleinman (1988) advocated for the need for

practitioners to demonstrate presence through witnessing and ethnographic-like techniques such as empathic listening, translation of semiotics and interpretations such that they contribute to an individuals' dignity and re-moralization (restoration of morale). Music holds possibilities for creating such a contact zone of empathic listening and has long been given medicinal and therapeutic value throughout history (Kreutz, MacDonald & Mitchell 2012). Forms of music intervention date back thousands of years through traditional, spiritual, religious, folk-indigenous and shamanic practices (Spintge & Droh 1992, Brummel-Smith 2008). Music is a unique vehicle for promoting wellness. It can be both structured and free and is both corporeal, creating measurable sound waves, and then diffuse, being temporally based and quick to dissipate. Music offered in combination with therapeutic presence can be an efficacious means of creating contact between beings and cultures and mediating stress responses. "Music that is specialized for the individual forms a kind of channel or vehicle of transformation that carries the person from the present state of pain, stress, confusion or illness, to a new desired state of wellness, peace, clarity or health" (Koen 2018, 254).

Recently, a growing number of disciplines, from musicology and anthropology, to music psychology, neurobiology and physics, are exploring the role of music in health. Music therapy has emerged in the last century as a modern profession in which music is used safely and intentionally to address health and bio-psycho-social-spiritual wellbeing **(**CAMT, 2016). Music therapists are credentialed professionals who facilitate change by safely combining knowledge of the musical elements (rhythm, tone quality, speed among others.), clients' musical preferences and history within the context of relationship created through the music itself. Several music therapy approaches have been developed, as it is a profession applied across a wide range of client populations and for varying conditions (Wigram et al. 2002, Wheeler 2014, Trondalen and Bonde 2012).

Studies under the category of "music and healing" arose through scholars such as Carol Laderman and Marina Roseman who compiled and edited "The Performance of Healing" (1996). This compilation, rather than focusing on musical analysis, describes the acts of the healing music across a wide range of cultures including but not limited to Korea, Papua New Guinea, Malaysia and West Sumba. All eight of the chapters in Gouk's "Musical Healing in Cultural

Contexts" (2000) describe a wide range of musical applications in healing across cultures including those from both "non-Western cosmologies" and those "assimilated by Western cosmologies" (22). Ethnomusicologist Carolina Robertson's 2002 "Narratives that Heal" (Now "Narratives of Creativity") project advocates for the innate and cross-cultural presence of creativity and addresses the narratives that prevent individuals from accessing the benefits of creativity. As a more recent development, medical ethnomusicology is "a field of research, applied practice and performance concerned with health, healing, wellness and well-being through music, sound and related practices and phenomena" (Koen 2018, 250). It was conceived as an expanded discipline geared to encompass any field of research interested in music, medicine, health, healing and culture (Koen et al. 2008). As such, academics working under this banner draw on methodologies and theories from many disciplines in their research (for example the arts, social sciences, health sciences, physical sciences and humanities) to elevate the acceptance of music's role in human health, wellness and prevention.

Music therapy and medical ethnomusicology are complementary fields that can and should work symbiotically together. Music therapists are trained to work clinically and safely with vulnerable individuals through therapeutic and rehabilitative treatment processes in ways that are largely beyond ethnomusicologists' ethical scope of practice and expertise (Stige 2008, Edwards and MacMahon 2015). Ethnomusicologists tend to be well grounded in research theory and methodology. They also typically possess a knowledge of and sensitivity to trans-cultural indigenous and folk praxis that music therapy training and application, rooted mostly in Western Classical traditions, continues to lack in significant ways (Gioia 2006, Chiang 2008). As Davis explains in her thesis detailing ethnomusicology-informed music therapy, "Implementing Indigenous healing practices must include an understanding of the cultural values and meaning from which they originate" (2013, 10). Such collaboration was hinted at through scholarship such as Rohrbacher (1993) who presented an ethnographic look at the music therapy profession. More direct emphasis on the need for interdisciplinary alliance appeared in Robertson-DeCarbo's 1974 article "Music as Therapy: A Bio-Cultural Problem," Moreno's proposals for "Multicultural music therapy" (1988) and an approach he called "ethnomusic therapy" (1995) and Shapiro's (2005) depiction the role of multicultural appreciation in developing therapeutic relationships. Despite theoretical advisements, there is still a general lack of understanding and

partnership between the fields and across countries (Chiang 2008, Swijghuisen-Reigersberg, 2017). Community music therapy, an approach where sessions occur in natural social contexts, accesses culture and community as resources to support health (Stige, 2010). Community music could be an effective interdisciplinary meeting point between music therapists and applied (medical) ethnomusicologists in research and practice.

Model: Five Dimensions of Wellbeing

Music offers the potential for effective illness treatment, as it can operate through multiple dimensions of health. Both music therapy and medical ethnomusicology offer similar models in this regard: Koen's model from (2005 and 2009)[3] offered a five-factor model that highlights physical, psychological, social, emotional and spiritual components. Similarly, in music therapy, clients are treated and assessed based on goal domains: cognitive, communicative, emotional, musical, physical, social and spiritual domains (CAMT 2016). Further, both of these models are comparable to endocrinologist Malarkey's (1999) PIERS components of health: physical, intellectual, emotional, relational and spiritual. Following the precedent set by these models, I opted to utilize a model highlighting five domains of wellness - physical, emotional, cognitive, social and transpersonal/spiritual - to discuss how music operates to address aspects of human health. While wellness domains can be treated individually, the pervasive, diffuse nature of music also enables other dimensions to be treated at the same time. This allows music treatment to be simultaneously specialized and pervasive. Koen (2018) used the term "embeingment" (as an alternative to embodiment), to denote this effect music exerts not only on the body but on all five factors of being together. To better illustrate, a few of the many examples of both qualitative and quantitative research supporting the uses of music across these five domains of wellness are described below.

Physical: Music can facilitate movement and enhance physical activity, priming multiple systems of the body (Thaut 2005, Karageorghis & Priest 2012). Strong rhythm can be a primer for movement and rhythm perception and involves motor production regions of the human brain. (Grahn & Brett 2007, Merchant et al. 2015). Movement rehabilitation can be facilitated through

[3] Koen (2018) has subsequently expanded and diversified this model since this original inception however I have chosen to use this original, more simplified model for this current work.

techniques involving rhythmic entrainment, the linking of body actions with certain music and beats (Thaut, 2005; Zatorre et al. 2007, Clark & Tamplin 2016). Generally, when musical elements are steady and consistently slow and low, the effect tends to be physiologically calming while music whose elements are erratic, varied, fast or high tends to be physiologically stimulating (Zatorre et al. 2007). Group singing is an activity that engages physicality and, according to Clift (2012), can be both energizing and relaxing and can contribute to tension reduction (Tonneijck et al. 2008; Jacob et al. 2009). Kossak (2015) proposed healing as created through relationships between human bio physiology, sound rhythm and frequencies. Music has been shown to contribute to both a reduction in perceived stress (Linnemann et al. 2015) as well as physiological stress markers such as cortisol, adrenaline, heart rate and blood pressure (Han et al. 2010, Koelsch et al. 2011, Kreutz, Murcia & Bongard 2012, Chanda & Levitin 2013, Bradt & Dileo 2014, Fancourt, Ockelford & Belai 2014). Further, active music making has been shown to be more beneficial for stress reduction than passive music listening as stress response is highly influenced by personal choice and experience (Chanda & Levitin 2013). Interestingly, there is also possibly a relationship between stress, immunity and chronic illness and disease which can also be mediated by music. Fancourt, Ockelford, & Belai 2014 noted changes in biomarkers (and hormones and neurotransmitters) of immune response with application of music. Thus, chronic conditions linked to immune disorders could potentially be assisted by music, though this, like most of the research regarding music and pain management, requires further investigation.

Cognitive: According to the auditory scaffolding hypothesis, the complex temporal organization of auditory phenomena offered in music may offer supportive framework for rehabilitating or developing cognitive abilities (Thaut 2005, Conway et al. 2009, LaGasse & Thaut 2012). Music in therapy is a "cognitive workout" (Hinton 2008, 159): it has many different overlapping, layered, sequential, changing elements to attend to (e.g. melody, rhythm, tempo, instrument timbre). A listener can attend to these together or one at a time or in various combinations, switching from one to the other, which ultimately develops cognitive abilities. As such, music can also promote psychological flexibility, an adaptive mental (and emotional) approach mediated largely through aspects of attention (Hinton 2008, Koen 2018). Music can be useful in cognitive rehabilitation, significantly increasing focus and verbal memory (Särkämö et al. 2008)

and neurological music therapy has been shown to impact general memory, attention and executive function (Thaut 2010).

Emotional: Music can impact moods and feelings (Juslin &Sloboda 2010) and facilitates the experience and expression of emotions and ideas that are difficult to convey solely through words (Hargreaves et al. 2005). It can assist in reducing impact associated with both conscious and unconscious emotional imprints (Clark & Tamplin 2016). Through intrinsic aspects of the music (the musical elements), extrinsic associations, memories gained through experience can be re-experienced and processed in order to be healed. Music has also been shown to be useful in reducing anxiety and depression (Bradt et al. 2013). It can play a meaningful role in psychological development and emotional regulation through adolescence into adulthood (Saarikallio 2011). Mood can impact perception of music when accessed without facilitation or outside of therapy (Hunter et al. 2011) while this tendency can be utilized to examine and improve mood through the "iso principle" in music therapy sessions (Heiderscheit & Madson 2015). Cited in Clift (2012), collective community group singing can enhance mood and help to develop skills, self-confidence, self-esteem and a sense of achievement (Davidson & Bailey 2005; Silber 2005). Clinical music therapy has been used successfully to assist in the treatment of anxiety and depression (Maratos et al. 2008, Gardstrom & Diestelkamp 2013, Zarate 2016) and other mental health concerns (Hense 2019).

Social: Since one of music's primary functions supports expression and connection (Miell et al. 2005) many theorize that one of the reasons music has persisted across the ages is due to the way its social impact has promoted survival. When rhythmic activities are performed by groups of people they tend to become synchronized (McNeill, 1995). This synchronization reflects social coordination and fosters feelings of social connection, specifically around interpersonal trust and bonding (Huron, D. 2001). Social effects of music may be mediated by oxytocin and vasopressin which are neuropeptides known to regulate social behavior (Chanda & Levitin 2013). Tarr et al. 2014 address the bonding that arises during synchronous group music activities and theorize that the experience of self-other merging is partially endorphin based. Many now speculate that music may have predated language, especially since speech and singing share many overlapping neural pathways. Speech can be rehabilitated through music therapy

treatment involving therapeutic singing, oral motor exercises, vocal intonation therapy (Tamplin 2008, LaGasse & Thaut 2012). According to Clift (2012), singing can bring people together providing social support, group identity and friendship (Clift & Hancox 2001, Latimer 2008; Lally 2009, Bungay et al. 2010). Brown (2014, 88) noted Singer's (1966) claim that unification of community derived through musical experiences does not last: "divisions are re-established as soon as the music falls silent and the temporary sense of communitas fades."

Spiritual (Transpersonal): Music relates to spiritual health in that it is said to assist individuals in connecting with flow state, inspiration, creativity, core identity, and to enhance individuals' overall resources. Though spiritual health can belong to all people no matter what stage of life, it is most often addressed in work with individuals at the end of life (Kidwell 2014, Potvin & Argue 2014) where music's impact is often attributed to the way it can promote meaning and hope (Salas 1990, Lipe 2002, Kidwell 2014). Music-prayer engages creative thinking and imagination, mobilizes emotions through different musical elements, allowing individuals to open in receptivity to access deeper feelings and beliefs while risking the vulnerability of expression (Lipe 2002). It also impacts consciousness and cognition promoting psychological flexibility or altered states (Koen 2018). In such cases, intention amplified by music also becomes a factor (Potvin & Argue 2014), helping individuals shift attention away from illness and painful experience. Music-prayer has been noted to open lines of communication and connection between people and to impact individuals' ability to connect and feel a part of something beyond themselves (Potvin &Argue 2014). Koen (2009) evaluated stress levels (through ECG, heart rate and blood pressure), finding that stress was lowest in the familiar prayer (maddah) listening but was also greatly reduced in the unfamiliar devotional music, showing a 'culturally-transcendent' link between music-prayer and stress reduction. The Bonney method of Guided Imagery in Music (where music listening takes the client on an imagery journey, witnessed and facilitated by the therapist) is an often-cited approach that induces the transpersonal realm (Lipe 2002). Music that is at the right balance of challenge and ease has also been shown to promote "flow" states (Csíkszentmihályi 1996) likened to transpersonal connections. Music-prayer can help patients transcend suffering (Aldridge 1995), find meaning (Trauger-Qherry & Haghighi 1999) and access hope (Chandler 1999).

Spirituality[4] and Health Across Cultures

Though spiritual-religious practice is found in all cultures, the way spirituality is experienced and expressed is highly variable and personal, involving both the knowable and more ineffable aspects of self and beyond (Wilbur 2000, cited in Potvin & Argue 2014). Spirituality and religion are reported to contribute to patient health while impacting how health and illness are perceived (Kidwell 2014) and national organizations such as the WHO, NICE, the Joint Commission and the NCP are now including it as a component of quality medical care (Koenig 2008). However, in most medical treatment, spirituality is the least often addressed of the dimensions of wellbeing, frequently overlooked and omitted even in integrative, complementary wellness models. Science and spirit have become dichotomies in modern establishment approaches to medicine (Engler 2003). In North American medical communities, there is still fear and stigma regarding spirituality and religion, and most physicians believe it is not appropriate for them to engage in prayer in a medical setting (Monroe et al. 2003, Koenig 2008). Even in music therapy, therapists are not necessarily aware of how they utilize (or exclude) spirituality in therapy, nor do they acknowledge the distinction between religion and spirituality or explore their personal spiritual beliefs (Lipe 2002, Potvin & Argue 2014, Kidwell 2014).

Though the role of spirituality is minimized in modern establishment healthcare, in contrast, it is almost always a significant component of indigenous, folk and traditional healing paradigms. In these models, ailments are regularly treated using both concrete and intangible realms, doctor and spiritual master/priest are often one in the same or the patient can even act as their own healer or doctor (Gioia 2006). As Mauss (1973) noted, "At the bottom of all our mystical states there are techniques of the body which we have not studied, but which were perfectly studied by China and India … there are biological means of entering into 'communication with God'" (87). Music shares a long-interconnected relationship with spirituality. Music can be an anchor for the ephemeral spirit, bridging the tangible and intangible, allowing the latter to be more readily experienced. "As individuals engage with music, abstract concepts such as hope, meaning and purpose are made concrete in the person's lived experience, opening up paths to growth and

[4] My use and interpretation of the term spirituality here aligns with the word transpersonal (derived from transpersonal psychology of S. Grof), meaning a perspective that extends beyond one's concept of individual persona, encompassing expanded or mystical states of consciousness (Rowan 1993).

healing" (Lipe 2002, 233). While music can and often does accompany prayer, music itself can act as a prayer, a means of communicating with dimensions of the sacred (Koen 2009, 2018, Potvin & Argue 2014). To this end, Koen (2005) identified four different forms of song and prayer in healing performance: music alone, prayer alone, combined music and prayer, and unified music-prayer. This capacity for music to function as prayer may be at work in the therapeutic process of transformation.

Much of the ethnographic research featuring healing work also tends to depict music processes used to connect with the transpersonal layers of the unseen. Tumbuka healers connect to spirit worlds by inducing trance states through complex rhythms played in different meters with feet and hips (Friedson 1996). Ngoma healing in central and southern Africa utilizes song-dance rituals facilitated by healers in group format, accessing a "relationship of spirits, words and music" (Jenzen 2000, 58). Maddah, a form of sung mystical poetry, and other song-prayer practices of Pamiri people of Tajikistan is used both for prevention and for curing illnesses through invoking baraka (spiritual essence) (Koen 2005, 2009). Islamic Sufi rituals that include "language performance" are explored for their social, transpersonal and "metaphysical" impact (Frishkopf 2013). Trancing as a practice viewed to link individuals to altered states through sound was explored by across cultures by Rouget (1985) who emphasized how psycho-social conditions facilitate music induced state transformations. Similarly, Becker's work (2004) explored "deep listening" involved in altered states and its connection to emotion across both secular and religious groups. Healing rituals inseparable from song and other spirit processes are described by various authors across many First Nations and Indigenous traditions such as Omaha tribal songs (Fletcher, La Fleche & Filmore 1893 cited in Gioia 2006) Lakota dream songs (Densmore 1948, Thorne 2015), Piman medicine songs (Bahr & Haeferby 1978), Navajo healing practices of Hataalii, "singing shaman" (Krippner 1993) and Muskoke Cree healing prayers (Irwin 2017) to name but a few. Temiar healing songs link musical structure/genre with the particular spirit guides from which they are received; in healings, they utilize the songs given by the spirit who caused the illness (Roseman 1991, 2005 and 2008). Dare healers in Zimbabwe use improvised music and harmonics to call, captivate and remove the spirit of an illness (Hinton 2008 referencing Metzger). Numerous music/healing rituals of Thailand involve a medium who, through instrumental accompaniment, invokes entrancement of self or patient with at least one

spirit (Bussakorn 2015). According to Cook (1997, 62), village healers and patients in Northern India tend to hold a "spiritual rather than a microbiological concept of disease." She presented a case study of healers Sitla and Babaji, highlighting treatment of patients' spirit-related afflictions using chanting and singing to invoke possession or connection with spirits. Cook described a four-stage process of healing (induction, diagnosis, treatment and curation), finding commonalities with modern music therapy techniques (assessment, goals/objectives development, treatment and evaluation) and thus termed these village healing practices Sacred Music Therapy.

Kirtan and Neo-Kirtan

Kirtan is a music-prayer practice originating in South Asia - primarily within India, Nepal and Pakistan - that combines singing with devotion. Kirtan comes from the Sanskrit *kirti* meaning to glorify or praise (Beck 2018). As a communal music experience, it involves repetitive, echoic call-response chanting of Sanskrit mantras and prayers in vernacular language placed in musical contexts (Slawek 1988, 1996, Widdess 2017, Beck 2018). I'm utilizing the term neo-kirtan here to denote the growing practice of devotional call and response chanting accessed outside of South Asian cultural and religious contexts. In these contexts, neo-kirtan tends to be connected with the rise of modern postural yoga movement that has surged over the past two decades in the Americas and other countries outside of India. Many individuals participating in these events and "transformational festivals" are described as seeking a form of personal emancipation or ways to work through trauma. (Pettit 2014, Lucia 2018).

Sanskrit Mantra and Indian Religious Philosophy

Kirtan typically involves the repetition of a Sanskrit mantra in song form, placing the mantra practice into musical melody. Mantras are sonic devices comprised of intricate, specific combinations of vowel and consonant patterns. There are several components of mantra highlighted in the literature. Mantras are called "verbal formulas" (Burchett 2008, 808) and "quasimorpheme(s) or a series of quasi-morphemes, or a series of mixed genuine and quasimorphemes arranged in conventional patterns" (Bharati 1965, cited in Alper, 1989, 111). They are described as having energy or power, often connected to Divinity and the cosmos. They are "energy-based sounds or *śabdha*" (Deshpande 2014, 63), "when properly vocalized, are

believed to possess an innate power" (Burchett 2008, 808). Further, rather than referential, mantras are believed to be creationary, transforming reality by affecting thought or associated action: mantras are "real, palpable, mental artifacts" (Alper 1989, 2), "word(s) of action, not just of thought" (Wheelock 1989, 96) believed to "affect reality" (Burchett 2008, 808).

Though many assume that a mantra refers to one specific thing, Sanskrit mantras resist clear classification given the diversity of different traditions of mantra practice (Timalsina 2018). Sanskrit mantras differ in length, context, usage and purpose (Alper 1989, Burchett 2008, Deshpande 2014). They can present on a range from long, detailed phrases such as the poetic verses of the *Vedas*, to a single sound such as the mono-syllabic seed (*bīja*) mantras more typical of the *Tantras*. Along with this, they can be seen to have some sort of semantic and lexicographical meaning or referred to as "non-linguistic" (Alper 1989). Further, some Sanskrit mantras are "transcendent," more focused on spiritual attainment while others offer more "quotidian" intentions to support daily physical life (Alper 1989). In fact, many exemplify several of the above qualities at the same time. Despite this variability, most traditions emphasize the importance of learning correct pronunciation, intonation and rhythm, especially when using mantras in ritual. Another significant commonality is the emphasis placed on recitation with appropriate mindset, one that is directed to the meaning of the mantra (*sankalpa*) or its corresponding deity to promote unification with its essence.

Indian Religious Philosophy, Mantra and Sound

The term Hinduism used to denote the idea of a unified religion in India is a relatively new concept. Most individuals have collectively followed particular practices or worshipped specific deities: a *Saiva* would worship Śiva, a *Vaishnava* would worship Vishnu as Krishna, a *Saktha* would worship a particular *devi* (goddess) and a *Tantrika* would practice from the *Tantras* (Flood 2003). The belief in the efficacy of chanting Sanskrit mantras to effect reality however, seems to be a unifying force amongst these various approaches, established and described throughout various Indian doctrines such as the *Vedas* and continued forward through *Upanishadic*, *Saiva-Tantric*, and *Vaiṣnavite* perspectives (Beck 1995). The significance of the use of mantra evolved within a cultural philosophy that valued speech and sound as divine, viewing auditory sound as a reflection of a metaphysical macrocosm. Hacker (1972) summarizes: "From ancient times, there

has been in India the conviction that mental representations (of sounds), if reaching a high degree of intensity, are capable of bringing about a reality not only on the psychological level but even in the domain of material things." (cited in Alper 1989, 14). Despite variations in individual traditions in South Asia, "they all have much in common with regard to ritual practices and the adoption of kirtan and *bhajan* in worship" (Beck 2016).

The foundational philosophies of Hinduism are often said to be found within the *Vedas*, made up of four separate works called the *Ṛg Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda* and *Atharva Veda*, (Klostermaier 2007). They describe the source of form and creation as *vac*, meaning literal speech/words as well as Divine word (Beck 1995). In the *Ṛg Veda, vac* is associated with creation, sounded at the origin of time, depicted as the personified feminine principle of energy, the active component that unites with the masculine principle of consciousness and potential to create all things in the manifest world (Larson 1974). According to Nijenhuis, an important *Vedic* hymn to *Sarasvati/Vac* (goddess of speech), "proves that already in *Vedic* times personified speech represented a cosmic creative principle, pervading the whole universe like wind (*vāta = Vayu*) and giving birth to the Father i.e. the creator of the world" (1992, 1). Ultimate reality is represented as sound-consciousness (*śabdha-brahman*), and all of the universe, reality and its objects evolve also through sounds or words, through primordial force. Several philosophical treatises such as the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the *Yoga Sūtras*, and the *Upaniṣads* discuss *Oṃ* or *praṇava* as the primordial sound of creator (Oṃ - Aum 2019). In *Tantric* philosophy, consciousness is denoted through nada-brahman meaning sonic God, synonymous of cosmic energy. "In gross form, *nada* (subtle sound) supports the things of the universe as their soul, in subtle it is represented by the Absolute Goddess. The subtle form is realized in the gross one" (Beck 1995, 123 quoting Dasgupta). Mantras themselves are presented as cruder forms of *vac* and, as such, are viewed as tangible manifestations of pure consciousness inseparable from divinity.

The relationship between divinity, creation and sound or language continues to be evident in India. For instance, grammar, as an embodiment of truth, has long been considered one of the paths of salvation (*darśana*) (Padoux 1990). Also, many musicological treatises that are still referenced include philosophical discussions of *nāda brahma* and the role of music as the Divine

manifest (Shringy, Sharma, & *Śārṅgadeva* 1978, Kitada 2012). The *Saṅgītaratnākara,* primarily a musical treatise, also includes a section called the *Piṇḍotpatti-prakaraṇa*, which describes the basis of the human body by addressing metaphysical concepts about origin and ontology, physiological concepts such as anatomy and function and Yogic perspectives which include the *chakras* (Shringy, Sharma, & *Śārṅgadeva*1978, Kitada 2012).

Kirtan from Religious to Secular

Kirtan in modern India is far from a uniform practice. As such, describing it with words like "traditional" or "religious" can be problematic because the term kirtan can mean different things, varying not only by individual but by community and region (Henry 2002). Kirtan goes by many names – *namakirtan* (divine names), *saṃkirtan*, *harikatha* and *padakirtan* (describing nature of the divine) etc. (Slawek 1988, Novetske 2003, Schultz 2002, Beck 2018). A kirtan can also involve a variety of components such as discourse, story-telling and epic enactments in addition to music (Novetske 2003). Further, the degree of audience participation can be variable, ranging on a spectrum from community-based to performative (Slawek 1996 Beck 2018). *Bhajan*, as we will see later in this work, is another term used interchangeably at times with kirtan though technically they refer to different things. A *bhajan,* derived from the word *Bhagavan* ('Lord') and the Sanskrit root *bhaj*, "to share, to partake of" (a ritual), mostly refers to any song that is devotional in nature (Beck 2018, 2). Most *bhajans* tend to feature one singer at least for a portion if not the entirety of the piece and are often more musically complex than kirtan (Slawek 1996, DelCiampio 2014, Brown 2014, Beck 2018). The term kirtan does not denote an entirely solo performance and instead implies a participatory group experience directed by one or more chant leaders.

Kirtan in India and within Indian diasporas tend to be associated with religion, accessed in ritual, in Hindu or Sikh temple practices (Slawek 1988, Schultz 2002), or offered as part of a *satsang*, literally meaning truth assembly, often involving receiving teachings or discourse from a spiritual guru (Singh, Jain & Singh 2013, McCartney 2017). "Kirtan [as well as *Bhajan*] was of major importance to the maintenance and proliferation of the religious beliefs and practices of popular Hinduism" (Slawek 1996, 57 quoted in Beck 2018). However, kirtan in India is not necessarily solely a religious practice. Kirtan has been depicted in promoting healing through a

range of disciplines including tantric medicine, traditional folk healing and yoga (Cook 1997, Pakaslahti 2014). *Padāvalī* kirtan in West Bengal has been portrayed as a commercial commodity, critiqued for becoming profit-driven rather than promoting egalitarian social prosperity (Graves 2017). Further, Schultz's ethnographic work (2002, 2008) with kirtan in the Indian state of Maharashtra demonstrates how it can be utilized politically, to gather individuals collectively for nationalistic unification, positioning spiritual practices and participatory music alongside ideological doctrine.

Kirtan was adopted as a technique of *bhakti* and initially rose to popularity in the public sphere during the medieval *bhakti* revolution which countered the constraints of religion. *Bhakti* is a spiritual path that emphasizes acts and states of devotion as a means to shift attachment from the world towards God (Puyang-Martin 1996, Klostermaier, 2007, Vaughn 2010). The *bhakti* movement originated in South India (now Tamil Nadu) in the 6th century and reached its height around the 15th and 16th centuries (Beck 2018) led by various saints and sages including individuals such as Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Meera bai, and Tulsi Das to name but a few. Supported by teachings from the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Bhagavad Purāṇas*, the *bhakti* movement rejected the limitations and control created through caste and religion, favouring free expression of devotion through poetry, prose and song as the primary link to God (Beck 2018). The use of devotional music such as kirtan and *bhajans*, was accessed as "a trigger to special states of consciousness" (Henry 2002, 50). Chaitanya Mahaprabhu is a figure particularly associated with kirtan, having taken kirtan out into the streets in the 16th century, promoting personal, unmediated connection to God by singing the names of the Divine (Slawek 1988, Cook 2009). His approach to the worship of Krishna (*Gaudiya Vaiṣṇavism)* has become foundational to the philosophies of the Hare Krishna movement (ISKCON or the International Society for Krishna Consciousness) (Vaughn 2010) and the linking of the *bhakti* revolution to the current proliferation of kirtan. ISKCON was established in North America in New York in 1966 with Bengali guru Srila A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896 – 1977) who gathered people through communal discourses, free vegetarian meals and congregational singing of devotional kirtan. Over a period of only a few years, the appeal of the devotional, anti-materialistic approach within 1960s counterculture paradigms meant the movement spread quickly. ISKCON is now a global movement, upholding *Vedic* ideals within various international locations such

that there is both a "flow of 'Western culture' to India and the counter-flow of 'Indian culture' to the West" (Fahy 2018, 21) creating a unique culture in its own right. As several scholars point out, (Cooke 2009, Brown 2014, DelCiampo 2014), ISKCON kirtan is a distinct and unique phenomenon, one to which many attribute the international evolution and popularization of kirtan outside of India, paving the way for neo-kirtan.

Rather than religious, most neo-kirtan participants tend to identify and categorize themselves as spiritual-but-not-religious (SBNR) (Pettit 2014). This SBNR title encompasses activities ranging from yoga to other complementary alternative therapies (Fuller 2001, Heelas and Woodhead 2005 Cooke 2009, Vaughn 2010, DelCiampo 2012, Pettit 2014) and those who identify under its umbrella represent more than a quarter of the American population (Ammerman 2013, Pew Research Center 2017). Identification as SBNR seems to have emerged at least in part as a rejection of perceived hegemony, hypocrisies and limited application of traditional religious systems in favour of more self-directed spirituality involving inward looking and eclectic practices to develop personal awareness (Heelas & Woodhead 2005, Strauss 2005). Interestingly, the polemical quality of these SBNR views echoes the medieval *bhakti* yoga movement and Chaitanya's mobilization of devotional kirtan in response to the exclusionary nature of *Brahmanical* religion. This kind of response is often how new spiritual-religious movements have been created including Christian and later Protestant faiths. Neo-kirtan practitioners mention the medieval *bhakti* movement as one of the defining sources of the current Western dissemination of its use. The re-telling and reperformance of the story of Chaitanya has become a means of supporting the SBNR approach in neo-kirtan.

Neo-kirtan includes elements that can be viewed as religious as well as those that align more with secular musical performance. Scholars consistently classify SBNR traditions as religions, namely because of the way they draw extensively on older religious traditions and appear to operate as religions (Pike 2004). An example of how neo-kirtan draws on older religious elements is the inclusion of mantras from *Vedic* rituals (*Gāyatrī, Mahāmṛtyunjaya* etc.) as well as post-*Vedic* or *Tantric* practices (*bīja*//seed mantras). Another is the use of ritualized actions and etiquette such as silence at end of chants, and the use of *añjali mudra* (palms together in front of the chest). Several spiritual-religious devices and symbols are employed such as *māla*

beads, *tilaks*, and altars with a melange of deities and iconographic imagery and pictures of gurus (Pettit 2014). Lastly, calls to self-transformation based on claims of ancient-ness or sacredness of the practice itself can be read as proselytization and conversion (Lucia 2018).

Neo-kirtan can also be viewed as secularized, assimilating with Western music entertainment and musical performances. This is seen through the way it is marketed (DelCiampo 2014) with posters and social media using words like "concert" and "performance" with images that focus on the musicians and musical experiences more so than devotional or religious content. Neo-kirtan also takes place in more secular locations (Cooke 2009) like auditoriums, theatres, community centers, farmers markets, restaurants, bars and dozens of festival stages. Some artists access flashy strobe lighting, spotlights and most typically sit facing an audience rather than an altar (Slawek 1988, Cooke 2009). There is often monetary exchange or ticket purchase required to attend neo-kirtan, with some festivals drawing tens of thousands of dollars for the kirtan headliner. Finally, the incorporation of pop-culture instruments and music styles ranging from Celtic and blues to electronica and dubstep (Brown 2014, DelCiampo 2014) draw attention to the music and performance and conjure associations with Hootnannies from the folk music revival (Cooke 2009) and other music performance more so than to devotion in a sacred space.

Critiques and Advantages of Neo-Kirtan and SBNR Paradigms

Neo-kirtan, as with many SBNR, has garnered criticism. Firstly, neo-kirtan practitioners have been accused of cultural appropriation, where neo-kirtan is viewed as a form of cultural imperialism that detracts from minority culture (Killen & Silk 2004) and excludes South Asian voices. Cooke (2009) noted how Indian musicians who use Indian melodies are not as successful in neo-kirtan circles and though often Westerners' pronunciation can be inaccurate, this can help the accessibility of the mantra for Western ears. Further, neo-kirtan's eclectic and decentralized theological paradigms can be seen as cherry picking from and even using certain traditions as a psycho-emotional balm (Cooke 2009, Pettit 2014). The movement is also accused of being reductive, and of romanticizing and essentializing Hindu and Sikh traditions, conveniently omitting beliefs and rituals that are incongruent with Western customs (Fuller 2001). Rather than offering the true personal transformation they claim, some view SBNR practices as narcissistic, unguided, ungrounded, and promoting spiritual bypass (Heelas 2008, McCartney 2019). Further,

the drama and strategic use of language and performative ritual are said to heighten emotional states and aesthetic moods promoting irrational influence over participants rather than critical thinking (McCartney 2017). Lastly, it can be seen as highly commercial and thus hypocritically creating consumption practices that oppose the philosophies promoted (York 2001).

Others however view the impact of neo-kirtan and other SBNR practices as significant and valuable, providing alternative options for experiencing spirit connection. The practice encourages inward looking, accountability and awareness through individually tailored exploration (Heelas & Woodhead 2005). Rather than narcissistic, one could argue that self-transformation is the vehicle of societal change (Hanegraaff 1996, Pike 2004), and using understanding derived from one's own experience is a more authentic guide than knowledge derived from others. Further, instead of trivializing and essentializing the cultures from which practices are derived, neo-kirtan practitioners often attempt to raise awareness of and promote respect and acceptance for non-dominant, indigenous and so-called "other" or "Eastern" doctrinal beliefs (Cooke 2009). Finally, the SBNR paradigm responds to cultural longing for transpersonal connection through beliefs that are mutable with room for diversity and mostly without requiring engagement with a particular religious dogma (Cooke 2009, Pettit 2012, Brown 2014).

The rise of SBNR practices such as neo-kirtan in Westernized contexts reflects a desire and need for ideologies that promote views embodiment connected to mind and existence mediated by spirituality and self-knowledge (Collier 2013b). They can be seen as operating with many benefits such as assisting the creation of new lifestyles, relationships and aspects of cultural life that do not fit within the confines of either religious or secular domains.

Kirtan, Mantra and Wellness Research

As noted in Brown's work with a Hare Krishna Community in Utah (2014), Nettl asserted that music's two main functions within society are to "support the integrity of individual social groups" and to "control humanity's relationship with the supernatural," (2003, 253) a view supported by kirtan research. According to Henry (2002) both rhythm and the mutual coordination of voices in kirtan music greatly serve to enhance the relationship between

individual and group. According to Browne (2014), neo-kirtan's hybrid of familiar and new components and use of participatory music presents a model for promoting understanding and integration of differences. Pettit (2014) found that song and music are strong unifying aspects of neo-kirtan, allowing members to explore meaning in a plural environment that functions as a community rather than a collection of individuals. Vaughn's (2010) work with individuals in addiction recovery revealed that the group format fosters a feeling of community support and the use of spirituality and prayer helps to actualize the eleventh step ("conscious contact with God"), significant in supporting long-lasting recovery though difficult given limited alternatives to religion. Turino (2008) described how participatory music engages members as creators themselves and leads to a clearer, more relatable experience of the interpersonal, transpersonal and spiritual. Cook (1997) described Northern Indian village healing practices with two separate healers, Koshalya and Babaji, who provided treatment through mantras, prayers and herbal prescriptions mediated by song. Pakaslahti's (2014) study at Balaji temple in Rajasthan offered ethnographic detail of chanting and kirtan practices as integral parts of traditional healing practices of spirit afflictions through the induction of trance states (*pesis*) both in patients as well as in healers.

The literature also reflects that mantra and kirtan chanting provide other functions beyond those which Nettl mentioned above, particularly regarding physicality. Quoting Csordas (2002, 30), "the most immediate and concrete means of convincing people of the reality of divine power is to involve their bodies," Brown (2014) noted how the relatively intangible concept of "the spiritual" becomes more tangible and palpable within the body through the corporeal, sensorial experiences kirtan enables. Neo-kirtan, like modern postural yoga, connects physicality with spirituality, elevating the body as a place of connection through sound production, challenging the traditional divide between the spiritual-religious and secular-scientific paradigms (Fuller 2008, Huss 2014). By engaging the body and senses which are "there to enable the soul to experience service to God" (Rosen 1996, 96), kirtan can cultivate the transpersonal awareness and connection individuals seek.

Mantra and kirtan chanting have been shown to impact emotional and cognitive wellbeing. Kenny, Bernier, & DeMartini (2005) found that an eight-week hour long call-response chanting

program enhanced mood and general wellbeing for individuals with mild to severe depression. Ten of the eleven participants showed significant improvement in depression markers measured with the Beck Inventory. Bormann (2006) noted decreases in anger and psychological distress and increases in faith in individuals with HIV utilizing mantra repetition. Bormann et al. (2014) later found that mantra repetition offered through a six-week mantra(m) program (MRP) improved the level of mindful attention for Veterans compared to those receiving talk therapy treatment alone. This mindful attention supported reduced post-traumatic stress symptoms, reduced depression and improved psychological well-being. Perry, Polito & Thompson (2016) compared the impact of chanting *Oṃ* silently versus chanting *Oṃ* out loud on cognition (attention) and affective states (positive mood and feelings of social cohesion). Results confirmed that chanting increases positive mood, decreases negative mood and improves attention. However, positive affect and altruism increased more following out-loud chanting than it did following silent chanting. Inexperienced participants also received the most significant benefit following vocal chanting. DelCiampo (2014) noted how neo-kirtan is often promoted in association with a healthy lifestyle, personal development, self-improvement accompanied by marketing devices like images of nature and concepts like social equity and vegetarianism. Other studies have addressed how mantra recitation positively impacts a variety of health components, including attention (Pradhan & Derle 2012, Bormann et al. 2014), memory (Ghaligi, Nagendra, & Bhatt 2006), spatial memory (Narayanan and Venugopalan 2018), stress reduction (Telles, Nagarathna & Nagendra 1998, Kalyani et al. 2011, Shobitha & Agarwal 2013, Sharma & Singh 2014) pain reduction (Yogitha et al. 2010) and mood, anxiety and depression (Lolla 2018). Although some of these studies had small sample sizes and lacked significant control variables, the results are interesting.

