



## **‘DIVINE LIGHT’ ACCOMPANYING ESSAY**

**By DR ANITA DATTA**

The realisation that India has a long-established choral tradition, and one that has origins and outposts far beyond beyond the convent school chapels, basilicas, and church cloisters, is sometimes a cause of surprise amongst Western choral enthusiasts. Like much of India’s cultural heritage, India’s choral tradition is a syncretic, multi-cultural, interfaith affair, a palimpsest of many cultures, languages, and aesthetics that emerges as a body of expression unified only through its diversity. Writing for the journal of the American Choral Directors Association in 1977, William Ermey noted that India’s choral tradition can be traced back at least as far as 1700, such that the Western Choral musics that arrived in later periods of colonization with the Portuguese, French, and English were necessarily a superimposition on existing, well-established, and pluralistic vocal cultures across devotional, secular, and folk traditions in the subcontinent (de Quadros 1997). Thus, across India, Portuguese secular song, Hindustani and Carnatic raga, Victorian Hymnody, and regional folk musics mingle in the repertoires of choral societies, radio choirs, film music and robed church choirs to form an abundant, if fragmented and frequently idiosyncratic, choral culture.

This recording offers a curated selection of music reflecting the plurality within and around what might be described as the living Indian Choral tradition. Works by 20<sup>th</sup> Century pioneers of choral music in India sit alongside music by contemporary innovators in the Indian and Western classical traditions. Christian prayer in Konkani, Greek and English nestle amongst Hindi secular poetry, excerpts from the Upanishads, and the philosophy of Desiderius Erasmus. These performances are juxtaposed with selected works based on the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), a polymathic humanist, a literary and political revolutionary whose contemporary influence extended across Europe from his home near Kolkata, West Bengal. The English translation of his poetry collection *Gitanjali* (Song Offerings) was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, making him the first non-European to receive this award and, to date, the only

Indian. In the same year he published his metaphysical poetic work *The Gardener*, and it is from these two transnationally celebrated texts that the works by international composers, including Somerville's own Christopher Churcher, find their source. Almost 100 years on from Tagore's fêted European tours, including visits to Oxford, it is fitting that his transnational call for a universalistic humanism continues to be explored by living composers from around the world.

In an era of great cultural and political change, this album is a timely expression of the Indian ideal of unity in diversity, achieved with joy through intercultural exchange and creative collaboration.

#### **Tuttarana – Reena Esmail**

Reena Esmail's playful title expresses the form of the work: A *Tarana* for a *Tutti*, that is, a whole-choir explosion of joyful rhythmic syllables in a virtuosic raga exposition. The *Tarana* of Hindustani Classical Music draws its name from Persian, meaning 'to sing', and is a form of vocal extemporisation using syllables derived variously from the sounds of Indian classical drumming (*bols*) and monosyllabic spiritual mantras. In this piece Esmail works melodic phrases in Rag Jog, a lively raga characterised by its zig-zag descending movements and playful alternation between major and minor third degree of the scale. Esmail extends the raga's scope through Western techniques such as modulation (shifting the home note), accessing a wider range of pitches and colours than a strict interpretation of the pentatonic Jog soundscape would offer. The result is a punchy performance, alive with colourful pitch slides, accented offbeats and Jog's characteristic mischievous dynamism.

#### **Paranjoti – Kyrie Eleison**

Victor Paranjoti is widely considered one of the leading protagonists of Indian Choral music. Founder of the Paranjoti Academy Chorus of Bombay, a choral society that performs extensively to this day, his compositional style drew together the linear characteristics of Carnatic music with the forms and harmonic precepts of Western classical. This piece explores minor and augmented sonorities resulting from the peculiar ascending and descending forms of the Ragam Purvikalyani, which features a flat second and sharpened fourth degree relative to the Ionian Mode (i.e. Western Major Scale). A bell tolling during the start of the Kyrie sections evokes both Christian and Hindu worship, brightening the palette emphasising the prominent major third degree of the raga, which is associated with deep peace and spiritual devotion.

#### **Miškinis – The Same Stream of Life**

The genesis of this piece demonstrates the diffuse influence of Tagore and the transnational reach of Indian influence upon the arts. Commissioned of Lithuanian composer Vytautas Miškinis by The New Dublin Voices, the English text arrived to the composer via its German translation. The word translated as 'life' is, in the original Bengali, *pran* (প্রাণ), which has the more nuanced sense of life-breath, breath, or vitality. Thus, the text expresses the unity of the life-force in all things in nature, and the pulsing vibrancy of Miškinis' setting presses the vitality throughout the work. Although in translation the poems do not convey the poetic reduplication of Tagore's original, wherein almost every noun appears twice like a pulsing heartbeat, Miškinis arrives at a repetitive impulse himself, drawing out the deeper invitation in words and music to attend to the message of universality in Tagore's theosophic vision.

#### **Jackson (Gabriel) – Peace my Heart from Requiem**

Set amongst Jackson's Requiem, *Peace my Heart* expresses an intimacy of grief that is both intensely personal and universally recognisable. Sharing with many other cultures the view that death is a gateway to something greater, the gentle setting creates a meditative glow around the beauty of Tagore's words, reflecting the solemnity of the respect the poet shows to the departed beloved, and the luminescence of the lamp they hold to light the spirit's way.

