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Book review:

Pritchard, M. orcid.org/0000-0003-3534-0956 (2024) Review of: *Songs of Tagore: poetry and melody* by Rabindranath Tagore and Satyajit Ray, edited and translated by Ananda Lal, Abingdon, Routledge, 2023, x+225 pp., £120.00 (hardback)/£29.24 (ebook), ISBN 9781032222875. *Ethnomusicology Forum*. ISSN 1741-1912

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17411912.2024.2363518>

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Songs of Tagore: Poetry and Melody, by Rabindranath Tagore and Satyajit Ray, edited and translated by Ananda Lal, Abingdon, Routledge, 2023, x+225pp., £120.00 (hardback)/£29.24 (ebook), ISBN 9781032222875.

It seems to be the fate of some cultural figures to always need reintroducing to an international audience, never being able to rely on a reputation established once and for all. One such figure is the Bengali polymath Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), a selection of whose songs is introduced here by the Kolkata theatre scholar Ananda Lal. The book's preface registers 'the need of an introduction in English to Tagore's songs', for a 'lay readership' as much as for academics, and, rightly if hopefully, with an eye to future musical and theatrical practitioners (viii). Ethnomusicologists may know other members of the extended Tagore family, such as the music theorist Sourindramohan Tagore (1840-1914), while not necessarily knowing (much) of Rabindranath; meanwhile those who still read Tagore's *Gitanjali* in English, or who had a chance during his 150th anniversary celebrations in 2011 to take in exhibitions of his painting or the popular play *The Post Office* ('Dāk Ghar', 1912), may have no point of access to his more than 2000 songs, known as *Rabindrasangit*. *Songs of Tagore* is not the introduction to Tagore's musical work I would recommend first for a newcomer: that remains Reba Som's musical biography (2009). What Prof. Lal's volume primarily offers is a selection of transcriptions and translations, together with accessory material that allows the reader to get to grips with many of the issues involved in realising the music from the printed page. This is not a quandary arising solely from old-fashioned ethnomusicological beliefs in transcription: these transcriptions are from original Bengali scores, the 64 volumes of the *Svarabitān* or collected melodies of *Rabindrasangit* issued by Tagore's estate in Bengali *ākārmātrik svaralipi*, which were employed for decades as an authoritative (and often dogmatic) point of reference in adjudicating performers' fidelity to tradition. *Rabindrasangit* is a music already mediated in its essence by print. Staff notation editions of Tagore's songs with accompanying translations do already exist, going as far back as the fastidious work of Arnold Bake (1935); perhaps the largest reliable such collection is that issued by the Sangeet Natak Akademi for the poet's centenary (Tagore 1961). But given the sheer extent of the corpus, there is plenty of room for more – especially if they are accompanied, as this collection is, by useful prefatory material and germane notes to the translations.

One of the two features that particularly mark the present volume out is the awareness it cultivates in the reader of the critical issues involved in transcription and performance of *Rabindrasangit* – an endeavour pursued to still greater lengths in Lars-Christian Koch's monograph (2012). Tagore asked for a degree of melodic fidelity in renditions of his songs that was virtually unprecedented on the subcontinent, and in later life began to train a whole cohort of (mostly female middle-class amateur) performers as one way to realize this end. The other way was through notation, but here his access was problematically mediated. Tagore found it impossible to write melodic inspirations down himself and instead required amanuenses to produce scores for him. The possibility of varied misrepresentation and error was significant – not to mention that of Tagore simply changing his tune from one rendition to the next. Sitansu Ray, former head of the music department at the university Tagore founded, Visva-Bharati in Santiniketan, once highlighted to me in conversation the scope for Tagore's scribes to mistake the *sā* or tonic of the melody, thereby completely undermining its sense: he suspected several *Rabindrasangit* had been subject to such misunderstanding. A footnote in the volume under review points to the work done by Saumyendranath Tagore and Devajit Bandyopadhyay to expose the questionable practices of the *Svarabitān*'s posthumous editors, who regularly dismissed alternative readings or simply changed the music, in both cases without explanation (17, note 33). However important it has been historically, the result cannot be called a critical edition. To say that, for songs existing only in the *Svarabitān* version, 'that score assumes a

position of authority like that of Shakespeare's dramatic texts' (17), is a more ambiguous statement than it might seem: no text, however 'authoritative', exists without interpretive context.

To shed light on that context in such a way as to illuminate even the tiniest crevices of ornamentation is a challenging endeavour – but one that is furthered by the inclusion here in translation of one of the major pieces of late twentieth-century *Rabindrasangit* criticism, Satyajit Ray's '*Rabindrasangite bhābbār kathā*' (1967) or 'Thoughts on *Rabindrasangit*' (chap. 2, pp. 25-49). In one passage Ray picks apart the note-by-note differences between three contemporary transcriptions of one of the most famous Western-influenced songs by Tagore, '*Ami chini go chini tomāre*'. Yet mingled with critical insight come interesting hints of cultural prejudice. Ray calls Sarala Devi's notation of one phrase 'English and un-Rabindrik' (p. 42, *rabindrik* meaning 'Tagoresque', a phrase loaded with normative connotations in the Bengali context), thereby implicitly conjoining two undefended judgements – that the 'special quality...in all of Rabindranath's compositions from the first to the last is their Bengaliness' [*bāngālitva*] (30, translation altered) and that what was English (or European) could form no true part of what was Bengali – as if the Raj had had no consequences for Bengali identity. (For an alternative take on how Western tonal thinking affected Tagore's practice as a melodist, see Sen 2018.)

