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THE ORIENTAL MISCELLANY AND THE HINDUSTANI AIR:

"WILD BUT PLEASING WHEN UNDERSTOOD"

By Jane Chapman

"I have nothing but bad news to tell of every sort and kind. I have just been touching my harpsichord, and to my infinite concern find it bewitched - It was tuned yesterday, and last night it was in perfect order - This morning just as I intended rattling off my cords [sic], I found the keys did not answer to my touch - it sounds as an old harpsichord does that has not been tuned for ten years - some of the keys have no sound - some have a dumb kind of tone - In short this charming instrument is quite ruined....

Very heavy rains have fallen for these two days, and last night the air was so damp that as I played upon the harpsichord, you would have imagined water had been thrown all over the keys."[1]

The accomplished harpsichordist Margaret Fowke is not lamenting the effect of the inclement weather of the British Isles, but the fate of a much loved harpsichord in late 18th-century India struggling against the excessively damp climate, having already survived the arduous journey by ship from England. For those of us who are passionate about playing keyboard music, it is inconceivable that it should not be part of our day to day lives. Its cultural functions are all encompassing, whether it be for social interaction and cohesion, exploration and spiritual enrichment, or just entertainment. Music can comfort and reinforce a view of ourselves, reflecting attitudes and conventions in society. Raymond Leppert's thought provoking, though somewhat extreme, analyses of family portraits often featuring a harpsichord or fortepiano, examine its symbolic significance, particularly in paintings by the artist Zoffany, commissioned by officials from the British establishment, resident in India.[2] Leppert also investigates the role of women, illustrating how central the harpsichord was to domestic life, an important strand in the story of the collection and performance of Hindustani Airs, such as those arranged and published in the *Oriental Miscellany.*

Over 100 years later, music was considered so vital to the wellbeing of Captain Scott and his fellow explorers in their race to the South Pole, that a Broadwood player piano, along with 250 music rolls, was stowed on board the "Terra Nova". "In mid-January 1911, it appears to have taken two days to remove the stairs outside the wardroom, to dismantle and hoist the piano to the deck, along with the roll cabinet and its contents, and to transport them all across the ice and re-erect them in the Winter Quarters Hut at Cape Evans. Lieutenant Henry Rennick seems to have been in charge of the operation, and on 20 January 1911, he courageously tuned the piano, and played 'Home, Sweet Home' as a sign that culture had finally arrived!"[3] For enthusiastic harpsichordists, and avid collectors of Hindustani Airs such

as Margaret Fowke and her friend Sophia Plowden, it was not so much that "culture had finally arrived", but that they were genuinely interested in and fascinated by the cultural world of late 18th-century India in which they found themselves.

"On entering the magnificent saloon, the eye is dazzled by a blaze of lights from splendid lustres, triple wall shades, chandle brass, etc., superb pier glasses, pictures, sofas, chairs, Turkey carpets, etc., adorn the splendid hall: these combined with the sounds of different kinds of music, both European and Indian, played at the same time in different apartments; the noise of native tom-toms from another part of the house; the hum of human voices, the glittering dresses of the dancing girls, their slow and graceful movement; the rich dresses of the Rajah and his equally opulent Indian guests; the gay circle of European ladies and gentlemen, and the delicious scent of attar of roses and sandal which perfumes the saloon, strikes the stranger with amazement; but he fancies himself transported to some enchanted region, and the whole scene before him is but a fairy vision." [4]

This glittering account of a nautch (literally meaning "dance"), where many of the songs that were to become Hindustani Airs were first encountered by Margaret and Sophia, appears in Pran Nevile's entertaining book *Stories from the Raj*. "The nautch became a common form of entertainment in the mansions of the English merchants turned rulers in Bengal and other parts of India. Mrs. S.C. Belnos, a reputed artist who lived in Calcutta in the early nineteenth century, has invested nautch girls with a romantic aura in her vivid description of a dance party held in Calcutta during the Puja festival."[5] Sets or troupes of performers would also travel between cantonments, as well as appearing at cultural centres such as Lucknow, where the Nawab of Awadh, Asaf-ud-Daula (1775-1797) held court, and was a discriminating and dedicated patron of the arts.