Newberg, a neuro-theologist, has been conducting fMRI-based research with various spiritual practices including studying participants focused on a prayer speech and sound or a devotional phrase (2015). These activities led to increased activity in regions of participants' frontal lobe, indicating enhanced focus and attention as well as activations in the amygdala, particularly if participants had impactful emotional responses. They also promoted decreased activity in the parietal lobe (and occipital lobe) and increased participant report a feeling of "spacelessness" or of oneness with all things. The back part of the parietal lobe is where one's sense of

physiological boundaries and perception of space and time are established. When activity in this area is reduced, awareness of boundaries of a distinct self also diminish, leaving individuals feeling both connected and separate simultaneously. Newberg also found a link between these prayer practices and subcortical areas of the brain, the thalamus and the hypothalamus which influence the autonomic nervous system and hormones, and these are to be explored further. "When people ask 'is there a spiritual spot or spiritual part of the brain?' I always reply: 'If there is a spiritual part of ourselves, it is the whole brain and body, because there are very integrated and complex processes involved in spiritual practices and experiences'" (Newberg 2015, 15).

Challenges with Research Involving Music and Wellness

Developing an effective framework to studying the effects of music intervention on human health presents challenges not only due to the lack of standardization of methodologies across music related research (Chanda & Levitin 2013) but also to the many variables involved with both music and health (Roseman 2008, West & Ironson 2008, Koen 2018). Applying music in systematic ways can pose difficulties. For instance, rigid prescriptive approaches can lead to failed results when musical process is not individualized. Likewise, isolating which specific variables are responsible for healing can be unreasonable: "Is pain relief due to psychological or vibrational effects or perhaps facilitated by compassion delivered on a carrier wave of music created just for that one person?" (West & Ironson 2008, 412). Cross-cultural representation in music research is lacking and most inquiries, especially biological and quantitative, are conducted with American test subjects only and inferences are drawn from these studies which may not translate culturally (Swijghuisen-Reigersberg 2017). One of the most significant challenges with music and health research is that the majority of literature does not provide adequate information to enable readers to understand and evaluate results, utilizing instead generic terms and omitting detailed explanation of music elements or how participants interacted with them. "'Music' is still treated … as a generic, catchall term rather than as a highly nuanced entity, analyzable, like cellular structure, on many levels in carefully chosen terms" (Roseman 2008, 36). This is a significant omission as the different qualities of musical elements, as well as their performance and application, can drastically change the impact and implications of a musical experience. Indeed, the term music cannot possibly denote one thing and adequately defining the term music has been a challenge across disciplines.

Studying the relationship between music and illness treatment solely through the current emphasis on isolated variables working independently can be unproductive (West & Ironson 2008). Swijghuisen-Reigersberg (2017) advised cross-cultural comparative studies using a range of participants over longer periods of time. West & Ironson (2008) suggested grounded theory, first observing "what" qualitatively, developing theories then testing these quantitatively to determine the "how." Fancourt, Ockelford, & Belai (2014) proposed an interdisciplinary approach, including the measurement and description of musical factors (sound of music, physical actions involved, social engagement and personal response) alongside the measurement of stress factors (psychological and physiological), all integrated with current understandings of theories. Asserting that the transformational process of healing is best understood through models that (first) explore the "how" of musical healing, Koen (2018) designed a triangular model which positions the human being, health/healing and music as three interrelated factors each to be investigated through the five factors of wellness.

Neo-kirtan: A deeper and specific exploration of impact and benefits

While the practice of kirtan has grown more popular and predominant in recent years, research that features kirtan in general, and the neo-kirtan movement itself, is still underrepresented. Being limited in number, these studies are not necessarily rigorous and demonstrate some of the methodological weaknesses mentioned earlier. There is clearly room and need for more investigation into the phenomenon of neo-kirtan and mantra chanting.

The research that follows is an examination of neo-kirtan and Westernized group chanting. It looks at case examples of kirtan across modern traditions and addresses the health impact of chant-infused healing techniques as they pertain to wellbeing and the multi-facets of wellness. Utilizing information and examples gathered through fieldwork with both neo-kirtan facilitators and participants, the perceived benefits and potential therapeutic implications of these chant-based offerings will be highlighted. As a meeting of theory and approach from music therapy and ethnomusicology, this research has implications for both fields and will contribute to the possibility of including music-prayer practices as therapeutic protocol.

Chapter 3: MODERN KIRTAN - FIVE PERSPECTIVES and APPLICATIONS

Kirtan in modern times has many faces. The following five case examples highlight this by describing kirtan across quite different contexts. The fifth example, Shanti Mission, is where the bulk of this field work was conducted and is therefore more extensive. At the conclusion of this chapter is a summarized reflection of kirtan and neo-kirtan as a genre and the similarities and differences highlighted by the cases presented here.

1. Kirtan in the Indian Diaspora in Vancouver

Rishima Bahadoorsingh (figure 6) is a devotional singer and Sathya Sai Baba[5] devotee who I came to know when we both sang with Dave Stringer in 2015. She lives in Vancouver, BC Canada and identifies as a member of the Indian diaspora. To gain perspective from someone more anchored in South Asian or "traditional" styles of kirtan, I interviewed Rishima via telephone. Unless otherwise indicated, the following is a summary of her words.

Rishima opened by emphasizing that kirtan in India is far from homogenous. For her, the word kirtan can denote different things as there are many styles including Sikh kirtan, Muslim *Qawwali*, ISKCON (Hare Krishna) *nam* kirtan and can even vary depending based on preferences across Hindu temples. However, according to Rishima, all music from the *bhakti* tradition is focused on accessing songs for anybody, songs for all people. Within this, Sathya Sai tradition has specific and even "strict" guidelines for how kirtans - also referred to interchangeably as *bhajans* - are delivered.[6]

In Sathya Sai kirtan, the melodies are mostly *rāga* based which Rishima defined as a specific formula applied to a set of ascending and descending notes that determines which notes can be used in a song, how they are to be used and when. In both Hindustani and Carnatic systems, different *rāgas* have different *rasas* or flavours called *navarasa* (nine emotional essences) with

[5] Sathya Sai Baba was a spiritual leader and founder of the Sathya Sai International Organization. For more information see www.sathyasai.org

[6] The word strict was hers and I believe she used it to contrast the perceived freedom associated with neo-kirtan approaches.

different qualities accessed in kirtans for different purposes. Some *rāgas* are even associated with

Figure 6: Rishima Bahadoorsingh from https://rayoflightmusic.weebly.com/about-me.html. Accessed with permission from Rishima Bahadoorsingh.

qualities of specific deities and are perceived to assist in accessing them. For example, *Hamsadhvani* is a typical Carnatic *rāga* for a Gaṇeśa song, *Bhairav* is utilized for Śiva, *Yaman* is romantic/devotional, *Megha* for rain/monsoon, *Deepak* for fire. Each song has a particular *bhava* (emotion/devotion) which the song and singer can choose to emit (mother and child-like for Yashoda and Krishna, servant relationship for Hanuman, friend like Arjuna and Krishna, sweetness for Krishna, beloved like Radha/Krishna etc.) According to Rishima, participants can imagine stories of the deities related to these relationships to bring out the *bhava* and love in a song. She went on to explain that all *rāgas* were initially intended to be devotional. Referencing the *Sama Veda*, the *Gandharva Veda* and the *Natya Śastra*, Rishima explained that many foundational doctrines that give instructions for music also address how to gain liberation and higher consciousness through music, chanting and dance. As with all *rāga* -based songs, Sathya Sai kirtan pieces tend to span the range of a singer's voice. Lower registers are said to activate lower *chakras* (energy centers) while moving through higher notes activates upper *chakras*.

Rishima noted how each kirtan song typically changes in speed, starting slow through the first round and becoming faster, finally to return to slow again. Similarly, the sequencing of the different pieces across the entire kirtan event also moves from slower to faster more dynamic pieces with the intention of creating a *crescendo* for the entire event. Her kirtan events always start with a song for Gaṇeśa and she explained that a Śiva kirtan would never be at the beginning of a kirtan event because they tend to be fast and strong with a lot of percussion. While in other traditions kirtans can be longer - from ten to thirty minutes long - kirtans in the Sathya Sai tradition tend to be three to five minutes long.

Figure 7 offers a transcription of the four main melodic sections of a Gaṇeśa kirtan, described by Rishima as typical of a kirtan from the Sathya Sai Baba tradition. She sang a portion of it during our interview and a recording of it sung by Arun Das and Hari can be accessed on YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eI9WGEpYhH0) or on the Sathya Sai International web page (https://sathyasai.us/devotion/song/jaya-sri-ganesha-vighna-nasha). This is a simplified transcription and I have omitted some of the melismas and vocal embellishments for simplicity purposes. According to the Sai International website, this song is in a *rāga* called *Miyan ki Malhar*. It is centered around a pattern of seven beats and has a melodic range which spans more than an octave. Listen to an excerpt of "Jaya Sri Ganesha Vigna Nasha Gajanana"[7] sung by Arun Das and Hari:
https://era-av.library.ualberta.ca/media_objects/k930bx92j/section/m326m2788

[7] Gaṇeśa (International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST) spelling) is used interchangeably with Ganesha in this thesis as the latter is a common spelling of the term, especially in titles of songs and in neo-kirtan circles.

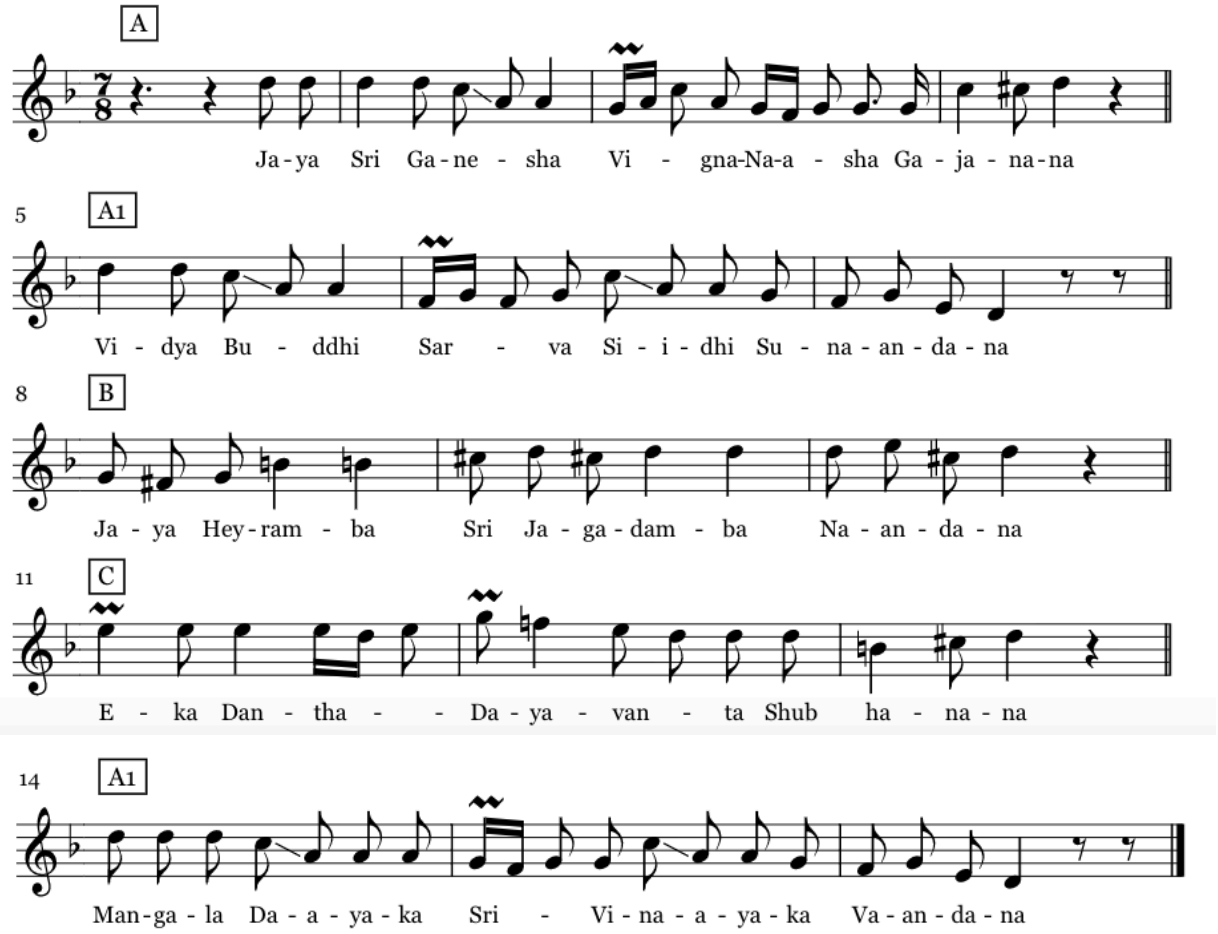


Figure 7: "Jaya Sri Ganesha Vigna Nasha." Transcribed by author. www.youtube.com/watch?v=eI9WGEpYhH0

Translation: Glory to the Lord of *Ganaas* destroyer of obstacles who has the head of an elephant who confers scholarship, intelligence, power. Glory to the son of *Jagadamba*, single tusked, compassionate bestower of auspiciousness. I bow to thee who has no leader.

The main instruments utilized in Sai kirtans are the *harmonium*, a portable instrument with a keyboard operated by bellows pumping air through reeds, the *tabla*, a percussion instrument made of two barrel-shaped tuneable drums, and the *manjira*, a pair of small cymbal-like instruments that create a high-pitched clangorous sound. Rishima noted that other instruments such as bansuri flutes, sitars and even guitars can be included especially for larger events. From my perspective, I speculate that the inclusion of guitar may have come about through the international nature of the organization; it may also be an influence from Bollywood music. Rishima further explained that different instruments are perceived to influence different parts of

the body – drums/bass for lower *chakras*, cymbals for higher ones, harmonium does all as it plays the melody.

Most of the pieces tend to be in Sanskrit, though Hindi or even Telugu or Tamil, are common as these are languages from South India where Sathya Sai Baba was from. As there are now Sathya Sai centers all over the world, many of the songs are translated into the vernacular languages or have their own compositions based on music from the country. Rishima has heard and sung songs in English, Japanese, Mandarin, Spanish, French, Russian etc. though she emphasized that most songs tend to be in Sanskrit and Hindi and these seem to be the most preferred languages to sing in.

Everyone is given an opportunity to sing and at the onset of a kirtan, all singers add their name and their chant to a list. Male and female leaders alternate in leading and she noted that though it can be nearly equal, there are almost always more females than males participating, but if there are less men, they will sing twice. While singing, everyone faces forward towards the altar rather than towards the rest of the group. Males and females sit separately which, according to her guru is both for protection but more importantly that it is in order to preserve and honour the difference between masculine and feminine energies. She remarked that this can be challenging for some, especially in an age of increasing gender fluidity. I have also noted similar physical orientation in kirtan, separation by gender and singing facing an altar, and these seem to be found only within some South Asian kirtan traditions.

Participants of Sai kirtan are advised not to dance or move too much and are also encouraged to avoid crying if possible. The reason for this, Rishima explained, is that movement and emotional expression tend to release too much energy and that instead, they approach kirtan as reflection time, an opportunity to experience different aspects of self. They are even instructed to stay quiet for ten to fifteen minutes at the end of the kirtan in order to integrate and prevent the energy from dissipating. Participants are however encouraged to clap during kirtans and are taught that clapping helps to integrate head, heart and hands, representing thought, word and deed respectively.

When I asked her if she considered herself religious, Rishima did not give a clear response either way. Instead she explained that, though her guru did traditionally follow Hinduism, he also taught about the unity of all religions. "You don't have to be a Hindu to be a student of Sai Baba" (Rishima Bahadoorsingh 2019). He taught about the importance of diversity and that all religions start with love. She explained that the bhakti movement helped with this. Sri Chaitanya, Sri Vallabha, Meera Bai, Tukarama and many other rebellious *Vaiṣṇavite* and *Śaivite* poets, singers and song writers wrote about surrendering to God and having pure divine love. For her, this changed the way people looked at music and religion, moving it from the head to the heart.

Describing her perception of neo-kirtan in North America, Rishima (2019) said, "It is great that people are starting to understand about different Gods and Goddesses… there are some amazing artists and it brings healing and love to a lot of people." To her, it is positive because kirtan is a powerful tool, not just for healing but for transformation, for creating a Divine connection. "The whole point is to cultivate the feeling and to become love, trying to get to the love vibration. Through kirtan we churn our insides, to bring up stuff to identify, process and clear… polishing the heart so that it is free" (Rishima Bahadoorsingh 2019). She also told me that, in her experience, there is some confusion in the Indian community about what is going on in the Western kirtan communities due to of cultural liberties taken, mostly unintentionally. Many neo-kirtan artists will offer kirtan in the park or on the beach and will often wear *māla* beads or *bindus*. However, Rishima explained that, given racial profiling, members of the Indian community do not have the same liberties and these same kinds of activities evoke protests about religiosity. She shared some examples of outright exclusion from the neo-kirtan scene where she and other South Asian musicians have not been welcomed. "Too traditional" or "too religious" are some of the reasons she has not been invited to perform at events that seem to be looking for "fusion" music or "white singers." She has experienced different treatment, feeling at times like an "exotic zoo animal" and this racial differential does exist in the Western Canadian kirtan community (Rishima 2019). She explained further, "There is a weird racial dynamic that is covered by the oneness argument," - meaning accountability is not always taken because of the belief that, in the end, everything is connected. "Saying we're all one and actually treating people as if we are all one are two different things…when you are exposed to people with

different ways of living, can you still feel we are all one?" (Rishima Bahadoorsingh 2019). In her view, there could be a stronger bridge between Indian diaspora kirtan and neo-kirtan communities as they seem to still be quite separate.

Despite some of these past experiences, she has noticed a shift in the last two years. "People are being more inclusive, working towards decolonizing yoga and kirtan. Though the bridge has not quite been made yet, people are starting to get it now" (Rishima Bahadoorsingh 2019). She has been invited to play at Beloved Festival this year and, in her view, this event is attempting to respectfully include South Asian musicians. Though Rishima is definitely not advocating that only Indians can sing kirtan, stating, "through Western communities, I see kirtan in a way I haven't seen it before" (2019), she also feels it is important to acknowledge and include those individuals who have been part of the kirtan tradition for so many years. For instance, the Sikh *Gurudwara* in her neighbourhood, regularly holds kirtan and has been there for more than 100 years. "It's about creating mutual understanding with all communities." Listen to an excerpt of Rishima singing "Song to Ganesha:"
https://era-av.library.ualberta.ca/media_objects/k930bx92j/section/df65v884m

2. Kirtan in Music Therapy in Canada

Aaron Lightstone (figure 8) is a music therapist based in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. I met him briefly during my own music therapy training in Kitchener-Waterloo when he offered workshops about technology and music therapy. He became a part of this research after responding to a post I made on social media where I learned he has been using kirtan in music therapy sessions with "Raj" (pseudonym), a client who is a member of the Indian diaspora in Toronto. A few years ago, Raj was involved in a major accident and sustained a traumatic brain injury (TBI) as a result. Prior to this accident, Raj had been sought out as an artist, leading *bhajans* and kirtan both in his country of origin as well as in Canada. Though he is still tremendously injured, according to Lightstone, Raj claims that kirtan in music therapy has saved him since he cannot get to the temple and receives much strength and comfort from chanting. Their five sessions to date at the time of our interview have included chanting one mantra in call-response or kirtan style for upwards of twenty minutes, remembered and chosen by Raj.

From Lightstone's perspective, a benefit of the kirtan format in therapy is that it involves shortened, repeated phrases which can be more accessible than the longer *bhajans*. During treatment Raj tried to sing a *bhajan* and couldn't recall much of it as it has many words and is melodically complex and variable. He was able to recall kirtan pieces however with more ease. Lightstone also believes there is "something more powerful with chanting in community" (Aaron Lightstone 2019) rather than singing alone. To that end, he suggested that one of the main benefits of spiritual-religious music in general is the social component. Referencing Porges' research (2007) linking communal singing and vagal tone, Lightstone shared his experience of the usefulness singing in groups for trauma resolution.

Figure 8: Aaron Lightstone. Photo by Kevin Lloyd Photography. Accessed with permission from Aaron Lightstone

Lightstone views kirtan more as a technique than as an aesthetic. Its call and response singing with shortened melodic lines in communal form is not necessarily unique to kirtan itself. He noted similar uses of repetition while researching hip hop music in African and other diasporic communities around Toronto, Canada for his master's degree in music therapy. In these communities, the way a short melodic phrase is repeated produces a unique and valued effect, holding meaning and import in a way that is not often legitimized in Western European music. Lightstone further explained that repetitive call and response technique does not belong to a

particular cultural or religious faction. As an example, he described experiences while participating in a music group at a reformed Jewish Synagogue in the Toronto area. Since many of the Hebrew prayers consist of long, wordy pieces of poetry, seemingly inaccessible to many of the attendees, prayer leaders have experimented with applying kirtan-like techniques to the prayers. This has involved distilling long passages of Hebrew texts and prayer books into concise phrases that capture their most essential aspects that is "kind of like taking a *bhajan* and turning it into a kirtan by only chanting the first couple of lines repetitively in a call and response fashion" (Aaron Lightstone 2019). These shortened prayers offered communally in call response song format are, according to Lightstone, both similar to and influenced by kirtan in technique and intention, but also aesthetically distinct given accompaniment with instruments he does not usually associate with kirtan including the oud, guitar, darbuka, bansuri and vocals. As another example, Lightstone described collaborating in creating recordings to reflect cultural diversity for individuals in care centers. They first interviewed musicians of various cultures to understand what would be considered soothing sounds and sounds to be avoided in their particular culture. Based on the interview results, they composed short instrumental mantra-like pieces involving repetitive melody that was often based on *rāgas* though simpler than what is typical of most classical music from around the world.

According to Lightstone, elements such as the drone as well as simple, repetitive melodies based on certain intervallic relationships from *rāgas* (he mentioned *Bhairavi* which has a major 3rd and flat 6th) can be utilized strategically in therapy in that they are both evocative and found as often in Western music. He noted however that a considerable part of applying music therapeutically is accessing pieces that are meaningful to particular clients. Consequently, Lightstone was not convinced that singing Sanskrit mantras with his Jewish dementia patients would be of benefit, for example, as they are less likely to have historical significance for them. A kirtan format need not involve a Sanskrit mantra and he was not convinced of an inherent power in the language itself. In his perspective, the impact of kirtan lies mainly in its format, such that one could take any traditional prayer or song from any tradition and simplify it to be sung in community which for him, this is the main benefit of the practice. When approached from its core structure as a technique, kirtan "doesn't necessarily belong to a culture, just as e=mc2 does not belong to

Jewish Germans" (Aaron Lightstone 2019). Instead, as a raw approach that has been revealed by the early practitioners, kirtan can be considered a human technique.

Lightstone's emphasis on the call and response technique of the group dynamic seemed to be his way of describing components of kirtan that are more widely applicable in therapeutic contexts. It might seem over-reductive and secularized, omitting the potential benefit of the transpersonal components that also accompany devotional music. His emphasis on the technique of kirtan does not necessarily negate the potential for spiritual wellbeing which will be explored later in this project. It simply highlights the fact that, given that spirituality is highly subjective and individual, the appropriateness and benefit of accessing the transpersonal components of kirtan in a therapeutic setting would be similarly highly individualized and person/client dependent.

3. Kirtan and Ecstatic Experience within the Guidance of the Hare Krishna Lineage

While in Australia, I was invited to lead a kirtan piece at a Saturday afternoon gathering organized by members of the Sydney Hare Krishna community. There I met "Karin" (pseudonym), who was also leading a kirtan piece that day. When I explained some of the work I had been doing in Australia, she was keen to speak with me and share her experience, particularly around the topic of benefit and harm of spiritual and musical practices.

Karin has been involved with the Hare Krishna community, otherwise known as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), since 2012. Prior to ISKCON, Karin had been exploring spirituality for several years and considered herself to be, in her own words, "almost anti-religious" (2018). Further, she was wary of new spiritual practices as a result of a previous experience with new age spirituality. While enrolled in a "Shamanic Healing" course she suffered what she referred to as an "intense kundalini spiritual crisis, otherwise known as a spiritual emergency" (Karin 2018). This experience left her feeling like she was going crazy. She was continuously disoriented, her "energy was too augmented" and she felt she was "in an inner world and an out of body experience at the same time" (Karin 2018). As a result, she had to take eight months off work and was in counselling for six years to learn to regulate her perceptions and contain this energy.

Karin did not set out to become a Hare Krishna and first attended ISKCON kirtan because she was dating someone who was also involved with the community. Though she was initially nervous about some of the devotional practices, over time, Karin simply found herself becoming increasingly involved with ISKCON community events in Sydney, taking philosophy and other courses, gradually realizing that the people in the community were trustworthy and "normal." Through kirtan at ISKCON, she has been able to have an "ecstatic experience" - which she described as being like a climax in her heart chakra, with a sense of euphoria and elation without heaviness. Unlike with the Shamanic healing course, this feeling of euphoria calms and even subsides after the kirtan is over. She is not left in an open place, unable to close the energy as she had experienced during her spiritual emergency. After kirtan, she said she feels good but in a way that is manageable and much more under her own control which feels safer for her.

In her view, one of the advantages of ISKCON is its history and tradition. She explained how it is based on *Vaishnav* philosophy, which has "deep historical references" and involves devotion (loving service) towards Krishna, viewed as the original supreme being. The history and philosophy of *Vaishnavism* is explained to new attendees in courses and then integrated and woven into their procedures and practices, keeping it alive for members. In Karin's view, to become part of the Hare Krishna community is to adopt a whole lifestyle, including food, practices, certain mantras and to engage with others in certain ways and at various gatherings. In her words, it is a "path well tested" offering much support and structure for spiritual aspirants.

The details she shared with me tell a necessary cautionary tale pertaining to some new age syncretic spiritual healing methods. Many of these approaches, Karin explained, do not offer the same guarantees and are not as complete a package as what she has experienced with ISCKON. "They usually involve one practice which is often developed based on one person's point of view, without the history, lineage and guidance ISCKON can provide" (Karin 2018). Further, many of these approaches leave much to interpretation. "While there is only one truth, there are people's interpretation and experiences of that truth. You often hear facilitators guiding people to experience "however you want to experience it" but there is not always truth in that experience" (Karin 2018). Further these new age methods are mostly unregulated, operated with a buyer-beware approach, such that those with the best marketing skills, not necessarily the

best healing skills, get the most attention. “Nowadays, anyone can do a training and call themselves a shaman but we must be careful when working with healing with people” (Karin 2018). In her opinion, the foundation of the wisdom passed through the lineage of gurus within ISKCON offers guidance, accountability, checks and balances along with tried and true methods. For Karin, the structure and depth it provides has allowed her to develop spiritually, to live a life of purpose whilst having safe devotional experiences along the way.

4. From Western Classical Music to *Bhajans* at Peedam, India

Sri Narayani Peedam (known as Peedam) is a spiritual center in Thirumalaikodi in Tamil Nadu, South India where I spent a combined total of four weeks over the course of this research. Peedam is founded by and affiliated with the work and teachings of Sri Sakthi Amma, a spiritual teacher and guru who promotes inner peace and harmony through devotional practices combined with an equal emphasis on service (*seva*). I visited Peedam primarily to gain firsthand knowledge by observing and experiencing kirtan-*bhajan* practice within India. Sakthi Amma’s teachings have also had a strong influence on Shanti Mission’s approach in recent years, making fieldwork there relevant to this research.

One of the main features at Peedam is Sripuram (figure 9), a large spiritual park created entirely based on Vedic principles such as sacred geometry, architecture (*vāstu*) and inclusion of the natural elements. At its core is a pristine golden temple devoted to goddess *Lakshmi Narayani*. *Sripuram* attracts thousands of visitors daily who walk along the 1.8 km long the star path (figure 10) to reach the central temple, listening to recorded *bhajans*, mantra and reading quotes and teachings by Sakthi Amma posted in several languages along the way. Several social welfare (*seva*) projects initiated by Sakthi Amma have flourished in the last decade. For example, the Sri Narayani Hospital and Research Center (figure 11) is an eight hundred bed non-profit hospital providing *arogya*, care to anyone regardless of financial situation or religion. It offers state of the art equipment so that patients can receive the best care, and provides outreach programs to over two hundred surrounding villages. Other examples of *seva* include *anna dhāṇam*, where free meals are provided to visitors of Peedam, feeding five thousand people daily. Green Sakthi is a project that both educates school children about the environment and supports in a

reforestation program, planting over 1.5 million native trees in the area. The Gho Samrakshana project protects and rescues cows from slaughterhouses.

Figure 9: Sripuram. Taken by author. August 13, 2019: Peedam, Tamil Nadu, India

Figure 10: The Starpath and Sripuram from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Temple,_Sripuram

Figure 11: Sri Narayani Hospital and Research Center. Image by author. July 28, 2018: Peedam, Tamil Nadu, India

Devotional practices at Sri Narayani Peedam involve several *pūjas* (sacred rituals) performed daily from 4am to 9pm by *Brahmin* priests throughout the various locations and temples. These *pūja* are in different forms and are based on *Vedic* principles. A fire *pūja* (*yajñam*), is a ritual where a series of items such as ghee, fragrant herbs as well as prayers are offered into a fire representing the divine. *Abhiṣekam* is another *pūja* ritual where a statue of a deity is shown devotion by being bathed and dressed. *Gho pūja* involves dressing a cow with flowers, cloth and special herbs and honouring it as an emanation of the divine mother. One of the main *pūjas* at Peedam is the *Mangala Narayani pūja*, performed daily by Sakthi Amma often at *Shanti Mandapam* (hall of peace) at the center of *Sri Narayani Peedam*. This three-hour purification bathing ceremony consecrates a deity of goddess *Narayani* by pouring various offerings upon and then cleansing it with water (*abhiṣekam*), offering it light from ghee lamps (*ārthi*) and beautifying it by dressing it with cloth, jewels and flowers (*alaṃkaram*). The deity is considered to be a form of the divine; engaging in these rituals are a demonstration of love for the divine and of purifying, beautifying and lighting the inner-self. This *pūja* is open to the public and individuals from all over India and abroad gather to watch Amma conduct the ritual. After the *pūja* is completed, observers can make offerings to Amma and receive holy water (*theertham*). All the *pūjas* are based on the five elements (*pañca bhūta*) - earth, water, fire, air, space - as nature is viewed as the divine.

The *Mangala Narayani pūjas* are accompanied throughout by priests chanting passages from the *Vedas*.[8] There is also instrumental music which appears only at certain points of the *pūja* (beginning, middle and end) along with two bells ringing at different speeds. The instruments used are a long oboe-like wind instrument called the *nādaswaram*, the *thavil* which is a double-sided drum with bass and high tone and a *surpethi* which is a droning, air pumped instrument resembling a *shruti* box. This instrumental music appears to be used to signal crucial points in the ritual, increasing in volume and rhythmic intensity at moments such as when the holy water is being poured over the deity, or during the final light offerings (*ārthi*). At about the halfway point of the *pūja*, a curtain is drawn across the altar space and certain private aspects of the ritual are performed without an audience. This involves a period of waiting for onlookers, during which kirtan-*bhajans* are sung by the local *bhajan* group. Zoë Narayani is one of the members of this group and spoke with me about her experiences of singing kirtan at Peedam.

Zoë (figure 12) is originally from Australia and has been living in South India as a volunteer school teacher at Narayani Peedam for more than a decade. Her background is in Classical singing and pharmacy and she was pursuing a career in musical theatre and opera before coming to the Peedam in 2006. Though the stage had always been a place where her fears and problems fell away, classical singing became too pressurized, unsatisfying, and caused her to be "too much in her head" (Zoë 2018). Prior to coming to India, Zoë had used recordings of mantras and other healing sounds to assist her journey with anorexia, to help her to reset the negative programs in her mind. She expressed several times that meditation, mantra and selfless service (*seva*) practices under Amma's guidance have offered profound healing and she is now composing and singing her own original devotional music in Sanskrit and Tamil.

When she first arrived at Peedam, Zoë experienced an intense period of emotional cleansing which, she explained, is typical when acclimatizing to life in an ashram environment. She did not attempt to join in singing for several years in case she burst into tears. She lost confidence in her vocal ability and had to re-examine of her identification as a singer. After some time away however, she found herself called back to music and was encouraged by others who heard her voice to learn and perform *bhajans* at the temple. Singing for locals as a foreigner has had its

[8] They were chanting from the *Samaveda* during my visit

challenges, requiring adaptations such as learning to sing while sitting on the floor facing the curtain drawn across the altar space. For Zoë, singing while standing and facing an audience was more natural, allowing for more vocal projection, ease and connection with participants. Further, most of the local *bhajan* group members were not trained singers and did not speak English, making coordination and musical communication difficult. To add to this, the music books they used were in Tamil script, did not include musical notation and different singers would often sing different notes or present alternate interpretations of songs. She was able to learn the songs when some Canadian devotees gave her a *bhajan* book with English transliterations and Sakthi Amma made musical recordings of popular *bhajans* that she could refer to. Shifting away from relying on musical notation or compositions in set form to music with more improvisation and spontaneity has also been a new experience for her. "Being in the flow (and) not knowing where it will go next has been a great lesson." (Zoë Narayani 2018). However, she now enjoys how the unrehearsed and free-form performances somehow weave themselves together. Sakthi Amma has also requested that each song be led by only one person at a time, with the rest of the singers singing response lines. This allows for more organization, prevents some of the underlying competitiveness and enables the group to learn new songs more effectively.

Figure 12: Zoë Narayani from https://zoenarayani.com/photos Accessed with permission from Zoë Narayani on June 23, 2019.

The kirtan songs at Peedam are *rāga* -based. Zoë explained how the different beats and scales traditionally convey different emotions, designed to both reflect and enhance the time of day and particular season. When she sings, she plans her *bhajan* selection based on these timings as well as her intuition, explaining that she tries to feel what the divine wishes her to sing in that particular moment. In Zoë's opinion, all *rāgas* have a place in devotional music, even those that evoke sadness since sadness is essentially about longing. In a devotional song, longing translates to yearning for the divine and the heartbreak of feeling separated; singing about this can soothe the heart.

Zoë shared some thoughts regarding neo-kirtan in comparison with her experience of *bhajans* at Peedam. From her perspective, the frequent reuse of melodies applied to different texts and meanings in India is completely accepted while in the West, people criticize or act adversely to songs that sound too similar. In India, *bhajan* singing is often more informal and less of a performance - she noted how people are encouraged to sing and make music together even if their enthusiasm is much greater than their musical abilities. In her view, the kirtan-*bhajans* at Peedam tend to be loud, with very little instrumental accompaniment and generally the *bhajans* selected are the ones that are most popular with locals. Western kirtan involves more harmonic structure and tends to be more simplistic when compared to traditional Indian melodies. This, in her opinion, allows the music to be used for relaxation and can be more of a meditative experience. "Medicine goes into the sweetness of the music… It's a way to create a sacred, interactive space… People use western kirtan to relax and de-stress, as a soundtrack for *savāsana* (lying down relaxation position) or for coming together to dance" (Zoë Narayani 2018). For Zoë, even if different people and cultures approach devotional singing in varying ways, the overall goal is the same: to experience peace and connection through music. She emphasized that these similarities should be our focus, more so than the differences. My interpretation of this comment is that in so doing, practitioners can recognize themselves in others and better understand others' methods and perspectives.

During my fieldwork at Peedam I observed participants freely coming and going throughout the *pūja* ritual. Additionally, the majority of onlookers would often leave on-masse at the onset of the private curtained portion, coinciding with the kirtan-*bhajan* performance. Individuals would

often return later, some staying at the nearby guesthouse requested to be notified via group chat as to when the *bhajans* were over, in order to partake in the *ārthi* at the conclusion of the *pūja* ritual. I wondered what kind of impact this had on the kirtan-*bhajans* or the ritual itself and the overall group dynamic. I asked Zoë about this and she shared the following:

> I'm fine with people not staying for *bhajans* and just coming at the end for *theertham*. I understand that after sitting for one hour, most people need to stretch their legs, eat lunch, go to the bathroom etc. They may also have *seva* or other work to do. I myself did not stay in the break until I joined the *bhajan* group. So, people coming and going is ok - as long as they are quiet and respectful while they are inside. I have come to understand over time that Amma's main reason for having *bhajan* chanting and singing at that time is to stop people from chatting inside the hall at that time (while the ritual is still going on.) So, our singing is not the main feature of the program so to speak - it's just something to occupy the minds of the people waiting inside… and to keep the focus on the Divine and not worldly things. We (in the *bhajan* group) all understand that although we are performing for Amma and all the devotees inside the hall, it is not a concert performance. We are the supporting act for Amma at this time. (Zoë Narayani 2018)

I also observed how, as a participant during the kirtan-*bhajans*, I felt more like an audience member than an active participant, less included or invited into the music than what I have experienced in other kirtan. With singers sitting facing a curtain, interaction between the *bhajan* group and onlookers was limited which meant there were no gestural instructions or encouragement to participate. At times, I was not certain whether audience participation was part of the social etiquette or not. Also, words, lyrics and translations were not given out and I struggled at times to hear exactly what was being sung. Perhaps had I grown up in the culture with its tradition, the proper etiquette would have been clearer.