The same defensive concern for purity of taste affects reflections on *Rabindrasangit* performance, the need felt by Ray to buttress this music's essence against the 'mediocre' commercial singers who dominate its public presentation (40). Scores serve a function here, argues Ray, enforcing a certain level of fidelity: but they do not indicate tempo, which judged by recordings has become on average significantly slower over time, or accompaniment, which has become heavier, less traditional – and more innovative. What accompanying instruments should be 'allowed'? Ray recommends not just those of classical *dhrupad*, *pākhawāj* and the Bengali *esrāj*, but also where appropriate the *khol* or the *dotārā* of Bengali *kirtan* and *bāul* song (46-48); he cannot abide the Hawaiian guitar which had recently become fashionable, whereas Lal endorses the use of electric guitar. Ray's own films beautifully demonstrate the potential of reduced accompaniment, *khāli golāy* (a cappella) or with tanpura: listen to '*Bāje karuno sure*' from *Teen Kanya*, '*E parabāse robe ke*' from *Kanchenjunga* or '*Bājilo kāhāro binā*' from his superb last film, *Agantuk*. But recent directors have used a much richer and more modern sonic palette, with rock and electronic colours blended into Q's *Tasher Desh* (2012) without necessarily sacrificing sensitivity to the *ras* or flavour of the individual song. There are no 'rules' or fixed standards here, only a persistent and unresolvable anxiety over the cultural and class politics of performance – a sentiment whose history has been traced in exemplary fashion by the contemporary *Rabindrasangit* singer and scholar Sahana Bajpaie in her recently completed PhD thesis at King's College London.

The other issue highlighted by *Songs of Tagore* is the importance of theatre and theatrical context for *Rabindrasangit*. The songs selected all belong to three plays, none of them designated by Tagore as *gītīnāṭya* (lit. song dramas) or *nrīṭyanāṭya* (dance dramas), but nevertheless permeated by song: *Rakta-karabi* (Red Oleander), *Tapati*, and *Arup Ratan* (Formless Jewel). Lal's translation of all three (Tagore 2001) should be consulted for the full narrative and interpretative context. The two books together give the Anglophone reader a full picture of these works, which is undeniably an advantage, though one also senses a chance missed to disseminate other works from Tagore's theatrical oeuvre. (As a more pedantic point, the present volume also does not quite include 'all the songs' from the three plays (22), evidently because the one missing song, '*Tor prāner ras to sukiye gelo ore*', from *Rakta-karabi*, exists only as text without melody.) The Tagore family's connection with the stage began before Rabindranath, with his elder brother Jyotirindranath and cousin-in-law Swarnakumari both important early influences on his musical-dramatic development in the genre of *gītābhīnāy*

(21). It remains surprising, however, quite how pervasive this theatrical inspiration was throughout Rabindranath's career: Lal cites Devajit Bandyopadhyay's figure of over 700 songs composed for plays of various kinds, nearly a third of Tagore's entire output (22). Often *Rabindrasangit* lovers and even performers are unaware of the original theatrical context for some of their favourite songs – a situation less likely to arise with Hindi film song, for instance. That context can often shed light on not just the meaning but sometimes even aspects of the intended performance approach to the song in question. 'O je māne nā mānā' from Act II Scene 4 of the play *Prayaschitta* ('Atonement') is introduced by the character Ramchandra who, having had enough of the pining sentiment of the scene's opening number 'Nā bale jeyo nā chale', explicitly requests his musicians to 'strike up a fast rhythm' (*ektā jalad tāl lāgāo* – Thākur 1909: 40) – and yet the two songs are commonly taken by modern performers at almost the same (slow) tempo. Ironic humour – a sudden reversal of perspective undermining the initial mood of romantic longing – is equally important to the contrast between the two songs, something missed in their separate performance. Indeed, it is often missed entirely in the canonical Bengali picture of Tagore as composer, which emphasises the serious, reflective and spiritual aspects of his work to the detriment of lighter notes. That suggests that an attempt to present a more rounded image of his musical achievement might do well to begin with his works for the stage – many of which also happen to deal with thoroughly contemporary themes of environmentalism or struggles against class and gender prejudice. Lal's translations are, as he himself suggests, a starting point for practical adaptation (23). Though never unfaithful, they are occasionally awkward and lack the flair of an established literary translator such as William Radice – though Radice has not tackled the challenge of rendering songs as verse. What is most needed at this point is not only more translations, literal or otherwise, but also their incorporation into sensitive and innovative transcultural productions of Tagore's musical plays. While such a project has the power to give Tagore's music a lasting global reputation, it evidently exceeds the duties of an academic editor. We can only hope it will one day receive the practical support it urgently requires.

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