

ON THE MUSIC OF *THE MUSIC ROOM*:
AN INTERVIEW WITH SATYAJIT RAY



This interview with Satyajit Ray was conducted in Kolkata in 1986, by Andrew Robinson, and originally published with the 1989 French CD of the Music Room soundtrack.

Do you think the seriousness of the music used in the film made your screenplay serious or was it the other way around?

No. My screenplay only mentioned the *kind* of music that was being sung or played. There was no mention in it of the actual singers. In any case, the zamindar in the original story—which was considered a classic of the Bengali short story—was fond of singing, which meant that he was fond of classical singing. The zamindars usually had classical soirees in their houses. You see, the screenplay couldn't, in any case, be a very rich brew, because there were very few characters in the story itself; both wife and son are lost, and only the three men remain.

What was [composer] Vilayat Khan's attitude toward the screenplay?

He was delighted. Biswambhar Roy, the zamindar, was the kind of character Vilayat and his family had known because they had zamindar sponsors. Vilayat's father himself had a zamindar as a patron. Vilayat was born on his estates, lived there, and so on. So, even halfway through the screenplay, I could see the film as a sort of chamber film, but I was confident that, with Chhabi Biswas, who was a very popular actor, it would be able to pull in the audience, even though it had few characters in it. And to be able to use the theme of classical music for the first time, I could also see, would be a draw for the public; the classical music recitals that took place every winter in Calcutta were then full to overflowing.

Was Vilayat wholly in sympathy with the zamindar?

Absolutely. He wrote a lovely theme for him, which I was rather worried about. I wanted a more neutral kind of approach to the music to go with the zamindar, not suggesting that I was full of sympathy for him but a kind of ambivalent attitude. But I liked Vilayat's theme as a piece of music, and I felt the story would tell what I wanted to tell and the music would not interfere with my general attitude toward feudalism and so on.

In your teens and twenties, you seem rather to have dismissed Indian classical music.

Not dismissed. I was making this enormous discovery of Western classical music, and the idea of composed music, with its formal beauty and structure, appealed to me greatly. In Indian music, one never knew with the musicians whether they would be performing well or not. You went to hear a very great musician and found that he had had too much to drink and wasn't up to his best. That sort of thing was a constant factor that militated against a full admiration for Indian classical music. But later, I realized that, however good the musician in Western classical music was, one could have a wonderful body of players playing music that was really not very substantial. I drew the conclusion that if I had the choice of a first-rate European pianist playing different pieces and a top-rate Indian musician singing no one knew what, I would go to hear the Indian, hoping that he would be at his best, doing something worthwhile.

The element of surprise?

The element of surprise.

Did your education at [Rabindranath] Tagore's university in Santiniketan wake you up to Indian classical music?

No. There I persisted with Western music. There wasn't a top-rate classical musician in Santiniketan. There was a teacher of classical music, but he wasn't really absolutely first-rate. But after Santiniketan, I became a great admirer of Ravi Shankar. He was very good then. I got in the habit of going to his concerts in the early 1940s, and discovering great riches in all sorts of things.

So by the time you worked with Vilayat Khan, you felt really confident?

Yes, quite confident. I was even able to specify the ragas I needed for certain sequences—in fact, for the title theme. I had him play certain things to start with and then decided on certain things, which we then developed and turned into a theme for the film. But actually, it was Imrat, Vilayat's younger brother, who knew film music much better than Vilayat did, knew its restrictions to specified times. Imrat was a great filmgoer.

And he didn't look down on it?

Not at all.

Could you describe the music of the film?

This was a film that called for music because there were long stretches of silence, partly because of the fact that there were no characters apart from Chhabi Biswas on the screen—there was no one to talk to! Not all the stretches were filled with music, but a great many of them were. And it had climaxes: the death of the son, the candles going out toward the end. Indian music wasn't always adequate. When the candles are going out, for instance, there is a feeling of terror, of uncertainty, something almost macabre, which Indian classical music alone was just not able to capture. So I had to improvise in the editing room, and finally you have Vīlayat and Sibelius playing together. And this combination gives you a sound texture that is more than just a music track.