Below are two examples of melodies for kirtan-*bhajans* sung at Peedam.
The first is a transcription of a melody from a recorded excerpt sung by Sri Sakthi Amma called "Jaya Jaya Nārāyanī" (figure 13). It is in 5/8 time and has two main melodic sections, the first A section acting like a refrain where the words remain the same. The words for the B section vary throughout the song. Both the A and B sections are sung in call and response style on the

recording with Sakthi Amma leading the call and a group of singers responding. Listen to an excerpt of "Jaya Jaya Nārāyanī" led by Sakthi Amma and the Peedam *bhajan* group: https://era-av.library.ualberta.ca/media_objects/k930bx92j/section/r494vm26p

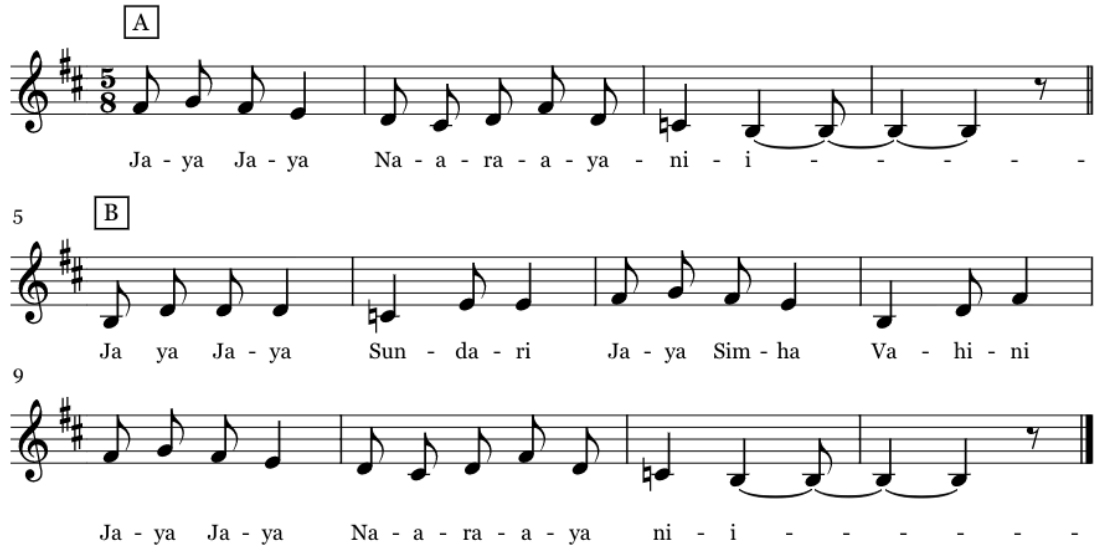


Figure 13: "Jaya Jaya Nārāyanī." Transcribed by author. Track 2 from "Sakthi Geetham 4."

Translation: Victory to Nārāyanī, victory to the beautiful one, the goddess who rides a lion.

The second piece is transcribed from a live recording led by Zoë Narayani (figure 14). By her description, it is a traditional *bhajan* for the deity Gaṇeśa and is composed in *Shubha Pantuvarali rāga*. In the recording, hand percussion (tambourine predominantly) and group clapping creates a contrasting rhythm with the vocal line. Listen to a live excerpt of "Oṃ Enum Pranava Roopa Nayaka" led by Zoë Narayani and the Peedam *bhajan* group. https://era-av.library.ualberta.ca/media_objects/k930bx92j/section/st74cr50c

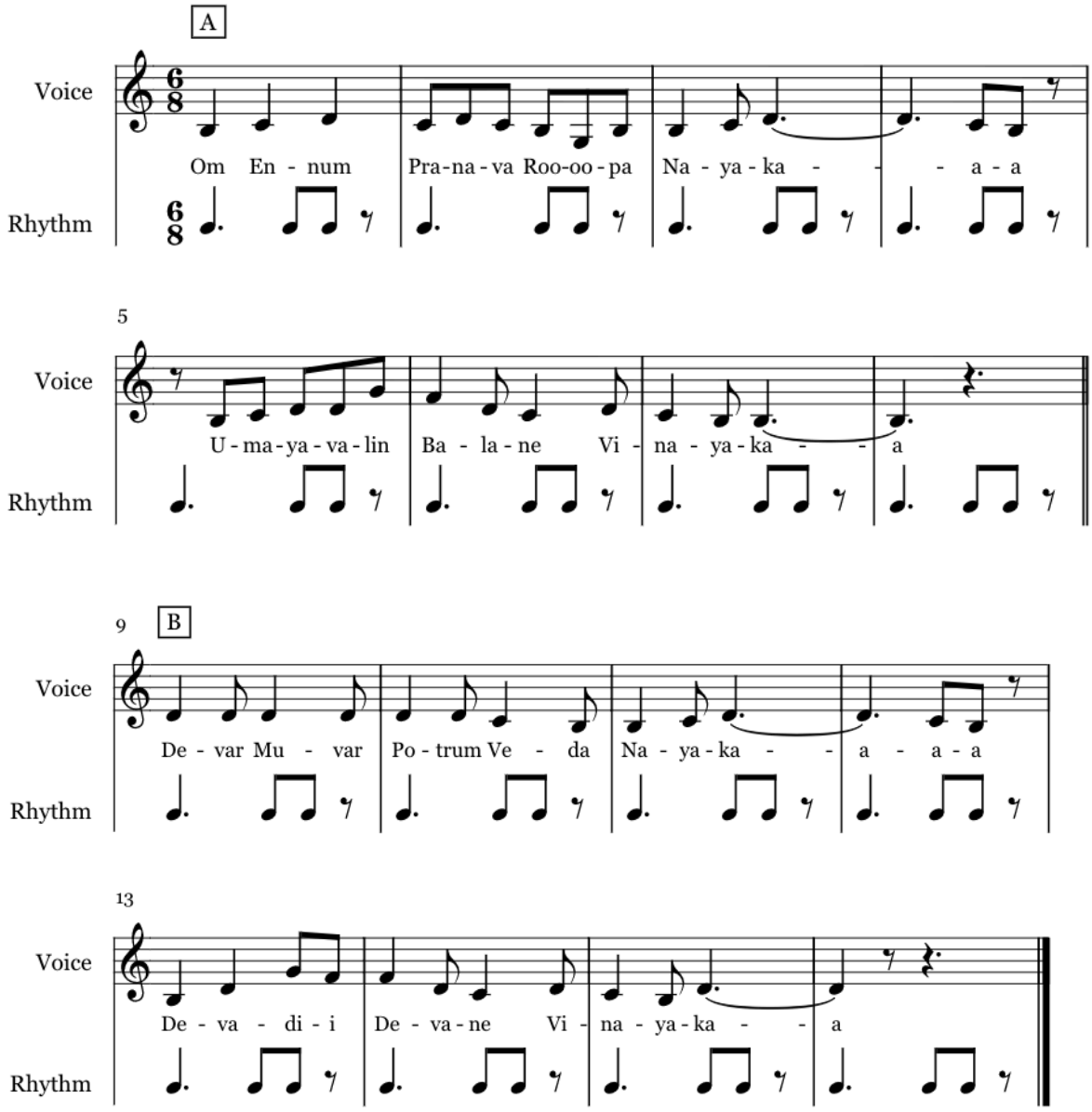


*Figure 14: "*Oṃ *Enum Pranava Roopa Nayaka." Transcribed by author from field recording by Zoë Narayani.*

Translation: Lord Vinayaka, you are the embodiment of *Oṃ*. Oh son of Uma and Śiva, praised by the trinity of gods, you are Lord of Lords and author of the *Vedas*.

5. Shanti Mission and Neo-Kirtan Practices

Shanti Mission - an Australia-based community and charitable organization - utilizes kirtan as a mainstay of their personal development training and spiritual education. *Shanti* is a Sanskrit word meaning peace. The vision for the organization is to foster a more peaceful, loving world by supporting peace within and amongst individuals. Eight pillars have been identified, used as guidelines for their organization and development: Devotion (love and commitment), purification (keeping the mind and body in good condition), meditation (practices that still the mind and expand awareness and focus), 100% responsibility (taking ownership and accountability for one's words, thoughts and actions), virtues (characteristics that support moral excellence), karma (the impact of one's previous behaviour on present), wisdom (cultivating inner knowing), and multi-faith (cultivating diversity in spiritual expression) ("Pillars of Shanti Mission" 2019).

Figure 15: Shanti Mission Community from. https://www.weekendnotes.com/abode-of-peace-ashram-shanti-mission/. Accessed June 14, 2019.

Several Shanti Mission communities (figure 15) exist across Australia in locations such as Melbourne, Sydney and the Canyon Meadows. There is also an active online community and many events and musical meditations can be accessed via Facebook live. Shanti Mission's main headquarters is in Cooranbong, a small town located an hour and a half up the coast, North of Sydney. The majority of this field research was conducted within this community and all the Shanti Mission participants I spoke with have been there if not lived there for a time. Cooranbong is a quiet and relatively small suburban country town comprised mostly of

residences, offering an interesting blend of rural and urban lifestyle with winding roads and lush greenery everywhere. Though there are amenities including a corner store, a deli, a post-office, a clinic and schools – even a college - it lacks a prominent town center, possibly because it is situated next to two other larger communities. Interestingly, Cooranbong is somewhat of a spiritual hub and the home for other communities besides Shanti Mission. There is a Buddhist Temple called *Wat Pah Buddarangsee*, as well as a large Seventh Day Adventist community which comprises about 30% of the town's population. This religious community is one reason Cooranbong still exists and at the turn of the 20th century, it served to boost the population and economy which had been declining due to development and railroad construction a few kilometers east of the town.[9]

One of the overarching objectives of Shanti Mission is to provide practical and accessible opportunities to develop knowledge and personal practices geared to enhance individual development. To accomplish this, they offer experiences ranging from seminars, individual healings, energy healing training, musical meditations, sound healings and rituals, most of which can be accessed online, as well as through books and audio recordings. Seminars are typically held on weekends over the course of one or two days and are geared towards enhancing relationships - for example Relationship Essentials, Finding True Empowerment and Soul Connection - or towards life mastery - such as Dimensions of Wealth and Spiritual Laws of Life (figure 16). Community members can receive an individual healing which they call Ignite Your Spirit (IYS) Therapy, described as "a form of spiritual counseling" ("Ignite Your Spirit Therapy" 2019) from a therapist who has been trained and certified by Shanti Mission in this method. IYS healing training involves four separate seminars where individuals learn about energy centers and how to cleanse and balance these for themselves and others. The skills offered through Shanti Mission are seemingly designed to help people improve overall wellbeing and live more fulfilling lives. "We believe spiritual education and training should go beyond theory and ideas and be highly practical and useful; stuff we can get our teeth into and ground in our lives to make real changes both personally and interpersonally" ("Vision and Philosophy" 2019).

[9] It struck me as interesting that three relatively diverse spiritual groups have congregated and made their home in such a small center like Cooranbong. I can only speculate as to the reason for this.

Satsang or "Musical Meditation" is one of the core events for the Shanti Mission community occurring weekly, typically on Sunday mornings. As there are Shanti Mission centers in various locations throughout Australia, the UK and North America, there is more than one Sunday *satsang*. However, Cooranbong's *satsang* could be considered the main gathering, led most often by Shakti Durga. It consists of kirtan and a specific guided meditation using IYS therapy techniques supported by music.[10]

Shanti Mission is a busy organization and during my stay, there was almost always a workshop or event to attend daily. While there is a financial exchange to participate, with the exception of some of the private healings, most of these are offered on a donation basis. As was explained to me, if an individual is drawn to attend a course, it is better for them to come and pay what they can rather than to miss out for lack of funds. This pay by donation basis is helpful for spiritual aspirants, since pursuing a more dedicated practice can be rather costly in a country like Australia where rent and food are relatively expensive. Further, commitment to learning may involve giving up work or even moving in order to have better access to teachers, lessons and practices. For these reasons, financial requirements could play a role in the demographics of Shanti Mission participants though this requires further investigation.

Figure 16: Spiritual Laws Workshop. Image by author. July 21, 2018: Cooranbong Australia.

[10] For a more detailed description, see chapter four.

Demographics and Diversity

The Shanti Mission community has an expressed intent to support and foster diversity. "We strongly believe that everyone has a unique spiritual path, which is not the same as anyone else's" ("Vision and Philosophy" 2019). I noted an attitude of openness and desire to promote inclusion regardless of age, gender, background, ethnicity or sexual orientation. This expressed desire to support diversity was reflected to a certain extent in the actual demographics of attendees at Shanti Mission's main headquarters in Cooranbong. I observed individuals openly expressing different gender identifications as well as sexual orientations. Further, I noted a relatively wide range in age, including adults from their twenties to seventies; statistics from survey respondents' reported age ranged from thirty-one to seventy-six with an average age of fifty-one. Though children occasionally attend with their parents, the bulk of Shanti Mission community continues to be adults.

The predominant demographic observed at events at Shanti Mission appeared to consist mostly of upper-middle class females of European or settler descent over the age of forty. Though men attend Shanti Mission events - and many Shanti musicians are male - there were always more female than male participants. However, according to Surya Krishna, practitioners who lead their own meditations and courses also attract their own demographic which may be different than this overall demographic; most of his meditations tend have as many males as females in attendance. Though I did not observe a wide range of ethnic diversity within Shanti Mission itself, several members of a Hindu temple from New Castle attended one of the Sunday *satsangs* while I was at Cooranbong, and I was told later that a few Shanti Mission musicians also went to their temple to collaborate. As Australia has a large South Asian presence, centers and temples in nearby cities offering more "traditional" religious practices may potentially contribute to the reduced ethnic diversity observed. Demographic diversity may also be more apparent within Shanti Mission's online community which I did not assess at this time.

Shanti Mission Headquarters: The Abode of Peace

On the evening of the day I arrived in Australia, I was taken by one of my hosts to the "Abode of Peace" (figures 17 and 18), the facility that acts as Shanti Mission's central hub in Cooranbong. This is where a majority of Shanti Mission programming takes place and music meditations are held here every Sunday for participants to attend live or online. The Abode is a large building that used to be a Christian college, and was leased by Shanti Mission in 2015. Located near the end of a tree-lined rural road, the Abode is nestled alongside private acreages, equine farms and forest. Its long driveway borders a large front yard that affords ample space for parking for participants and culminates in a lovely outdoor sitting area at the front of the building. The narrow hallway off the front door opens onto a large gathering space that serves as a common area at the center of the building. This area has chairs and couches for seating and has a wood-burning fireplace, particularly useful on cold winter days in Australia where most buildings are neither insulated nor well heated. Advertisements for upcoming events, posters of affirmations and images of spiritual avatars line the walls of this common area. In the back corner lies a store offering books, CDs and other spiritual paraphernalia ranging from incense and crystals to images of gurus or Hindu deities for sale.

Unlike traditional ashrams, the Abode is more of a center for events and does not offer lodging or places for students to stay. Several Shanti Mission members rent apartments within the complex located right next door to the Abode. Also, the old Shanti Mission center, located roughly a ten-minute walk across a field, has been converted into a retreat center and offers both temporary to more long-term rooms for rent for community members.

Figure 17: The Abode of Peace. Image by author. July 18, 2018: Cooranbong Australia.

The Abode has four main temple spaces: The Durga Temple, the Archangelic temple, the Vedic Temple and the Buddhist Temple. The Buddhist temple is located at the front of the building, to the left of the front entrance; it was under construction during the study. Occupying the full length of the right side of the Abode, the Durga temple (figure 19) is a long rectangular room where musical meditations (*satsangs*), sound healing and weekend workshop courses are held. The space is large enough to easily hold one hundred and fifty to two hundred people. One end of the room houses stacked chairs and cushions to be set up and dismantled for events. The opposite end of the room features a raised stage area, where hangs a picture of Sri Sakthi Amma, Shakti Durga's main teacher at the time of this research.

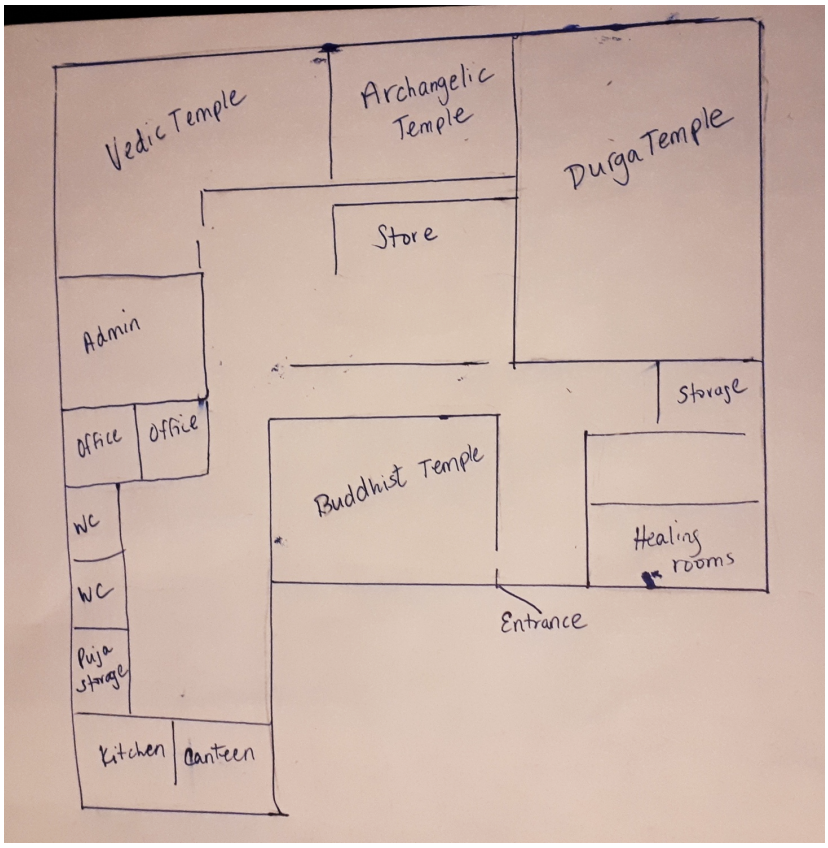


Figure 18: Schematic of the Abode of Peace. Drawn by author on July 14, 2019.

Figure 19: The Durga Temple. Image by author. June 10, 2018: Cooranbong Australia.

Two smaller temple spaces, the Archangelic and Vedic temples respectively, are located at the back end of the building. The Archangelic temple (figure 20) is a bright, white, airy room, used mostly for private meditation and personal reflection. A recording of Shakti Durga's angel

prayer plays continuously and the room is scented with frankincense. The space honours the Judeo-Christian traditions and all four Archangels are represented (Michael, Rafael, Gabriel, Uriel), each with a different altar station in four separate corners of the room. The main wall portrays an image of Jesus, an image of Mary and an image of sacred geometry between them. Below this sits an altar with a statue of an angel and various crystals. In the center of the space is a circle of illuminated crystal stones. On my first visit to the room, I paused in front of the stones for a moment of quiet contemplation, taking in the surroundings. Hanumani, who was still leading my tour, described a practice they suggest for the space. She instructed me to enter the circle of lighted crystal along the left, to come to the center and make a prayer or ask a question, to spin around clockwise and stand in contemplation and then to exit on the right side. I gave it a try, asking for assistance and success in completing this fieldwork.

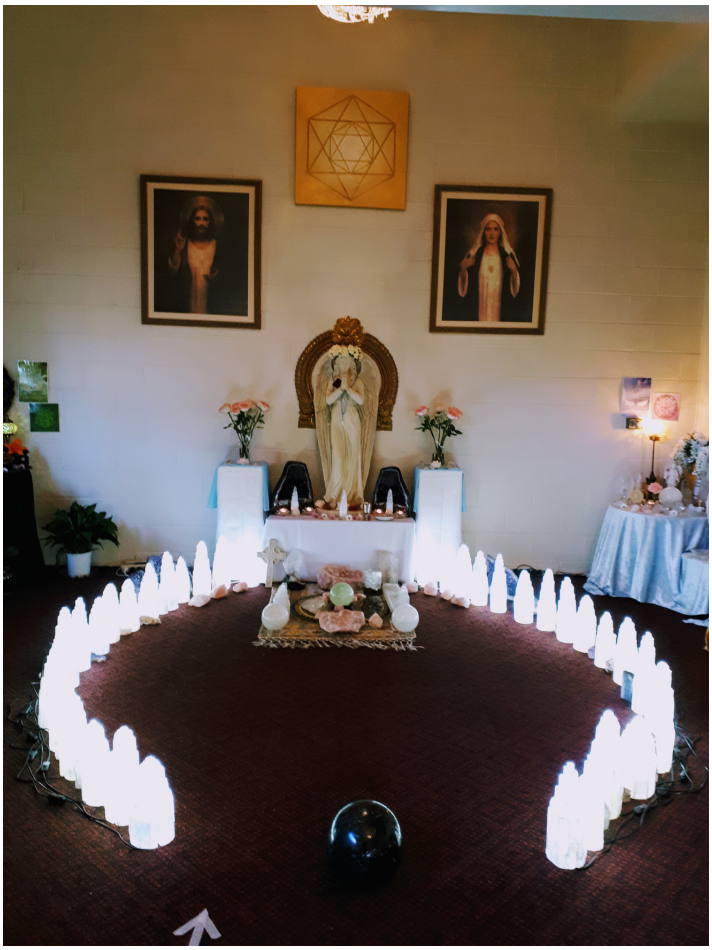


Figure 20: Archangelic Temple. Image by author. June 28, 2018: Cooranbong Australia.

The following morning, I explored the Vedic temple (figures 21 and 22) after participating in a *japa*-mantra ritual led in the space by Shakti Durga. This temple space is where most of the rituals (such as *pūjas* and *abhiṣekam*) take place. It is filled with a variety of Hindu deities, iconography and images honouring different Vedic-Hindu Gods and Goddesses including Durga, Śiva, Sarasvati, Lakshmi, Gaṇeśa, Vishnu and others. Red and orange are the thematic colours and the scent of incense mixed with ghee wafts through the air. The walls are lined with several photos and Hindu deities as well as spiritual teachers including Sathya Sai Baba, Sri Sakthi Amma and Shakti Durga. This was my first encounter with Shakti Durga on this trip and she verbally acknowledged me at the *pūja*, welcoming me to their community. Listen to a Lakshmi *pūja* at Shanti Mission:
https://era-av.library.ualberta.ca/media_objects/k930bx92j/section/jh343t28m

Several smaller rooms distributed around the Abode are used for purposes like meetings, event and preparation or individual healings, treatments where members from the community receive assistance and support from Shanti Mission's Ignite Your Spirit (IYS) Therapists. There is a kitchen to the left side of the building, connected with a canteen where lunches, snacks and beverages are prepared and offered for sale during events and weekend courses. The large office administration space housed in the back corner of the building is where a dozen Shanti Mission members work part time to support the organization through tasks including accounting and marketing of Shanti Mission and its many projects.

Figure 21: The Vedic Temple. Image by author. August 2, 2018: Cooranbong Australia.

Figure 22: Altar in the Vedic Temple. Image by author. June 29, 2018: Cooranbong Australia.

What brings people to Shanti Mission?

Shanti Mission attracts individuals with a wide range of experience in spiritual practice. It seems to function most effectively as a bridge for individuals exploring spirituality even for the first time or who are seeking to pursue transpersonal concepts and healing in ways they had not

previously considered or studied. The majority of interviewees indicated that, while they had "dabbled" with certain concepts and teachings, Shanti Mission was their first substantial exposure and commitment to spirituality of any form including mainstream religion. Further, not everyone comes to Shanti Mission initially buying in to the idea of spirituality and alternative practices, especially when it comes to kirtan. Survey respondents (unpublished data 2018) shared:

> "I have gone from being a skeptic to teaching about the Divine and our energy bodies."
>
> "At first I found it (the kirtan) uncomfortable and too much even though I loved it elsewhere."[11]

Shanti Bhavan (2018) called herself a "card carrying skeptic." Though she had always admired those who had faith she did not think this was something she was capable of. She also found singing with other people and the church-reminiscent structure of Shanti Mission somewhat confronting and uncomfortable. She has since found much benefit from the school and now feels quite comfortable with group singing. Similarly, though she now loves the kirtan experience, Hanumani also had initial challenges with it. She found the kirtan hard to follow because of the continuous change in the music, that it was very different from what she had been used to. Laxmi Maa shared that she initially felt a lot of resistance both to the music as well as to the healing work, largely because it was different than what she had experienced previously. She had personal judgements about a "spiritual teacher who sings on stages" and fear because of a misunderstanding from other teachings (Laxmi Maa 2018). She has since realized her early impressions of Shanti Mission were distorted by these learned beliefs and expectations.

Some participants discovered Shanti Mission through family and friends also attending and participating. Maitreya came to Shanti Mission with his partner at the time, having noticed positive shifts in her mood after her attendance. He admitted to being hesitant at first about kirtan, "what are they going on about?" (Maitreya 2018a) but then began to feel positive changes in himself, that he was less tired and had a higher level of energy. Stellar Maya first became interested in Shanti Mission because of her mother, having noticed that she seemed "lighter and

[11] Though I am speculating, this last comment could be because Shanti Mission kirtan often involves other processes and techniques beyond simply the music practice itself, further described in Chapter five.

brighter" since attending (Stellar Maya 2018). Stellar Maya's first introduction to Shanti Mission was through the community healing clinic where she was treated by a student of IYS Therapy. She appreciated the acceptance and lack of judgement she received from the practitioner and felt drawn to return. Another anonymous participant experienced a series of crisis events and received a healing from a Shanti Mission practitioner. This helped her find relief and to move through some beliefs she deemed were holding her back. Over time, chanting mantra has "hands down" become the most transformative aspect for her.

Though individuals become involved with a community like Shanti Mission for a variety of reasons, some general patterns emerged in conversation and in studying the survey results. Most respondents claimed they were drawn to Shanti Mission because they were looking for an outlet to nurture their spirituality, to learn to meditate and for guidance or spiritual support. Though more and more offer meditation techniques in New South Wales, Shanti Mission appears to be a particularly musical choice since all their events incorporate music and singing in a variety of forms. Several respondents also mentioned that kirtan and singing were draws to the organization. Shanti Mission also provides a kind of balance between structure and liberal openness through offering regular consistent events, practices and techniques, while welcoming multiple streams of spiritual expression and different types of religion. This can be attractive to individuals who are wary of religion but who long for the support of community and the stability of structure. One anonymous survey respondent brought up in the Catholic tradition joined Shanti Mission because she said she needed to find God through spirituality rather than through religion. Three survey respondents also indicated that they came to Shanti Mission for connection with other people or to create community, both of which are prominent component of this organization.

Most participants initially came to Shanti mission while in the midst of a crisis or challenging time. A crisis period is a common time for people to turn to practices with spiritual or alternative influences, especially if other more secular, mainstream or bio-medical approaches have failed. More than half of the survey respondents indicated that they came in search of assistance, specifically in the form of emotional issues (four people), health issues/illness (three people),

addiction recovery support (one person), or because life was generally challenging (four people). Words such as "darkness," "low point," "feeling stuck," "depression," and "loss" were common amongst explanations both in interviews and as keywords in the survey. For many, this crisis was expressed as emotional distress and sometimes presented as difficulty in relationships. Surya Rose had been on medication for anxiety and depression for years and came to Shanti Mission in the midst of a difficult time in her primary relationship. Other participants such as Adi Dass and Niranjanaaya arrived while going through a divorce and came to work through their emotions and habits, which they felt were reflected in the dissolving marriage. Even Shakti Durga's spiritual journey began as a result of searching for support for the depression and anxiety she experienced after a difficult divorce. A few interviewees also spoke of working on recovery from different forms of addiction. "I was an angry, unhappy drug addicted human blaming others for my unhappiness" said Patches (2018). Ultimately, people seem to come to a community like Shanti Mission deliberately in order to help change aspects of life and improve wellbeing in order to grow as human beings. As Shakti Durga has said, "Shanti Mission is a group of people who are seekers of the meaning of life … (we) churn our life problems through the various practices." ("Vision and Philosophy" 2019).

Multi-faith at Shanti Mission

As one of the eight main pillars of the organization, Shanti Mission strives to offer a multi-faith approach, one that recognizes the variability and individuality in expression of spirituality. As Shakti Durga expressed during a musical meditation, "No matter what we practice, no matter what faith, creed, sect whatever that we belong to, we all meet in the end at the one… everybody's welcome here because we all have hearts and we can all love more than we have before" (Musical Meditation (*Satsang*) Three 2018, 0:02 – 0:35). A multi-faith approach means to accept and study across the different faiths and traditions, weaving together commonalities to develop a unified path. As such, Shanti Mission accesses eclectic modalities, and incorporates teachings and rituals from several traditions including Hinduism, Christianity, Kabbalah, Western Mystery Schools, Neo Paganism, Taoism and Buddhism as well as the many live teachers Shakti Durga has worked with over the years. "Buddhism, Christianity, Paganism, Vedic… come find your flavour. We are holding a vision that Shanti Mission can allow spaciousness for difference," said Hamsa Devi (2018).

Spirituality at Shanti Mission does not require a set concept of God nor affiliation with organized religion. "Some people think that to be spiritual involves religion and this can be off-putting depending on the person's history," said Patches (2018). "There is a spark of light in each of us and the Spiritual is within, finding the spark of light, spirit of you. So, finding the truth of yourself and Consciousness is spiritual development and health." Long-time Shanti Mission participant Hanumani was an atheist for many years and even still has difficulty with the concept of an external God. She does however believe in a higher order and considers spirituality to be one of the most important things in her life. "There's more to life than just the physical in that we also have a higher self or soul. It also has to do with ethics and doing good, believing in karma, and that there is some kind of order in the universe" (Hanumani 2018).

While their faith approach is eclectic and diverse, interestingly, Islamic traditions are not mentioned or present in any Shanti Mission teachings. Observing the larger cultural climate, most Islamic practices also seem to be treated differently in places such as North America and Australia and have not infiltrated Spiritual but not Religious practices in the same way Buddhist or Hindu traditions have. Further, other than the inclusion of a *didjeridu* (also known as the *yidaki*, a long tubular drone instrument native to Australian Indigenous cultures) in one of their pieces, I also did not observe acknowledgement or incorporation of Indigenous Aboriginal practices. Many of the programs I observed at Shanti Mission tended to rely heavily on South Asian influences, namely *Vedic* (*Brahmanical*) and *Tantric* spiritual and religious artifacts. An example of this influence is the number of *pūja* ritual practices that take place regularly at Shanti Mission primarily in the form of fire *pūja* (figure 23) and *abhiṣekam*. Another example is the heavy reliance on Sanskrit mantra across practices as well as the Sanskrit spiritual names given to Shanti Mission devotees.

Figure 23: Pūja. Image by author. July 9, 2018: Cooranbong, Australia.

Despite the predominance of these South Asian Hindu influenced practices, I did observe and experience multi-faith and diverse practice. I found some old program notes at the Shanti Mission Abode describing the proceedings for what had been a spring time Pentecostal celebration invoking the Archangels and Jesus. Social media advertisements mention events such as an Easter retreat, a course about mysticism and Celtic deities and a *Wesak* meditation celebrating Buddha on the full moon in May. I also attended a winter solstice event in June. This was an evening gathering similar in structure to other musical meditations (*satsangs*) though since the winter solstice was originally a pagan celebration based around yule, the event was layered with themes from nature traditions. The overall theme was about utilizing the dark, or the "bruises of life," like a womb from which to be nurtured and grow. Stories were shared, such as that of the pagan goddess Persephone in the underworld, and songs were in mostly in English and had a Celtic flavour, supported by two harps and the synthesizer. Unlike some other musical meditations, this one evoked more stillness and quiet, producing a deeply calming experience.

A final observation regarding Shanti Mission's multi-faith approach is the way participants utilized terms such as "East" or "West" when addressing philosophical paradigms and even musical styles. Such ideas and generalized divisions are constructions of sorts, deemed

problematic as they can be essentializing and inaccurate. Identifying exactly what classifies as "Eastern" or "Western" can be challenging, especially in this current more connected global community. Several individuals practice and have contributed to the evolution of "Eastern" religions in North America, just as Christianity is practiced by individuals all over the world. Further, Buddhism and Hinduism are both considered "Eastern" yet are quite different in their conception and practice; placing them together under the same umbrella is not necessarily sensible. Nevertheless, individuals at Shanti Mission seem to perceive this East – West division. Noting this frame of reference sheds some light on their emphasis on a multi-faith approach and provides understanding as to why an eclectic, even syncretic, approach might be seen as beneficial within the community and necessary for the world at large.

Neo-Kirtan at Shanti Mission

Neo-kirtan is one of the primary music forms applied across various Shanti Mission classes, meditations and events. The deliberate choice to rely on this music form, which is still relatively outside of Australian mainstream culture, is evidence that something about neo-kirtan is supportive of their mission to facilitate personal transformation, and inner awareness. The term neo-kirtan has been my addition while the Shanti Mission community simply calls this music kirtan. However, as I will explain, the way neo-kirtan is presented at Shanti Mission, it is clearly a fusion which allows it to act as a mediating or bridging form between South Asian and Australian pop culture.

Shakti Durga did not initially intend to use music and singing. However, she spontaneously began singing one day while teaching and songs and sounds or tones would suddenly come out of her "when spirit got strong" (Shakti Durga a 2018). She explained how, at first, she used more "Western paradigms" such as referring to angels and singing hallelujah though when she was introduced to mantra in Bali at the Hindu temple, it resonated with her such that the effect was "bliss evoking" (Shakti Durga a 2018). Finding it easy to "slide into an expanded state using sound and mantra," she could feel the monks in the temple utilizing music mantra to practice their faith, as an expression of their love of the divine (*bhakti*) and not as entertainment.

Neo-kirtan is led by Shakti Durga and a rotating roster of about fifteen musicians who offer live musical support at Shanti Mission events. Most have had prior performing experience, playing or singing in other contexts or with other groups and have come to be involved with music at Shanti Mission by expressing an interest and obtaining approval from Shakti Durga. Many have made recordings as individuals, duos or small groups and these are used during events in cases where no musicians are available to play live. Every Shanti Mission event includes music in some form with performers or band members changing from event to event, dependant on who is around and available to play. Shanti musicians can be seen and heard playing during workshops seminars, for sound healings, kirtan events and *satsang* musical meditation which tends to draw the largest group of musicians at once. The *satsangs* I observed typically had six to eight musicians playing and singing together.

Most of the kirtan pieces used at Shanti Mission are those composed by Shanti musicians. Composers reported being given creative freedom around their work, encouraged to develop pieces highlighting individuality in their own musical styles. This heightened level of freedom also comes through in the way the kirtan pieces are performed. Though at times the musicians are asked to play specific songs, the set list is typically unplanned and songs are selected in response to the theme of the course or particular meditation it is supporting. Though I observed the musicians rehearsing in preparation for a live recording, this is apparently a rarity. Instead of formal practices, musicians either familiarize themselves with the more frequently played kirtan pieces, read from a book of charts (figures 24 and 25) or simply utilize their skill at playing music by ear, joining in as they feel they can during the performance. According to Veena Vaani, though different kirtan leaders may sing the same chant, they all have creative license to change it, to improvise and to sing it in their own way. Kirtan for her is more mutable, especially in comparison to Christian hymns which are devotional but usually more set, in terms of their form. One participant called kirtan a multi-interpretive music form, reflecting this reduced emphasis on singing a piece exactly as written. Niranjanaaya underlined the importance of this "in the moment" quality for kirtan musicians. In his opinion, to be a Shanti Mission kirtan artist requires the ability to be flexible and adaptable. Rather than creating a predetermined song list, choosing music spontaneously allows it to better reflect the mood of the day and to better serve the particular group of participants present.

Moola Mantra (G)

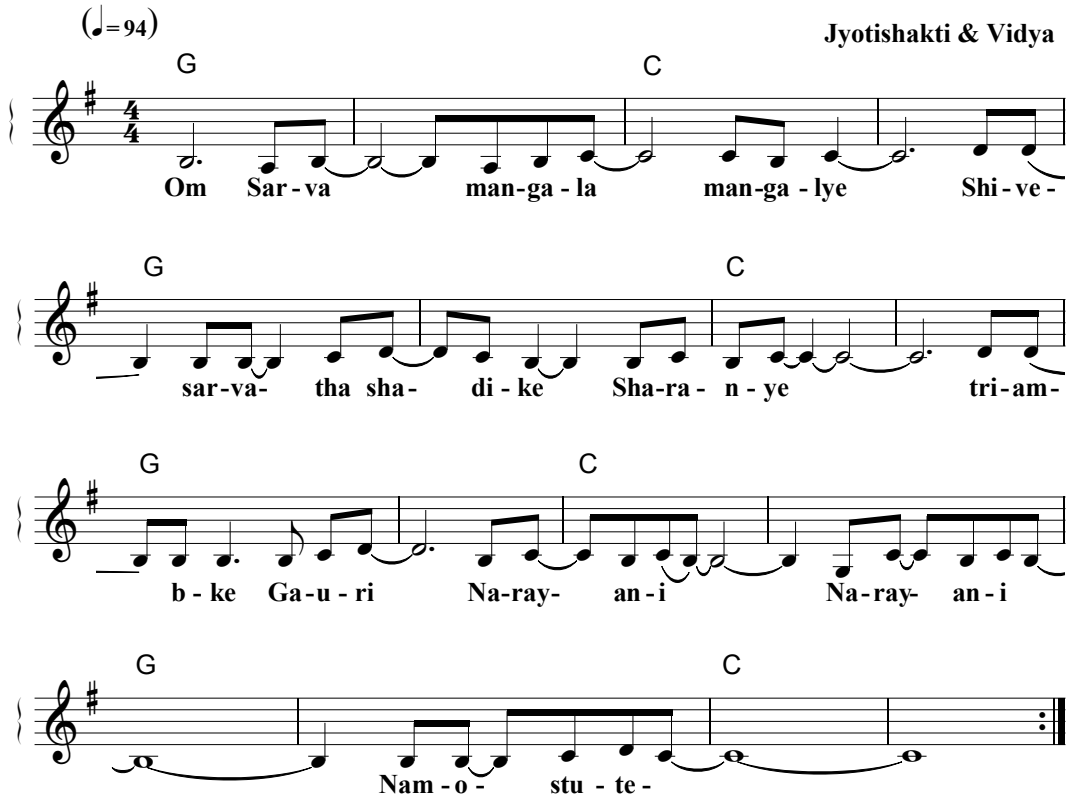


Figure 24: "Moola Mantra." Text from the Devi Mahatmyam, melody by Jyotishakti and Vidya. Transcribed by Veena Vaani

Moola Mantra (G)

Music Jyotishakti & Vidya 07 07 16

```
G                C
Om Sarva mangala  mangalye

     G                          C
Shive  sarvatha shadike Sharanye

     G                 C
Triam-bke Gauri Naray-ani

        G              C
Narayani    Namostute
```

Figure 25: Simplified chart of "Moola Mantra" by Jyotishakti and Vidya.

