

Transcreations by Tagore

A Music Program by *Bodhi*, IIT Kanpur

Introduction

For Tagore, the initial training of setting his lyrics to a tune started at a very young age with his beloved Jyoti-dada (Jyotirindranath Tagore). Jyoti Dada would create tunes on Piano. He and Akshay Babu would set lyrics to these tunes. What started as a playful exercise would eventually bloom into a separate genre known as *Rabindrasangeet*. Based on the poetic themes, Tagore songs are typically divided into five categories: *Prakriti*, *Puja*, *Prem*, *Swadesh* and *Bichitro*. There may be sub-divisions such as, songs belonging to *Prakriti* may be sub-divided into six different seasons. In addition, there are several musical (or dance) drama and other collections of songs for special occasions (*Anushthanik*). Altogether, the collection *Gitanitan* has 2233 songs.

Tagore songs have dual importance as poetry and music. One cannot be seen without the other. In his life, Tagore came in close contact with many different forms of music in different parts of India and the world. He liberally borrowed from all musical forms that he liked. He would often create melodies based on tunes he heard. Occasionally, the exact tune would be reflected in his song but that is rare. More often, he would adapt the tune to suit his lyrics and create the mood for his poetry. Thus, the word ‘Transcreation’ or creative transcription. The adaptations were always with creative musical modifications.

Today, we celebrate the musical journey of Rabindranath Tagore by presenting samples of various genres of music that are reflected in Tagore songs. The presentation is in no way exhaustive. In our limited time, we will only cover the major genres of music.

Outline of the Program

We will start our program with a verse from Rik-veda, *Sangachhadhwam* that was adapted by Tagore as a prayer in the Brahmo temples. This will be followed by the popular Tagore song “Anandolokey ...”. He set the music of both of these songs based on “Kayo Shri Gowri...”, the official anthem of the Kingdom of Mysore under Wadiyar dynasty.

Following that, the main program will be divided into three parts: part one will consist of folk and western music; part two will be Carnatic music and part three will be Hindustani classical music. Some of the original songs will also be presented, wherever available, along with the Tagore songs.

Part I

Western Music

Some of Tagore’s songs were influenced and sometimes, inspired by western tunes. Growing up in his ancestral home at Jorasanko, he was familiar with western music as his grandfather

Prince Dwarkanath was a connoisseur of the same. During his first trip to England as a 17 year old, he became familiar with English, Irish and Scottish music. In his memoir *Jivan Smriti*, he writes: “I cannot claim that I have experienced the soul of the European music. However, the music I experienced as an intense listener was heartfelt and attracted me immensely. I felt the music to be romantic and a melodic expression of the diversity in life.”

We present the song “Kato-baar bhebe-chinu..” that was written in 1885 and the tune was adapted from the song “Drink to me only with thine eyes”. The song was written by the famous English poet Ben Johnson as the verse “The Celia” which was published in the year 1616 as a part of the poetry book called ‘The Forest’. The words of this poetry were almost literal translation of the verse ‘Letters 33’ of the collection named ‘Letters’, written by the Greek poet Philostratus in the 3rd Century. The lyrics of the Tagore song are very different compared to the original song. There is some confusion about the composer of music for this song. One source mentions Colonel R. Mellish (1777 – 1817) and the other source points to Mozart (1756 – 1791).

Sari-gaan

Sari-gaan or Bhatiyali are the songs of boatmen of Bengal. These are commonly heard and popular in the Ganges delta region of both West Bengal and Bangladesh. They are often called the ‘songs of river’. Rhythm of the songs matches the movements of the oars of boatmen. Tagore came in touch with this genre of folk songs while living in Silaidaha. The original Bhatiyali song that we are going to perform is “Mon Majhi Samal Samal..”. The Tagore song set in the same tune is “Ebar Tor Mora Gange Baan Esheche..”. Although the lyrics talk of floods, large waves, courage in the face of waves, taking life risks, etc., they are metaphorical. The song was written in the context of the *Bengal Division Movement* in 1905. The flood and the wave are those of the freedom movement triggered by the division of Bengal into three states. Once you put the words into the context, the apparent song of the river turns into an inspirational song for the freedom movement.

