

***Butterfly* in Bombay: Operatic Culture and British Identity During the *Raj* and Beyond**

Trevor R. Nelson

E. M. Forster's colonial novel *A Passage to India* is brimming with music, though almost exclusively Western styles. Even as one might expect some mention of Indian music within this volume depicting the life of a colonial subject at the height of the British *Raj*, Forster's position as an outsider prevented him from giving adequate space to the sounds of native Indian communities. The one mention of indigenous music is an aside, just another instance of Mrs. Moore wanting to get to know "the real India" (Forster 1924:27). Elsewhere, the author describes amateur orchestras populated by British expatriates; Songs and *entr'acte* music for European dramas also get their due (ibid.:17, 22). Forster even uses Western music as a point of comparison, describing one character as having so little regard to all around her that she treated the entire subcontinent "as a comic opera" (ibid.:49). This quip is the only mention of opera—a genre considered by many in the nineteenth century to be the height of Western musical pursuit—in the entire novel. In the soundscape of *A Passage to India*, where Western music easily prevails, opera only plays a referential role. Forster's tale is far from the definitive statement on Western music-making in India under British rule, as demonstrated by many musicological studies (Head 1985; Farrell 1997; Woodfield 2000; Walton 2019); yet, it does raise a fundamental question: what role did opera play in the lives of Britons living in India during the *Raj*?

Scholars have made clear that when a European power took over land in the age of colonialism, one of the first acts of establishing control was the formation of cultural institutions (Horn 1998; Irving 2012). Many imperial powers, including Britain, followed this model across the world over the last millennium; examples of this include the teaching of Shakespeare in South Africa or the use of Tonic Sol-Fa music solmization in Madagascar (Johnson 1995, McGuire 2009). During the early days of colonial settlement, there was great fear that Europeans would "fall victim" to the wonders of "exotic" locales. In India, the colonial government was quick to instill British institutions to maintain a sense of national identity, keeping the expatriate citizenry distinctly European in sensibility.¹ Indeed, Western music gained a secure hold in the form of amateur orchestras and madrigal societies, an influence still felt today through the music of Bollywood. Furthermore, as Hannah Marsden has demonstrated, to this day, Western

music still plays a role in debates about what it means to be Indian (2018:136). What role did opera—the genre of Western music most closely tied with notions of musical excellence and modernity at the height of British imperialism—play in British identity formation during the Raj?

In this article, I consider the nature of Western opera and the culture surrounding its performance in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, as well as reflect on its legacy in South Asia today. After reviewing the many concerns of early British settlers in India about the need for a robust, pseudo-European cultural sphere, I trace existing accounts of music-making among British expatriate communities during the mid- to late-1800s, honing in on operatic resonances. I draw extensively from the *Times of India*, the largest English-language newspaper on the subcontinent, based in Bombay (now Mumbai).² By engaging with the presence and absence of Western cultural forms in India, one can better understand the cultural capital of certain artistic ventures during and after colonial rule. These notions of value are essential when considering India's only surviving opera house: the Royal Opera House in Mumbai. This site, which underwent a massive renovation in the early 2010s, continues to play a role in the cultural life of the city. This study complements the quickly-expanding body of literature on opera and operatic performance outside of the West, including India (Centrangolo 2016; André 2018; Liao 2019), studies on Western classical music and opera in India (Marsden 2018; Walton 2019), and scholarship on the influence of Indian music and culture on British musical life (Farrell 1997; Ghuman 2014). This article differs, however, by tracking the role of opera in imperial identity formation and deconstruction over a period of 150 years, rather than providing brief snapshots in time.

I argue that even though opera was only one small element of British expatriate cultural life during the 250 years of colonial occupation, the desire of Britons living in India to keep up with Europe's music and cultural "progress" kept the dream of opera in Bombay alive into the 1930s. Furthermore, the *idea* of opera, rather than the actual performance of the genre, continues to exert weight on revitalization efforts in certain enclaves of India today. Of course, this symbolism is closely tied to the role of the West in global power structures to this day. This article scratches the surface of opera within India, glossing over many details, events, and people essential in the genre's rise and fall on the subcontinent. Even in light of these weaknesses, this is a necessary step in fostering a more nuanced history of Western opera in India.

A (Brief) History of Western Music in India

In the seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries, European settlement in India was slow. Following Queen Elizabeth I's granting of a royal charter to the East India Company in 1600, the English set their trade sights on Qing China and the Indian subcontinent (Canny 1998:4). Unlike the Dominion of Canada and the other American territories, there was little intention of turning India into a settler colony. It was only in the 1760s that the British began to explore the possibility of long-term settlement, and even then, encampments remained only in coastal areas surrounding the cities of Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, and Tellicherry (now Thalassery) (Ray 1998:510). Even as the economies of these ports grew, populations remained quite small; Linda Colley reasons that there were typically just around 200 Europeans in India at any given time until the mid-eighteenth century (2002:248–51).

With so few Europeans in India, every man counted and defection was a real concern. The colonial ethos, fueled by essentialist beliefs about race and gender, led many East India Company employees to venture into spaces outside of British control. Officials were quite worried that the unfamiliar nature of South Asia would cause these young men to lose both their moral virtue and national identity: it became commonplace for those stationed in India to refer to themselves as “Indian,” rather than English or British (ibid.:254). Back in London, the rise of the *nabob* community—men who returned to Britain after colonial service yet retained some cultural practices from India—made this concern tangible, with Tillman W. Nechtman arguing that nabobs were crucial in shaping proper and improper modes of Britishness in both the colony and the metropole (2010:16). With their attachment to brightly-colored clothes and spicy food, nabobs made evident the necessity of asserting British culture abroad, if only so the British Isles could remain, in the official mind, a safe and clean oasis.

