Travels of musical notes: Memories of Mozart and “Jay ho!”

Madhuja Mukherjee  
Jadavpur University

Abstract

This paper discusses the composition “Itna na mujhse tu pyaar badhaa” and the networks of memory and flow that are related to it. Created by the Indian composer-musician Salil Chowdhury for the film Chhaya (1961), this song entered the Indian popular domain to become an iconic composition that in a self-conscious way popularised Western-classical notes. While the uses of clarinets, strings and flutes have a longer history in Indian films, Chowdhury’s music underscored its influences. In my understanding, the contemporary composition “Jay ho!” (from Slumdog millionaire, 2008), by the Academy Award winner musician-composer A.R. Rahman, rearranges Chowdhury’s song on a different musical plane, which is then followed up in the song (and music video) of the Pussycat Dolls. The thrust and the hook of the Pussycat Dolls number seems to be that it has reworked the idea of “Bollywood” music for global listeners. This paper tries to study such displacements, journeys and questions of authorship, as well as the role of technology in reception and the function of the musician within this contested terrain. The primary questions that come up concern the problems of memory and forgetting of certain musical notes, and the origins and passages of these notes. Moreover, the processes through which certain musical patterns enter popular culture to lose their identity and become a part of something that may be totally different are crucial here.

Keywords: Indian film-music; musical compositions; memory; popular domains; reception.
THE NETWORK OF NOTES

The framework of this essay emerges out of a series of recorded interviews – of music composer Prabudha Banerjee (2010) and professor Amlan Dasgupta (2011), Jadavpur University, Kolkata - which have been juxtaposed with a series of texts and audio-visual clips to examine the ways in which musical notes travel across disparate zones of time and space to transform the very materiality of the musical object. The aim of this essay is to explore the processes of music-making in the context of Indian cinema and its varied modes of reception, which has become further complicated through media convergences (including the growing overlaps of music television cultures, downloading practices of disparate music, and changes in listening habits which include uses of portable music systems and media players), new media practices and digital tools. In a context where a pool of (mostly mutated and undefined) sound elements becomes available to us, a particular composition may not in popular parlance be associated with a single condition or any specific “original” text. Moreover, this variegated range of disparate sounds competes with the density of the everyday soundscape. It is within this network of fragmentary associations that I contest the question of “authorship”, especially in the context of popular (Indian) cinema and public cultures, in order to examine the manner in which, within specific historical conditions, the memory of certain tunes is reproduced, received, and re-circulated. The composition that encouraged such an enquiry is Mozart’s *Symphony No. 40 in G minor, KV. 550*, which was rearranged by the maverick Indian composer Salil Chowdhury for the film *Chhaya* (1961), as well as in later reformulations in films such as *Tridev* (1989) and in a more recent instance the famous number “Jay ho!” from *Slumdog millionaire* (2008).

In this attempt to study the modes of borrowing, transportation and transformations of Mozart’s composition, I consider four crucial moments in the history of Indian popular cinema and music cultures: firstly, the crucial moments of the 1940s, the cultural movements of the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA, the Left cultural platform) during this period, and the post-Independence era, when the (inter) national-modern question was important; secondly, the 1960s, or the “golden era” of Indian (film) songs, when their popularity soared high through the marvellous singing of the playback singers and their mass dissemination through radio; thirdly, the cassette boom in the 1980s, the technological revolution and the availability of tapes as well as locally-made cheap cassette players, which ushered in the mass character of music consumption in India; finally, the post-globalisation era, instances of media convergence and the function of Bollywood, which reveal the density of the terrain.

