From Threatened by Modernity to Reinvented by Modernity: The History of the History of Indian Classical Music 1980 – 2006

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Abstract

In Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern, Amanda Weidman argued that ethnomusicology had ignored Indian classical music's colonial history in favor of musicological knowledge. Thus, her project's "most important aim" was to "bring Indian classical music...within the purview of anthropology" (2006: 24). Quizzically, Daniel Neuman aimed for the same twenty-six years earlier. His 1980 The Life of Music in North India, also endeavored to provide an anthropological account of modern Indian classical music culture. The fact is, both authors were firsts, since what it meant to bring this music under the purview of anthropology—or history and ethnography for that matter—had significantly changed after twenty-six years. Most notably, twenty-first century scholars no longer saw modern Indian classical music through the lens of culture and tradition. Rather, they reframed it as a product of nationalism, modernity and colonialism. Thus, whereas Neuman and Jon B. Higgins portrayed the music as an evolving ancient tradition adapting to the threat of modernity, scholars like Lakshmi Subramanian and Weidman argued that nationalism fueled a re-invention of Indian classical music in response to the legacy of colonialism. If Neuman and Higgins were under the ideological sway of structural anthropology and the Indian nationalist music-reform movement, the new scholars used postcolonial theory to re-cast Indian classical music in new light. In tracing the emergence of nation, modernity and colonialism as the dominant analytics for discussing Indian classical music in English-language ethnomusicological scholarship, this paper tries to understand the logic behind this shift and suggests a new avenue of inquiry.

Threatened by Modernity

This paper concentrates on a shift that occurred in authors' conceptions of Indian classical music found in ethnomusicological scholarship written in the English language from 1980 to 2006. 1980 was the year Wayne State University Press published *The Life of Music in North India: The Organization of an Artistic Tradition* written by Daniel Neuman. Basing his ethnography in Delhi, Neuman had interviewed seventy-five Hindustani musicians in an effort to bring the reader into the "*Life* of Music in North India." Yet, ironically, a foreboding *death* of Hindustani music, a "tremendous shattering of tradition" caused by the perilous forces of modernity, pervaded Neuman's characterization of the Hindustani music tradition in the twentieth century (Neuman 1980:223-229). Oscillating between characterizing the "Life of Music in North India" as such, as well as portraying the music-culture as having evolved through "adaptive strategies," Neuman's study was markedly different from other ethnomusicological studies published at the time.

In his introduction, Neuman articulated the theory that music and culture were somehow interrelated. He explicitly theorized culture, society and civilization—terms he used interchangeably—as a system or a structure. His definition of this structure was a "utilized system of symbols and meanings" (ibid:24). It was deeply influenced by Clifford Geertz's theory of culture found in his 1973 collection of essays, *The Interpretation of Cultures*.

Fascinated with "the persistence of Indian music culture," especially "its ability not merely to survive but to thrive," Neuman theorized that Hindustani music employed "adaptive strategies" for adjusting to modern Indian civilization (ibid:26). He borrowed this theory from anthropologist Milton Singer's theory of "adaptive processes" (Singer 1968:438-447). Singer wrote,

> …to my mind…a plausible explanation [for change in Indian society] is that Indian civilization has built into it adaptive mechanisms for incorporating new techniques, new ideas, and newcomers, with only a gradual replacement of the old. (ibid:xi)

Adopting structuralism as his dominant anthropological framework, Neuman proposed culture was a complex system of interrelated parts. Structuralist studies called for an investigation into the relationships between these parts, such as the relationship between music and caste, or music and religion. Claude Levi Strauss's kinship charts exemplified this approach and Neuman included such charts in his presentation of the lineages of the predominantly Muslim *gharanas,* the hereditary stylistic schools of Hindustani music (Neuman 1980:246-254).

A glimpse into the chapters of *The Life of Music in North India* articulates what innovative ethnomusicology was in 1980. Neuman first explored the thoughts and ideas that musicians held about Hindustani music and about being a musician. Then, instead of turning to the actual music and poetry, he investigated the hierarchical social organization involved in who played which instruments and sang which performance genres. In a moment of candor, Bonnie Wade revealed her ethnomusicological preoccupations in a 1980 book review, describing Neuman's elucidation of the division of musical labor as a "situation… ethnomusicologists dream about: that rare and clear explanation of musical structure in social as well as musical terms" (Wade 1980:96).

