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Book Review

MUSICOPHILIA IN MUMBAI: PERFORMING SUBJECTS AND THE METROPOLITAN UNCONSCIOUS

by Tejaswini Niranjana, Tulika Books, Delhi, 2020, pp. 240, ₹650,
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Musicophilia in Mumbai: Performing Subjects and the Metropolitan Unconscious by Tejaswini Niranjana, Tulika Books, Delhi, 2020, pp. 240, ₹650, ISBN 978-81-941260-7-2.

Reviewed by Abhik Majumdar, Assistant Professor, National Law University Odisha, Cuttack.

Reviewing Tejaswini Niranjana's book turned out to be a somewhat disquieting experience. I clarify that I do not use the adjective as a stand-in for terms like 'harrowing' or 'tortuous' associated with bad writing. Nor do I invoke it in any other disparaging sense. By 'disquieting' I mean simply that the reviewing process requires keeping track of so many red flags that it begins to evoke the trepidation usually reserved for traversing minefields. The first red flag we encounter is contextual. We are informed about a documentary film, an exhibition, and an installation undertaken in conjunction with the present text. In the Afterword the author describes them as an 'integral part of the exploratory research' and 'also a research output'. So do these parallel outputs inform the reader about where the book text situates within the context of the theme it addresses? And thus offer insights contextualising the text? More significantly, do they say something the text eschews? If the text, the film and the exhibition constitute aspects of a single narrative, can we treat the text alone as an adequate account of the narrative? Of course the question is moot: my remit does not extend beyond the book, and hence I have to treat it as a stand-alone work, whether or not it adequately represents the larger narrative. But the disquiet still remains.

In fact, the disquiet is actually enhanced by the unconventional, even esoteric theme of the narrative. Central to it is the 'musicophiliac'—a term of the author's own coinage encompassing listeners, collectors, students, and so forth, all of whom 'came into Hindustani music as non-traditional musical subjects' (p. 7). Her argument is that as music seeped into publicly accessible spaces in the late 19th century and, correspondingly musicophiliacs' involvement enhanced multifold, their shared involvement 'are the [*sic*] factors that fed into the production of the musical interiority' of the 20th century. (The use of the definitive article is curious: is it inadvertent or does the author suggest her enumeration approximates the exhaustive?) Niranjana proceeds to characterise the book as an account of the spaces and practices 'through which the love of music is manifested in Bombay/Mumbai'. But why Bombay? According to her, the city 'obtains what I call a *metropolitan unconscious*, a collectivized unconscious' (emphasis in the original). She frames this 'unconscious' exclusively within migrant histories, specifically of those who came to settle here (i.e. Bombay) under conditions of 'colonial modernity'. Further on, she construes the 'unconscious' in terms of the 'sedimented repertoire of ways of living and experiencing that people brought into Bombay' transforming through its engagement with the present; she then labels it a 'unique mode of being for musical and other subjects'. So now we may identify four distinct strands within the narrative: musicophiliacs (i.e. 'non-traditional' musical subjects); the 'metropolitan unconscious' drawn from musicophiliacs' and hereditary musicians' migrant histories engaging with the present (p. 10); the 'spaces and practices' through which musicophilia manifests within the city; and, lastly, the musical 'interiority' realised by the 'community of musical affect', as she puts it. Later in the narrative Niranjana offers some clues about how she intends to correlate these four strands, when she suggests investigating the city's 'musicophiliac modernity' in order to better understand the 'formation of the metropolitan unconscious in Mumbai' (p. 24).

The first chapter engages with Bombay's emergence as a centre of music. Niranjana associates this emergence with the fall of Awadh *circa* 1857 [*sic* 1856], after which date practitioners of music relocated to other 'native states' (p. 18). Later she labels the date as a 'symbolic marker' (p. 22), and acknowledges that migration of musicians began much earlier and was gradual in character. She identifies as identifiers of 'modernity' practices such as a 'culture of debate and argument around music'; music criticism in the media; following favourite musicians' performances; organising music clubs and societies, and so forth. More to the point, she posits that the musical affect associated with Hindustani music is 'created through listening together and listening to each other, and through the culture of "appreciation" —the *wah-wah mandali*—that develops in the city' (p. 24). The suggestion of shared experience this claim carries is of the utmost significance, and I shall revert to it later. Niranjana then proceeds to trace the rise in Bombay of theatre; members of the Kalavant and Tawaif communities; music schools; and the various endeavours to 'reform' music, specifically music pedagogy. Her assertion that Tawaifs were taught not by Ustads but by '*been* players and sarangi players who had assimilated the music of the great singers' (p. 30) is bound to raise eyebrows; her definition of the *Been* as 'a wind musical instrument' (p. 188) does not improve matters. This is not a minor nit: the prominence of the *Been* or *Rudra Vina* as a solo instrument (its days of accompaniment were over centuries ago), not to mention the mystique its practitioners surrounded it with, are surely significant influences on the issue of musical transmission. The chapter concludes with a narration of the author's explorations of Mumbai's *mujra* venues.