Music played a crucial role in this cultural assertion. By the 1750s, the British strongholds were growing larger by the day; many men were starting to bring families to India, which led to a surge of Western musicking on the subcontinent. Ian Woodfield notes that domestic music-making in Calcutta closely mirrored culture in London due to a desire to show off middle-class wealth (2000:6). Obtaining quality instruments, however, remained a significant hurdle. It took close to six months for any instruments to arrive from Europe, yet these were manufactured with milder climates in mind; heat and

humidity caused nearly half of all keyboard instruments to break within one year (ibid.:20).

Music thus became a way of controlling British space. Using portraiture, Richard Leppert argues that bringing cultural comforts like keyboards and sheet music to settlements became a way for British officials to prove that colonies were safe. In paintings of prominent British expatriate families, artists frequently added musical objects, which Leppert sees as symbolic of order and rationalization. This performative act became a way of asserting British cultural triumph over the subcontinent (Leppert 1989:102). Portraits can tell us of the presence of music, but leave much of the performance practice a mystery. For that, one must look elsewhere, with press coverage being a prime option.

Music societies began forming in the major British strongholds beginning in the 1760s. Raymond Head notes that choral singing was the most popular, with groups performing familiar fare such as folk songs and ballads. Instrumental ensembles were much rarer, as it was challenging to find enough skilled musicians to fill out an orchestra. These groups tended toward repertoire similar to their European counterparts, reading the music of Haydn, Corelli, and J. C. Bach. Calcutta orchestras even performed Handel's *Messiah* at least twice—once in 1786 and again in 1797 (Head 1985:549).

Reviews of these performances in the English-language *Calcutta Gazette* point to a growing desire among the British expatriate community for more spectacle and wonderment. When evaluating the 1786 *Messiah* performance, one critic remarked that the level of execution would have garnered applause “in any theatre in Europe and the management of the choruses exceeded every expectation” (18 May 1786, quoted in Head 1985:551). Just as domestic music-making became symbolic of the British impulse to make India culturally similar to the metropole, performing music with grander proportions signified the ever-increasing power the British exerted across the subcontinent. Their ability to bring together large instrumental and vocal forces made evident their growing numbers in South Asia, as well as the British hankering to make Indian port cities places of trade and European culture. Symphonies and oratorios indeed were potent tools for demonstrating this yearning, but during the nineteenth century, opera became a dominant symbol of British rule.

The Curtain Rises

By the end of the eighteenth-century, commentators began to note the lack of opera in India, even as the genre succeeded across Europe and into the Americas. Many British

expatriates came to consider this a significant problem. Opera, particularly the Italian variety, was an essential cultural form for them, even if just for seeing and being seen (Hall-Witt 2007); if expatriates ever hoped to return to Britain, they had to stay informed of the newest generic trends either through detailed letters from friends or family back in Europe or by undertaking crash-courses upon their homecoming. Woodfield even notes a woman from the 1780s who refused to move to Calcutta with her husband due to the lack of opera (2000:198). The British expatriate elite came to realize that if India was to become a place of permanent British settlement then opera should be instituted within the major metropolitan areas.

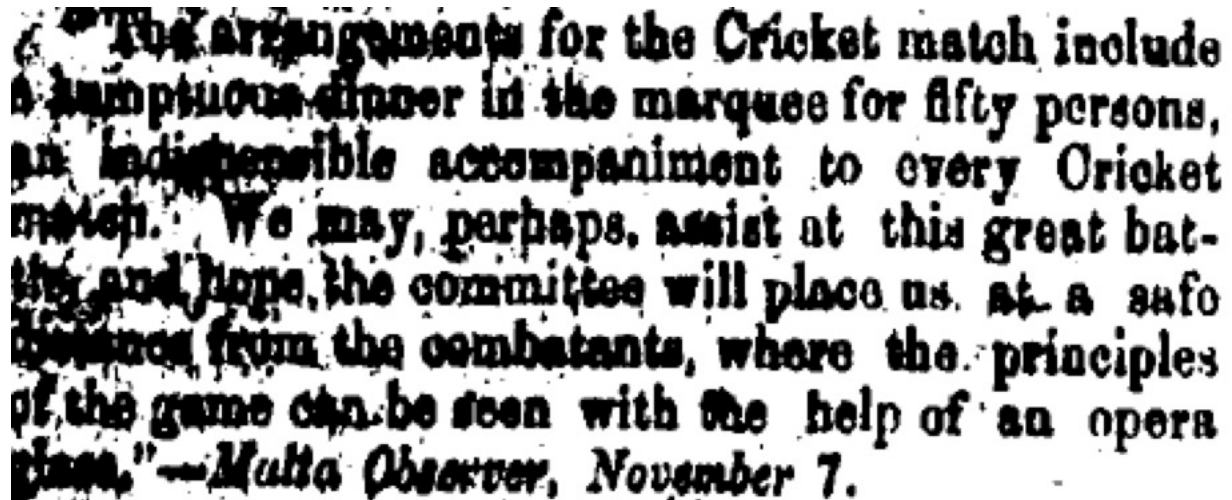
Opera arias and overtures became a dominant musical form in European enclaves. Receipts and pay records from music distributors in Calcutta and Bombay make clear that some of their top-selling products were operatic excerpts. These arrangements, intended for performance in the home, became a way for ruling-class families to stay abreast of operatic developments back in Europe. It was even a favorite hobby amongst bored wives to teach their songbirds hit tunes from new works. There is no evidence as to how this practice began or if it was unique to the Indian context, but it undoubtedly points toward a level of domestic comfort felt by some European women; not only was India safe for them, but they were able to conquer the native beasts (ibid.:32). Like the tiger-skin adornments standard in their homes, Indian songbirds chirping out the latest Mozart air signified a conquering of the landscape.

