

From old Ragas to new voices: Experiencing contemporary Indian Choral Music

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Introduction

Most people who have not visited India would probably have a set of stereotyped images of the country, partly based on preconceptions encouraged by colonialism and largely influenced by the media. Recently, through "the increasing reference to India as an economically underdeveloped country, the image of India as a vital, pulsating land has begun to emerge from the fog of Maharajas, snake-charmers and the rope-trick" (Thapar, 1976, p.15). This has served to introduce the world to the multi-faceted nature of life in India.

Indian music has faced a similar situation with most people regarding Indian music as the classical music of North India (Hindustani music) and that of the South (Carnatic music). Such is the extent of the popularity of Indian classical music that it is perhaps the first non-Western art music to have made a substantial presence on the Western concert stage. There exists, however, in India an enormous range of devotional, primitive, folk, and contemporary popular music (including film music) as well as its art musics. In all these genres of music we find the results of the interaction with other musical languages and cultures, caused by a long history of invasion and external influences. Indeed, such is the extent and scope of foreign invasion that it is impossible to state what is conclusively indigenous and what is not. Already by about 1000 AD, long before the onset of European colonialism, interaction with other parts of the world was well established. Through the northwest, cultural and economic exchange took place with Central Asia and the Middle East. Through the western coast and the Persian gulf, extensive trade with the Mediterranean and with Africa had taken place, this being also the route through which Christianity first made its appearance. The eastern coast and the northeast exported Indian religion, culture, and materials to East Asia including China, and as far east and south as the Indonesian archipelago. An excellent example of the result of cultural contact is the Hindustani classical music of North India which was moulded and created through centuries of contact with Islamic culture from Persia and elsewhere.

In the second millenium, European colonialism changed the face of Indian society. The presence of Western society over more than four centuries led to political upheavals and spawned new cultural expressions in the everyday life of customs, dress, food, etc. Of the three colonisers, (British, French and Portuguese), the least influential was the French, who maintained one small possession in the south of India, Pondicherry, until the mid-twentieth century. Of the

other two, the English domination was by far the largest and most pervasive.

The Indian music influenced by European settlement is largely neglected, even by musicologists. This music is rejected by Indians for not being totally indigenous, and is frequently seen as unworthy of attention by Western (or, for that matter, Indian) musicologists because it smacks of colonialism. Also, with the vastness and the diversity of Indian music, it is only natural that some areas of music will be neglected by researchers.

Post-colonial choral music

The Western choral tradition was a superimposition on an already well established and diverse choral and vocal culture in the devotional, primitive, and folk music of India. This was a specific outcome of contact with English, French, and Portuguese colonial cultures in the religious observances of the Christian church and in secular society.¹ The nature of the church in society was different under the different colonisers. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Portuguese set out to undertake a large-scale conversion to Christianity and to superimpose its culture extensively. The British, by contrast, believed that "the traditional social fabric of India was ultimately rooted in religion and would unravel if Christianity were introduced on a large scale" (Johnson, 1995, p 130). Thus the percentage of Christians in the population of British India is approximately 2%, whereas the percentage of the Christians in the population of Portuguese Goa is approximately 40%. With a large proportion of the population involved in the Christian liturgy, Goa saw the emergence of a large number of choirs, the main purpose of which was to function within the Church.

