KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Professor Tina K. Ramnarine

Performance Research in a Decolonising Era: Examples from India and its Diaspora

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Performance researchers have much to contribute to the study of decolonisation, a scholarly and political discourse gaining momentum as the age of empire recedes further into the past. This paper will draw on examples from India and its Diaspora to highlight the capacity of performance research to deepen understandings of colonial and postcolonial experiences.

The discussion will focus on two aspects of the processes of decolonisation. The first aspect relates to historiography and its revisions, illustrated with reference to performance research on the labour histories of Indian indentureship in the Caribbean, Fiji, Mauritius and South Africa (e.g. Dabydeen and Samaroo, 1987 and 1996; Bandyopadhyay, 2010). What are the insights to be gained from highlighting the performative dimension of a history that was formed by nineteenth-century British imperial policies on trade in sugar, tea, spices and other commodities? The question is timely since this year, 2017, marks the centenary of the abolition of indentureship.

The second aspect relates to decolonising reassessments of the impact of empire and its legacies in Britain. This ranges from historical opposition to indentureship to reconfigurations of the British national imagination. The former includes performances that took place in India, as well as in its diasporic sites, while the latter can be traced through the convergence of musical performances in the former imperial centre. A key trope will be collaboration as a way of articulating celebratory features of social relations in music historiography, which will be considered through the joint projects of Ravi Shankar and Yehudi Menuhin. Theoretically, the paper will be guided by performance research perspectives in revisionist historiography and M. K. Gandhi’s (1927) autobiographical insights into self (re)-creation as an ‘experiment with truth’ in decolonising processes.

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Christopher L. Ballengee, PhD

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‘When de music soundin’ sweet’: Performance practice, instrument construction, and the changing aesthetics of Trinidadian tassa drumming

Tassa drumming in Trinidad and Tobago is a unique manifestation of the North Indian dhol-tasha tradition, which was spread globally by the British indenture system from 1838-1917. While Trinidadian tassa retains many of the distinguishing features of its forebears, tassa has taken a decidedly Caribbean trajectory in its development. Moreover, tassa is an important accompaniment for Hindu weddings, Hosay (the central...
event in the Shi’a Muslim Muharram observance), and other Indian Trinidadian cultural events through which it has become an icon of Indianness in Trinidad and Tobago’s multicultural society.

This paper examines links among changes in tassa repertoire, instrumental timbre, playing technique, and instrument construction all within a broader discussion of Indian-identified musical practice. Among other changes in instrument construction, the 1990s transition from the traditional clay-shelled tassa drum to the now more common metal-shelled tassa was influenced by and has in turn fueled increasingly virtuosic expectations in technique and repertoire, demonstrated especially in formal tassa competitions and corollary movements toward professionalization of the art form. Such expectations have also catalyzed an aesthetic trend toward dramatically different timbres made possible through this new technology. Such changes are not without controversy, however, as veteran drummers often decry contemporary performance practice they perceive as privileging entertainment over musical substance. Drawing on Trinidadian slang to bring these issues into focus, I summarize competing notions of what comprises a “sweet,” or good, tassa performance in terms of timbre, repertoire, and technique.

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Magdalen Gorringe
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**The BBC Young Dancer and Decolonising Imagination**

The process of decolonisation requires a radical re-imagination of how we construct our identities – one that steps away from fictions of independence and essentialism, and acknowledges the complex web that places our cultures and economies in constant dialogue with and interdependence on each other. It requires a self-conscious abandonment of identities that privilege nostalgia for an idealised past, whether this is perceived as lost through geographical dislocation, or through the changes of history – a nostalgia that tends to underplay cultural interweavings in favour of cultural essentialism. This process is urgently required now, in the face of trends across the world towards strident nationalism and separateness.

The arts can serve to reinforce such essentialism or to disturb it. My contention is that the televised competition, the BBC Young Dancer, offers an imperfect yet important model for a navigation between essentialism and assimilationism; between valuing the distinctive and insistence on difference, thereby contributing to a decolonised imagination of our future.