#### **Hella Johnson – Gitanjali Chants**

The broad influence and enduring appeal of Tagore's *Gitanjali* may be partly attributed to the plurality of meaning carried in the poetry of the Bengali language from which the verses are derived. In contrast to ideals of specificity and precision often prized in Germanic linguistic cultures, Bengali is a language in which the inherently multiple meanings of words and their forms is exploited in ordinary speech as well as literary form. Throughout *Gitanjali* Tagore's casual use of Bengali's inherently fluid, genderless third-person structures to create poems that could, in alternate or simultaneous interpretations, express a relation between lovers, friends, parent and child, or devotee and divinity. Hella Johnson picks up on the monastic, spiritual nature of these texts, setting them in a simple, Gregorian chant style, peppered with only occasional bare harmonies. This exposing approach to the text results in a candid and intense exposition of prayerful, adoring wonder.

#### **Churcher – Light**

Christopher Churcher engages Tagore's poetic exploration of light through a blending of drone-like, slow moving harmonies that suspend dissonance through long phrases evoking the constancy and texture of light impressed in sound. The central section counterposes syllabic rhythms to paint the beating natural imagery through which

Tagore simultaneously evokes the somatic experiences of light and warmth, and the spiritual experience of basking in the presence of the divine.

### **Alexander – Faith is the Bird**

Elizabeth Alexander draws upon Appalachian and Gospel traditions to shape this lively, joyful piece with its bluesy harmonic language and playful, dip-diving melodies. Playfulness of the repetition and variation builds energy and radiance towards the glorious, shimmering, final chord.

### **Paranjoti – Poili Santa**

Poili Santa is an *ovi*, a nuptial folk song, from the Konkani region which stretches across Maharashtra and Goa on India's West Coast. The singing of *ovi* is traditionally sung during the preparations of the bride, including the sewing of her *sado* (sari) and the *chuddo* (Bangle Ceremony). Catholicism has been a dominant force in Goa and the wider Konkani regions since the Portuguese colonial era in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, and so the text of this traditional song is replaced with words invoking the cross as the foundation of the singers' faith in the Konkani language. Paranjoti's homophonic setting retains the simplicity and spirit of the unison-sung traditional music of the regions, while adding supportive *a capella* accompaniment in the rest of the choir.

### **Rajasekar – Light Eternal**

Shruthi Rajasekar is a dual heritage composer and musician whose music celebrates and encompasses the dynamism of her South Indian and Western musical and cultural heritages. In *Light Eternal*, she explores the themes and symbolism of light in the Christian and Hindu faiths, drawing on the Psalms and the Upanishads as well as the philosophic work of Erasmus to consider the significance of earthly and spiritual enlightenment. The eternal nature of light, energy, and the spirit emerges through the semiotics of the texts but also of the music itself, particularly in Shruthi Rajasekar's deployment of the *Thanam* form in the written climax for choir, which intermingles with the improvised *Thanam* performance of world-leading Saraswati Veena player Nirmala Rajasekar. This distinctive style of exposition is etymologically derived from *Ananta*, the Sanskrit for the eternal or limitless, extending the messages of the selected texts into the sonic plane.

### **Nirmala Rajasekar – Coffee Kapi**

Nirmala Rajasekar is a Saraswati Veena performer and composer renowned internationally for her versatility, astonishing technique, and the stunning tonal quality of her playing. She is the recipient of the highest civilian honour in the state of Tamil Nadu, the Kalaimamani, awarded by the state's Directorate of Art and Culture. A

traditional performer of great standing, she has worked extensively with musicians across cultures, genres, and styles, taking the Veena and Carnatic approaches to music-making into new frontiers. Her imaginative thinking is apparent in her composition *Coffee Kapi*, commissioned and premiered by the St. Olaf College Jazz Band in 2008. Anchored firmly in the affordances of the versatile Raga Kapi and rhythmic framework of Thalam Adi, the piece's title plays on the double meaning of Kapi in Tamil, as both the name of a raga and of coffee, a highly popular beverage with distinctive cultural pre-eminence in the Tamil region of India. The recording features a veena alapana (improvised sketch) of the raga before the composition commences.

### **Bhatia – Six Seasons**

Vanraj Bhatia was a multi award-winning composer from Bombay, trained in Hindustani and Western Classical music, and best known for his contributions to Indian New Wave Cinema and Contemporary Indian Classical Music. In his youth he won multiple international scholarships, including a prize that facilitated his studying composition at the Conservatoire de Paris with Nadia Boulanger. In 2012 he was awarded the civilian honour of Padma Shri for his distinguished services to music and the arts. This suite of six pieces describes in miniature the parade of seasons in North India. Bhatia sets Hindi language poems within ragas associated with the respective times of year, seeking to capture the improvisatory linearity of Hindustani raga in the structures of Western SATB verticality, and an overarching programmatic form. In the melodic writing of the pieces, Bhatia gives precise indications for approaches to ornamentation that are distinctly Hindustani in character, notating *gamak*, decorative oscillation between notes, and pitch-sliding note changes in the style of *meendh*. The scores as artefacts are themselves, therefore, innovative documents, scripting a bold vision of contemporary Indian music in the precision of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Western staff notation. The result is a distinctive exposition that is syncretic in its conception, transcription, and sonorities.

**Dr Anita Datta, Spring 2025**