Thus Neuman's discoveries were exactly what ethnomusicologists were looking for: some kind of proof that music and culture were not separate spheres. The caste divisions of musical labor provided American ethnomusicologists with a discovery of sorts that strengthened their hypothesis on the connections between music and culture.

Neuman was not alone. Jon B. Higgins' article "From Prince to Populace: Patronage as a Determinant of Change in South Indian (Karnatak) Music" appeared in a 1976 issue of the *Journal of Asian Music* guest-edited by Neuman and devoted to cultural change.[1] Like Neuman, when Higgins discussed the concept of change in Indian classical music in the modern period, he characterized modernity as a threat to an ancient and evolving tradition. In addition, Higgins viewed the history of Indian classical music as the Indian nationalists viewed the history of the Indian nation. He wrote,[2]

> Far from being the enemy of tradition, change has been rather the core, the soul of a vital art form constantly in the process of becoming. Over the past two thousand years and more, every new generation has received the oral corpus of musical repertoire and style, transformed it and in turn transmitted it to the next generation. So far as we know the tradition has undergone a constant process of evolution. (Higgins 1976:20)

The idea was that Vedic chant—often posited as the beginning of Indian music—was the same national classical music that had evolved into the *kritis* of Thyagaraja, the famous eighteenth century saint-composer. This kind of music history corresponded with nationalist histories of the Indian nation that anachronistically projected the present nation-state back in time, and construed the past as evolving towards the present nation-state.[3] I will now turn to the new generation of scholars who would radically alter this type of historicism.

Reinvented by Modernity

With the 2006 publications of Lakshmi Subramanian's *From the Tanjore Court to the Madras Music Academy: A Social History of Music in South India* and Amanda Weidman's *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern: The Postcolonial Politics of Music in South India*,the study and theorization of the Indian classical music tradition had undergone a radical transformation. These works shifted the scholarly imagination from espousing the concept of an evolving tradition, to espousing a tradition reinvented in the colonial encounter. Although these two authors ascribed different degrees of significance to the role of colonialism, the bastion of scholarship that had imagined an autonomous Indian classical tradition had breathed its last.

Unlike Neuman, Subramanian and Weidman were not interested in theorizing about the relationship between music and culture, but instead turned to the ways that South Indian *nationalists* theorized the relationship between music and the nation. Nor were native music terminologies, or kinship charts found in their work. Instead, they gleaned their insights into nationalism, modernity, and colonialism, largely through discourse analysis. Print culture's variety of forms, i.e. newspaper and journal articles, published speeches of nationalists and colonists, political cartoons, novels and hagiographies about musicians and composers, all came under serious scrutiny as did print culture itself as a key force driving the modern reform of Indian classical music (Subramanian 2006:56). Indeed, Weidman went as far to argue that the notion of the composer came into being in South India, "only in the twentieth century, with the widespread use of notation and the printing of notation and musical manuals" (Weidman 2006:20).

Yet, although Subramanian and Weidman agreed the tradition had been reinvented in the twentieth century, their vision of this reinvention was significantly different. Subramanian's definition of the reinvention as "both an act of staging as well as an accretion of cultural production in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" (Subramanian 2006:2), invested not only orientalist and colonial discourse of the eighteenth and nineteenth century with significance for influencing the twentieth century reinvention, but also gave credit to the music and lives of the eighteenth century trinity composers as central to the twentieth century reinvention.4 Thus, while she openly acknowledged that the elevation of these composers' lives and works took place in the twentieth century, Subramanian argued it was only natural, since their musical contributions deserved the recognition they received.