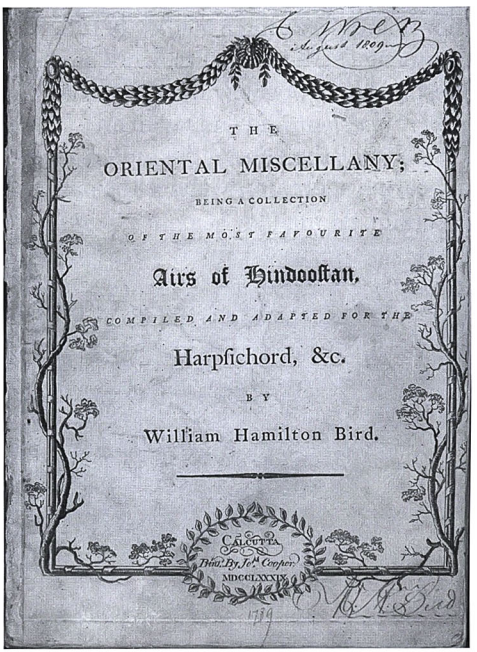

THE
ORIENTAL MISCELLANY;
BEING A COLLECTION
OF THE MOST FAVOURITE
Airs of Hindoostan,
COMPILED AND ADAPTED FOR THE
Harpsichord, &c.
BY
William Hamilton Bird.
Calcutta
Printed By Jos.h Cooper
MDCCLXXXIX

Fig. 1 Title page of the *Oriental Miscellany* (Calcutta, 1789).

"Wild but pleasing when understood." This fascinating description of a tappa, a form of Indian vocal music originating from the folk songs of the camel drivers of Punjab, and characterised by intricate and profuse ornamentation, can be found in the preface of the *Oriental Miscellany*, the first publication of Indian music written in staff notation for Western instruments, notably the harpsichord. Compiled by William Hamilton Bird, a conductor and concert promoter active in Calcutta, this collection of Hindustani Airs was first published by subscription in 1789.[6] The volume contains 30 songs (most of which are also arranged for guitar) in different Indian vocal styles, transcribed from live performance, with titles transliterated from the original Arabic script, though no

actual verse. Bird also includes his own composition, a sonata for harpsichord with violin or flute accompaniment, which weaves "select passages" from at least eight of the Airs into its various movements, creating a medley of tuneful fragments. Perhaps the first work of East West fusion, it opens with an Italianate *Allegro maestoso*, and ends with an English *Jigg*, the titles of the Indian songs appearing sporadically above the music.

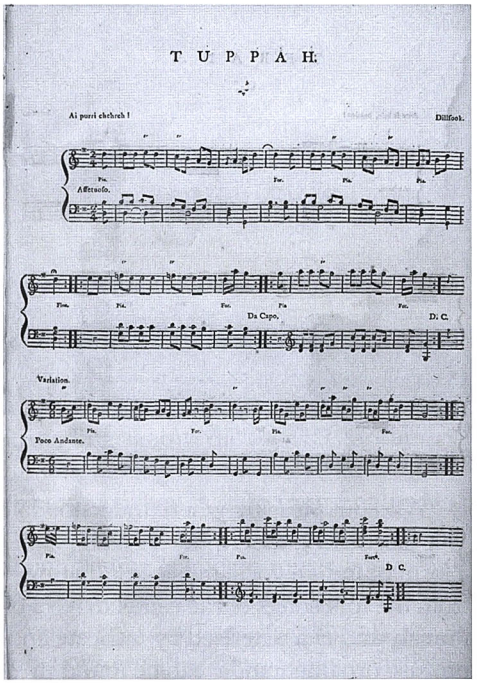


Fig. 2: "Tuppah" from the *Oriental Miscellany* (Calcutta, 1789).