In a welcome departure from the BBC young musician (focused exclusively on Western classical music), the Young Dancer includes a South Asian dance category (covering bharatanatyam and kathak) as an equal fourth among three other categories (hip-hop, Western contemporary and ballet), thereby situating South Asian dance forms as equally representative of ‘British’ dance. At the same time, its commitment to showing how young performers use their techniques ‘to express something new’ disrupts the
desire of both Western and Indian diasporic audiences to see in South Asian dance forms a 'somehow timeless …means of accessing "Indianness"'.

In this way it helps us to imagine a 'decolonised' future, which acknowledges the past to allow us to shape new identities - rather than seeking (impossibly and dangerously) to restore a supposed identity from the past.

Dr Jasmine Hornabrook
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Gender, New Creativity and Carnatic Music in London

Musical creativity and gender roles are shifting in the Carnatic music scene in London. Carnatic music has a long history, from its origins in the Sanskrit Vedas and Tamil pannisai to its current presence in South Asian diasporic culture, yet it was deeply impacted by British colonialism. Scholars suggest that Carnatic music in the twentieth century lay at the heart of Indian sovereignty that was not open to any negotiation or compromise (Subramanian 2006: 17), whilst others suggest the virtuosic style is a 'modern and postcolonial desire' to create a 'natural and authentic' Indian sound and representative 'voice' distinct from anything 'remotely Western' (Weidman 2006: 57). Within this nationalist project, ideals of femininity positioned women to uphold the inner core of Indian culture as the 'bearers of tradition' (Bakrania 2013: 17; Chatterjee 1989). In contemporary diasporas, such as displaced Sri Lankan Tamil communities in London, Carnatic music learning and performance is indicative of a constructed Tamil cultural identity that emerged as part of Tamil cultural and ethnic solidarity with India in the face of ethnic persecution in Sri Lanka. Many musicians now experiment with their Carnatic musical background to find a new diasporic voice, breaking away from 'traditional' gender roles and the rigidity of the Carnatic music aesthetic of twentieth century India.

This paper examines emerging creative projects amongst second-generation female musicians within Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic communities and the Carnatic music scene in London. Whilst retaining their 'Indian' sound, these second-generation musicians now combine their Carnatic background with their everyday soundworlds in London. These creative processes shift from an aesthetic that was responsive to colonialism in India to highlight hybridity in a diasporic community that largely uses Carnatic music to portray an essentialised ideal of South Asian/Tamil identity. I argue that the examples in this paper decentre cultural expectations and the position of women as bearers of tradition and reposition them as creative agents in a transnational diaspora and global city.
Colonial Choreography for Colonial *Mise-en-scène*: Manipulation of Sri Lankan Dancers in Colonial Photographs and Films

During nineteenth and early twentieth century the British called Sri Lankan dancers “Singhalese devil dancers.” “Singhalese devil dancers” is a colonial manifestation. The colonizers named these performers “devil dancers,” unilaterally imposing Christian notions of the devil on to Sri Lankan dancers, although some of them represented sacred indigenous deities. The British displaced various performers that came from different social and religious contexts in pre-colonial Sri Lanka and categorized them in a reductive repertoire named “Sinhalese devil dancers.” This repertoire was readily received by Europeans as it justified the colonial project, the white man’s burden to save the “uncivilized” East.

In colonial photographs billed as “Singhalese devil dancers,” Sri Lankan dancers appear with unusual combination of costumes and gestures. While they were wearing dance costumes of an agrarian ritual of central hills, they pose gestures of healing dance of Southern Sri Lanka. There is no evidence that suggests these two components – costume and gestures – appeared together. But, why did that only happen in colonial visual media? I will analyze various visual medial such as colonial photographs and films to examine the colonial encounter with Sri Lankan dancers.

