

# A poem in a medium not of words: Music, dance and arts education in Rabindranath Tagore's Santiniketan

**Matthew Pritchard**

Faculty of Music, University of Cambridge, UK

Arts & Humanities in Higher Education

2014, Vol. 13(1–2) 101–114

© The Author(s) 2013

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1474022213491344

ahh.sagepub.com



## Abstract

In light of recent attempts to defend the role of the arts in education against the effects of policies based on utilitarian principles, this paper examines the arts educational writings and practical projects of Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) at Santiniketan in West Bengal, showing how they were motivated by a Romantic and Upanishadic philosophy centred on the anti-utilitarian concept of 'surplus'. While the development of Santiniketan's present arts and music departments away from Tagore's original ideals is acknowledged and traced, the paper argues that Tagore's aesthetic and educational philosophy still contains much to challenge us. In many ways, his thought can be seen as more compatible with progressive and liberal arts education than the ideology of high modernism that developed at the same period in Europe.

## Keywords

Bengali, education, liberal arts, modernism, music, Romanticism

The model of education established by the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) at Santiniketan in West Bengal merits attention, at present, for three reasons. The first and most superficial is that ever-effective journalist's 'hook', the anniversary: Tagore's 150th has been stretched over the best part of two years, prompting welcome re-examination of his varied legacy but also much uncertainty about the extent and nature of his relevance today. The second is the crisis in arts funding and higher education brought about by sweeping budget cuts, both in England and abroad. That has led to parallel doubts, and robust defences, of the role of the arts in an educational and social system increasingly dominated

---

## Corresponding author:

Matthew Pritchard, Faculty of Music, University of Cambridge, 11 West Road, Cambridge CB3 9DP, UK.

Email: mp318@cam.ac.uk

by the utilitarian logic of the market. It does not take much knowledge of Tagore's thought and work as an educator to see its relevance to the latter debate. Indeed Martha Nussbaum (2010) has already pointed public attention in the West towards Tagore's defence of many of the values she believes are fostered by a liberal arts education. In what follows, I will attempt to trace more closely the development of Tagore's educational vision and its embodiments at Santiniketan. Santiniketan is not the kind of place one writes about at second-hand, however. It exerts a physical attraction over every scholar who works on Tagore and on Bengali culture and has an atmospheric presence of its own that calls out for description, independently of its documented past. Having studied *Rabindrasangit* (the songs composed by Tagore) at the Sangit Bhavan or music department of Visva-Bharati University in Santiniketan for a year in 2009–2010, I will try and convey some of my own impressions of the place, its educational ethos, and lastly, the connection of that ethos with the music and philosophical thought of Tagore. Both his music and philosophy can (cultural differences from European forms notwithstanding) be described as Romantic and idealist in orientation. It is the productivity of a confrontation – in our thinking about both the arts and education – with Romantic values that were still in the ascendant a century ago that I would urge as the third, and most deep-lying, reason for studying Tagore today.

'A poem in a medium not of words': this was Tagore's description of his educational project at Santiniketan, the 'abode of peace', originally a family residence near the town of Bolpur in the dry, laterite-red dust of Birbhum, a district of Bengal about a hundred miles north of Calcutta. The location was discovered by Rabindranath's father, 'Maharishi' Debendranath Tagore, who valued it for its peaceful atmosphere and founded an ashram there in 1863. It was in the spirit of the Indian ashram that Rabindranath founded a small boys' school at Santiniketan in 1901, partly as a solution to the problem of educating his son Rathindranath.<sup>1</sup> As a child, Rabindranath had suffered in the strict and formal atmosphere of Calcutta schools run on English lines – so much so that his family eventually decided to have him educated at home – and he did not want to subject his children to the same treatment. This does not mean that Rathindranath had an easy time of it at his father's school. In its early days, the school's ethos was not so much Bohemian as ascetic and patriotic: this was to be a small traditional Indian school (if not exclusively Hindu, since three of the five teachers were in fact Christian), modelled on the *tapoban* or forest hermitages described in Sanskrit literature. One of its designations was *Brahmacharyashram*, an institution designed to uphold the ideals of the first of the four stages of Hindu life, *brahmacharya* (from puberty until marriage), as prescribed by the Laws of Manu – in other words, celibacy, austerity, and study of the Vedas. As Kathleen O'Connell's (2002: 64) invaluable book on Tagore's educational work makes clear, this early phase of Tagore's vision was 'informed by nineteenth century Hindu nationalism and revivalism'. Luxuries – adjudged to include toothpaste and shoes – were banned, and in the original constitution of the school (reproduced by O'Connell), much stress is laid on discipline and spirituality, with certain mantras from the Upanishads prescribed for chanting and meditation.

