A Personal Experience in India through a Musical Composition

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Date:____________________________
Précis

During my study abroad experience in the large city of Pune in Maharashtra, India during the summer of 2012, I found myself immersed in the richness of the surrounding culture. Three distinct aspects of my trip captivated me the most: the bustling, wild traffic, the spiritual nature of Indian music and the dedication of those who performed it, and the dependence Indians had on the annual monsoons to provide water for the city. These three fascinating aspects of my journey led me to compose a sort of musical diary, expressing these sensations. As I was composing the three-movement wind quintet, I explored the musical device known as exoticism (using foreign musical gestures to evoke distant lands or locales) and the social construct of Orientalism. I was interested to know if my piece contained Orientalism or exoticism, and if I intended it to be that way.

I studied the ideas of exoticism and Orientalism in order to inform my own composition and decided that I had no intention of using Indian music as an exotic device or novelty. Instead, I merely intended to express my experiences as a Westerner in a culture foreign to me. The result is the three-movement composition, Wind Quintet No. 1, *Scenes from Pune.*
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Video 1 – Video recording of a ride in an Autorickshaw in Pune, India (5:33)

Video 2 – Video recording of Shivani Sur and Sonja Larson performing original fusion (7:43)

Video 3 – Video recording of Shivani Sur practicing traditional vocal Indian music (1:17)

Introduction

A chorus of honks and beeps bled through the safe steel walls of the SUV. Crowds of buzzing vehicles sped chaotically outside the tinted window. Motors ran incessantly and rhythmically all around me. I was in Pune, India, for the first time, simultaneously bewildered and fascinated by the disorganization surrounding me and overwhelmed by the images and sounds zipping all around me. At that moment, I decided I would compose a piece of music. Certain melodies and rhythms inspired by my surroundings were already at embryonic stages in my mind. By the time I arrived at the hostel where I would spend the next month and a half, I could sing back some of the sounds I heard in the busy streets of Pune.

Traveling is a great passion of mine. I enjoy diving into new situations, which is why I decided to study abroad in Maharashtra in the summer of 2012. Every place I have visited has taught me something unique and Pune was no exception. My love for travel developed from my upbringing in a military family; I moved constantly while growing up. I have observed many cultures, landscapes, and climates each leaving me with a different impression. As I became a more serious musician, I found the world around me to be the greatest inspiration for performing and composing music. When I returned to Washington State after my rich experience in India, I reflected on my journey and the sounds I associated with it. I decided that composing a three-
movement wind quintet to express the sensations of my trip would be an effective way to portray them.

Exoticism and Orientalism in Music History

To help prepare for writing my composition, I looked to other examples of Western music that evoked Eastern cultures and experiences in those cultures. One device used to suggest a land far away or a distant historical period in time is musical exoticism. Exoticism in the context of music may be defined as “the borrowing or use of musical materials that evoke distant locales or alien frames of reference.”¹ Historically these “distant locales” were those in the Middle East and Asia, more broadly termed “the Orient” by Europeans. This device considers Western musical styles to be normative and everything else as exotic. It also adopts the perception that all cultures and peoples in the Orient can be thought of as one large group. This mentality is known as Orientalism. Orientalism exists as a Western idea alone. The only reason the East is seen as a faraway place of intrigue is because the West labeled it as such. Through the arts, Europeans presented a tinted view of the Orient, one filtered by their own beliefs and culture.² Frequently, the mentality of Orientalism also attaches particular qualities to the East and West. The normative West held a self-appointed position of superiority over the otherness of the East.³

The early use of exoticism by European composers in the Classical Period (1750-1820) consisted largely of musical references to the Middle East and Turkey. Influenced by the eighteenth century Ottoman Empire, following their invasions of Europe during the eighteenth century, composers, such as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, began quoting Turkish musical styles