On the contrary, for Weidman, the trinity composers of the eighteenth century were only preoccupations of the twentieth century Brahmin middle-class due to the middle class's anxiety over the change from royal patronage to urban music business. Weidman argued, "the more the music business flourished, the more the figure of Thyagaraja as a musician existing outside of…the money economy was celebrated" (Weidman 2008:100). For Weidman, the period of royal patronage had no connection to the twentieth century, but rather

> The definition of Karnatic music as spiritual or devotional and the preoccupation with the figure of Thyagaraja as a saint who refused royal patronage were responses to anxiety about the commercialization of music. (ibid:103)

Quite unlike Subramanian's definition of the reinvention as "both an act of staging as well as an accretion of cultural production," Weidman went out on a limb to argue that modern South Indian classical music, as we know it today—including its status as "classical"—was truly created in the colonial encounter and "modeled on the classical music of the West, with its notations, composers, compositions, conservatories, and concerts" (ibid:5).

Using a variety of discourse to support her claims, Weidman's first chapter was a tour de force, giving an unprecedented deep postcolonial reading of Karnatak classical music's adoption of the violin. The arguments of this chapter reappeared throughout her entire monograph. Her first argument was that scholars had misunderstood the ways Karnatak music had profoundly been created in the context of colonialism. For Weidman, modernity itself was a result of the contact of cultures in colonial regimes and she viewed the Karnatak violin as the very embodiment of this colonial encounter.

Next, Weidman argued that the gramophone—presenting a way for women to be heard without being seen to escape the associations of their bodies (ibid:122), and the microphone—enabling singers to sing quietly while projecting a sense of intimacy to a vast audience (ibid:126)—enabled the emergence of a discourse about the voice, which was articulated powerfully in the discussions of M.S. Subbalakshmi's "voice of the century." The music sung by Subbalakshmi became conflated with notions of ideal South Indian middle-class womanhood which like Karnatak music was imagined to be a realm of true, authentic Indian culture untouched by colonialism (ibid:135).

Two Influences on the New Scholarship

This paper has shown how Weidman and Subramanian's conclusions differed from those of Neuman and Higgins. While Neuman and Higgins argued Indian classical music was *threatened by modernity* the latter argued that it was *created in modernity* and argued that the Brahman middle class undertook the project to modernize, spiritualize, standardize and disseminate their brand of Indian classical music because music was emblematic of the very nation for which they sought independence. Thus, if nationalists wanted progress for the nation, they wanted progress for their music as well (notation, for example was imagined as a site for progress). Neuman and Higgins on the other hand, conceptualized Indian classical music as an ancient tradition. They did not study discourse but studied "culture" through interviews and according to the model of structural anthropology, which inspired Neuman to include kinship charts and to theorize the structure of Hindustani music culture. Yet, however clearly we can articulate these differences in historicism one question left unanswered is *why* the historicism of Indian classical music of the same period changed.

Perhaps the biggest limitation for a comprehensive answer to this question is confining the discussion to only texts, for this problematically ignores the historical context in which the authors wrote. And at the same time, it is a fallacy to think the paradigm shift ensconced in the print of English language scholarship is an exact report of actual historical change. No doubt, the onset of postcolonial theory transformed how ethnomusicologists viewed cultural change. Is it not ironic that change was actually Neuman and Higgins' topic of focus yet they concluded that the

colonial encounter was something that had not touched Indian classical music? This must be due to the lack of postcolonial theory in their time.

Yet on the fringe of postcolonial theory is Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* published in 1983. In it Anderson argued that the spread of printing was a very significant factor in the rise of nationalism. In his view, with the onset of printing standardized scripts in books and newspapers, readers in their respective languages began to feel connected to each other due to their shared printed language devoid of dialect differences and began to see themselves as a community. Thus print capitalism, Anderson argued, was the primary medium for developing nationalism. Although scholars of Indian nationalism and South Asian literary history have discredited the application of Anderson's work to South Asia (Chatterjee 1993, Kaviraj 2006), connecting nationalism to print capitalism was compelling enough to appear in Subramanian's characterization of Karnatak music discourse. She wrote,

> The modern discourse on the performing arts, especially music, in nineteenth and twentieth century India was shaped largely in the convergence of Orientalist scholarship with print culture, and its dissemination among the urban Indian middle class…. the technology of print provided the convenient conduit to a new and eager public. (Subramanian 2006:56)

Recall that Weidman also argued that the notion of the composer came into being in South India because of printing.

