



Andrew Alter, *Dancing with Devtās: Drums, Power and Possession in the Music of Garhwal, North India*

Ashgate, UK, 2008. 302 pages. 19 b&w illustrations, 33 musical transcriptions, 1 map. Hardback, £65.00. ISBN: 978-0-7546-5669-2.

THE AUTHOR, ethnomusicologist Andrew Alter, is Senior Lecturer in Contemporary Music Studies at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. In the *fourteen-year* study *Dancing with Devtās*, Alter describes the drum-centered music of Garhwal in the central Himalayan state of Uttarakhand, India. His aim is to “identif[y] elements of musical practice that illustrate meaning and power in music” (3), in particular the power to make listeners dance through the agency of deities (*devtās*). The book’s strength lies mainly in richly describing a fragment of an extensive drumming tradition. Together with the works of such scholars as GROESBECK (1995), HUEHNS (1991), TINGEY (1994), and WEGNER (1986), and forthcoming volumes by MANUEL and WOLF, Alter’s work draws attention to the role of percussion not merely as accompaniment, but more importantly as the defining feature of musical events that are critical in religious and life-cycle rituals.

The book is comprised of nine chapters and a short conclusion. Part one, chapters one through six, provides a background for part two, the analyses of three performance contexts. In Chapter 1, Alter presents a “theoretical framework” that points toward “ways in which musical meaning translates into musical power.” Powerful music, he explains, makes people do things, and is of two types: “teleological,” designed to “influence, create, or control action and phenomena,” and “symbolic,” which “carries or holds a reference to powerful things as mutually agreed by a group or society” (12). Although Alter cites a number of authors here and throughout the book, his model does not build upon existing models or take account of the significant literature on musical semiotics. The use of the term “symbolic” is particularly problematic, not only because of the questions raised by the more specialized terminology of C. S. Pierce, but also because it leaves out any consideration of what it means to “mutually agree.” Music also holds sway in ways that Alter might acknowledge as powerful even when members of societies disagree about them—violently (as in the case of drumming during Muharram, for example). Alter’s model points out four “spheres of interaction between music and the contexts of performance”: belief systems, physical power (volume, densities), expressiveness, and “the social cultural sphere... [in which] the uses and functions of music are related to such things as relationships of power exhibited through dominance and control in social hierarchies” (13). This theoretical framework, composed of four vaguely outlined components and resting on several circular definitions (for example, power is defined with terms that include “power”), is not the strongest feature of the book.

Chapter 2 provides background on the region, its people, and language. The literature review, though short, reads like an extended footnote. For example, re-

garding a work by John Leavitt, Alter writes that it “has important implications for Garhwali epic renditions” without cluing the reader in as to why this is so. Chapter 3, “Caste Groups and Instrumentalists,” is a brief and useful introduction to the social and religious positions of musicians in the region. It focuses on the most significant group for the study, the Bajgis. Chapter 4 introduces the performance genres and Chapter 5, the musical instruments. Garhwal instruments are cognate with instruments spread more widely in the Himalayas and include barrel, kettle, and waisted drums, trumpet, bagpipe, and a metal dining plate (*thālī*) used as an idiophone. The paired *ḍhol* (barrel drum) and *damauñ* (shallow kettle drum) are featured in the analysis; these resemble the familiar pairing of *ḍhol* with *tāsha* in other parts of South Asia, but the texture of their interaction is distinct. From this useful chapter, it emerges that Garhwalis associate larger-sized drums and their lower pitches with femaleness and smaller, high-pitched drums with maleness (the reverse of what one finds in some other areas of South Asia). The hand-drawn illustrations in this chapter are both attractive and useful. Chapter 6 discusses a fascinating but illusive text called the *Ocean of Drumming* (*Ḍhol Sāgar*) that some claim to have seen in printed form. This text is supposed to be a compendium of all that is known about the *ḍhol* and how it is used in ritual contexts, but it is also, according to some performers, a text of verses and syllable sequences that performers have transmitted orally. That is, for some it is a kind of rule and instruction book for *ḍhol* and for others it constitutes aspects of the content of *ḍhol* performance itself.

Part two consists of an analysis of drumming at the Pāñḍavalīlā (wedding music), and a form of storytelling, singing, and dancing called *pawārñā*. As a reader I had hoped these three chapters would dig deeper ethnographically, and indeed at the beginning of Chapter 7, we are led by motorcycle into the world of Andrew Alter’s fieldwork. Unfortunately, the mood is broken after two pages with an unnecessary section that begins, “This chapter marks a departure from the form and tenor of Part I of this book.” This is but one instance of larger writing problems in this book—repetitious reminders, gratuitous quotations, and awkward constructions—that careful editors and manuscript reviewers ought to have spotted.

Chapter 7 focuses on the music associated with an episode in the *Mahābhārata* (Hindu epic). The discussion proceeds rapidly into musical particularities. The reader is informed that the many transcriptions in this and the next chapter were made on the basis of video recordings, and for this reason contain more detail than can be detected by the ear on the useful CD included in the back of the book.

Alter includes an illuminating discussion of the role of vocables in the drum tradition, pointing out that some of his informants did not distinguish “reciting” from “playing” *bol* (syllable) sequences. Although drummers did not assign lexical meaning to the syllable sequences (as they do in other parts of the Himalayas), they seemed to suggest that these syllables once possessed a greater significance than they now do, and that information about this lost meaning can be found in the *Ḍhol Sāgar*.