Translation: Adoration to that Goddess who is the auspiciousness of all that is auspicious. She who is the consort of Lord Śiva (the three eyed one), the sister of Vishnu with fair skin. She bestows every desire of one's heart. We take refuge and salute you.[12]

Despite the enhanced freedom in the music, I observed a few patterns in the choices of kirtan pieces used at Shanti Mission. Out of twelve events I attended with kirtan, nine of them opened with a version of a Gaṇeśa kirtan (explained as a mantra for removing obstacles). The other three opened with a mantra invoking Sri Sakthi Amma and a kirtan piece invoking the Ganges river, explained to also have cleansing properties. In addition, several of these *satsangs* also included a piece referring to the Goddess Kali during the opening portion, sung to invoke courage to go against difficulties or personal demons. Though the tendency to sing a piece that includes Gaṇeśa near the opening of an event is not specific to Shanti Mission, as Savitur (2018) explained, at Shanti Mission, "A Ganesh mantra helps prepare the group attitude and creates an environment supportive of cleansing. This helps create receptivity for healing in the guided meditation." I also noticed a tendency at Shanti Mission to end sessions with upbeat kirtan pieces, often set in major keys with more energetic, quicker tempos that emphasize an increase in intensity towards the end.

Most Shanti Mission pieces tend towards a small melodic range. Those with broader range tended to be reserved for solo sections for musicians, happening only on occasion. Another example of singing with a slightly broader melody is when Shakti Durga offers what her students refer to as a "singing discourse," where she delivers teachings in poetic lines spontaneously sung as an improvised solo melody (figure 26). Further, Shanti mission kirtan tended to accomplish a change in intensity more often through dynamic volume, increasing the amount of percussion and other instrumentation, rather than changes of tempo. A possible explanation for this is that it is easier to coordinate with larger groups of musicians playing together.

While I observed kirtan chants offered in Sanskrit, Hebrew and English languages, most of the kirtan material seemed to be predominantly influenced by *Vedic* and Sanskrit traditions. In a kirtan concert on June 10th, 2018, nine of the ten pieces were in Sanskrit, three had additional

[12] Translation by the author

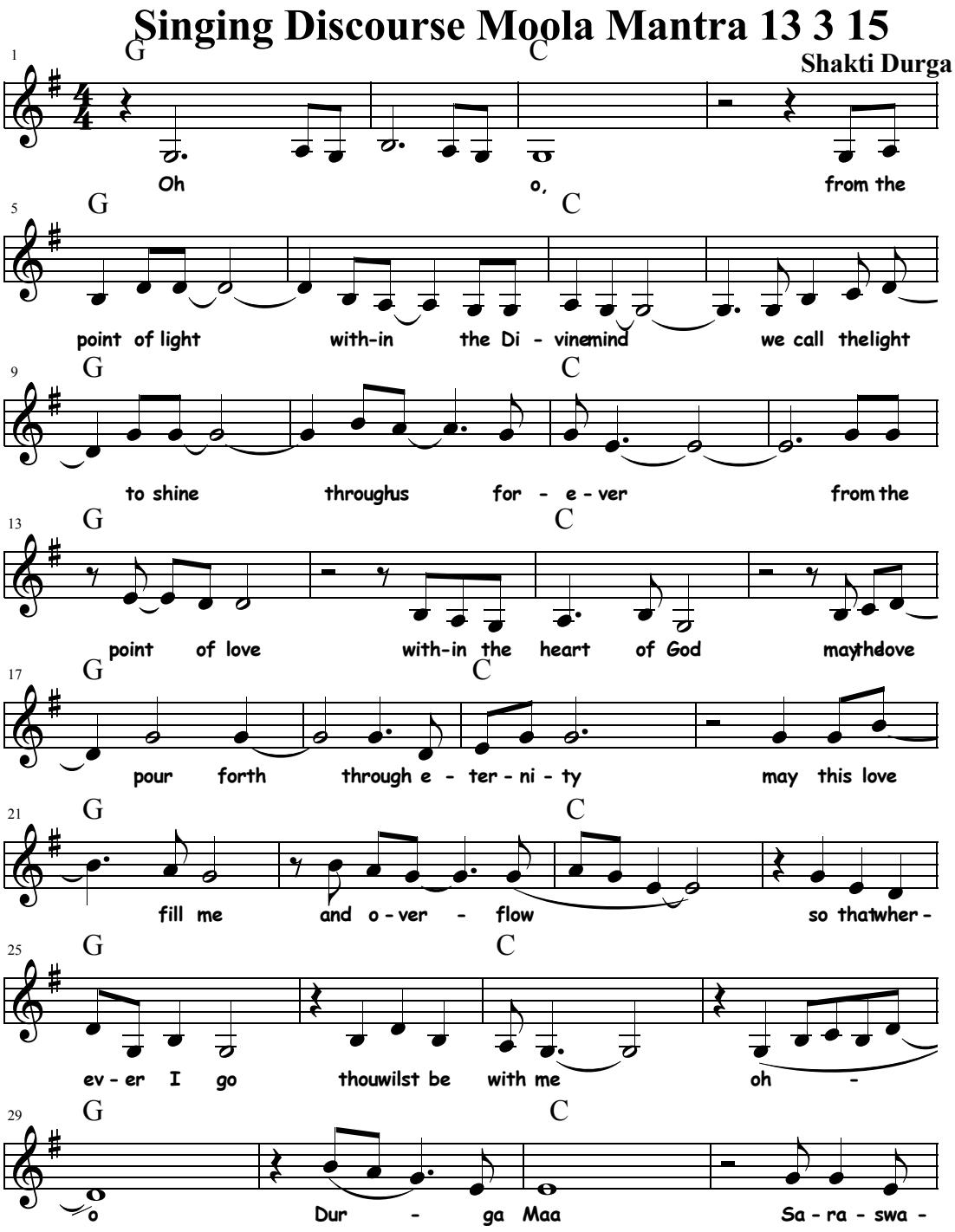


Figure 26: Partial Transcription of a Singing Discourse. Transcribed by Veena Vaani.

English lyrics added to the mantras and one of the songs was in Hebrew. However, though the kirtans mostly featured Sanskrit mantras, the music at Shanti Mission was not characteristically South Asian in style. Chants tended to be highly harmonically composed, with pieces in both major and minor modalities, some with modulations. Noted in observation and confirmed by Veena Vaani, both Aeolian and Mixolydian modes, with characteristic lowered seventh notes, were particularly favoured at the time of this research. In Veena Vaani's opinion, they draw on Aeolian mode as it gives a smoother, more deepening experience than the harmonic minor while Mixolydian mode has a dreamy, unresolved quality. Additionally, most of the instruments favoured were those more often associated with Western popular music for example, the synthesizer, acoustic and electric guitar, bass, and percussion instruments such as shakers and tambourine and djembe or cajon drums. Instruments considered to be more traditionally South Asian, such as sitar, tabla or harmonium, though used frequently by other neo-kirtan artists such as Krishna Das and Dave Stringer, did not often appear in Shanti Mission music. Though this might be explained by the ability and availability of certain musicians, a few individuals in the community own harmoniums which could be easily learned by a keyboard player. There was no evidence of musicians being guided to learn South Asian instruments - a common and respected practice amongst many spiritual aspirants who take an interest in Indian philosophies and practices. Through informal conversation, a few individuals pointed to an overall aesthetic at Shanti Mission, one that leans more towards certain "Western" popular or new age sounds. Though this was not confirmed by Shakti Durga, one individual cautioned about playing blues chords and styles, as, in her opinion, this was also not in keeping with the aesthetic at Shanti Mission.

This sonic rooting of South Asian language and culture within the familiarity of contemporary, folk and new age genres and instruments supports the notion that Shanti Mission functions as a bridge between Australian settler communities and multi-cultural perspectives. Merging potentially foreign practices with familiar music can make the experience more palatable and more easily received by newcomers. Furthermore, beyond appealing to other individuals, playing music that is reflective of one's own history, experience and taste rather than forcing a style for appearance or for tradition's sake is, in my opinion, an important part of musical artistry.

The following is structural analysis of "Jai Ganesh[13]," a kirtan song written by Maitreya and excerpted from "Musical Meditation (*Satsang*) Four" from August 19, 2018. This song was used in almost all of the Shanti Mission kirtan related events I attended. Along with musical notation, highlighting the melody and basic harmonic structure, I have included notes offering a few performance details. Accompanying this analysis is a video link of "Jai Ganesh" from *Musical Meditation (Satsang) Four.*"
https://era-av.library.ualberta.ca/media_objects/k930bx92j/section/ng451j448

"Jai Ganesh" from Musical Meditation *Satsang* on August 19, 2018

Maitreya: 2:25 "So just relaxing your body… and We're going to sing together… I'll do the first chant then everyone sing back *Oṃ gaṃ gaṇapataye namaha* to clear the path"

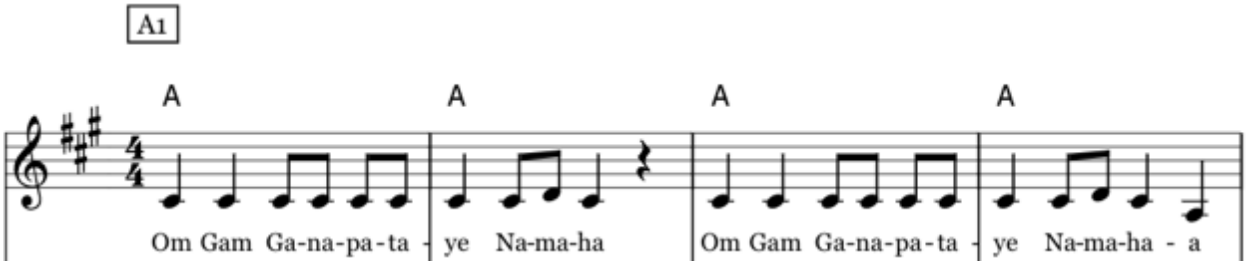
Intro – Oms: 2:43 – 3:12

- Long *Oṃ* sung twice by Maitreya on the tonic note 'A.' Harmonized *Oṃ* sung by Shakti Durga
- Acoustic guitar is prominent, playing a line that foreshadows the melody of the chant.
- Lead electric guitar plays a solo descant complementary to the acoustic guitar.

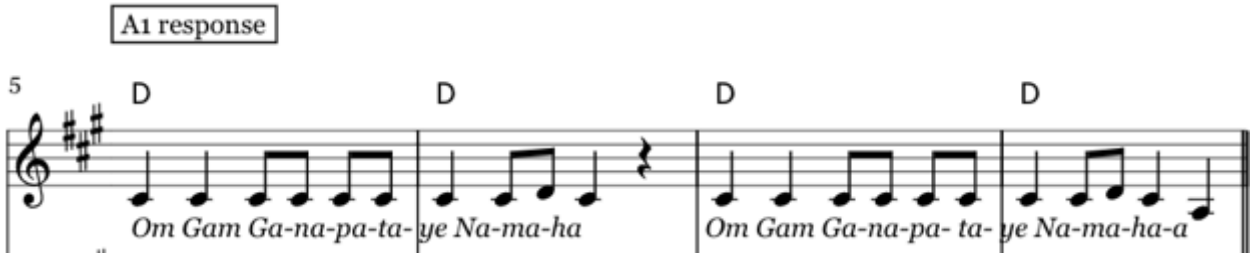
A1 section 3:13

"*Oṃ gaṃ gaṇapataye namaha*" call and response repeated twice.

- Guitar accompaniment emphasizing the tonic note.
- The A tonic chord sustains throughout the call and switches to a suspended D chord for the response, highlighting the tonic through the subdominant.



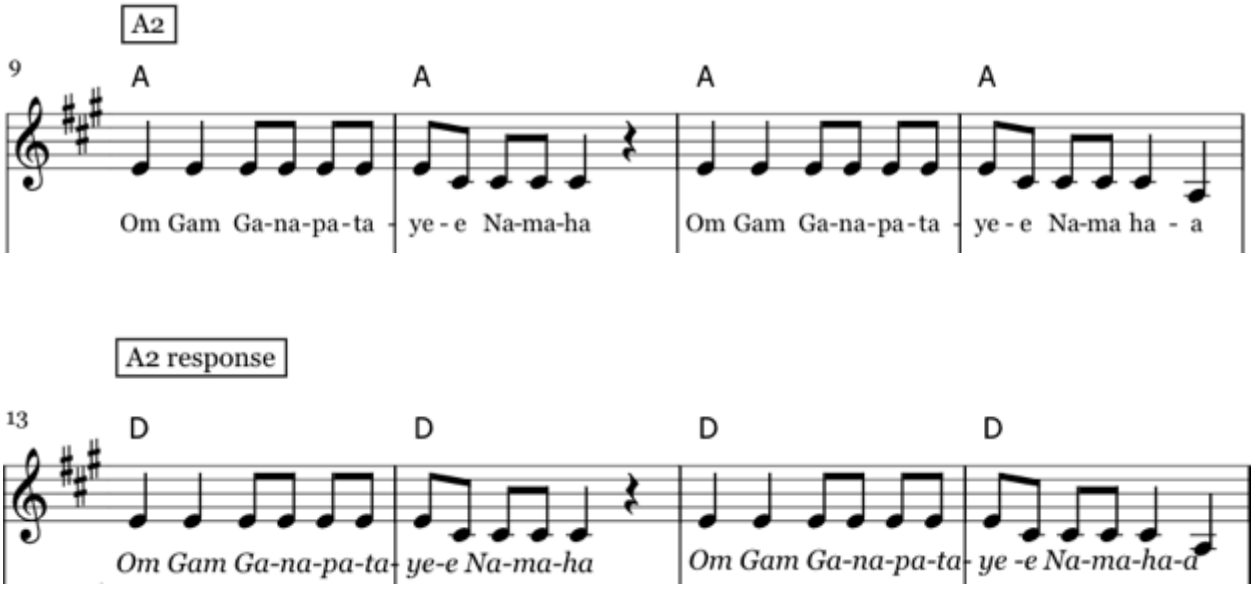
[13] Ganesh is used in this case as this is the spelling of the title of the song used by the composer. It is also a familiar spelling of the term outside of South Asian contexts. Ganesha and Gaṇeśa are used interchangeably throughout this work to acknowledge both common neo-kirtan and more formal uses of the term.



A2 Section 3:46

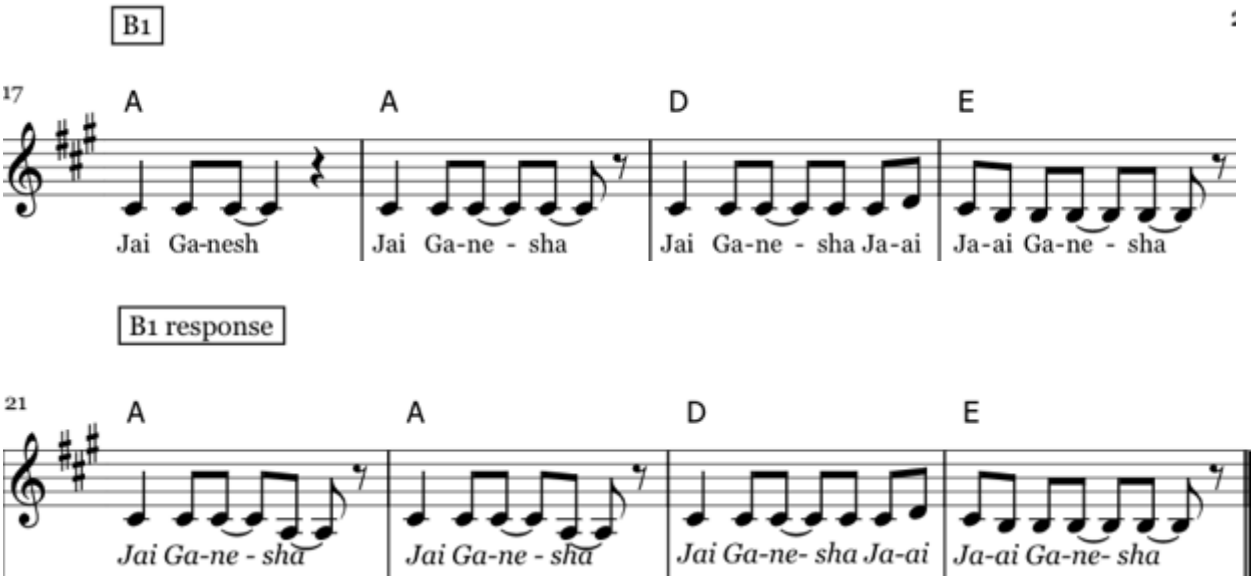
"*Oṃ gaṃ gaṇapataye namaḥ.*" This variation on the melody is repeated twice in call-response

- Piano becomes more prominent in the musical support.
- Like in the A1 section, the tonic chord sustains throughout the call and switches to a suspended D chord (subdominant).



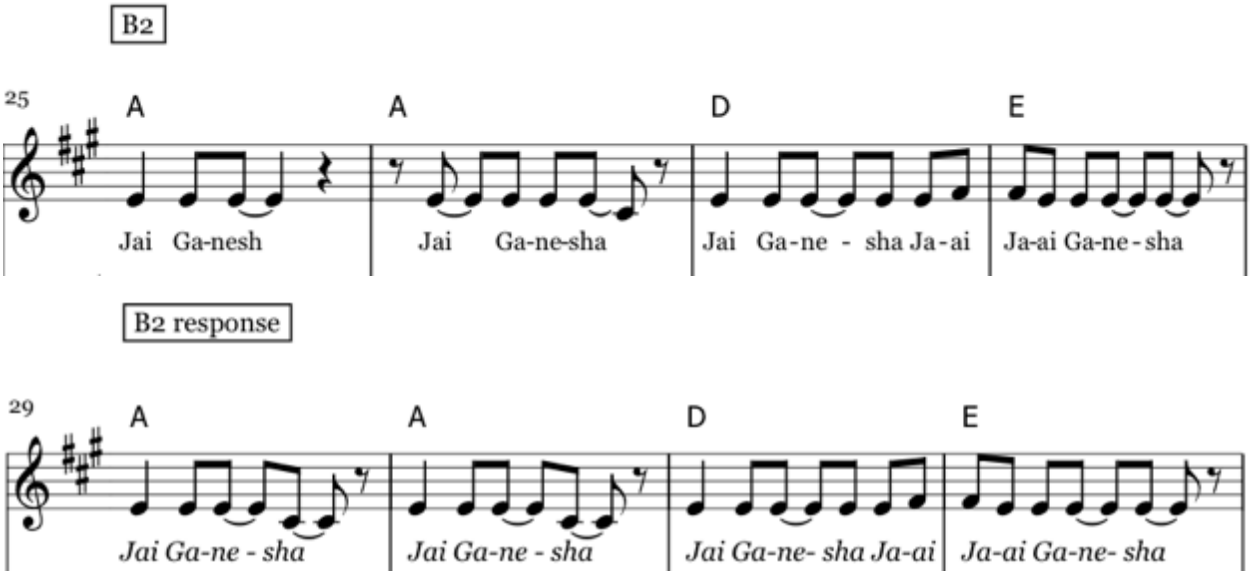
B1 Section and response. 4:20

- "Jai Ganesha" call and Response repeated once.
- Maitreya sings a descant during the response on the word *'jai'* (he indicates the word means victory)
- Supporting instruments drop in volume and texture during the call
- Response melody is slightly different than call.



B2 section and response. 4:37

- Call and response repeated twice.
- As in the B1 section, the call and response are melodically slightly different.
- Maitreya sings a descant during the response
- Shakti Durga singing harmonies through the call and the response
- *Staccato* in the supporting guitar during the call. Other instruments join in on the response



A1 Section Revisited. **5:11**

- Call and response both repeated twice.
- Maitreya delivers the melody of the call up an octave.
- The word '*hari*' is added before the *Oṃ*
- Piano and acoustic and electric guitar continue to support. The acoustic guitar is played with steady strong strums. The piano line is more melodic and uses higher ranges of the piano.

A2 Section Repeated 5:42

- Call and response repeated twice.
- on the second call, Maitreya speeds up "*gaṃ gaṇapataye*" stylistically

B1 section and response. 6:15

- Call and response repeated twice.
- Maitreya becomes more liberal with the melody
- Shakti Durga sings a descant and harmony during the call and response

B2 section and response. 6:48

- Call and response repeated twice.
- As in the earlier B1 section, the call and response are minimally different.
- All vocals are becoming louder
- Supporting instruments increasing in volume and texture

C section 7:20 (break down)

- *Oṃ gaṃ gaṇapataye namaḥ* Call and responses twice
- The music shifts, breaks into softer dynamics, fewer instruments and a change in guitar strumming pattern.
- Call is half the length of the A or B sections

Musical interlude 7:38

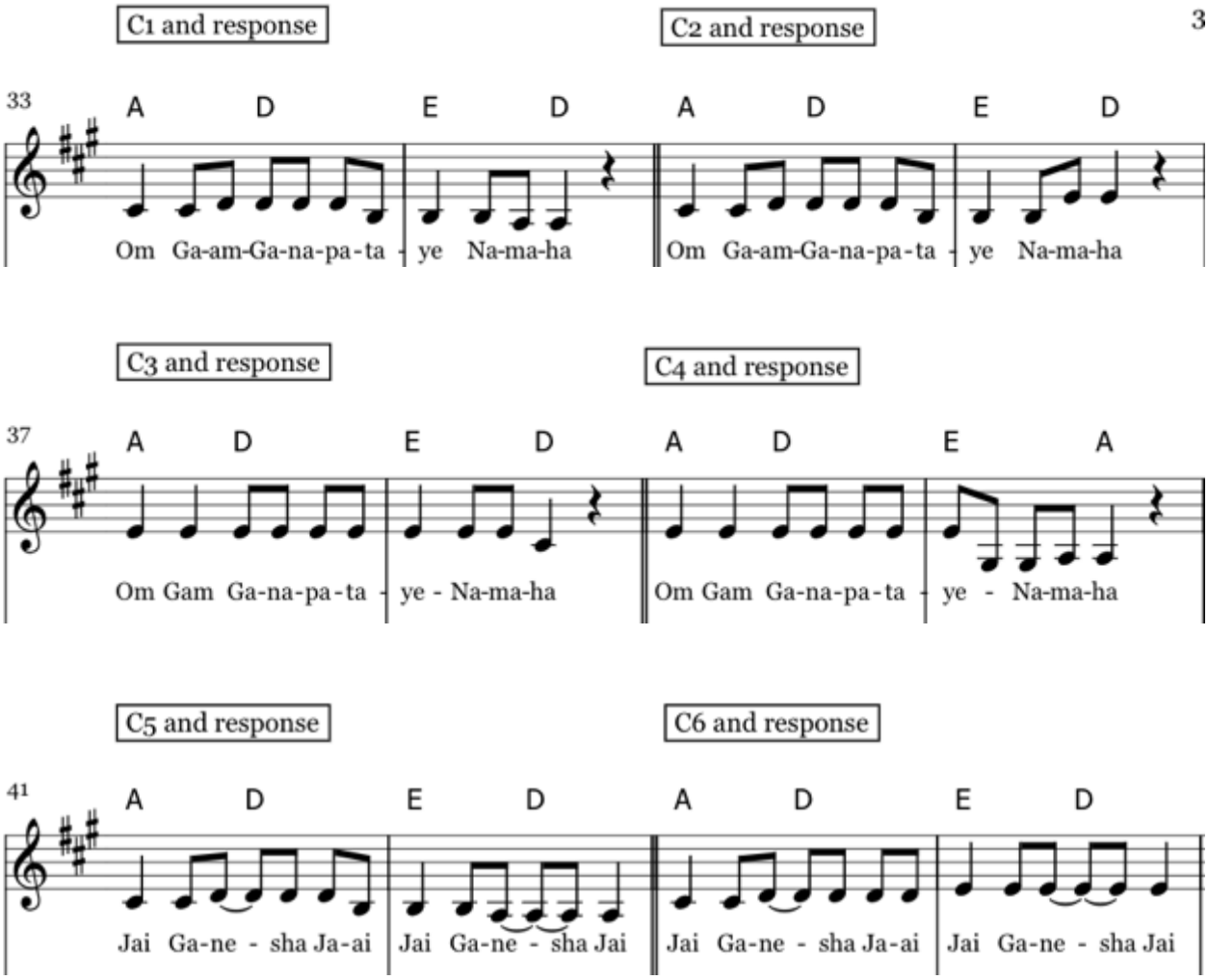
- Solo electric guitar, supported by acoustic guitar and piano. The music reflects the chords of C sections

C section and variations 8:12

- Call and response continues

- Melodically, Maitreya changes amidst the different versions of *Oṃ gaṃ gaṇapataye namaha*, mostly adding variation towards the end of the phrases.

- Call is half the length of the A and B sections: this adds to the intensity and energy of this portion.



Outro C1 variation 9:18

- "*Oṃ gaṃ gaṇapataye namaḥ*" call and response twice at a reduced speed.

- To end, a slow repetition of the C1 section sung by all leads into silence. The etiquette following kirtan pieces is to maintain silence after the piece is completed

ANALYSIS of KIRTAN COMPONENTS ACROSS TRADITIONS

Combining what has been described in the cases above with other observations of kirtan, the following is a synthesis of the more frequently encountered or typical musical and cultural characteristics of neo-kirtan. First, I will address characteristics common to kirtan in general followed by an overview of the characteristics more typical of neo-kirtan and how these differ from South Asian kirtan. While acknowledging that for every tendency named below there are exceptions, my intent is to present a general picture of neo-kirtan to better understand and recognize it.

Echoic call and response communal singing. The pervasive use of call and response singing is one of the hallmarks of kirtan in all traditions and forms. Typically, one person leads the kirtan piece and the group responds by singing back, though the responsibility of leading may be shared by several people and the response may also be facilitated by several response leaders or musicians. In kirtan, the response is most often a direct echo of the call. This distinguishes it from many other kinds of participatory music making, such as Christian congregational music where everyone sings together or other forms of call response singing where the group response is different from what was initially called.

Participatory and egalitarian emphasis. By its very nature, kirtan requires active group participation in singing in order to qualify as a kirtan rather than another type of music offering. Though it can have solo sections, I have not observed a kirtan event conducted entirely as a solo performance. There is also often diminished distinction between performer and audience with an attitude of inclusion. Though potentially never completely equal, the inclusion of individuals of different castes, genders and religions is said to have been a significant component of kirtan and its role as a social device right from the medieval *bhakti* movement to present times (Slawek 1988). This egalitarian perspective is perhaps most prominent when the responsibility of leading is shared amongst many or, in some cases, when everyone present is invited to lead. In kirtans where one person is the main facilitator, there is still a seeming understanding that all participants' roles differ from that of a solo music performance. Though sometimes kirtan artists

are on a stage, at other times, all participants are organized in a circle on the floor together, the participatory nature reduces the division between "performer" and "audience." Current neo-kirtan artists will often open by and using phrases such as "everyone is the band" (Dave Stringer 2018) explaining to participants the significance of their singing, that the more participation there is, the better the experience.

High level of repetition or periodicity. Kirtan pieces are comprised of at least two but often three or more sections of different melodic phrases. Each of these sections are typically sung in echoic call and response style at least twice though this can be repeated several times before a new phrase or section is introduced, which then also then is repeated. Participants can cycle through many repetitions of the same melodic line before a new melodic idea is introduced. Ultimately this creates a circular flow of sound, a giving and receiving of vocalizations which some neo-kirtan presenters liken to the metaphor of the breath, the expelling outwards (exhale) followed by a pause and intake (inhale). This high degree of repetition seems to assist with the meditative quality of the piece and helps to establish synchrony amongst participants, as individuals breathe, sound, sing and move together. This effect is described by Hutchins and Palmer (2011) who explored the priming effects of repetition in music and speech and Newberg (2015) who discerned that a high degree of repetition impacts the frontal cortex, enhancing mental focus. Henry (2002) named repetition as one of the components of intensity in South Asian music. When change does finally happen through new content or through shift in volume or speed, this change has greater impact.

Devotional Attitude and Atmosphere. Kirtan events are presented with an underlying pretext of evoking a prayerful atmosphere. Within this is often a shared expectation that participants are to cultivate a devotional attitude both when listening and singing. Further, all songs are either inherently prayerful in terms of lyric content or interpreted as such. For example, more secular love songs or songs about longing can be presented and received within the pretext of an overall adoration of God and of one's spiritual nature.

Shifts in Intensity: Kirtan formula structure (figure 27). The majority of the kirtan I have experienced generally follows a similar format. First, the music begins at a low intensity with

softer dynamics, slower tempo, lengthened mantras and reduced instrumentation, sometimes featuring only a solo voice and instrument. This initial is generally reflective, quiet, and meditative, facilitating a shared sensitivity amongst the group and establishing a sense of connection for all participants, entraining through breath and sounds. After a few minutes, the music builds in intensity. This can be accomplished either through a gradual shift or through a sudden marked change most noticeable through a faster tempo, and/or the addition of more musicians creating a larger breadth and volume of sound with more complexity in texture and timbre. Many neo-kirtans I have observed have tended to achieve this shift through accelerated tempo, though not necessarily in every case, especially at Shanti Mission where the shift in intensity was also accomplished through orchestration and the addition of instruments and voices. Over time, the musical intensity increases, growing and building to a peak. Both through observation and by participant account, this escalation in the music also seems to coincide with a lift in participants' individual energy. Following this period of elevated intensity comes a reasonably quick drop in musical elements such that the sound created returns to a quiet, reflective style similar to the opening of the song. Most often kirtan pieces end after this sudden drop in intensity though occasionally, some loop around through layers of intensity to again build the ecstatic experience. Though some neo-kirtan are presented without these shifts, either consistently upbeat, promoting movement and dancing, or steady and slow, promoting stillness and introspection, this structure is the form that I encountered most often.

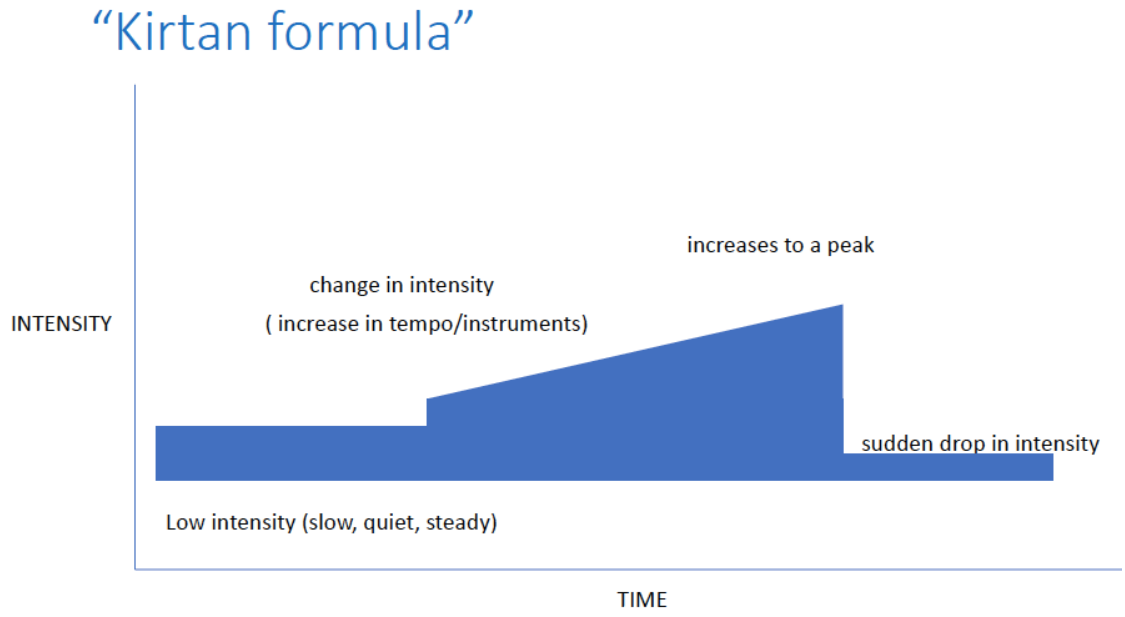


Figure 27: Schematic of Kirtan Formula

Characteristics More Common of Neo-Kirtan

Simplicity in musical elements. Ultimately the music presented in neo-kirtan tends to be simplistic, especially at the onset. The music of neo-kirtan tends to be composed using uncomplicated and even stepwise melodies with limited melodic range as well as steady rhythms most often in duple time offered in relatively short musical phrases. Given that kirtan is participatory and inclusive for individuals with different levels of music ability, this base simplicity ultimately allows for more accessible singing, allowing as many as possible to partake. Layers of complexity can be added through harmonies, descants and instrumental solos, taken on by leading musicians once the base melody is established. In contrast, South Asian kirtan, though deemed simplistic by some Classical musicians, tends to feature wider melodic phrasing, more ornamentation, melismas and bent notes combined with varied or even complex rhythms and time signatures. It is also influenced by *rāga*, though, as was explained by Rishima (2018) and confirmed by observation, more individuals are experimenting with breaking the rules of *rāga* in all musical styles.

Eclectic Instrumentation. Neo-kirtan tends to include a wide variety of instrumentation, often dependent on what and who is available to play. Orchestration I have observed has involved instruments considered more "traditional" to kirtan like the *harmonium* and the *tabla* as well as instruments such as synthesizers, acoustic and electric guitars, violins, flutes, trumpets, and percussion of all sorts including djembes, cajons, dumbeks, drum kits to name a few. Any instrument is seemingly a possible addition to a neo-kirtan circle though individual kirtan leaders may have certain preferences in terms of the sound they are seeking to create. This component of neo-kirtan can be explained by its egalitarian emphasis as a welcoming of all instrumental voices within the kirtan structure. Though South Asian kirtan instrumentation can vary, the scope of instruments I have observed seems to be more selective. In India, kirtan tends to favour percussion instruments such as the *tabla* or *mṛdangam* and *kartals*, drone instruments such as the *harmonium* and *tampura* with the occasional appearance of melodic instruments. Beck (2018, 2) confirmed this observation: "Membranophones and idiophones include pairs of hand cymbals called *kartal* or *jhanjh*, drums such as the *tabla*, *pakhavaj*, *dholak*, or *khol*, and occasionally bells, clappers or tambourines. Bowed chordophones such as the *sarangi* or *esraj* (multi stringed

instrument played with a bow) provide melodic support for the singing, but the *harmonium* has tended to replace these." Though other instruments can also appear - such as *sitar*, *ektar* (a single stringed instrument that creates a rhythmic drone), *bansuri* (flute) and *sarode* (a fretless guitar like instrument), the aforementioned percussion and drone instruments seem to be foundational.

Harmonic Structure. Neo-kirtan tends to be composed based strongly on harmonic or chordal structure and is very seldom led acapella. The aesthetic of harmony can be utilized in neo-kirtan to augment the environment and create effect. It is not often drone based, which is one of the key factors that distinguishes it from Hindustani and South Asian classical music in general. Rather than harmony, rhythm and melody seem to be significant components of South Asian kirtan. These elements find their grounding and can stand out over the stable foundation of a drone often provided by a tanpura, harmonium or a *shruti* box, (a small hand pumped reed instrument). The kirtan-*bhajans* observed at Peedam were often led acapella, sometimes supported by clapping or a percussion instrument, omitting any strong grounding in tonality. However, as noted in Sakthi Amma's (2010) kirtan recording of "Jaya Jaya Nārāyanī," some South-Asian kirtan are including harmonic structures. This could either be a result of desire to appeal to Western students and audiences or through influences from popular culture, music and Bollywood.

Diverse Music Genres and Styles. Stylistically, there tends to be a high level of creative agency in neo-kirtan. Supporting music utilized for neo-kirtan chants tends to be set in a range of different popular musical styles - folk, rock, blues, jazz, reggae and even dubstep (electronic dance) to name a few. As with popular music, the genre tends to depend on the particular artist offering and their personal musical styles. While I have observed all aforementioned styles in North America, more in-depth cross-cultural investigation could be useful to note potential correlations and patterns, as well as any locational differences in style and content. South Asian kirtan does not tend to include the same type of musical genre diversity - I have not observed blues, reggae or rock styles for example. South Asian kirtan is seemingly influenced by both *Hindustani*, *Carnatic* and local folk music traditions which are also vast and diverse. Though most non-Indian participants in this research tended to hear this kirtan as relatively mono-stylistic, referred to categorically as simply "Indian" or "traditional," as indicated, kirtan in South

Asia is not a uniform entity, and eclecticism may be more apparent to locals and those with more knowledge of South Asian music.

Eclectic lyric content. Though the lyrics for the majority of neo-kirtan tend to highlight Sanskrit mantras, some pieces also include other devotional lyrical components such as affirmations or repetitive songs written in the local vernacular language. Some neo-kirtan incorporates songs from popular music, such as tunes by the Beatles, Bob Marley or even love songs that are re-interpreted to refer love of God or self. On occasion, sacred music from other cultural traditions - such as Christianity, or even various Polynesian, South American, First Nations chants - have been included as part of neo-kirtan. Some are accessing a format very similar to the structure of kirtan with other spiritual-religious lyrical content, including American Rabbi Andrew Hahn, also known as the Kirtan Rabbi, who incorporates Hebrew, Jewish teachings and modes into kirtan's call and response format (Lightstone 2019). Within Hindu traditions, South Asian kirtan tends mostly to feature Sanskrit though vernacular dialects such as Tamil, Punjabi and Hindi can also be used. Although possible, I have not observed Bollywood or Western popular music re-interpreted in South Asian kirtan.

