

SYMPHONIES, STATUS AND SOFT POWER: THE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA OF INDIA

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Abstract

The Symphony Orchestra of India (SOI) is India's only professional symphony orchestra. In this paper, I explore the roles and meanings of the SOI. First, I situate it locally within its home city of Mumbai, positioning it within discourses of social class, status, and globally-minded aspiration. I argue that local values and ideologies surrounding professional musicianship compromise attempts to embed orchestral musicking in the city. I then move on to place the SOI within discourses of nation building, questioning the role of the orchestra as a marker of national development. I suggest that Mumbai's transnational middle class and elite communities, as well as the SOI's multinational corporate donors, consider investment in an orchestra a part of India's wider political and economic development. I point to tensions that are created as India's local and national government resist the notion of the orchestra as a marker of modernity and instead champion Indian arts and cultures as foundational to India's nationhood. Finally, I explore the SOI's transnational networks, looking at its role within cultural diplomacy and soft power. I show that, whilst the SOI has made significant steps in 'reaching out' and finding a place within transnational cultural networks, its efforts are hampered by its failure to 'stand out'; to forge its own national identity as an *Indian* symphony orchestra.

Keywords

Orchestra, India, Mumbai, Soft Power, Cultural diplomacy.



FIGURE 1: The Symphony Orchestra of India (By courtesy of NCPA 2016).

THE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA OF INDIA: A BACKGROUND

The Symphony Orchestra of India (in the following SOI, FIGURE 1) was founded in 2006 by the National Centre for the Performing Arts (in the following NCPA), a large arts centre located in South Mumbai. It performs two concert 'seasons' per year as a full symphony orchestra in

February and September¹, as well as more regular small chamber concerts in the off-season periods. A core group of musicians make up an SOI chamber orchestra and are resident in Mumbai all year round; freelance musicians are employed to make up the full symphony orchestra during the seasons. The full-time musicians are a mix of Indian nationals and foreigners (mainly from Eastern Europe), whilst the freelance visiting musicians are from various international locations, often Kazakhstan or the UK². The SOI employs a resident conductor, Zane Dalal³, and invites a guest conductor for each season.

Repertoire generally focuses on canonic works from the late classical and romantic eras⁴ and includes symphonies and larger scale orchestral works, concertos with invited soloists, and smaller chamber concerts or recitals. NCPA chairman Khushroo Suntook, together with orchestral manager Xerses Unvala, conductor Zane Dalal and Music Director Marat Bisengaliev, decide on the repertoire for each season, with input from British advisor Edward Smith.

In an interview taken in 2014, I asked Suntook about the orchestra's repertoire, and about the tastes of the audiences in Mumbai: "If you have opera or ballet, you are full! Oh, they love it, they love big things. Opera is a passion for them. We did a *Butterfly*, we did *Tosca*, we have done *Cavalleria Rusticana*, lots of things. And full house, you can charge as much as you want. Very popular, they love it. Because it's really an extension of Bollywood you know." (Suntook 2011. Personal communication, 10 September)

Tastes tend to be rather conservative in Mumbai, as Suntook highlighted in our conversation, which took place just before a concert in the September season: "Tonight, it is going to be a difficult program; Britten and Bartok. They like a traditional concert, basically they do love their Bach, Mozart, Haydn Beethoven, Brahms. But that's true of everything. When you go to festival hall if it's a Beethoven concert it's sold out, but if you are going to do all Bartok or all Berg, basically you can get tickets." (Ibid.).

The origins of the SOI are somewhat hazy: during a period of fieldwork in Mumbai in 2014, I was presented with varying accounts and narratives. The official version posited by the SOI is that Suntook heard Kazakh violinist Marat Bisengaliev performing in London in 2004. Impressed by the performance, Suntook invited Bisengaliev to come to Mumbai and help to start India's first professional orchestra, which he did in 2006. They advertised for players and

¹ 2020 seasons were interrupted by the global COVID-19 pandemic.

² Marat Bisengaliev, Music Director of the SOI, was from Kazakhstan and often reached out to the community of musicians there to fill orchestral seats. NCPA Chairman Khushroo Suntook, meanwhile, had many contacts in the UK. At the time of research, the NCPA employed a British orchestral manager, who also facilitated the sourcing of musicians from the UK.

³ Zane Dalal is a British conductor from a Parsi family. He has worked with the SOI since 2006, as Resident Conductor and, from 2014, as Associate Music Director.

⁴ The term 'canonic work' refers pieces of music from a particular historical era or a particular genre that are generally considered by persons in some educational circles to be great, important or even iconic. The late classical and early eras in the history of Western music date from around 1800 to around 1910. Examples of canonic works from this time include (but are not limited to) Beethoven's 5th Symphony (composed in 1808), Bruch's violin concerto number 1 in G minor (composed in 1866), and Rimsky-Korsakov's Scheherazade (composed in 1888). All of these works have been performed by the SOI.

auditioned local musicians, filling gaps in the orchestra with professional musicians invited from abroad, many from Bisengaliev's home country of Kazakhstan.

An alternative narrative was put to me by a British musician who had spent many years as guest player with the amateur Bombay Chamber Orchestra (BCO)⁵ and, later, with the SOI. She suggested that the idea and the initial funding came from a small group of UK musicians who had spent time in India playing with the BCO. The SOI was planned by these musicians as an educational institution first and foremost, with the majority of time and effort to be put into local education projects, supplemented by concerts. The goal, my informant suggested, was that the music education projects would result in the SOI being 50 per cent Indian in membership by 2015, something which was then side-lined in favour of producing concerts of international standards through an ongoing practice of employing foreign musicians (Jessica, 2014. Personal communication, 1 September).

Now, the Symphony Orchestra of India is in its 13th year and is very much embedded within the Western Classical Music scene in the city of Mumbai. What are the roles and meanings of the SOI for its local audiences, for its Indian musicians, and for Mumbai's wider communities?