The second chapter concerns the 'spaces of music', specifically the 'relationship between Hindustani music and the organization of built space and of neighbourhoods in Mumbai', and addressing two inquiries: how the organisation of built space 'constructs certain forms of sociality'; and how it sustains musical performance and pedagogy, and hence musical practice generally (p. 43). Niranjana restricts her exegesis to Girgaum or the old 'native town', once home to several theatre and musical genres, and also performative and pedagogic venues. She explores connections between performances and performative spaces. An imagined Hirabai Barodekar recital at the Royal Opera House (as opposed to more conventional settings such as the Deodhar School or the Ganesh Utsav). She speculates whether the stateliness of the venue impact on the auditory experience or the audience's responses: 'Did polite applause replace the enthusiastic "Wah"? Did people shake their heads as they always did while listening to Indian music, and move their arms?' (p. 47). She then touches upon Blavatsky Lodge, Jinnah Hall and Deodhar School of Music. The material is only partially anecdotal, collected from a limited number of interviews, and substantially imagined. Next she turns to distinctly less impressive surroundings: the Kothas of famed songstresses; the Chawls and surrounding spaces housing members of what may be called the lower middle class; music schools; smaller auditoria such as Laxmi Baug and the Framjee Cowasjee Institute, and Ganesh Chaturthi pandals. These served as performative, and also residential, pedagogical, and discursive spaces – often one function flowed seamlessly into another. Impromptu *soirées* in unconventional surroundings such as the Azad Avanadh Vadyalaya, a *Tabla* maker's workshop and outlet, are recounted in great detail. These sections make minimal use of imagined material, and rely mainly on anecdotal and memoir texts. Yet the chapter lacks somewhat for details that would have made the narrative come alive more effectively. Accounts of residential spaces, for instance, are limited to who lived in them, as distinct from *how* they lived there, how they were 'at home' in those spaces – their habits, their recreational practices, where they went for their evening stroll and, crucially, what they ate. Frequent mentions of eateries and

tea-shops frequented by performers rarely extends to, say, what kind of tea a particular performer would demand.

The third chapter engages with the passion of those obsessed with music. It comprises narratives of musicophiliacs – those who performed, organised house concerts, patronised musicians, promoted artistes out of love for music. A key issue concerns access – access to tutelage, performance, and so on – for non-traditional initiates into musicophilia. Niranjana stretches this to include even women from courtesan communities who regularly hosted and participated in musical exchanges and discussions. This leads to musicophila fomenting social transgressions. Localities associated with courtesans served as both performative and discursive venues. These were clearly out of bounds for women from ‘respectable’ families. And even males ran the risk of opprobrium. The narrative here takes on a deeply personal, individual character. In fact, much of the chapter derives from first-person accounts of musicophiliacs fulfilling various roles.

The last two chapters deal with various aspects of Taleem or the practice of imparting tutelage. Chapter Four begins with engrossing accounts of hereditary musicians and how they conducted Taleem sessions. Niranjana admits: ‘Finding a suitable form for this chapter has not been easy. I have tried to step away from the objective, social-historical mode of description/ analysis and instead pulled the many voices in my head into these pages.’ She then concludes that her objective was to not merely record the ‘factual details of taleem’ but to highlight how ‘people remember, reflect on and represent their experience of it.’ (p. 122) Imagined encounters give way altogether to one-to-one conversations with erstwhile disciples of maestros. While this certainly enriches the narrative, it also undermines some of the basic premises of the book. The presence of the cityscape diminishes: in Gangubai’s narrative, even the railway appears to figure more prominently than Bombay does (p. 128). Similarly, so does the collectivity (‘listening together and listening to each other’) implicit in Niranjana’s construction of the musical affect. Individual experiences take centrestage here. And unlike in the previous chapters, those interviewed speak in their own voices with the author mediating only minimally.