Baul

The word Baul has its origin in Sanskrit *vatula*, meaning mad. Bauls are a mystic musician community in Bengal (and in present day Bangladesh). Bauls can be from any religious community (Hindu, Muslim, Sufi, Tantrik, etc.) and they refuse to be led by any set of established social and religious customs. One of the most well-known exponents of this group was Lalon Fakir. The bauls’ sole aim is to attain freedom of mind and soul. They search for this illusive *Moner Manush*, a figureless entity of true self that resides deep inside every mind and soul. Since this *Moner Manush* lives within everyone, they profess love for every human being in the world irrespective of their caste, creed and religion. Their songs often express the anguish of searching for the *Moner Manush* and not being able to find it.

Tagore came in close contact with this community of musicians when he lived at his ancestral farm house at Silaidaha on the bank of the Padma (presently in Bangladesh). He was fascinated by this community and a sizeable contingent of bauls settled around Shantiniketan once he established his schools there. A large number of Tagore’s songs were directly or

indirectly influenced by the music of bauls. The next song “Bhenge mor ghorer chabi” is one such adaptation of the original baul song “Dekhechi Rupsagorey..”.

Ramprasadi

Ramprasad Sen was an 18th century *Shakta* (follower of the goddess Kali and tantric ideology) poet in Bengal. He was also the court-poet of Raja Krishnachandra of Nadia. Through his poetry and songs, he created a musical form that goes by the name of *Ramprasadi* which belongs to the genre of Shyama-Sangeet (songs related to the goddess Kali). Although, all his songs were about the goddess Kali, they also included as the backdrop, social problems such as the Bengal famine (of 1770). Tagore got attracted to this distinctive style of folk music of Bengal and set several of his songs to this style of tunes. Although, some of his lyrics from the Puja category of songs talk of ‘Ma’ or some form of the god, they were not specific to the goddess Kali. We are going to perform the Tagore song “Ami-i sudhu roinu baki..” that is set in this distinctive style.

Kirtana

The music style of *kirtana* has its roots in the vedic *anukirtana* tradition. Many derivatives of this style were adopted in Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Vaishnavism and in Carnatic tradition of music. In Bengal, the Vaishnav movement triggered by Sri Chaitanya Dev made the *kirtanas* immensely popular. Tagore had read vast amounts of Vaishnava literature of Vidyapati, Chandidas, Gyandas and Govindadas, at a very young age. Many of these were Vaishnav verses sung in the *kirtana* styles. At a young age, he also wrote poetry in similar styles under the pseudonym *Bhanusingha*. He appreciated this form of music enough to write: “I have admired *kirtana* for a long time. It has a way of expressing the deepest feelings as a musical drama, that is not possible in other musical forms. *Kirtana* originated from and has deep roots in poetry and literature. However, it has spread its musical wings and branches far and wide such that, it has established a separate identity as a musical style. I am proud of the virtuosity of *kirtan* musicians in Bengal.” We are going to present the Tagore song “Majhe Majhe tabo dekha pai”, that is set to a tune in this style.

Part II

Carnatic Music:

Rabindranath Tagore developed a keen interest in Carnatic music and in this, he had three sources of influence: Savithri Govinda Krishnan of Adyar, Tagore’s niece Sarala Devi who had resided in Mysore for several years, and Indira Devi, daughter of Satyendranath Tagore.

Influence of Mysore is seen in the popular song “Anandolokey ...” which is based on “Kayo Shri Gowri...”, the official anthem of the Kingdom of Mysore under Wadiyar dynasty. You have already listened to this composition at the beginning of the program.

In 1919, during his extensive tour of southern India, Tagore stayed with Mrs. Annie Besant at Adyar for some time where he met Savithri Govinda Krishnan.