No avian mimicry, however, could match the allure of an operatic diva. It is difficult to pinpoint precisely the first full staging of a Western opera in India. Raymond Head mentions an 1831 performance of *Don Giovanni* in Calcutta, yet does not supply any documentation or any further evidence to support this claim (1985:552). Similarly, Benjamin Walton notes that semi-staged performances of *L'italiana in Algeri* in Calcutta in 1836 and 1843 were quite important for artistic life in the city (2019:123–26). Thus, we can tentatively pinpoint the 1830s as the beginning of staged opera's influence in certain areas of India.

Press coverage provides a great way to uncover this forgotten history. *The Times of India*, which began publishing in 1838, catered to the British expatriate community in Bombay. While Calcutta had been the seat of British power in India, during the nineteenth century, Bombay and other cities were growing in influence (Washbrook 2010:199). It also bears mentioning that as the *Times of India* was an English-language paper and run by

Europeans living in India, its purview was limited, focusing almost exclusively on the goings-on within European enclaves. To only look at the *Times* when attempting to fully understand musical life in colonial India would be an error. The *Times* does, however, provide a clear projection of the ideals valued by British expatriates during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While the remainder of this article will focus on operatic life in Bombay, other cities across British India certainly had operatic cultures of their own; Partha Chatterjee even describes how the British used Italian opera as a pedagogical tool at the New Bengali Theatre of Calcutta (2012:228).

Advertisements from the 1860s make clear the growing market for opera in India. The China Depot and General Emporium in central Bombay listed opera glasses prominently in their “Classified Advertisements” published ten times during July 1861. The supplier pointed out that these were imported directly from Paris and London (*ToI*, 1, 3, 6, 9, 10, 12, 17, 18, 23, and 24 July 1861). Opera glasses certainly have many uses outside a theatre—a later article titled “A Portuguese view of cricket,” reprinted from the *Malta Observer*, described the technology being used to watch a match—but these prominent advertisements allude to the presence for some market for operatic commodities (*ToI* 25 December 1861:4; see Figure 1).



The arrangements for the Cricket match include a sumptuous dinner in the marquee for fifty persons, an indispensable accompaniment to every Cricket match. We may, perhaps, assist at this great battle, and hope, the committee will place us at a safe distance from the combatants, where the principles of the game can be seen with the help of an opera glass." —Malta Observer, November 7.

Figure 1. Excerpt of article describing a cricket match being viewed via opera glasses. Source: *Times of India*, 25 December 1861, p. 4.

In August 1861, the *Times* published “Our Paris Correspondence,” a series of letters from the French capital; one alerted the Bombay readership of the construction of the new *Opéra*. The note’s author described how none of his readers would be able to find their

way around Paris anymore due to the massive amounts of construction going on back in Europe (*ToI* 10 August 1861:2; see Figure 2). It is clear that Europeans in Bombay would be interested in learning about the goings-on in one of Europe's cultural centers, as well as the new musical destinations to visit upon their return to the West.

None of you will be able to find your way about Paris when you return here; the whole city is being pulled down and rebuilt. Assuredly, if Gibbon be right that Rome perished from excess of luxury, Paris must be near its fall, for luxurious habits here have encroached upon all classes. The workmen complain as they always will complain; but they never had so fine a time of it as now. I watched them this morning building the new Opera House. They have a small steam engine which hoists up all the blocks of stone, which they roll lazily into their places; below it women vend ice at two sous (one penny), and distributing coffee. Nor have the rich much reason to complain. The ground on which the Opera stands is sold for 2000l. £ (200) the square yard; and Made. de Pontalba, who bought her house in the Place Vendome ten years ago for £ 25,000, has just sold it for £ 64,000. Well, these are fine times; but bread, and meat, and wine are at fabulous prices also; so are lodgings. The Marquis of Hertford draws nearly 10,000 £ a year from the house which he lately built at the corner of the Rue Michodiere. The catastrophe, or cataclysm, must come they say. However, the comet has not brought it in its train, for the luminary is fast disappearing; instead of dragging at each remove a lengthening chain, its tail is becoming small by degrees and beautifully less; it scarcely now continues to keep up a decent appearance in the heavens, and is cut out by the evening star.

Figure 2. Excerpt from "Our Paris Correspondence" describing construction taking place in the city, including the *Opéra*. Source: *Times of India*, 10 August 1861, p. 2.

Solo singers and instrumental groups also performed operatic tunes frequently. In December 1861, Mr. E. J. Martinnant Jr. presented a concert at Bombay's town hall; it

was quite an event, and rumors circulated beforehand that Bombay's Governor-general would be in attendance. The *Times* published the concert program beforehand and it featured numerous selections from English and Italian operas. Most were overtures or arrangements of tunes for various instrumental trios. American parlor song also featured prominently in the evening's festivities, and like all good Victorian affairs, the concert was to end with "God Save the Queen" (*ToI* 17 December 1861:4; see Figure 3). The presence of names like Donizetti and Rossini without any explanation points to the ubiquitous nature of their works in bourgeois spaces across the globe.

We beg to remind our readers that the Vocal and Instrumental Concert of Mr. E. J. Martinnant, Junr. takes place this evening at the Town Hall. As it is given under the Patronage of Sir George Clerk, and as His Excellency we believe will honor the occasion with his presence, no doubt Mr. Martinnant will have a numerous audience. The following is the

PROGRAMME OF THE EVENING.

PART I.