It is within this network of meaning that Salil Chowdhury’s song “Itna na mujhse tu pyaar badhaa” (“Don’t love me as much”) from the film *Chhaya* becomes imperative. Based on Mozart’s *Symphony No. 40*, this song entered the Indian public domain to become an iconic composition that in a self-conscious way negotiated Western classical notes. My study (Mukherjee forthcoming) of the film journals of the 1930s and advertisements for records shows that the public in a colonised country were indeed familiar with popular Western music¹. In the context of colonisation, Western classical music was a recognisable mode, particularly for the English-educated in
Calcutta and Bombay. By the 1940s, songs were composed in jazz styles, as well as in waltzes, Latin American popular genres, etc. Music directors were experimenting with Western instruments, harmony and orchestration. Popular melodrama used such forms enthusiastically and often employed caricatures of such syncretic forms in a somewhat self-reflexive way. For instance, a film like _Grihalakhsmi_ (1945, Bengali), in an elaborate sequence, shows the various instruments that were used (including sitar, shehnai, piano, guitar, tabla, harmonium, etc.) as well as different musical forms, singing styles and modes of performance. Furthermore, a social-reformist film like _Kunku_ (1937, Marathi) uses ambient sounds as an accompaniment to the songs. The film presents Nira (the protagonist) as a modern individual who seeks her individual rights, and enjoys singing along with an entire orchestra, played on the gramophone. Developed through a number of sequences, this culminates in her performing along with an English song being played on the gramophone. _Kunku_ accentuates the complexities of cultural practices during the colonial period as well as the patterns by which filmmakers addressed and negotiated them. Indeed, as Biswarup Sen (2010, p. 92) writes, “[m]usicians from Calcutta were responsible for most of the innovations that would give Hindi film music its distinctive identity”. By the late 1940s and early 1950s, while the _film-geet_ (film-song) became an independent spectacular “song and dance sequence” a recognisable pattern for Hindi film music was audible. It deployed an (a) _alap_ (prelude), followed by (b) _gaat_ and _taan_ (refrain-verse), along with instrumental interludes. Anna Morcom (2007) after Alison Arnold (1988) discusses the “eclectic” tendency of this pattern.

It is within this structure that one can analyse the national modern question, which was at the same time “international modern”. Furthermore, Salil Chowdhury belonged to the political-cultural tradition of IPTA and Left cultural explorations. In addition, at the time when Chowdhury (who was trained in Indian classical music) recreated “Western” compositions, the use of clarinets, strings and flutes had long been accepted within the Indian musical milieu. Thus, Chowdhury’s music, in effect, seemed to underscore such influences. Additionally, this easily combined with the practices within Indian classical, which encouraged the use of quotations and allusions. At the turn of the twentieth century, such existing conditions were inter-linked with the emergent situation where new locations for musical transaction were formed with the entry of gramophone records. Besides, film music was also making use of another popular tendency, that is, the band music (for instance the Maihar Band) created by distinguished musicians like Alauddin Khan and others (Mukherjee 2007), This meant a new pool of music would be available as modern urban entertainment. Clearly, a thorough research of Hindi film music illustrates the ways in which a popular form grew out of contemporary practices of mechanical reproduction and produced new domains for musical interfaces with audiences. As pointed out by Dasgupta (2011), Indian musicians had played for Queen Victoria’s coronation (in the mid-nineteenth century), and had accompanied the (in) famous Mata Hari with her performances (in the early twentieth century). During such musical exchanges with other artists, “sometimes only small fragments got transferred, and transformed”, and produced what Dasgupta refers to as “a scene
of new possibilities” (ibid.). Additionally, cinema offered an exceptional field since as a popular form, and growing from different performative cultures, it encouraged interactions between disparate musical tropes. In short, popular films appreciate experimentations, and draw upon distinct practices of music and performance, as well as visual cultures. Music thus operates within a domain that has multiple layers and underpinnings; moreover, its movements include journeys back and forth between various locations, which do not always imply direct quotations.

A film like *Barsaat* (1949) illustrates the ways in which the violin became the “sonic signifier” of romance and love in Indian contexts. For instance, in one of the crucial sequences, when the female protagonist’s (Reshma) marriage is being fixed to someone other than the hero (Pran), she suffers in love. As she lies on the bed, the camera tracks in to get a closer shot, just as the strings (played by Pran from outside) sound more powerful than ever. In this scene, like the previous three occasions, upon hearing the tune Reshma rushes out. Cut to a shot of Pran playing a variation of the *Hungarian rhapsodies*, while the lights reflected back from the waters highlight the melodramatic moment. Reframed by a series of doorways, Reshma rushes in and embraces Pran fervently. A sharp cut to a closer shot is supported by music, which stops abruptly to emphasise (through it absence) the unique seductive quality of the composition. Truly, one of most important aspects in this context is Kapoor’s reworking of the *Hungarian rhapsodies* in this and in other films. Kapoor takes a popular Western composition and re-creates it within a specific Indian context (as well, Pran describes it to Reshma and consequently to the audience) to underline the function of music in cinema (just as he reveals the real musician in the climax of the film).

