Closer encounters

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Indian music and the west

Gerry Farrell

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In October 1902 Fred Gaisberg of the Gramophone and Typewriter Company Ltd (later to become EMI) set off to Calcutta to seek out and record Indian musicians. Knowing nothing of Indian music, he relied on a local theatre entrepreneur who led him to a performance of *Romeo and Juliet*, with sung interludes from

> a chorus of young Nautch girls heavily bleached with rice powder and dressed in transparent gauze. They sang 'And her golden hair was hanging down her back' accompanied by fourteen brass instruments all playing in unison.

The exasperated Gaisberg soon left, no doubt to the hurt bewilderment of his hosts, who had struggled to master the curious ways of Western music especially for his benefit.

This little comedy of mutual misunderstanding is typical of the West's encounter with Indian music, as Gerry Farrell's fascinating book makes clear. By the time Gaisberg arrived in India that encounter was already several centuries old, but the West was no closer to a genuine understanding of Indian music than it had been in the days of the East India Company. And yet this wasn't for want of interest. On the contrary, Indian music has always inspired in Westerners a fascination mingled with puzzlement and even disgust. Their response to that fascination, as Farrell explains, was deeply ambivalent. Fascination relies on mystery, and mystery cannot long survive a genuine encounter. As Farrell puts it, 'The East and all its works have to remain mysterious in order to retain artistic validity.' That encounter can be held at bay by converting the East into a gorgeous spectacle – a process famously described by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism*, an influential book to which Farrell pays hommage.

But music presents problems for the orientalism thesis; for one thing it cannot be easily possessed like a carpet or hookah (common items among the baggage of returning East India employees), and for another it cannot be so easily represented. To be represented, Indian music must first be notated (now that we have recording, this is no longer the case – which might help to explain why, in the late 20th century, we are in danger of retreating back to an orientalist fantasy). But the instant you try to notate a piece of exotic music, idle fascination must give way to real listening; which may be why, for Farrell, music-making is a privileged area that escapes the imperatives of colonialism.

> In the history of Indian music and the West, the genre of the Hindustani Air ... is an illustration of the way in which music functioned as a bridge between cultures, an aesthetic realm that operated outside wider political and economic structures.

It would be nice to believe that optimistic sentiment, but in fact the chapters Farrell devotes to the way Indian music was converted, first into the 18th-century domestic song known as the 'Hindustani Air', and latterly into parlour songs like 'Pale hands', prove rather the opposite. Indian music for home consumption remained strictly at the level of fantasy. By the early 20th century, 'in relation to the Orient, the Western distinction between the real and the imagined had become terminally blurred'. When the Sufi musician Inayat Khan travelled to America to proselytise for the spiritual value of real Indian music, he found himself playing in a backing band for the exotic dancer Ruth St Denis.

But that's only one side of the story. The other side – the investigation of genuine Indian music by Western musicology, and its eventual importation into the West, might seem to support Farrell's thesis better. The story of that investigation, carried out in many cases by traders or colonial administrators in their spare time, is fascinating. Sir William Jones is typical of this heroic breed; he took time off from his duties as a High Court judge to investigate Indian religion, languages and music. His book *On the musical modes of the Hindoos* of 1792 was the first serious attempt by a Westerner to understand Indian music, and it was marked by two preoccupations which would recur like leitmotivs for the next century and a half. One was the knotty question of how the microtonal shadings of indian music could be reconciled with Western notation; the other was the belief that the ancient Hindu forms of music, as enshrined in Sanskrit texts, had been corrupted by the Islamic culture of the Mughals. A hundred years later these were still the dominant concerns of Western musicologists (and Eastern ones too; the story of how Indian musicologists took on the mindset of Western ones is a poignant sub-theme in the book). Clements, the founder of the Philharmonic Society of Western India, was appalled at the state of Indian music at the turn of the century. 'Theory is practically non-existent. Correct intonation is only to be found practised by a few professionals, and they cannot impart their secrets, except by example.' How else would they impart them, we might well ask, knowing now that the oral tradition of Indian classical music, with its enormously long apprenticeship within a specific gharana, or family, is one its glories? But then Clements wasn't interested in living Indian music, any more than the writer of sentimental 'Hindoo' music-hall songs. Once again, a true encounter with the Other was avoided.

