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Qambel Maran: Syriac Chants from South India by Joseph J. Palackal

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Recording Reviews

Qambel Maran: Syriac Chants from South India. 2002. Recorded by Joseph J. Palackal. Pan Records 2085. One compact disc. Booklet (16 pp.) with notes by Joseph J. Palackal; photographs, map.

Although most of the scholarly literature (musical and otherwise) on Kerala, a state in southwest coastal India, has focused on the state's Hindu traditions, Hindus comprise only about fifty-eight percent of the state's population. In general Kerala's large Christian and Muslim communities have been neglected. Joseph Palackal, a doctoral student in ethnomusicology at the City University of New York, has attempted to compensate for this imbalance with a series of publications over the last several years (Palackal 1999, 2001; Groesbeck and Palackal 2000), culminating in this CD. These have focused on the Syrian Christians, a community that traces its origin to the putative arrival of the Apostle St. Thomas in South India in 52 C.E. He apparently converted some of the indigenous population, and stayed in India until his death twenty years later. A second Thomas (Thomas Kinayi) immigrated to Kerala in the fourth century C.E. along with a group of Persian Christians, and these converts and descendants of immigrants propagated traditions that still thrive today. Among these is a tradition of chant in Syriac. This CD documents a selection of the chants performed in the Syro-Malabar Catholic church, one of five main branches of the Kerala Syrian Christians, and comprising about half of Kerala's Christian population. (They accepted allegiance to Rome about a hundred years after the arrival of the Portuguese in Kerala in 1498, but demanded a separate Syrian hierarchy within the Catholic church, which was finally granted to them in 1896.) This is the only CD I have been able to locate devoted exclusively to pre-mass-mediated Kerala Christian music, so it is especially welcome.

This CD contains twenty-nine chants, mostly from the Office, the Eucharist, and funerary services; in addition there are several paraliturgical chants that bear greater influence of Latin (originally Portuguese) Catholicism. Some of these are accompanied by musical instruments, most of which the Portuguese may have brought with them. These include the triangle, bass drum,

violin, and harmonium, the latter of which replaced the earlier pipe organ found in the Portuguese churches. The CD represents an older phase in the Syro-Malabar tradition, as many parts of the liturgy have for about forty years been sung in Malayalam, the language of Kerala; on this CD the language is Syriac. It would have been interesting to hear a few Malayalam examples of this chant as well, for comparison. Palackal has selected a number of priests from central Kerala to perform, and he sings the last chant on the CD himself; as he explains in the liner notes, he “grew up in the music tradition represented in this CD,” as a singer at his own parish Syro-Malabar church in Kerala (15).

The sound quality of the recording is excellent, as all voices and instruments are heard clearly. The liner notes are also carefully researched and informative, and the photographs and map that accompany them are of fine quality. There are no song texts in the booklet, but they are available from Pan records, and the subject matter of each text is summarized in the notes. I would have appreciated reading more, however, about the practice of contemporary Syrian Christian ritual; for instance, are those clergy who know the Office well numerous enough now to allow for regular performance of the Office in most churches, or is the tradition thriving in only a few? (It seems that a large number of the participants from this recording officiate at two churches—is this because there are few other churches in Kerala at which the priests are expert at these chants?) Are there any long festivals in the churches comparable to the ten-day *utsavams* in the Hindu temples of this area; if so, what sort of activities take place at these besides chant? In general the details of the church services, especially those attended by the laity, are subordinated in the liner notes to details of the Syriac language, and the texts and musical settings of the chants themselves. We also hear little about the role of chant, if any, in day-to-day lay Christian life in Kerala. The emphasis is more on text than on context.

The relationship of this music to Hindu music of South India has piqued the interest of scholars for some time, with most averring that connections between this tradition and Jewish and Christian traditions in West Asia are probably much stronger than those between Christian music and Hindu music of this region (Ross 1979). Yet I was struck by the similarity between the voice-harmonium interaction in some of these chants and that in some Hindu *bhajan* singing; could this represent a Hindu influence? Palackal does not address this issue, but he does suggest a Carnatic classical influence on three of the chants on this CD; two of them according to him are in the Carnatic seven-count *tālam miśra cāpu*, and part of another is in the six-count *tālam rūpakam*. I wondered whether the priests themselves (few of whom, I would guess, are connoisseurs of Carnatic music) use this terminology. More consideration of priestly (and lay) discourse on musical issues could

illuminate the degree to which South Indian Hindu music has (or has not) impacted this Syriac tradition.

These quibbles aside, this CD and its accompanying booklet constitute a signal contribution to the scanty literature on Kerala Christian music. Palackal's immersion in this tradition—which, as he notes, dates from his early childhood and culminates in roughly six years of fieldwork in the late 1990s—shows. His understanding of its history, its texts and music, the Syriac language, and the chant's contemporary performance practice is exhaustive. Chant scholars as well as Indic musicologists will benefit considerably from this disc, as well as from Palackal's other recent publications. We are in his debt, and we await the completion of his dissertation on this subject.

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Pete Seeger: American Favorite Ballads, vol. 1. 2002. Recorded by Moses Asch between 1950–62, compiled by Jeff Place and Guy Logsdon. One compact disc. Smithsonian Folkways SFW CD 40150. Booklet (36 pp.) in English, including bibliography.

As the first volume in an anthology of Pete Seeger recordings for Moses Asch's Folkways label, this compilation draws from the core of folk songs found on the original five-record set of the same name. At the time of their release, between 1957 and 1962, *American Favorite Ballads* became a mainstay for folk revivalists of the 1960s, impacting singers and songwriters for subsequent generations. Although the title of the series remains somewhat inaccurate (Seeger himself described it as "presumptuous" [3]), the collection of twenty-eight songs contains a variety of sea chanteys, Negro spirituals, childrens play songs, and hobo, work, and cowboy songs and ballads. Additional tunes were culled from other Seeger recordings such as *American Ballads* (FA 2319 [1957]) and *Frontier Ballads* (FA 2175, FA 2176 [1954]), as well as from the *American Favorite Ballads* songbook (Oak Publications [1961, 1968r]; Music Sales [1995r]). While the reissue strives