Using the political interpretations given to the act of choreography, in this paper, I consider the colonial inscription, manipulation, and control of Sri Lankan dancing bodies through camera as a choreographic act. I argue that colonial photographers and film makers choreographed Sri Lankan dancers to compose an image of the “Singhalese devil dancers” that make sense to the colonial *mise-en-scène*. Choreographers manipulate dancing bodies to get the desired dance compositions. In the same way, colonial photographers and film makers manipulated, controlled and inscribed dancing bodies to compose the image of the Singhalese devil dancers to satisfy the Western audiences.

Music of the Raj? Symphonies and Soft Power in India

Following a tour of Mumbai, Chennai and Delhi by the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra in 2014, a BBC article reported a growing interest in India as a new and potentially enormous market. The tour, sponsored by the British Council, was met with
much enthusiasm and fostered such goodwill that it was hailed as the 'beginning of a lasting relationship between India and Scotland' (Tully 2014).

This growing interest in India is encouraged by the National Center for Performance Arts in Mumbai, which invites several touring orchestras each year and supports India’s own professional orchestra, the Symphony Orchestra of India. This decade-old orchestra is, according to a concert brochure “leading the initiative to develop India's international cultural profile alongside countries such as China, Korea, Malaysia and Singapore, all of which have established symphony orchestras” (NCPA 2014).

This paper will examine the roles and meanings of the Symphony Orchestra of India.

In the first part of this paper, based on ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in Mumbai, I outline local orchestral performance and consumption. I argue that whilst the Symphony Orchestra of India allows for the creation and articulation of cosmopolitan identities in Mumbai, historically rooted markers of colonialism impact and shape local consumption and reception.

In the second part of this paper, drawing on Joseph Nye’s theory of soft power, and on ethnomusicological case studies in China and Oman, I unpick the role of the symphony orchestra in India’s development as a global economic and cultural power.

Finally, I problematize the orchestra as a marker of modernity and ask: is the symphony orchestra a hegemonic player within cultures of decolonization?

Tiyasha Dutta Paul and Nisha Somasundaram


**Resistance and renewal: new vocabularies of dance and music in the Indian performance tradition of Odissi**

Scholars have increasingly recognised the role of Indian musical and performance traditions in the context of both international labour and colonialism. This is particularly true in the case of the Indian art form of Odissi which is considered the oldest dance form of India and originated in the ritual of temple worship, sacred art and regional music of Odisha. Odissi, having declined under colonial rule was revived in striking fashion around the time of Indian independence and went on subsequently to be practised globally from countries as diverse as Malaysia, South Africa, the USA and Britain despite remaining deeply embedded and linked to the musical traditions and history of Odisha. This paper focuses on the creative and intellectual output of key dance artists and scholars such as Ananya Chatterjea in North America and Ramli Ibrahim in Malaysia who have used the Odissi vocabulary in ground-breaking and innovative ways, reflecting their own diasporic and national milieus and varied interests in creativity and communication. The paper also includes our own observations as Odissi practitioners in
the UK and suggests that the emergence of Odissi in international contexts provides a compelling case study of the ways in which the performance traditions of South Asia in new environs has created new contemporary performance languages and aesthetics whilst also reflecting the unique and fraught history and experience of immigrant groups. Presented in the style of a lecture-presentation, this paper will include a live demonstration of how the auditory elements of Odissi could be explored and re-imagined using Batu, the second piece in the traditional Odissi repertoire which was created inspired from sculptures and reliefs from the Konarak Temple in Odisha which depicts various percussive and other auditory instruments.

Satkirti Sinha

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**Bidesiya Theatre: Musical Folk drama from Indian Diaspora to Caribbean Lands and Launda Naach**

Bhikhari Thakur (1887-1971) is considered the founder of the all-male musical theatrical form called Bidesiya in mid-1920s Bihar, India. A major source of inspiration for Thakur was the religious musical drama of Ramleela, and migration stories of his fellow villagers to Caribbean Islands. Thakur was not educated but this did not prevent him from becoming one of those gems of India who through his artistic work (direction, acting, choreography and musical composition) helped Bihari culture and Bhojpuri language to flourish all over India, as well as in those countries where indentured labourers were forced by the British government to migrate during the British era in India. As Thakur was from small caste he did not receive much praise for his work in India, but he played a pivotal role in providing cultural identity to the Bhojpuri migrants in different parts of the world. Just as the Notting Hill Carnival helped West Indies migrants to gather and celebrate their heritage, in quite a comparable way Thakur gave an artistic form ‘Bidesiya’ to the indentured labourers to promote their culture in countries like Trinidad, Jamaica, Suriname and also Mauritius and the Netherlands.

