Ephemeral Embodiments: The Materiality of Music and Dance in Colonial Punjab

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> Deep down the hope is that by giving marginalized voices places *to speak and shout and sing from*, anthropology can in some measure counter the long-standing arrogance of colonial and imperial authority, of history written in one language, in one voice, as one narrative.
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> Steven Feld [1]

How are music and dance archived as cultural forms? To what range of archives do historians turn in order to write histories of performative culture? The slant toward oral as opposed to written knowledge in South Asian performance traditions has meant that along with traditional archival research, any serious historian must rely equally on several other kinds of archives, including oral testimonies, ethnography, audio-visual recording, memoirs, etc. This vast diversity of source material constitutes what Stuart Hall has termed 'living archives': a necessarily 'unfinished, open-ended' repository.[2] Through a case study of researching histories of music and dance in colonial Punjab, I demonstrate here evidence from such 'living archives' for the ephemeral moment of performance. Across time, I locate two such instances of performance: one embodied in the female performer's body, and the second in the bodies of listeners to *rāga*-based music.

Given the sparseness of written notation in the South Asian case, these two ephemeral cultural artefacts (music and dance) have proven distinctly elusive for the historian to access through the traditional manoeuvre of solely relying on archival records. The technical difficulty of accessing performative cultures of the past is compounded by the fact that the majority of South Asian musicians have historically been unlettered, leaving behind only elusive archival traces. The 'trace' of the past on the present has been theorised for historical methodology more generally as well. According to Paul Ricoeur, the only measure of the 'reality' of the past is the way in which it survives in the 'traces' of the present, be they documents, testimonies, accounts of witnesses or oral memories. It is through the 'trace', then, that the past persists in the present, and the work of the historian is to re-enact the past by 're-presenting' these traces.[3]

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1 Steven Feld, 'A Rainforest Acoustemology', in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, Michael Bull, Les Back and David Howes, eds, Berg, Oxford and New York, 2003, p 223, emphasis added

2 See Stuart Hall, 'Constituting an Archive', *Third Text*, vol 15, no 54, Spring 2001, pp 89–92

3 See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, *Vol 3*, K Blamey and D Pellauer, trans, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1988 [1985], pp 98–100

Locating traces of these ephemeral cultural forms in the archives, and especially of socially liminal musicians and dancers, is a particularly fraught task. How might one write a history that provides a place for marginalised voices 'to speak, shout and sing from', as per ethnomusicologist Steven Feld's formulation quoted above? The technical difficulty of accessing voices from the past is combined with the ethical dilemmas of the very possibility of accessing the subjectivities of socially liminal musicians and dancers, separated from us in time, space and social location. Despite these limitations, of course, there do exist 'an infinity of traces' (*qua* Gramsci) of South Asian musicians and dancers in the archives. And, like the fairytale's giant, one can strain to detect 'the scent of (subaltern) human flesh' in the mainstream archives, to paraphrase Marc Bloch.[4]

Another way of doing this is to search for what Gyanendra Pandey has called 'un-archived' histories. Pandey argues that 'the very process of archiving is accompanied by a process of 'un-archiving': rendering many aspects of social, cultural, political relations in the past (and present) as incidental, chaotic, trivial, inconsequential, and therefore unhistorical. In other words, he says, 'the archive, as a site of remembrance… is also at the same time a project of forgetting'.[5] He then suggests we seek histories of 'the ordinary, the everyday, the ever-present, yet trivialised or trifling; conditions, practices, expectations and agendas *so common as to not even be noticed*'.[6]

Musicians, dancers and performers have traditionally constituted this 'trivial' realm, often seen as an added 'frill' to proper historical narrative, to more 'serious' political history. Part of the reason is that music and dance are so inherently ephemeral, and especially in the South Asian case where there is the vexing sparseness of written notation. But to what archives do historians turn to write histories of music and dance? One way to resolve this difficulty of accessing sound, especially from the pre-recording era, is by asserting the importance of being 'more interested in evidence *of* sound, than in [conclusive] evidence *for* sound', as Yvonne Liao suggests in her PhD on 1930s Shanghai.[7] In other words, instead of expecting the archives to produce fully fleshed-out accounts and biographies of musicians, or potentially replicable songs and performances, how can we trace clues to the presence of musicians and dancers in the traditional archival record? How can we detect the presence of the moment of performance itself, howsoever ephemeral?