It's easy to adopt a superior smile

when reading about these well-meaning but basically wrong-headed approaches to Indian music. But as the later chapters of Farrell's book show outside a narrow circle of ethnomusicologists and aficianados, the West is no wiser now. Just as much violence is done to an Indian melodic pattern by its incorporation into a 60s rock song as was done, two hundred years ago, by its recomposition into a Hindustani Air. And the misunderstanding of rock's brief infatuation with Indian music was more than musical. When Ravi Shankar played in rock concerts he was appalled to see his young audience both stoned and engaging in, as he put it, 'indecent behaviour'. They, on the other hand, were convinced that 'tuning in and dropping out' was what Indian musicians did all the time. In the nineties, the orientalist fantasy of Indian has returned in the pop music of British Asian youth. 'Countryman', by the band Fun-da-mental, describes India as 'a land of waterfalls and coloured birds'.

The godess Sarasvati discovers a new medium of sound in the gramophone (EMI Music Archives, 1906; from Farrell: *Indian music and the west*)

Farrell confines his narrative to the English-speaking part of the West, which does lead to one or two surprising omissions. For example, there's no mention of the great French musicologist Alain Danielou, who directed UNESCO's pioneering recordings of Indian musics in the 60s, and who who worked out a highly individual theory of the North Indian raga system. But in every other respect the book is admirable. He recounts his tale of endlessly renewed misunderstanding with great deftness and insight, adding just enough anecdote and circumstantial detail to bring the narrative to life. He conveys the richness and complexity of his subject not by multiplying facts and footnotes – the normal method these days – but by a humane complexity of perspective, with none of the ideological stridency that the title might lead one to expect.

CD REVIEWS

Fun and games

DAVID BRUCE

Magnus Lindberg: Arena 2; Tendenza; Coyote blues; Corrente
Avanti! Chamber Orchestra/Sakari Oramo
Ondine ODE 882-2

Per Nørgård: Symphonies nos.4 and 5
Danish National Radio Symphony Orchestra/Leif Segerstam
Chandos CHAN 9533

Much of Magnus Lindberg's most recent music has a distinctly octatonic flavour, conjuring resonances with all the composers who have used that mode before, from Knussen back to Rimsky-Korsakov. Its employment by him is the latest in a long line of developments which have swept through Lindberg's style, from the early, spikey modernism (of which *Tendenza* (1982) here is an extremely fine example), through the spectral-inspired works of the 80s, to the neo-impressionist wafts of the Piano Concerto and *Aura* (1994). The scale provides both a solid support for the hectic of note-spinning Lindberg so favours, as well as an ability to draw out consonant but not tonal harmonies, with dominant sevenths particularly to the fore. The latter, of course, have been compositional currency for most of the century, but it also neatly ties in with the kind of approach to orchestration and vertical sonority Lindberg learnt from his studies with Gérard Grisey in Paris – in that spectral thinking is, inevitably, also very much concerned with the dominant seventh. The combination of the two techniques, particularly evident to my ear in *Arena 2*, produces music whose relatively traditional hue is lit up with extraordinary finesse by iridescent harmonic colour.

The three recent pieces on this disc, *Corrente* (1992), *Coyote blues* (1993) and *Arena 2* (1996) share a great deal in common in the way they move from moment to moment. Lindberg's is an extremely refined technique, so that even though one is aware of the *sort* of techniques he is using at any particular moment (be it heterophony, modal noodling or simpler homophonic progressions) one can rarely spot the joins, or work out *exactly* what is happening – especially as everything is flying by at such an incredible speed. This is the fun of Lindberg's music. It is, however, a game that one can only