In an interview in Kolkata Doordarshan at the age of 70, Savithri Devi recounted her first meeting with Tagore as a 14 year old girl, who was more interested in playing with friends than singing in front of a gathering of unknown gentlemen (P C Mahalanobis and some more top intellectuals of southern India were present). After a few chorus with other girls, Tagore requested her to sing a pure South Indian song for him and she obliged with “Meenakshi Me Mudam..”, a Muthuswami Dikshitar composition. Little she knew that she would soon be traveling to Shantiniketan for her studies and Tagore would compose one of his famous song “Basonti He Bhubono Mohini...” based the first song she performed for him at Adyar. She talked about many of the other Carnatic classical songs she performed for Tagore during her stay at Shantiniketan and some of the well-known Tagore songs that are based on them.

Some of the notable Tagore songs which are based on Carnatic classical music are: “Bedona Ki Bhashai Re..” based on the Thyagaraja composition “Dhyaname Varamaine..” in Raga Dhanyasi; “E Ki Labonye ...” based on the Thyagaraja composition “Lavanya Rama..” in Raga Poorna Shadjam; “Basonti He Bhubono Mohini..” based on the Muthuswami Dikshitar composition “Meenakshi Me Mudam..” in Raga Purvi Kalyani; “Baje Koruno Sure..” based on the Thyagaraja composition “Nidhu Charanmule..” in Raga Simhendra Madhyamam; and “Nilanjana Chaya..” based on the Thyagaraja composition “Brindavana Lola..” in Raga Todi.

In this section, the artists will perform three of these songs. The Carnatic originals will be played on violin by Prof. Venkitanaryanan.

Part III

Hindustani Classical

In his memoir, Tagore wrote that the training of music and singing was an integral part of growing up in his family. In the manuscript, he wrote that he could not remember a time when he could not sing. Although he never had a formal training in classical music for any length of time, many in the family would learn and he would pick up the tunes by listening.

In his musical journey, he would come in close contact with many of the maestros of hindustani classical music of his time. In Shantiniketan, he was also influenced by Dinendranath Tagore who was well trained in hindustani classical music. He developed enough knowledge to not only set tunes of a large portion of his songs based on ragas but also experiment with them. He would often modify a note (*shudh* to *komal* or vice versa) of the raga or add a full or half a note to a raga to suit his lyrical requirements. According to most of the pundits of hindustani classical music, the result was always pleasing and never awkward. As a result, unlike the genres described earlier, in Tagore songs set in hindustani classical, the original *bandish* or song is often not reproduced or recognizable. Therefore, we will present a *bandish* in the raga on which the Tagore song is based on. They will be similar in the overall structure but not the same.

He also modified and sometimes created Talas to suit his requirements. Some of these are: Shasti Taal (2 + 4 or 4 + 2 beats); Roopakda Taal (3 + 2 + 3 beats); Jhampak Taal (3 + 2 beats); Naba Taal (3 + 2 + 2 + 2 beats); Ekadashi Taal (3 + 2 + 2 + 4 beats) and Naba Pancha Taal (2 + 4 + 4 + 4 + 4 beats).

Pure classical music without any meaningful words did not attract Tagore. He preferred to put words to the classical tunes. One cannot listen to a Tagore song as a pure classical raga. The poetry is an integral part and the appropriate raga is often chosen to bring out the mood of the poetry. For example, the songs in the category of *Prakriti* or Nature are divided into six seasons and the song of a certain season would be based on one of the ragas associated with that season. Similarly, if the lyrics describe the morning, the tune will typically be based on one of the morning ragas. The beauty of a Tagore song is the perfect fusion of the lyric and the raga. They complement each other to create a different genre of music.

We will present five Tagore songs based on five different ragas: one morning and one evening raga, one spring and one monsoon raga, and following the tradition of Hindustani classical music, we end our program with raga Bhairavi. The classical bandishes will be sung by Smt. Amarabati Biswas.

Bodhi presents

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সুৰের মধুর রবীন্দ্রনাথ

- উপস্থাপনায় বোধি

A bouquet of
Tagore's Composition based on

Folk Music

Hindustani Classical Ragas

Carnatic Classical Kritis

Hindustani Classical Recital

Smt. Amarabati Biswas

Carnatic Violin Recital

Prof. P Venkitanarayanan

L 19, 7pm, September 29 2018 @ IIT Kanpur

All are cordially invited

