

CD Review

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Qambel M āran: Syriac Chants from South India. Liner notes and photography by Joseph J. Palackal. Leiden, Netherlands: Pan Records Ethnic Series #2085, 2002. Transcriptions of the text and English translation are available by contacting PAN records.

This important recording is a collection of Syriac Christian chants from the state of Kerala, which is organized according to the performance context: liturgical, paraliturgical, and special celebratory occasions. Most of the chants are from the Chaldean tradition of the Syro-Malabar Church. The twenty-nine tracks totaling just over an hour of recordings, in most cases, comprise of the first few stanzas of each chant. The songs were recorded on two separate occasions, the first being at St. Joseph's Monastery chapel at Mannaman, Kerala, in August 1999 and the second at the Christian Arts and Communication recording studio in Ernakulam, in August 2000.

Palackal's liner notes give a brief synopsis of the history of the various Syriac churches and their respective liturgical traditions in Kerala. The chants are in Syriac, though the pronunciation is distinctly different from the Middle Eastern Syriac due to the influence of Malayalam, the local language; the study of Syriac language has steadily declined since the 1970s, and most singers read the Syriac texts written in Malayalam script. Palackal paints a picture in broad strokes about the way the Syriac Christianity's musical repertoire has developed in Kerala from the time of the introduction of Christianity to India in the first through fourth centuries, to the Portuguese involvement in the sixteenth century, and to the vernacularization of the liturgy in the twentieth century. Different sections of this recording represent these various historical developments and performance contexts including: 1) chants from the liturgy of the hours, 2) chants from the Rites of Rāza, 3) chants from the services for the dead, 4) Syriac translations of Latin chants for paraliturgical services, and 5) chants for special occasions such as wedding ceremonies.

Following the general notes are comments on each track that give the song's background, authorship or biblical sources, themes, and important musical elements. These comments are particularly useful for the outside researcher, who might not have deep understanding of the liturgy or the linguistic context. Also included is a short autobiographical excerpt explaining Palackal's background in this tradition as well as an abbreviated bibliography, which is helpful to those who are interested in pursuing a scholarly interest in this music. The last page of the liner notes also provides an extensive list of the performers including but not limited to the St. John's church choir of Kochi and the St. Mary's Forane church choir of Pallipuram.

Palackal presents a few observations regarding the intercultural musical influences in this corpus while acknowledging the need for further work in the area of historical enquiry. He also emphasizes the transnational nature of this music not only between India and the West, but also between India and the Middle East. One of the most interesting evidences of transnationalism in the music is the instrumentation of many of these songs, which includes harmonium, violin, drum, and triangle. According to Palackal, there is evidence that the practice of playing violin or rebec may have been initiated before the arrival of the Portuguese merchants and missionaries.

The photographs, which include depictions of angel-musicians and architectural details of the places of worship, add another layer to this already rich ethnographic data.

The title track, *Qambel M aran*, is a prayer from the services of the dead, asking for the Lord to receive the offering of his servants. The first stanza is translated as follows:

Receive, O Lord, this offering
Which thy servant offers with faith
And a pure heart, into the heaven above

The fact that this song title is also used for the title of the recording seems to imply that the music collected here is also an offering intended to give glory to God. This recording along with the commentary in the accompanying liner notes allows both the novice listener as well as those who are familiar with the language and tradition to appreciate these songs as cultural, historical, and devotional treasures from Kerala, the cradle of Christianity in India.

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