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| OVERTURE, "Guy Mannering" (Bishop) | BAND. |
| SOLO ON THE VIOLIN, "Fantasia Selections from the Opera of <i>Lurline</i> (H. Becker) with piano accompaniment | MR. MARTIN- NANT. |
| CHORUS, "The Pirate Queen" (Frater) | SERENADERS. |
| SOLO ON THE CLARINET.—AIR "O Cara Memoria" with brilliant variations (Swan Muller) with piano accompaniment | MR. L. PERRET. |
| SONG, "Annie Laurie," with piano accompaniment and sung by | MR. J. T. MOR- TON. |
| GRAND TRIO FOR THE CLARINET, VIOLIN AND PIANO "Fantasia Sur Les Motifs del opera <i>Elisir D'Amour</i> " (Donizetti) | MESSES. PERRET MARTIN- NANT, AND SWAN- SEGER. |
| SONG AND CHORUS, "I'm off to Charlestown" (Foster) | SERENADERS. |
| SOLO ON THE PIANO "Partant pour La Syrie" with brilliant variations (Hertz) | MR. MARTIN- NANT. |

PART II.

| | |
|--|------------------------|
| OVERTURE, "L'italien de Alger" (Rossini) | BAND. |
| SOLO ON THE VIOLIN, "Auld Robin Gray" with variations (Przyger) | MR. MARTIN- NANT. |
| SONG AND CHORUS, "Oh Boys! Carry me Long" (Foster) | SERENADERS. |
| SOLO ON THE CLARINET, Diver- tissement Sur Les Motifs del opera <i>Lucrezia Borgia</i> . (Donizetti) and arranged by Mr. Perret with piano accompaniment | MR. L. PER- RET. |
| SONG, "Beautiful Star" with Piano accompaniment (Sayers) and sung by | MR. J. T. MOR- TON. |
| SOLO ON THE PIANO. "Capriccio in A." (Hertz) | MR. SWANSEGER. |
| SONG AND CHORUS, "Camptown Races"—(Foster) | SERENADERS. |
| SOLO ON THE VIOLIN, "Le Roi D. Yvetot" (N. Louis) with brilliant variations, and piano accompani- ment | MR. MARTIN- NANT. |

GOD SAVE THE QUEEN.

To commence precisely at half-past 8.

Figure 3. Concert announcement and program. *Times of India*, 18 December 1861, p. 3.

These three brief operatic mentions from 1861 show that among the British expatriate community of Bombay, there was both a familiarity with and desire to hear Western opera. What is missing, of course, are records of fully-staged performances. Many obstacles prevented the formation of an excellent company or regular seasons of operatic programming in India. Writing in 1865, one commentator noted the climate was a significant barrier to hearing great music on the subcontinent: “Nowhere else, in the British dependencies, if we except the Mediterranean, is there, for definite reasons, a more equable high temperature. No time is more favorable than the evening for the development of those soothing impressions of melancholy resignation and tenderness which it is so peculiarly the province of music to inspire” (*ToI* 3 July 1865:3). To cope with the climate, bands and orchestras increased their brass sections while limiting their winds and strings. In turn, orchestral and operatic works were perverted, morphed into martial expressions of might. The anonymous *Times* author asserts that they would love to hear the “airy flights of the Italian school as represented by Rossini, Donizetti, and the simple and intellectual Bellini,” but would rather not if too many brass players tainted the orchestra (*ibid.*).

Aside from concerns over instrumentation, performance venues were also lacking in Bombay; there were few places capable of hosting a fully-staged opera, or even large concerts. Most public performances had to take place outside or in smaller venues. These halls were not suitable for more extravagant productions or lavish enough to cater to the touring demands of prominent European performers. As the British became more comfortable with their position of power in India, their expected standard of living grew in tandem. They became unable to make do with performance practices of the past. As writers in the *Times* made clear, Indian orchestras had to live up to the standards set by their European counterparts to make expatriates happy with their living situations in Bombay (*ibid.*).

A political and cultural turning point came in 1876 when Queen Victoria became Empress of India. Even as the British brought India under formal control in June 1858, it was the passing of the Royal Titles act of 1876 and the Delhi Durbar of 1877 which made plain to Britons living at home and abroad that India was now part of the UK’s growing formal empire. By that time, entrepreneurs had erected larger performance spaces capable of hosting opera stagings; two prominent examples were the Grant Road Theatre and the Hall within the Framjee Cowasjee Institute. In 1878, both venues hosted performances of

the Royal Italian Opera company touring throughout India under the director of a man called Signor Cagli. The company first gave a series of concert performances at the Framjee Cowasjee Hall, about which the *Times* raved:

To those unaccustomed for sometime to anything but the ordinary dilettante singing, with its slovenly accompaniments, forced or exaggerated expression robbed from the time and the general expression it leaves of exertion and laboured study, the crisp time, facile execution, and properly modulated expression of some of Signor Cagli's artistes must prove a rare treat. (*ToI* 28 November 1878:2)

The article went on to describe how due to the success of the original concerts, the company was able to secure a temporary contract with the Grant Road Theatre to give a series of fully-staged Italian operas. In December, the company mounted what the *Times* called a "little season," which opened with Verdi's *Il trovatore* and closed with Donizetti's *La favorita* (*ToI* 2 December 1878:2; *ToI* 6 January 1879). Other highlights included *Don Pasquale*, *Ernani*, and *Lucia di Lammermoor* (*ToI* 13 December 1878:2; *ToI* 20 December 1878:2; *ToI* 30 December 1878:2). Advertisements for the season ran daily in the *Times*, with ticket prices ranging from one to five rupees (*ToI* 3 December 1878:1).

Reviews of these performances were mostly positive, noting that even if the prima donnas did not match the quality of singing at La Scala or Bayreuth, the operas were still the highlight of Bombay's cultural season. Some spectators, however, were not pleased that Italian opera was becoming so prominent. In a letter to the editor, one individual wrote:

I am very fond of music, and especially operatic music, but it is fearfully hard work to have to sit through a piece and to be utterly in the dark as to what the actors are arriving at until you read an account of it in the next day's paper. Italian is no doubt a beautiful language, but what is the good if you are not put in a fair position to appreciate it? I am not ashamed to confess that I don't speak Italian, nor understand a word of it when spoken, and no doubt nineteen-twentieths of the house are in the same position. (*ToI* 18 December 1876)

The author, calling him- or herself "Ignoramus," goes on to say that Bombay music shops no longer carry opera scores nor librettos, which just made the Italian operas much too challenging to understand; "Ignoramus" suggested a season of English opera or that the

Times should publish a short synopsis of each evening's opera before it occurred. The editor kindly replied that "the plots of most of the operas are so well known that it is scarcely necessary to reproduce them" (*ibid.*).

