

Time, Space and Music in the Kathmandu Valley

Research >
South Asia

South Asian classical music, like Western classical music, has become progressively detached from associations with time and space, especially in the era of global dissemination. In the Newar town of Bhaktapur in the Kathmandu Valley of Nepal, however, music and dance are integrated with the ritual and agricultural calendar, social organization, urban geography, and Hindu-Buddhist concepts of sacred time and space. Performance also provides opportunities for religious devotion, expressive fulfilment, and entertainment for its participants and onlookers, in a culture where alternative diversions such as television were unknown until recently.

By Richard Widdess

Musical performance in Bhaktapur seems designed to reinforce a sense of individual location within social and divine orders. Devotional *dāphā* songs, for example, are sung by groups of men, mostly drawn from the farmer caste, based at particular temples and resident in the neighbourhood (*tvah*) in which the temple stands. The group celebrates its identity with regular feasts, organizes recruitment and training, and offers social support to its members. *Dāphā* songs, sung during auspicious seasons, festivals, and full-moon nights, bear the signatures of local kings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and are in praise of various deities, most of whose shrines are located outside the *tvah* (in some cases outside Bhaktapur): singing them constitutes, *inter alia*, a 'virtual pilgrimage'.

In performance, the song is divided between two sub-groups, who repeat each line many times, at slow and fast speeds, in complex patterns of alternation. During this musical expansion of the song, temporal location is established by metrical patterns played on small cymbals (*tāh*) of penetrating tone. Playing this instrument is an important responsibility, often performed or directed by the lead singer.

The structure of time and space

Time and space are both viewed as cyclic in Bhaktapur; in each domain, cycles can overlap. Mundane time is cyclic in the annual rotation of the seasons, the monthly sequence of lunar phases, and the diurnal alternation of night and day; musical forms, repertoires and instruments are linked to these cycles. Cosmic time is again cyclical, with both the individual and the universe undergoing repeated processes of destruction and re-creation. The cosmic order is celebrated by means of festivals in which music plays an important part. The Buddhist festival of Gūlā, for example, celebrates the coming end of the present universe. The sound of animal-horn trumpets (*neku*), played exclusively at this festival is believed to call the spirits of the departed back to this world for their next cycle of reincarnation (Greene 2002).

Space can also be articulated in cyclic fashion. People worship temples and shrines, where physically possible, by walking clockwise around them (*pradakṣiṇa*), while the route from one to the next may be part of a larger *pradakṣiṇa*, for example around the neighbourhood. A *pradakṣiṇa* of the whole town, following a traditional processional route, is an important feature of major festivals, and an occasion for much music-making and dance, giving locally-based music groups an opportunity to pay musical homage directly to deities in other parts of the town. At the New Year festival of Biskāh in March 2003, for example, I accompanied a *dāphā* group on a clockwise musical circuit of Bhaktapur, during which songs were sung at 42 different shrines.

Musical time, articulated through metre and form, is also complexly cyclic. Most compositions comprise a number of sections, within each of which a single metrical cycle will be repeated many times. Successive sections may be of the same or different metre, and the piece as a whole may constitute a larger cycle, where the first section returns periodically or at the end. The ringing sounds of the *tāh* help performance groups to negotiate changes of metre and tempo in the more complex pieces.

Musical structure, function and meaning

The Gājātrā, or Cow Festival, is an example of a calendrical festival in which music-making has an important function and which takes place on the processional route round Bhaktapur

It is held at full moon in August each year to commemorate all those who have died in the city during the previous 12 months. Each bereaved family decorates a tall bamboo structure intended to represent a sacred cow, indicated by straw horns and a painted cow's face. A portrait of the dead person is attached to this 'cow', which is then carried in pro-



The *dāphā* group of Lākulāchē *tvah* perform with drum (*lālākḥ*) and cymbals (*tāh*). Bhaktapur, March 2003.

cession for one complete round of the city, a process taking three to four hours. The 'cow' can be preceded by two lines of dancers, usually children or young men, accompanied by drums and cymbals, who perform a stick-dance, called *Sāpāru Pyākḥā* or *Ghēṭāgīśī*. The purpose of this dance is to cheer up the bereaved, for on this day the gates of heaven stand unlocked, and their deceased relative's soul will enter with the help of a cow. To add to the amusement, some dancers wear face-paint or fancy dress, and one sees men dressed as women, demons (*khyāh*), Hindu gods and goddesses, or even Father Christmas taking part in the procession.