Admittedly, one can buy toothpaste in the shops on campus these days, but some features from the early school still survive at the university: Tagore's paragraph in the constitution on the necessity for an atmosphere of *bhakti*, or devotion of the students to their teachers, stresses that students 'be devoted to their teachers with no reservation . . . one cannot join in criticism or rebuke of them in any way' and stipulates that they should perform *pranaam*, or touch the feet of their teachers, once a day (O'Connell, 2002: 68). This is a traditional Indian gesture of respect to one's elders, one to which Santiniketan students then and now would be quite accustomed in family and other settings; but to expect it formally produces a rather odd routine, still visible in the music department today (students queue up at the end of class to touch their teacher's feet). At least one teacher I knew in Sangit Bhavan told his students to stop their *pranaaming*, feeling that the gesture had become a formality without any true *bhakti* behind it.

The emphasis on spiritual values, discipline and austerity was at this stage very much a nationalist gesture. As Rabindranath wrote to the Maharaja of Tripura in 1902 a few months after the school had been inaugurated, 'I wish to keep my students away from all the luxuries of European [read: British] life and any blind infatuation with Europe and thus lead them in the ways of the sacred and unsullied Indian tradition of poverty' (Dutta and Robinson, 2009: 133). Alongside the students' more natural, more 'Indian' way of life was the use of Bengali rather than English as the medium of instruction, a cause which Rabindranath championed throughout his writing career (and which has left its mark in the predominance of vernacular-medium schools throughout modern West Bengal). It is the burden of his earliest essay on education, *Sikshar Herpher* (1892),<sup>2</sup> and recurs in the 1906 essay 'The Problem of Education'.<sup>3</sup> The focus was *à propos*, since it was in 1905 that Lord Curzon's division of Bengal sparked off an intense phase of nationalist (anti-British, but also specifically pro-Bengali) protest and sentiment, in which Tagore was closely involved.

All this defines an interesting position relative to the norms of colonial education at the time, but it is hard to see at this juncture how Tagore's educational vision deserves to be called progressive rather than (in the strict sense) reactionary. As O'Connell (2002: 80) points out, the original constitution of the school contains little on the pedagogical benefits of 'closeness to Nature' suggested by the school's rural setting, nor is there any discussion of the role of music and the arts. But this was only the beginning of Rabindranath's project. As time went on, these aspects began to be given more weight, owing not only to Rabindranath's own predilections – Santiniketan was a 'poet's school', after all – but even to some of the characteristics of nationalism and revivalism, as he idiosyncratically defined them.

In his 1892 essay, Rabindranath does not oppose the use of English on any parochial grounds. On the contrary, he hopes that if the use of Bengali is combined with a thoroughgoing translation of European culture and scientific knowledge into the vernacular medium, then such culture and knowledge will be made available to more of the population than could be reached by an insistence on the unnatural constraints of education in a foreign tongue. (His precedent and

model here is the nineteenth-century Bengali periodical *Bangadarshan*, founded by the novelist Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, one of the great figures of the Bengal Renaissance (Tagore, 1961: 46–47.) For Rabindranath, the point of education in the vernacular is that it liberates the student to use language creatively and intuitively, allowing him or her to express the feelings and incidents of their own immediate environment, and also granting access to the imaginary forms of poetry, mythology, and history which give significant depth to that environment. By contrast, education in English was then – and still is today, to a large extent – a utilitarian choice, restricting the student's imagination for the sake of mastering the grammar of the language of global power. Tagore's arguments here are still relevant and challenging, defining some of the major implications of a liberal education in the Indian context.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, as Uma Das Gupta (1988: 154–155) has observed, the notion of universal consciousness behind the Tagore family's revivalist Upanishadic spirituality itself implied more than a parochially nationalist concept of education. A key relevant concept in Tagore's philosophy here is that of 'surplus', being what lifts humanity and its civilization above the subsistence-level cycle of material need and satisfaction on which animals operate (see Sengupta, 1988). In his 1930 Oxford lectures, published as *The Religion of Man* (1931), Tagore quotes a line from the Atharva Veda: 'Righteousness, truth, great endeavours, empire, religion, enterprise, heroism and prosperity, the past and the future, dwell in the surpassing strength of the surplus' (Tagore, 1931a: 42).<sup>5</sup> With a stress on this concept, Tagore's thought begins to move in an original direction, away from the ascetic, almost Gandhian ideals with which he began his school. As Sengupta (1988: 44) observes, there is no distinction apparent in Tagore's thought between useful 'surplus' and useless 'superfluity' (to make such a distinction would in a way already be a capitulation to utilitarian logic); and although the concept is meant to be understood more in a spiritual than a material sense, the two domains are often compared, or overlap, in Tagore's writings. Superfluity is true wealth, understood not as a dead accumulation of external possessions, but an overflowing of man's vital impulses, transcending everyday needs and concerns. It relates to two more familiar Romantic themes in Tagore's writings, 'expression' and 'personality', both of which help to define the sphere of the human, and the arts and humanities, as against Nature and the natural sciences. In the first of his 1917 lectures delivered in America, 'What is Art?', Tagore writes: 'Man has a fund of emotional energy which is not all occupied with his self-preservation. This surplus seeks its outlet in the creation of Art, for man's civilisation is built upon his surplus' (Tagore, 1931b: 11). Tagore goes on to compare the reflection of man's personality that he treasures in his artistic expressions with the way a rich man's self is reflected in his (superfluous) possessions:

When a feeling is aroused in our hearts which is far in excess of the amount that can be completely absorbed by the object which has produced it, it comes back to us and makes us conscious of ourselves by its return waves. When we are in poverty, all our

attention is fixed outside us, – upon the objects which we must acquire for our need. But when our wealth greatly surpasses our needs, its light is reflected back upon us, and we have the exultation of feeling that we are rich persons. This is the reason why, of all creatures, only man knows himself, because his impulse of knowledge comes back to him in its excess. He feels his personality more intensely than other creatures, because his power of feeling is more than can be exhausted by his objects. This efflux of the consciousness of his personality requires an outlet of expression. Therefore, in Art, man reveals himself and not his objects. His objects have their place in books of information and science, where he has to completely conceal himself (Tagore 1931b: 11–12).

Towards the end of the same lecture, Tagore (1931b: 37) takes the opportunity to turn this distinction against the pretensions of Western science to explain the human in abstract and purely functional terms, including a swipe against then-fashionable applications of Darwinism to the analysis of society. But although his Western audiences must have found numerous resonances with their intellectual concerns, Tagore's philosophical embrace of the 'surplus' also resonates with his own educational experiences, and in particular a curious episode in the history of Santiniketan, in which his pedagogical ideals collided with those of his most famous compatriot, Gandhi.

Over its first decade, Tagore's Santiniketan school grew steadily into an institution that reflected, more closely than at the beginning, its founder's poetic temperament. He felt his project ripening, like a mango:

Because the growth of this school was the growth of my life and not that of a mere carrying out of my doctrines, its ideals changed with its maturity like a ripening fruit that not only grows in its bulk and deepens in its colour, but undergoes change in the very quality of its inner pulp. (Tagore, 1931b: 132)

Certain ascetic rules and ideals were reinterpreted: the school's 'bareness of furniture and materials' (which is still striking) was there 'not because it is poverty, but because it leads to personal experience of the world', rid of unnecessary 'proxies' such as chairs, glass windows and shoes that separate one from contact with the earth and air (Tagore, 1931b: 119–120). Experiments were made with student democracy, flexibly paced learning, and co-education (O'Connell, 2002: 90–93). And although music and the arts were not part of the curriculum as such, they (along with observation of Nature, and games) formed part of the leisure hour after lessons were over. Rabindranath was in one of his most important creative phases in the 1900s and shared the results with the students. They worked to put on several of his plays, with regular lessons being deserted or cancelled as the school gathered around the famous open rehearsals leading up to the first performance. (This is still a feature of life at Sangit Bhavan and helps to create its particular atmosphere; though I can confirm it has its frustrating side when one is trying to pursue a regular course of study!) During the anti-partition protests of 1905, students

went around the local villages singing the *swadeshi* or nationalist songs Rabindranath was then writing, and in more reflective moments they also sang the songs from *Gitanjali*, the collection which (though translated and deprived of its musical context) would make Tagore world-famous a few years later.

This atmosphere was, it appears, disrupted when in 1915 Gandhi relocated his 'Phoenix' school from South Africa to Santiniketan during a period of Tagore's absence. Gandhi felt that there was 'no institution today in the world to excel Phoenix in its ideals or its way of life', and accordingly imposed those ideals and way of life straight away upon the other Santiniketan students. Levels of austerity went some way beyond what Tagore had expected. Gandhi writes proudly in his autobiography about the (surely unpalatable) Phoenix approach to cooking – 'Condiments were eschewed. Rice, *dal* [lentils], vegetables and even wheat flour were all cooked at one and the same time in a steam cooker' (Gandhi, 2001: 346). Tagore expressed his misgivings to C. F. Andrews, his and Gandhi's mutual friend: the Phoenix students 'have discipline where they should have ideals. They are trained to obey which is bad for a human being; for obedience is... not... good in itself, but because it is a sacrifice' (O'Connell, 2002: 96). As O'Connell surmises, the episode disheartened Tagore to the extent that he left Santiniketan and tried to start a new 'model school' at Jorasanko, the house in Calcutta where he had grown up. In institutional terms, this would exist only for a few years, thus 'bridging the gap' between Rabindranath's loss of interest in the Santiniketan school and the establishment of Visva-Bharati in 1921; but from the perspective of arts education, the move was of considerable significance.