THE ITALIAN OPERA COMPANY.

The Bombay public will be pleased to hear that Signor Cagli's company of singers have made arrangements to give a series of Italian Operas at the Grant Road Theatre, beginning next Saturday. We have hitherto contented ourselves with merely a few passing remarks on the entertainments he has been giving us the last week, but now that we are to be regaled with elaborate performances, it is worth while to notice more fully the capabilities of this troupe. In Bombay we are accustomed to a good deal of amateur singing, much of which is above the average, and it needs an occasional visit, such as that of Signor Cagli's *virtuosi*, to recall to us the vast gap between the singing of even an accomplished dilettante and that of an ordinary professional. The world, and perhaps, too, the amateur also, will have it that talent of this sort is but a useful and pleasant social attribute, so that these performances degenerate into a pleading for the meaningless thanks of an appreciative after-dinner throng, whose voices—

"Low with fashion, not with feeling, softly freighted

"All the air about the windows with elastic laughter sweet."

The professional, who trusts to his voice for his living, must cultivate and use his advantages in a very different manner. To those unaccustomed for sometime to anything but the ordinary dilettante singing, with its slovenly accompaniments, forced and exaggerated expression robbed from the time, and the general impression it leaves of exertion and laboured study, the crisp time, facile execution, and properly modulated expression of some of Signor Cagli's artistes must prove a rare treat. We may mention, *en passant*, that not the least pleasing part of the performances has been the masterly way in which Signor Guarneri played the accompaniments, particularly, if we remember that through all the rippling merriment of Rissini's brilliant allegro passages, he had to sustain the double rôle of leader and follower.

Figure 4 (left). Excerpt from *Times of India* article announcing the Royal Italian Opera Company staying in Bombay for a small opera season. 28 November 1878, p. 2.

Figure 5 (below). Letter to the editor of *Times of India*. 18 December 1878.

THE ITALIAN OPERA COMPANY.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES OF INDIA.

SIR,—I have been several times to the operas, and have tried to enjoy them. I am very fond of music, and especially of operatic music, but it is fearfully hard work to have to sit through a piece and to be utterly in the dark as to what the actors are arriving at until you read an account of it in the next day's paper.

Italian is no doubt a beautiful language, but what is the good if you are not put in a fair position to appreciate it? I am not ashamed to confess that I don't speak Italian, nor understand a word of it when spoken, and no doubt nineteen-twentieths of the house are in the same predicament. But if I were made acquainted with the plot of the piece, so as to be able to follow the incidents of each scene with tolerable accuracy, the want of knowledge of the language would be easily got over. I should be in a better position to appreciate the performance and truthfully to applaud it. There seems to be none of the operas (music and words) obtainable at the music shops, could you not therefore take pity on my ignorance and arrange to publish in the paper each day before the performance a short description of the opera?

Dec. 16.

IGNORAMUS.

** The plots of most of the operas are so well known that it is scarcely necessary to reproduce them.—Ed T. or I.

There is little discussion of the audience makeup for these operas aside from a snide remark that the clothes worn by spectators got more elaborate the further up the boxes your eyes went (*ToI* 30 December 1878:2). The British expatriate public, which had been yearning for greater access to Italian opera and other hallmarks of European culture, was finally getting what it wanted.

These performances of European opera were occurring alongside other forms of theatrical entertainment, notably Parsi stage dramas. Throughout the Victorian era, there were many touring melodrama troupes that stopped in port cities such as Bombay where they performed European works for colonial elites, as well as some members of the Indian aristocracy. Eventually members of the Parsi community established their own companies, adapting canonic melodramas to better suit their Indian audiences (Hansen 2016:17; see also 2003, 2013). While opera existed alongside these art forms, Parsi theatre gained a much stronger foothold and established itself as the dominant stage genre of the Raj, at least in large cities. And yet there was a degree of cross-pollination; following the tours of opera companies, some Parsi theatre owners began to market their own productions as operas to profit from the hype and prestige of the foreign tours (Hansen 2016:24). Even as Parsi theatre and other hybrid forms of culture set down deep roots in Bombay, operatic culture in the city remained a game of imports, mirroring the situation in London (Rodmell 2013:8, 185).

Additionally, opera companies were competing against forms of popular entertainment. During the late nineteenth century, blackface minstrel shows became quite prominent in major cities around India. While these Indian minstrel shows were closer to the London versions than their American counterparts, the musical makeup contained the expected mix of parlor song, comic acts, and the occasional opera aria, though these opera numbers were frequently performed as parodies intended to negatively stereotype people with black skin (Shope 2016:36; see also Norris 2007). The popularity of minstrelsy relied, in part, on the genre's acclaim in London, though performers did frequently adapt their routines to reference local issues and stereotypes about Indian ethnic groups (Shope 2016:8). In this way, the genre was similar to opera, as through growing transnational entertainment circuits, British expatriates could keep abreast of fashionable music styles even while away from the metropole.

Expatriate elites were unreservedly willing to use their economic capital to make their home as comfortable as possible, even if that meant importing an operatic culture foreign to them, just like their brethren back in Britain. So while opera was never as popular as other forms of theatre in Bombay, the coverage of this “small season” in the *Times* makes it quite plain that opera had a foothold in India.

The Royal Opera House Then...

Demand for European opera in Bombay only increased during the *fin-de-siècle* as new venues capable of staging music dramas continued to spring up across the city.

International travel also became more accessible and stable; the rise of steamships and the standardization of the imperial railroad system made it possible for touring companies to stop in the area with more frequency and stay for extended periods (Headrick 1981).

For British expatriates, access to opera as a status symbol, was a way of asserting British identity even away from the metropole. Notorious for importing their music for centuries, Britons were doing the same even when divorced from the British Isles. The time had come for a space dedicated to opera performances in Bombay: the Royal Opera House.