Alter points out that drummers rarely used the term *tāl* for their percussion patterns; they prefer the term *bājā*. This widespread terminological preference in South Asia tends to separate a classical view of *tāl* as an abstract metric structure

(which could, as in Hindustani music, have an associated *ṭhekā*, or characteristic timbral/accental pattern) from one of a variety of regional views of percussion patterns that emphasize their status as items of repertoire—not as metric frameworks within which a piece is set (see WOLF forthcoming). Alter correctly associates the noun *bājā* with the verb *bajānā*, to play (a musical instrument), and therefore translates the term as a “playing” or a “stroke.” The etymological basis for the term in Sanskrit, however, is *vādhyā*, meaning musical instrument; examples from several South Asian languages and language families demonstrate that naming items of repertoire according to the musical instruments/ensembles upon which they are played is characteristic of South Asia as a musical area. The Garhwal case studies also relate to other drum-centered traditions in South Asia in that they involve modulation from *bājā* to *bājā*. The art of stringing together drumming patterns in such varied traditions as Scheduled Caste drumming in Tamil Nadu, *ḍhol-tāsha* playing across South Asia, and *ḍhol* playing in Panjab, Sindh, and Rajasthan, remain under-examined in the scholarly literature and deserve treatment not only in the broader South Asian context, but also in the context of Central and West Asian suite structures, both modern and historical (see AL FARUQI 1985).

Although I had difficulty in hearing the recorded examples as transcribed (in part because of the missing visual component), it is clear in examining the first several examples that the *damauñ* parts, at the very least, are made up of a few modules that are repeated and varied. The modules are shorter than the whole unit (that is, the “piece”) that is repeated. I would have liked to have seen more attention paid to the building blocks of the patterns and how they are transformed within the tradition as a whole. As the drummers move through the sequence of *bājās*, the dancing becomes more emphatic; finally, a concluding *bājā* is played when some of the characters become possessed. Chapter 7 marshals the musical evidence to suggest that “steadily increasing tempo” and “continuously more dense compound divisions” create a climax that leads to possession. Alter is careful to point out here, and elsewhere, that the examples chosen for analysis are significantly different from performances during the same rituals in other parts of Garhwal. Given these major differences, it would have been helpful if Alter could have made statements of a more general nature as well—what does he make of these variations? What is the wider significance of the analysis he does provide? Do drummers in many of the other villages also produce musical climaxes that lead to possession?

The analysis of wedding music in Chapter 8 also emphasizes how partial Alter’s view necessarily is. In this case, not only do traditions vary regionally, but also, at any given moment, more than one band is playing at the same time and live music is often overlaid with recorded music. The wedding repertoire analyzed here points toward a drum-based semiotic system whereby different drum patterns are linked to particular rituals. This music-indexicality is also widespread in the folk, ritual, and classical music of South Asia—some traditions favor melodies, some favor drum patterns, some employ a combination of drum patterns and melodies. Geography plays a role in the naming of *bājās* and also in their composition, in that repertoire performed “while climbing a steep path,” for example, ought not be too complicated or virtuosic. Path-related *bājā* names also include those played while

“going around a bend,” “for walking single-file on a level path,” “at the edge of a river,” and “for climbing up to the bride’s house.”

The final chapter describes the performance of the story of rival brothers Kirthipal and Kunjpal by a singer/storyteller to the accompaniment of the *hurkī* and *thālī*. The *hurkī* is an hourglass-shaped drum whose straps can be squeezed to provide alterations in pitch. The relation of *hurkī* to *thālī* (metal plate) is comparable to that of *ḍhol* to *dhamauñ* in that the former instrument in each of the pairs is deeper in pitch and rhythmically less dense than the latter. In terms of expressing the drama of the story, Alter found that “more emotive passages incorporate wider oscillations at a louder volume” and “more delicate passages involve less oscillation and a softer volume” (180). Alter provides a fine-grained analysis of the performance, and identifies eight vocal delivery styles that are defined by whether or not they are pitched, the style of articulating the text, the way of using the *hurkī* as accompaniment, presence of vocal accompaniment, and presence of dance. As in Chapter 7, Alter provides a chart of the whole performance, here in terms of the different vocal delivery styles. The segment of the performance from which the audio examples derive is shown clearly and helpfully on this chart.

The conclusion returns to the “four spheres of musical power” laid out in chapter 1. Although this was an appropriate way to tie up the book, I could not help but feel that the framework, which to me lacked rigor, did not do justice to the musical analyses in the book—which were rigorous. I was left wondering if the “theoretical frame” might better have been one that addressed the musical process itself, as so much of the book was actually focused on musical sound and conceptualization.

In keeping with other books of the SOAS musicology series, this volume is handsomely produced—a hardcover book with a tastefully designed dust jacket, ample photographs and musical notations, a CD—and handsomely priced at about \$100. The typesetting, however, did not match this standard. Diacritical markings for terms in Indian languages looked clunky—the tilde used to indicate nasalization appeared fat and large in relation to the very fine macrons over *i*’s and *a*’s. The width and spacing of letters were also unattractive, the macron over an “i” often bumping into the next letter when italicized. Hopefully, Ashgate will overcome this technical hurdle in future publications.

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