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KEITH HOWARD

*School of Oriental and African Studies*

*kh@soas.ac.uk*

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**Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern: The Postcolonial Politics of Music in South India**

AMANDA J. WEIDMAN

Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2006

xv + 350 pp., ISBN: 0-8223-3620-0 (£23.95)

**From the Tanjore Court to the Madras Music Academy: A Social History of Music in South India**

LAKSHMI SUBRAMANIAN

Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2006

x + 196 pp., ISBN: 978-0-19-567835-2 (£19.99)

Three recent monographs argue from a set of positions rooted in contemporary postcolonial studies that Karnatak and Hindustani musical practices were selected, transformed and *made to be* classical in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The two studies reviewed here concern the recent social history of Karnatak music. The third (Bakhle 2005) assesses the role of two key figures in the transformation of Hindustani music during the same period and is not examined here.

Amanda Weidman and Lakshmi Subramanian implicitly distinguish the South Asian musical traditions codified in treatises over many centuries from what was selected for emphasis by contemporary practitioners and reformers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. ‘Classical’ music to both authors is not merely art music, but an art music legitimised by a hierarchical canon of compositions, by the recognition of individual composers and performers and by an appearance of being modern and scientific. Making music classical involved, in no small part, the efforts of a growing Indian middle class to define itself in relation to the British colonial establishment. ‘Classicalness’ in music projected both a sense of connectedness with ancient Indian (Hindu) origins and a modern sense of orderliness and refinement. Efforts at musical

reform, making some kinds of music classical, became closely entwined with nation building.

Weidman reads historical texts and images as a trained anthropologist, grounding her ethnography in interactions with her violin teacher, an eccentric inheritor of an antiquated violin style. Weidman's musicianship informs her fine readings of violin techniques and aesthetics; her style of argumentation is bold and declarative; her presentation of evidence leisurely and attentive to detail. Weidman's greatest strength is in the presentation of primary materials, both popular and technical, in Tamil. Her fluency in spoken and written Tamil makes her source analyses rich for the specialist and the general reader.

Subramanian, a social historian of Tamil descent, grew up immersed in the Karnatak musical culture of the Tamil-diaspora community in Calcutta. Subramanian's learned and engaging monograph reaches back further into Indian history than does Weidman's, but is less detailed. After a wide-ranging introduction and 'genealogy' of Karnatak music (a little less than a third of the book), Subramanian focuses mainly on the activities of the Madras Music Academy and on the Tamil language movement in a series of chapters entitled 'Defining the classical', 'Consolidating the classical', 'On the margins of the classical' and 'Contesting the classical'.

Where Weidman is declarative, Subramanian is interrogative; her questions engage broader debates in the field of Indian history. For instance, Subramanian takes cues from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century history-writing, which placed an increased emphasis on 'facticity, sequence, and... individual authorship' (5–6), to assess the degree to which Chinnaswamy Mudaliar, the Madras Academy and the Tanjore court were registering an attempt to establish a newer framework. This example also illustrates another difference between the authors: unlike Weidman, who asserts newness in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with little reference to evidence from earlier periods, Subramanian is more apt to address issues of continuity (see also 93).

The differences between an anthropologist and a historian treating a series of the same moments in Indian history are often subtle. The following example, however, brings the differences into relief. Subramanian describes the discourse on music and the performing arts in the early twentieth century as being derived from the larger project of Indian national self-discovery (14). She locates the roots of this in the establishment of the Madras branch of the Gayan Samaj in the 1870s, the aim being to preserve and transmit music to the middle class (15). Weidman focuses not on what the Gayan Samaj represented per se, but how, in 1989, the *vina* player S. Balachander used the published proceedings of the Gayan Samaj to call into question the authorship of compositions that had been attributed to the composer-king Swati Tirunal, and what this implied about changes in conceptions of what it meant to have one's name associated with a work (193–7).

Both authors thematise 'language' but in different ways. Subramanian's treatment is limited mainly to the Tamil music movement. Weidman subsumes language under

a larger notion of 'voice' that includes: 'the voice itself', the sound of the human voice as opposed to instruments, the capacity to speak, language and its politics, and transformations of vocal sound under the impact of recording and broadcasting technologies. Using the master trope of voice, Weidman makes these subtopics speak to each other interestingly, if at some points confusedly.