I discuss below four different kinds of archival traces around music and dance, *and* musicians and dancers, in an attempt to demonstrate how it is only through a multiplicity of archival forms ('ever-mutating' and 'unfinished', after Hall) that we can reconstruct histories of performance in South Asia. The first three sources are from nineteenth-century colonial Punjab: a travel

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4 'The good historian is like the giant of the fairy tale. He knows that wherever he catches the scent of human flesh, there his quarry lies.' Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1992 [first English translation originally printed in 1953], p 22

5 Gyanendra Pandey, 'Un-archived Histories: The "Mad" and the "Trifling"', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol 47, no 1, January 2012, pp 37–41, pp 37–38

6 Ibid, pp 37–38, emphasis added

7 Y J Y Liao, 'Western Music and Municipality in 1930s and 1940s Shanghai', PhD dissertation, King's College, London, 2017, p 41

memoir in German translated into English detailing the moment of colonial encounter between an Austrian diplomat and a Punjabi performer, an anonymous artist's sketch, and a manuscript in Urdu and Gurmukhi detailing codes of ideal conduct for the princes of Punjab's royal house of Patiala. The final source consists of my 'intermedial' reading of an iconic scene from *Baiju Bawra* (1952), the classic mid-twentieth-century Hindi film directed by Vijay Bhatt and written by Zia Sarhadi. By discussing these four very different kinds of archival traces around music and dance, musicians and dancers, I offer an understanding of musical practices in Punjab as embodied techniques, which, while being shaped by colonialism, can equally offer important glimpses into Punjab's precolonial musical pasts.

Baron Charles von Hügel (1795–1870), an Austrian diplomat and explorer, was one of many European travellers who visited Maharaja Ranjit Singh's court at Lahore during the early 1830s, between 1831 and 1836. He wrote a remarkably detailed memoir of his travels through Punjab. In contrast to the Orientalist views of the majority of European observers, Hugel's account is atypical and exceptional in its comparatively neutral tone towards the Maharaja's famed corps of female dancers.[8] He provides us with valuable descriptions about these dancers, the conditions of their apprenticeship and employment at a royal court, etc. More significantly, though, Hugel offers a richness of detail around the very *act* of the musical and dancing performance itself. This is exemplified in the following paragraph:

> I shall not soon forget the expression with which the girl (a dancer called Kaira [sic]) sang… Throwing herself at the same time at the listener's feet, her features lighted up, as though beseeching for a hearing, and her hands clasping his knee…She moved away, *her hand raised, and her head thrown back*; while she threw an expression of despair into the last line, and *seemed to sob out* the words... She presently steps forward, the soft slow music becomes louder and quicker, as the expression becomes more impassioned; the dancer, describing either hope or fear, moves rapidly from side to side, and the whole usually concludes with an imitation of despair. [9]

This description lays out the peculiarities of the musical and dance performance Hugel witnessed in early nineteenth-century Lahore. The richness of his account is such that even twenty-first-century readers, familiar with the features of the north Indian courtesan's dance performance, will immediately recognise the contours of *bhāv*, *abhinayā* and the shifts in rhythm and tempo that characterise it. In particular, Hugel's account clearly lays out the ways in which

[8] However, in keeping with the tone of the other European travellers to the Lahore court, Hugel's account of the Sikh ruler Ranjit Singh himself is replete with the familiar negative tropes of the debauched Orientalist despot; for a broader discussion of this group of performers, see Radha Kapuria, 'Of Music and the Maharaja: Gender, Affect and Power in Ranjit Singh's Lahore', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol 54, no 2, March 2020, pp 654–690

[9] Baron Hugel, *Travels in Kashmir and the Panjab, containing a particular account of the government and character of the Sikhs*, translated and with notes by T B Jervis, J Petheram, London, 1845, p 345, emphasis added

the dancer sang and danced simultaneously, using both forms to express a lover's passion and despair. Hugel captures the power of expression and enactment that defines the courtesan's performance. This is a particularly good example of written words in the archive capturing a sense of the aural, the performative and the ephemeral moment.