Contemporary records of the space’s earlier days are scarce. Construction took place between 1909 and 1912, with King George V inaugurating the building in 1911 while in India for his Durbar. The earliest mention of the space in the *Times* came in 1911, though opera was not the spectacle mentioned: “A crowded attendance was present as the opening of Mr. Bandmann’s new Bombay theatre, the Royal Opera House, New Queen’s Road, on Saturday evening, to see the colored cinematograph pictures taken on the new system called kinemacolor” (*ToI* 10 July 1911:4). Kinemacolor, the first successful color motion picture process, only a few years old in 1911, was already making a splash in the Raj (McKernan 2013:100–104). Cinema first arrived in Bombay in 1896 and over the next two decades, an industry of Indian-created films sprung up across the city. Again, the Parsis were prominent in the development and circulation of these films in the early-twentieth century (Bose 2006:39–42). These early films did not have synchronized sound, but their technological novelty drew great crowds from across Bombay. As such, it is hardly surprising that a new hall like the Royal Opera House would showcase advances in film.

And yet, in this instance, we witness a collapse. For over a century, the British expatriate community was quite desperate for access to one of the triumphs of Western musical modernity, leading to the construction of a new hall dedicated to opera. By the time of the

Royal Opera House's construction, however, other media forms were becoming prominent. Even as builders outfitted the space with all the accoutrements of operatic modernity, such as a lowered orchestra pit, it was immediately forced to play catch-up and outfit itself for the performance of other art forms. In this way, the Royal Opera House is similar to many halls built in America during the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. These sites, invariably called opera houses, hosted a panoply of genres including cinema, theatre, and minstrelsy, and came to become a sort of community center (Condee 2004:4). Even London's Covent Garden, on occasion, served as a screening venue for films in the 1920s (Wilson 2019:104). The fact that the first mention of Bombay's Royal Opera House in the *Times* is not actually about operatic performance indicates that a similar multi-use aesthetic was at play here as well.

This disjuncture still leaves the question of why to label the hall an Opera House and what value that title carried. Chatterjee, speaking of the Indian nationalist context, argues that activists selectively chose elements of Western modernity and brought them into the fold of their political agenda (1989:240; see also 1993). A related negotiation with forms of modernity was occurring among the Britons in India at the same time. Expatriates, separated from the metropole, were continually forging their identity within not only their geographic space (the Indian subcontinent) but also the hierarchy of the British Empire. They were undeniably British, yet their displacement also marked them as Others in the pecking order of European sensibility, complicating the supposed binary opposition between metropole and colony (Stoler and Cooper 1997). In the nineteenth century, Western elites considered opera the marker *par excellence* of a European modernity, but at the dawn of the twentieth century, the art form was quickly becoming outdated in the eyes of many, prompting the rise of *verismo* (Wilson 2007; Schwartz 2009). By keeping the name "Opera House," the owners and patrons aligned themselves with the cosmopolitan capital and ideals of valorized European art forms. It was less about the actual performance of opera than it was about the aura of the access to opera and its connected Western cultural prestige. Both the Royal Opera House and British expatriates during the Raj exemplified the changing demands of "high culture" during the early-twentieth century, as well as how art forms shifted to meet the ebbs and flows of modernity.

Nevertheless, the Royal Opera House became a site of numerous operatic performances. Throughout the 1920s, the space hosted various touring companies from Italy, Germany, Russia, and the UK. These groups tended to perform the canonical bulwarks, though they were not afraid of breaking out of their national repertoires; one Italian company gave an

“enthusiastic” performance of *Carmen* (*ToI* 15 December 1924:7), and the Russian Grand Opera staged Gounod’s *Roméo et Juliette* (*ToI* 30 April 1920:10). The works of Puccini and Verdi seem to have been the most popular, along with operas featuring blatant themes of exoticism and cultural domination (e.g. *Carmen*, *Madama Butterfly*). Reviewers did not comment on audience reactions to these problematic aspects; discussions tended to focus on the quality of the performance rather than the opera as work. Performers even stretched generic labels at times. In 1929, the Royal Opera House hosted Santoro’s Italian Marionettes; they performed a series of tableaux drawn from opera, though the only work mentioned by name was Lehár’s *The Merry Widow*. A review described the event as “extremely clever, quite out of the ordinary run of entertainment,” noting that “the singing by a party of opera singers was very well done” (*ToI* 15 March 1929:10; see Figure 6).

MARIONETTE SHOW AT ROYAL OPERA HOUSE.

A FINE PERFORMANCE.

Santoro's Italian Marionettes show at the Royal Opera House on Thursday was extremely clever, quite out of the ordinary run of entertainments. The manipulation of the figures was much better than one usually expects from a show of this kind and caused much merriment in the audience. The singing by a party of opera singers was very well done.

The first item on the programme was a condensed version of the musical comedy “Merry Widow” which was much appreciated, and was followed by a tableaux, representing a scene in a Spanish town at the time of the Inquisition. The spirit of darkness gloats over the heavily chained spirit of light who by a supreme effort free herself from her fetters and eventually vanquishes darkness. The next tableaux shows Egyptian trumpeters playing the Excelsior Hymn followed by the dancers of the Ballett, who dance very well.

Figure 6. Excerpt from review of marionette performance. Source: *Times of India*, 15 March 1929, p. 10.

By the mid-1930s, however, the tide had shifted. The public's desire to see opera in Bombay was lessening and the Royal Opera House did not see the business it was used to during the 20s, partially due to the growing popular music and jazz market (Shope 2016; Fernandes 2012). This fading mirrored shifts in operatic practice in Europe, where critics saw the death of Puccini as a fundamental end of opera, a genre which, despite best efforts, failed to live up to the promises of the modern world (Wilson 2007:201). These changes happened alongside debates in 1920s Britain about the status of opera: was the genre too elitist? Should it remain a symbol of high culture—if it even ever existed as such (Wilson 2019)? Just like citizens in Britain, expatriates in Bombay were finding opera stuffy and too high-class—even as they were trying to project their own status as elites in India and beyond. These disagreements over the place of opera reflected a general dissatisfaction with high culture in the 1930s across Europe and among British opera goers living in India, a situation further complicated by the rise of new forms of entertainment, most notably film.