In one passage, Weidman suggests that the 'logic' of an 'anxiety that the voice will be lost *if not captured* by writing' contradicts the logic whereby the 'voice could be lost precisely by being *completely captured* by writing' (242). The contradiction is only apparent, however, if the former 'voice' represents musical content (e.g. a piece or theory in a treatise) and the latter, oral tradition as a locus of Indian music's identity and authority. It is possible that the contradiction derives from Weidman's use of the term 'voice'. This is unfortunate, for it detracts from the important point of the passage, that the English language conferred authority on the 'orality' of Indian tradition.

'Indigenous Indian classical music', for Weidman, is an idea that emerged in the twentieth century as a result of a 'politics of voice' that pitted Indianness against Westernness. The 'voice' stood for oral tradition, originality, humanity and tradition; as opposed to notation, reproduction, mechanisation and modernity (5). South Indians did not opt in a simple way to cling to the 'Indian' side of this set of oppositions; they developed a sense of what was the voice, what was traditional, as they interacted with others, especially colonial and modern others (an argument similar to that in Irschick 1994). The idea that the English language conferred authority on the 'orality' of Indian tradition is part of this larger interactionalist argument.

Weidman's analyses of interactions are particularly insightful and detailed with regard to notation and instruments. The fluid, syllabic notations of the Indian past, some felt, were inadequate when compared with the 'scientific' notations of the West; and yet, that very contrast is what allowed South Indians to foreground their melodies ('voice') as Indian, as escaping exact representation. Regarding instruments, Weidman shows how the violin, entering the Indian realm in the mid-eighteenth century, became a tool for defining the ideal physical voice of the performer on stage in the twentieth century. It provided an externalised model for unsegmented melodic movement (unlike the *vina*); and a loud and accurate accompaniment to the singer, articulating melodic gestures sometimes more clearly than the singers could themselves.

Subramanian largely upholds Weidman's views on the violin, but points out that the discourse on the tradition of *nagasvaram* (double-reed aerophone) as a referent to the voice was equally important at that time (103). Both studies could be criticised for failing to acknowledge substantially the long history of attention to the problem of vocal-versus-instrumental production by Indian writers, theorists and philosophers. Instruments appear in early literature as 'little more than a tool', according to Lewis Rowell. Early authors used human vital breath (*prana*) to connect the 'universal substratum of sound' with 'individual musical sounds' (Rowell 1992, 40). These

abstractions of voice could be read against what Weidman describes as ‘the ideal of a voice that came naturally from within, unmediated by performance of any kind’ in the mid-twentieth century (116).

Often-cited examples from South Indian musical history treat the theme of what happens when an instrumentalist attempts to imitate the human voice. The twelfth-century *Periyapurānam*, for example, describes the so-called *yal*-breaking *pans*—melodies too complex and fluid to be accommodated by a harp (see Ayyangar 1972, 54). The Mamandur inscriptions of the seventh century describe the interactions of a *parivadini* (harp) player and vocalist (Lockwood and Bhat 2001). Both of these sources represent interactions that ‘stage’ the voice (and instruments), in Weidman’s terms, from much earlier periods. One might also question the degree to which the ‘new’ discourse on voice was shared in the emergent national period. T.N. Ramachandran argued in the 1930s that the Mamandur inscription described the *vina* as a model for the voice, rather than the reverse (Lockwood and Bhat [2001] dispute Ramachandran’s interpretation). Such a prominent art historian, active early in the twentieth century, might have been expected to use this ambiguous passage to support a primordialist position on the voice, but he did not. Weidman did not present such contrary evidence. I found myself wishing for Subramanian’s questioning of what ‘new’ meant as I read Weidman’s assertions about the emergence of a ‘new’ conception of voice in twentieth-century south India.

The idea that India and the West share a unitary modernity linked by colonialism is central to Weidman’s argument. In her view, this modernity gave rise to the modern idea of classical music in both parts of the world (288). In resisting the possibility that India’s modernity could be ‘alternative’, Weidman avoids the pitfall of assuming the existence of ‘real’ modernity against which the Indian version should be compared. However, in not granting difference, she also devalues the idea that anything like ‘culture’ could persist through time other than as a colonially infused gaze upon the past. The assumption of a single modernity also allows Weidman to apply theories of modern selfhood (Taylor 1989), nationalism (Chatterjee 1993), colonialism and modernity (Mitchell 1988; Mitchell 2000) to matters of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries without considering the extent to which the processes described are versions of what has come before.

