

Lewis Rowell. *Music and Musical Thought in Early India*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Reviewed by Stephen Slawek

Lewis Rowell's *Music and Musical Thought in Early India* is undoubtedly the most significant scholarly work on the art music traditions of India to appear since Harold Powers's comprehensive contribution to the article on Indian music in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*.¹ Rowell displays his intimate knowledge of the musicological tradition of India with a virtuosity that commands respect and engenders an admiration of the rigorous scholarship that underlies his presentation. As with most virtuosic displays, *Music and Musical Thought in Early India* requires close attention and patience on the part of the reader to savor and make sense of the profuse amount of fine details that it contains. It is a densely written work (but peppered with many forays into the realm of humor) that, by necessity, is heavily laden with Sanskrit terminology and elaborate explanations of esoteric philosophical concepts. In short, it is not a book to be included in an undergraduate's reading list. Nor is it one that will appeal to those who are unwilling to grapple with voluminous amounts of detailed description and large passages of lexicographical writing. But for those of us who thrive on a luxuriant wealth of information and heady flights of intellectual reasoning, Rowell's book stands as a formidable challenge that rewards the stalwart reader many times over for the effort expended in comprehending its contents. It is a book that belongs on the shelf of every serious scholar of South Asian music.

Rowell has adopted a strategy in addressing the constellation of ancient Indian musical concepts that is similar to what ethnomusicologists have used in creating phonemic transcriptions of tunes

¹Harold Powers, Nazir A. Jairazbhoy, Regula Qureshi, Robert Simon, Bonnie C. Wade, and Kapila Vatsyayan, "India, subcontinent of," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 1980), 9:69-166. Powers's contribution consists of part 1, "The Region, its Music, and its History," and part 2, "Theory and Practice of Classical Music."

that exist in numerous variants. Rather than giving us a slavish account of the ways one author's description of a particular concept or term might differ from those of other authors, Rowell surveys, distills, and blends the thinking of India's ancient writers on music to create a synthetic understanding of what he demonstrates to be concepts that existed with a great deal of continuity throughout the history of ancient Indian music and, to a large extent, continue to be found in the current practices of India's art musicians. Thus, rather than focusing on particular treatises, the conventional approach stemming from the intellectual technology and methodology of traditional Indian musicology which continues today, particularly in the work of modern Indian musicologists, but also in the work of some Westerners (e.g., Emmie Te Nijenhuis) working on Indian music, Rowell has chosen to focus on particular concepts and ideas. In place of using chronology as an organizational plan, Rowell has centered his chapters on broad topics such as thought, sound, chant, theater, *śāstra*, pitch, time, form, song, and style.

The principal sources Rowell has relied on in compiling his material are those treatises that are well-known to scholars of India's musical traditions. These include Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Dattila's *Dattilam*, Narad's *Nārādīyaśikṣā*, Matang's *Bṛhaddeśī*, Abhinavagupta's *Abhinavabhāratī*, Śārṅgadeva's *Śaṅgītaratnākara*, and others. The time span encompassing these writings is over one thousand years, beginning about A.D. 200 and ending in the middle of the thirteenth century. That the topics addressed by the treatise writers remained remarkably constant and the terminology of their concepts relatively consistent throughout such a vast time span is clear evidence of the remarkable continuity of India's art music traditions. Rowell has chosen to place emphasis on this continuity, arguing in the end that Indian music has weathered several major conquests (the last three listed as Islamic intrusions and rule, British colonialism, and the present electronic conquest of audio-video technology) without losing the essential conceptual premises on which it is based.

Following a brief introduction that provides contextualizing historical information regarding the ancient treatises about music, Rowell delves into the primary topic of his study in the chapter entitled

“Thought.” He focuses specifically on those traditions of thought within which musical speculation arose, tracing these to the Vedic tradition. He continues with a brief introduction to the principle tenets of the six orthodox systems of Indian philosophy, introducing the reader to the central concepts of Hinduism that relate to the mind, consciousness, and sense of the self. To reinforce the meticulous detail he provides in his presentation, Rowell here and in subsequent chapters provides comparative information drawn from traditions of ancient Greece as well as from more recent layers of Western tradition. Following a glimpse at the philosophical underpinnings of Yoga, Rowell concludes this chapter by distilling a primordial system of values that appears to provide the foundation of ancient Indian thought in which nonmanifest, continuous, subtle, and inner qualities are valued over manifest, discontinuous, gross outer qualities.

In the following chapter, “Sound,” Rowell begins to narrow his focus, getting closer to the universe within which music resides. He skillfully summarizes the theory of sound that developed in the ancient grammatical and philosophical schools of thought in India, pointing out a few of the variations that existed among these before delving into the terminology of sound and the finer shades of meaning that distinguished one aspect of sound from another. Focusing on the most important of these from a musical perspective, Rowell elaborates the concept of *nāda* (“sound”), distinguishing between manifested and unmanifested types. He then explains its connection to the cosmological medium of *ākāśa* through which *nāda* is transmitted, calling it the “subtle and ethereal fluid that pervades the entire universe as the special vehicle for life (in the form of breath), energy, and sound” (48).