With the rise of synchronized sound in films during the late 1920s and into the 30s, music became an indispensable part of Indian cinema. Early examples drew mostly from the Parsi theatre tradition, but, as Anna Morcom describes, the mingling of Indian and Western musical traditions in cities like Bombay and Calcutta led to a form of hybridity in most *filmī*, which resulted in a style of music unique to the emerging Hindi cinema industry (2007:4–6). While it is impossible to pinpoint film as the sole—or even dominant—reason that opera never gained a stronger foothold in Bombay in the early-twentieth century, I am confident that this new form of entertainment and its technological wonders certainly attracted some spectators away from the opera house.

It bears mentioning that the British population in Bombay was becoming a smaller minority all the time. I have not been able to access any definitive records regarding the number of Britons in Bombay, but the 1931 Indian census notes that of the 1.25 million people in Bombay, 1.8% of the population was Christian, or around 22,840 persons (Shirras 1935: 436, 446). Of course, not all of these Christians were British and not all Britons were Christian, but these figures give some indication of the demographics of Bombay. Moreover, there were non-British communities in India deeply connected to Western forms of music-making. I have already mentioned the role of Parsis in theatre and film, and additionally there were the Goans, with strong connections to American popular music and jazz (Shope 2016). As most reviews of music performances do not discuss audience makeup, it is impossible to know what proportion of the opera audience was British and what was Indian, but in all likelihood, a significant and growing number

of audience members would not have been British—a major change from just fifty years earlier.

On February 6, 1936, the *Times* published a four-page “special supplement” documenting a series of renovations undertaken at the Royal Opera House which turned the hall into a single-screen cinema. To call this coverage a study in the marketing of new technology would be an understatement. The article outlines a brief history of the space, as well as the history of English dramatic arts in Bombay more inclusively. The author is careful to dispel any misconceptions about the place of the venue in the lives of *all* Indians:

For a long time a mistaken impression about the theatre seemed to prevail among a certain class of Indians. The belief seemed to be that the place was intended mainly for Europeans, and that the standard of entertainment was, to use a common by expressive American term, ‘highbrow’, or above the level of taste of the average entertainment seeker in an Indian city. From time to time the proprietor made efforts to dispel this misconception, to show that the Opera House was open to all decent theatre-goers., but such efforts were never entirely successful. The impression still lingered, and this of course affected the income of the theatre (*ToI* 6 February 1936:6; see Figure 7).

The ROYAL OPERA HOUSE
SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT

**RENOVATED ROYAL OPERA HOUSE
REOPENS TODAY**

The Story of the City's Chief Theatre

TODAY Bombay's Royal Opera House, fresh and resplendent after a thorough process of renovation, begins a new era as the city's largest and most elegantly appointed cinema.

supposed, were pretty rude "rig-ups." But we must not speak too disparagingly of them on that score. We must not forget that a certain young Englishman from Warwickshire, who went up to London in the days of Elizabeth, achieved great things in places where which no diarist of this period has left illuminating notes. But it is known, and it is an interesting fact, that the ground upon which the building stood was granted unconditionally by Government and vested in trustees. The theatre, it may be supposed, had no competi-

been in existence for 65 years and had never paid its way had now come to an end. Who after this experience would propose the building of another? Anyhow we may be certain that nothing was farther from the minds of those people who assembled at the Town Hall in 1858 to consider the disposal of the sum of money received from the sale of that bankrupt playhouse.

Whatever the method adopted, may have been, the money evidently was found, and for this fact we cite Mr. K. M. Katreji as an authority. He states that in 1860 the theatre was standing alone like an oasis in the desert." But this theatre too was not a success. A few years passed and it ceased to exist. The "oasis" had vanished.

Figure 7. Cover from Royal Opera House renovation special supplement. Source: *Times of India*, 6 February 1936, p. 6.

The article goes on to explain that because of the Royal Opera House's superb acoustics, it is the only hall in India capable of showcasing the "talkies" the way they were intended to be heard. Extended bits of prose outline the paint contractors, the Western Electric Sound System, and new acoustic corrective sold by The Asbestos and Belting Company. Peppered along the periphery of the article are numerous photographs showing the updated hall and its new additions, including the modern projection room. A full-page advertisement urges the public to see "3 teams of Brilliant Stars in the Grandest of All Musical Romances!" Also present is promotional material for neon lights, soundproofing, and other materials which would only be of interest to business owners in Bombay (ibid.: 5-8). The article does not discuss the decision to retain the space's name.

This spread makes clear that the Royal Opera House is a site of modernity, even if the cultural contents displayed inside changed: opera was out while talking cinema was in. But what *kind* of modernity was it, Western or Indian? Rajnayaran Chandavarkar advocates for an understanding of Bombay as always already modern. This unique state of being occurs through the city's constant restructuring in response to social, economic, and geographic change (2009:15-16). Chandavarkar does not mention the Royal Opera House, but the space's history falls squarely within his theory. So when one considers the general scope of the *Times* supplement, it becomes clear that the newspaper's editorial team wanted the public to think of Bombay as a city keeping up with European culture, all while catering to the needs of citizens on the ground. The construction of the Royal Opera House in the early twentieth century was one way in which British expatriates attempted to achieve this cultural desire, and the renovation of the hall into a cinema was merely taking that drive one step further. The space was a site of European opulence and musical class within the hustle and bustle of Bombay itself, while the designation "opera house" marked the terrain as one of a distinctly European version of modernity even as the contents shifted away from *prima donnas* to film stars.