From the evidence we have, Jorasanko in Rabindranath's childhood may have been one of the most culturally, aesthetically and intellectually stimulating households of the nineteenth century: their roof sheltered a chemistry laboratory, a family theatre putting on the first Bengali operas, numerous authors, poets, professional musicians, and artists, a widely-read family journal (*Bharati*), and the most emancipated and creative women to be found in Calcutta (on the latter, see Deb, 2010). The young Rabindranath picked up acquaintance with developments in European literature or the rudiments of Indian classical music almost just by breathing, and it is hardly surprising that he wanted to return home for educational inspiration in 1915. There his 'model school' was connected with a Jorasanko cultural salon called the Bichitra (Variety) Club, which included an art school run by Abanindranath and Gagenendranath Tagore and staffed by Nandalal Bose and other future staff of Kala Bhavan, the art department of Visva-Bharati (O'Connell, 2002: 97–99). Readings and performances of Rabindranath's own works continued, notably the premiere of his most internationally celebrated play, *Dak Ghar* (The Post Office). Something of the leisure and richness of this environment is surely behind Tagore's contemporary philosophical references to the importance of 'superfluity', which relate more logically, in economic terms, to the (originally Mughal) *zamindari* or aristocratic land-owning system that supported his family than to an ancient Indic ideal of forest hermitages.



A specific link can be found in Tagore's conception of music, and (later in life) of dance and drama.<sup>6</sup> For him, music and dance were the most direct and sensuous expressions of man's inner 'surplus' of feeling, and thus most in need of protection from social conservatives or utilitarians who 'propose to boycott music on the audacious reasoning that music is superfluous... They do not grasp that with superfluity comes humanity, that it is precisely superfluity which is the supreme aim of human life' (Tagore, 2004: 65). In his 1912 essay 'Music' (*Sangit*), Tagore nostalgically recalls a bygone age of aristocratic patronage: 'on the great religious feast-days virtuosi of many lands used to come and assemble at the houses of the wealthiest men... Then Lakshmi [the goddess of wealth] and Saraswati [the goddess of music and learning] used to meet in one place, and music's spring breezes would blow through the heart of the land' (Tagore, 2004: 31). In modern India, by contrast, the philistine British and Anglo-Indian upper classes preferred luxury goods to cultural patronage, and as for the place of music and the arts in education, 'music forms no part of the education of our educated class; in the factories of clerkship that go by the name of "colleges" art and music have no place; and the astounding thing is, that in every university we have titled "national" there is no seat for scholars of the arts either' (Tagore, 2004: 38).

It was this situation – which in this 1912 text Rabindranath clearly feels as a matter of national shame when compared to his recent experiences of the lavish choral festivals of Edwardian England – that provided one of the impulses for Visva-Bharati University, conceived not only as an effort towards international understanding ('where the world makes its home in a single nest', ran its Sanskrit motto) but as a 'Centre of Indian Culture'. This was the title of Rabindranath's 1919 sketch for the new university (Tagore, 1961: 202–230). It would bring together scholars of Indian languages and history from India and abroad, creating an autochthonous institute of Indological scholarship to rival the projects of European Orientalism; but it would also foster a living Indian culture, and bring the arts into the heart of Indian higher education. Towards the end of his essay, Rabindranath remarks on the 'great impetus' given to Indian music and art by the Mughals, and the comparative lack of cultural expression produced by the British on Indian soil. 'In the proposed centre of our culture', he goes on to proclaim, in defiance of 'utilitarian ambitions', 'music and art must have prominent seats of honour, and not merely a tolerant nod of recognition. A real standard of aesthetic taste will thus develop; and with its help our own art will grow in strength and riches' (Tagore, 1961: 226).