LOCAL MEANINGS: THE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA AND SOCIAL CLASS

The home of the SOI, the National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA), stands on the edge of the Arabian sea overlooking the lights of a grand sweeping bay locally dubbed 'the Queen's Necklace'. It is arguably the centre of the Western classical music scene in Mumbai; it is certainly the most high-profile venue, with the most funding and the most prestige.

The NCPA is a large multi-venue arts centre comprising three large concert halls alongside two smaller venues, a cafe, a restaurant, an office block, a library, a practice block, accommodation for staff and several car parks. The complex is home to an organ donated by the German government, a classical harp and several Steinway grand pianos. Built on land reclaimed from the sea, the NCPA's size, the style of its buildings, its decor, and its location create an impression of wealth and status. From its plush red carpets to its glimmering chandeliers, air-conditioned rooms, high-end restaurant and the price of its tickets⁶, the NCPA's opulence situates it firmly within the social spaces occupied by the middle and upper classes. It also reinforces associations between Western classical music and the middle or upper classes, associations rooted in European social and musical development and praxis (Gramit, 2002; Small, 1987; Nettle, 1995; Bourdieu, 1979), associations which have been present in colonial India (Farrell, 1996; Leppert, 1987; Woodfield, 2000) and which continue to be felt in various transnational global sites (Kraus, 1989; Yoshihara, 2008; Morcom, 2002; Yang, 2007).

Western classical music in Mumbai had historically been bound up with middle class socio-economically elite Parsi and Catholic communities (Marsden, 2019), although before the SOI

⁵ The BCO is Mumbai's longest running amateur orchestra. It was founded in 1962 by local Parsi violinist Jini Dinshaw, who continues to run the orchestra at the time of writing. More info can be found at <http://bcoindia.co.in/>

⁶ There is some debate as to the relevance of ticket prices to classical music audience demographics. Andrew Mitchell has compiled evidence showing that opera tickets prices in the UK are in fact lower than many other cultural, sporting or tourist activities (Mitchell, 2015). In Mumbai, the cost of ticket to Western classical music concerts does exclude a larger portion of the city's residents than comparable prices in the UK would (recently estimates suggest that 44 percent of Mumbai's residents live in slums). J.P.E Harper Scott, meanwhile, frames concert attendance within discourses of social class, pointing to football tickets as an example of high-priced events popular with working classes (Harper Scott, 2012).

these communities did not have access to a local professional orchestra⁷ and as such their opportunities to practice their taste cultures within their locale were limited. The SOI's 2014 concert season brochure, though, highlighted ongoing and deliberate connections between the NCPA and Mumbai's middle / upper classes. The following passage is taken from its 'Overview' page:

AUDIENCE PROFILE

“The NCPA presents more than 600 events each year, encompassing the full range of Indian performing arts traditions, as well as international stars from a diverse range of genres including drama, contemporary dance, orchestral concerts, opera, jazz and chamber music. Audiences for these events comprise the cultural cognoscenti from across Mumbai, typically drawn from the city's educated professionals and business people, academicians, government employees, celebrities from the arts and entertainment sectors and students.” (NCPA, 2014:5).

Here, the intentional outlining of the middle and upper classes as the NCPA's core audience indicates both a celebration of this strata of society (perhaps there is an element of flattery intended, as this brochure was intended to be read, in English, by those attending the SOI season) and a lack of inclusivity with regards to less privileged audiences: the NCPA makes no claims of egalitarianism. This is in contrast to initiatives in many Euro-American sites, whereby orchestras actively attempt to reach out to, engage with, and include diverse communities from a range of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds (Ramnarine, 2012).

I attended several concerts, during which I observed that audiences at the NCPA were predominantly English speaking, affluent and from the older generation, perhaps aged 50 years and above. Parsis⁸ were in the majority, although Suntook and Unvala stressed that this was slowly changing. Unvala described the audience profile to me as follows:

“There is a knowledgeable group who have travelled the world going to concerts. They are the core and have been there from the start.” (Unvala, 2014: Personal communication, 20 August).

A musician who had played in the SOI and who regularly attended concerts corroborated Unvala's assertion that audiences were affluent and internationally-minded, telling me, “Sometimes people go for concerts of Western classical music just to prove that they are international, that they have travelled abroad.” (Malhotra, 2014. Personal communication, 2 September). Many audience members were influential within spheres of business and politics; I observed business leaders and foreign ambassadors at several concerts and after-parties, their presence was encouraged by the SOI as tickets were reserved for corporate sponsors.

⁷ By ‘professional orchestra’ I refer to orchestras made up of professional musicians who are paid a salary, and which exist to perform orchestral music at the highest level, usually to paying audiences. Amateur orchestras, by contrast, are usually made up of unpaid musicians for whom music is a hobby or a personal passion rather than a job.

⁸ The Parsi community in India follow Zoroastrianism, a religion originating in Persia. From the 8th to 10th centuries, Zoroastrians in Persia were persecuted and fled to India, settling in the western coastal state of Gujarat. They began migrating to Bombay from the 1640s onwards. The Parsis in Bombay prospered during the British Raj. They spoke English and collaborated with the British on a plurality of business, education and cultural projects, which often made them unpopular amongst the rest of the Indian population (Bamboot, 2015). Due to their prosperity, however, the Parsis shaped Mumbai enormously. Today the Parsi community is tiny in number: there are only around 60 000 Parsis in India, most of whom live in Mumbai (Murphy, 2014). The Parsi community has strong links with Western classical music, and are integral to the Western classical music scene in Mumbai.

In his 2004 research on concert attendance in London, Stephen Cottrell argues that quasi-ritualistic orchestral concerts scaffolded by a mythologically enhanced belief system provide a space in which attendees accrue symbolic and cultural capital. For Cottrell, this symbolic and cultural capital was synonymous with musical knowledge and activities: in attending concerts audiences could hypostatise their membership of a community of sophisticated imbibers of cultural production (2004). Here, I echo Cottrell and suggest that orchestral concerts at the NCPA provide a space in which attendees accrued and displayed symbolic and cultural capital. In Mumbai this is synonymous with social status, and signifies membership of an elite transnational musical community, an extension, often, of a transnational identity and lifestyle (with regards to education, travel, and business).

