Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern: The Postcolonial Politics of Music in South India by Amanda J. Weidman

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Amanda J. Weidman's *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern: The Postcolonial Politics of Music in South India* is an incisive account of the development of South Indian classical (Karnatic) music in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The book's central thesis is that the consolidation and enthronement of what is now commonly known as the indigenous "Karnatic classical tradition" emerged as a result of fundamental shifts in the social and political landscape of South India in the early twentieth century. Drawing on ethnographic work (studying violin in Madras) and archival materials, Weidman explores the ways in which a heterogeneous collection of South Indian musical styles, repertoire and performance practices were molded into a classical tradition that embodied new ideas about subjectivity, gender and nationalism in the South Indian context. Through analysis of music theory treatises, advertisements and other media, and drawing from contemporary feminist theory, linguistic anthropology, and musicology, Weidman pieces together an erudite study of the political and historical roots of one of India's cherished musical traditions. Her theoretical framework deserves special attention; it engages productively with historical detail in order to conceptualize the role of music in producing modes of South Indian subjectivity and modernity.

Weidman's premise is that the formation of the Karnatic classical tradition proceeded from the historical conditions of colonialism and post-colonialism. On a material level, the dissolution of the princely states and the patronage system, occurring as a result of colonial rule, brought about significant changes in South Indian musical institutions and performance conventions. The elite, mostly urban South Indian Brahmin population supported an alternative economy of musical performance in which new sound technologies and performance venues contributed to the emergence of new techniques, aesthetics and instrumentation. Through careful textual and musical analysis, Weidman shows how, within the framework of the colonial encounter, musical practices and discourses mediated between the "project of modernity" (6) in colonial India, on the one hand, and the desire for preservation of "authentic" Indian tradition on the other. The ideal Karnatic music had to exemplify "the modern"—by using new sound technologies, developing a written repertoire and staging concerts—while at the same time it embodied the "essential difference"(7) of Indian music. As Weidman states: "the voice—the vocal nature of Indian music and its ties to oral tradition—came to stand for this essential difference" (5). Thus, as Weidman demonstrates, the binary of tradition and modernity framed the claims to authority that were made in regards to particular types of voices. The subsequent valorization of particular kinds of vocality contributed to what Weidman calls a "politics of voice," in which certain voices and discourses about voices were thought best able to represent Karnatic tradition.

The "politics of voice" is the lens through which Weidman's study is focused. Each chapter in the book concentrates on a particular moment in the development of the Karnatic tradition in which the concept of "voice" was re-imagined, re-inscribed, redefined or destabilized. Chapters one and two explore what Weidman calls the "staging" of the voice in Karnatic music. Chapter one examines the history of the violin and its place in the Karnatic tradition. Although colonialists brought the violin to South India in the early nineteenth century, it has since played a central role in the Karnatic tradition. Weidman observes that it is by virtue of the violin's ability to represent the sound of the voice that it successfully supports the voice not as "mere accompaniment" (15) or as a "colonial add-on" (15) but by "ventriloquizing" and thus highlighting the vocal line. By virtue of its mimetic character, the violin was able to stage the Karnatic voice in a particular way. Chapter two looks at the literal staging of music in the concert venues and schools that replaced temple and street performances. Weidman points out that these new venues contributed to the formation of an audience who was "…considerably more homogeneous in terms of class and caste" (59) than previous audiences. The conventions of the concert hall framed Karnatic music as a refined and upper-class practice that embodied a particular version of tradition.

Chapters three and four are concerned with ideas of the "natural" Karnatic voice in relation to gender, language and the singing and listening subject. Weidman's particularly trenchant arguments here reveal the ideological underpinnings of the idea of the "modern subjectivity" as it relates to the politics of voice: "Modern subjectivity hinges on the notion of voice as a metaphor for self and authenticity and on the various techniques—musical, linguistic, and literary—by which particular voices are made to seem authentic." (7-8) Observing how the politics of voice validated the characteristic of interiority as an essential component of modern subjectivity, Weidman's critique then focuses on the figure of the subaltern as the limit to that modern subjectivity: "…voiceless, still,

unresponsive as a statue, deaf by virtue of his 'iron ears', and, above all unable to appreciate music" (191). The subaltern, by virtue of his exclusion from norms of musical behavior, seems to have no voice and thus no real subjectivity: "a figure profoundly disturbing because he seemed to possess no interiority" (191). Weidman's postcolonial critique underlines the conditions of exclusion and erasure that that were necessary to protect the ontological boundaries of the proper musical subject.

Chapters five and six focus on the figures of the composer and the guru in South India and the ways in which technological innovations reconfigured their respective roles in relation to the preservation of musical tradition. Weidman demonstrates how sound technologies such as the radio, the phonograph, and the microphone gave rise to anxieties around the idea of fidelity to tradition and the notation, preservation and dissemination of music. Weidman explores the ways in which "ideas about tradition and authenticity were themselves formed in the encounter with such technologies" (21). Her discussion of the gramophone addresses how the ability to listen repeatedly to a performance concretized ideas about what constituted the perfect musicality and the ideal listening experience: sound reproduction technologies "provided a new metaphor for tradition" (268).

Weidman's goal in this book is to "bring Indian classical music…within the purview of anthropology" (24) by dismantling its ideologies of the voice. Weidman treats the voice as a "historical and anthropological object" (9) pointing out that as the voice is metaphorized in theory as the locus of subjectivity and agency, it is thus vital to attend to its role in the entailments of modernity. Weidman critiques the field of ethnomusicology for canonizing the Karnatic tradition and "elid[ing] the colonial history that made the category of 'Indian classical music' possible" (24). Despite this critique of the discipline, Weidman's book does in fact join an already established body of work on Indian music that draws connections between colonialism, nationalism, and the classicization of Indian musical tradition. What makes this book exemplary is Weidman's painstaking historiography, her postcolonial stance, and her commitment to putting Karnatic music in its social context.

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