This aim can without exaggeration be said to have been achieved by Kala Bhavan, the university's art department, which initially included music and drama in an integrated atmosphere of all-round aesthetic education.<sup>7</sup> Its *adhyaksha* or principal was Nandalal Bose, whom K. G. Subramanyam, one of Kala Bhavan's latter-day luminaries, called Tagore's 'matching accomplice, who could keep pace with the various sides of his creativity' (Subramanyam, 1978: 156). Both Bose and Rabindranath were interested in the traditions of Indian mural-painting and relief sculpture, evident in Nandalal's decorations for buildings around campus. But

their common ‘standard of aesthetic taste’ also incorporated what Rabindranath called the ‘toughness’ and ‘economy of the heart’ of Japanese aesthetics (Subramanyam, 1978: 157). This was visible in the characteristically bare and abstract decor for Rabindranath’s *nrityanatyas* or dance dramas, joint aesthetic ventures in which Rabindranath’s songs, various styles of Asian dance, instrumental music and design were combined in productions that toured India and abroad to raise funds for the university. On the musical and choreographical side, Rabindranath was much assisted by Santidev Ghosh, brought up in Santiniketan almost since birth, who defined his own vividly expressive style of singing *Rabindrasangit* and travelled to Sri Lanka and Indonesia to bring back traditional choreography for Tagore’s dance dramas.

Rabindranath’s mature educational philosophy was progressive, humanist and oriented towards the arts in a number of ways,<sup>8</sup> but from the early days of the school up until the dance dramas of the 1930s, it was surely his creative presence that did the most, directly and indirectly, to enrich the lives of students at his institutions. The fact that he and his associates were forging new styles and standards for the nation, not simply mediating past, settled traditions and techniques, must have been crucial in creating an atmosphere of vital aesthetic engagement. If so, that condition is of course just what cannot easily be replicated in the establishment of other arts education programmes today: not every institution is lucky enough to have a genius-in-residence. It is also what has made it hard for Sangit and Kala Bhavan to maintain the momentum they had during Tagore’s lifetime. Sangit Bhavan in particular seemed to me to have suffered – in its music and dance faculties rather more than its drama – a kind of subtle musealization. This can be explained partly by the characteristics of the musical repertoire Rabindranath himself created. Unlike most North Indian music, Tagore songs are meant to be sung more or less as written – and indeed it is significant that they *were* written down at the moment of their conception, whereas most classical Indian *bandishes* or compositions have been transmitted through oral tradition. Reacting against what he saw as Hindustani music’s over-exploitation of virtuosity, Rabindranath forbade the application of full-blown improvisation to his music – thus ensuring it stayed within the abilities of amateur singers, but also keeping it creatively static, and separate from what is generally allowed (even in Santiniketan) to be the ‘higher’ and more demanding mainstream of *raga*-based classical music. Rabindranath’s essays on music do not suggest he would have been content with these consequences. He saw himself very much as part of a continuing tradition of Bengali song composition, one which would interact with and transform the *raga* system (the Sangit Bhavan curriculum he discussed with Santidev Ghosh in the last months of his life was to specify how his songs should be taught in conjunction with the traditional *ragas* (Ghose, 1978: 58–60)). And yet that system continued oblivious, and his tradition found no descendants after the work of his younger Muslim contemporary Kazi Nazrul Islam, now canonized as Bangladesh’s national poet.

There is a visible difference here in the situation of the fine arts in Santiniketan, trying to adjust to the dynamic of globalization in the twenty-first century.



Santiniketan's fine arts graduates are faced with the same competing tendencies that confront their peers elsewhere in India, and indeed to a considerable extent, in the rest of the modern art world. They bear creative, intellectual and financial responsibility for the choices they make – to make their art more political, for instance, or to adopt Western postmodernist styles, or genres such as installation art. All of these tendencies, which I have seen in evidence at Kala Bhavan exhibitions, help to engage Santiniketan's artists with broader developments in the arts, and – it must be pointed out – also move it away from the styles and problems represented by the older generation of Santiniketan teachers and graduates, such as K. G. Subramanyan. Nothing comparable occurs, or can occur, in the performing arts. The equivalent here would rather be the craft tradition, carried on largely outside the university in the sister-institution of Sriniketan, which commercially exploits the Bengali public's demand for a recognizable, traditional 'Santiniketan style' (particularly in batik work and leather goods). Sangit Bhavan largely exists today to embody and transmit its own 'Santiniketan style' as a way of presenting Tagore's songs, dramas and dance dramas, one which serves as a model for Bengali performances of Tagore's works around the globe. When executed accurately and tastefully – not spoilt, as is often the case, by incompetent amplification, inappropriate musical accompaniment and crass lighting – the effect can be marvellous; but there is little room for creative self-expression. One sometimes wishes there were some Bengali equivalent to the radical *Inszenierung* of German opera houses, updating Verdi and Wagner to make a contemporary point. But I am not aware of any such move. Music and dance at Santiniketan remain firmly rooted in the past, and the preservation of Tagore's legacy. As a result, they essentially do not engage creatively with the future of the performing arts in India – let alone the rest of the world.