The sense of despair enacted by the dancer 'Khairan' (misspelt by Hugel as 'Kaira') is also visible in an engraving (see **Figure 1**) from W G Osborne's account of Ranjit Singh's court for the year 1838, published in 1840.[10] Given that Osborne's journals date to 1838, they succeeded Hugel's observations by only two years, making it likely that the same (or largely similar) cohort of performers entertained both commentators. Osborne's engraving depicts a band of musicians and dancers located outside one of Ranjit Singh's camps, the open countryside visible in the trees behind them. The main cohort of performers includes five male musicians, playing a variety of musical instruments and accompanying three female performers. They are flanked by courtesans seated on the ground on both sides, with those on the right foreground leisurely smoking a *hookāh*, an allusion perhaps to their superior status as senior *tawā'if*.

It is clear that a dance performance is in progress, with the lead dancer's hand gestures embodying the very 'imitation of despair' referred to by Hugel above. Through an intermedial reading from these archival traces across different media–textual and visual–then, we are able to get an approximate sense of how dance performances at Ranjit Singh's Lahore court would have actually looked, sounded and felt like.

As per Klaus Jensen's concise definition, intermediality refers to the 'interconnectedness' of different media, denoting 'communication through several sensory modalities at once'.[11] In other words, intermediality is key to constructing narratives of ephemeral moments of musical performance from a distant temporal location in the past. Intermediality can also be understood, after Robin Nelson, 'as a bridge between mediums'. For Nelson, an intermedial approach is not 'either/or', privileging one medium over another (written versus visual or sonic, for example), or even an 'in-between' one. Instead, it is best described through a 'both–and' model of interpretation, where the perspectives and voices from both (or more) media come together to create meaning.[12] Fully capturing the ephemerality of musical and dance performance historically in the archives on South Asia is thus only possible through such an intermedial reading, combining insights from both written and visual, and as we shall see below, cinematic and sonic media.

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[10] Osborne was military secretary to William Bentinck, Governor General of India (1828–1834). Osborne's account was illustrated with sixteen engravings depicting different scenes from Ranjit Singh's court. It is unclear who the artist of the engravings was, and it is possible Osborne created these illustrations himself.

[11] Klaus Bruhn Jensen, 'Intermediality', in Wolfgang Donsbach, ed, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Communication*, Wiley/Blackwell, UK, 2015, p 279. The 'intermedial' can also be understood as the 'meeting of the material, the perceptual and the social'; see Lars Elleström, "The Modalities of Media: A Model for Understanding Intermedial Relations," in *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality*, Lars Elleström, ed, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, 2010.

[12] Robin Nelson, 'Introduction: Prospective Mapping and Network of Terms', in Sarah Bay-Cheng, Chiel Kattenbelt, Andy Lavender and Robin Nelson, eds, *Mapping Intermediality in Performance*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2010, pp 10, 14, 17

Figure 1: Engraving of 'Dancing Girls' at Ranjit Singh's camp – from W G Osborne, *The Court and Camp of Runjeet Sing: With an Introductory Sketch of the Origin and Rise of the Sihk* [sic] *State: Illustrated with Sixteen Engravings* (London: Henry Colburn, 1840), p 97, courtesy of The Portico Library, Manchester (Shelfmark B1277, Copy No 20096)