To insist, though, that to be involved in Western classical music as a listener or a performer is to be a member of the middle or upper classes is problematic as it often disregards the social experiences of the musicians involved. This has become particularly evident in recent years where scholarly and ethnographic focus has started to be levelled more at the musicians involved in performing and teaching Western classical music rather than at composers or audiences. Mari Yoshihara and Cottrell both highlight the discrepancy between the cultural status of professional musicians and their actual position in their local class systems (Yoshihara 2008; Cottrell, 2004). Yoshihara, whilst admitting that the initial stages involved in becoming a professional (Western classical) musician – childhood lessons, expensive instruments - probably signifies some degree of established family wealth, points out that the economic lives of most classical musicians working in the USA are fraught with contradictions. Musicians are, 'at once members of the cultural elite and workers selling their labour, they possess skills and expertise but generally have limited control in the workplace' (Yoshihara, 2008:131). She highlights a contradiction common in the case of many musicians - they are high in cultural capital but low in economic capital and as a result, their status as members of the middle classes is ambiguous.

In Mumbai, the status and class of the audiences is entirely different to that of the musicians. Audiences are, according to my observations, almost all middle-class elites (English speaking, able and willing to afford the high cost of attending concerts), transnational in both ideology and lifestyle. Musicians, meanwhile, are not in the same social sphere, as evidenced by their low pay and reputedly poor working conditions. This differentiation was outlined by Furtados Music Store⁹ director Anthony Gomes, who told me:

“Western music is prestigious. Not being a Western musician. So, learning music is prestigious, going for concerts is prestigious, but unfortunately it is, you’re on the lower rungs of society if you are a Western musician, if you are a musician, period.” (Gomes 2014. Personal communication, 14 February).

Whilst in some transnational sites Western classical musicians may enjoy high levels of cultural, if not economic, capital (Yoshihara, Cottrell), the musicians of the SOI are bound by very local notions regarding the status of musicians within society, as outlined above by Gomes. To gain further insight into the social status and socio-economic backgrounds of Indian SOI musicians, I interviewed Deon, the youngest and newest Indian musician to be recruited to the SOI. A 25-year-old viola player from a distant northern suburb, Deon was a serious and committed musician. He was not from a wealthy family and was not a typical attendee of orchestral concerts: he had never seen an orchestral concert before the age of nineteen. Deon

⁹ Furtados Music Store is Mumbai’s oldest music store. It was established in the city 1865, and now operates across the nation, with outlets in all major Indian cities. It stocks a wide array of instruments and tech equipment. In Mumbai, it is particularly well known for its piano showroom.

had taught himself the violin (there were, he informed me, no teachers available to him throughout his childhood), before switching to the viola when he joined the SOI. He had grown up listening to Bollywood and Indian classical musics and had cultivated an interest in Western classical music at church, where he had sung and played the piano as a child (the family could not afford a piano; church provided Deon with opportunities beyond his own economic reach).

Deon had studied sociology at college but had decided to make music his career after meeting some UK-based visiting musicians who had provided him with inspiration and encouragement. Deon's family were, though, unhappy with his musical aspirations. For them, worries about the financial insecurities of professional musicianship were compounded by locally-rooted notions of the social status of musicians, as Deon explained:

“They think I'm playing on the street basically. They say, “why are you wasting your time?” Even my parents think that. [...] In India to think about playing music and earning money is not very common. Very few people like me do it. It is all about studies. You finish your degree and you work in the office, in front of the computer. That is a job. This is not a job. This is what an Indian thinks.” (Deon D’Souza 2014. Personal communication, 22 December).

As the youngest of the nine Indian musicians in the SOI, Deon was the only one to have begun his career by playing Western classical music. The rest had all started out in the Bollywood film industry, working as session musicians in Bollywood's signature large string sections until digital sounds replaced live orchestras and work dried up. Being a Bollywood musician carries additional stigma, both from audience members and from local amateur musicians themselves: many of my informants in Mumbai expressed their disapproval of Bollywood music; it is considered to be of poor quality, with lyrics of questionable taste. The late-night lifestyle that has historically been associated with being a Bollywood musician (with many sessions stretching into the early hours) adds to its shady reputation. Whilst the cultural capital associated with playing in symphony orchestras is somewhat higher than that of Bollywood orchestras¹⁰, the SOI players continue to exist within a similar social sphere as their Bollywood colleagues, a sphere almost entirely disconnected to that of their audiences.

The disconnect between the social spheres of audience and musician was, during my research period in 2014, becoming problematic for the SOI, particularly with regards to its struggles to recruit Indian players (it was regularly criticised for its lack of Indian players and reliance on foreign musicians to fill empty seats, particularly in the wind, brass and percussion sections). The NCPA had opened a small music school with the aim of training Mumbai's young musicians to professional standards, in the hope of producing a generation of local musicians able to join the orchestra in the future, thereby increasing the number of Indians in the ensemble without compromising on performance ability. The school was naturally attracting the children of regular SOI audience members; people with a keen interest in Western classical music who resided near to the NCPA (in the most affluent part of Mumbai), with the disposable income necessary to afford the school's high fees. When I asked Zane Dalal, the SOI's resident conductor, what these parents would think if their child decided to become an orchestral musician, he responded as follows:

“I think they would be distraught. Indian parents, most parents actually, it's wrong of me to generalise, but specifically Indian parents, are very keen on their children getting ahead and

¹⁰ One of my informants, a musician who played both Bollywood and Western classical genres and does not want to be named, told me that, when describing his work to new people, he took pains to stress that he played in a symphony orchestra rather than a Bollywood orchestra. He believed that Bollywood orchestras were associated with poor quality music and low performance skills and was keen to disassociate himself as much as possible from film musicians.

being successful. And the proven fields, psychologically left by the British, are to be lawyers, doctors and mathematicians, accountants, scientists. And music does not get a fair shot in terms of the psychological ranking it has. And for this reason, even the Indian music masters, who are amazing icons, have a sort of secondary ranking in society. They shouldn't but they do." (Dalal 2014. Personal communication, 3 February).