That would appear to stand as something of an indictment of the Santiniketan tradition. Yet in concluding I want to reverse the angle of vision and show that the Santiniketan tradition could be understood as putting its own questions, questions just as unsettling in their own way, to a Western 'politics of aesthetics' that we perhaps accept too uncritically.<sup>9</sup> For the Bengali culture summed up by the figure and symbol of Tagore is not, in its most intelligent form, a bulwark against aesthetic modernity (whether that is realized stylistically in modernism, postmodernism, or any of the West's artistic movements since the early twentieth century), but the outline of an alternative kind of modern art and aesthetic sensibility, still infused with Romantic and idealist principles rather than preoccupied with their refutation. Neither the contemporary readers of Tagore's late poetry nor those who attended the first exhibitions of his paintings could have been in doubt that this was art for the times: experimental, playing with abstraction, fragmentation and *vers libre*, boldly utilising much harsher and darker images and colours than the art of Rabindranath's early years. Nonetheless, it was conceived in a spirit that continued to exist in relationship to the ideals of universality and humanism Tagore fought for as an educator and public intellectual. The tragedy is that the moment of universality represented by Tagore and Santiniketan in the 1920s could not be

expanded and continued – that Tagore became to many Bengalis only the figure of a kind of local personality cult.<sup>10</sup> But as a vital cultural impulse – the last of the Bengali Renaissance from which Tagore sprang – the Santiniketan tradition contains much to inspire, and also to challenge us in our thinking about the arts and education and how they can be combined. For much as we might try, we cannot develop better methods to teach art and music in a historical or aesthetic vacuum – that is, without reflecting critically on the core values of those traditions which make up the substance of what we teach. Unlike Tagore's, those values do not always sit comfortably with the values we associate with a progressive education.

This is true above all, I suggest, for the Western high modernist tradition that developed during the latter half of Tagore's lifetime and came to dominate educational and cultural ideals after the Second World War. Let us turn away for a moment from the Indian scene to the contrasting figure of Theodor Adorno: a quintessentially European thinker who had little or no connection with Tagore, but who defined the concept of 'modernism' (*die Moderne*) as it is now employed, and with it, the 'politics of aesthetics' that still governs the consciousness of many composers and artists today. His relevance to arts education may not immediately seem obvious; but in fact one of the formative critical conflicts in his career was with the progressive music pedagogy of the inter-war period. For Adorno, any compromise with the musical requirements of children and amateurs, such as in the *Gebrauchsmusik* movement around 1930 (or the work of Benjamin Britten), led only to worthless 'recorder music'.<sup>11</sup> If certain children were talented enough to learn an instrument, agreed composer Ernst Krenek, they could begin the struggle to approach the masterworks themselves; the rest could always be taught a little passive 'music appreciation' with the aid of a gramophone and some analytical charts.<sup>12</sup> This was not just pedagogical carelessness. The problem even today for educators who want to make music, especially contemporary music, exciting and 'accessible' (through performance, dance, and sympathetic response), is that not all music presents itself as 'accessible', at least by such means. Much post-war Western classical music lends itself all too well to sedentary, non-participative and purely intellectual analysis.

I would attribute this to two deep-seated characteristics of the high modernist tradition as an aesthetic regime, which will sound rather stark when put this way, but which, I should stress, depend in my view on an aesthetic culture and politics, and are not inherent in an absolute sense in the work of, say, Schoenberg or Stravinsky. That said, they are quickly stated: modernism is elitist, and it is dehumanized. Adorno, at least, denied neither point. For him, 'the work of Stravinsky or Picasso, let alone Marcel Proust, is inconceivable without elitism'; and the first part of his *Philosophy of Modern Music* is a defence of Schoenberg's music as thoroughly rationalized and dehumanized – necessarily so, says Adorno, because modern music must, through these characteristics, reflect the condition of man in modern society (Adorno, 1984 [1931]: 101; 2004: 29–134). In both respects, Adorno was following and enhancing traits of the rejection of Romanticism that followed the First World War.<sup>13</sup> We can and should understand his support for this aesthetic

direction in the context of his time; but that means we also have the right to question its applicability to our own epoch. In particular, we might question whether those artists and thinkers who did not follow the high modernist agenda, and who thus did not feel compelled to embrace elitism and dehumanization, have more to contribute to a movement for liberal arts education that is, after all, founded on the exact opposite of those two characteristics: on the arts' contribution to democracy and a sense of humanistic values.

