The White Conch (dungkar) resonates with the sound of Buddhist teachings to symbolize the awakening of sentient beings from ignorance.

(Above) Many Bhutanese young people in large towns like Thimphu continue to develop their country’s rich musical heritage by exploring new musical styles in small, informal nightclubs that welcome improvisation. Photo by Rebecca Winsor

(Right) Musical instruments accompany monastic chants and dance at major public festivals. Photo by John Berthold

Music

Bhutanese religious music, greatly influenced by Tibet, often accompanies sacred masked dances or other ritual ceremonies and festivals. Long trumpets and oboe-like instruments, double-sided drums, cymbals, bells, and conch shells complement monastic chants and provide rhythm at dances and other ceremonies.

Secular music includes Nepali- and Tibetan-influenced traditions. Singing, sometimes accompanied by a flute, a seven-stringed lute (usually brightly painted with a carved dragon’s head), a two-stringed bowed instrument, and a hammer dulcimer, is an important part of daily life and celebration. In Thimphu, the capital city, there are many contemporary music venues, where young people are busy fusing traditional Bhutanese, Indian, and Western musical styles to develop Bhutanese pop music.