Music and Empire: South & Southeast Asia, c. 1750-1950

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Music and Empire is a single-semester module that currently focuses on South and Southeast Asia, especially the Indian subcontinent and the Malay world, in the transition to and through European colonialism c. 1750–1950. As a historian of music in Mughal India and the para-colonial Indian Ocean, I have taught this course in the Music Department at King's College London in various iterations since 2011 (at the time of writing, it was last taught in Semester 2 of 2021/22). Its original concept and design was closely linked to the European Research Council (ERC) Starting Grant of which I was Principal Investigator 2011–15/16, “Musical Transitions to European Colonialism in the Eastern Indian Ocean” (MUSTECIO).¹

Until the 2020/21 academic year, Music and Empire was taught solely as a graduate seminar option, taken for credit by Master of Music (MMus) students (as well as SOAS MMus students and KCL students from, e.g., the Departments of History, Comparative Literature, and Religious Studies) and audited by PhD students and postdoctoral fellows. But in the past two years it has been taught to both third-year undergraduates and graduate students, with a single joint lecture and separate seminars and assessments (the undergraduates have weekly quizzes, a coursework essay, and a 24-hour online open-book examination; the graduates have a verbal presentation and a coursework essay). The module

Acknowledgement of Country: I have lived and worked in the United Kingdom for the past quarter century, but I was fortunate to be born on Turrbal country in what is now called South East Queensland. As an Australian woman of white settler background, I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which I was born and raised, the Turrbal people and the Gubbi Gubbi people, and I pay my respects to elders past, present, and emerging.

generally attracts thirty to forty students in total each year. Annual cohorts frequently include students of South, Southeast, and East Asian heritages and other Global Majority students.

Students should emerge from this course with a sound, comparative understanding of the cultural history of music under empire in specific regions, with a focus on the interplay of Asian and European cultures in the context of asymmetrical power relations. This entails the ability to differentiate between a variety of European and Asian empires, as well as related historiographical paradigms and issues. Students should develop a wider ability to use evidence from studying the musical field to contribute to, challenge, and critique pre-existing historical paradigms, rather than merely interpreting musical culture through them. They acquire knowledge of musicological and ethnomusicological approaches, as well as a range of available sources in music research, in a module that emphasizes the study of music and empire in relation to social, political, mercantile, ideological, and music-specific issues.

The module is conceptually innovative, in that it is designed to remove the colonial-era split between musicology and ethnomusicology by focusing primarily on the histories of Asian and mixed-race performing arts, artists, and audiences in the eastern Indian Ocean and South China Sea, instead of on Orientalist representations of “Asia” in Western music or on European music in its Asian colonies. The second approach has, to date, dominated scholarship and teaching on this topic. Music and empire has customarily been taught in one of two ways. Either, and most commonly, it has been taught by “musicologists” as the history of music in/of Europe and its settler colonies, using European-language sources, with very little reference to the realities of musical lives and economies in the colonised world, and even less use, if any, of Asian source materials for the period. Alternatively, and more recently, “ethnomusicologists” have taught music and empire from a postcolonial ethnographic perspective, looking back at empire’s legacies from/in the long twentieth century, using Asian source materials but going back no further than the birth of the sound recording, c. 1890, an advent that occurred very late in colonial history.

Neither approach is able to tackle the question of how colonialism changed musical fields in South and Southeast Asia: the first neglects, often to the point of ignoring, the colonised world; and the second does not go back remotely far enough.

This module aims to break down these conceptual, geographical, and chronological barriers by: (1) exploring historical work on the music, dance, and sound of the region under colonialism; (2) extending the time period from before European colonial rule to the point of decolonisation; and (3) using

relevant secondary literature from a range of disciplines that draws on Asian-language sources dating back as far as the seventeenth century, in parallel with relevant European-language sources.

In line with this approach, Music and Empire has long attempted to bring to the fore in its reading lists as many historical and contemporary voices as possible from South and Southeast Asia, especially citizen and diaspora scholars working on source materials in Asian languages and visual cultures. Scholars from the Global North working in Asian languages continue to feature inevitably; as you will see from the length of the current reading list, nobody and nothing has been “replaced.” One continuing obstacle to diversity and inclusion is that the module has to be taught in English, so readings on the formal syllabus are restricted to the English language. But I encourage students to use any other languages they are able to work in, either of the region or of the relevant colonising powers, in their choice of sources for their essays, exams, and presentations.

The rationale behind these choices is threefold.

First, coloniality is fundamental to and inherent in the institutionalised split between musicology and ethnomusicology. I base my argument on the insights of two rather disparate scholars: Lydia Goehr and Walter Mignolo. Goehr argued in her seminal essay of 1992 that Western art music is, and is studied as, an imaginary museum of musical works; her insight largely remains true today. I then build onto that Mignolo’s compelling observation that when Europeans devised the colonial-modern museum, they divided it into two kinds: the art museum, which focuses on the history of the “people with history,” i.e., Europeans, “us”; and the ethnological museum, which focuses on the “timeless” ethnography of the “people without history,” or those “outside ‘our’ history,” such as the Chinese.