³ Said, 42.
and using Turkish instruments in their compositions, in particular Turkish percussion.\textsuperscript{4} Mozart used Orientalism to portray danger, which made sense within its historical context because of the recent threat posed to Europe by the Ottoman Empire. As time elapsed and musical styles evolved, exoticism continued to capture the interest of composers for different reasons. By the early twentieth century, composers such as Claude Debussy moved farther east in their use of exoticism, exploring Javanese, Chinese, and Japanese music. At this time, using the music of other, distant cultures “attained a vogue of considerable intensity.”\textsuperscript{5} Composers adapted foreign musical techniques such as pentatonic scales (five note patterns commonly used in much folk music, including some Western folk traditions) and non-Western tuning systems.\textsuperscript{6} Among the most prominent composers making use of exoticism was Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. Some of his most famous works include those employing heavy use of music exoticism, such as \textit{Scheherazade} and \textit{Mlada}. The latter is an opera featuring several foreign characters, one of which is called the “Indian Guest.” In the suite version of \textit{Mlada}, this character is expressed by a movement titled, “Indian Dance.” Though the influences are very stylized and only loosely related to authentic Indian music, “Indian Dance” has become a prominent example in the adaptation of Eastern cultures in Western music. The percussion parts are the most authentically Indian, with similar drum beats and patterns, though not quite as complex as authentic Hindustani or Carnatic music.\textsuperscript{7} While researching these composers and pieces, I began to question whether my music would employ Orientalist ideals or exoticism.

One view of Orientalism considers the Western use of exotic elements to have a basis in prejudice against the East. These Orientalists portray the differentness of the Orient as a

\textsuperscript{4} Bellman, 47.
\textsuperscript{5} Said, 118.
\textsuperscript{6} Bellman, 260.
\textsuperscript{7} Michail Jurowski, director; Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra, “Mlada Suite.” \textit{Mlada Suite, Overture on 3 Russian Themes, Fantasia on Serbian Themes, Sadko, Russian Easter Festival} (Capriccio Records).
spectacle, something so far removed from the norm that it becomes amusing or incredible. They exploit the culture of Asia for the shock value. This comes from a history of exploitation of the East. Beginning with the East India Company (a Dutch spice-trading company that exported goods from India to Europe) in the early eighteenth century, Europeans made their presence increasingly prominent in India. The British eventually subjugated the subcontinent, exploiting its resources, labor, and elements of Indian culture for their own gain. This included music. This further emphasized the Orientalist ideal of Western superiority over the East. Thus, since the late eighteenth century, Western interpretations of Indian music has been present in the West, and, although in modern times relations with the nation are not quite so imperialist, Western musicians still borrow from the attractive exotic elements found in Indian traditional music to add novelty and excitement to their music. With this in mind, I would like to avoid the notion of Orientalism or exoticism in my music. I have no intention of exploiting the Indian culture as some kind of novelty in a Western composition. This leads to an interesting question. Are Orientalists defined by their intentions or actions?

**Musical Influences**

My influences include works by Western composers, such as Rimsky-Korsakov’s “Indian Dance” from *Mlada*, which employs Indian percussive elements and almost continuous open fifths in the lower parts to imitate a drone normally used in ragas. The French composer, Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992), was among the first western composers to use authentic Indian rhythms or *talas* in his music. His piece, *Oiseaux exotiques (Exotic Birds)*, employs this

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9 Ragas are Indian melodic dialects, resembling Western scales.
10 Jurowski, *Mlada Suite.*
technique heavily along with melodic material taken from bird song. Another influential composer in applying exotic elements to Western music is György Ligeti. Ligeti used the folk music of his country, Hungary, as the exotic element in his music, rather than music of the Orient. Listening to his Sechs Bagatellen (Six Bagatelles) for wind quintet not only illustrated how to incorporate folk music in a modern piece, but how to orchestrate it for wind quintet (flute, oboe, clarinet, horn in F, and bassoon). Since my composition uses the same ensemble, Ligeti’s Sechs Bagatellen provides a useful example of how this particular combination of instruments can be used to evoke different cultures. These compositions informed my composition in terms of instrumentation and the use of exotic materials. While I may or may not consider myself to be using exoticism, it helps to have looked at how other composers portrayed lands that were foreign to them.

I also listened to other well-respected wind quintets to gain an even greater understanding of the ensemble’s orchestration, such as Quintet for Winds, op. 43 by Carl Nielsen, which includes a well-instrumented theme and variations. Another exemplary wind quintet is Ryan M. Hare’s Mythos, Five Legends for Wind Quintet, which uses repetition and motives (short segments of melodic material) effectively between instruments to create both unity and variation in his piece, something I explored in the third movement of my piece. His idiomatic writing for each instrument in the quintet also provides a useful example for other composers.