Chapter five opens with complications arising within preceptor-disciple relationships, interspersed with occasional excursions into tutelage from other Gurus. It then addresses the practice of learning by listening to the radio, gramophone records, public concerts, and so forth. Finally it examines modern methods such as tutelage over Skype and other video-calling platforms. The chapter represents a curious mishmash of incongruent elements: ruptures within conventional pedagogic relations; alternatives to such relations (*i.e.* securing knowledge from other Gurus, radio etc.); and flourishing relations sustained through alternate mediums. This ambiguity spills over into specific sub-themes too. For instance, the discussion on learning through gramophone records and radio broadcasts (p. 159 et seq) clubs together three disparate scenarios which are not distinguished from each other: one, in the absence of a Guru, where these become the primary source of knowledge; two, augmenting without the Guru’s sanction the knowledge received from the latter; and three, where the Guru himself or herself organises listening sessions to broaden disciples’ horizons, which constitutes an extension of and not an alternative to regular Taleem.

There can be little doubt that the book marks a new approach to Indian music scholarship. Its unconventional theme and structuring, not to mention its engaging writing style, mark a refreshing distance from the pedantry that pervades through much of the literature on the topic. Having said that, however, I confess to harbouring some reservations about the way the book was conceived.

Take the four strands within the narrative I had identified earlier on. Despite going through the text several times, I am left with the impression that they have been dealt with in an uneven manner. In Chapter Two, urban spaces are explored in much detail, but musical affect and interiority are hardly touched upon. In Chapters Four and Five, the significance of urban spaces diminishes. Many themes addressed there offer little scope for spatial locations to contribute. Acquiring knowledge through listening to radio broadcasts and gramophone records could be undertaken literally anywhere such as, for instance, the Ahmedabad of Arvind Parikh's formative years. In my view Chapter Three is the only place where the various strands of the narrative coincide to a meaningful degree, which is possibly why I found it the most satisfying to read. This is not to say Chapters Four and Five were not interesting – indeed they were. But the reasons I found them interesting was that Niranjana lets her subjects speak in their own voice, free of any compulsion to correlate narratives with urban spaces or the 'metropolitan unconscious'.

The second concerns how musical concepts are characterised here. Restricting musicophilia to 'non-traditional musical subjects' alone may serve an excellent purpose, but it also precludes from the study otherwise relevant examples of members of traditional families relating to music in non-traditional ways: possible instances include Manji Khan being heavily influenced by the Gayaki of Gwalior's Rahimat Khan to the utter consternation of his own father Alladiya Khan; Gajananbuwa Joshi teaching himself the violin and earning acclaim as a solo violinist; Vilayat Khan crafting a radically new playing style, and also changes to setup of his Sitar, after the premature death of his father Enayat Khan; and DV Paluskar seeking tutelage from the disciples and Gurubhais of his father Vishnu Digambar Paluskar after the latter's death.

My deepest reservations lie in regard to Niranjana's construction of 'musical affect' which provides impetus to her coinage 'musicophilia'. At various points in the narrative she uses phrases such as 'aural community' and 'collective listening' (p. 7); 'community of musical affect' (p. 10); 'listening together and listening to each other' creating the affect (p. 24), and so forth to suggest the affect functions on musicophiliacs at a collective or communal level. Constraints of space and time compel me to address the point in a single paragraph instead of the 1100-odd words I had initially devoted to it. We begin from the 'recognizable repertoire of exclamations and gestures', expressions contributing to the production of '*mahaul* or atmosphere/ambience' (p. 82); elsewhere she acknowledges her own inexperience (or 'musical shyness' as she puts it) in knowing when and how to employ these expressions (p. 6). What she overlooks is the very specialised purpose they serve. They constitute responses to a musical idea or expression that the performer has just intoned, responses specifically attesting to the excellence of the latter. Which means that unless disingenuous or insincere, they are necessarily premised upon an honestly-held belief to the effect. Therefore, at the heart of these gestures and exclamations lies an assessment or evaluation, of necessity an intensely personal undertaking. Hence while the collective can and does play a vital role in musicophilia in its larger sense, it does not figure in the production of musical affect during performance. Informed listeners do not listen together. They listen individually. And hence so does the musical affect take root at the individual and not collective plane. The phrase '*wah-wah mandali*' can be considered meaningful only when used in its most pejorative sense, that is, when referencing claque and groupie-gangs tasked with boosting the performer's fan-following through premeditated acclaim. For similar reasons, so does the idea of 'community of musical affect' appear to be intrinsically flawed. This, in my opinion, vitally weakens one of the book's fundamental premises.