If Anderson's was an indirect influence on Weidman and Subramanian the influence of Partha Chatterjee—whose work was a brilliant response to Anderson—cannot be missed.[5] Both Weidman and Subramanian cited and uncritically used Chatterjee's work (Subramanian 2006:17-18, 143-144; Weidman 2008:6, 302n3, 309n50). Moreover, Weidman had assimilated Chatterjee to the point where her language sounded like it could be his own.

Chatterjee's central idea was that before nationalism becomes political, nationalists carve out a unique space, what Chatterjee called the "inner domain" and what Weidman referred to as the "safely delineated realm" imagined to be a realm of culture untouched by colonialism—such as the arts or one's mother tongue. Subramanian like Weidman argued that the efforts to represent South Indian music as classical was "*generated by* the inner logic of nationalist thought that, Partha Chatterjee claims, demarcated a distinct domain of sovereignty" (Subramanian 2006:17). This "inner domain" strengthened national pride and was premised upon the difference—whether in the arts, language or family values—between colonists and colonized. Chatterjee believed the "inner domain" served to justify and inspire the anti-colonial movement to reach political independence.

According to Chatterjee, accompanying this "inner domain" was an "outer domain" or a material sphere of economy, statecraft, science and technology in which the West was supposed to have supremacy. Chatterjee argued that the more colonized people imitated Western skills in the outer realm, the greater the need was to protect the "inner realm" (Chatterjee 1993:26). Thus Weidman would write, "the more the music business flourished, the more the figure of Thyagaraja as a musician existing outside of (and even resisting) the money economy was celebrated" (Weidman 2008:100).

Conclusion: An Avenue of Inquiry

It is clear that the works of Anderson and Chatterjee have significantly influenced the shift in historicism of Indian classical music in the modern period. Yet, as mentioned above, confining an investigation into this paradigm shift to only texts reduces change to the words of scholars. It ignores the historical context in which they wrote. Thus, I propose scholars write histories of modern scholarly patronage. Studying the ideological climate at American Universities where Neuman and Higgins studied and worked, compared with Weidman and Subramanian's milieu, would be a first step.

This would lead to larger questions about the history of the interaction of American universities, American financed but South Asian based language-training programs, and fellowship organizations, fieldwork experience, and with the scholarship ethnomusicologists produced in the twentieth century. Such a history of scholarly patronage would *include* a comprehensive understanding of change in historicism. Moreover, while there has been a surge of interest in the ways academic disciplines like philology articulated central aspects of European modernity, the emergence of institutional support in America for the ethnomusicological task of studying the entire world's music

must articulate something significant about American history in the 1950s and 1960s.

These kinds of inquiries are reflexive in their own way since they shift the focus onto “us,” the imagined community of ethnomusicologists, and the institutions that enable us to produce scholarship on the music of India. “Reflexive” writing often means bringing our subjective experience as ethnographers into the fabric of our texts, holding out the promise of “distancing us from historically colonialist approaches” (Kisliuk 1997:23). However true this is, reflexive writing often ignores the fascinating interactions of American universities, language-training programs, and fellowship organizations, with fieldwork, scholarship and the maintenance of academic disciplines. These kinds of investigations would get at the logic behind the paradigm shift found in the scholarship of Higgins, Neuman, Weidman, and Subramanian.

Notes

1. The journal was entitled “Symposium on the Ethnomusicology of Culture Change in Asia."

2. For a lucid discussion of Indian nationalist linear history in relation to North Indian classical music see Kobayashi 1995:151-153.

3. I owe this point to Kobayashi 1995:153.

4. However, she did not stop with the eighteenth and nineteenth century but devoted thirteen pages to a two-thousand year old history of South Indian classical music culminating in descriptions of the trinity composers. Although it might be contradictory that Subramanian burdens herself to construct such a history when the nationalist discourse she critically historicizes was rife with such historical narratives positing a linear history of music stretching back two thousand years, we should applaud her for not reducing all history of the longue durée to nationalist fancy.

5. Other influential works not discussed in this paper are Gayathri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak”(1988), Timothy Mitchell’s scholarship in *Questions of Modernity* (2000), and Sumathi Ramaswamy’s *Passions of the Tongue* (1997). I have chosen Anderson (and Chatterjee) since this paper has been more about nationalism and the colonial regime and less about gender, modernity or linguistic nationalism.

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