Besides listening to great examples of wind quintets and compositions employing exoticism, I studied some basic Indian music theory, including rhythms, ragas, ornamentation, and improvisation. Alam Danielou’s book, The Ragas of Northern Indian Music, is highly

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13 Ryan M. Hare, Mythos, Five Legends for Wind Quintet.
informative when it comes to the theory and history of the Indian musical tradition. The book acts as a translation dictionary for Western musicians; it explains the notes, melodies, and rhythms of Indian music in Western musical terms. This was exceptionally helpful when trying to notate Indian musical influences in compositions. Another book important to my project is *Classical Music of India* by Anant Vaidyanathan. This book illustrates the principles of Indian music and the traditions of classical music training in India. Vaidyanathan explains the structure and form of different ragas as well as the various schools of thought and the important improvisatory component of traditional Indian music. Listening to authentic Indian music has also been an important component to understanding the way Indian music theory works, and has provided me with another influence for my composition, particularly in the second movement.

**I. Autorickshaw**

The form of the piece consists of three movements, each portraying one of the three distinct aspects to my study abroad experience. While living in the vibrant metropolitan culture of Pune, Maharashtra, the buzz of crowded streets and craze of unregulated traffic left a strong impression on me. The day I arrived in the city, I sat in one of the only four-wheeled vehicles on the street while it zipped through the crowds of mopeds and motorcycles. This was the moment I first thought about composing a musical piece to relay my experiences in the country. As I rode in the car towards my soon-to-be home in Pune, my imagination conjured fast-moving, rhythmically unrelated musical segments, which became clearer throughout my stay in the city when I began using autorickshaws to travel around Pune. These are small automated vehicles with two-stroke motors and three wheels used as taxis in the bustling city.
Even though I rode in these vehicles countless times during my stay in Pune, I never really got used to the lack of lanes, disregard for speed limits, neglect for traffic signs, and the tens of thousands of motorcycles and cars moving swiftly and simultaneously through the streets.\footnote{See video one.} 

In the first movement of the quintet, my goal was for the audience to feel a sense of excitement, confusion, and motion. During the first three bars, I introduce many of the motives used throughout the movement. In the first beat of measure one, there are three grace notes leading to an eighth note in the flute and oboe line. This fast-moving figure helps evoke the hectic nature of the city and repeats several times during the course of the movement to unify it. The melody in the clarinet and counter melody in the bassoon during these first three measures each have their own rhythm and melodic direction to indicate the many speeding vehicles populating the streets. I used oboe and stopped horn playing accented eighth notes a half-step apart to evoke the continuing beeping horns that accompanied the traffic. Gershwin’s similar use
of car horns in *An American in Paris* influences these figures. The placement of these eighth notes in the measure is sporadic to give a sense of irregularity.

I. Autorickshaw

Fig. 2: Measures one through three of “Autorickshaw.”

Throughout the movement, I overlap on-beats and off-beats and change the beat emphasis of a measure to create disorganization and evoke a feeling of chaos. Although I use a tonal center around G in the first half of the movement to retain some structural and aesthetic unity, I did not plan any consistent harmonic structure or progression in this movement. This served to increase the musical unpredictability of the movement. I employ quickly-changing dynamics especially in the first half of the movement to portray fast motion in addition to a brisk tempo and moving notes. In measure sixty-three I introduce a contrasting B section that abruptly slows the movement’s pace. I included this section mostly for musical aesthetic and contrast. It also foreshadows the serene, improvisatory nature of the next movement. Throughout measures
seventy-six to seventy-nine, the pace and motion gradually increase eventually returning to the fast-moving motives of the beginning. While feeling a little confused and unsettled, the audience should still feel aesthetically drawn to the piece through its energy and unifying motivic features.