Dalal's response suggests that the low status of musicians is not only deep-rooted, but unlikely to change, even if the employer is the SOI, with all its markers and signifiers of class, wealth, and status. Professional musicianship in India is associated with neither economic nor cultural capital; it signifies economic instability and low social ranking. Those moving in social spheres associated with concert attendance do not consider musical performance as a career option. For Dalal, this was all part of, "the differences and difficulties of setting up an orchestra in this environment" (ibid).

Local discourses are thus impacting on this very transnational practice, and tensions are occurring as ambitions to cultivate Indian performers of international standards¹¹ are met with local ideas of status, class and cultural capital.

"EVERY GREAT COUNTRY SHOULD HAVE A SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA": NATION BUILDING AND THE SOI

An NDTV¹² newsreader smiles into the camera as she reads the final piece of the day: "Ten years ago, a group of Western classical music lovers got together and wanted to achieve the impossible: Give India a symphony orchestra it could call its very own. Now, a decade later, they are a close-knit family with musicians from around the world. Here's their story." (NDTV: 1 October, 2016).

A video begins playing, an introduction to NDTV's regular 'Art Matters' segment, followed by a shot of an orchestra rehearsing. A close up of a bow being drawn over a violin string fades into a wider shot of a cello section playing together with gusto. A voice-over is heard: "Every great country should have a symphony orchestra, a simple thought that led to the founding of the Symphony Orchestra of India." (ibid).

Should every great country have a Symphony Orchestra? What does the symphony orchestra signify to the global community? How can we locate the orchestra within discourses of national development?

Some scholars have linked Western classical music with processes of nation building, which is often discussed within a lexicon of 'modernisation' in developing countries¹³. Anne Rasmussen, for example, has noted that, 'The arts are used as tools for both nation building and for diplomacy throughout the world' (Rasmussen 2012: 64). She links initiatives by Sultan Qaboos of Oman to import European art music with 'similar projects of Europeanisation as a prerequisite to modernisation' (ibid). Rasmussen here echoes critiques of colonialist ideologies placing European society as the pinnacle of modern social progress and European culture as the pinnacle of cultural progress (Chakrabarty 2000).

The NCPA in Mumbai was originally conceived with an agenda of nation building, but with a

¹¹ By international I refer to the employment standards set by globally renowned orchestras from a multiplicity of sites – Europe, America and Asia.

¹² New Delhi Television.

¹³ Green, 2002; 2011; Huang, 2011; Kraus, 1989; Kok, 2011; Mach, 1994; Nettle, 1985; Philips, 1969; Pieridou-Skoutella, 2011; Small, 1996; Yandi, 2012; Yang, 2007; Yoshihara, 2007.

mission to preserve and promote *Indian* performance arts and culture. It was founded in the late 1960s by two Parsi industrialists: JRD Tata and Jamshed Bhabha¹⁴. At the time of the NCPA's inauguration, Tata wrote, "The decision to establish the NCPA was promoted by the recognition of the pressing need to preserve for posterity and develop India's rich legacy in the arts, particularly those like music which depend for their survival on performance and oral traditions" (JRD Tata 1969).

In the aftermath of colonialism, when the newly emerging independent nation of India was in the process of re-establishing cultural identities and pushing back against the Euro-centric cultural hierarchy established by the British (Dwyer, 2000, Booth, 1996), it was in-keeping with the political sentiment of the time to focus on national arts. Bhabha, writing in 1969, stressed the need for a focus on national music in particular: "The art [Indian music] has been handed down by oral tradition and kept alive for centuries by teachers and masters [...] This category of hereditary teachers is fast drying out and disappearing [...] Thus, the proposed National Centre for the Performance Arts is necessary for the survival and preservation of a great heritage of music, dance and drama." (Bhabha, J., 1969).

One of the first tasks the NCPA undertook between the years of 1969 and 1974 was to record for posterity a large number of performances of leading Hindustani and Carnatic musicians, and to create an archive holding of these recordings. During these years, visiting Western ensembles were invited to perform, although only at a rate of around one per year, according to the NCPA's website (NCPA, 2013).

In the last ten years, though, the NCPA's musical programming appears to be leaning towards the Western classical genre, with more Western classical music concerts programmed than any other genre, a departure from the centre's original mission of preserving and promoting Indian arts and music. Was this shift in focus to be interpreted as an indication that nation building was no longer a part of the NCPA's remit?

A SOI promotional video made in 2012 suggests that nation building does indeed to play a part in the NCPA's activities, but situating the orchestra, not Indian classical music, within visions of Indian nationalism. 'Come and hear the new voice of India', reads a caption, over a video of seemingly 'ordinary' Mumbaikers singing along to the finale of Beethoven's Ninth symphony. SOI concert brochures communicate a similar message. The following passage is taken from a brochure that I picked up at a concert in 2014:

"As India continues to establish itself as a global economic power, the creation of first-rate cultural institutions working towards international recognition will be a vital component of the nation's growing prestige on the world stage. In creating the SOI, the NCPA is leading the initiative to develop India's international cultural profile alongside countries such as China, Korea, Malaysia and Singapore, all of which have established symphony orchestras." (NCPA, 2014).

In my discussions with the managers of the NCPA, it became clear that they considered the arts centre as still very much entwined with India's progress as a developing nation, as well as with Mumbai status as an emerging global city. The SOI's orchestral manager, Unvala, pointed to a shift in musical focus rather than a move away from national objectives, with orchestral music now being considered as a major part of national development and as synonymous with India's economic growth. Unvala told me: "With any major donor for anything, it's just sharing the vision and seeing the importance of having an orchestra the need to have an orchestra and the

¹⁴ JRD Tata was the chairman of the Tata group, a multi-national business conglomerate founded by his uncle Jamshedji Tata in 1868. Jamshed Bhabha was the brother of Homi Bhabha, India's famed nuclear physicist.

value of having an orchestra in India. And it goes parallel, as India has grown internationally, brand India has grown. I think alongside that, alongside the economy the culture grows as well and gets a more international outlook as well, so, we try to balance at the NCPA, because of course one of our main missions is promoting and preserving Indian arts and culture, which is a never-ending mission, I mean it's so vast and rich. But I also think that we have to have an eye to the international arts too, and form both sides.” (Unvala, 2014. Personal communication, 3 February).