Having established the cosmological basis of sound, Rowell moves on in the fourth chapter, “Chant,” to connect these concepts to their articulation in the form of India’s earliest, formalized system of sound communication beyond a purely linguistic mode, Vedic chant. What I found most intriguing here is Rowell’s contention that certain phonetic characteristics of the Sanskrit language have led to characteristic formations of sound in music. Thus, the linguistic element of *sandhi*, which dictates the continuous flow of linked syllables and prescribes rules governing the kinds of changes that take place when certain

sounds combine, is related to the concept of a melodic line “with minimal interruptions and a strong sense of progression, reinforced by many gliding transitions between the individual *svaras* and pitch clusters” (71). Aspiration as a means of distinguishing similar sounds into two consonants is transferred to the system of syllabic representation of particular drum sounds. Nasality, which functions in the language as a means of creating both continuity and separation (72), surfaces in the musical tradition as a preferred quality of sound both in vocal and instrumental music. The complex generative scheme that articulates the Sanskrit syllabary and the prominence of the syllable itself as a concept in Indian linguistic theory also connect directly to modes of thought about musical sound. From these astute observations, it is obvious that Rowell is on to something that resides deeply within the system of musical creation in India. It is also apparent that finding musical metaphors of cultural themes is a central concern of Rowell’s, and he continues to pursue this concern in the remaining chapters of the book.

Chapter 5, a chapter on the Sanskrit theater, follows the chapter on chant, a logical progression since the evidence that we have available to us strongly implies that the theater provided a transitional milieu between the ritual contexts of sacralized sound (chant) and later secular contexts of mundane music making (although music was never separated completely from a spiritual context in India). It is also in connection with theater that India’s most famous theoretical statement—Bharata’s *Nāṭyaśāstra*—was made. Rowell devotes a substantial part of this chapter to a discussion of the contents of this treatise. One of my few disappointments in the volume is here, as Rowell chooses to devote a minimal amount of space to the discussion of musical instruments. I believe that had he given more attention to this vast topic, Rowell might possibly have avoided some questionable assertions in his later chapter on the pitch system.

Chapter 6, “*Śāstra*”, a chapter on the character of ancient Indian musicological methods and their surviving artifacts (i.e., the *saṅgīta śāstras*) and the problems these pose to the modern scholar precedes a series of chapters examining the various elemental domains of musical sound. In a lengthy study of an essentially esoteric topic, it might

appear odd for a reviewer to single out any one aspect of the work to be bordering on the arcane. However, I must admit that the chapter on *śāstra* required great fortitude on the part of the reviewer to plow through, especially as Rowell digresses into an elaborate explanation of the poetic meters underlying the verses typical of the writing of the early treatises of Indian music. Could it be that he was attempting to emulate the moralistic method of the ancient *śāstrakārs* that he was describing as he wrote this chapter? After all, he does begin the chapter by tracing the etymology of the word *śāstra* to the root of a word meaning “to punish,” and he closes the section with a reminder drawn from the *Nāṭyaśāstra* that things of value come to one only after great effort. As Rowell states, “No pain, no gain” (140).

India’s ancient musicologists reveled in subjecting the minutiae of their subject to elaborate schemes of classification. In more ways than one, the remaining chapters of *Music and Musical Thought in Early India* reproduce this aspect of Indian musicological writing. In particular, the chapters on pitch, musical time, form, song, and style (chapters 7 through 11, respectively) present voluminous amounts of elaborated and classified detail, introducing the reader to the stupifying vastness of musical terminology that is found in the ancient treatises. The chapter on pitch addresses the standard topics of *śruti* (microtonal measurement), *svara* (audible tone), *jātī* (melody type, mode), *rāga* (melodic framework, mode) and others. In discussing the derivation of the scale system, Rowell states that the modern system of intonation approximates the Western system of twelve-tone equal temperament (143). It is here that I would assert that a closer look at instrumental music might lead one to a different opinion. The drums and the stringed instruments of Indian art music have specific technologies built into them that lend a heavy emphasis towards the production of harmonic and just-intoned intervals. For example, the north Indian tabla has a composite, weighted head that emits a tone whose overtones constitute a perfect harmonic series. Also, musicians tuning a sitar or tanpura listen closely for the harmonic third interval (they call it a *svayambhu gandhar*, a “self-evident third scale degree”). In addition, on a correctly tuned set of sympathetic strings on a sitar, the interval from the second degree to the sixth degree is clearly less than a perfect fifth,

while that from the first to the fifth degree is the harmonic (perfect) fifth. All of these examples tend to indicate that the system of intonation is something other than one of equal temperament. Beyond that, the *rāga* system includes numerous instances of “adjusted” intonation. To characterize the modern system as close to equal temperament is, in my opinion, an oversimplification of what remains an extremely complex topic.

Rowell has had a particular interest in researching the concept of musical time, and his expertise in the subject is clearly in evidence in chapter 8, “Time.” His explanation of the ancient Indian *tāla* system is as lucid as it is revealing of the qualitative differences that exist between the ancient concept of rhythm and the present practices of both the northern and southern systems of the art tradition. Also of note is the sophisticated discussion of form in the following chapter. Rowell convincingly ties together the paradigms of form with the essential modes of thought and cultural themes elaborated in the earlier chapter on thought. In doing so, he also demonstrates that these archetypal structures continue to exist in present practice, thus making the strongest argument to date for the temporal continuity of the music-making process in India’s art music traditions. Future scholarly work attempting to document systemic change in Indian music’s history will need to answer in some way the arguments that Rowell makes.

In closing, I wish only to state that *Music and Musical Thought in Early India* is an elegantly written work that will remain a valuable research resource well into the future. It is a volume that represents the culmination of close to twenty years of research on ancient Indian music and will stand as a rigorous work of scholarship that has much to offer to the novice as well as the specialist, to the Western scholar as well as the Indian, and to the musicologist as well as the ethnomusicologist. Lastly, it is a work that will allow performers of Indian music to glimpse the musical ideas of a distant past that continue to live in the melodies and rhythms that they create.