The dance and burlesque evidently help to accomplish the necessary psychological reconciliation between personal feelings of loss and acceptance of cosmic reality. This reconciliation is mediated through music. The music of the stick-dance comprises two sections, which I shall call A and B. The A section has an eight-beat rhythm, and the dancers clash their sticks on the seventh beat. The whole section can be repeated as many times as required, and there are a number of variations which can be played on the accompanying drums. The B section has a six-beat rhythm, with sticks clashing more frequently, on beats three and six. This rhythm can again be repeated as many times as desired. In addition to these two sections of dance, a musical invocation, called *dyah-*



A participant in the Sāpāru stick-dance, wearing traditional dress. Bhaktapur, August 1999.

lhaygu, 'invoking the god', is played at the beginning of the dance, at the end, and at intervals during the course of the procession. There is no dance accompanying this piece, which has no regular metre, and features free-rhythm drum rolls.

These three distinct musical sections, in binary, ternary, and irregular metre respectively, can be related to urban geography. The binary-metre section A is a walking rhythm, during which the dancers progress slowly through the narrow streets. When they come to an open space where a crowd is watching, they switch to the ternary-metre section B, which allows them to make more vigorous dance movements, showing off their skill and stamina. Similarly, when the dancing group approaches an important temple or other shrine, the leading drummer changes from the A section to the B section a few metres ahead of the temple so that the dancers can entertain the god with vigorous movements. As the procession passes the shrine he changes to the *dyah-lhaygu*, so that the drummers, walking behind the dancers, can make their own salutation.

The formal and metrical structure of this music thus relates to the space in which it is performed, but it also reveals deeper meanings. The rhythm of section A is identical to that of a children's song that everyone in Bhaktapur knows. The first line asks: 'What shall we do with the straw cow? Let's put it in the *gwākḥā* (a small niche in the wall of a room).' The second line answers: 'It's too big for the niche. Let's throw it into the river.' This song articulates the underlying issue of the Gājātrā festival: do we hang on to the souls of our departed loved ones, or do we entrust them to the river of *samsāra*, the eternal cycle of reincarnation? The answer is of course the latter, and at the end of the day the straw cows are indeed thrown into the river. Although this song is not normally sung while dancing, it is explicitly evoked by the rhythm of the music.

Section B of the music represents a compression of the eight-beat music of section A into six beats (and further compression occurs in the *dyah-lhaygu*). The compression of longer into shorter time-spans, of the same or different metre, is a feature of Newar music, which Gert-Matthias Wegner has compared with the multiple roofs of a Newar pagoda-style temple, becoming smaller as they ascend (Wegner 1986). While this analogy may be fortuitous, a possible link between temple architecture and music is the *maṇḍala*, a type of cosmic map in which the universe is represented as a symmetrical arrangement of concentric areas of differing geometries, contracting towards the centre, with the presiding deity of the *maṇḍala* occupying the central, smallest space. This recurrent motif in Newar culture 'applies equally to the universe as a whole, to the country Nepal, to each city, to each temple and shrine, and, tantrically, to the worshipper's own body. The realization of one's own identity with these larger designs is the attainment of salvation' (Gellner 1992:190 f.). Wegner, an ethnomusicologist who has lived for many years in Bhaktapur, writes: 'To be part of the whole *maṇḍala* is really what matters here, what gives people their deep-rooted sense of security and happiness.' (pers. com.) Thus music and dance connect individuals not only with each other as a community, but also with cultural constructions of sacred space and time, within which each person can find their place. <

References

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