After his death, this form vanished from India but it is still being practised in Caribbean islands. Launda Naach which was part of Bidesiya form has now become an independent dance form in Caribbean countries and in the Netherlands. As a researcher and practitioner of this form I am trying to start this musical folk form on a global level by adding Caribbean Music Jahaji and Chutney with migration stories of Indian Diaspora in Caribbean Lands.
Decolonizing Indian Classical Dance? Projects of Reform, Classical to Contemporary

Now contained under the rubric “classical,” several dance practices in India underwent significant “reconstruction” in the heyday of 20th century anti-colonial politics reliant upon the nationalist claim of a cohesive and stable “Indian” cultural identity. Such restoration of prestige to a supposedly denigrated cultural practice offered a positive “artistic” counterpoint to alleviate nationalist anxieties regarding the purity of the nation and the uniqueness of its identity; reclaiming traditions supposedly rooted in a 2000 year old history offered one site for the expression of an unadulterated Indian identity that predated colonization, while redeeming the dance’s “essence” as high art served to disprove normative claims regarding Indian incivility.

Within a few decades of this nationalist reconstruction, Indian classical dance forms were regarded as emblematic of Indian culture and tradition, not only in the subcontinent but abroad as well. In this paper, I build on the important critiques of the nationalist reconstruction of Indian classical dance in India to examine how this project is enacted in the transnational present. Beginning with the historical narratives presented by dancers invested in the “classical” foundation of their dance, I argue that both diasporic and non-diasporic (British) dancers uphold the foundational assumptions of the reconstructive Indian nationalist movement even as they are located within, and identify with, a very different national and political context, namely multicultural Britain. I then expand my analysis to trace the frictions between these classically oriented dancers and those who express more “contemporary” interests that seek to “modernize” their dance. So doing, I draw attention to the complex continuities of reformist cultural politics, crucial to the postcolonial reconstruction of the dance as well as the contemporary delineation of multiple evaluative categories of artistic practice. The relationship between classical and contemporary dance, I argue, reveals the ongoing relations of coloniality on South Asian performance arts.

Decolonization and Hindustani Music: The View from California

Although this conference takes its main subject as musical performance in the South Asian Diaspora in the United Kingdom, the spread of South Asian culture, especially music in the post-colonial period was a worldwide phenomenon.
The founding of the Ali Akbar College of Music (AACM) in the San Francisco area in 1967 ranks as a seminal event in any retrospective view of the introduction and acceptance of Hindustani classical music in the West. Although the pathway for the dissemination of the North Indian classical traditions took quite a different trajectory in the United States (particularly in California) than in Europe or the UK, the impact of renowned masters of these arts gathered in one place teaching hundreds of students was felt worldwide.

I will present a general overview of how Indian music was received and the degree to which it was integrated into the American cultural fabric in the middle and late 20th century, with particular attention to the circumstances that led to the origin of the AACM and its subsequent history as a cultural institution in the San Francisco Bay Area, and more generally in the United States. As well as the role of the artists, particularly Ustad Ali Akbar Khan and Pandit Ravi Shankar, the role of Dr. Robert E. Brown (1927-2005) is of special significance.

In addition to the direct role played by the Ali Akbar College in spreading the music culture of India through teaching and performance, the history of the shifting interaction between Ali Akbar Khan and his college with South Asians in the Bay Area illustrates the changes that took place in the West Coast iteration of the social and economic conditions of the diaspora.