**Music, mutations, memories**

As demonstrated by Peter Manuel (1993), the 1980s were marked by changes within the music industry with the introduction of “cassettes” or tapes, which encouraged the mass dissemination of music in India. Manuel shows how the economic policies of the late 1970s led to the unprecedented growth of the cassette industry in India. With the arrival of cassettes, music became available in the local grocery shops, just as a film like *Dance dance* (1987) narrates the success of the T-series cassettes company and its proprietor Gulshan Kumar. The Indian consumer-electronics industry burgeoned during this time. Manuel (1993, p. 62) quotes journalist Anil Chopra, who insists that “the real cassette boom has happened mostly since 1984 or ’85, especially because tape coating has started in India in a huge way”. Indeed, the cassette technology restructured the music scene in India. While in the early 1980s “two-in-ones” (recorder-cum-player) were a “craze”, the album *Disco deewane* (1981, music by Biddu) ensured that what comprised the very idea of popular music in the sub-continent would now be taken under new conditions. While it may be argued that it was indeed R.D. Burman’s music that presented the “radical new versions of pleasure, sexuality, and desire” of the 1970s (Sen 2010, p. 95), the music of *Disco dancer* (1982) by Bappi Lahiri emphasised the “vast network of inflows and outflows” (Sen 2010, p. 88) of Indian popular music.
In recent times, Ashish Rajadhyaksha (2002) describes the “Bollywoodisation of the Indian cinema” as the “corporatisation” of the film industry that plans to re-integrate finance, production, and distribution, along with the music industry. Moreover, in his recent book (Rajadhyaksha 2009, pp. 99-100) he has elaborated on the “cinema-effects” and suggests that

[within the universe of the cinema, what does an inclusive definition of the text actually include? Even on its own, as a production process, it is clear that the repudiation of authenticity in Bollywood – in the music of Bollywood funk or in the Jani-Khosla installation at Selfridges – coincides with a widespread social tendency towards evoking film mainly for purposes of re-presentation, re-definition [...] of reprocessing the cinema in order, eventually, to make it available for numerous and varied uses primarily outside movie theatre [sic].

As well, Prasad (2008, p. 49) suggests that “successful commodification of Indian cinema as Bollywood in the International market is based on the idea of an unchanging essence that distinguishes it from Hollywood”. Kaarsholm (2002), Kaur and Sinha (2005) as well as Rajadhyaksha (2009) describe the Indian Summer festival in London in 2002 as an important point at which Bollywood became acceptable globally, and became popular as a brand that is both “kitschy and cool”. The Indian Summer festival showcased a variety of Hindi popular films, along with Satyajit Ray’s films. It also launched music composer A.R. Rahman and Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musical Bombay dreams, and the Victoria and Albert Museum presented Hindi film posters in their exhibition titled Cinema India: The art of Bollywood. Moreover, it was the style in which Moulin Rouge! (2001) quoted a popular Hindi film song (“Chamma, chamma...”) that gave Bollywood global appeal which was beyond the “curry and sari”. In addition, the massive popularity of Slumdog millionaire (2008) underlined the processes through which Bollywood has become a big business, just as it demonstrated the ways in which a popular form may be appropriated by a more powerful canon.

In my understanding, the contemporary composition “Jay ho!” by the Academy Award winner musician-composer A.R. Rahman rearranges Chowdhury’s song on a different musical plane, which was then followed up by the song (and music-video) of the Pussycat Dolls. After Chowdhury had transported Mozart to Indian contexts, and when, in the 1980s, Kalyanji-Anandji borrowed from Chowdhury (as argued by Banerjee 2010), the new musical compositions were not negotiating classical Western sounds (or Mozart’s Symphony No. 40), but reworking an Indian classic like “Itna na mujhshe tu pyaar barah” for a wider audience. Clearly, it is hard to locate a path of influence explaining the intertextual connections between the disparate moments of musical communications. Thus, as we examine this specific instance of musical allusions, each composition does not directly reflect upon the other. “Sometimes there is a break”, insists Dasgupta (2011), as he describes how on certain occasions, “it’s not a series of cultural allusions, but a reference to the proximal source”. Therefore, even when Rahman transformed a classic for “Western” audiences, he
was indeed through a convoluted route “returning” an Indian version of Western classical music to contemporary audiences, for whom such mutations did not seem to evoke the said associations. The thrust and the hook of the Pussycat Dolls’ number appears to be that it has reworked a Bollywood “thing” for global listeners. As well, the music video demonstrates through its *mise en scène* and through the presence of Rahman that it may not be mainly about fresh musical compositions and new musical transactions. Instead, the music video seems to trade with certain tunes, notions and images regarding Bollywood (for instance, the uses of *namaste* and *bindi* in the video), or what Prasad (2008) describes as an “unchanging essence”. Indeed, it is a representation of the entire gamut of the visual trope of Bollywood.

