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REVIEW: RECORDING

Calcutta 1789: À la croisée de l'Europe et de l'Inde

Christopher Palameta and Notturna

ATMA Classique ACD22831, 2023; one disc, 64 minutes

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At supper the saloon was superbly lighted, and the table sumptuously covered...a band of music was introduced, which played all the evening. I was requested to favour the company with a song (vocal music being highly esteemed by the *Calcutonians*); and so anxious were the gentlemen to discover whether I had a voice tuned to melody, or not, that doubt and expectation sat on each countenance. I dispelled their doubts...and have bound myself by a solemn promise, to [perform] on each succeeding evening. A jingling of unaccustomed sounds to my ears now interrupted my eulogiums... The *notch-girls*...sang lively and tender compositions alternately, as was apparent by the movement of their eyes and hands, but to me otherwise unintelligible; danced with good effect; and, I could perceive, were well-rewarded. After which, the night being particularly fine, we were instantly conveyed in our palanquins to the Company's gardens... (Anon., *Hartly House, Calcutta*, ed. Monica Clough (London: Pluto, 1989 [1789]), 43-4)

So writes Sophia Goldborne, the heroine of an anonymous epistolary novel published in the very same year invoked in the title of the recording under review, describing typical musical entertainments among Calcutta's colonial classes. Elsewhere in the book we are given more detail of a concert 'performed in a grand hall' including two items by Handel (*Alexander's Feast*, or an extract from it, and 'the' Coronation Anthem, presumably 'Zadok the Priest') as well as the overture to Arne's *Artaxerxes* (*Hartly House, Calcutta*, 102-3). The peculiar contours of 'Anglo-Indian' period taste already begin to emerge from these two fictional, but entirely plausible occasions – and they are reflected in this finely executed and thoughtfully conceived collection offered by the historical oboist Christopher Palameta and his chamber ensemble Notturna.

The most adventurous side of the recording, prompting the addition to Notturna of Uwe Neumann on sitar and Shawn Mativetsky on tabla, is the selection of 'Hindustani airs' – a genre whose incongruous title very much belongs in quotation marks. As a series of scholars from Ian Woodfield and Gerry Farrell to Nicholas Cook have explored, the 'Hindustani air' was one of the most fascinating, and at times problematic, intercultural species of music to come out of early modern colonial encounters. Its evolution encompassed various stages, two of which are represented here. One is the transcription of Indian vocal music on the spot by an enthusiastic, usually female British musician (in this case the Benares-based Margaret Fowke, producing the 'air' entitled 'Sakia' that opens the album). The other is its regularization and publication with an eye to the European music market as in William Hamilton Bird's *Oriental Miscellany* (1789), from which numbers 13 and 15 (a *terana* and *rekhtah*) are performed here by Notturna, rearranged for ensemble by Palameta from Bird's keyboard pieces. As Katherine Schofield has pointed out (see <https://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/2018/06/sophia-plowden-khanum-jan-and-hindustani-airs.html> and the accompanying podcast), Bird's *rekhtahs* were really ghazals or poetic *rubai(yat)*, lyrical quatrains, and with some detective work she was able to locate their Persian-Indian originals: the form, at least, overlapped serendipitously with the ternary or rounded binary form of a European 'air' or keyboard dance movement.

That single correspondence aside, it is hard to recognize Bird's products as per se anything but rather odd European galant miniatures. Little indicates their Indian origin other than the curious omissions and contortions they contain, from lack of harmonization, irregular phrase structures and fermatas to occasional changes of mode. These are documents of an aural and cultural struggle for understanding, European musicians '[doing] their best with the means available to document elusive sounds that would not readily conform to existing Western paradigms', to cite the accompanying booklet (15). (A more accurate characterisation of those sounds remains somewhat elusive here too, it must be noted – the use of 'quarter tones' mentioned by Palameta is more a characteristic of Middle Eastern and Persian traditional music than an analogy to the variable Indian *sruti*, and 'frequent and "wild" modulations' is the exact opposite of the subcontinent's drone-rooted approach to melody, though it may capture something of how this was perceived by European listeners.) A creative approach is needed to restore some of the colour drained by these pieces' uncomfortable adaptation to Western notation and style – whether the free structure incorporating space for a tabla solo on 'Sakia' (see Jane Chapman's introductory raga-based preludes in her recording of the *Oriental Miscellany* (Signum SIGCD415)), or the use of sitar to add back in the nuanced ornamentation whose fluidity could not be conveyed on the page through any number of mordents and acciaccaturas.

Leaving the excitement and frustration of intercultural encounter behind, the other and more enduring side of British musical life in Calcutta was its conservatism: a fidelity to Handel, Purcell, Corelli and what was known as 'ancient' music of the period between 1680–1750, shared among others by the adventurous young Margaret Fowke's 'crusty' father Joseph and Lord and Lady Clive (Ian Woodfield, *Music of the Raj* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 133–4). The present disc includes two Purcell songs given instrumental arrangements, 'If Love's a Sweet Passion' and 'Fairest Isle' from *King Arthur*, and three Handel numbers, 'Ahi perché, giusto ciel' from *Rodelinda*, 'Will the sun forget to streak' from *Solomon*, and 'Falsa imagine' from *Ottone*, all of which were taken from a book of 1786 arrangements known to have belonged to the Tanjore maharaja Serfoji II. Both at home and abroad, 'ancient' music did some of the cultural work performed later by 'classical music', reinforcing class hierarchy and resisting commercial fashion, as well as granting space for the affective reinforcement of masculine British imperial values (Woodfield, *Music of the Raj*, 130). In practice, particularly at the colonial margins, its perceived authenticity and musical solidity could be undermined by ubiquitous practices of arrangement – John Walsh's Quartet in G major 'My Song Shall Be Alway', a less-than-skilful composite of Handel movements, being one example, here somewhat cleaned up from its original published version. Establishment taste could not completely shut out the latest products of the European music industry from Calcutta, however. Their more up-to-date style is represented on *Calcutta 1789* by three quintet movements (from op. 22 nos 1 and 2) by J.C. Bach, and a first recording of Carl Friedrich Abel's Oboe Quartet in B flat major op. 12 no. 5, works that contain effective minor-tinged modulatory sections juxtaposed with the conventional elegance of their principal material. Rounding off the album is one more Purcell movement, the Rondeau from *The Indian Queen* presented now – in a nice integrative gesture to the foregoing 'Hindustani airs' – with tabla accompaniment and a sitar postlude.

Indeed the presence of the two Indian classical instrumentalists in the recording as a whole might even seem *too* well-integrated – highlighting by contrast the risk that Margaret Fowkes and her contemporaries were taking as they crossed cultural boundaries. Little of that risk is palpable here: the gap between European eighteenth-century styles of ornamentation, so beautifully exemplified in their pure form by Palameta in the *da capo* of 'Falsa imagine', and that of Hindustani classical music is smoothed over through skilful arrangement and blending of timbres, leaving no space for the Baroque specialists to challenge themselves with the imitation of North Indian phrasing (as Yehudi Menuhin so famously did on the original 1967 'West Meets East' foray of the recording era). If that should be counted as a criticism, it is in any case a small one in the context of a superbly professional package, distinguished by excellent recording quality, buoyant playing and brisk tempi balanced with

melodic clarity and invention. The more substantial Bach and Abel movements are likely to be the highlight for most listeners, but the tightness of ensemble and Palameta's smooth, rounded tone are a pleasure throughout.