The final nineteenth-century source is the *Guru Nanak Parkash*, written at the princely court of Patiala in 1891 by Dewan Gurmukh Singh, Finance Minister of the princely state. The *Guru Nanak Parkash* is a multigenre text, containing a genealogy of the Patiala ruling dynasty, a manual of princely conduct, and also a commentary on Sikh scripture.[13] Gurmukh Singh creates a context to expound on the teachings of Guru Nanak through the passages on the social place of music. Singh argues that dreams can be a source of either pleasure or sorrow, in order to outline the importance of actions in earthly life and emphasising that good deeds alone pave the path to heaven. The author then portrays the dream sequence of an ordinary man, who desires the luxurious lifestyle of royalty and dreams of himself as the all-powerful monarch. The first part of the dream is a description of a magnificent royal court, which the author titled *'Hālat-i-Jalvat'* (The Condition of Splendour), where this ordinary man is enthroned as the powerful ruler with the great rulers of all time in attendance. The description of this courtly *darbār* is followed by an account of the 'State of Privacy' or *'Hālat-i-Khilvat'*, in which music and musicians played a central role:

> The singing is of such a character that all these *Rāgas* have appeared, embodied, as though statues (*mujassam)*, along with their thirty *Rāginis*. And they have begun displaying their unique, inherent nature (*tāsīr)*. This composition (*gat*) of the dance

[13] Dewan Gurmukh Singh, *Guru Nānak Parkāsh*, Aftab Press, Lahore, 1891, British Library shelfmark Or 13079

> of *Kamāch*, that atmosphere (created by) *ṭhumrī* and *ṭappā*, and (there is) such an intoxication of coquetry and elegance, that upon listening and watching, people at the court became like paintings on the wall. [14]

This is a remarkable passage of a fictional setting, and delineates the impact of the music itself on listeners. The linguistic choice of phrase, relating how 'people at the court became like paintings on the wall', echoes the use of a similar phrase in Persian by Sohan Lal Suri, court chronicler of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's reign, to describe the impact of the musicians on the audience (which had included Lord William Bentinck) at the *darbār* held in his honour at Rupar in 1831: 'and the clever singers made it clear in their most pleasant mood that they could make the audience like pictures on the wall by making them listen with one slowly developing, charming tune of theirs'.[15] Both these descriptions encapsulate the idea about the impact of music being such that it: i) transforms listeners into the stillness typical of paintings, or objects of art; and ii) enlivens the very melodic modes or *rāga*s to such a degree, that they bless the musician/performer by appearing in their human-sculptural form.

The phrase is also particularly apt given the existence of actual music-related wall murals painted in the Sheesh Mahal ('Hall of Mirrors') in the palace forts at both Lahore and Patiala.[16] These murals consist of musicians and performers themselves, as at Lahore, or in *rāgamālā* ('Garland of *Rāga*s') paintings of different *rāga*s and *rāginī*s at Patiala. Thus, both chroniclers – Sohan Lal Suri at the Lahore court, and Gurmukh Singh at the Patiala court – would have been familiar with these murals, rendering the 'paintings on the wall' phrase diegetic in both texts.

This idea about the power and impact of music is echoed some six decades later in a scene from the 1952 film *Baiju Bawra*. In this scene, the great sixteenth-century musician Tansen is solitarily practising the notes of the meditative and solemn Raga Darbari.[17] Before delving deeper into the scene itself, I wish to dwell on the specifically intermedial quality it holds for our analysis of discourses from late nineteenth-century Punjab on the impact of music on the external world. According to the narratologist Irina O Rajewsky, of the many meanings 'intermediality' may hold, one of the subcategories is in the sense of the 'intermedial reference'.[18] Rajewsky observes that:

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[14] Ibid, p 92, emphasis added

[15] Sohan Lal Suri, *Umdat-ut-Tawarikh, Daftar III, Chronicle of the Reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh 1831–1839 AD*, S Chand & Co, Panjab, 1961, p 88

[16] For more details on the Lahore mural, and for the *rāgamālā* paintings at Patiala, see Chapters 1 and 4, respectively, in Radha Kapuria, *Music in Colonial Punjab: Courtesans, Bards & Connoisseurs*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, forthcoming 2023

[17] The scene lasts from 1:12:19 to 1:15:41 in *Baiju Bawra* on the Shemaroo Movies YouTube channel https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CF35-vCIKfY, uploaded on 27 February 2018