At the peak of European colonial power, as is well known, academic music studies were conceptually divided into the historical study of the music of the “people with history”—historical musicology—and the anthropological study of the “people without/ outside ‘our’ history”—ethnomusicology (at the time called “comparative musicology”). That original division has hardened into an institutionalised fissure that endures unrepairoed to this day. The parallels with

3. I am indebted to current KCL PhD student Javier Rivas for this observation.
Mignolo’s art museum/ethnological museum division are blatantly clear, and they have serious implications for the entire discipline. Because of the split, neither musicology nor ethnomusicology has, until recently, been especially open to the fact that the “without/outside” cultures that are the customary remit of musical anthropologists have accessible and relevant histories, and that the sources that document those histories are plentiful, even via secondary literature, if we spread our interdisciplinary net wide enough.\(^7\)

Such histories are not “decolonial,” and studying them is not inherently “decolonising” work, a term I prefer to use solely for the processes of sovereign nations becoming independent from colonising powers. Decolonisation should never be a metaphor.\(^8\) If music studies were to take its radical implications seriously, we would need to tear down the institutional silos of musicology and ethnomusicology altogether and start from undivided ground. I do not believe that is ever going to happen; it is an unrealisable utopian vision. But by insisting that we train our scholarly focus on the histories of performing arts under colonialism in the region, from their own sources, written by colonised peoples, we go some way towards at least tipping the balance.

Secondly, representation and citation practices matter. Because it has largely only been possible to pursue ethnomusicology professionally in certain institutions of the Global North, the canonical academic literature on South and Southeast Asian music and dance, including the small minority of publications of a historical nature, has historically tended to be written by Northern white authors (with noteworthy exceptions; see reading lists below). This is changing as a new generation of doctoral students from South and Southeast Asian heritages are filling academic ethnomusicology and global musicology jobs and publishing their research. But there is also a large amount of relevant work in several disciplines beyond music studies that expands, deepens, and challenges our narrow disciplinary perspectives of what performing-arts histories might be in the region. It takes sustained, regular revision and lateral thinking to move beyond the old favorites on a reading list and locate, read, and set work by junior and Global Majority scholars and by researchers in fields beyond card-carrying music studies. But a commitment to global equality, diversity, and inclusion requires such labor as an absolute minimum. (You will see from this syllabus that there is a long way to go.)

The final major rationale behind this module is to introduce students to our emerging theoretical work with the concept of the “paracolonial,” as first

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7. See the long reading lists below for literature that demonstrates the ample possibility of music history before the period of recorded sound in South and Southeast Asia.

articulated by Stephanie Newell.\(^\text{9}\) Crucially, Asian-language and visual primary sources from the timeframe we conveniently mark off as the “colonial period” frequently give us entirely different perspectives (plural) than top-down models of European hegemony, built largely on colonial and privileged nationalist sources, allow. Paracolonial denotes “alongside” and “beyond” the colonial, and when applied to performing-arts histories it opens up revolutionary historical vistas, allowing for a range of subaltern and articulated voices to interact with each other in a variety of ways. My ERC team and I theorised the paracolonial in 2015–2017 to refer to systems of musical knowledge and practice that operated alongside and beyond the colonial state throughout this period. These systems were frequently facilitated by colonial infrastructures, technologies, and presence in South and Southeast Asia, such as railways, print, and the gramophone; but they were not, necessarily or indeed even often, dependent upon colonial epistemologies. Rather, they coexisted in differing relations and tensions with colonial thought and action regarding music, “noise,” and their place in society.\(^\text{10}\)

Unlike much postcolonial historiography of Asian musics in the region to date, which takes the overpowering voices of the colonisers and their Western-educated nationalist mirror images at their own estimation, the paracolonial opens up much more room for the autonomous agency of South and Southeast Asian music makers and listeners within the conditions of possibility they were afforded in the transcolonial Indian Ocean c.1750–1950.

This syllabus is a work in progress and represents the state of the field in 2021–2022 in the no-doubt blinkered eyes of one particular historian of South and Southeast Asia. I look forward to it being superseded.

Module Description

In this module, you will develop a deeper understanding of the diverse ways in which European imperialism and colonialism changed musical culture in South and Southeast Asia through a detailed, comparative examination of changing contexts for music making in the Indian Ocean region c. 1750–1950. We will focus mainly on British imperialism and colonialism in the Indian subcontinent and the Malay world; our major themes will be transition and interplay between cultures, over time, and geographically across the Indian Ocean. Topics to be covered may include, but are not restricted to, different approaches

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to music and empire; postcolonial and paracolonial; Orientalism and race; cir-
culation; musical knowledge; sound and affect; religion; gender and sexuality;
sovereignty and decolonisation. Throughout, this module aims to bring eth-
nomusicological, musicological, and historical approaches to pre-colonial and
colonial musical pasts back into creative dialogue, in order to consider how a
more nuanced history of changing musical fields can contribute to the wider
historical debate on European imperialism and colonialism.