...and Now

The Royal Opera House continued to function as a single-screen cinema for the next fifty years. By the 1970s and 80s, however, the multiplex had come into vogue and the hall faded from daily life, closing its doors for good in 1993. Conservation efforts sprung up in the mid-2000s when a group of architects in Mumbai submitted a preservation plan to the city's Urban Heritage Conservation Committee. Restoration began in 2008; the process was slow, but after the World Monuments Fund placed the hall on their list of endangered architectural sites, the pace picked up dramatically (Nair 2011). In 2016, builders completed interior renovations and the Royal Opera House Mumbai (as it is now

known) opened its doors for the first time in twenty-three years. In 2017, UNESCO honored the hall with a Cultural Heritage Conservation award (Kotak 2017).

The opera house's website proudly proclaims "We are a performance space and cultural venue par excellence. Widely touted as the city's Cultural Crown Jewel and India's only surviving Opera House, we are one of the last standing Baroque structures in Mumbai today" (Royal Opera House n.d.). This blatant colonial rhetoric would be telling on its own, but becomes more startling when coupled with the coverage of the restoration in news outlets across India. Pankti Kadakia of the *Hindustan Times* downplays the Royal Opera House's history in cinema, only mentioning how the space was converted in the 1970s to make it appropriate for art-deco cinema (2016). Mohua Dasi of the *Times of India* got closer to the factual history of the hall through a discussion of the space's cinematic past, though even this article stresses the need for a space for live performances in the heart of Mumbai, stating that since the Royal Opera House was converted into a cinema, there were no other appropriate places for theatre and Western music (2015). (I should note that the National Centre for the Performing Arts opened in Bombay in 1986, and contains five theaters capable of hosting Western music performances.) The most egregious error comes from NDTV; in a television spot on the renovation, the station contended that the first performance in the reconstructed hall was a concert by Bombay-born British soprano Patricia Rozario. NDTV failed to mention that the day before her concert of Western operatic arias the Royal Opera House hosted the Mumbai Academy of Moving Images Film Festival (2016).

I do not intend to suggest a level of malice or an intentional revisionist history on the part of these news organizations. It is quite telling, however, that throughout the history of the Royal Opera House, journalists attempted to raise the cultural value of the space through association with Western opera, all while arguing that the venue was open to all. Within twenty years of the site's construction, opera was not drawing crowds, but opera-as-concept remained via the space's name, connecting the hall to Western ideals of class. As others continually updated the space to meet the needs of modern performing ensembles and movie screenings, retaining the name "Royal Opera House" kept the hall in a static cultural state at the height of the Raj, where Western opulence and grandeur were essential for the city's European elite.

In a sense, there are competing modernities at the Royal Opera House Mumbai. On one hand, there is a version where a seemingly-lost form of Western modernity, still

celebrated throughout Europe as a symbol of class and intellect, is touted as having a historic home in India and needs to be supported. On the other hand, there is a uniquely Indian form of modernity present in film and cinema culture, a practice with a distinctive claim to the space. And yet, in almost all publicity material, administrators and journalists highlight opera and other forms of Western art music. In 2017, Asad Lallijee, Senior VP and CEO of Avid Learning (the curatorial group charged with running the Royal Opera House), described opera as a small but fervent “niche market” in India. Furthermore, site administrators made known that one of their primary goals was to promote opera, all while democratizing the genre and growing its market (BloombergQuint 2017). It is almost as if some perceive Western music as a global standard for “high art music,” even in light of the numerous classical traditions native to India. In an era of increasing globalization, the promotion of a universal standard takes on new meaning, one in which unity through diversity is not acceptable, but instead shared experiences and benchmarks are key. In this case, the advancement of Western opera in India becomes another way of bringing the nation to the West in an almost neocolonial fashion. For some in India today, it is not so much about the actual performance of opera as it is the *idea* that opera *could* be performed in the house.

Opera as performed and, even more importantly, conceptualized asserted much weight among British expatriates during the 350 years of British occupation in India; the genre continues to loom high in the minds of certain Indians to this day. Even after the genre lost its appeal as a marker of modernity to the expatriate elite, the Royal Opera House, a space designed explicitly for its performance, retained its status as a place of “high culture.” Through British colonial rule in India, opera and its clout became ingrained within a site in the center of urban India, even as the opera house’s ability to meet the needs of the city’s community points toward a unique form of South Asian modernity.

The role of Western art music outside of Europe and its impact on modern culture deserves more attention from musicologists, ethnomusicologists, and scholars of postcolonialism. A more in-depth consideration of opera in India and other colonial spaces would play a significant role in understanding the imperial experience from a multitude of angles, as well as inform the growing corpus of literature on global music history. This article barely scratches the surface of the story of opera in Mumbai. There is room for a more systematic reconstruction of programming decisions, as well as close readings of specific operas and their reception within the city. Opera, in its absence and presence, as performed and conceptualized, exerted an enormous influence on the life of Anglo-Indians on the subcontinent, and this influence persists to this day.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the numerous colleagues, mentors, and friends who helped with this article in its many forms: Gabrielle Cornish, Anaar Desai-Stephens, Lisa Jakelski, Mary McArthur, and Jane Sylvester. This project benefitted immensely from feedback received from colleagues in Anaar's Approaches to South Asian Music Seminar and the 2018 SEM Niagara Meeting. Additionally, I am thankful for the many useful comments from the anonymous readers from the journal.

Notes

¹ Among Europeans living in India, terms for national identity were quite fungible until well into the twentieth century. For example, it was not uncommon for British service members in the eighteenth century to call themselves "Indian." (See Colley 2002.) Throughout this article, I use the term "British expatriate" to refer to individuals of British heritage living in India. Here I follow the terminology put forward by Bradley Shope (2016).

² In this article, I refer to cities by their names during the period in question. Furthermore, as many of the *Times of India* articles cited do not have titles or have generic labels, I will provide dates and page numbers in citations.

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