Four and a half centuries of Portuguese colonialism led to the shaping of several manifestations of intercultural choral music, both in the secular arena and in the liturgical and devotional music of the Catholic church (Pereira & Martins, 1978). British colonialism was clearly not as evangelical as that of the Portuguese. The music of the English church was usually restricted to English hymns. Although choirs existed in the churches of British India, it was the secular nature of society which gave rise to (a) the development of an instrumental musical culture, (b) the performance of operas and musical theatre, (c) the emergence of salon music, and (d) the development of choirs. Furthermore, the influence on Indian music of Western concepts, colonial structures, musical material began to be pervasive in art music as well as in devotional and popular music. It was, however, true that the choral music in the English church succeeded in giving an impetus to the development of Western-style Indian choirs, and this is precisely the ensemble with which the research of this paper deals. These choirs sang almost exclusively Western repertoire because the choirs were peopled with, existed for, and composed for the Western Anglicised society. The many Western-style choirs that were established in India, have sung a wide range of repertoire from the traditional Western choral repertoire, both sacred and secular, to the more contemporary range of intercultural music.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this choral development is the emergence of new literature for choirs using Indian musical resources, by Indian and Western composers either conveyed aurally or written in Western notation.² It would be safe to say that Indian intercultural choral music is so obscure and isolated that very few people outside of India have had the opportunity to hear it.

Indeed, it is only recently that the first examples of such repertoire have been published outside India, namely in the USA (*Music of Asia and the Pacific*. A. de Quadros (Ed.). Oregon USA: Earthsongs).

Much has been written on the transformation of traditional Indian music-education, context, relationship with society, etc., of European settlement. Only comparatively recently, is the traffic of ideas starting to move the other way, with Indian instruments and musical material influencing contemporary Western repertoire. New literature of this kind is not just written by Indian composers — composers in the West have also done so, notable among them being the well-known German composer, Peter Hamel who has written several pieces in this genre (Hamel, 1976).

Foremost among contemporary Indian choral composers, Vanraj Bhatia had his early education in Indian music, studied piano later, went on to study composition in England, and then in France with Nadia Boulanger. His works employ Indian melodic material, Indian texts, Western notation, a complex mix of traditional Indian and contemporary Western rhythmic material, and vertical relationships.

The *Six Seasons* by Bhatia, as an example of intercultural choral music, possesses elements of Western and Indian musical languages as follows:

1. Although it is based on Indian ragas, it builds on the more miniature quality of folk music and the concept of a definite small-scale choral work.

2. It uses the polyphonic structure of Western music but without being governed by attention to the vertical relationships and harmonic structures of the Western style. It is predominantly a set of independent lines, with each vocal line stating the raga melodies. With its mixed-voice (SATB) context it is clearly written for the Western-style choral ensemble.

3. Indian music is normally limited to a specific seasonal or event-based context. Bhatia's pieces are written for and based on specific seasons, namely Spring, Summer, Monsoon, Harvest, and Winter. Raga melodies are specific for each season. Thus, the first movement, *Basant* [Spring], uses the raga melody of *Basant*. The second, *Grishma* [Summer], is based on *Rag Jai Jaivanti*; the third, *Varsha* [Monsoon], on *Rag Megh Malhar*; the fourth, *Sharad* [Autumn], on *Rag Hindol*; the fifth, *Shishir* [Harvest], on *Rag Desh*; and the last, *Hemant* [Winter], on *Rag Shyam Kalyan*. Notwithstanding this link with seasons, these pieces are not written to be performed within the exclusivity of these seasons. Rather, the work is constructed around the ragas belonging to specified times of the day or year, and incorporates them into the structure of a multi-movement work in the Western style. Thus, as a multi-movement work, it is not unlike a work such as the Vaughan Williams' *Folk Songs of the Four Seasons*. In traditional Indian music, the ragas of six separate seasons would not normally be heard in the same performance or even at the same time of the year.

4. The authorship of this piece is a single composer, unlike the authorship of Indian music ordinarily. It does however build on the already established musical material and structure of ragas. It is difficult to ascribe a role to this kind of compositional process. It is unlike the arrangement of a traditional folk song, such as the arrangement of a spiritual by a contemporary composer where a single melody line is transformed into a choral piece. Nor is it a composition where the melodic material is well established and the composition is merely the quotation of specific melodies. It is a specific creative expression arising from the

improvisatory nature of the raga itself with the composer using the ascending and descending patterns of the ragas and using them to write a polyphonic piece.