In his book *The cinema effect*, Sean Cubitt (2004) describes his theory of film by discussing the image *vis-à-vis* three notions. He suggests that the cinema and the world have as their basis the same categories of “Being”. These categories are first “Being in-itself, or what Peirce calls *Firstness*”, secondly “Being in relation to something else, or *Secondness*”, and thirdly “Being in relation to something else from the perspective of a third thing – the logical relations of things in the universe, or *Thirdness*” (Dawkins 2005). Having elaborated on these principles, his purpose is to complete his study by “historicising”. Through a close-reading of “Itna na mujhshe tu pyaar barah” as well as “Jay ho!”, one examines this “interpretive” aspect of cinema, or the “thirdness” of displacements, travels and mutations, which are deeply connected to histories of reception and technologies, thereby disturbing the role of the author. The primary questions that come up within this framework are the problems of remembering and forgetting (of certain musical notes, and their origins and historical passages). In addition, the processes through which certain musical patterns enter the realm of the popular to lose their very fabric and become a part of something that may be totally different are significant. Therefore, returning to the problem of authorship, since the author (or Mozart) is indeed dead, the (ghost of the) music now belongs to the listeners, who can probably recognise Mozart’s composition in a plethora of sonic signifiers or in a composite structure that refers to many such notes and memories.

**Endnotes**

1. Published in journals like *Batayan* (Bengali), 1932; *Bioscope* (Bengali), 1930; *Cinema Sansar* (Hindi), 1932-33; *Chitra Lekha* (Bengali), 1930-31; *Dipali* (Bengali), 1931-1932; *Film Land*, 1931-32; *Film World*, 1934; *Kheyali* (Bengali), 1932; *Nach Ghar* (Bengali), 1926-27; and so on, housed in local libraries as well as at NFAI, Pune and BFI, London. In my forthcoming book (Mukherjee forthcoming) I have anthologised the important writings on films written in the early period between the 1920s and 1930s, and have situated the important yet somewhat unknown arguments on the advent of sound within the larger framework of the social history films.

2. Satyajit Ray’s *Charulata* (1964, Bengali) is a fine example of such transformations during the colonial period. Also see Chatterjee 2002.

3. Music composed by Himanshu Dutta. The film was also made in Hindi.

4. Also made in Hindi as *Duniya na mane* (1937), music by Kesavrao Bhole.
5. While the idea of Indian modernity in the colonial and post-colonial conditions has been debated at length by Chatterjee (2002), I would like to draw attention to Leftist political thought and cultural movements, which propagated the notion of “internationalism” in Indian contexts. The translation of the iconic composition “International” was a part of such projects. Chowdhury was instrumental in adapting and translating musical compositions (including the music dedicated to Black American civil rights movements) to the Indian socio-political scenario.

6. The mass acceptance of both gramophone records and film music in India became momentous in the 1950s post-colonial period with the intervention of radio, which played a crucial role in popularising film songs beyond cinematic boundaries. Gerry Farrell’s (1993) writing on gramophone records illustrates the function of urban middle classes and the ways in which musical activities became fashionable in big cities like Bombay and Calcutta via the availability of records.


8. Manuel (1993, p. 62) writes that “[s]ales of recorded music – almost entirely cassettes by late 1980s – went from $1.2 million in 1980 to $12 million in 1986”. Indeed, the cassette technology successfully reorganised the music industry in India. Also see Rajadhyaksha (2007) for a critical reading of such industrial shifts.

**References**


Banerjee, Prabuddha. 2010. Interview with the author, 14 October, Kolkata.


Morcom, Anna. 2007. *Hindi film songs and the cinema*. Ashgate, Aldershot and Burlington, VT.