Conductor Dalal similarly stressed the role of the SOI as a signifier of Mumbai's status as a global city. In the quote below, he draws parallels between the orchestra and developments within the city's extra-cultural spheres of trade and finance: “The idea of the SOI certainly was, why don't we have a professional standard orchestra in the city, as all these other global cities do? The global nature of the last 15 years has suggested that each of the cities from Mumbai to Osaka need to not be provincial island bound viewpoints, they need to be nodal hubs of trade, finance, in a sort of global setting. And it was a good idea to have a symphony orchestra. And we are going to talk in a little bit about how it is a symphony orchestra at odds with the ground it stands on. But it was worthwhile to say that if Mumbai was to be a global city, and a financial capital and a node point in South Asia that people would recognize as a modern city looking into the new millennium, then why doesn't it have an orchestra?” (Dalal, 2014. Personal communication, 3 February).

Links with finance highlighted by Dalal were tangible by the SOI's corporate sponsors. International banking conglomerate Citibank provide the primary source of funding for the orchestra, supplemented by other corporate sponsors from the world of business and finance (NCPA, 2014). Businesses interested in India's economic growth are, it seems, also interested in supporting the NCPA's mission to cultivate what it considered to be a transnationally recognised cultural marker of economic development.

Dalal also noted the presence of orchestras in other post-colonial and developing nation states as indicative of modernisation, telling me, “Singapore has one and Bangkok has one, and certainly there are three in Japan and twenty-three million in China, and Australia” (ibid). Dalal's comparisons with orchestral praxis in other countries of Asia and the world, place the orchestra firmly within discourses surrounding modern nationhood. For Dalal (as well as for many other supporters of the SOI), modernity and economic development were signified by the presence of a symphony orchestra. The presence of the SOI is to be celebrated; it legitimises Mumbai as a global city and confirms the success of India as a fast-growing global economy.

Dalal, in our conversation, hinted at some local resistance to the SOI, noting that the orchestra may be considered “at odds with the ground it stands on” (ibid). Neither the local Maharashtrian government nor the central Indian government provide support in any capacity for Western classical music, indeed, they appear to many to be resistant to it. The SOI are subject to taxation regulations of 25% on every ticket sold (down from an initial 50%), as are any other Western classical music performances in the city. There is no government funding for Western music education projects. There is no discernible presence of local government personnel at concerts (in contrast to the afore-mentioned presence of many members of the business community). Some members of the Western classical music scene in Mumbai regularly voice frustration at a perceived persecution of their activities by local government, one going so far as to dub the local Shiv Sena ruling party ‘Maharashtrian Chauvinists’ (Masani, 2014). Does the government of India then not recognise the value of the orchestra in projects of modernisation and nation building?

There has been some scholarly discussion about the role of the nation state within spheres of nation building and culture in India. The emphasis however, has been firmly on the

development of India's own music cultures, with the classicisation of Hindustani and Carnatic music (Weidman, 2009; Moro, 2004) leading to it 'functioning as one of the key emblems of the nation's cultural inheritance' (Subramanian, 2008:76). Lakshmi Subramanian has suggested that a re-imagining of Indian classical music¹⁵, from entertainment within princely courts to high art concert music located among middle class public spheres "not only appealed to the incipient nationalist imagination, it also gave the nation state an agenda of sorts for self-conscious cultural engineering that provided its citizen subjects and its diaspora with a concrete set of markers to invoke images and imaginings of the nation" (2008:76).

A focus on indigenous Indian cultures within nation building has been criticised by Indian economist and historian Amartya Sen, who writes, 'The growing tendency in contemporary India to champion the need for an indigenous culture that has resisted external influences lacks credibility as well as coherency. It has become quite common to cite the foreign origin of an idea or a tradition as an argument against it, and this has been linked up with an anti-modernist priority' (Sen, 2005:131). However, could the Indian government's reluctance to embrace Western classical music not be interpreted as an attempt to move away from colonial-era notions of cultural legitimacy? As Thomas Metcalf has pointed out, Indian music cultures under the British Raj were subject to denigration as one of many strategies used by the British to justify their rule over India (Metcalf 1994), whilst Subramanian suggests that nationalist's focus on Indian classical arts and culture during a period of classicisation was marked by a backlash against 'colonial critiques of native deficiency' (Subramanian, 2008:76). Metcalf and Subramanian's work chime with wider critiques of the role of Western classical music within narratives of nation building and modernisation in developing and/or post-colonial countries as demonstrative of ongoing cultural hegemony rooted in historical ideologies regarding Western culture as the peak of civilisation. To draw in more contemporary case-studies from other global sites, Yoshihara has suggested that Japan's post-war adoption of Western classical music was indicative of Japan's need to seek recognition by the hegemonic West by mastering Western arts and culture (Yoshihara, 2007), and Yang has argued that, "Modernisation in Asia entailed negotiations not between class and ethnicity, although there are certainly elements of these as well, but even more, between colonising and local practices, and between the foreign and the indigenous" (Yang, 2007:27).¹⁶

Following on from Yoshihara's and Yang's research, the SOI could be re-framed within discourses of post-colonial anxiety, characterised by Sankaran Krishna as attempts by elites to 'fashion their narrations in the image of what are considered successful nation-states. Both the past and the future become an imitative and thankless quest to prove that supremely unworthy maxim: "we are as good as" (Krishna 1999: xix)? This prompts the question: is the SOI a means by which Mumbai's elites attempt to demonstrate that India is as good as other nations with established orchestras?

I discussed the issue of post-colonial anxiety with Joseph, a former SOI musician. His response suggests that Western classical music in Mumbai is a site in which nuanced and overlapping positions of post-colonial anxiety and of national pride were negotiated. Joseph told me: "We actually, you know, want to compete with the West in many fields, we do value their recognition as well. At the same time, Indians have kind of too much pride, because of the colonisation and that, we don't want to be that Stockholm syndrome country." (Joseph, 2016. Personal

¹⁵ What is referred to by 'Indian classical music' are the Hindustani tradition from Northern India and the Carnatic tradition from Southern India.