II. Atma

The second aspect of Indian culture to captivate me contrasts with the crazy rickshaw rides. This was the potent but calming spirituality of India, which impressed me as I spent many days listening to my Indian roommate and host mother practice their art of performing traditional Indian music. This spirituality was not necessarily a religious construct but rather a deep personal connection with the music they performed. My roommate, Shivani Sur, sings in the Indian tradition and has a master’s degree in the subject. My host mother, Swapna Datar, is a professional Indian violinist with many years of schooling. She founded and runs a hostel as a place for musicians to feel welcome. Both of these women inspired me immensely through the imagination and soul they possessed while performing their music. Shivani and I were able to play music together while we were roommates. We practiced together over the course of my visit to create a Western-Indian fusion. At the time I was working on the Bassoon Concerto in B-flat major, K191 by Mozart so we borrowed some elements from that piece and melded them with a raga. I remember having a difficult time improvising with Shivani who had been practicing the art for years. Still, it was one of the most musically rewarding experiences of my life. At the end of my stay we performed our composition for the final banquet in my study abroad program.¹⁵

During my stay with Swapna, I would come up to her apartment, which also doubled as her studio, every morning to have chai. Her violin students would often times be there too practicing ragas and techniques. I listened carefully while sipping chai and noticed many

¹⁵ See video two.
similarities in the way we both practiced, starting with scales (or ragas) and moving to pieces of music. This gave me stronger connection to the performance of Indian music. I also enjoyed listening to Swapna herself practice violin in the afternoon. Sometimes I stood outside her apartment just to listen. The way she played violin so differently than in Western music—from using slides and other ornamentation to the way she held the instrument—captured my interest. In the second movement of this quintet, I evoke more traditional Indian music to express the serene feelings I gathered while listening to these two women perform.

In “Atma,” the audience should note the large contrast in character from the energetic buzz of the first movement to the calm serenity of the second. I begin with sustained notes in the bassoon and horn which sound a fifth apart to emulate the drone used in Indian music. The movement is soloistic in nature, with melodic material presented by one instrument at a time in most instances. During these solos, I attempt to emulate the improvisatory quality of Indian traditional music by using a combination of fast-moving notes and grace notes to mimic the complex ornamentation. In the early stages of composition, I used a reference recording of Shivani practicing to generate some of these melodies. In the first half of the movement, I use the Hanumatodi raga, which corresponds with the Western Phrygian mode (Do, Ra, Me, Fa, Sol, Le, Te), with the tonic note of B.

![Phrygian scale or Hanumatodi raga starting on B.](image)

**Fig. 3:** Phrygian scale or Hanumatodi raga starting on B.

I used this raga because it is the one with which I became the most familiar while performing with Shivani, and I enjoy the sound of it. The lowered second degree of the scale (Ra), creates an

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[16] See video three.
interesting pull towards the tonic. In the second half of the movement, I modulate in measure thirty-six to a c-centered scale inspired by the raga marva (Do, Ra, Mi, Fi, Sol, La, Ti), but also uses a flattened third, sixth, and seventh degree (Do, Ra, Me, Fi, Sol, Le, Te), which does not exist in Indian music.

![Created scale used in the second half of “Atma.”](image)

I use this invented scale to create a more dynamic tonality. While remaining calm, the movement builds emotion through modulation and dynamic level until it reaches a climax. Here, the audience should feel a sense of fulfillment in some way, though they should interpret the context for themselves.

### III. Monsoon

The third aspect of Indian culture to inspire my composition was the dependence of the Indian people on the rains. As my time in India was drawing to a close, the arrival of the annual monsoon was delayed later and later in the season. If the rains did not arrive soon drought would have been imminent, and I felt this tension building among the inhabitants of Pune. This was the most striking and widespread issue I witnessed while in the city. This problem transcended any differences between people in the city because water supply affects everyone. It does not matter what religion one follows, to what caste she belongs, and whether she is wealthy or poor. Unlike most other issues in contemporary India, the country’s dependence on the annual rainfall, the monsoon, marks every person. Most people I spoke with in Pune mentioned the problem in some way. Sometimes it was just a passing comment about their water supply for the day and other
times they delve into the topic heavily, expressing all of their worries. This highly expected rainfall was and still is integral to the lives of Pune’s people, and the absence of it troubled everyone extensively. Though I left Pune before I was able to experience more than a taste of the monsoon, the relief that washed over the area as the rains finally arrived must have been enormous.