Tagore must count as one of, if not the foremost among such figures. The idea of democratic, egalitarian participation was central to his conception of art – particularly of music, in which his own efforts were directed, under the sign of the 'age of democracy', towards widening the accessibility of India's classical tradition – towards, in his words, 'making the fenced-off music of the *ustads* [professional court musicians] into the music of all of us' (Tagore, 2004: 44, 65).<sup>14</sup> Neither did Tagore acquiesce in the 'dehumanization of art', even when he saw it in the work of Indian poets of a younger generation influenced by Pound and Eliot. It was not that he retreated from world events into his own sheltered but outworn Romantic haven; rather he saw the need to preach ideas of human personality, sympathy, expression and the superfluous gesture to a world that was increasingly stepping in time to a mechanical beat. It is in his songs that one finds the intimate and personal realization of these participatory and humanistic values. Few of them work well in an average concert setting; few have been recorded in a way that does them full justice – and there are more than 2000 of them, a fact which itself testifies to Tagore's personal connection of music and 'surplus'. Their sentiments are responses to Nature and the seasons, to the lover or to God (frequently the use of the anonymous second-person pronoun *tumi* makes it impossible to tell which), to festivals and public ceremonies, or simply to the transitory thoughts of some obscure hour in Rabindranath's life.<sup>15</sup> When sung impromptu and unaccompanied, sat on the floor or on a *mora* (basketwork stool) next to an open doorway on a clear Santiniketan evening, the tune whispering softly of the longing in the night breeze, then one can guess why these songs mean as much to a Bengali – if in such a different way – as Schubert does to us. For Satyajit Ray, who knew and loved both Eastern and Western art song traditions, they were even worth more. Eschewing external complexities, Tagore's music is itself an 'education in sympathy' or 'cultivation of feeling' (*bodher sadhana*), the third stage of education envisioned by Tagore beyond cultivation of the mind and the senses, and for him, the most important: 'we must constantly remember that neither the education of the senses, nor the education of the intellect, but the cultivation of feeling should receive the place of honour in our schools' (O'Connell, 2002: 90). Bengalis can draw on an almost measureless resource for such cultivation simply by sitting down – as they frequently do – with friends, tea, and an open copy of Rabindranath's *Gitabitan* or collected songs. A reminder that (as the Humboldtian tradition of *Bildung* suggests) education and culture are, on some level, one and the same thing – an ongoing process, and one quite open to those outside the walls of a university.

## Notes

1. As a note on Tagore's varying appellations, he is commonly referred to by his first name in Bengal, sometimes familiarly by its shortening to 'Rabi', sometimes reverently as *Gurudev* (divine teacher), the term by which Gandhi addressed him publicly. The use of his last name, though accepted elsewhere, would create confusion in a Bengali context since the Tagore family produced numerous other figures of considerable importance to Bengali culture. In this essay, I will alternate between forename and surname when that seems appropriate.
2. This can be found translated as 'The Vicissitudes of Education' in Tagore, 1961: 39–48; O'Connell (2002: 52) suggests that the title 'The Discrepancies of Education' better reflects the Bengali *herpher* and the subject of the essay.
3. 'The Problem of Education', in Tagore, 1961: 67–82.
4. In this reorientation towards the vernacular, Tagore's idea of liberal education differs from the roots of the 'liberal arts' concept in the West, which go back to the medieval curriculum and education in Latin (the *artes liberales*). More recent defences of the role of classical languages in Western liberal education have often rested, paradoxically, on the same humanistic and anti-utilitarian outlook that underpins Tagore's argument for emphasizing the vernacular. In a different and more local paradox, the implementation of Tagore's ideas through a state-wide programme of Bengali education tends to impose on linguistic minorities the very same kinds of limitations that Tagore identified with the imposition of English on Bengali-speakers. Several welfare projects in the Santiniketan area (RSV, Suchana) are trying to develop primary education programmes oriented towards the language and culture of indigenous (*adivasi*) groups, such as the Santals or Kora.
5. This appears to be a translation of Atharva-Veda XI.7, verse 17, which actually refers quite specifically to the *uchhista* or leavings of food or other offerings made to a deity; one could thus question whether Tagore's reading is contextually accurate, although this is not relevant to the present argument.
6. For an engaging précis of Tagore's thoughts on dance, drama and physical movement in education, see 'The Art of Movement in Education', a transcript of remarks made by Tagore to Leonard Elmhirst in 1924, in Tagore and Elmhirst, 1961: 101–111.
7. Sangit Bhavan only separated from Kala Bhavan in 1934; before then many students alternated between fine and performing arts in their daily curriculum.
8. For a comparison of Tagore's ideas with Western educational theory, see O'Connell, 2002, chapter 7, 'Tagore in the Context of Western Progressive-Humanist Education'.
9. For a recent influential exploration of the political nature of Western aesthetic regimes, see Rancière, 2004.
10. Nirad C. Chaudhuri (1987: 596) referred scathingly to Tagore's transformation into the 'holy mascot of Bengali provincial vanity'.
11. See Adorno, 'Musikpädagogische Musik: Brief an Ernst Krenek' (Adorno and Krenek, 1974: 215–223). On *Gebrauchsmusik*, see Pritchard, 2012.
12. Ernst Krenek, 'Was erwartet der Komponist von der Musikerziehung?' ('What does the composer expect from music education?') (Adorno and Krenek, 1974: 208–214).
13. A key earlier statement of these two points in the anti-Romantic agenda is of course Ortega y Gasset's 1925 essay 'The Dehumanization of Art' (Gasset, 1968: 3–54).