¹⁶ These arguments by Yoshihara and Yang speak to debates surrounding Western classical music and notions of autonomy, rooted as they are in assumptions of Western classical music as synonymous with European cultures.

communication, 2 September).

The role of the Symphony Orchestra of India within India's nation development is a complex one. Whilst its proponents argue that an orchestra serves as a marker of modernity and of economic development, historically rooted ideologies of Western cultural hegemony must be inserted into critical discourses. It appears, for the time being at least, that whilst Mumbai's transnational middle class and elite communities and the SOI's multinational corporate donors consider investment in an orchestra a part of India's wider political and economic development, India's local and national government continue to resist this particular signifier of modernity, championing instead Indian arts and cultures as foundational to India's nationhood.

SYMPHONIES AND SOFT POWER: THE ORCHESTRA AND CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

The SOI, as I made clear in the above sections, is about more than just music. Whilst for those involved in the running of it, and for its audiences, a genuine love and appreciation for orchestral music is always made clear, local pressures and questions constantly compel it to justify its presence on a plurality of levels. It is not enough for the orchestra to provide Mumbai's Western classical music aficionados with regular concerts, it has to serve extra-musical purposes for its critics to be convinced of its usefulness, particularly in light of the high cost of running the orchestra. Why were funds being directed towards Western music instead of Indian music? Why are concert halls being given over to Western performances rather than Indian? These implied (as well as sometimes, direct) questions are often asked accusatorially, eliciting a defensive response, as I noted in my interviews with Suntook, Dalal and Unvala.

As I discussed above, one of the means by which the SOI justifies itself within Mumbai is to argue that the symphony orchestra is a marker of modernisation, and is recognised and celebrated as such transnationally. However, during one of our discussions, Suntook pointed to the SOI's role in further extra-musical spheres: soft power and cultural diplomacy:

“It’s not a money-making business, it's something that’s a part of your soft power as we call it. You’ve got to have an orchestra. You’ve got to have shall we say an attraction for the international community to come here. And so many of our German and Italian consular friends and business friends say, “Thank God, we would like a posting in Bombay because they have got the NCPA!” They really love it.” (Suntook, 2014. Personal communication, 10 September)

What Is Soft Power?

Often considered as intertwined with cultural diplomacy, the term soft power was coined by Joseph Nye in 1990 to describe the ability of a nation state to attract and co-opt rather than coerce, use force or give money as a means of persuasion (Nye, 1990). Nye suggests that soft power has three key sources: culture, political values and policies. It has been argued that culture is the most important of these three (Mazrui, 1990).

Soft power can be either governmental or non-governmental in nature, with some suggesting that the role of non-state actors could overtake that of governments (Thussu, 2013). Governments value soft power immensely, as evidenced by their funding of soft power quangos, examples being the British Council, the Goethe Institut, the Alliance Francais, and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations. Examples of non-governmental soft power could include national cuisine, educational institutes, entertainment industries, sports, transnational corporations, celebrities, and the creative and cultural industries (Thussu, 2013). Soft power can be considered essentially as things which communicate a positive message about a nation to the world, making that nation more desirable and attractive and increasing its status and influence. The term soft power has acquired global currency and is widely and routinely used in policy and academic literature (Thussu, 2013:4).

A recent report by Kings College London made a distinction between cultural diplomacy and soft power. Cultural diplomacy is characterised as 'reaching out', whereas soft power is 'standing out' (Doeser and Nisbett, 2017:14). It is helpful to break down discussions of the orchestra into these two sub-categories.

Cultural Diplomacy: Reaching Out

James Doeser and Melissa Nisbet, authors of *The art of soft power: A study of cultural diplomacy at the UN Office in Geneva* (2017), suggest that cultural diplomacy, 'reaching out', has four foundational goals: 'unite, socialise, communicate and educate' (Doeser and Nisbet, 2017:15). How do orchestras play a role?

Graham Sheffield CBE, Director of Arts at the British Council, has described orchestras as, 'a strange medium in which to conduct contemporary international cultural relations' (Sheffield, 2016). Orchestras are, Sheffield points out, large, unwieldy, expensive, often playing repertoire unconnected to the orchestras themselves, and often disassociated from the community in which they appear (ibid). Despite this, orchestras have played, and continue to play an important role within transnational cultural relations. They have been discussed in relation to European youth integration in the Baltic Youth Philharmonic (Ramnarine, 2014) and the European Youth Orchestra (Sheffield, 2016), as well as in relation to conflict resolution in the Middle East (Beckles Wilson, 2009), and attempts at fostering goodwill between the USA and North Korea (Wakin, 2008). These examples all conform to at least one, if not several, of Doeser and Nisbett's notions of cultural diplomacy: they provide spaces for transnational unity, for socialisation, for cross-cultural communication, and for education.

The role of orchestras within diplomatic relations, though, is subject to similar critiques as to that of its role in nation building, in that it goes towards maintaining ideologies of Western cultural hegemony and superiority. Orchestras from nation states with comparatively newer or smaller traditions of Western classical music are in a disadvantaged position, forced to conduct cultural diplomacy within the cultural paradigms of hegemonic states. In this critique, cultural diplomacy is re-imagined, as developing nation states employ the orchestra as a tool to impress and to communicate their own cultural progress in a comparative sphere, echoing Krishna's notions of post-colonial anxiety (1999), discussed earlier in this paper. This is highlighted in a 2016 article by the Financial Review, which criticised a concert in New York by the China Philharmonic Orchestra as 'not yet at Western levels of quality' (The Economist, 2016), the Chinese promoter commenting, 'our tours are a way of showing our orchestra's standards, to show our colleagues in Europe that we're getting better and better' (Wu, 2016 in The Economist, 2016).