Student Outcomes

By the end of the module, the students will be able to demonstrate:

- a sound, comparative understanding of the cultural history of music under
  empire in specific regions, with a focus on the interplay of European
  and Asian cultures in the context of asymmetrical power relations.
- a detailed knowledge of musicological and ethnomusicological
  approaches to music and empire.
- a detailed knowledge of the available sources for the study of music and
  empire, and an understanding of how to read them.
- an ability to differentiate between different kinds of European and Asian
  empires and to apply that understanding to musical contexts.
- an ability to differentiate between and to critique different historiograph-
  ical paradigms and issues in relation to specific European and extra-Eu-
  ropean empires.
- an ability to discuss aspects of musical culture within the framework of
  these issues and paradigms, including but not restricted to social, polit-
  ical, mercantile, ideological, and music-specific issues.
- a wider ability to use evidence from studying the musical field to contrib-
  ute to, challenge, and critique pre-existing historical paradigms, rather
  than merely interpreting musical culture through them.
- all these skills in written argument and seminar discussions.

Seminar Topics

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Assigned Weekly Readings

These must be read before each seminar; undergraduates only have to read the starred readings; MMus students must read all of them. You may choose which supplementary readings (beginning on p. X below) you wish to read, and may read them at your own pace.

Seminar 1. Music, Empires, Entangled Histories


Seminar 2. Paracolonial Contexts 1: South Asia


Seminar 3. Paracolonial Contexts 2: Southeast Asia


Seminar 4. Orientalism and Race


Seminar 5. Circulation
**Weidman, Amanda. “Gone Native? Travels of the Violin in South India.” In Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern: The Postcolonial Politics of Music
Music and Empire


**Seminar 6. Knowledge**


**Seminar 7. Sound and Affect**


**Seminar 8. Religion**


**Seminar 9. Gender and Sexuality**


Seminar 10. Sovereignty and Decolonisation


Supplementary Readings by Topic

Music, Empires, Entangled Histories


*Paracolonial Contexts 1: South Asia*


Feelings: A History of Emotions in the Rain, edited by Imke Rajamani, Margrit

Niranjan, Tejaswini. “Musicophilia and the Lingua Musica in Mumbai.”

Niranjan, Tejaswini. Music, Modernity, and Publicness in India. Oxford:

O’Hanlon, Rosalind, and David Washbrook. “Histories in Transition.”

Orsini, Francesca, Print and pleasure: popular literature and entertaining
fictions in colonial North India (2017).

Orsini, Francesca, and Katherine Butler Schofield, eds. Tellings and Texts:
Music, Literature, and Performance in North India. Cambridge: Open Book,
2015.

Ranade, Ashok D. Stage Music of Maharashtra. New Delhi: Sangeet Natak
Akademi, 1986.

Roy, Tirthankar. “Music and Society in Late Colonial India: A Study of Esraj

Ruckert, George E. Music in North India. Oxford: Oxford University Press,
2004.

Saha, Poulomi. “Singing Bengal into a Nation: Tagore the Colonial

Schofield, Katherine Butler. “Learning to Taste the Emotions: The Mughal
Rasika.” In Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature, and Performance in North India,
edited by Francesca Orsini and Katherine Butler Schofield, 407–22. Cambridge:
Open Book, 2015.

———. “‘Words without Songs’: The Social History of Hindustani Song
Collections in India’s Muslim Courts c. 1770–1830.” In Theory and Practice
in the Music of the Islamic World, edited by Rachel Harris and Martin Stokes,

https://soundcloud.com/user-513302522.

Shope, Bradley. American Popular Music in Britain’s Raj. Eastman Studies in

———. “The Public Consumption of Western Music in Colonial India.”

Sykes, Jim. “Sound as Promise and Threat: Drumming, Collective Violence
and Colonial Law in British Ceylon.” In Cultural Histories of Noise, Sound,
and Listening in Europe, 1300–1918, edited by Ian Biddle and Kirsten Gibson,


**Paracolonial Contexts 2: Southeast Asia**


*D Orientalism and Race*


*Circulation*


Knowledge


Sound and Affect


**Religion**


**Gender and Sexuality**


Sovereignty and Decolonisation


**General Bibliography**

**General History Books**


*General Music/Sound Books*

Music of the Indian Ocean website: [https://sites.google.com/site/musicofthe-](https://sites.google.com/site/musicofthe-)
indianocean/.

Articles on India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia in the New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians.

Articles on India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia in the Garland Encyclopedia of World Music.

Pacific


South Asia


Southeast Asia


*East Asia*


*Americas*


Europe


Global


European and American Empires