5. Contemporary choral music of this kind is subject not only to the interpretation of the composer's intention, but also to the performance practice of Indian music and the considerations of appropriate ensemble qualities of blend, balance, etc. for a Western-style choral ensemble. It calls for a new performance practice and an investigation of the authenticity of a new musical language. The composer has asked for the mind (glissandi) and for the traditional ornamentation gamak (oscillation between notes) to be maintained and has notated them usually in sixteenth-notes, as in Hemant, measures 31-32 (Bhatia, 1994c).

6. The central characteristics of Indian music are present here.

7. Improvisation, so much a part of Indian music, is not an element of this new literature.

8. The social structure of the choral ensemble is hierarchical with the conductor at the top. This stands in sharp distinction from the traditional social structure of Indian musical ensembles, where there may be leadership and there may be a hierarchy but never a conductor who is not an active participant in the production of the sound itself.

9. In the creation of this new form of intercultural musical language, the traditional transmission from an oral to written has been adopted.

Vocal Production

The characteristics of Indian vocal production are vastly different from those of the Western art music tradition. As the focus of this conference is not simply on the musicological aspects of contemporary Indian choral music but on the pedagogical and the aural aspects, the nature of these differences in vocal production must be clarified. The prime purpose must be to enable Western singers and conductors to approach the performance of these works with confidence. The physical differences between the two vocal traditions are considerable, but this genre contains an amalgam of both as follows:

1. Posture: Indian singing is always undertaken from a seated cross-legged posture, described in hatha yoga terms as sukhasan (Figure 1. Vishnudevananda, 1960, plate 19), where the upper body is in a relaxed, vertical position. Not only is the Western performing posture usually standing and sometimes sitting on a chair, but the rib cage is lifted to allow for maximum expansion on inhalation. When the body is seated cross-legged such expansion is limited. The *Six Seasons* is meant to be performed standing in traditional choral configuration but a Western choir would benefit from the singing of this repertoire while sitting cross-legged.

2. Registers: The Indian tradition seeks to develop the low to middle register using mainly the heavy mechanism. The use of the light mechanism or head voice is discouraged. Where the tessitura is particularly high in the soprano, tenor and bass parts in measures 81-82 of Shishir, the use of head voice is to be used as late as possible.

3. In both traditions, the opening of the mouth is "north-south" not "east-west", with the throat open. The essential point of departure is the position of the soft palate which is lifted in Western music and low in Indian music; the lifting of the soft palate would distort the natural sounds of the Hindi language and would be inappropriate. Trained Western singers are not accustomed to this and will find

this challenging.³

4. Traditional Indian singing does not use the support of the diaphragm in breathing. The abdomen is expected to collapse naturally with the exhalation. The beginning of the sound with attack or onset is not encouraged. This is not unlike the breathing techniques for vocal production of several European folk musics. As with the position of the soft palate, trained Western singers will find it difficult not to use the breathing techniques that they have learned.

5. The sound is coloured by the vowel and consonant sounds of Hindi, the pronunciation of which should present only limited difficulties for speakers of European languages. There are a few consonant sounds which do not exist in English, for example, and the judicious use of a pronunciation tape or, even better, a native speaker would be the best way of generating an aural picture of required inflections.

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Endnotes

¹ The diverse nature of the establishment of the Christian church in India would make a detailed expose of its characteristics impossible within the scope of this paper. In pre-colonial India, the Syrian church had already established a strong foothold in the South. A distinct liturgy and musical tradition has developed during the last two thousand years based on the integration of traditional songs sung in Malayali.

² Victor Paranjoti, music critic and musicologist, based most of his works on

his profound knowledge of Indian and Western classical and Indian folk music. Over a period of several years, he gathered together many folk songs from all over India and used them along with traditional raga melodies as a basis for choral arrangements. The *Dravidian Dithyramb* is one such example.

³ These comments are based on my first-hand experiences in preparing this repertoire with a Western choir, namely the National Youth Choir of Great Britain (Musical Director: Mike Brewer), which gave the first performance of this entire song cycle by a non-Indian choir on 5 January, 1997.