India has been on the receiving end of orchestral cultural diplomacy; in 1993 Israel sent the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Mumbai born conductor Zubin Mehta, to India following the two countries formally establishing diplomatic relations in 1992. Mehroo Jeejeebhoy, director of the Mehli Mehta Music Foundation in Mumbai, was a part of the organising committee, and described the magnitude of the event: "This was the first important event. The Israel Philharmonic are like the ambassadors of Israel. The first important event was bringing this orchestra to India" (Jeejeebhoy, 2012. Personal communication, 19 August). In 2014 the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra were in Mumbai as part of a cultural diplomacy tour of India organised in the lead up to the Commonwealth Games, which were to be held in Glasgow the following year. Accompanied by violinist Nicola Benedetti, the orchestra performed at the NCPA and ran several educational and outreach sessions across the Mumbai. The tour was funded by the British Council, the BBC and the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, with some contributions from India, and was much lauded, both in India and the UK. Commentators from the media and from the orchestra itself stressed the communicative nature

of the event, pointing to attempts made at cross-cultural collaboration; Indian musicians had, prior to the orchestra tour, visited Scotland to participate in collaborative musical exchange, and a commonwealth youth orchestra featuring musicians from Scotland, India and Kenya was planned for the following summer. Sheffield, in an article written about the exchange, suggested that, 'It was a concerted attempt to reach as many people through the collaboration as possible; and to share traditions from east and west' (Sheffield, 2016).

I spoke with Gavin Reid, director of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra. Reid situated the orchestral tour within spheres of cultural dialogue and exchange, and was keen to highlight the communicative, social, and educational (as outlined by Doeser and Nisbet, 2017) elements of the trip, as indicated in the following quote:

“I certainly wouldn't like this to sound like the Brits coming into India, far from it, and we have always viewed this as an exchange, because we have learned so much by just coming here. It's a life-changer for many people. But we also wanted to make sure that we were bringing something back to Scotland, which is why the opportunity to bring Rahman and his students and his music, which, to the best of our knowledge, there had never been an evening of AR Rahman's music in Scotland before.” (Reid, 2014. Personal communication, 6 April).

The role of the orchestral tour in building relationships between Scotland and India was further highlighted by BBC journalist Mark Tully, who reported, 'After the final concert the British Council, who generously assisted the tour, gave a reception at which it was widely agreed that this success should be the beginning of a lasting relationship between India and Scotland' (Tully, 2014).

For its part, the Symphony Orchestra of India is taking steps to integrate itself within networks of transnational dialogue and exchange on a more proactive level. It is a member of the Alliance of Asia Pacific Regional Orchestras, thereby situating itself within Asian cultural integration. It has toured abroad, firstly to Russia in 2010 for a performance at a festival of world orchestras, followed by visits to Oman, Switzerland and the UK. In terms of cultural diplomacy, these tours are indicative of the positive diplomatic relations between India and the countries visited. The NCPA has fostered direct links with a number of international cultural centres, including the Kennedy Centre in New York, the New York Metropolitan Opera, the National Theatre in London and the Russian Bolshoi Ballet. It also had established relationships with several embassies in Mumbai, including the British Council, the Alliance Francais and the Goethe Institut.

The SOI and its home, the NCPA, have over the years, then, been able to play a role in fostering cultural relations with a multiplicity of cultural centres, aiding transnational and cross-cultural projects of unity, communication, socialisation and education (Doeser and Nisbet, 2017). Whilst their role is still perhaps a small one, it is imbued with potential. As Unvala noted, “With the SOI at least our role as sort of cultural ambassadors is still growing” (Unvala, 2014. Personal communication, 30 October).

Soft Power: Standing Out

Doeser and Nisbitt discuss soft power - standing out - as having four sub-categories: Power, Business, Leadership and Identity (2017). Is the SOI effectively standing out as a purveyor of Indian soft power?

In his book *Communicating India's Soft Power*, Thussu comments, “Parallel to its rising economic power, is the growing global awareness of India's soft power – its mass media, popular culture, cuisine, and communication outlets” (Thussu, 2013: 2). Thussu suggests that whilst the first two decades of globalisation enabled 'the expansion of largely Western culture

and consumerism around the world' (2013:3), in the second decade of the twenty first century, Indian cultures, “from Bollywood cinema to Bhangra music. From mobile telephony to online communication” (Ibid.), were steadily growing in visibility, volume and value.

The cultures that Thussu suggests make populations in other countries highly receptive to India are characterised as nation-specific: Indian cuisine, Bollywood cinema, Indian spirituality, yoga and Indian classical music are all given as examples (Thussu, 2013). Indian politician and former diplomat Shashi Tharoor has also spoken about India's soft power. He argues that discussions surrounding India as an economic super-power or as a military or nuclear power should re-refocussed on India's 'power of example, the attraction of India's culture' (Tharoor, 2009). Tharoor, like Thussu, gives examples of soft power which carry markers of a very recognisable Indian identity: Bollywood movies, ayurvedic medicine, yoga (Ibid.).

For Thussu and Tharoor, Indian soft power is bound up in cultures rooted in India, cultures recognisable as Indian to the rest of the world. Their arguments suggest that it is the fourth pillar of soft power - identity - the ability 'to give a sense of identity, to reflect your identity, to identify you as a country' (Doerer and Nisbitt, 2017:15) which enables Indian cultures to 'stand out'. It is here that I suggest the SOI's role as a purveyor of soft power is most problematic.

Many local voices in Mumbai (and according to Bombay Chamber Orchestra founder Jini Dinshaw, many transnational audiences) question the Indian identity of the Symphony Orchestra of India, with a lack of Indian musicians¹⁷ and a perceived reluctance to invite Indian or Indian-origin guest soloists, being key complaints. I asked Suntook why the SOI employs so few Indian players. He replied:

“You don’t get in just because you are Indian – we have a certain standard and we interviewed God knows how many, dozens and dozens, of players and all I got from my Marat [Bisengeliyev, music director of the SOI] was “niete, niете, niете, niете”, because you have to be good. And now we have got eleven really good players. They can play string quartets, they are really very good. [...] We have constituted a world-wide search for Indian players. We have put it on the net, we have advertised, we have spent a lot of money. The problem is that we don’t offer a full twelve-month job to people who are only willing to play in the orchestra. A lot of people say, “we will only come back for the season”. But that’s OK, just to show the face to the public that we have more Indians. But we would like to have them as permanent employees, which they don’t want to do.” (Suntook, 2014. Personal communication, 10 September).