The *Oriental Miscellany*, dedicated to the first Governor General of India, Warren Hastings, attracted over 250 subscribers, most of whom seem to have been drawn from the expatriate community in India. British presence in India was long established with the steady growth of the East India Company, its economic and political control and private armies. Vast numbers of officers, traders and fortune seekers flocked to India, eventually followed by British women with their chattels, harpsichords and fortepianos. Two such women were Margaret Fowke and Sophia Plowden, whose correspondence and diaries survive today. Margaret came from a musical family, and joined her father in India in 1776. Her brother Francis, a keen violinist, wrote a treatise called *On the Vina or Indian Lyre*, published in *Asiatick Researches* (1788).[7] Margaret received help with translations of the original songs from the orientalist William Jones, author of *On the Musical Modes of the Hindoos*, a publication known to Haydn.[8]

Sophia, whose husband was employed by the East India Company, travelled with her harpsichord from Calcutta up the river Ganges to the inland residencies at Lucknow. It is here that she collected songs heard at nautch parties performed at private houses or at court, often sung by renowned performers such as the famous Kashmiri singer known as Khanum Jan, who was reputedly painted by Zoffany, and perhaps even buried in Sophia's garden. [9] Transcriptions from live performance were made in domestic settings, with singers specifically invited for that purpose.

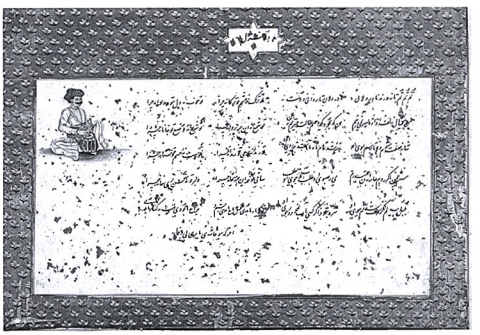
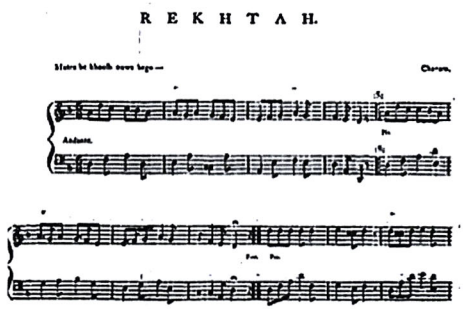
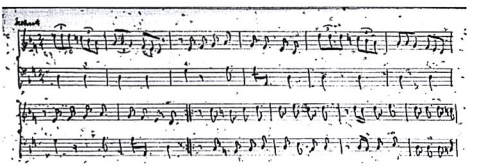


Fig. 3: Anon, Indian Artist in Lucknow, Tabla, c1787 (Plowden MS 380, © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.).

Sophia compiled her own unpublished collection of Hindustani Airs in the late 1780s which is beautifully illustrated with detailed pictures of Indian musicians and singers.[10] The manuscript contains 77 songs transcribed by John Braganza and texts of Persian and Urdu poetry on separate leaves. It is interesting to compare versions of the same music in both collections. As can be seen in the following examples, the arrangement in the Plowden MS may be closer in spirit to the original Indian version. This song identified by Katherine Butler Schofield in the Plowden MS is a famous ghazal by the classical Persian poet Khwaja Shamsuddin Muhammad "Hafiz" Shirazi (1310-79), and was popular in the Anglo Indian community, probably because of the repeated catchy phrase "taza ba taza no ba no". The Plowden transcription has a simple bass line, and less complex harmony, the second section being in unison. The rhythm is varied implying both 2/4 and 6/8. The melody is sometimes syncopated with rests at the beginning of the bars, becoming more adventurous after the double bar, and the key signature (B-flat and F-natural) draws attention to the modality. The version in the *Oriental Miscellany* is more obviously arranged for keyboard. Please see ex. 1 and 2 below.



Example 1. *Mutrib-i khush-nava bego/Taza ba taza no ba no (Sing, sweet-tongued musician!/Ever fresh and ever new)* translated by Katherine Butler Schofield, Excerpt from the *Oriental Miscellany* (No. IV)



Example 2. Excerpt from the Plowden MS (MS380, © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge).

Sophia was a subscriber to the *Oriental Miscellany,* and may well have contributed to the publication as William Hamilton Bird was part of her musical circle. As well as regular concert parties, Sophia recreated a nautch in costume, with friends drawn from the British officer class in the East India Company playing Indian instruments as she sang, and perhaps accompanied herself on the harpsichord.