In the final movement of my composition, I attempt to convey the stress that filled the air as everyone anxiously awaited the rains and the immense relief the community felt when it finally came. The first six measures set up the mood for the beginning and end of “Monsoon” using long notes and dissonances to evoke stagnant stress. I use staccato quarter notes either a minor or major second apart to emulate slow motion and anxiety.

I use hocketing (scoring the melody across different parts) with many of the rhythms throughout this section of the movement to delay the sense of motion in the melodic line. For example, on the offbeat of beat three in measure six the clarinet begins a new melodic idea but the horn fills
in the next note on beat four. Then, the clarinet picks up the line again on beat one followed by horn and oboe on beat two and bassoon on beat three of measure seven. Most of the dissonant intervals I use include interval classes one and two. In measure five, the quintet plays a chord comprised of concert B, C, C-sharp, and D-sharp, followed closely by a D in the oboe. These are all intervals of a second stacked upon each other to create a stressful-sounding chord. In addition to dissonant intervals, I use the harsh timbre of flutter tongue in the flute, clarinet, and oboe parts to add an even greater feeling of anxiety. The audience should feel tension and some discomfort with this section’s slow pace and clashing notes.

This anxious, stressful section continues until measure thirty-eight where I begin a three-measure build-up into measure forty-one. At measure forty-one the movement reaches an important climax and begins a more consonant and fluid section. This represents the great relief people felt when the monsoon finally came. It also gives great relief musically by contrasting the slow-moving dissonant beginning. However pleasant and joyous this section is, it ends quickly like the monsoon. Only fifteen bars later, the second and most important climax occurs with a strong cadence to indicate the end of the consonant musical section. During measures fifty-six to sixty-nine the music becomes increasingly dissonant until the slower-moving beginning material returns at measure seventy. This represents the cyclical nature of the Indian people’s reliance on the monsoon. The piece ends quietly with flute, clarinet, horn, and bassoon playing a more consonant B dominant ninth chord until oboe comes in with a crunchy D-natural, creating an enigmatic and inconclusive ending.
Fig. 6: Measures eighty-one and eighty-two of “Monsoon.”

Conclusion

Are Orientalists defined by their intentions or their actions? In terms of my musical actions, in some ways, I may be considered an Orientalist. I borrowed music from the East and integrated it into a Western composition. I visited India as a predominately Western citizen with all the associated ideals and values. I am certain I harbor unconscious biases that were ingrained in me from my culture. In terms of intentions, I do not consider myself an Orientalist. I intended to learn some of the traditions of Indian music with a focused purpose: to convey the rich experiences I had while studying abroad in India. I did not aim to reproduce authentic Indian music or exploit the Eastern culture as something alien and exotic. I merely intended to reflect upon my experience in India from an inescapably Western perspective. I cannot remove myself from the Western culture in which I was raised. Is my work Orientalist? I would like to think not; I do not see the West as the normative or superior form of music, just the one with which I am more familiar. “No one has ever devised a method for detaching the scholar from the circumstances of life, from the fact of his involvement (conscious or unconscious) with a class,
set of beliefs, a social position, or from the mere activity of being a member of society."\textsuperscript{17} I am presenting the East, particularly Pune, India, through a Western perspective. Perhaps in this way I am using Orientalism or exoticism in my composition, but the intent behind my work was different. It is not culturally insensitive or immoral to borrow music of other cultures, only to define it as inferior or use it as a spectacle. Ultimately, what makes something Orientalist is the intentions behind it. Rather than using Indian musical traditions as a novelty (something that is now, in my opinion, culturally inappropriate) I integrated these elements to create something new and to help portray my personal impressions of a culture foreign to me.

My goal for this composition was not to provide a programmatic image of my experiences in India, nor to make something that sounded authentically Indian. It was to portray the feelings and sensations I experienced while in Pune. The titles of the movements may provide some detail in terms of what inspired the composition but in the end, the listener will decide what the quick, overlapping motives in the first movement mean. The audience will listen to the soloistic lines in the second movement and feel something completely unique. When consonance and fluidity arrive in “Monsoon” they will feel their own version of relief. The connection this piece has to my trip to India is a purely personal one. The rich experiences in Pune that inspired this work helped me compose it but ultimately, those who enjoy my music will apply their own personal meaning to it.

\textsuperscript{17} Said, 10.
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