As this quote shows, for Suntook the quality of musical performance is more important than the national or ethnic identity of the players. His local audiences are, he went on to say, more interested in hearing music of international standards than seeing more Indian musicians in the orchestra: “Everybody should hear this music. And when they hear it they are quite stunned. But it has to be well played, and that’s been the problem here in India, because if it is badly played it is not nice. We want to maintain a certain standard. And that standard has to be international. We have got very good players from London orchestras, from Eastern European orchestras, our players are very good.” (Ibid.).

Suntook was supported in his views by Dalal, who told me the following: “We wanted to remain with a quality-based thing, and that is extremely important to us. A lot of people say why don’t you have more Indians in the orchestra, this is not an Indian orchestra, and of course, it’s not a photo-op either, and it’s not a football club either, so people need to turn around and go away.” (Dalal, 2014. Personal communication, 3 February).

¹⁷ At the time of writing there were eight Indian members of the orchestra.

Other voices in Mumbai suggest that even if there must be a minority of Indian players, the SOI should perform more works by Indian composers. This was something which, again, the SOI management appear reluctant to do, citing their own tastes for Western classical pieces as well as the preferences of their core audience. Dalal told me, “I don’t think fusion works” (Dalal, 2014. Personal communication, 2 February).

When touring abroad, however, the SOI are obliged to perform Indian identities, as evidenced by Suntook, who informed me, “And that is what the West wants when we take it for tour in Europe. They want a complete Indian first half” (Suntook, 2014. Personal communication, 10 September). In order to satisfy these wants, the SOI’s management have commissioned special works to perform outside of India. For their 2013 tour of Oman, the SOI performed a triple concerto with Indian tabla player Zakir Hussain, American banjo player Bela Fleck and American bassist Edgar Meyer, and had commissioned a further tabla concerto from Zakir Hussain for a 2016 tour to Switzerland, which was performed again in the UK in 2019. Unvala explained:

“So, we were trying to come up with a program that would have an Indian element in it. We have done these international performances, but this will be our first big multi-city tour. We thought that having an Indian composer and an Indian musician with us was important for that. And Zakir Hussain is arguably today one of the biggest Indian names in the music world and personally I think one of the greatest living musicians today across all genres. So, we were discussing of ways of how we get that India element in and Zakir’s name came up.” (Unvala, 2014. Personal communication, 30 October).

Expectations that national pieces be included in a touring orchestra’s repertoire are by no means uncommon; for their concert in Mumbai the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra played an arrangement of Scottish reels, thereby bringing to their performance a cultural specificity reflective of Scotland and Scottish musical cultures. Suntook, though problematised the notion of ‘Indian’ Western classical music, pointing to ambiguities and difficulties created in fusion compositions, as quoted: “That’s true because if you have a Japanese composer or if you have a Chinese composer they are not really, they compose in the Western style, some of them don’t even do that, they have their own... well but the notation is Western let’s put it that way. So, it’s really international music.” (Ibid.).

Suntook’s conclusion here that orchestral music is ‘international’ hints at a reluctance to attach national specificity to pieces of music based upon the nationality of composers. Whilst this reluctance may chime with values of his Mumbai audiences, it has the potential to undermine efforts to create an Indian orchestral sound. It also speaks to wider debates surrounding notions and ideologies of Western classical music as universal and autonomous, or as culturally and nationally specific.

Efforts by Suntook, Unvala and Dalal to incorporate Indian-ness into the SOI appear to be led by foreign demand rather than local protest or personal choice. Could their reluctance to cultivate an Indian identity, either in terms of ethnicity of players or in terms of repertoire, compromise the SOI’s role as an effective purveyor of soft power? Do their values retard the SOI’s ability to stand out, to reflect India’s identity as a country?

Whilst the SOI appears to be finding a place within transnational networks of cultural diplomacy, its struggle to carve out an Indian identity suggests that it has yet to become a significant facet of India’s soft power. The SOI does not ‘stand out’, the key criteria for success within soft power were hampered by ongoing tensions regarding its uniqueness of any identity. It does not, despite some efforts, reflect the identity of India in a manner that could ‘shape, alter and impact the ideas and opinions of public communities’ (Varma in Thussu, 2013:128). Ideologies of universalism have shaped an orchestral praxis which fails to communicate a

specificity of India's cultural prowess. To do that it would first have to become what local critic Jini Dinshaw suggests: a truly *Indian* symphony orchestra (Dinshaw, 2014).

FINAL THOUGHTS

Throughout this paper, I have discussed the roles and meanings of the SOI, firstly in relation to social status and prestige within its locale, and then within transnational frameworks of nation building and cultural diplomacy. These roles are newly established and still evolving, as the orchestra continues to find its place in India and to shape its identity, both locally and within the transnational sphere.

For some, the presence of the SOI is a cause for anxiety, a signal that Mumbai's elite communities subscribe to narratives situating hegemonic Western cultures as synonymous with modernisation and development, legitimising a notion that India is somehow culturally 'behind' other developing Asian nations, and must 'catch up' as it establishes itself as a global economic and political superpower.

However, it is possible to consider an alternative interpretation and frame the SOI within processes of decolonisation. Holton has argued that the development of global cultures has moved away from a colonially-rooted core-periphery model, and is now driven through the emergence and interests of a cross-national global elite (Holton, 2000). Cultural power has therefore become decentralised and multi-centred. Applying Holton's theory to the Indian context would lead to an understanding of the SOI as an example of the interests of cross-national global elites based in India, and as an indicator of Mumbai's position as a nodal city within cross-national cultural powers. Most optimistically, one could argue that the proliferation of professional symphony orchestras in Asia, of which the SOI is the only example, helps to decentralise orchestral praxis, which may in turn lead to a destabilisation of the West's historical cultural hegemony.

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