Summation

While some components are common to all kirtan, neo-kirtan has certain characteristics that distinguish it stylistically and have prompted my use of the term in order to address these distinctions. The use of harmonic structure, wide variety of instrumentation, eclecticism in lyric content, simplicity in musical elements and varied more Westernized musical styles are some of neo-kirtan's characteristics. Despite this tendency towards eclectic and even syncretic practice, there are components found across the majority of kirtan which serve to unify the genre. These are: active group participation, echoic call and response, high periodicity, shifts in intensity and devotional attitude.

Chapter 4: THE PERCEIVED HEALTH IMPLICATIONS OF NEO-KIRTAN ACROSS FIVE DOMAINS

One of the main hypotheses of this research is that the growing popularity of neo-kirtan can be, at least in part, attributed to the health benefits individuals have been experiencing from participating in it. What follows is an exploration of how neo-kirtan is perceived to impact wellness through a summary of its effect across spiritual, social, physical, cognitive and emotional domains.

Transpersonal and Spiritual Wellbeing

Kirtan is an inherently devotional practice, overtly accessing spiritual ideologies, artifacts and terms and was perceived by research participants and adherents to benefit spiritual health in significant ways. The largest majority (90%) of Shanti Mission survey respondents strongly agreed that kirtan benefits their spiritual wellbeing, with all participants either agreeing or strongly agreeing to this question. Indeed, kirtan is a specific kind of music with more emphasis on spirituality and has been purposefully incorporated into Shanti Mission practices due to its perceived ability to help people evolve and grow spiritually.

Key terms such as "lift," "unity," "connection" and "expanding vibration" were commonly used to describe increased spiritual wellness and kirtan is perceived to help in this capacity. Many participants described an overall "lift in vibration" in kirtan where vibration was described as a set point, an overall way of being. Some examples of this from the anonymous surveys (unpublished data 2018)[14] studied included:

> "This is what the chanting does: it helps us shift out of the set point (mundane, habitual ways of being)."
>
> "Kirtan is an opportunity to expand and lift, shift me from out of the idea of confinement of the physical and mental."

[14] All surveys were completed in July and August 2018. Survey participants will remain anonymous throughout this research in accordance with ethics requirements

Parvati (2018) described further, “Imagine your vibration like a chart or an ECG graph… When you add kirtan, the graph becomes more stretched out and rounded… rather than the sharp pointy staccato way of feeling, it’s a smoother, more even experience… softer.” Spiritual growth is seen to smooth out the edges and create a stronger sense of one’s overall base-tone.

At Shanti Mission, kirtan is perceived to help individuals develop, strengthen and personalize their spiritual connection. This was demonstrated clearly in survey comments (unpublished data 2018) including:

> “I do feel more connected to source.”
>
> “Strongly agree, Kirtan chanting is my vehicle to God.”

Developing a stronger spiritual vitality through kirtan has a seemingly cumulative effect. According to Adi Dass (2018), “The more your chant, the more you create a relationship with a certain chant. Assistance comes faster as you build up connection by repetitive use.” Further, engaging in kirtan chanting shifts spiritual wellbeing from the conceptual realm to a noticeable, experienced phenomenon. According to Parvati (2018), “Chanting as a practice helps reveal the divine inside so that it’s no longer just a concept. The regular practice of using these mantras is revealing this truth making it a lived-in experience. It helps to turn the small thing inside that’s cloaked into a great big shiny thing inside.” Parvati further identified this as “core strength.” Though she has sung all her life, initially realizing through music that there was something beyond physical self, prior to her work with Shanti Mission she sang mainly popular songs and a few church hymns. Kirtan singing has given her a clearer awareness of these other, less tangible layers of herself and a greater sense of stability than she had ever received from chanting songs by famous folk singers. “The consistent kirtan singing has brought a strength to my being that has opened my heart and helps me stay strong when there’s challenge. There’s no better love for me than singing the names of God or Goddess” (Parvati 2018).

In most models of health, the spiritual domain is omitted or, at best, placed in line with other dimensions. Several participants however expressed difficulty differentiating the spiritual domain from the other health factors. “The spiritual realm is part of the physical body. Anything that happens there impacts the physical even though it can be subtle” (Laxmi Maa 2018). Related, is how frequently the word “connection” was used when speaking about

spiritual health. It is this subtlety that makes the concept of spirituality ineffable and perhaps why some models exclude it as a parameter of health. According to Patches (2018), spiritual health should not be considered in line with the other dimensions of health. Instead, it is experienced more as an overarching state that contains all domains. In terms of the interlocking visual for the model, some suggested that the spiritual wellbeing should be moved either to the center of the model or expanded outward as an all-encompassing concentric circle to demonstrate how spiritual health is the heart and the vessel for wellbeing in general (figure 28). In this way, spiritual health was identified as a primary component, a source point and even a container for all other kinds or domains of health.

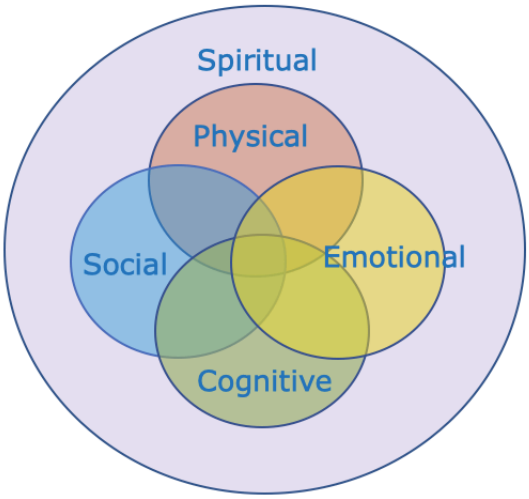


Figure 28: Alternate model emphasizing the spiritual domain. Created by the author.

Social Wellbeing

Social interaction is naturally embedded within kirtan's call and response structure, requiring participation of more than one person in order to be performed. Many participants noted the impact of kirtan on their social wellbeing and 75% of survey respondents strongly agreed with this notion.

The music and musical structure of kirtan was identified as helping to bring people together. According to Shakti Durga, music in general, "bonds a group of people faster than anything else. It can make people feel like they belong" (2018a). She explained that when people engage

and create meaningful activity within a group the whole group is healthier. This is particularly enhanced by the call and response nature of kirtan which allows for ample crowd participation. This involvement increases individuals' sense of inclusion and seems to be appreciated. One survey respondent mentioned, "It's nice to have music that you can participate in, that you can sing along with." Further, the call and response of the kirtan song structure is emulative of the give and take of conversational expression patterns, where participants vocalize and then listen to a response. It serves as a way to practice these components equally, assisting those who have difficulty listening equally as those who have difficulty expressing. Said another survey respondent (unpublished data 2018), "My confidence in verbal communication has improved since taking part in fairly regular kirtan chanting."

The social context provided through kirtan gives participants natural opportunities to interact with and meet other people. This interaction occurs not only within the music when individuals sing together, but also outside the music, as people typically commune before and after the event. I experienced a handful of occasions after kirtan at Shanti Mission where I was invited into conversation with people I had not met before. Interaction with strangers felt comfortable both because it seemed to be part of the etiquette and nature of the group dynamic but also because of the lingering remnants of the collective chanting we had just shared. Survey participants (unpublished data 2018) noted how the inclusion of kirtan as has strengthened the community by bringing individuals:

> "I have made more friends through *Satsang*. It breaks down people's reserve as we chant together."
>
> "Coming together with a community of like-minded people has made us stronger by music such as kirtan."

American neo-kirtan artist Dave Stringer (2018), also similarly noted how chanting kirtan in Sanskrit has become a unifying practice, observing a similarity in the experience in very different parts of the world. Recalling a kirtan he led in China he explained how he required an interpreter to address and communicate instructions to the crowd. As soon as they started chanting in Sanskrit however, he felt like he could have been anywhere in any country.

Given its group context, a common idea I encountered throughout this research is that kirtan has direct social benefits. Though participants did indeed confirm impact to their social wellbeing, this benefit was not described to be as direct, frequent or straightforward as anticipated. While kirtan can assist relationally, some participants distinguished between being in musical synchrony with others and having actual relationships or friendships with them outside kirtan contexts. According to Hanumani (2018), "It's great to be included, to get to sing with others… but it doesn't mean I'll be friends with them." Similarly, a survey participant (unpublished data 2018) added, "It definitely brings people together but this is not the major benefit for me." While kirtan may open a possibility for social connection, relationship with other participants it is not a given and the experiences does not simply allow participants to gloss over conflicts, history or differences in personality. However, community engagement events at Shanti Missions, of which kirtan is one, do seem to be part of wellbeing for its participants. A survey respondent (unpublished data 2018) reflected this, explaining how it was not just the kirtan specifically that has impacted their social health.

> "I can't say that if I just did kirtan alone I would have progressed as rapidly. My social life has improved dramatically. I am no longer bullied, people are responsive and friendly to me, and I'm no longer isolated or withdrawn. But I feel it's being part of Shanti Mission that has assisted me, not really kirtan itself."

Rather than simply acting as a benefit in and of itself, the social context contributes to other benefits received through kirtan. Niranjanaaya shared how chanting in a group provides opportunities to relate to others' experiences and to gain new perspectives on one's own. Several participants, including the following survey respondent (unpublished data 2018), also expressed how more people participating in synchrony amplifies and adds strength to the practice: "Chanting in a group makes the energy stronger." Yogrishi Vishvketu similarly confirmed that chanting in a group creates stronger impact and benefit than chanting individually which, while good, requires more effort. "Instead, the group can inspire you" (Yogrishi Vishvketu 2018). Dave Stringer (2018) also spoke of how a group can also accelerate the experience, explained this through human tendency to entrain and fall into synchrony. In his view, chanting in a group can contribute to a kind of musical "contagion" such that one person's enjoyment can initiate similar states in another.

Physical Wellbeing

While the relationship between a devotional music practice and spiritual or social wellbeing seems relatively straight-forward, the potential connection of kirtan to physical health is perhaps less obvious. While 66% of survey respondents strongly agreed with the impact of kirtan on their physical wellbeing, both their comments as well as those from interview participants describes more benefit. The following illustrates how both Shanti Mission as well as other neo-kirtan participants reported an experienced connection between physical corporeal reality and their sonic kirtan practice.

Shanti Mission participants indicated that kirtan chanting can facilitate physical relaxation and release of muscular tension or stress. Supporting comments from the survey (unpublished data 2018) include:

> "Generally, it (kirtan) always helps me to relax and to feel more comfortable within myself. My ability to sing has improved since taking part in kirtan chanting, as kirtan chanting comes from the heart."
>
> "(Kirtan) helps to release stress & tension in the body."
>
> "Helps me relax and release tension from my body."
>
> "Sometimes I have felt stressed or somewhat troubled before *Satsang* (causing tension in the body, especially shoulders and neck). During the *Satsang* and chanting this has just dissolved into relaxation and feeling uplifted."
>
> "Little remains of the painful, tight neck and shoulders. My overall breathing is at least a 1000% different. As well my experience in the workplace is amazingly lighter and more peaceful."

Since kirtan involves singing, many of these physical benefits also seem to be in alignment with perceived benefits of singing in general. According to Veena Vaani (2018), "Singing tones the muscles of the face, the lungs and the torso. It also helps to regulate and deepen breathing, helps digestion and the diaphragm, it calms the heart rate and stabilizes blood pressure." She then explained how kirtan's call and response structure, seen as somewhat unique for Western

participants, results in increased stress reduction. "The call-response nature of kirtan is like breath and even mimics its pattern. There is less stress in singing because of the pause for the call and relaxing between the line when you can listen and absorb the energy" (Veena Vaani 2018).

Partaking in Shanti Mission kirtan assisted in reduced pain perception and even increased immunity for some. According to survey respondents (unpublished data 2018):

> "Most times if I am experiencing physical pain or discomfort, after kirtan chanting either in *satsang* or a healing the pain goes away."
>
> "When I'm doing more chanting, my vibration is higher and I don't get sick like I used to."
>
> "It reduces physical pain from osteoarthritis."

Several interviewees also mentioned noticing pain such as headaches, sinus ache, and back and joint discomfort dissipating for themselves or others after kirtan in *Satsang*. Maitreya and Sada, who use chanting in their healing sessions, said their clients report diminished headaches and migraines, cleared sinuses, improved digestion and their reduced back pain. Maitreya has worked with individuals with cancer and other serious illnesses involving pain. He said, "At the very least, singing and chanting helps release some of the fear about illness" and this relaxation can then help with pain reduction (Maitreya 2018a). While conducting this fieldwork, on three separate occasions, tension headaches disappeared after kirtan in a Shanti Mission *satsang* or in a weekend workshop. Many who discussed physical healing through kirtan shared that it is most effective when kirtan chanting is combined with the meditations format offered in Shanti Mission *satsang*.

Kirtan chanting at Shanti Mission can also trigger spontaneous physical movements and responses in participants. Stellar Maya (2018) clarified, "I sense the sound vibrations through physiological responses like tingles up my spine or sudden bursts of energy." A survey respondent (unpublished data 2018) explained, "When chanting my physical body awareness is increased. Through breath, and flow of sound, it affects my body through the *chakras*." Jagatambe spoke about how her body often feels like it is physically vibrating in kirtan and she

has experienced jaw shuddering, sweating, and increased bursts of energy. She called this "blissful embodiment" and related it to a shift in her nervous system (2018). Stellar Maya referred to experiencing tingling in her hands and palms during kirtan as well as heat, shifts in sensation of weight and lightness in her body - sometimes her arms lift up without her trying. I witnessed some of these physiological responses during kirtans - eyes fluttering, arms raising and bodies shaking. I also noted other more typical movement responses to music including swaying, head nodding, clapping and dancing.

Given these kinesthetic responses, participants indicated that kirtan chanting can facilitate embodiment of less tangible components of spirituality. It is a way to viscerally make contact with and understand spirituality through diffuse sound vibration, sensation and emotional feelings. Said Hanumani (2018), "There's something about engaging in the singing… it grounds it in your body, physicalizes the teachings and experience." Maitreya talked about kirtan as a tangible flow of energy and that it can "go right through you… you can just feel it" (2018a). Ganapati (2018) emphasized the significance of the kinesthetic feeling of music. "The impact of a song isn't in the words. People don't pay attention to the words, they aren't the thing that catch you…It's the feeling of the music and sound." Also, through repeated practice, both within the kirtan song itself as well as the recurring nature of kirtan opportunities at Shanti Mission, this embodiment of spirituality invokes learning, training and changes in behaviour. As Niranjanaaya remarked, "The more we chant a certain mantra, the more of the quality of that mantra we embody" (2018).

The possibility of physical shifts from chanting can depend on the kind of mantra used. Shakti Durga stated (2018a), "It has to be the right mantra because different mantras have different flavours and not all mantras are the same. They reflect different frequencies of light being put together." Some mantras have historically been utilized for physical healing, in treating illness and disease. For example, a mantra invoking *Dhanvantari*, a deity of healing said to be connected with the creation of *Ayurveda*, was mentioned by almost all participants when asked about the physicality of chanting practice. This mantra is used often at Shanti Mission, chanted collectively at least once a week. In her interview, Shakti Durga (2018a) sang this mantra for me, indicating that while she chants it, she asks to take all sickness out.

Oṃ namo bhagavate vāsudēvāya dhanvantaraye amṛta-kalasa-hastāya |
sarvāmaya-vinaśāya trailokyanāthāya sri mahāviṣṇave namaḥ ||

Translation:

Obeisance to the lord Vāsudēva Dhanvantari (who in later traditions depicted as the god of *Ayurveda* in the form of Vishnu (son of Vāsudēva). With a pitcher of ambrosia in hand in order to destroy all diseases. The lord of three worlds, obeisance to Dhanvantari in the form of the great Vishnu.[15]

Shakti Durga singing the Dhanvantari Mantra:

https://era-av.library.ualberta.ca/media_objects/k930bx92j/section/bv73c160r

This mantra can also appear in shortened form - *Oṃ eim dhanvantaraye namaha* (meaning offering respect to Dhanvantari) - which could be more easily accessed in kirtan. Parvati shared another mantra she uses often when working with individuals specifically experiencing pain: *Oṃ namo nārāyanī sarva bhadra uchariya uchariya swaha*. This mantra invokes Nārāyanī (a combination of three goddesses) and then asks all pain to leave, leave. Her clients report diminished pain, stiffness that loosens up, greater relaxation and symptoms that go away altogether. Parvati has observed that using directed healings with chanting for ailments within the physical realm often leads to resolution occurring with more rapidity than original medical prognosis.

To explain existence, Shanti Mission utilizes what they call "The V Diagram" (figure 29), that includes different levels such as the physical, the etheric (associated with the aura and electro-magnetic field), the astral (thoughts and emotions), soul (our essence comprised of light and sound) and the divine void. By my assessment this model is an interpretation of the koshas or sheathes of the yogic body mentioned earlier. Based on this model, physicality connects to soul and spirit through increasingly subtle layers of consciousness, less readily perceived through the senses. As such, Shanti Mission participants consistently reported that much of the work regarding physical healing happens on these other more subtle layers. According to Shakti Durga (2018a), "As we lift and shift our vibration we bring about physical changes and manifestations on the physical realm. Mantra helps us create this high vibration." Savitur noted (2018), "Pain exists at a certain level and mantra exists at another. We can use the mantra to

[15] Translated by Deepro Chakraborty on July 9th, 2019. See page 116 for a transcription.

bring people from one level of vibration through a process similar to entrainment." Said a survey participant (unpublished data 2018), "When we clean out stagnant energy, we can experience physical shifts." Further, audible sound and music are perceived links between these more subtle and dense layers of our existence. Several participants adhere to the belief that physicality is the result of a more metaphysical idea of collective vibration and that accessing its related sonic vibration impacts physicality. Sada (2018) explained how music is a way to impact our "subtle energetic layers" which ripple through denser more physical layers. According to Jagatambe (2018), "Vibration is creation and thus sound impacts everything. All that comes to be from vibration. We can harness the power of vibration through the conscious use of sound. How accurately this is reflected by modern science is contentious." Niranjanaaya stated (2018), "Music is vibration… energy is vibration…. Everything vibrates at a certain frequency. It's about becoming skilled at using or channelling that energy."

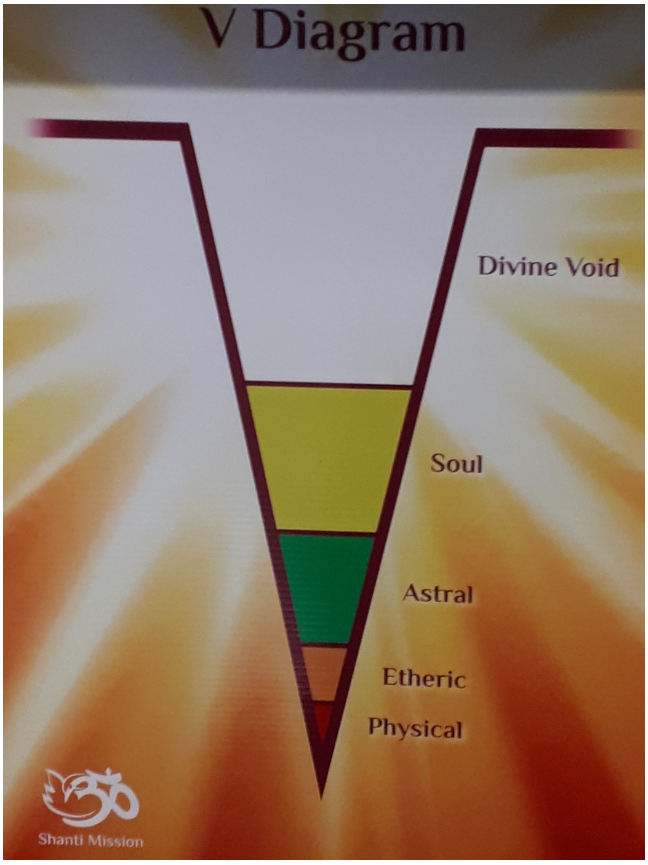


Figure 29: "V Diagram." Image by author. June 14, 2018: Cooranbong Australia.

Similarly, Dave Stringer added, "A good chant impacts the body physically and neurologically" (2018). He explained some of his understanding of the neurology behind kirtan through his personal research as well as interactions with Andrew Newberg, a neuroscientist and pioneer of neuro-theology. According to Stringer, there are different ways this impact is procured given the different styles in which kirtan is practiced. He learned chanting in the Shaivite tradition, which tend to offer long, extended kirtans that start very slow then gradually become faster. In the following I have paraphrased his explanation of what Stringer (2018) perceives to be occurring physiologically through this process of kirtan:

> Beginning with slow, drawn out singing regulates, slows and unifies breathing, which stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS), the relaxation response, and creates feelings of deep calm. Over time, the long and slow repetition increases in speed, sometimes to very fast and ecstatic tempos. Stringer will then often "cut the beat in half" meaning he will play a section slower, reduced to half time. He can then increase the tempo again over time and even repeat this half time cut again repeatedly. As the chant becomes faster, the repetitions and speed changes stimulate the sympathetic nervous system (SNS), producing an excitation response. Normally, the autonomic nervous system, as regulated by the hypothalamus, works by trying to maintain a balance, alternately stimulating and relaxing the body as needed. But in a kirtan (and other activities like dancing and long-distance running) Stringer hypothesizes that both the SNS and PNS are induced to fire, simultaneously producing a state of excited relaxation (or ecstatic) that is neurologically very similar, if not identical, to the state created through sexual connection. From this perspective, physicality and neurological processes can be directly linked to spiritual or more metaphysical experiences.

Cognitive Wellbeing

Cognitive wellbeing encompasses various mental functions such as attention, focus, decision making and memory. While several interview participants noted how these components can benefit from kirtan, cognitive wellbeing was perceived to be less impacted by this practice, receiving a lower number of survey respondents (55%) who strongly agreed with its benefit. In what follows is a description of how research participants perceived the cognitive benefits of kirtan chanting.

Chanting of any kind, be it in kirtan settings or others, is viewed to assist with focus and clarity. Musical chanting as a meditative device was said to be engaging, providing a specific focal point and concrete stimulation to connect with. "Chanting gives the mind a job to do. Rather than drifting off, it helps it to focus. The more you do this, the more your mind stills. That's when change can happen" (Patches 2018). Survey participants (unpublished data 2018) agreed

> "When I'm (chanting) a lot I'm able to be more vigilant with my thoughts, to watch thoughts and let them pass."
>
> "My mind has something to focus on while mantra works on my heart."

While some participants reported how chanting focuses the mind, several also reported that kirtan serves to distract the mind. Said Niranjanaaya (2018), "Chanting mantra switches off the thinking mind." Similarly, an anonymous participant (2018) shared, "It seemed initially as though I was hypnotized through the music and the meditation. It felt like an altered state of consciousness, similar to places I have experienced through actual hypnotherapy or substance use." A survey participant (2018) explained, "Kirtan chanting helps dull the monkey mind chatter that we can have going on sometimes unconsciously." Though focus and distraction seem dissimilar, they are both ways of pulling the mind from the busy-ness of cluttered or unwanted thoughts. The mind and mental activity tend to be viewed as deterrents to wellbeing across some SBNR practices. This quieting of the mind then is seen to allow it to become a tool, rather than a deterrent, for the possibilities of change and health.

When it comes to illness strongly influenced by dysfunctional thought patterns, both Parvati and Savitur recommended using the *Mahāmṛtyunjaya* mantra to work with the cognitive dimension of illness. The *Mahāmṛtyunjaya* mantra is a popular mantra found in both the *Ṛg* and *Yajur Vedas*. It is performed often in ritual and is associated with Śiva and destruction of mental illusion.

> *oṃ tryaṃbakaṃ yajāmahe sugandhiṃ puṣṭivardhanam*|
> *urvārukamiva bandhanān mṛtyor mukṣīya mā'mṛtāt*||

> Translation: *Oṃ*. We worship the three-eyed one, the virtuous supreme being who increases prosperity. As a cucumber (released from the vine), so may we be liberated from the bondage of death not immortality.[16]
>
> Watch a version of the *Mahāmṛtyunjaya* mantra at Shanti Mission: https://era-av.library.ualberta.ca/media_objects/k930bx92j/section/v692t7177

According to Parvati, chanting this mantra augments awareness of the patterns of thought that support illness or disease. She has noted that when she uses this mantra with others, it prevents them from thinking in ways that bring about ill health.

> If I see that someone's health pattern is really tied to particular destructive thoughts, the *Mahāmṛtyunjaya* is the mantra I use. For me that mantra isn't just healing. In chanting it, you're asking to destroy the consciousness that creates ill health or that hurts your body. So, the chant doesn't heal the body necessarily but works with the consciousness which can help alleviate the symptoms in the body (Parvati 2018).

Chants in English - or any other vernacular language - can be beneficial especially regarding mental focus. Participants noted this, commenting how mantras in other languages can, at times, become a diversion, even a deterrent to the practice, particularly for individuals newer to kirtan. A survey participant expressed, "(Kirtan is) uplifting, joyful, and sometimes tricky as it is done mainly in Sanskrit" (unpublished data 2018). Shanti Bhavan explained that both the Sanskrit language and the culture of chant at Shanti Mission were initially "confronting" though admitted that, "Once you get into it, eventually you go beyond the mind" (Shanti Bhavan 2018). Stellar Maya explained that understanding the meaning of a chant can be beneficial; this is inherent in the English language chants. However, if people take the time to explain the meaning of Sanskrit mantra, it too can help focus and enhance the practice by harnessing knowledge and comprehension. Further, in her experience, chanting in a familiar language or providing syntactical meaning of the words not only placates the mind but can also be a way of consciously repatterning thought-habits and self-talk, practicing new mental beliefs and affirmations, such as "I am beautiful," or "I forgive myself."

[16] Translation by Diane Fereig on September 20, 2019.

Emotional Wellbeing

When asked to generally describe kirtan at Shanti Mission in without other qualifiers, almost all respondents referred to its emotional effect. Next to the spiritual domain, emotional wellbeing was the area most perceived to be impacted by kirtan, evidenced both by the frequency of emotional descriptions in interviews as well the percentage of survey respondents (85%) who agreed or strongly agreed that kirtan benefits emotional health.

For Shanti Mission participants, kirtan facilitates the experience of positive emotions and the repetition is perceived to allow these to build. Key words such as "joyful", "uplifting," "heart centered," and "change of feeling states" were mentioned frequently; some examples from the survey (unpublished data 2018) included:

> "Uplifting. Transformational. It brings me great joy and bliss."
>
> "Kirtan chanting lifts my mood and makes me happy."
>
> "As soon as I heard it, it uplifted my mood and made me happy."
>
> "Chanting is an important practise for me. It centres me and calms my mind. Brings me peace, connectedness and bliss. "
>
> "Strongly agree. I feel totally uplifted and different at the end of a Satsang supported by Kirtan. Ready to face the world with gratitude."

For Hanumani, Shanti Mission kirtan connects her with joyfulness and playfulness more than any other kirtan she has experienced. She attributed this to the flexibility she perceives in their approach, reminding her not to be so serious. Also, the participatory nature of kirtan allows for more engagement in positive affect. "Just listening to a performance is different than participating. It's outside yourself. Though it might feel good, it's less experienced (*sic*) because you're observing it" (Hanumani 2018). Veena Vaani explained that the faster and louder parts of kirtan exude a sense of exhilaration and joy, which can still be calming and relaxing, rather than inducing a state of panic or stressful non-relaxation. In this way, "It is an ecstatic experience that brings about balance" (2018). Participants described kirtan as both meditative and relaxing as well as joyful and ecstatic. While this might be attributed to the broad stylistic approaches in neo-kirtan, as noted earlier, one kirtan piece can offer opportunity for both states and may even facilitate the experience of these states at the same time.

Kirtan also allows for increased awareness of and subsequent release of a wide range of emotions, including those perceived as challenging or negative. I often observed tears being shed during Shanti Mission kirtan. As one survey respondent (unpublished data 2018) expressed, "It is healing because it helps me experience my emotions." Patches shared how, during her first kirtan, she experienced new emotions and an awareness of feelings she had not previously seen or noticed in herself. "It just triggers something. Kirtan gives us an avenue to switch off the mind and allow emotion" (Patches 2018). In addition, negative emotional qualities are neither dismissed nor ignored but are presented as useful for deeper exploration. During a Shanti Mission relationship workshops I attended, we spent a few hours reframing "shadow" emotions, exploring how certain qualities and feelings, those often judged or avoided, can also have positive applications. For example, anger can be a signal for needing to change and judgement can also be regarded as discernment, both of which are necessary at times in life. Seemingly, developing a greater awareness of a variety of emotions can influence a person's ability to heal, promoting a deeper understanding and acceptance of self. Kirtan can also be an effective way of transforming or releasing emotions. Adi Dass (2018) confirmed, "Sound is a fast track to opening the heart. Most people connect emotionally to sound in some manner. I can be in a bad mood and play a Krishna kirtan, which is all about joy, and it helps change my mood." Similarly, Siddhi Shakti shared that "kirtan creates a palpable change for people in the room … I can feel a difference after it's over." Survey respondent (unpublished data 2018) also expressed similar experiences of transformation:

> "It's long term and has transformed my whole life. I am no longer depressed. My anger is still present but less every day, I am now more peaceful or can flip back into peace very easily. I don't really have anymore challenging experiences. I am more forgiving, more kinder, more calmer and a better version of me. My family have noticed the benefits and they like the new person I have become and acknowledge the benefits of Shanti mission. Although I will say, it's a combination of kirtan, healing and divine transference. But the kirtan is a major part of it."

While emotional expressions such as crying or laughter are not unique to Shanti Mission kirtan per se, they seem to be more frequent. The context in which Shanti Mission offers kirtan, as

described in the following chapter, is set up to hold space for more of these emotional expressions.

Dave Stringer stated that the benefit of his kirtan practice for him has been primarily within the realm of emotional healing. While chanting regularly during his initial stay at his teacher's ashram, he began to notice the cathartic and transformative effect it had on his sense of self. "It could change something emotionally difficult into something that felt freeing or even ecstatic, transforming heaviness into lightness. Anything that helps people become acquainted with their emotions and realize that they aren't stuck in them is beneficial" (Dave Stringer 2018). For Stringer, emotions play a large part in disease in general. "There's a saying in the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas: If you bring up what is within you, what you bring up will set you free. If you do not bring up what is within you, what you do not bring up will destroy you" (ibid). Qualities of emotions can be liberating or destructive depending on how they are used. Though he did not claim that chanting can prevent all disease, in his experience, it can create an insulating or therapeutic effect.

Surya Rose (2018) and Shanti Bhavan's (2018) stories highlight the emotional impact of participating in kirtan in Shanti Mission meditations and *satsang*.
When Surya Rose first came to a Shanti Mission, she was on medication for anxiety and depression which she had been battling for years. She began attending musical meditation with Maitreya, where she was first exposed to kirtan. Her first experience was "powerful" and she noticed the effects right away as it brought up difficult emotions she had learned to suppress, making her more conscious of them. The kirtan helped her to notice and feel her emotions by feeling and, in so doing, they were more easily released. This musical meditation was the first time she had "felt something other than depressed and dark." She started attending every week, bought CDs to practice with every day after work and began to receive individual healings. After twelve months at Shanti Mission, she went off all medication. When I asked her how she decided to do this, she said that after using the meditation and sacred music she no longer felt bad about herself, was not having suicidal thoughts and just knew she was no longer depressed.

Shanti Bhavan had previously found meditation almost impossible, and felt unable to "empty the mind" or "be peaceful". The impact of her first Shanti Mission meditation, led with recorded tracks in another individual's loungeroom, was profound, rousing her emotions such that she cried for three days after. Though she found the singing in a small group incredibly confronting, she said she couldn't help but sing along to the chants, and was particularly moved by Maitreya's devotional songs long before hearing him play live. The meditations significantly assisted with emotional regulation and became part of her 12-step work with Narcotics Anonymous, particularly in that it helped her connect with a Higher Power as described in steps eleven and twelve in the step literature. She finds Shanti Mission music incredibly powerful. "The music tangibly lifts and shifts me when in meditation … it makes me cry a lot without warning … the emotions are spontaneous." Previous to Shanti Mission, she only experienced such peak euphoric moments while under the influence of drugs. She longed for the ability to feel peace, joy and calm no matter what and has been learning to create this for herself without substance support through practices such as kirtan at *satsang*. Shanti Bhavan reported noticeable ripple effects of her increased emotional maturity in other life areas such as enhanced productive in the workplace, the ability to form better relationships and manage crisis situations.

Discussion: Emotional Domain as Tangible Link through Neo-Kirtan

One of the trends arising from this research is that, when approaching neo-kirtan as a wellness device, its relationship to emotional health holds particular significance. Not only were emotional qualities most often mentioned by participants in regards to perceived benefits, these were also linked to the other health domains in various reported ways. This is particularly relevant when considering potential therapeutic applications of kirtan.

A change in spiritual health was often identified and evidenced by participants through a change in overall mood and emotion. For example, key words used when describing spiritual health included feeling light, upbeat, joyous, easily motivated, easy, light-heartedness and fun. Emotional wellbeing is a more recognizable, tangible marker for transpersonal shifts, especially since the experience or even the concept of spiritual wellbeing can be more subtle, not easily identified. Associated shifts in feeling (emotion) can be more ready markers for transpersonal wellness.

Participants addressed a strong connection between emotional pain and physical pain or illness. Shakti Durga summarized this phenomenon simply by saying (2018a), "Any malady has a psycho-spiritual issue. If we clear this out, we can alleviate the symptomatology." As both a Shanti Mission healer as well as a psychologist, Jagatambe has ample experience treating anxiety and depression, observing how people find different ways of coping with trauma and difficult experiences. "Some access emotional pain, others access physical pain. Emotions can have an impact on one's physical state and behaviour, just as depression and hopelessness can leave people feeling heavy, sluggish and unmotivated to leave the house" (Jagatambe 2018). Surya Rose, now a Shanti Mission trained healer, has observed patterns of connection between physical and emotional wellbeing in her clients, reporting that almost all her clients who have sustained serious trauma or abuse have also dealt with physical health issues. "When we focus on working with the emotional trauma… this impacts the physical health side. Some clients don't tell me about physical ailments until after, when they remark on how a symptom has gone away. I know we can work indirectly on physical health by working on emotions and trauma" (Surya Rose 2018). She related two case stories, the first about a client whose stomach issues disappeared after working through her grief and anger and the second about a client who initially sought her assistance to regulate her blood pressure and thyroid whose sessions ended up addressing emotions and family dynamics. Yogrishi Vishvketu also attributed the physical benefit of kirtan to the influence of emotions. He explained that chanting can help release emotions like fear and anger which can increase high blood pressure, heart problems and chest pain. Contracting emotions can create congestion whereas expansive emotions open the heart. In his experience, chanting relaxes repressed emotions, thereby making space in the body for movement, circulation, blood flow and prana (life force energy) which helps the body's organs and glands work normally and the body becomes balanced.

The meaning and associated feelings created from thoughts was a common link between cognition and wellbeing. Yogrishi Vishvketu explained that any thought we have is a vibration and is coloured by the emotional meaning given to it, creating energy in motion. According to Dave Stringer, people are averse to meditative practices often because of the unpleasant emotions that can result from thoughts. "What arises through spiritual practices as we become

aware of the mind and its processes isn't always what we would perceive as spiritual. We witness anger, jealousy, boredom..." (Dave Stringer 2018). Said Shakti Durga (2018a), "When people begin to perceive themselves differently… all kinds of pain and suffering can fall away." Kirtan can seemingly assist in changing the feeling tone of thoughts as individuals from the survey (unpublished data 2018) noted:

> "Chanting is great for distancing the mind from negative thoughts."
>
> "Kirtan can be a way to repattern the thinking mind.
>
> "Kirtan … shifts my focus to the music and words and, as they are Sanskrit high vibrational words they… give me a feeling of bliss."

Krishna Das also agreed, naming the impact of releasing negative patterned states created by the mind as one of the most powerful aspects of chanting. "Chanting is a practice that allows people to gradually pull themselves out of obsessive thinking and obsessive identification with the body. It loosens the glue between belief and thought. This eventually allows a person to become one with that (the changeless, formless, eternal, unconditional), which is the ultimate therapy" (Krishna Das 2018).

The socio-relational benefits of kirtan were also shown to be strongly influenced through shifts in emotions and feeling qualities. By making long term changes in feeling states, mood, and overall attitude, individuals reported that they were better able to interact with others in healthy and responsive ways. As expressed by survey respondents (unpublished data 2018), individuals reported feeling better and happier, they are more likely to have successful interpersonal interactions with others:

> "I don't notice an improvement in the (relational) characteristics you mention. However, when my vibration is lifted my thoughts are positive, higher so I'm more likely to act and speak with love and in service."
>
> "The kirtan chanting has opened me into more love and compassion and so I find that it is easier communicate and to get along with others… I have developed great friends and relationships in the community."

> Kirtan chanting "settles my nervous system and… helps me deal with challenging situations much better… (which) helps me connect with others."
>
> "Being in a state of more peace with a more open heart overrides my ego and I am more open to others."

Parvati (2018) explained further: "Kirtan opens your heart so there's often more love, patience, acceptance and compassion. Chanting in groups helps us to see ourselves in other people so there's less separation, less of 'us' and 'them'." She described an experience with a family member with whom she had difficulty and how she utilized kirtan music to assist. Before a call or visit to this individual, she would put on a recording of a kirtan piece. She found "Hey Ma Durga" by Krishna Das to be particularly effective and would even sing it through her whole commute, visualizing the face of her family member as Durga. According to her, this helped her shift her feelings towards this individual, such that she could relate with them with love and compassion and their relationship is now much closer.

Survey Correlations

Worth mentioning here are a few of the correlational patterns between the domains revealed through analysis of the survey. A correlation between mental and emotional benefit emerged - those who strongly agreed or disagreed to the cognitive benefit of kirtan also strongly agreed or disagreed with its emotional benefit. Similarly, those who strongly agreed or disagreed to the physical benefit of kirtan also strongly agreed or disagreed with its social benefit. Though the survey was too small to be considered for its statistical significance, these connections and others would be interesting to pursue through more rigorous quantitative future research.