A vivid picture of musical activity emerges from the correspondence of the Fowke family, which is one of the main inspirations behind Ian Woodfield's detailed book *Music of the Raj,* a valuable source of information on the musical lives of Anglo Indian society.[11] It is possible to imagine how performances of the Airs which Margaret transcribed herself would be a pleasant addition to an evening's entertainment which included chamber music, glee singing and keyboard sonatas (often accompanied on violin by a male acquaintance), such as the one composed by William Hamilton Bird which is included in the *Oriental Miscellany.* Margaret's father, Joseph, preferred the "ancient" composers such as Handel and Corelli, whilst she craved the fashionable music of J.C. Bach and Haydn. Interestingly Margaret was also persuaded by her father to become acquainted with the music of Rameau, so would have been familiar with baroque French ornamentation.

This period in Anglo Indian relations was a time in which cultural interaction and openness was seen in a relatively positive light. It seems that the shared experience of like minded Europeans collecting these songs and direct communication with Indian hosts such as the Mughal Nawab of Awadh, was central to creating some kind of cohesive equanimity between the ruling elite on both sides. Enlightened as this may be, Bird really struggled to make the Airs accessible to a Western audience. He notes in the introduction that "it has cost him great pains to bring them into any form as to TIME", and that "The greatest imperfection, however, in the music in every part of India, is the total want of accompaniment; a third, or fifth, are additions." He is therefore very conscious of his role as adapter.

The *Oriental Miscellany* had to have a practical outcome, something tangible for the subscribers, namely pieces of music that they could play which would be as close as possible to the tuneful songs they had heard at nautch parties and other social gatherings, and therefore different to the more convoluted and complex instrumental music which we tend to associate with Indian classical music rather than the lighter vocal styles. They needed to be musically satisfying and not too difficult to perform on a harpsichord, incorporating a simple rhythmical bass line and set of variations or repeated sections, extending the song in a way that was idiomatic to the harpsichord, and not totally at odds with the original vocal form. Thus the adaptations conformed to European musical taste and fashion of the late eighteenth century, whilst still retaining their original appeal.

The entertainment and practical value of this publication is also highlighted when Bird states that the songs of Bengal are too lively to allow much expression, and one or more may be danced to as cotillions, "the minors having been added for that purpose". This reflects however subconsciously the original connection between music and dance. The vogue for collecting Indian songs did not exist in isolation. The fashion for Scotch Song arranged by composers such as Barsanti, or national airs from countries such as Switzerland, was already well established as can be seen from inventories of music imported to India. The Hindustani Airs were considered on one level as genuine transcriptions, and later appeared in publications such as Crotch's *Specimens of Various Styles of Music...Adapted to Keyed Instruments* (c.1808-15), a collection of short pieces including national airs from China to Norway and beyond, and perhaps one of the first practical forays into world music.

My interest in the *Oriental Miscellany* goes back many years. The late Gerry Farrell included much about the genre of the Hindustani Air and its subsequent manifestations in his book, *Indian Music and the West*.[12] Consequently there was a facsimile at home next to the harpsichord, against which Gerry nonchalantly leant his sitar. On various occasions we tried out the pieces, the sitar becoming a large drone instrument, similar to a tambura, whilst I played the Airs on the harpsichord, or conversely the harpsichord acting as a giant drone, arpeggiating tonic and dominant notes throughout, and the sitar playing the melody.

As artist in residence at the Foyle Special Collections Library, King's College London, I recently collaborated with musicologist and expert in Indian vocal music, Katherine Butler Schofield, examining a rare copy of the *Oriental Miscellany* from the Thurston Dart

collection. This I compared with a copy at the Royal College of Music and a later edition published in Edinburgh c.1805 for pianoforte and harp, held at the British Library, which contains some additional arrangements of the same material.[13]

As part of my residency we attempted to reconstruct a performance of the *Airs of Hindoostan* involving Indian and Western musicians, using instruments that would have been appropriate in the late eighteenth century. The singer Yusuf Mahmoud was joined by Surgeet Singh Aulakh on sarangi, a bowed string instrument that shadows and compliments the vocal line (rather than harmonium which was brought over by missionaries in the nineteenth century), and also accompanied on tabla and tambura.[14] The aim was to reverse the process of transcribing and arranging, and reconstruct the original Indian songs from the Hindustani Airs, performing them alongside the published versions for harpsichord which were further adapted in some instances to include baroque flute. The appropriate texts correlated by Katherine Butler Schofield were taken from the Plowden MS.