The film opens with the titles, which are *Tori*—a rather bleak, rather austere morning raga that shows beautiful playing by Vīlayat, with a string background. We had decided to use violins, not necessarily for melodic purposes but to give a body, a background kind of texture, instead of using the *tanpura*, which is a drone. I felt that would make it sound too much like a concert performance. So we decided on using strings as a drone, holding the tonic, even doing rhythmic things, instead of using the *tabla* and the *mridanga*, which, again, would make it sound like a concert performance. We decided on using strings both for percussive and drone purposes, and Vīlayat agreed to that.

Then there was the singing, of course. This is an important element in the story, where the zamindar listens to a female singer and is very moved by the song and describes to his wife how



wonderful the singer was; although she wasn't beautiful, when she sang, one forgot her looks—she was transformed physically. We used the very best singer of that type of song, from Lucknow, Akhtaribai [a.k.a. Begum Akhtar]. We went there and spoke to her. She started life as a professional *thumri* singer but later married a barrister and was living a very quiet domestic life. At first, there was a slight resistance, but we approached the barrister through an uncle of mine who lived in Lucknow and was a barrister himself; they were great friends. I also needed a male singer. I had decided that there would be three important musical sessions in the film. One would be a *thumri* singer, which was very common; one would be a *kathak* dancer, which was also a very common thing; and one be *khyal* singing by a male singer. This I decided for the sake of variety. And these came at three different points. First, when the zamindar was affluent—a real zamindar—in a flashback. Second, when the nouveau riche neighbor had also taken to holding musical soirees and had invited this dancer; Biswambhar has to invite the same dancer out of hubris. And finally, when the male singer sings, which is combined with an element of tension where the boat doesn't arrive. He gets all sorts of premonitions of disaster while the singing is going on, which makes a contrast. These are the three.

For the male singer, we chose a raga that is suitable for the rainy season. It's attributed to [Miyan] Tansen, one of the greatest composers India has ever produced. His version of "Malhar" has a particular note in it that gives it a special color at certain points. And we used a singer who had just become very famous indeed—Salamat Ali Khan. He had already given two or three performances in Calcutta and been recognized as one of the brightest young stars.

We approached him, and he was very cordial and friendly, willing and eager. So it was Akhtaribai for the *thumri*, Salamat for the *khyal*, Roshan Kumari for the dance. She was definitely the best dancer of that time. The raga was chosen for the dancing also; it starts with the singing, then goes into the dance with the beating of the percussion. That was a lovely raga.

I must say that Vilayat's choice of ragas was very satisfying. There was one long, wordless sequence, for instance, where preparations are being made for the dance sequence. The wine is brought out, and the carpet is unrolled. The old times are returning, and the servant is very happy. The chandeliers are being brought down and cleaned. For that, the brothers played a duet, a South Indian raga now used in North Indian music also—a very bright-sounding raga, wonderfully bright-sounding. That was the high point of the film, where music comes into the foreground almost.

And, of course, there was *shehnai* at various points. Very early in the film, it is established that the zamindars were in the habit of waking up in the morning to the sound of *shehnai*. Musicians would play in what is known as the *nahabat* [a special balcony for musicians]; in the zamindari house, this is part of the architecture, usually above the main gate. We had Bismillah Khan, who is far and away the best *shehnai* player India has ever produced. He had to record five or six different pieces for different times of the day; they were put in the right positions at the time of final cutting. He didn't know where they would go or why he was playing certain things; he was just happy to play.

That's all the music there was in the film, apart from various pieces of background music.

Many critics seem to feel that you show sympathy for the zamindar. What do you feel?

Well, he's sort of dying. There is an element of pathos in that, and in the fact that the man doesn't know the process of history; this makes him a figure of pathos. You pity him, ultimately. And there is no doubt that the zamindars were real connoisseurs of music, and sponsors of music, and that musicians owed a great deal to them. Without the feudal lords, music wouldn't have flourished the way it did, for long periods, starting from the Moguls.

How did you cope with the fact that Chhabi Biswas was totally unmusical?