Contraindications or Drawbacks of Devotional Chanting

As much as devotional music, as with many different kinds of music, has been explored in this research for its benefits for wellbeing, there are times when the application of music is inappropriate, ineffective or can even cause harm. I have come to understand this phenomenon through training and experience in music therapy however, upon completing a brief literature exploration, research on this topic seems extremely limited. Regarding kirtan, it stands to reason that if chanting has positive benefits, it could also have negative or potentially damaging effects.

Although not the topic of this research, this section serves as a short introduction to the drawbacks of chanting as I believe it is an important conversation, one I hope to address more extensively at a later time.

When I asked Shakti Durga about potential harm with kirtan chanting, she explained that many mantras can be used generically in kirtan for general mixed groups: *Oṃ namaḥ śivaya*, (salutations to Lord Śiva) *Oṃ gaṃ gaṇapataye namaḥ* (salutations to the Lord of hosts, remover of obstacles), *Gāyatrī Mantra* (a revered mantra for the sun deity from the *Ṛg Veda)*, *Oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ* (invoking the jewel in the lotus, compassion). These mantras are all fairly popular and well known, prescribed by many teachers likely because, in her opinion, they are safer for general use. She cautioned about the use of certain other mantras, particularly those that consist primarily seed (*bīja*) or monosyllabic vocative sounds, as they can create strong reactions and the wrong one at the wrong time may cause imbalances. She gave the analogy of plugging a hairdryer into an outlet with the wrong voltage; without a transformer, it is too much energy. When using mantras generically, especially for recordings or studies with people not well known to the facilitator, it is best to be cautious. Similarly, she advised against using these with people in delicate or fragile states. Parvati echoed this, explaining that, though she feels some form of chanting could almost always be used, she would take care not to use just any mantra with every person. It is particularly important to take care with people experiencing or likely to experience psychosis, mainly because they may not have the ability to discern, process or clearly contemplate what is encountered through chant. "I would imagine that chanting *Oṃ shanti* (meaning the sacred tone of peace) would be highly beneficial with them but I might not chant a *Kali* or Durga mantra because they are big energies that could become distorted for the person" (Parvati 2018). Other interviewees added that if too much chanting is done all at once, it can bring emotions up too quickly. Yogrishi Vishvketu (2018) also agreed that particular mantras should be used at specific times, especially because "some sounds create contraction others create expansion."

By contrast, when I asked Krishna Das (2018) about potential harm of kirtan chanting, he responded, "there is no downside to chanting." He explained that his teacher Neem Keroli Baba taught him that chanting is a completely balanced ("sattvic") practice and helps all the time. He

believes in the importance of chanting through the emotions that arise; allowing them to be moved through chanting means they can be expressed: "Better out than in." He was instructed to go on repeating the names whether sad, happy, angry, distressed, that gradually the practice of chanting divine names will open into a deeper relationship with God. He also feels that any divine name chosen is fine. "There are many names of God. They aren't different, they are the same. They help us to gradually recognize the Divinity within ourselves. Any name of God, any name you call is good" (Krishna Das 2018).

Though it might not lead to harm per se, there are also times when mantras might also not be of benefit. Yogrishi Vishvketu suggested that certain mantras can be ineffective at times, particularly if the wrong mantra is selected for the purpose. When it comes to healing, he strongly suggested using the *Mahāmṛtyunjaya mantra* (mentioned previously), as the use of another mantra might not work at all for this purpose. Similarly, according to Hamsa Devi (2018), a mantra can be less effective when it is simply being repeated without correct intent, pronunciation or "vibration." In her experience, "When you grab a mantra off the internet and simply repeat it, it can be pretty harmless though it may not have its potential impact."

From these explanations, it seems that while some mantras are recommended for collective use in mainstream neo-kirtan ideation, other mantras are seen to be beneficial only in specific, individual circumstances. Some of the stronger mantras (*bījas*) are perceived to function most effectively on an individual and even prescriptive basis such that these are perhaps best administered by a teacher, healer or therapist who has experience and authority to do so. When it comes to group chanting as in neo-kirtan, best practice may be to instead access phrases from Sanskrit scriptures or names of deities. While it seems that neo-kirtan as a devotional music can be used effectively as part of a wellness development, it is also just as important to acknowledge the potential for harmful impact. As with anything to do with wellness, moderation seems to be a good measure.

Interestingly, when asked about potential drawbacks or harm in kirtan, most participants answered by addressing the mantra itself without addressing other factors involving the music or the context in which these mantras are presented in kirtan. In my experience, these latter factors

can contribute strongly to the effect of the overall experience. For example, while attending a Shanti Mission workshops early on in this study, a recording of an English translation of a Sanskrit mantra was played during one of the meditation processes. This particular song had been performed at a friend and former music partner's memorial as he had also helped collaborate on its creation. When the recording began, I felt an intense welling up of grief that I could not stop but also that I did not feel was appropriate to express. This grief, in my opinion, was due to my memories and experiential associations with this mantra, more than the mantra itself. I eventually excused myself from the room and took some time to work through the feelings before returning. Later, when the workshop leader was about to play the piece again, unaware of my reaction, I explained the situation and they opted for a different piece. The experience left me feeling quite vulnerable and tender for days. Though I may have needed to re-experience this grief, I was neither supported to work through it nor did anyone follow up with me after the workshop.

This scenario points to the importance of practicing caution and developing keen awareness of the effect of music on the emotions. Music is highly connected with the limbic system, involving emotions and memory, and one of the risks includes the potential to trigger charged memories and re-traumatization. Further, it demonstrates some of the risks involved with many personal development courses and spiritual workshops as most are unmonitored, un-regulated as was described in Karin's case example (Chapter 3). Most of these, in my experience, lack solid ethical guidelines, training for facilitators in how to monitor and manage difficult situations as they arise and typically do not conduct thorough participant background checks nor adequate follow up with participants. The effect of the aforementioned music in the workshop I attended could have left a longer emotional imprint, potentially causing me to never want to return to a Shanti Mission event. Though Shanti Mission facilitators undergo a therapist training and complete an immense amount of personal work, some of the rigours and standards upheld in more traditional therapeutic group processes are not followed or taught in this context.

Some scholars like McCartney (2017) are critical of various *satsang* practices primarily because of the way they are perceived to access music and the arts to cultivate emotion and a subjective experience of "truth." From this perspective, such practices neither promote critical thinking nor

intellectual reflection. Instead, these rituals are said to use charisma, drama, choreography, music and *kirtan* chanting to heighten suggestibility and emotional sensibility of participants. McCartney also warns of surrendering one's own thought processes to the "social contagion" (2017, 205) of the group mind. In his view, heightened affect leads to "dis-intellectualism" and irrationality and the potential for mis-use or manipulation. From my perspective, critical thinking is not always superior to affect nor does an increase in affect automatically eliminate critical thinking and cause irrationality. Additionally, not all *satsangs* are as intentionally manipulative as McCartney depicts and some of his arguments are overly reductive eliminating details and levels of complexity. However, if kirtan and other music can strongly impact emotional wellbeing, as participants in this research have identified, it is important to note how it can also be utilized to access emotions to create less desirable, negative or even harmful effects.

Finally, a potentially detrimental ramification of neo-kirtan is the possibility it provides for mis-informed or inappropriate use of mantras. Appropriation has been increasingly addressed regarding postural yoga, and could also be investigated with neo-kirtan to see what kind of role it plays and whether this negatively impacts participants or even members from South Asian diasporas. I asked some participants about their perceptions on the subject. Most everyone dismissed the idea of appropriation, seeing it as irrelevant to their practice and experience. Some indicated that cultural appropriation as a concept exists at a "lower level of consciousness" than the intention for the work being done with mantras and chanting. Though potential appropriation might not be a reason to cease all kirtan, total dismissal and refusal to entertain the possibility seems irresponsible, imbalanced and could even be an example of spiritual by-pass. Perhaps the actual label "cultural appropriation" is problematic as it implies ownership or improper taking or use of others' culture while determining who belongs or has the right to access any cultural artifact is challenging. Is cultural belonging determined mostly through blood, through being born in to or through practice and time spent engaging with it? Terms such as misrepresentation or un-informed use seem more accurate and suitable. By some orthodox views, when using Vedic mantras without appropriate meter, succession of notes (*svara*), etc. and without proper initiation may be actually be harmful to the *Vedas* themselves, damaging the integrity and continuity of what has and continues to be a strongly rooted aural tradition. Similarly, what of mantras that are ritually prohibited to be chanted out loud? In these cases, what takes precedence

– the authenticity of tradition in ritual prescription or well-being benefits as indicated by some of the recent scholarship? (Dr. Neil Dalal, personal communication, September 8, 2019). I have observed misuse of terms, designations and monetary gain in neo-kirtan practice that could fall into these categories, and, upon reflection, may have unknowingly engaged in appropriation myself. Decolonizing these practices requires openness to looking at and evaluating practices, and openness to posing questions without clear answers. There is a conversation to be had here, one that requires deeper investigation and willingness to look.

Chapter 5: EFFECTIVENESS of NEO-KIRTAN - A COMBINATION OF CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

Given the increasing number of studies affirming the efficacy of the use of music in healthcare, the benefits described in engaging with neo-kirtan addressed in the previous chapter could be attributed purely to the fact that it is a musical technique. However, the term "music" does not simply refer to one thing and much of this research still utilizes such generalizations problematically. Further, to claim that impact is a direct result of kirtan music, or any music, in and of itself is does not reflect the entirety or complexity of the healing process. While certainly devotional music can play a significant role in promoting wellbeing, the music itself is but one of the factors involved. This concept was reflected as a significant trend that emerged while conducting this fieldwork. Participants identified several other contextual factors surrounding neo-kirtan music that they perceived to contribute to its overall healing potential. In other words, the wellness benefit of neo-kirtan was described as a combination of several interdependent components co-mingling with the music of kirtan. In what follows I will explore these contextual components including the use of Sanskrit mantra, the inclusion of other meditative techniques, the quality of one's intention or mental focus, affiliation with a teacher and quality of training, as well as the social and environmental settings in which kirtan takes place.

Factor One: The Use and Effect of Sanskrit Mantras

One Sunday morning while in Sydney, I passed a Baptist church and could hear music coming from inside. As I entered, a singer supported by a four-piece band was leading the congregation in songs that I later discovered were written by a well-known Australian worship group called Hillsong. The congregation was singing "Jesus bring new wine out of me" several times repetitively. I stayed for three songs which all had similar sections involving short repetitive phrases with small melodic contour. The orchestration, chord progression and instrumentation - guitar, male vocals, percussion, bass, back-up singers - was reminiscent of Shanti Mission's neo-kirtan. At first glance, the main apparent difference was the call and response format and, more poignantly, the use of Sanskrit mantra.

Given the predominance of Sanskrit used in their music, discussions around mantras and Sanskrit arose frequently in conversations with Shanti Mission informants. Mantras come in many forms and variations which several participants also identified. For example, Patches (2018) named three types of mantras she uses when teaching, depending on students' experience and level. "There are simple mantras, often a short word or phrase for example *Oṃ gaṃ gaṇapataye namaha*. There are medium length mantras such as the *Gāyatrī* or *Mahāmṛtyunjaya* mantras (described earlier) which has two lines. Then there are complex mantras such as the *Sri Suktam* which has dozens of lines."
Watch a version of the *Gāyatrī* mantra at Shanti Mission:
https://era-av.library.ualberta.ca/media_objects/k930bx92j/section/6h440t625
Hear an example of the *Sri Suktam* during a *puja* at Shanti Mission:
https://era-av.library.ualberta.ca/media_objects/k930bx92j/section/q237hs862

When asked to describe mantras, many spoke of the elements, mantras as light language or as living things arising from nature:

> "They help us come back to our nature," (Maitreya 2018a)
>
> "Mantras are light language and our soul is made of light. They connect us with nature and geometries of light and sound" (Shakti Durga 2018a).

In referring to mantras as a form of nature, inferred was the idea that they are a part of humanity's collective essence and thus of belong to all beings. This rationale was accessed as an explanation for neo-kirtan's more multicultural or Westernized orientation and seemed to allow participants to justify the possibility for universal access to mantra use beyond the potential harm of appropriation.

Many participants expressed a belief in the possibility for mantras to create certain effects or alter experience. According to Yogrishi Vishvketu (2018), mantras are "creationary" words that are vibrationally established "to have certain effects no matter who chants them and what they believe." Shakti Durga (2018a) described how mantras influence experience through a chain of effects aligning with their V diagram, reflecting the layered nature of existence:

> "Mantras impact our overall state first …. through spiritual levels, waking up the strength and wisdom of the soul. After this, the mind is impacted, in that it quiets and goes still. When this happens, we begin to see a change in hormone production and brain patterns, which have an impact on our emotions and physiological functioning."

In her experience, mantras actually become a form of the deity, such that the deity can be emitted and experienced as the sound, a phenomenon she called *mantra sakthi*. Similarly, Krishna Das also alluded to the idea that the actual experience of God and chanting names of the divine are the same thing when chanted fully and wholeheartedly.

Participants explained their belief in the creationary effects of mantras in a few ways. Some referred to knowledge given to them in a discourse by a respected teacher or spiritual guide: "Amma says mantras are from nature and can affect nature" for example. Others noted that mantras have existed for many years and their staying power is evidence of efficacy. "Mantras have lasted for so long which means they work. You wouldn't recommend something that doesn't work… It wouldn't survive" (Maitreya 2018b). Sada added (2018b), "The fact that mantras have survived thousands of years, many of which were shared through oral culture, means that they have relevance and importance to people and that they work." Finally, several participants referred to their experience with mantras when explaining their belief in their efficacy. According to Dave Stringer (2018), "We chant because it works. The experience is the proof." Yogrishi Vishvketu agreed, saying that when people have direct experience with mantra chanting they understand more. Experience with mantra for him does not always mean understanding syntax or intention of the mantra's content. He shared an example of a businessman who, coming to kirtan from a high-stress situation, ended up falling asleep during the session. When the kirtan ended, the man awoke and found he felt changed, light-hearted and different. "So even when you're sleeping the body is receiving (sound) vibration all the time. This impacts your mood which then impacts your body." Likewise, Patches (2018) whose first experience of chanting Sanskrit mantras was at Shanti Mission shared that though she did not initially understand the meaning, she felt "something" through recitation that grew over time.

Though neo-kirtan most often involves mantras invoking the names or traits associated with deities of Hinduism, participants are mostly individuals from outside India and who do not

identify as Hindu per se. To navigate this phenomenon, leaders de-emphasize links with religiosity by highlighting the qualities and characteristics of deities or describing them as archetypes, universal patterns that exist across cultures and within individuals. For example, Shakti Durga noted that different mantras invoke different "flavours of the Divine" (2018a) that are reflected in human consciousness through archetypes, giving examples such as the courageous protector (Durga) or the remover of obstacles (Gaṇeśa) or the bringer of prosperity (Lakshmi) etc. The qualities of different mantras and associated deities are often described before chanting begins, when participants are prompted to evoke these qualities within themselves and their own consciousness. Similar guidance can also be seen coming from South Asian teachers. A portion of a discourse given by Sri Sakthi Amma regarding divine names and their relationship to the body, senses and instincts can be read to be supportive of this kind of interpretation.

> "Within the human body, there is Sarasvati, there is Lakshmi, there is Kali. They are in the body in the form of vibrations. Because of different vibrations we get different senses. How does the calf know to suckle five minutes after birth? Sarasvati energy guides instinct…. The vibration of Sarasvati, knowledge/wisdom, exists within us all. So that's why we all have wisdom and knowledge. So the source of those energies, if you want to have more, the enlightened souls, sages, created these things called mantras. So, we can access this in whichever place we want." (Sri Sakthi Amma 2018).

Mantras as Sound Work

One evening, two Sakthi Amma devotees and musicians invited me to their home near Bondi for dinner. Over dahl and rice, the conversation eventually led to their experiences with kirtan and mantra, even to examining Sanskrit and whether Sanskrit words contain greater potency than other words. A story was related about a kirtan when someone requested to chant "*guru ne*." While guru is a known Sanskrit term, literally referring to a guide or teacher who lights the darkness, no one had ever heard of "*guru ne*." Nevertheless, the group then experimented with chanting "guru ne" and it apparently created a profound sense of peace and stillness. However, this was also within the context of a group that had been already chanting many other mantras for well over an hour. We then discussed whether the impact of other words said with intention and focus could have equal effect to that experienced when chanting well-known, ancient

mantras. Would it be possible to use other words in the same way and did it matter what the word actually means? Could any words or sounds in any language other than Sanskrit, or even a random word like Pepsi be used in similar ways and have the same impact? None of us could say for certain though we all felt that the word Pepsi, being the name of a specific product, would certainly be quite challenging to chant with the same intent. The general feeling around the table was that it could be plausible to draw on other sounds, recited with an open heart, focus, and holding a particular intention to bring about positive effects (Brulotte 2018).

Some facilitators and teachers, particularly those working with non-Indian students, are explaining mantra work as a form of sound healing. Yogrishi Vishvketu often describes mantra from a sonic perspective, aligning it with sound work and sound healing rather than a religious ritual. This can be more easily understood by some of his North American students who can be reluctant, resistant or skeptical of chanting. He also advised to utilize what he calls *nirguṇa* mantras, mantras that are not necessarily associated with names of deities or forms, rather than *saguṇa* mantras, mantras that directly reflect a deity or name of God. Mantras that do not have an associated image can be better to start. Rather than chanting the name of Durga, Krishna or Sarasvati, which can wrap people up in the idea of religiosity and religious appropriation - even if it is not - he suggests Sanskrit *nirguṇa* mantras from *Advaita Vedanta* such as *Iśa vashyam idam sarvam* meaning "This divine is everywhere, for everyone"; *soham soham* meaning "I am that I am"; or *Aham sukhito*, meaning "I am pure essence" (Yogrishi Vishvketu 2018).

In a discourse to students, Sri Sakthi Amma explained the seed (*bīja*) mantras from a sonic perspective involving energized sound (2018):

> "The source (of the Universe) is written in some single letters called *bīja aksharas* (seed letter mantras). When we say *bīja* mantras, they really don't have any meaning. For example, when we chant aum, there is no meaning. But by creating the sound, it creates the energy. So, when we chant a mantra ultimately, we are able to experience and receive (divine) energy…. From morning to evening we speak so many words. All those words create sound but all those sounds don't have this energy. It may have that *nāda* (sound) but there is no *sakthi* (power) in the *nāda*. *Sakthi* exists only in mantras, the *bīja aksharas* …. When we say the divine is a form of energy, when we chant the letters of

> the *bīja aksharas*, it creates the same energy wherever we chant. From thousands of seeds, all you need is one seed to grow one big banyan tree. So, the whole big banyan tree is hiding in the seed. Similarly, the whole universe is hiding in one letter called *bīja aksharas*."

In kirtans as well as workshops, Dave Stringer often explains the influence of mantras primarily through their sonic effect. For him, mantras are comprised of sounds that many individuals frequently use as expressions of certain feelings or experiences, noting some similarities in the use of sounds across all kinds of different languages. To illustrate, Stringer used the mantra *Oṃ namaḥ śivaya*, the first mantra he ever learned, which he described to me as an invocation of the sound that represents the unity of all things (*Oṃ*) and salutations to Śiva (*namaḥ śivaya*).

> "The sound OOOH creates opening and is the sound we make when we are in wonder or awe. MMM is a closed sound, like a hug, and is affirming, small and inward. In this way the mantra *Oṃ* represents the unity of far and near, of infinite and intimate, noting that it is interesting that both of these sounds can be sustained. AAA creates and is a sound made to express relief and satisfaction. NNN is often used to denote the negatives; it has a separating effect in the way that things sometimes come apart before they come together. SSHH is another sound heard everywhere often meaning to be quiet and soft. EEII tends to have a freeing effect or feeling. VVVV creates a pleasant buzz and can be energizing." (Dave Stringer 2018).

Stringer is an international kirtan artist and, having chanted in more than twenty different countries, has had the opportunity to explore these ideas with many people from many backgrounds. In his view, the sounds that are contained within mantras can create similar effect and meaning across cultures. As such, mantras "gesture to something connected and universal; for the most part we all use these basic sounds in the same way" (Dave Stringer 2018).

Stringer's experience is an intriguing account of some of unifying components of collective sonic expression and experience. While the sounds mentioned may be common amongst different cultures, the existence of true universals is often contested (Brown 2002) as the concept can be over generalized and even romanticized, as with the idea of music as a universal language. Individual responses to sounds can vary widely and may not be as obvious as they

seem on first glance, particularly true when it comes to meaning and communication as different people can have widely different interpretations of the same shared sonic event, even those within the same culture. Some expressive sounds - like "shhhh" - may seemingly have a more collective interpretation. Generalizing this observation to several or all sounds is challenging and requires further investigation to clarify.

Mantra: Kirtan or *Japa* Repetition

At Shanti Mission, mantras are practiced both in kirtan and *japa* form. *Japa* (also called *japamala, japamantra*) is the repetition of a mantra in declamatory style, often using a string of mala beads to count 108 repetitions. This style of chanting can be associated with ritual practice and *pūjas*. Whereas kirtan tends to be more melodic and song based, in *japa* chanting the vocal line is less melodic, typically spanning a tone and a half (figure 30). Neo-kirtan participants tend to refer to *japa* as more "traditional" or "*Vedic*." Many interviewees distinguished a different flavour and tone created through these two different uses of mantra. Patches (2018) summarized the difference stating that kirtan creates a sense of "wide expansiveness" while *japa* creates a sense of more "depth." My interpretation of this description is that kirtan offers a more external awareness and connection with others and *japa* offers more inward self-awareness. When she's practicing *japa* alone, Parvati (2018) notices more corporeal shifts and awareness and explained, "Kirtan is more about experience of coming into oneness with people who are different from me. *Japa*-mantra, even when done in a group context, seems to be more about personal and focused practice." Jagatambe (2018) said that kirtan, especially at Shanti Mission, accesses spirituality through "passion and the emotional, feeling realms that can open the heart to engage the soul." For her, kirtan engages her creativity and has a playfulness with more room for variation and experimentation in melody, rhythm and tempo. By contrast, her experience of *japa* mantra is that it less playful, with more focus on devotion through concentration on the energy and effect created though still brings deep abiding joy, unconditional love and a soul connection. A few participants suggested that adding in a few *japa* style mantras during more melodically diverse kirtan events, combining the two into one offering, might be an effective facilitation practice. Listen to the Dhanvantari mantra sung in japa style by the Shanti Mission community: https://era-av.library.ualberta.ca/media_objects/k930bx92j/section/t148fj07w

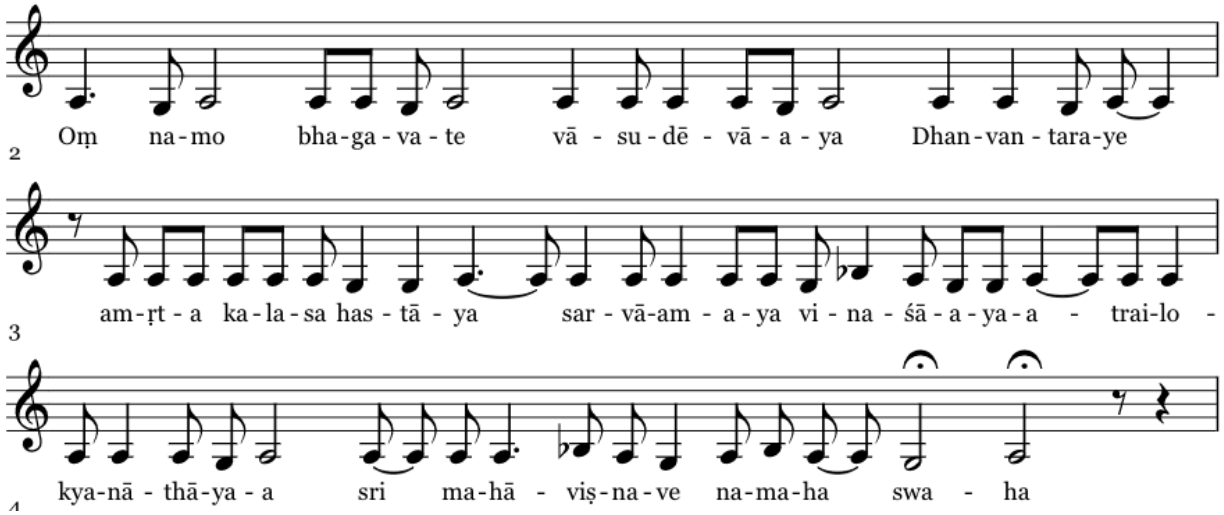


Figure 30: Dhanvantari mantra utilized in pūjas. Transcribed by author.

As Shanti Mission events often act as an introduction to meditation and spirituality, for many, kirtan is their first exposure to mantra. Given its musical and group context, interviewees said that kirtan acts as a gateway to a mantra-*japa* ritual and more personalized and individual practices. "This is partly why music is so important … people connect with music and have a tangible experience through it. It's less subtle, we can respond to it more easily. Since we culturally understand and are familiar with music vibration, adding this to chanting can make the mantra easier to digest" (Hamsa Devi 2018). Similarly, American artist Krishna Das also distinguished between the music and mantra practice, emphasizing that mantras are about chanting the names of the divine regardless of context. "Music is one thing and chanting the names is another" (Krishna Das 2018). He related kirtan chanting to a mother giving her child its medicine in a spoonful of syrup describing the music as the syrup and the mantra as the medicine. "Music relaxes us, helps us focus but it is the mantra, the repetition of the names, that will plant seeds for destruction of suffering and give us strength to deal with what arises. This is the goal of existence" (Krishna Das 2018).

Overall, *japa* and kirtan are seen as mutually beneficial. Shakti Durga pointed out that ultimately both kirtan and mantra *japa* take us to the same place; both are designed to bring an experience of bliss and joy. Similarly, Yogrishi Vishvketu (2018) broadened this idea to include

other meditative practices: "(These methods) all work together. Yoga posture helps you breathe, breathing (pranayama) opens the heart, an open heart helps sound and sound helps devotion."

Sanskrit Mantras Over Other Music

Over the course of my stay in Australia I went to a few events at the Rhythm Hut, a volunteer driven community organization based in a town called Gosford. The Rhythm Hut offers a variety of music programs, ranging from drum circles to performances. It has a grass roots atmosphere and is the kind of place where all are welcome. One Sunday evening, Shanti Bhavan and I attended a music event featuring two singer-songwriters whose differing song styles I admired, capturing a wide range of emotions. Observing the audience, I noticed engagement in many forms like head bobbing, swaying and movement and strong cheering between songs. Both musicians also engaged the audience in group singing in a few songs, lasting for several minutes at times. I wondered about the effect of this kind of group singing and the difference, if any, between these kinds of experiences and neo-kirtan. On the drive home, I spoke about this with Shanti Bhavan. She proceeded to recount an experience she had sitting on the roof of the guest house at Sri Sakthi Amma's Ashram in India with Shanti Mission musicians Maitreya and Parvati. They started singing "Let it Be" by the Beatles and blended it with the mantra *Oṃ namo nārāyanī*. Shanti Bhavan recalled the experience as deeply moving, making the hairs on her arms stand up and noted that she did not have the same response to listening to "Let it Be" sung by only the Beatles themselves. So, she asked, "Is the effect in the musical content or is it about the vehicle and their delivery of the music? Would a mantra be more powerful? Could Katy Perry belt out a mantra such that it brings healing?" (Shanti Bhavan 2018).

When I asked Maitreya about the use of kirtan rather than other songs he said, "Any music… has the potential to help a group of people. Even a sad song can help people express their grief and can help people connect with their emotions" (2018b). Similarly, Yogrishi Vishvketu explained that since the primary purpose of the kirtan genre is to invoke devotion and to develop faith, it does not require as much particularity in the words used, at least not in comparison to *japa*-based ritual. In his opinion it is possible to use English to effectively bring about healing, and kirtan chanting need not be limited to Sanskrit mantra. However, Vishvketu also stated that Sanskrit mantras are the most effective sound to use as they are the fastest way to liberate and heal what

is stuck. Though some utilize the word more liberally, the term mantra refers to Sanskrit and denotes certain sonic patterns, through specific combinations of vowels and consonants. He explained that Sanskrit was created purposefully to work on "vibration," to lead the brain in a particular direction.

Similarly, while agreeing that other music has impactful potential, most Shanti Mission participants were adamant about the exponential benefit of utilizing Sanskrit mantra. According to Parvati (2018), "Secular music can move us and inspire us but does the repetition of it change us? I'm not sure. But the repetition of sacred mantra definitely changes us." Niranjanaaya (2018) explained, "When I listen to secular music, I will get more of an emotional high but my overall state may stay the same or be lowered. It's hard to find songs that make me a better person. It's easy to find songs that, if overindulged, could make me a less tolerant person and more negative in my outlook." Many participants explained this belief through the creationary paradigm of Sanskrit. According to Jagatambe, though most devotional music connects with our soul, the Sanskrit in kirtan further attunes us to our essential nature. "In English, the word table is a label, it is referential. With Sanskrit mantra the sound that means the thing it represents actually is the thing it represents. It's not just representation but vibrates at the essence of the thing" (Jagatambe 2018). Sada (2018b) agreed saying, "the impact and energy in the Sanskrit mantras is established," explaining that when you sing mantras, you are plugging into the effect of a vibration that has accessed by thousands of people. Similarly, for Veena Vaani (2018), English songs "do not convey the same power and connection as Sanskrit" which better allows her consciousness to expand, her mind to still and to be in a state of much more grace. While research participants were open to the possibility of utilizing a wide variety of languages, Sanskrit was perceived to hold particular import regarding efficacy and degree of impact and benefit.

Factor Two: Intention

During an "Empowering Relationships" workshop at Shanti Mission, I had three conversations with different participants who revolving around their perception of intention. The first participant described another workshop led by Shakti Durga where everyone was first asked to get up and sing a mantra with no other instruction. According to her, the result "wasn't ideal" as

most were non-musicians. However, they were asked to sing a second time with the instruction to deliberately think of and visualize - what she called "intend to connect with"- a spiritual teacher or avatar. This time, the sounds participants made changed dramatically, becoming more beautiful and pleasing. The second participant shared a related anecdote and expressed that she notes a change in Shakti Durga's voice quality, a vocal power when she consciously embodies the state of Shakti Durga. A third participant who works with paint and jewellery mentioned that in her own artistic endeavours, if she does not take time to consciously use her intention connect to a divine source in some way, her creative work does not flow as easily.

When it comes to impact and sonic quality of kirtan, the act of utilizing intentionality seemed to hold significance for most participants and "intention," as a key-word, was mentioned frequently. "Intention is focused thought that has a purpose" said Hanumani (2018). "Holding an intention means to place attention and energy into something…putting your awareness in a certain direction." Veena Vaani (2018) described intention as a mental construct with a focus on emotionality: "It is opening, expansive, leaning forward, inclusive rather than controlling and set. It is intuitive, a deep soul knowing that it's the right thing to be doing and will benefit the souls of everyone. There is a component of love in intention and reaching for higher consciousness… and vulnerability because you are opening yourself up to offer something that is not a textbook set thing."

Participants distinguished a difference between one's personal intention and the intention or meaning of the Sanskrit mantra itself, believed to be present in the sonic combination of vowels and consonants. One's personal intention can be viewed as an act of will where participants deliberately use the conscious mind to direct and focus thoughts, whereas the meaning embedded in the mantra is viewed to have effect on some level whether one purposefully holds this intention or not. The majority of neo-kirtan participants do not know exact word for word translations of the mantras they chant in kirtan. This kind of semantic understanding can be obtained through scholarship or by chanting in vernacular language rather than Sanskrit. Rather than a complete understanding, more participants tend to have a general idea of the broad meaning or purpose of a particular mantra, especially since this kind of overview is often given by neo-kirtan leaders before initiating a chant. However, participants in neo-kirtan circles are

increasingly instructed to connect to the essence of the sound, the feeling it creates and to create one's own personal intention. Engaging with this feeling is seen as being just as important if not more so than understanding semantic translations as this can over-engage thinking. According to Yogrishi Vishvketu, it can be beneficial for some participants not to focus too much on the semantic meaning of the words since an awareness occurs at a deeper level which can create an opening emotionally and physically. "A little bit of explanation of the meaning can be helpful but too much explanation can make the practice too intellectual and people can get stuck in the mind and lose the new experience" (Yogrishi Vishvketu 2018).

All interview subjects agreed that kirtan chanting can be offered more as entertainment rather than as a device of devotion or for healing, a distinction that is perceived to involve intention. For Laxmi Maa, if the intention behind music making is for fame or money, there is a flavour of "being needed." However, "when one sings from the heart, it doesn't matter what the words or lyrics are about", noting the purity of the Latin in Gregorian chant (Laxmi Maa 2018). For Veena Vaani (2018) the difference in impact in different music "comes down to intention. Even some devotional music can be sung with a here we go again attitude and some secular songs can evoke devotion even if they weren't written for that purpose." Hanumani spoke about other neo-kirtan she experienced at a yoga festival. "I felt something was missing… a spiritual connection or guidance. It felt more like a performance, getting people into a heightened state … just a musical high without the fabric that weaves it together." Similarly, Adi Dass expressed, "it depends who is doing the kirtan … the energy of the leader impacts the song. Two people can sing the same kirtan and it doesn't have the same impact." Said Stellar Maya, "It's the energy. Faith and love are energies. When you sing with faith and love and humility it has a tangible effect." For Maitreya, much of the impact of the music has to do with the inner state of the person offering the music. Two people can play the same piece of music and create a different response. He referenced Sakthi Amma saying, "She could sing to Kali or she could sing twinkle twinkle little star… when she sings with love, it can be medicine for people" (Maitreya 2018b).

Krishna Das has experienced some people who are chanting kirtan to "get something from it" (2018). The distinction for him is that their life is not their practice. However, he also expressed his belief in the power of the mantra itself to override any kind of intention held by practitioners.

When asked about intention, he answered, “Everybody’s doing the best they can. People say all kinds of things… whether it is really what is going on is another story” (Krishna Das 2018). He then told a parable about a person who climbed a holy tree to hide and ended up summoning Śiva unknowingly from the shaking of the tree. Śiva appeared as a result of the individuals’ actions not from his conscious intention. For Krishna Das, simply doing the practice of chanting is enough and an intention to connect is not necessary, it is something he believes and trusts is happening. “I just do what I do” (Krishna Das 2018).

For Yogrishi Vishvketu, much of the impact of kirtan depends on one’s intention. “Singing from the heart changes everything” (Yogrishi 2018). Details such as quality of voice or language choice are not as important as approaching kirtan from a state of loving devotion and making this one’s focus. Dave Stringer (2018) explained how, in his view, intention is an excellent accelerant. “If you apply an intention to the mantra it powers it up.” However, he also expressed that intention is not always necessary. “If you sit down to chant and stick with it you will have an experience even if you have resistance.” Several participants have approached him after a kirtan to express that, though initially they came because someone else (a girlfriend or family member) wanted to, they ended up becoming immersed in the chanting. “Chanting can be beyond intention leading us to the moment” (ibid 2018). Sri Sakthi Amma (2018) explained “The important thing that when we chant, the focus and dedication must be there. If you chant two billion times without love and devotion, nothing will happen. If you chant at least one hundred times with love and devotion, it creates a big energy within us.”

When offering kirtan at Shanti Mission, the ability to hold an intention of “unity” is seemingly just as important, if not more so, than musical skill. During a casual group brunch, the discussion turned to the Shanti music group and their challenge in finding this unity at times. Shakti Durga referred to the significance of a musician’s inner state and referenced a former Shanti musician who always “sang from her ego rather than from her heart” (Brulotte 2018). Even though she was one of the most technically skilled singers they had, she was asked to leave the group for not being able to hold a more clear, unified intention. To set and hold intention when playing kirtan, musicians Sada and Maitreya consciously focus on a Divine source, their own hearts, the instruments played and the participants before and throughout music offerings.

In so doing, they feel they can be more effectively utilize the music to help people. When Maitreya is connected to intention, he feels free, more relaxed, warmth in his heart and the ability to send love on each breath so that, rather than just sounds coming out of his mouth, the music rises up from a place of goodness. Similarly, Sada, said she feels peaceful, joyful, that the music making feels bigger than her body, not just automatic. When Maitreya does not connect he feels more nervousness and tension and Sada (2018) expressed that it feels more like just her body "physically going through the memory of making music."

The concept of intention and its interplay with the impact of kirtan was identified as significant for participants of this research. Holding more altruistic intentions for healing, love, devotion and connection were favoured over making music mindlessly without focus or with egoic intentions for personal gain. While this factor was fairly easily described qualitatively, evaluating the impact of intention from a more quantitative objective perspective would be interesting albeit potentially challenging.

Factor Three: The Addition of Other Techniques

Rather than offered on its own, kirtan at Shanti Mission is typically presented within the structure of *satsang* musical meditation. These musical meditations place kirtan interdependently alongside a themed guided meditation based on "Ignite your Spirit" (IYS) Therapy techniques, an approach unique to Shanti Mission developed by Shakti Durga combining techniques learned from her various teachers (see Introduction). *Satsang* includes different components such as guided visualizations and imagery work, verbal releases, spoken affirmations and breath cued releases. Additionally, the entire meditation is supported by instrumental music throughout, usually played live. This combination of kirtan chanting with guided IYS meditation is one of the hallmarks of Shanti Mission's approach to wellbeing and according to respondents, leads to longer lasting transformation rather short-lived emotional highs. It is one of the salient differences between Shanti Mission kirtan and other neo-kirtan and highlights the notion that long-term change can require more than simply kirtan or music.