14. 'Democracy' in the first quote occurs in English (transliterated into Bengali as *dimokreshi*).
15. For a valuable and accessible introduction to Tagore's music in the context of his biography, see Som, 2009.

## References

- Adorno TW (1984 [1931]) *Gegen die neue Tonalität*. In: Tiedemann R, Schulz K (eds) *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 18. Frankfurt a.M: Suhrkamp, pp.98–107.
- Adorno TW (2004) *Philosophy of Modern Music* (Mitchell AG and Blomster WV, trans.). New York: Continuum.
- Adorno TW and Krenek E (1974) *Theodor W. Adorno und Ernst Krenek: Briefwechsel*. Frankfurt a. M: Suhrkamp.
- Chaudhuri NC (1987) *Thy Hand, Great Anarch! India 1912–1952*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Das Gupta U (1988) Santiniketan: continuity and change. In: Chaudhuri B, Subramanyam KG (eds) *Rabindranath Tagore and the Challenges of Today*. Shimla: Institute of Advanced Study, pp.154–155.
- Deb C (2010) *Women of the Tagore Household* (Chowdhry S and Roy S, trans.). New Delhi: Penguin.
- Dutta K and Robinson A (2009) *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man*. London: Tauris.
- Gandhi MK (2001) *An Autobiography, or the Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Desai M, trans.). London: Penguin.
- Ghose S (1978) *Music and Dance in Rabindranath Tagore's Education Philosophy*. New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi.
- Nussbaum M (2010) *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- O'Connell KM (2002) *Rabindranath Tagore: The Poet as Educator*. Kolkata: Visva-Bharati Press.
- Pritchard M (2012) Who killed the concert? Heinrich Bessler and the inter-war politics of Gebrauchsmusik. *twentieth-century music* 8(1): 29–48.
- Rancière J (2004) *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (Rockhill G, transl.). London: Continuum.
- Sengupta SC Chaudhuri and Subramanyam (1988) The surplus in man: the poet's philosophy of man. *Rabindranath Tagore and the Challenges of Today*. Shimla: Institute of Advanced Study, pp.39–54.
- Som R (2009) *Rabindranath Tagore: The Singer and His Song*. New Delhi: Penguin.
- Subramanyam KG (1978) The role of arts in Santiniketan. *Visva-Bharati Quarterly* 42(3–4): 151–167.
- Tagore R (1931a) *The Religion of Man*. London: Macmillan.
- Tagore R (1931b) *Personality: Lectures Delivered in America*. London: Macmillan.
- Tagore R (1961) *Towards Universal Man*. Santiniketan: Visva-Bharati Press.
- Tagore R (2004) *Sangit Chinta*. Kolkata: Visva Bharati Granthanbibhag.
- Tagore R and Elmhirst L (1961) *Rabindranath Tagore, Pioneer in Education: Essays and Exchanges between Rabindranath Tagore and Leonard Elmhirst*. London: John Murray.
- y Gasset O (1968) *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

**Author biography**

**Matthew Pritchard** is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow in Music at the University of Cambridge. After completing a PhD on the theory and aesthetics of melody in late Beethoven at Royal Holloway, University of London, in 2009, he took a one-year course of study in *Rabindrasangit*, the songs of Rabindranath Tagore, at Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan, in West Bengal. Since then he continues to research and publish on the history of music aesthetics over the last two centuries in both German and Bengali contexts, and is currently working on a book on the subject of historical music aesthetics, provisionally entitled *The Song is Not the Singer's Alone*. Recent publications include 'A heap of broken images'? Reviving Austro-German debates over musical meaning, 1900–1936', in the *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* (May 2013).