[18] Irina O Rajewsky, 'Intermediality, Intertextuality and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality', in *Intermédialités: Histoire et théorie des arts, des lettres et des techniques*, no 6, Autumn 2005, pp 52–55, p 57

> In intermedial references the definitive intermedial aspect has to do with the reference itself which a given media product (such as a text, film, etc) makes to an individual product, system, or subsystem of a different medium, and to its medial specificities. Hence, the media product (and its overall signification) constitutes itself in relation to the media product or system to which it refers. [19]

In our context, the film *Baiju Bawra* constitutes itself in relation to the 'medial specifities' of the system of Hindustani classical music. The specific 'intermedial reference' to the discourses on music's impact we encountered above is evident in the following scene from the film. The eponymous hero of the film is Tansen's rival, Baiju Bawra. Baiju surreptitiously attempts to murder Tansen during this solitary musical practice session (see **Figure 2**). However, he fails spectacularly, on account of the music emanating from Tansen. Like the swords of Tansen's bodyguards, Baiju's own murder weapon is also lulled into distraction by the powerful music being produced by the maestro in his arresting voice.

The power of Tansen's singing is such that the *rāga*s and *rāginī*s seem to be responding in appreciative, choral unison to the 'call' of his *ālāp* (1:13:48 onwards, see **Figure 3**). At the conclusion of the scene, Baiju comes to his senses, proceeding to pick up his sword and strike Tansen's *tānpurā* with it. As the audience, the aural clue for us to understand that the music has ceased to flow is signified by the extra-musical sound of 'aah!' uttered in the choral voice of the *rāga*s and *rāginī*s, who, like the maestro, are stunned by Baiju's violent act.

Figure 2: Baiju preparing to murder Tansen – screenshot from *Baiju Bawra*, 1952, available to view on the Sheramoo Movies YouTube channel, www.youtube.com/watch?v=CF35-vCIKfY (see from 1:12:19 to 1:15:41)

[19] Ibid, pp 59–60

Figure 3: The Rāga-Rāginīs respond to Tansen's singing – screenshot from *Baiju Bawra*, 1952, available to view on the Shemaroo Movies YouTube channel www.youtube.com/watch?v=CF35-vCIKfY (see from 1:12:19 to 1:15:41)

In many ways, then, the tropes available in elite Punjabi writing on music from the late nineteenth century are part of the diegesis of this scene from *Baiju Bawra* in the mid-twentieth century. This scene is the perfect embodiment of the ways in which such notions comprised 'living archives' that mid-twentieth-century filmmakers subconsciously tapped into, while creating what is still the most popular film on classical music in mainstream Hindi cinema.

It is not only the power of the singing alone that is of import here but also the act of historical imagination for us as researchers, two centuries removed from nineteenth-century Punjab. The power of the audiovisual medium, and especially of the cinematic as a mode of enlivening traces from the past, bringing to life historical figures and imagined historical moments, helps us imagine the 'stickiness', as it were, of a complex nineteenth-century metaphor. It is only upon viewing, and listening to, the response of the Raga and Ragini paintings to Tansen's singing in the intermedial reference from the *Baiju Bawra* clip that we can fully appreciate the metaphysical, artistic and ephemeral impact music was understood to have on elite listeners in nineteenth-century Punjab. To put it another way, this mid-twentieth-century depiction of a sixteenth-century singer's musical skills acts as a sonic bridge to understanding textual discourse on music from a late-nineteenth-century manuscript. In the process, the intermedial referencing of musical discourses going back several centuries in the twentieth-century film *Baiju Bawra* infuses the archive, as constituted by the late-nineteenth-century Patialvi text, the *Guru Nanak Parkash,* with a 'living' quality for modern readers.

From a description of sound brought alive through written words and engravings in the nineteenth century, to the enlivening of art and painting through musical sound via the

cinematic medium in the mid-twentieth, I hope to have established that an intermedial reading is the most useful one to understand the palimpsestic living archives of music in dance in colonial and contemporary Punjab.

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