In performance, ornamentation was added to the harpsichord part, influenced in part by Geminiani's treatise on *Good Taste in the Art of Musick* (1749), which may have been known to the British in India, and embellishments adopted by Clementi and other early classical composers. In my forthcoming recording made on the Kirkman harpsichord (1773) housed in the Museum at the Royal College of Music, I attempt to incorporate melodic material inspired by the ragas which may have formed the basis of the Indian songs, in short unmeasured preludes before the Airs, imitating an Indian *alap*. Yusuf's concept of ornamentation could be likened to that employed by an accomplished baroque singer totally at home in their own style, though obviously differently executed. There are however some characteristics in common, which could be broken down into types of appoggiaturas, trills and complex turns. I also found myself drawn towards playing *agréments* in the French style. As a flight of fancy, Yusuf and I tried to imagine the process of inculturation in reverse — from West to East, and as if the Chanam and Dilsook mentioned in William Hamilton Bird's introduction as vocalists who made the original music live through their grace and expression could have been influenced in any way by Margaret and Sophia, and their harpsichords.

Further observations on the Hindustani Airs and musical analysis by Andrew Woolley can be found on the University of Edinburgh website.[15]

Fig 4. Performance at the Chapel, King's College London, 18 May 2012.

Endnotes

1 I. Woodfield, cited in "A Harpsichord on the River Ganges: English Keyboard Instruments and the Collection of 'Hindostannie' Airs", *Hindustani Music, Thirteenth to Twentieth Centuries* (New Delhi: Codarts and Manohar, 2010).

2 R. Leppert, "Music, domestic life and cultural chauvinism: images of British subjects at home in India", *Music and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

R. Leppert, "The female at music: praxis, representation and the problematic of identity", *Music and Image* (Cambridge University Press, 1988).

3 Online, "The Pianola Institute", accessed 20 June 2012, <http://www.pianola.org/history/history_pianolists.cfm>.

4 Quoted in Pran Nevile, *Stories from the Raj: sahibs, mensahibs, and others,* (New Delhi: Indialog Publications, 2004), 39.

5 Pran Nevile, *Stories from the Raj: sahibs, mensahibs, and others,* (New Delhi: Indialog Publications, 2004).

6 Andrew Woolley, biographical information on William Hamilton Bird, Online, "Wild but pleasing when understood: William Hamilton Bird and the Hindoostanni Air", accessed 20 June 2012, <http://www.academia.edu/1755676/Wild_but_pleasing_when_understood_William_Hamilton_Bird_and_the_Hindoostanni_air>.

7 Francis Fowke, "On the Vina or Indian Lyre", *Asiatick Researches 1* (1788), 295-9.

8 W. Jones, "On the Musical Modes of the Hindoos", *Asiatick Researches* 3 (1799), 55-87.

9 K. Butler Schofield, "Hindustani airs through the looking-glass: the tale of Khanum Jan," (lecture, 15 November 2011, India Institute, King's College London).

10 Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, MS 380.

11 Ian Woodfield, *Indian Music of the Raj* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

12 Gerry Farrell, *Indian Music and the West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

13 Information about Jane Chapman's residency may be found Online, "King's College London", <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/library/collections/showcasing/artistinresidence.aspx>.

14 18 May 2012, The Chapel, King's College London. Performers: Yusuf Mahmoud, Surgeet Singh Aulakh, Amardeep Singh Sari, Katherine Butler Schofield, Jane Chapman, and Yu-Wei Hu.

15 Woolley, *Ibid*.

Other sources:

Cook, N., "Encountering the Other, Redefining the Self: Hindostannie Airs, Haydn's Folksong Settings and the 'Common Practice' Style", *Music and Orientalism in the British Empire, 1780s–1840s: Portrayal of the East* (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2007), 13-37.

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Woodfield, Ian, "Collecting Indian Songs in 18th-century Lucknow: Problems of Transcription", *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 3 (1994), 73-88.

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