Though *satsang* meditations at Shanti Mission are usually led without a predetermined program, some general patterns were observed, particularly in relation to the overall process and sequence

of activity. It typically opens with an introduction by the designated meditation leader. This is one of the only portions of *satsang* without music and can involve some discourse, teaching or concept clarification. Then, one or two kirtan pieces are played, offered most often by live musicians, though recorded music can provide a substitute when musicians are not available. Following the kirtan chanting, the *satsang* leader begins the guided meditation, which tends to feature two distinct elements. The first involves cleansing where participants are facilitated to release any barriers to wellbeing, such as emotional or mental blocks, behavioural habits and overall negative patterns. The second portion of the meditation is devoted to replenishment, building and creating what is desired through positive affirmations. If Shakti Durga is leading, she will sometimes offer a "singing discourse," delivering teachings in poetic lines spontaneously sung as improvised solo melodies (figure 26). *Satsang* typically ends with two to four more kirtan pieces supported by an individual blessing process where all participants are invited to come up and receive a brief laying on of hands from the *satsang* leader and other senior participants.

Through research on the use of song across several First Nations healing practices in North America, I have noted similar patterns of combining music and chant with other spiritual devices or practices. Parvati has some experience working with ritual with an Elder near Connecticut. She said, "The shamanic journey is any journey where you explore your inner environment in order to gain insight or make contact with something of greater consciousness than yourself" (2018). She went on to explain that while some traditional folk practices might use herbs, fasting or plant medicine to open up consciousness to unseen worlds for guidance, a similar transformation can happen through a directed meditative experience. For it to be transformative there needs to be consciousness and energy. In this way, she believes the healing modality of *satsang* can be read as a type of shamanic journey in that intention and sound are used to shift the awareness around people so they can see that there might be alternatives.

Spoken releases and affirmations ("Cognitive Refocusing"):

The spoken releases and affirmations used in *satsang* are statements or commands presented in participants' vernacular language. They mirror the structure of kirtan in that they are first called out by the facilitator who asks the group to repeat what is said, in verbal call and response

fashion. An instruction to visualize and direct the breath usually follows each release statement. Participants are guided to breathe in specific ways, sometimes from a certain area or region of the body or even while visualizing a colour or pattern. This technique is taught in IYS therapy and the entire process is referred to as "cognitive refocusing."

For participants, these spoken releases and affirmations provide concrete means to engage conscious thought and will, helping individuals focus their mind and connect to the meditation. According to Shakti Durga (2018a), the spoken releases and affirmations are a form of "meditation *via positiva*" where the mind is given something to do which is in opposition to "meditation *via negativa*", which can be a challenging form of meditation, instructing practitioners simply to empty the mind. The spoken commands also serve to create transparency and overt naming of particular themes and patterns arising for the collective group. This can increase participants awareness, ability to uncover underlying beliefs and to connect with the process with more ease and depth. From Parvati (2018), "When people speak releases (out-loud) with directed breathing, they access the power of their spoken word. It's like it resounds throughout their body and they feel it more strongly."

The following is a series of dictations of verbal releases and affirmations from "Musical Meditation (*Satsang*) Five: To Heal a Difficult Situation" which I attended via Facebook Live on November 18, 2018. This meditation portion was led by Shakti Durga supported by Maitreya playing in the background on guitar. Watch Musical Meditation (*Satsang*) Five: To Heal a Difficult Situation" https://era-av.library.ualberta.ca/media_objects/k930bx92j/section/rj4305495

> [17:28 – 19:00] "So just say I now release all negative thoughts…. vibrations and emotions…… that hold me back…. from inner self Mastery…. and skill-fulness in action…. Breathe deeply in…. and releasing." (pause for breathing). "Say, I release all attachment to being right …. and to winning arguments…. and I set myself free…. to arise in to love …. that brings Harmony…. and mutual empowerment…. And breathe deeply…. release everywhere "haaaa"…Sometimes these things are not conscious. Say, I release the energy of all misunderstandings…. and difficult communication…. and I set myself free… to transmute all such energy…. into love in action…. love in my heart….

and love in my world…. Breathe in deeply, hold in the heart chakra and then release everywhere." (Pause for breathing).

[21:05 -22:10] "Breathing in through your crown, down through the body and into the Earth. And in this moment of now, just creating a vision of how you'd like it to be, in this part of your life that we're working on. That's your choice. How would you like it to be? And let's put our energy into being congruent with that, our visioning. How would we like it to be? The vibrance, the connection, the spaciousness. And then with the next out-breath releasing through the crown chakra on the top of the head" (pause for breathing).

[23:00 – 23:50] "First thing is acceptance. And then, from that ground comes the capacity for change. And so, let's say, I choose to accept things as they are…. and make my peace with this…., that it's happened for a reason…. and that as I unlock the mysteries…. I will learn and grow…. and have the choice…. to transform this situation…… into something amazing and beautiful. Breathe deeply in and releasing everywhere" (pause for breathing).

[24:46 – 25:30] "Breathing slowly and deeply and feel light coming in from above through the top of your head and pull it in with your intention and your will. Visualize light coming in and filling your whole body, mind and spirit. And say, as I Blaze with the Inner Light…. my whole life transforms… joyfully…. and with ease and Grace…. Breathe deeply and let your energy expand" (pause for breathing.)

Supportive music in guided meditation

In addition to kirtan, other supportive music is played throughout *satsang*. The spoken releases and affirmations are accompanied mostly by instrumental music, often featuring either synthesizer, harp or guitar. Veena Vaani (2018), who often plays for this portion of *satsang*, explained how this supportive music is usually "a totally intuitive process," one that she does not tend to analyze. The music is improvised and through it she attempts to create a musical holding palate, a container for the meditation, playing to help augment what is said rather than distract

from it. She does this by keeping the tempo stable, omitting strong beats or accents. She selects sounds and keys that she feels relate to and reflect the quality of the words used in meditation, listening for where the words can take the group. If the meditation is uplifting, she mirrors this with upward movements; if it is reflective or about difficulties, she chooses a minor modality. She also tends to use more minor keys during spoken releases and more introspective moments, as she feels these keys tend to emphasize these qualities for people. In affirmation phases, she plays to bring in positivity or musical qualities that could assist participants to reach the outcome. She also often accesses the pentatonic scale for its harmonious unobtrusiveness but tries not to make it obvious - if in G pentatonic, she may use A in the base which assists in keeping the tonality ambiguous, neither major nor minor.

Effect of combining kirtan with spoken releases and affirmations

All Shanti Mission participants interviewed agreed that the pairing of spoken releases and affirmations with kirtan chanting is complementary and valuable. "You can do one without the other but they are most beneficial together" says Surya Rose (2018). "Release commands, affirmations, energy healing and music all combine together so that all realms, physical emotional mental and spiritual are addressed" (ibid).

According to participants all musical components of *satsang* increase emotional connection and the ability to tap into memories and the subconscious, adding to the overall persuasiveness of the experience. However, the kirtan with mantras geared specifically towards meditation themes can greatly assist the process, allowing new ways to be perceived and adopted. The kirtan creates a softening and a receptivity to change suggested through the meditation, and is seen to amplify what is said in English, strengthening and solidifying the spoken healing commands. According to Jagatambe (2018) "(Kirtan) makes the releases more effective and helps with these. It is easier to increase receptivity and invite people into a peaceful state and connection to the right brain. Vibration helps in and of itself but kirtan helps put people in more receptive and connective state." Increased receptivity enhances the implementation of spoken releases, in which participants utilize their words, conscious will as well as the collective energy of the group to create change. The combination of the spoken sounds with the sung music is seen to facilitate a more powerful outcome. Savitur (2018) explained that the chanting helps lift people out of

their repetitive habits of thinking and feeling: “It is a quick and effective way to get people focused and out of the mind and it cuts through the thinking field, moving people more into unity. The release commands in turn benefit kirtan by creating space between the individual and their thoughts and feelings so they can become more deeply immersed in the kirtan music, creating more possibility for transformation.”

This structure provided by *satsang* seems to offer more possibilities when it comes to healing with kirtan. According to Niranjanaaya (2018), “Ignite Your Spirit therapy with kirtan is more effective in this way than just kirtan on its own because it has the capacity to engage and identify the specific set of issues and respond in a more contextualized way. This is not a criticism of kirtan and that it can’t also be effective.” Shanti Bhavan (2018) observed that, “kirtan or concert events aren’t usually pitched as a way to move through things consciously. Whereas in *satsang*, this intent is clearer. I find I can go to a *satsang* when I’m grappling with something and am more likely to move through it.” Hanumani (2018) shared how *satsang* meditation offers a “full package (that) always seems to address whatever issues are going on for me in some way... (this helps me) feel like I’ve been cleaned out.” For her, Shanti mission *satsangs* provide more direction and structure than other kirtan experiences and have given her insights that have helped her let go of a lot of things she was not initially aware of. Referring to other kirtan events with silent meditation offered at completion, she found this helped her feel peaceful but did not leave her feeling changed.

I tend to agree with these accounts of the efficacy of Shanti Mission’s approach of combining kirtan with sound and spoken word, especially in comparison to other neo-kirtan experiences. In so doing, they appear to utilize kirtan purposefully as tool to address wellbeing.

The following is a shortened structural analysis and verbal transcription of “Musical Meditation (*Satsang*) Six: To Enhance Deep Learning” led by Shakti Durga on February 2nd, 2019. The complete transcription is available in Appendix C. Watch this musical meditation (*satsang*) at: https://era-av.library.ualberta.ca/media_objects/k930bx92j/section/zc77sr15j

Time	Highlights and Summarized Description
00:00 – 01:45	**Welcome and Introduction: Shakti Durga** - Assistance for learning theme introduced, (with Sarasvati) - Shakti Durga provides an anecdote about a participant who received blessings and the positive impact on his studies concluding with, "So I have no doubt, and neither did this young man, as to the power of the blessings."
01:45 – 2:38	**Discourse: Introduction to Gaṇeśa: Shakti Durga** - "Ganesha in the Vedic system and the yoga system is usually invoked at the beginning of anything so as to help remove the issues and problems." - Shakti Durga explains mythology of how Ganesh's human head was chopped off and replaced with an elephant head representing the release of human consciousness and problems. "So that's the reason that we use this mantra first… We're also asking that the limitations of our human consciousness be released… that we open up to the Divine's way of perceiving things which is much broader and much more filled with love and wisdom." - Other musicians introduced
02:38 – 05:13	**Induction and Invocation: Shakti Durga** - Maitreya's guitar picking begins - Shakti Durga leads participants in a brief visualization involving the heart, nature and breath. "Feeling your love for the natural world and the infinite divine energy that's within that. And then with the next in-breath, breathing in the spirit, the life force that's everywhere around us and send that up to the infinite, however you perceived the infinite, *paramaśakti, parambrahmha, eiṃ* … Whatever is your paradigm." - She invokes spiritual guides, teachers and angels to assist with the meditation.
05:13 – 05:43	**Kirtan mantra translation: Shakti Durga** - Shakti Durga explains the Sanskrit used. "Jai Ganesha, victory to Ganesha. *Oṃ* is calling on the infinite source. *Gaṃ* is a *bīja* sound that has the effect of bringing it into the physical now… *Gaṇapataye*, a name of Ganesha who marshals all the Divine forces to get something done. Namaha, we surrender to you."

05:43 – 13:17	**"Jai Ganesha" kirtan song: Maitreya** "So I will sing the mantra twice and everyone sing back connecting our hearts and voices." (For a musical example of "Jai Ganesh", see Chapter 3).
13:17 – 19:01	**Breath work visualization: Shakti Durga** - Maitreya continues to finger pick on his guitar in the same key (A) as "Jai Gaṇeśa." - Shakti Durga guides the group to breathe in and out through different places in the body. "With every big in breath igniting your spirit and with every slow silent outbreath releasing any stress, tension, anxiety… breathing in through the top of your head … and out through *ajna* chakra between the eyebrows… next inbreath again through the top of the head and out through the back of the head, clearing the channels that hold on to our past energies. Breathe in through the crown and out through the back of the neck. Breathe in through the crown chakra and out through your solar plexus area…." (cont.) - Shakti Durga explains that Sarasvati is associated with the sacral chakra (*svadhisthāna*) between the hips. She prepares the group to do a clearing "so that we've got plenty of energy to create new learning and to bring in the blessings of mother Sarasvati."
19:03 – 24:43	**Cognitive Refocusing: Releases/cleansing: Shakti Durga** "So just repeating after me. I now release all negative energy… Negative thoughts and vibrations… and negative emotions… That slow down *svadhisthāna* chakra… and create staleness… breathe in and release through the chakra, really letting go." - "Say I release all fear of my creative power… And I give myself permission… to utilize the divine within me… To create a heavenly life… breathe deeply in and releasing through this chakra" cont.
24:43 – 25:51	**Kirtan introduction: Shakti Durga** - Shakti Durga introduces Śiva as, "the giver of yoga to the world, the mystic ascetic who sits in meditation all the time," connected to Sarasvati as her brother. - "And we're going to sing to Lord Śiva, the infinite knower of all things… And then we'll sing "Śivohum" which means I am consciousness, and pure bliss, pure bliss

	beyond form. And it'll be call and response. We've used many of the names of Lord Śiva in this song, you just sing whatever I sing. We'll sing to Liṅgarāja (pillar of light), to Mahadev, the great God, to Sada Śiva, the eternal light of Śiva, to Parameśwara the supreme God, to Gurudev, the origin of all guru lineages back to Lord Śiva, Nityasundara, eternal beauty, *praṇava* embodied Om. So many beautiful names. But feel the vibration and let your spirit understand what's happening."
25:51-35:10	**"Oṃ Namaḥ Śivaya/ Śivohum" Kirtan song: Shakti Durga and Ganapati** - Vocals led by Shakti Durga and Ganapati who also supports on guitar.
35:10 – 41:50	**Cognitive Refocusing: Releases with Affirmations: Shakti Durga** - Ganapati continues playing the chords of "Śivohum" in the background. - Shakti Durga: "Say I release all blockages to bliss…. From my body, mind and energy field… and I set myself free… to receive the bliss of Śiva … *Oṃ namaḥ śivaya*… (x3) And then say I call forth the seeds of consciousness… I need for the coming year… I call forth the seeds of consciousness… to be awakened… and to bear fruit…. in this coming year… to bring joy… to bring love… wisdom… and self-fulfillment… And breathe deeply in and release through the head region." (cont.) - "Just say, I now release… All of the old stuck, stale energy… and confusing thoughts… confounding beliefs… and lesser truths… so I can now grow… in to the higher truth… greater wisdom… and more profound awareness… of my inner light… and how to blaze…with love… humility…. respect… and grace… Breathing in and then release as you blaze that light." (cont.)
41:50 – 42:33	**Sarasvati Kirtan Introduction** - Shakti Durga: "And we'll now call upon Sarasvati, who in the ancient creation myths was seen as Śiva's sister. He was light and she was the power to learn. So, we're gonna sing a song called Sarasvati ma, Sarasvati. And then we'll sing "*ma jaya ma jaya ma*." And the ma we're referring to is the mother of all wisdom. Jaya, victory to you."
42:30 – 48:35	**"Sarasvati Ma" Kirtan Song: Shakti Durga and Maitreya** Led by Shakti Durga on vocals and Maitreya on guitar

48:35 – 52:10	**Cognitive Refocusing: Affirmation and Blessing: Shakti Durga** - "And just breathing in the mantra. Let it go right through your body. And just say I call on the mother of all knowledge. I call upon Sarasvati… Say I'm open to new learning… In enjoy learning… learning is easy… I easily learn what I need… and transmute my learning into wisdom… so be it… And breathing in, hold and then breathing normally." - She invites participants to send love to a teacher they would like to learn from: "And raise your hands, palms facing outwards at about chest height. And send love to this teacher. And say, I send you genuine affection and respect… and love from my heart… and I ask that you inspire me… and share your wisdom with me… That my own learning is faster... More pervasive... More accurate… and expansive… through divine grace… so be it. Breathing in and just sending that love to whoever you'd like to learn from. See them joyful and fulfilled in what they're doing. Send them love and best wishes… And be open to the flow of energy from them to you to inspire you in your learning…"
52:10 – 53:37	**Transition to Conclusion: Shakti Durga** - Shakti Durga guides participants to rub their hands and then their faces, "Breathe the energy into your facial tissue… that you greet the world with joy and illumination. And then bring awareness back into the physical body and open eyes."

Factor Four: Training, Experience and Guidance of a Teacher

Another factor that emerged as a component of the impact of kirtan is the amount of experience in working with group chanting and with mantras. The more an individual accesses a particular mantra, understanding it through guidance and experience, the more resonance it has for this individual and the more they are able to utilize this within a group of individuals. This is seemingly the case both for facilitators as well as participants in kirtan though was mentioned to be particularly significant for those leading kirtan as they are perceived to play a bigger role given their ability to choose and influence the direction and feeling of a kirtan.

Affiliation with and amount of guidance received from a teacher was also said to influence to effect of kirtan. In Shakti Durga's experience, not only does a connection to a teacher help individuals remain focused on their path, but also, when kirtan is offered through a lineage, the mantra has more ability to change people and alleviate issues. Without this, the kirtan can run the risk of becoming more like entertainment or even potentially harmful (see chapter four). In her opinion, though all sacred music can be beneficial, the more highly attuned the musician offering it is, the more impact it will have. This attunement does not always mean musical technique but rather an essence of devotion. In Adi Dass' view, most people offering chants in a powerful and effective way are connected with a teacher or lineage. "Kirtan artists who are connected to a high spiritual teacher, and who have a strong heartfelt devotion to that teacher, have the capacity to bring the energy of that Spiritual Master into their kirtan" (Adi Dass 2018). By way of confirming this, she spoke of the Shanti Mission musicians who, she observed, become much more powerful kirtan artists the more closely they connected with Shakti Durga and as their devotion grows. "(Sakthi) Amma has also been an influence on our musicians as… the artists developed devotion for Amma through Shakti Durga which has added to the power of the chanting. Artists, for example, Krishna Das and Snatam Kaur, very powerful kirtan artists, have great devotion to their spiritual teachers and are able to bring that something extra into their performance which is felt by the audience and causes transformation for all those present" (Adi Dass 2018). Indeed, Krishna Das referred to his guru Neem Karoli Baba several times in our interview conversation as well as in the workshop he led in Sydney. Rather than taking direct credit for his kirtan, he feels that when he sings, his guru is transmitting through him. He also explained that he does not chant for other people per se but instead offers allows people to participate in his personal chanting practice, but not necessarily to please them.

Participants stressed the importance of informed mantra use through practice under the guidance of a teacher not only to enhance effectiveness of kirtan but to avoid potential misuse. Said Shakti Durga (2018b), "All the texts say the mantras should be administered by a master, teacher or guru." She went on to explain how a teacher can guide the evolution of one's mantra practice and that some mantras are not taught until the student is in a higher state of development. Savitur also commented on this, noting that Sakthi Amma gives everyone the mantra *Oṃ namo nārāyanī* (translated as salutations to the tri-goddess Durga, Lakshmi, Sarasvati) as a starting

point and does not recommend other mantras until experience has been gained. Several individuals recounted times when Shakti Durga encouraged practitioners to stop using a mantra because it was creating imbalance or opening too much too fast. Another individual spoke of the importance of having at least some degree of awareness and understanding of meaning and purpose for mantras utilized, giving the example that only chanting *ram ram ram*, the seed mantra for the element of fire, one could build a lot of fire which could potentially lead to personality imbalances. Said Vishvketu, while some basic mantras are useful for everybody to sing or chant, some mantras, mantras require a spiritual teacher. He compared this to how certain medications are given generally over the counter while others require prescriptions.

Factor Five: Social Context

Social context can play a role in the effect and impact of any musical offering. Given its participatory nature, group dynamics might play an even bigger role in kirtan as each piece is mediated by the way the group of participants in the audience choose or are able to interact with it. The role the collective plays is fairly integral to the structure of kirtan, requiring participants to engage with and respond to the call in some way in order to function as a kirtan; without a group response, kirtan becomes solo singing.

Regarding group dynamics in kirtan, "receptivity" is a term that came up for Shanti Mission participants and, as mentioned earlier, some of the opening components of *satsang* are designed to heighten this receptivity. Ganapati emphasized the importance of this receptive interaction and participant engagement in kirtan. "The most important thing in kirtan is the response from the group. If they go 'yea' you go 'yeah more… there's no division, there's no me and you, it becomes 'us'. It has very little to do with me or them as individuals. It's like being in any relationship, it always takes two to tango" (Ganapati 2018). Ganapati (ibid) went on to explain that kirtan, "breaks the stubbornness of ourselves to be individuals. When it becomes 'us' other harmonies and other sounds come in." Zoë Narayani (2018) also mentioned the importance of the group dynamic, saying**, "**It's a group effort. We are all creating together." For her, if the participants are "cold", there is not much a leader can do. But if they are connected, the experience grows exponentially and is one that cannot be derived from watching or interacting with a recording.

Familiarity and consistency in group dynamic, regularly participating as a "community" was also expressed as a factor in the overall effect. Well-known artists such as Krishna Das and Dave Stringer tend to tour the world, leading kirtan in different places with different people each time. Others based in one city more consistently can potentially develop a community around their events with higher likelihood of similar people attending each time. However, neither of these typically involves the kind of community building as Shanti Mission does. One of the first things Hanumani shared with me was how she feels there are no other spiritual communities like Shanti Mission. Members are taught how to help each other and are given tools to support with their IYS healing method. In other communities she had participated in, when someone was unwell they were advised to see a counsellor or the main spiritual teacher etc. whereas in Shanti Mission, her peers are empowered to be of assistance. Though two kirtans do not necessarily involve exactly the same people, many who attend Shanti Mission events identify as belonging to the Shanti Mission "community." Further, within the context of this community, neo-kirtan at is performed consistently, at regular times and locations with regular participants, many of whom attend weekly. This constancy also seemingly holds implications for the effect of the kirtan. One a survey respondent (unpublished data 2018) explained:

> "I have been to other kirtan events and whilst I enjoy them, it is when I am with a group of people whom I love and have developed relationship with over the last twelve years (as I have at Shanti Mission) that I get the most benefit from kirtan and chanting. It's like we have one collective heart and we truly become one with each other and one with the divine in each other when we sing to the divine with each other which allows more divine to flow through each other. The relationships we have definitely affect the benefits of kirtan and chanting in a positive way. "

Unity Consciousness: Connection through Intention

"Connection" and "unity consciousness" are states frequently mentioned at Shanti Mission and, from their descriptions, can be equated to more mainstream terms such as "presence" or "flow." Unlike social wellbeing which can imply impact on relationships and personalities outside of kirtan, unity consciousness is seemingly more of a transpersonal state of connection facilitated between individuals through devotional music making. Interpreting what participants shared,

rather than social benefit, perhaps this collective consciousness is closer than to what people are pointing at when they say that music brings people together. While this connection can impact the kirtan, engaging in the kirtan music can also facilitate and help this connection.

Figure 31: "Unity Consciousness." Parvati and Shakti Durga. Image by author. June 15, 2018: Cooranbong Australia.

Though it can be accelerated through intention, unity was described as a state that simply happens or arrives, which, for some, might seem quite ephemeral. Referencing "the heart" is one way Shanti Mission creates relatable understanding to the concept of unity consciousness (figure 31). The heart is both physical, a location in the body, and a metaphorical representative of emotional states, so it can be a rather tangible way for people to access this state of connection. I often noted Shanti Mission musicians giving cues like "connect in your heart" or "use your heart with your voice" when guiding participants into chanting. Veena Vaani (2018) described connecting with an open heart as "centered stillness with a gentle, peaceful yet joyous component… when I feel connected to supreme power, creativity, the Great Creator. The process can be a quiet internal softening, a relaxing surrender or it can be an intense emotional response." Sada (2018b) added that being in the heart is more of a knowing, an inner connection that is beyond what the mind is saying:

> "When you're in your heart, there's not always a logical reason for feeling joyful and happy. You can still feel all is perfect and joyful even when the outside world events

around are not. For example, if you come to kirtan and you're struggling and mad, your mind can give you many reasons to be angry. When you are reminded to drop into your heart, you can go beyond the mind and still find a place of connection to sing from. The singing comes from a different place than the thoughts and feelings."

Dave Stringer (2018) agreed with Shanti Mission participants and had a lot to say about unity consciousness as a concrete measurable experience:

> "Western minds have found ways to undermine or discredit the idea of unity consciousness. We love the states when we are connected with them, but then doubt them when we are not in them, because we question what is real versus what is unreal. Often, we attribute what is experienced the most to being what is real though this is not necessarily an accurate representation. In reality the boundaries of our "self" are fuzzy but we feel them to be clear. For example, where our bodies end and the world "outside" begins is less defined than we think…. We breathe the same air and share molecules with other around us … In this case, from a molecular perspective, where is the boundary between self and world?"

Researcher Andrew Newberg is beginning to track these more ephemeral transpersonal states of consciousness from a neurological perspective. According to Dave Stringer who has worked with Newberg, "Newberg's research is serving to link between spirituality with physical and psychological health showing how the brain works during certain experiences and practices (e.g., meditation and prayer)." (Dave Stringer 2018). Stringer related information from some of Newberg's projects using fMRI to track individuals' responses while in meditative states achieved through focused repetition of patterns of prayer speech and sound. Newberg has noted increased activity in the frontal lobe, indicating enhanced focus and attention. He has also found activation in the amygdala, particularly if participants had impactful emotional responses. Finally, decreased activity in the occipital parietal lobe was also observed when people reported a sense of "spacelessness" or a sense of oneness with all things. The back part of the parietal lobe is associated with sense of body and boundaries as well as sense of space and time. They have come to understand that reduced activity in this area diminishes these

boundaries and one's sense of self as an individual goes away, creating the feeling of being both connected and separate simultaneously. In our interview, Stringer (2018) concluded,

> "The more one experiences unity consciousness the more empathy can develop because there are similar neurological mechanisms by which it works. We begin to note that consciousness isn't stuck in one modality and there are multiple consciousnesses that we can come in and out of. This helps us routinely travel across the boundary as the more you do it the more it becomes familiar. Kirtan can be seen as a methodology to help groups of people slip beyond these boundaries, leading to feelings of ecstasy and wonder… In some ways then, it doesn't matter if there is a God or not, our brain is set up to have these spiritual experiences and to connect communicate and cooperate."

In his view, this unity connection can be a key to wellbeing, helping individuals survive and then thrive by developing meaning and purpose.

While this more quantitative, evidence-based research of spiritual experience can be useful, making it easier to then bring into the mainstream through the science of neurology and physiology, it can also be problematic. For instance, while at a café next to the guest house I stayed at in Tamil Nadu, I found myself in conversation with a doctor working at the Narayani Research hospital. I first asked him about the *Dhanvantari pūja* that occurs twice a day in a prayer room just beyond the front entrance of the hospital which he said he attends occasionally though not regularly. When I explained the project, he said he was happy to hear of research about kirtan and mantra because he would like to be able to use mantra more in his practice. While in favour of accessing mantras in healthcare, he shared how this is not practiced at the Narayani hospital because it has not yet been proven by science. Though patients are free to practice according to their beliefs and upbringing, in his words, "We mainly use Western guidelines," and advised that more "scientific research" needs to be implemented so that professionals can be allowed to use this in treatment (Brulotte 2018). In his opinion, even in India it would be difficult to promote the use of mantra in hospital without the proof or scientific evidence behind it. Since so much of Sakthi Amma's practice and teachings emphasize the role of devotion through the use of prayer and mantra this demonstrates some of the challenges wrapped up in favouring quantitative biomedicine and control trial methodology as superior to other more subjective approaches. While critical thinking, rigour and evidence-based practice

are important, when these measures become prioritized and favoured as superior, many details relevant to the uniqueness of individuals are discredited and disregarded, and access to cultural practices becomes limited in significant ways. While I am not suggesting mantra chanting should be regarded as the same as biomedical protocol, diminishing the role of cultural practices in wellbeing can be a barrier to healing. Objective, quantitative methodology often speaks in generalities, omitting detailed perspectives or inclusion of individual nuance and difference. As no single intervention works for everyone in the same way all of the time, the humanism that supports individuals' preferences, dignity and perceptions of wellbeing is as significant to understanding as are broad-scale overviews.

Secondly, evaluating practices quantitatively requires accessing devices or procedures for measurement. This inherently requires altering the culture of the subject of research, either by changing the environment in which practices take place, bringing them into a laboratory or clinic to be examined, or by adding procedures prior to, during or after such as filling out surveys, spitting in cups or being hooked up to machines etc. While conducting this fieldwork, I noted how the presence of simply an audio or video recording device seemed to shift participants' attention, comfortability and performance, without adding the other devices and procedures required to conduct statistically significant control trial studies. Many control trial projects neglect to fully address this potential influence on their research and the reality of whether what is being captured and recorded is actually reflective and true to what happens in praxis in more natural, unmeasured environments.

Interdisciplinary models that include the subjective intricacies of qualitative methods and more objective perspectives of quantitative methods seems an important solution. Such an approach "takes into account scientific research alongside the opinions of patients and healthcare professionals … informed by an approach to healthcare that promotes the collection, interpretation, and integration of valid, important, and applicable patient-reported, clinician-observed, and research-derived evidence." (Wigram and Gold 2012, 168). Combining the description and ethnographic mindfulness of one's footprint as a researcher with opportunities for numerical evaluation and scientific rigour is, in my opinion, a better way to capture as much

of the reality of phenomena as possible. Hopefully such collaborative approaches are increasing and will continue to be more welcomed and studied in the near future.

Factor Six: The Environmental Context

As explained in the literature review, neo-kirtan is offered in a variety of physical contexts ranging from more spiritualized centers such as the Abode of Peace, meditation halls and yoga studios to settings like concert auditoriums, farmer's markets, gymnasiums, festival stages and, in one example, even a bar. Communities such as ISKCON engage in chanting in public areas, on the streets and in airports etc. Discussion about the potential effect created through these different venues did not arise in the interviews. Consequently, I will offer some limited reflection and speculation based on my experience and general observations.

In a discourse I attended, Sakthi Amma mentioned the importance of one's environs as a spiritual aspirant. Amma expressed that attending to and cultivating positive surroundings are important because environment influences thoughts which then influence actions. Amma also highlighted the significance of maintaining a specific space in the house for spiritual devotion, to accumulate positivity within the space. From this perspective, taking care to offer kirtan in specific physical contexts could enhance its influence. Further, kirtan conducted in settings imbued with more spiritual association could impact whether it is perceived more as a ritual or as a performance. This in turn could also affect how participants engage with it and what kinds of actions and language is accepted or even expected. For example, speaking more about mystical concepts, including elements of Hindu mythology or talking directly about deities may be more openly received in a context that is overtly positioning itself as spiritual. As a result, kirtan participants in these environments might be less prone to essentializing or trivializing the practice.

Given the wide range of venues in which it is offered however, it does not seem that the environmental context in which kirtan is presented is considered to be a significant factor in its impact. In addition, part of the mythology of the practice is the idea that sounding prayers aloud plays a role in shifting the atmosphere. This is particularly true in the ISKCON movement where chanting is seen not just as a personal private practice but one that should be shared and made public. It is viewed as beneficial for all, even those who do not understand the words or

their meaning. “Chanting to oneself, in one’s mind or in a whisper, is beneficial for oneself, but chanting loudly is beneficial for oneself and for all those who hear. Loud chanting is thus said to be a hundred times more beneficial than silent chanting” (Delmonico 2007, 552). In ISKCON chanting and singing are viewed as a service, aiding to purify the world and those around. In his ethnographic work, Slawek quotes informants: “By uttering good words, the pollution in the air is counteracted…we believe that our kirtan benefits the welfare of the whole world” (Slawek 1996, 84). Ultimately a negative, less sacred or unappealing environment could, from this perspective, be transformed through the practice of sounding devotion.

Chapter 6: CONCLUSION

Statements such as "all life is rhythmic and our bodies (are) an orchestra of vibration" (Brummel-Smith 2008, 310) emerging in research ranging from disciplines such as neuroscience and psychology of music to religious studies and musicology are evidence of the increasing interest and inquiring into the vibrational qualities of existence and the nature of vital force. This kind of inquiry, often translating into research focusing on music, is gradually changing approaches to health, progressively incorporating intangible, subjective and intersubjective factors as components that contribute to the creation of illness and wellness. While the transpersonal as one of these factors and its relationship to corporeal wellbeing is still not widely understood, music is increasingly seen to act as a link in accessing resources that contribute to health involving both tangible physical sensation and less tangible and impermanent auditory experiences.

This research has described kirtan, a transpersonal music praxis, which appears in varied forms across traditions. Salient common characteristics between traditions were highlighted and neo-kirtan was discussed both in how it resembles and differs from kirtan more rooted in South Asian culture. As a focal point, this research has explored the different ways neo-kirtan is perceived to impact health, seemingly one of the reasons for its rise outside of South Asia. Though not all participants were in absolute agreement about the benefits across the different domains, agreement levels were high and patterns were discernible. Participants have a more tangible, embodied experience of spirituality or divinity through kirtan. Further, kirtan gives participants natural opportunities to interact, and individuals experienced enhanced group cohesion, particularly during kirtan performance itself, as well as improved communication. Participants also described physical experiences ranging from increased relaxation, pain reduction and boosted immunity. To a lesser extent, kirtan was said to enhance cognitive clarity and focus, giving the mind a tangible task to engage with while assisting with reducing limiting thoughts. Notably, a main thread that emerged through both participant observation and surveys was the ability for neo-kirtan to create perceptible emotional impact, facilitating not only uplifting and joyful feelings but also bringing emotions of all kinds to the surface for identification and release. Further, due to the apparent interconnectedness of emotional wellness to that of the

other domains, focusing on accessing neo-kirtan to enhance primarily emotional wellbeing could be an effective approach to realizing wellness across these other areas as well.

A significant pattern that emerged in this research revealed how the music of neo-kirtan is not the only factor contributing to its overall impact and usefulness as a wellness device. Not only do participants receive some of the benefits of sung music, participants expressed belief in the power of the use of mantra as lyrics. Holding devotional, altruistic intentions while participating was underscored as a significant component of neo-kirtan, contributing to stronger impact and in avoiding "just musicking" or falling into a self-gratifying or more performance-oriented approach. The use of other techniques, in this case guided meditation and cognitive refocusing through spoken releases and affirmations, was reported to allow for clearer, more complete healing when added to a neo-kirtan experience. Training and connection to a teacher or lineage was said to help avoid misuse and amplify benefit, while community, group dynamics and environmental context were also considered as contributing factors in the impact of neo-kirtan. When it comes to wellness and healing, the musical aspect of neo-kirtan combines with several other contextual factors, all contributing to the possibility of benefit attained. Without these contextual factors, the music alone was not necessarily seen to be enough to result in sustained transformation. Indeed, "[T]here is no magic chord progression, no secret drumbeat, that will unlock the body's mysteries. Instead, the music works by reaching out, embracing larger and larger wholes. The more numerous the connecting points- between therapist and patient, between patient and family, between family and community, between doctor and alternative healers, and so on- the more powerful the results" (Gioia 2006, 181).

Regarding kirtan's application in more therapeutic contexts - as in music therapy - some ideas emerged through this work. As a cultural device, kirtan could be useful with individuals for whom the mantras or the practice itself holds historical significance and personal meaning. Secondly, the musical techniques found in kirtan such as the repetition, the call and response and the short or simplified melodic phrases could be utilized to benefit a variety of individuals especially when employing lyrics that draw from the client's cultural or historical background. Further, the strong impact described around the emotional domain of wellness could lend itself to employing kirtan with individuals looking to address this aspect of their health. The effectiveness

of applying kirtan with Sanskrit lyrics across general client populations is not clear though, given the personal nature of spirituality and religious practice, unless this is something that holds meaning and value for clients themselves, may not be an effective way of meeting a client. This topic requires further investigation.

The study of kirtan is a vast topic and, given the reduced scope of a master's research topic, there are some limitations to this work and areas yet to be investigated. This project presents a detailed, personalized, qualitative look at some neo-kirtan practices, a perspective that offers the advantages of individual insight and description. In future, employing more systematic, quantitative mechanisms alongside qualitative description would be beneficial. This includes enhancing the scope and impact of the survey and recruiting wider populations of individuals to respond. The survey administered in Shanti Mission, though offering some compelling insight through commentary and key words, was limited and strongly biased. Similarly, this research focused on perspectives of dedicated practitioners of kirtan and neo-kirtan. Incorporating viewpoints of irregular practitioners or individuals who have discarded the practice or their spiritual community could be both interesting and useful for further understanding. More thorough investigation of correlations such as potential connection between socio-economic status or gender and engagement with neo-kirtan could also be beneficial. For instance, Davidson and Bailey (2005) found a correlation between socioeconomic status and degree of inhibition to participate (given social musicianship expectations) in group singing situations and perhaps similar dynamic plays out in neo-kirtan. Also, while several male musicians have risen to high levels of fame leading neo-kirtan, more women than men seem to be inclined towards these practices, as noted anecdotally at various research sites. I can currently only speculate as to reasons for this - perhaps part the reason is social, and a better understanding requires further inquiry. Finally, broader study of both Hindu and Sikh traditions would be a useful contribution, particularly regarding their relationship to more religious applications of kirtan as well as developments within neo-kirtan communities.

Some trends that emerged in this research can also be found in other scholarship, highlighting the value of future interdisciplinary inquiry. For instance, music therapy theory has long addressed the role of music in therapy, highlighting the role music plays as a vessel acting not alone but in

combination with other factors including other techniques or client-therapist dynamics for example. Music therapy training also addresses the necessity of education, awareness, and experience in order for facilitators to effectively and safely administer music. This not only reflects participants' perspectives from this research about the significance of a teacher when offering neo-kirtan but many accounts of Indigenous healing traditions also mention requirements for healers (as well as patients) prior to healing rituals as these can impact the ritual itself (Morse Young and Swartz 1991). Irwin (2017) specified how proper training, initiation, moral obligations, regular renewal of knowledge of medicines, fasting cleansing rituals and many years of dedicated practice were all recommended for Indigenous healers, assisting in sustaining powers of the medicine and accurate diagnosis and treatment. Additionally, Thorne (2015) addressed the line between healing and harming in traditional practice; healing medicine, with improper intention, can be used to create harm. Learning how medicine can harm helps prevent misuse from the healer and provides knowledge of how to treat others who have been subjected to "bad medicine." Like the importance given to intention in this research, in his work with Christian congregational singing, Adnams (2013) described the idea of "really worshipping" versus "just singing", echoing many of the sentiments of participants in this study regarding the role of intention and connection in effective neo-kirtan delivery. Similarly, Gioia (2006) emphasized the connection between physicians' intentions or expectations and the outcome of treatment, from 70% – 90 % success rates for enthusiastic doctors to 30% – 40% success for skeptics.