Well, I discovered that rather late [laughs]. I said to myself, "My God, and he looks so much like a zamindar himself!" He had the ways of an aristocratic character, but he didn't know a note of music. He did a very convincing job of playing the *esraj* while his son sings. I don't know how he did it—through sheer grit, I think. That was one point where it was absolutely essential to establish visually that this man was musical. Chhabi Biswas managed it, and we all heaved a sigh of relief after the shot. There was another point that was much more subtle that I credit myself with. That is the scene where the zamindar is sitting on a moonlit veranda and listening to music coming from the other man's house. You can hear the music, the dance music; it's the same dance that is later given in his own home. There's a thing called a *som* in Indian classical music; if the beat is sixteen to the bar, when the sixteenth beat comes, it is the culminating point, and if you



indicate by clapping at that precise point, it shows you are aware of the rhythm, of the mathematics. If you go to a South Indian concert in Madras, everybody is beating time, even the smallest child; they learn rhythm incredibly well. And when the *som* comes, they do a little clap. Now, Biswambhar Roy was sitting in the chair, with the stick in his left hand and one finger free. I had him lift his finger at one point, and in the mixing, I coincided the two [*laughs*].

And he had no idea why he was doing this?

No idea at all.

How did he react to the whole problem?

He said, "I know nothing of music. I don't react to music the way you do. But I will try to act a connoisseur by the right facial expressions at certain points—saying 'wah-wah,' shaking the head, looking dreamy-eyed." I would have used more of that, had he been musical, had it come spontaneously. But I avoided it as much as possible because I could see his acting wasn't up to the real thing.

How did Chhabi Biswas take to your direction? Was he prepared to have a younger man tell him what to do?

He certainly approved of all the ideas. For instance, the candles going out was not in the original script. I don't even remember what that was like. The idea of the candles going out one by one was devised on location, while we were shooting. I was working like I

normally do; every evening, I was sitting with the script and thinking, in case any fresh ideas might come for the next day's shooting. And this suddenly came to me in a flash, and I described it to Chhabi Biswas. He was terribly excited. He said, "I have never come across such a brilliant and fresh and expressive idea." So he was keyed up to play that scene right up to the hilt.

Did you get help from the real-life zamindar who owned the palace where you shot the film?

Well, you see, he had an uncle who was the model for the Chhabi Biswas character. They had a music room that was much too small for my purpose; I wanted a huge room with pillars. He himself was an extremely devout man, extremely nice, and also, in a sense, very liberal; he had a lot of friends in Calcutta known to my family, one of them being a great-uncle of mine. He was completely opposite in character to the Chhabi Biswas character. He didn't drink. He didn't listen to music. He was a great reader of books, and he was a perfect gentleman—a wonderfully kindhearted, gentle person. But he had experience through his uncle of this kind of behavior, of the archetypal zamindar.

I think The Music Room is the only film of yours in which the main character is incapable of change. With the exception of Devi, perhaps.

Yes. That is true. But I wasn't aware of that when I made it. I was fascinated by the musical aspect as well as by the character, about

half and half. He was one person while his wife and son were alive, quite another when they died and he was alone. And then, a sudden surge of feeling when he finds he has a rival, who is now holding all the soirees—a sudden decision to outdo him.

So there is, in a sense, a transition from a certain mood to another mood at a certain point in the film. Without that, he would have just faded away. It was this sudden decision coming at the end of his life that gave the story its special quality. I think, for me, he was a symbolic character. We were dealing with symbols. The nouveau riche, with his completely boorish kind of attitude—he was also a kind of archetype. The whole zamindari became an archetype of dying feudalism.

What about the Western response to the film? How do you account for that?

It's very hard to understand. When I made the film, I didn't think it would export at all. I was making it for my own audience. As it turned out, it was not made for a popular audience. We spent as little money as possible to ensure that the money we did spend would come back. It did. It had terrific success the first six or seven weeks, then it tailed off. I felt, watching the film with the audience, that it was perhaps a little too austere and the public was probably not ready for it. Today, it would certainly draw a much larger audience.

There is certainly an exotic element.

Yes, there is, but there is also the fact that you have to sit through

seven or eight minutes of music you're not used to. Sitar is one thing, *shehnai* is one thing, but *khyal* singing, with all its filigree and ornamentation, is very foreign to the Western ear. But perhaps the fact that people are already attached to this main character, concerned about his fate . . . All through the *khyal*, the man is suffering from stress and tension—in other words, while the song is going on, the story itself is progressing. And the chandelier is swinging. Even so, it's not a total explanation for the success of the film. ♣