Subramanian’s attention to the earlier history of Indian music and pre- and early modernity in India continually allows the reader to assess the degree to which colonial modernity represents rupture or continuity. Subramanian positions her discussion in the context of current debates about early Indian modernity as a ‘period’ or a ‘conceptual framework’. Like Weidman and others, she locates modernity in moments of interaction, citing the cabinet of Tanjore Maharaja Serfoji (r. 1798–1832) as an example of ‘new modes of engagement with science and art mediated by the growing interactions with Europeans’ (7).

One place in which Weidman’s single-modernity approach falters is in reference to Timothy Mitchell’s notion of ‘enframing’. In this ‘essential element of the colonial gaze’, time and space are divided ‘into exact and precisely repeating units that seem to

exist independently of what they contain' (Weidman 211; Mitchell 1988, 85–6). Weidman uses this idea to contrast Chinnaswamy Mudaliar's musical notations, which employ the 'uniform spaces provided by the staff', with the more differentiated idea of time provided by *tālā*, hand gestures, and so forth. There is no question that these two notations do different things. However, 'enframing' in these abstract terms is neither colonial nor new to Indian musical thinking. Richard Widdess amply demonstrates the tendency for Indian writers to represent music in a 'tabular format' dating back to the very first extant notations of the seventh century (1995, 92); the fact that these grids mean different things in different sources only serves to underline the fact that 'enframing' has important roots in Indian musical representations. Aside from the specific origin of staff notation in the West, was Mudaliar's enterprise entirely colonial? Are we left with a tautology, whereby Mudaliar's enterprise differs from what came before only because it is, to use Subramanian's words, 'guided by the imperatives of modern identity politics' (34)?

Weidman devotes an entire chapter (192–244) to arguments about the use of notation, the development of the idea of a modern composer, and to issues of *rāgā* theory attendant on fixing knowledge in written form. These are rich and informative sections of the book. Subramanian leads the reader quickly through some of the same points. She touches on notation occasionally (e.g. 93–9), provides verbatim quotations from those actively 'consolidating the classical' in the early days of the music academy (84–110), and arrives at conclusions similar to those of Weidman. Both authors foreground the importance of Tyagaraja (1767–1847) as a model of the classical. For Subramanian, the quest for authentic versions of Tyagaraja's compositions (correcting 'imperfect' versions when necessary) (91) was linked with a project of constructing 'an acceptable heritage for the nation'; this entailed 'artistic and social engineering' and foregrounding the 'spiritual functions' of music (72–3). Related to the emphasis on single composers, Subramanian and Weidman also both argue that classical sensibility involved a focus on the individual soloist and a de-emphasis on percussion (Subramanian 101; Weidman 102).

A few technical matters pertaining to Subramanian's book should be mentioned here. First, at least one of Subramanian's chapters was published in nearly the same form as an article elsewhere, but nowhere is this acknowledged in the text. Second, the book reads as a series of separate articles, whether or not they were published as such. More could have been done to knit the parts of the book together and remove redundancy. Third, the copy editing is exceedingly poor; several undecipherable run-on sentences and many sentences in which a comma separates the subject from its verb make careful reading slow-going and frustrating.

The implications of these works (along with Bakhle's) extend beyond India or Indian music. The question of what motivates societies, or societal subgroups, to codify repertoires, to select styles to stand for a nation or people, and to argue about these questions, heatedly, at particular historical moments, remains a ripe one for further cross-cultural consideration. Complementary studies might detail, for example, the micropolitics associated with the rise of the *radif* of Mirza Abdollah

in nineteenth-century Iran—multiple colonialisms were at play as today’s Iranian ‘classical’ music began to assume its modern form. Another approach would be to reach beyond obvious colonial situations and classical music repertoires. According to David Hughes (1992), some so-called ‘folk songs’ (*min’yo*) in Japan, such as ‘*Esashi Oiwake*’, have come to be regarded as ‘classical’. Emphasis on accurate transmission, establishment of authoritative notations and the attempt to raise the status of the art through bowdlerisation are but a few of the processes that we also recognise in the development of modern Indian classical music. Comparison will, hopefully, loosen some of the entrenched positions certain postcolonial writings have bequeathed to scholars writing on music.

I assigned both of these books for a recent seminar on South Indian classical music and have also used articles by both authors that were eventually included as chapters in these books. The writings generated considerable enthusiasm among the students and without question comprise some of the more interesting and challenging scholarship to emerge on South Indian music in recent years. I recommend them without reservation, and ideally as a pair, for advanced students and specialists alike.

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RICHARD KENT WOLF  
Harvard University  
rwolf@fas.harvard.edu

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