Scholars (Koen 2005, Gioia 2006, Thorne 2015 and others) have noted resemblances and patterns in healing music practices of traditional indigenous cultures around the world, theorizing that these are not isolated geographically, but perhaps a part of a bigger universal wisdom. Given this as well as some of the correlations of trends found in scholarship mentioned above, a research project that compares and contrasts methods of sonic healing across various cultural traditions could be an interesting approach. Similarly, synthetic work looking at the relationship between various chant traditions, even where "healing" is not explicitly given central attention, could be useful. For example, drawing on some of Turino's work (2008) with participatory music or Dr. Frishkopf's work with Islamic and Sufi traditions could be a starting point, especially since this seemingly has much in common and has potentially been influenced by

Hindu kirtan and mantra practices. This could be approached by searching chant traditions in literature then conducting fieldwork exploring individuals' experiences of these, examining similarities and differences regarding context, purpose, benefit and relationship with religion/spirituality. Further, one of the intentions of this work was to set the foundation for further participant action or mixed modality research involving a multi-culturally informed music therapy program. Drawing on the information gathered in this work, a multi-culturally informed program utilizing kirtan and other techniques outside the realm of Western Classical music could be developed, implemented and measured as a beneficial avenue for future inquiry.

Ultimately, this research has described various kirtan practices and has clarified some of the perceived benefits of participating in neo-kirtan while highlighting the need to increase awareness of how to most effectively apply it, especially if considering utilizing neo-kirtan as a tool to assist with healing and wellbeing. The significance of kirtan's impact on emotional wellbeing was underlined as a portal to work with and enhance wellbeing in other domains. Finally, this work has underlined the intermingling of music and context, that music is not necessarily healing full stop in and of itself but, given certain conditions and environmental factors, can play a significant role in the healing process. The development of neo-kirtan is a fascinating phenomenon and while much yet remains to be explored and discussed regarding the many faces of kirtan currently practiced, this work offers a glimpse into the benefit of the practice as a factor in its international migration.

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Interviews & Surveys

Adi Dass. Interviewed by Tiffany Sparrow Brulotte, Cooranbong, NSW, Australia, July 11, 2018.

Aaron Lightstone. Music Therapist. Telephone interview by Tiffany Sparrow Brulotte, Edmonton, AB, Canada, February 4, 2019.

Dave Stringer. American Kirtan Artist. Skype interview by Tiffany Sparrow Brulotte, Edmonton, AB, Canada, August 28, 2018. (audio consent)

Ganapati (Brett Jones). Interviewed by Tiffany Sparrow Brulotte, Cooranbong, NSW, Australia, July 10, 2018.

Hanumani (Tracey Beckler). Interviewed by Tiffany Sparrow Brulotte, Cooranbong, NSW, Australia, June 27, 2018.

Hamsa Devi. Interviewed by Tiffany Sparrow Brulotte, Peedam, India, July 30, 2018. (audio consent)

Jagatambe Narayani. Interviewed by Tiffany Sparrow Brulotte, Cooranbong, NSW, Australia, July 4, 2018.

Krishna Das. Interviewed by Tiffany Sparrow Brulotte, Sydney, NSW, Australia, July 15, 2018.

Laxmi Maa. Interviewed by Tiffany Sparrow Brulotte, Cooranbong, NSW, Australia, July 14, 2018.

Maitreya Shanti (Chad Humphreys) a. Interviewed by Tiffany Sparrow Brulotte, Cooranbong, NSW, Australia, June 6, 2018.

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Appendix A: Survey Questionnaire

1. What is your age?

2. When did you first start coming to Shanti Mission events and why?

3. How would you describe kirtan chanting within Shanti Mission?

4. Please rate the following statement from strongly agree to strongly disagree: "The music in satsang is important to my overall experience and to the impact of satsang.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

   Describe or explain

5. Please rate the following statement from strongly agree to strongly disagree: "Shanti Mission kirtan chanting has been beneficial for me physically (e.g. for the body)."

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

   Describe or explain

6. Please rate the following statement from strongly agree to strongly disagree: "Shanti music kirtan chanting has been beneficial for me psycho-emotionally (e.g. pertaining to your feelings, mood etc.). "

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

   Describe or explain

7. Please rate the following statement from strongly agree to strongly disagree: “Shanti music kirtan chanting has been beneficial for me mentally (e.g. pertaining to your intellect, attention, focus, memory etc.). “

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

Describe or explain

8. Please rate the following statement from strongly agree to strongly disagree: “Shanti music kirtan chanting has been beneficial for me socially (e.g. pertaining to your relationships, communication etc.).”

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

Describe or explain

9. Please rate the following statement from strongly agree to strongly disagree: “Shanti music kirtan chanting has been beneficial for me spiritually.”

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

Describe or explain

10. Should the need arise, can I contact you for a follow up interview? If yes, please include your name and email here:

Appendix B: Survey Responses

1. What is your age?
Open-Ended Response
49
53
65
60
68
41
65
43
46
31
49
36
61
42
68
34
51
61
45
54
76
37

2. When did you first start coming to Shanti Mission events and why?
Open-Ended Response

- I had 3 slipped discs and a pinched sciatica pain for 3 years and in so much pain, I need to change my life and wanted to learn to meditate
- 2006 to learn how to meditate as part of 12 Step program
- 2005 for meditation
- 2015
- 3 months approx because I was feeling disconnected & low
- 2016 for guidance and support
- 2004. Initially I attended the meditation group which was led by Kim Fraser (Shakti Durga). I was drawn to meditate with her.
- 2014. Life changes...divorce. A willingness to change and look for community in light of depression and other health issues.
- 3 1/2 years ago, was going through a challenging period in my life and needed spiritual support
- October 2016 - was looking for something to do with singing to try, and found myself at a satsang.
- july 11, 2018 My life was a mess and i was guided to Ignite Your Spirit (the workshop)
- 5 years ago, first attended a meditation with a friend at one of her friends houses
- 2013 Found Shanti Mission on Meetup in Melbourne. Started coming as a way to get me out of the house and around other people
- 2015 I was invited to come along to a Satsang and IYS course by my kinesiologist.
- 2008 for Kirtan. I love chanting and started with Siddha Yoga in 1989
- back in 1997, because I was struggling emotionally and mentally, and was interested in spirituality.
- 2014 looking for transformation
- Approximately 6 years ago after an episode of depression and anxiety brought about by bullying in the workplace. I was "the victim"
- 2014 to meditate
- 2012 To the bodhi festival to see the Peace angels and the festival .I got a sample healing and loved it so I came to a course 2 weeks later
- 2006 Because I knew as soon as I met Shakti Durga that she was to be my teacher. This was just before she became a Guru
- 2010

3. How would you describe kirtan chanting within Shanti Mission?
Open-Ended Response

- Uplifting, joyous, freeing, Exilir to forget all your human worries
- Sublime, heart opening, joy filled
- positive uplifting energy, letting go of thought forms while focus on chants. hearing the mantra/chant first then repeating it myself is very powerful helps emerge to the Divine energy
- powerful
- My soul led me to this experience & it brings me peace & raises my energetic vibration & I leave feeling more centred & at peace
- Modern (compared to other yoga lineages) At first I found it uncomfortable and too much even though I loved it elsewhere (people told me it was the energy)
- Divine!!! It is relaxing, inspiring and filled with amazing energy.
- Uniting. Kirtan lifts my mood and makes me happy
- uplifting joyful, bringing me back to my inner self and the heart
- Powerful, moving, transformative, clearing
- uplifting, joyful, and sometimes tricky as it is done mainly in sanscrit
- A beautiful way to connect with others, energy and the divine
- The Best. I enjoy this kirtan more than any other I've attended since 2013
- Sublime, uplifting, meditative, joyful, bliss, calming, centring, energising
- Uplifting. Transformational. The Nada Shakti in the sound stimulates and activates my energy field and brings me great joy and bliss
- I love it. It's fun. Interactive. Wholesome. Uplifting. Makes you feel good. Healing.
- i love live music so as soon as i heard it it uplifted my mood and made me happy. I preferred English so I wasn't really fussed about singing in Sanskrit. But once I knew the benefits of kirtan (became less ignorant) I started loving it and now I'm addicted. I love how Shanti Mission kirtan takes well known kirtan chants and make it their own, add their own distinct flavour.
- Love it!. It opens my heart, raises my vibration and gives me great joy! It relieves physical and emotional pain
- More than just music, you can feel the vibration in the music
- One of my most favourite things to do in my life .I love singing I love high energy and expanding .I love the fact that people sing in unity and I can feel the energy in the music .I feel it shift energy in my body and chakras . So much fun too.
- Absolutely wonderful for releasing negativity and that it works even when one does not know what the chant means. Also helps us move into a higher state of Consciousness
- Upbeat, uplifting and sometimes soulful.

4. A) Please rate the following statement from strongly agree to strongly disagree:"The music in satsang is important to my overall experience and to the impact of satsang."

Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree

Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Agree
Strongly agree
Agree
Strongly agree

4. B) Describe an example and/or explain your response:

- Music helps to open my being to shift the energy that needs to be expelled and pull in more of the uplifting divine energy
- focusing on the music has power to let go of the ego hold on what wanting to release, therefor helps surrender process
- heightened awareness with Gannga band also with Vidya

- Our mind can block or reason or try to protect us - the music goes straight to our heart, direct. It's a right brain medium not like language which is left brain. When emotions are engaged then there is connection to self which allows healing and or connection to divine which lifts our vibration (see Hawkins Vibrational Scale)
- The music in satsang strongly supports the meditation. It assists in clearing negative energy and helps to call in the Divine Energy. It also assists in the bringing of the participants into the present moment.
- What I could only explain as being together beyond concepts.

- It's where the transmutation happens for me, where the energy is strongest
- i find that music is an easy way to open my heart chakra and thus connect more deeply to my truth
- I feel stronger connection to the energy, my community and the divine with good music at satsang
- For me, just hearing my Guru's voice heals deep within me. As she leads most of the Satsangs and sings and/or plays her harp, it is always a sublime experience for me.
- I find it connects me to what is happening and I love the music. It feels amazing!
- Strongly agree. Music is the key to my life in Shanti Mission. Guru uses music/ Mantra as a vehicle to lift our vibration
- It just adds so much energy, vibrancy, healing and life to the satsang. It helps me deepen my experience within the meditation. Is fun to sing to. Is a beautiful way to express.
- As soon as the kirtan start transcending and within a few minutes I am in a bliss state. This sets me up for the rest of the event and makes me more receptive to the discourse or the blessing or the meditation that is following. As a disciple I find that the kirtan enables me to open more to the Guru.
- The music uplifts me. Problems and challenges are not as big in my head when chanting with the music. Live music has a stronger effect than recorded music

- These chants have been chanted billions of times so they have lots of energy in them. Meditation is inhanced and depending on which chant we are chanting, will depend on what is being healed. Chanting can also be really good for taking us out of the mind where there is thoughts happening. It's a good distraction.

5. A) Please rate the following statement from strongly agree to strongly disagree: "Shanti Mission kirtan chanting has been beneficial for me physically (e.g. for the body). "

Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Agree
Agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree

Neither agree nor disagree
Neither agree nor disagree
Strongly agree
Agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree

5. B) Describe an example and/or explain your response:

- I love to sing to God- it is my very favourite kind of singing. Shanti Mission kirtan chanting allows me to get out of the way and commune with the divine that is in me and around me - I naturally move into harmonising when I sing. This has helped to strengthen my voice, my ear for music and gives me a sense of well being.
- helps to release stress & tension in the body,

- Generally it always helps me to relax and to feel more comfortable within myself. My ability to sing has improved since taking part in kirtan chanting, as kirtan chanting comes from the heart.
- When chanting my physical body awareness is increased. Breath, flow of sound and opening, it affects my body through the chakras
- I sense the sound vibrations through physiological responses like tingles up my spine or sudden bursts of energy. When we clean out stagnant energy, we can experience physical shifts.

- I think when I'm doing more chanting, my vibration is higher and I don't get sick like I use to.
- most times if i am experiencing physical pain or discomfort after kirtan canting, either in satsang or a healing, the pain goes away.
- Helps me relax and release tension from my body
- Pre Shanti Mission, I experienced a lot of stress in my workplace. So little remains of the painful, tight neck and shoulders. My overall breathing is at least a 1000% different. As well my experience in the workplace is amazingly lighter and more peaceful.
- I feel energised
- Strongly agree SM Kirtan chanting raises your bin then you can draw the energy into your cells and organs

- I don't have anything significantly physically wrong with me. I'm more spiritually/emotionally/mentally damaged. But I remember once having a sore lower back (due to travelling, being overweight, little bit of old age arthritis) and I sang kirtan with an ascended master in Bali and it completely disappeared while I was with the master. As soon as I left it returned.
- It reduces physical pain from osteoarthritis

- Sometimes I have felt stressed or somewhat troubled before Satsang (causing tension in the body, especially shoulders and neck) During the Satsang and chanting this has just dissolved into relaxation and feeling uplifted
- There is countless different mantras that can be chanted. For example the dhanvantre mantra, if chanted over and over, is good for healing the physical body.

6. A) Please rate the following statement from strongly agree to strongly disagree: "Shanti Mission kirtan chanting has been beneficial for me psycho-emotionally (e.g. feelings, mood etc.)."

Strongly agree
Strongly disagree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Agree

Strongly agree
Agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree

Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree

6. B) Describe an example and/or explain your response:

- I guess I've sort of explained that above. Music helps to open my heart and helps energy to shift and lift in an amazing way for me. I feel closest to the Divine when singing. This definitely benefits me emotionally and psychologically
- helps to surrender emotional torment that we hold onto
- Powerful satsang

- Body mind emotion are connected, they are actually one. The days of humanity privileging the mind (thanks to newton) I hope are coming to a close. So if music helps emotional connection then physical releases follow e.g. Crying, heart opening. Even from a somatic psychotherapeutic perspective (which is secular) this is the premise. Heal mind, emotion, self and the body follows
- When chanting I always feel mentally calmer and more peaceful. I also feel happier when and after kirtan chanting. Kirtan chanting has generally improved my confidence, especially in the area of my ability to sing.
- Lightness of being during and after chanting. Restful states. Nervous system calming so more emotionally stable. Thoughts come and go with awareness. Feelings seem to also come up more readily.

- It's been one of the biggest ways of clearing the emotions processing over the past two years coming onto a spiritual path.
- It is healing because it helps me experience my emotions i don't think i have ever left a session with the same feeling or mood that i went in with!
- I can go in flat and come out joyful and uplifted and Shakti'd up

- Chanting is an important practise for me. It centres me and calms my mind. Brings me peace, connectedness and bliss.
- Strongly agree. I feel totally uplifted and different at the end of a Satsang supported by Kirtan. Ready to face the world with gratitude
- It opens my heart to more love. Lifts my mood. Often I feel extreme bliss in kirtan. I get lost in the high of it.
- Yes, and I don't have to be present at a Shanti Mission kirtan session. I can now get benefits from kirtan chanting at home or at other events. And it's long term and has transformed my whole life. I am no longer depressed. My anger is still present but less every day, I am now more peaceful or can flip back into peace very easily. I don't really have anymore challenging experiences. I am more forgiving, more kinder, more calmer and a better version of me. My family have noticed the benefits and they like the new person I have become and acknowledge the benefits of Shanti mission. Although I will say, i's a combination of kirtan, healing and divine transference. But the kirtan is a major part of it.
- It lifts me to a joyful, blissful state.
- Music can open the heart releasing suppressed lower emotions which leaves you feeling more peaceful and lighter

- Many times I have begun a session feeling 'down' or 'troubled emotionally' After the kirtan (and also some releases that usually go hand in hand with chanting) I was feeling happy, clear and back on track to move forward in life...
- They are very uplifting and fun. If we were to chant Om Shanti (shanti meaning peace) over and over, then we are wanting more peace in our mind, body and energy field.

7. A) Please rate the following statement from strongly agree to strongly disagree: "Shanti Mission kirtan chanting has been beneficial for me mentally (e.g. intellect, attention, focus, memory etc.)."

Strongly agree
Strongly disagree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Strongly agree
Agree
Agree
Agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree

Strongly agree

Agree
Agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree

7. B) Describe an example and/or explain your response:

- SM kirtan is so simple yet complex in it effects and benefits. It helps me to focus my mind as it's repetitive nature is a mantra that focuses my mind and stills it at the same time to allow that meditative state to pervade my being. It is my most preferred way to meditate.
- releases the mind clutter, allow heightens attention and focus, releasing mind chatter opens me up to enhanced memory and frees blockages to wisdom

- More peaceful & focused

- I feel clearer mentally and more focused.
- Clarity.

- When I'm doing it a lot I am able to be more vigilant with my thoughts - more mindful to watch thoughts and let them pass
- after satsangs and other sessions involving shanti mission kirtan chanting my mind is clearer and i can definitely focus better.
- Being able to use chanting outside of Shanti mission and tune into the energy of the times I've been with the group, settles my nervous system and helps me focus my attention / energy
- My memory pre Shanti Mission is now viewed from the perspective of compassion, forgiveness and love. There isn't a dollar value for the clarity and focus I feel now.
- It certainly helps me to focus my mind.
- Strongly agree. Mentally it quietens my mind. Cuts down on the mental dandruff. My mind has something to focus on while Mantra works on my heart. Like Heartmath
- I think it has helped me to focus at times when my mind has been all over the place.
- Not really applicable to me, but my consciousness has expanded rapidly. But once again, a combination of kirtan, healing and attending retreats/workshops (divine transference). Wouldn't really say that kirtan alone was responsible for this.
- I cannot say that I have noticed changes in this area.
- Chanting helps dull the monkey mind chatter that we can have going on sometimes unconsciously. It shifts my focus to the words and as they are Sanskrit high vibrational words they start to vibrate throughout my aura and chakras giving me a feeling of bliss.

- No specific example... I just KNOW it helps me in all ways and especially as it comes with instruction and verbal releases. rarely is kirtan chanting an isolated thing...
- Chanting is great for distancing the mind from negative thoughts.

8. A) Please rate the following statement from strongly agree to strongly disagree: "Shanti Mission kirtan chanting has been beneficial for me socially (e.g. relationships, communication etc.)."

Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree

Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Agree

Agree
Agree
Agree
Agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree

8. B) Describe an example and/or explain your response:

- I have been to other kirtan events and whilst I enjoy them, it is when I am with a group of people whom I love and have developed relationship with over the last 12 years (as I have at SM) that I get the most benefit from kirtan and chanting. It's like we have one collective heart and we truly become one with each other and one with the divine in each other when we sing to the divine with each other which allows more divine to flow through each other. The relationships we have definitely affect the benefits of kirtan and chanting in a positive way.
- I would never sing and I felt isolated from fun seeing others sing with open heart. SM kirtan has helps me open my heart and join in with the group, no longer isolating myself
- Get on better with other members

- Not sure - I don't notice an improvement in the characteristics you mention. However when my vibration is lifted my thoughts are positive, higher so more likely to act and speak with love and in service
- When chanting the entire group seems to become as one. My confidence in verbal communication has improved since taking part in fairly regular kirtan chanting.
- SM kirtan has provided me with joyous community.

- Changes my vibration and so much has changed in terms of communication and relationships
- I have developed great friends and relationships in the community. The kirtan chanting has opened me into more love and compassion and so i find that it is easier communicate and to get along with others, especially after a satsang or session when there has been kirtan chanting
- Being able to use chanting outside of Shanti mission and tune into the energy of the times I've been with the group, settles my nervous system and helps me focus my attention / energy and help me deal with challenging situations much better, clear my mind and my energy field. Also helps me connect with others :)
- I view my community as my extended family and I love chanting with them!
- It definitely brings people together but this is not the major benefit for me.
- Agree. I have made more friends through Satsang. It breaks down people's reserve as we chant together
- Yes, because it helps me to connect with other people.
- It's been part of my spiritual development. I can't say that if I just did kirtan alone I would have progressed as rapidly. My social life has improved dramatically. I am no longer bullied, people are responsive and friendly to me, no longer isolated or withdrawn. But I feel it's being part of shanti mission that has assisted me and being a disciple. Not really kirtan itself.
- Being in a state of more peace with a more open heart overrides my ego and I am more open to others.
- Coming together with a community of like minded people us made stronger by music such as Kirtan. The call and response style of Kirtan allows crowd involvement and participation and inclusion.

- Its just great fun to chant with soul family and often spontaneous dancing takes place as well
- There are specific chants that can help remove fear, blockages and negative energy.

9. A) Please rate the following statement from strongly agree to strongly disagree: "Shanti Mission kirtan chanting has been beneficial for me spiritually."

Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Agree
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Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree

Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree
Strongly agree

9. B) Describe an example and/or explain your response:

- I feel like I've already explained that above. When we sing to the divine allowing the divine to flow through us as we sing which then allows more divine to shine through us, we are able to more fully realise that there is no me and them or me and the Divine- we are that! One with the divine, one with each other, there is no separateness! Kirtan and chanting has helped me to realise my spiritual growth more than any other practice, especially when I can sing with my Guru.
- I was an atheist when I first came to SM the kirtan chanting helped me open my heart which helped me to release my judgement, chanting names of God opened me up to God, Goddess within & without
- Incentive to see Krishna Das that gave me a high

- I can withstand the energy easier now than the beginning. And sometimes I can get powerful insights and messages from higher realms so I do feel more connected to source
- When chanting the entire group seems to become as one and the Energy lifts which is always Spiritually beneficial. Chanting in a group makes the energy stronger

- Yes!! It's fundamental to my spiritual connection Kirtan is an opportunity to expand and lift, shift me from out of the idea of confinement of the physical and mental
- I have gone from being a skeptic to teaching about the Divine and our energy bodies.

- I have learned several Suktams by heart, as a result of daily chanting practice. My Spiritual life is of the most importance to me, so why wouldn't I be committed to chanting.
- As soon as the music starts it reminds me about why I am on the spiritual path even during times where I might question this. It can easily raise my vibration to joy, peace and beyond. It's uplifting and really helps me to connect with my soul.
- Strongly agree Kirtan chanting is my vehicle to God.
- Definitely. I can feel shifting inside of my being when singing. Also learning about the mantra's and feeling the activation inside of my energy body.
- Yes, I progressed so rapidly in shanti mission, from a skeptic, non believer, fully present in the maya of the world, to being addicted to the Divine and kirtan and puja in a few years. My whole concept of spirituality changed. I believe kirtan was part of that evolvement. But wouldn't state that it was the only reason for the rapid progress.
- Absolutely! When chanting I feel closer to the Divine and frequently experience transcendence to higher planes, sometimes having experiences of inner plane beings eg. angels
- This is what the chanting does: it helps us shift out of the set point

- I have been taking part for many years and am a different person because of it.....
- Kirtan chanting helps me connect to the Divine.

Appendix C: Verbal Transcription from Satsang Musical Meditation

February 2nd 2019. Transcribed by the author.

Welcome and Introduction:
00:35 – 02:16
Today is a Sarasvati day for us. At the beginning of every academic year… we give a blessing for all of the learning that's gonna to happen during the year. And in particular to anyone who's studying. So, whether you are studying yoga or about to embark on school, university U3A…. then we like to give a blessing. Also, if we know what you're studying we can ask members of the community "does anyone do that" and get them to bless you too. Because have a blessing from someone who's already mastered a subject can do amazing things for their ease of understanding of the discipline. There is not only an intellectual component to learning, there's an opening to paradigms and to the spirit of a subject as well. So, the blessings really help with that.

I remember a young man who came and had a blessing with Śiva when he was embarking on a law degree. Śiva was a practicing lawyer for 40 years or so. And he was able to give master codes of energy to this young man, who flew through his law degree, despite also having a brain injury part of the way through and having to recover… So, I have no doubt, and neither did this young man, as to the power of the blessings. When we give with the intent of sharing our love, sharing our wisdom and encouraging others on their path of discovery and the gaining of wisdom.

Introduction to the Gaṇeśa: Discourse
2:17 – 3:50
So we will start as we very often do in our satsang with a Ganesha mantra. Ganesha in the Vedic system and the yoga system is usually invoked at the beginning of anything so as to help remove the issues and problems. Because, let's face it, all his issues and problems got released when Lord Śiva his dad chopped his head off, thereby chopping off his human consciousness and giving him Divine consciousness. So that's the reason that we use this mantra first… We're also asking that the limitations of our human consciousness be released (Shakti Durga makes a chopping motion and sound…laughter in the audience) and that we open up to the Divine's way of perceiving things which is much broader and much more filled with love and wisdom.

SD then introduces the other musicians: Maitreya and Ganapati on vocals and guitar, Sada on percussion, Siddhi Shakti on drums, Śiva, her partner on stage with her and Arjuna in the sound booth and on lead guitar.

Induction and Invocation
3:52 – 7:00
So, go into the heart. Maybe touch your heart chakra for a moment and really sink into your presence and the Divine inside of you.
(guitar picking starts)
And taking a deep breath in. And with the outbreath just releasing through your feet into the ground, using pranic breathing, yogic breathing. With the next breath in, breathing in from

above from the pillar of light that is part of your etheric body let that breath come down through your body and down into the earth. And then breathing up from the earth the wonderful energy of *bhu lokah* the physical plane. Breathing this energy up through eh feet right up through the body and into your heart area. As you bring your connection with nature into your heart. Feeling your love for the natural world and the infinite divine energy that's within that. And then with the next in-breath, breathing in the spirit, the life force that's everywhere around us and send that up to the infinite, however you perceived the infinite, *paramaśakti, parambrahmha, eiṃ* …. Whatever is your paradigm. And then breathing in from above and into the heart area, connecting with the love that's inside you, connecting with the infinite, connected to the earth.

Invocation: As we call upon the supreme, the oneness, the indivisible essence. We call on our souls and the divine within our souls. We call upon all of our spiritual guides, friends, angels and the teachers both in the physical and inner world. And we thank you for the love and encouragement and for your wisdom. May we be inspired to learn and grow to embody ever more wisdom. Turning ignorance to knowledge, knowledge to understanding and understanding to realization. And we ask this in full faith… so be it.

So Jai Ganesha, victory to Ganesha… *Oṃ gaṃ gaṇapataye namaha*
Oṃ is calling on the infinite source. *Gaṃ* is a *bīja* sound that has the effect of bringing it in to the physical now. *Gaṃ* … very grounded. *Gaṇapataye*, the name of Ganesha who marshals all the Divine forces to get something done. Namaha, we surrender to you.
Enjoy the song.

"Jai Ganesha" kirtan song:
7:00 – 14:34
Maitreya: "So I will sing the mantra twice and everyone sing back connecting our hearts and voices."

Breath work visualization
14:35 – 19:59
And breathing in the mantra and take it right into your heart. Let the warmth of the spiritual mantra permeate your body. Taking a big in breath and a silent out breath. Just really quiet and slow. Big in breath and a slow silent out breath. With every big in breath igniting your spirit and with every slow silent outbreath releasing any stress, tension, anxiety. Just let it go with the breath. And in …. And releasing down through your feet with a slow silent outbreath. And now breathing in through the top of your head through your crown chakra and out through *ajna* chakra between the eyebrows. Do that again (repeats instructions)… With the next inbreath again through the top of the head and out through the back of the head, clearing the channels that hold on to our past energies. Breathe in through the crown and out through the back of the neck. Breathe in through the crown chakra and out through your solar plexus area…. Be really present to your body and your energy body. Breathing in to your *ajna* chakra between the eyebrows and releasing through the throat area. In through *ajna* and out through your solar plexus. Again, in through *ajna*… and out through your sacral chakra between the hips… that's a little congested.

Breathing in through your crown and out through your sacral chakra. Breathing in again through the crown, out through your base chakra.

So let's just take our awareness to *svadhisthāna* chakra between the hips. The sacral *chakra*. *Svadhisthāna* means seat, it means our seat. The seat of who we be… and the energies of the Divine and that which gives rise to polarity. Have a big job to do in this area. *Ida* and *pingala* start to create the individualization of our own stream and current of life which seems to be separate from all the rest of life out there. This is a very important chakra. Just breathing into your seat, into *svadhisthāna* and intend to release any of the stresses and pressure with the out breath. Our capacity for creating anything, even learning, to create the capacity to learn, the shakti has to come up through here, through this particular chakra….
So let's do a little clearing here so that we've got plenty of energy to create new learning and to bring in the blessings of mother Sarasvati.
There are many systems of assigning gods and goddesses to the chakras. But one that I particularly like is where Ganesha is in our base chakra and Lord *Brahma* and his wife *Sarasvati* the power and light of creation live within *svadhisthāna chakra*.

Cognitive Refocusing: Releases/cleansing
20:00 – 26:03
So, we're going to do some cognitive refocusing, a sort of group healing exercise. Just let your body and mind and spirit be open. You'll get a lot of blessings coming in from Shakti Durga and the team of light that you work with to help you to release blockages and burdens

So just repeating after me. I now release all negative energy…. Negative thoughts and vibrations… and negative emotions…. That slow down *svadhisthāna* chakra… and create staleness… breathe in and release through the chakra, really letting go.

Say I release all fear of my creative power…. And I give myself permission… to utilize the divine within me…. To create a heavenly life… breathe deeply in and releasing through this chakra

Lord Buddha very wisely said that no life is devoid of suffering and when we've been knocked around a bit by suffering, we can actually lose sight of what's beneath it, what it's there for and what we're turning into. We can lose our hope and we can lose our direction. This will cause a dampening of the *svadhisthāna* chakra as we can really feel knocked off our seat.

So just say I now release all hopelessness…frustration and despair…. From when life hasn't turned out… the way my mind through it should.
Breathe in … and release everywhere.
And what you're releasing is being instantly transmuted by the many angelic beings in the room and by the many gods and goddesses who are like angels who are here to help us.

Say I choose to honour my power of creation… and to make wholesome choices…. That take me towards union…. Oneness… and yoga… breathe deeply in and releasing everywhere….

Just breathing up through your body with the inbreath and out through your crown….

And just imagine that energy is now flooding up from the seat, up through the various energy centers. Feel it coming up towards *ajna* chakra, out through your crown chakra. And send that energy up the pillar of light that exists above your head.

In the Vedic tradition, Lord Śiva who is the giver of yoga to the world, the mystic ascetic who sits in meditation all the time, one of his names is Lingaraja which means pillar of light. And we have our own Lingaraja, the divine connection that is the pillar of light running through it, of which *shushumna*, the central yogic channel, forms one part. So, focusing on this pillar of infinite light and imagine brilliant light coming down from above, in through the top of your head, down through your body and connecting you into mother earth. And from the core of the earth, a corresponding light comes up and in through your feet and up through *ida* and *pingala*, the secondary yogic channels to the left and right. And feel those channels being filled with luscious energy with a lot of *ojas*, the energy of nourishment. Coming up from the earth, bathing you in delicious, nourishing energy. And direct that energy with your mind up through your body and let it sit within your mind, within the brain, the neural pathways all being bathed in this energy. And from the infinite pillar of light above, just feel a lot of light coming down, and centering on your mind as well. A current coming up from below and down from above, meeting in your mind.

Kirtan introduction
26:03 – 27:19
And we're going to sing to Lord Śiva, the infinite knower of all things…And then we'll sing "Śivohum" which means I am consciousness, and pure bliss, pure bliss beyond form. And it'll be call and response. We've used many of the names of Lord Śiva in this song, you just sing whatever I sing. We'll sing to Liṅgarāja (pillar of light), to Mahadev, the great God, to Sada Śiva, the eternal light of Śiva, to Parameśwara the supreme God, to Gurudev, the origin of all guru lineages back to Lord Śiva, Nityasundara, eternal beauty, *praṇava* embodied *Oṃ*. So many beautiful names.
But feel the vibration and let your spirit understand what's happening.

Om Namaḥ Śivaya Kirtan song
27:20 - 36:59

Outtro: Just breathing in the energy of the mantra… *śivohum*. I am bliss. Bliss beyond form. Ganapati continues the chords of *śivo hum*

Cognitive Refocusing: Releases with Affirmations
37:00 – 43:22
Say I release all blockages to bliss… From my body, mind and energy field… and I set myself free… to receive the bliss of Śiva… *Oṃ namaḥ śivaya*… (x3)
And breathe deeply in and let your whole energy field expand with the outbreath, so you're blazing like the sun. Breathe in more from above from the Lingaraja into your heart and let yourself blaze, blaze with light, like the sun…. Take your awareness to *ajna* chakra and imagine brilliant light in behind your eyes. We'll help you, receiving the blessing between the eyebrows into your ajna chakra. Think thank you and it will get stronger. Light penetrating, illuminating the the light within you. Turning it up, letting it shine.

And then say I call forth the seeds of consciousness… I need for the coming year… I call forth the seeds of consciousness… to be awakened… and to bear fruit…. In this coming year… to bring joy… to bring love… wisdom… and self-fulfillment…. And breathe deeply in and release through the head region.
And say I ask for help…. From the source of love… with all that I need to learn…. Please make it clear… please make it unambiguous… and please help me… on my eternal journey… to divine wisdom… Breathe deeply in and releasing.

Just be aware of your body. Breathing slowly and deeply and release through the back of the body. Breathing in from above and releasing through the front of the body.
Sometimes when we haven't learned something yet, we can have a blocking belief. Something that actually slows down our capacity to learn because we thought it was going to look like something else, so we are not predisposed to what it actually looks like. So let's release some blocking beliefs

Just say I call upon Lingaraja …. And Sada Śiva … the eternal Śiva …. Please dissolve and disintegrate…. All blocking beliefs… and negative thought forms…which stop me… on my journey of learning… from and optimal experience… breathe in and release through *ajna* chakra. Use your chakras. Breathe in again and release through the same chakra. Breathe in again and out through the back of the head.

Lord Śiva is also called the destroyer. Destroyer of what we've out grown and what doesn't serve us anymore. Sometimes we don't even know what that is, but we feel like there's something not right. But the infinite does know what that is. So what if you ask for help in releasing the stuck and stale and that which blocks you from higher wisdom.
Just say, I now release…. All of the old stuck, stale energy… and confusing thoughts… confounding beliefs… and lesser truths… so I can now grow… in to the higher truth…greater wisdom… and more profound awareness… of my inner light… and how to blaze…with love… humility… respect… and grace… Breathing in and then release as you blaze that light.

Sarasvati Kirtan Introduction
43:23 – 44:05
And we'll now call upon Sarasvati, who in the ancient creation myths was seen as Śiva's sister. He was light and she was the power to learn. So we're gonna sing a song called Sarasvati ma, Sarasvati. And then we'll sing "*ma jaya ma jaya ma*." And the ma we're referring to is the mother of all wisdom. Jaya, victory to you.

44:10 – 50:20 Sarasvati Ma Song
"Let's call mother Sarasvati to be here"

Cognitive Refocusing: Affirmation and Blessing
50:30 54:08
And just breathing in the mantra. Let it go right through your body. And just say

I call on the mother of all knowledge. I call upon Sarasvati. By the holy name Sarada….
Sarada…Sarada… mother of all knowledge… I call to you…. Breathe in and let your energy expand
Say please inspire me… at the right time… in the right way….so the right thing happens… Jai ma..
Breathing in… holding in the head region and then gently release the breath
Say I'm open to new learning… In enjoy learning… learning is easy… I easily learn what I need… and transmute my learning into wisdom… so be it…. And breathing in, hold and then breathing normally.

When we want to merge our spirit with someone else, one of the fastest way to do it is to send that person love. This means that from our heart, we're sending something precious to the other person. We also open a spiritual corridor for the sharing of energy when we send love. IT brings us into greater unity and it also allows us to understand each other more. And so just thinking of a teacher that you have in whatever discipline you would like to learn more about. And raise your hands, palms facing outwards at about chest height. And send love to this teacher. And say, I send you genuine affection and respect… and love from my heart… and I ask that you inspire me.. and share your wisdom with me…. That my own learning is faster… More pervasive… More accurate… and expansive… through divine grace… so be it.
Breathing in and just sending that love to whoever you'd like to learn from. See them joyful and fulfilled in what they're doing. Send them love and best wishes… And be open to the flow of energy from them to you to inspire you in your learning…

Transition to Conclusion
54:09 – 56:07
And then put your hands down and feeling all the energy in and around you. And focus this in your hands as you rub your hands together, creating some heat and spiritual energy and place your hands on your face for a nice divine facial and draw the spiritual energy into the cells in your face, that you glow with divine energy. Breathe the energy into your facial tissue… that you greet the world with joy and illumination.
So be it.
Put your hands down, bring your awareness back into your physical body and open your eyes. Good singing everyone. Sounded great from here I hope you enjoyed that and could feel the expansiveness of chanting the names of the divine.

Appendix D: Ethics Approval

Notification of Approval

Date:	April 3, 2018
Study ID:	Pro00077048
Principal Investigator:	Tiffany Brulotte
Study Supervisor:	Michael Frishkopf
Study Title:	Sing pray heal. Exploring the Health Benefits of Kirtan as Sacred community music therapy.
Approval Expiry Date:	Tuesday, April 2, 2019

Approved Consent Form:	Approval Date	Approved Document
	4/3/2018	Elder Info and Consent form.docx
	4/3/2018	Other kirtan participant info and consent form.docx
	4/3/2018	Shanti Mission info and consent.docx

Thank you for submitting the above study to the Research Ethics Board 1. Your application has been reviewed and approved on behalf of the committee.

A renewal report must be submitted next year prior to the expiry of this approval if your study still requires ethics approval. If you do not renew on or before the renewal expiry date, you will have to re-submit an ethics application.

Approval by the Research Ethics Board does not encompass authorization to access the staff, students, facilities or resources of local institutions for the purposes of the research.

Sincerely,

Anne Malena, PhD
Chair, Research Ethics Board 1

Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system).