



Cultivating a respectable femininity: gender and Girija Devi's *ṭhumrī* style

Chloe Zadeh
School of Oriental and African Studies [London]

A cloud of suspicion surrounds the North Indian semi-classical genre *ṭhumrī*. In the nineteenth century, *ṭhumrī* was courtesans' music: they sang it for elite gentlemen, often as a prelude to sexual relations. Nowadays, classical musicians of both sexes perform the genre in the concert hall; however, despite its new, respectable performance context, the genre has retained its association with courtesans and continues to exude an aura of disrepute. This threatens to damage the reputation of the women who sing it. Unlike their male counterparts (who may sing *ṭhumrī* with impunity), women *ṭhumrī*-singers are frequently suspected of hailing from a courtesan background; this can have detrimental effects on their status amongst classical musicians and often also on their careers.

This paper will examine the musical style of Girija Devi, one of the foremost *ṭhumrī*-singers of the twentieth century. It will highlight some of Devi's stylistic innovations, reading them as part of an attempt to raise the prestige of *ṭhumrī* and to assert her status as a reputable classical musician, in response to repeated claims that she might be a courtesan. Amelia Maciszewski (1998) has written about ways in which Devi has crafted her public persona so as to emphasise her respectability: Devi is keen to point out that she is a married woman and a devout Hindu and vehemently distances herself from colleagues of courtesan background. In her descriptions of *ṭhumrī*, she plays down any erotic associations by drawing attention to the genre's spirituality. This paper will suggest that these rhetorical strategies have musical parallels. I will propose that Devi:

1. avoids musical characteristics that evoke courtesan culture and a sensuous femininity;
2. emphasises, instead, those musical elements that have devotional connotations; and
3. offsets the light tone of *ṭhumrī* by appropriating musical features from the serious genre *dhrupad*.

The rhythmic character of Devi's *ṭhumrī* style is a case in point. In her *ṭhumrī* improvisations, Devi frequently employs rhythmic manipulation and play. Example 1 is typical. Note the sequential pattern starting at i: this consists of three three-semiquaver-long cells (i, ii and iii), containing transposed versions of a two-note falling figure. Devi arranges these cells in careful relation to the underlying meter. At i and ii, they are off the beat, creating rhythmic tension and a syncopated feel; only on its final rendition (at iii) does this figure occur on the beat, resolving the rhythmic tension just created. (This increasing tension embodies the meaning of the words, demonstrating the growing desperation of the narrator who sings "*nā, nā, nā jāvo*" ("don't, don't, don't go") to her lover.)

The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef. The melody is written in a style that combines traditional Indian notation with Western staff notation. The lyrics are written below the staff: "nā — jā - vo nā nā — nā — nā — jā - vo etc.". Above the staff, three sections of the melody are bracketed and labeled with Roman numerals: 'i' (covering the first three notes), 'ii' (covering the next three notes), and 'iii' (covering the final three notes). The notes are a mix of quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes, with some rests.

Example 1. Extract from *Itanī araja morī māna* (7:48 to 7:59).

This calculated rhythmic play, characteristic of Devi’s *ṭhumrī* style, is rarely found in the *ṭhumrīs* of other singers. It is, however, commonplace in metered section of *dhrupad*. My paper will suggest that this is one of a number of techniques Devi borrows from *dhrupad* in order to alter *ṭhumrī*’s connotations. Musicians describe *dhrupad* as a weighty, esoteric genre. Sung almost exclusively by men, it has never been associated with courtesans. In appropriating musical techniques from *dhrupad*, Devi imparts an air of seriousness and respectability to her *ṭhumrī* performances. This paper will highlight various features of Devi’s *ṭhumrī* style, suggesting that her musical decisions are informed by her position as a woman singer claiming personal respectability while singing a genre commonly associated with a suspect erotic femininity.

Over the last twenty years, ethnomusicologists have shown considerable interest in how gender can structure musical cultures; rarely, however, have they examined how gender-related issues might influence the stylistic development of the music of those cultures.¹ My examination of twentieth-century *ṭhumrī* style looks at the musical embodiment of gendered characteristics. Influenced by the semiotic approach of topic theorists in Western musicology, I hope to practise an analytical method that highlights the social significance of musical features, combining the in-depth examination of musical style with the study of that music’s social context.

Bibliography

- Maciszewski, Amelia. 1998. *Gendered Stories, Gendered Styles: Contemporary Hindustani Music as Discourse, Attitudes, and Practice*. University of Texas at Austin: PhD dissertation.
- McClary, Susan. 1991. *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Discography

- ‘Itni araj mori man’. From *Girija Devi: Golden Raaga Collection*. Times Music TDIC 006.

¹ Western “new” musicologists provide the most important precedents for this kind of analysis (see for example McClary 1991).

Chloe Zadeh is a PhD candidate at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, where she is researching Indian classical music under the supervision of Richard Widdess (supported by a grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council).

Her undergraduate degree was in (mainly) Western musicology at Emmanuel College, Cambridge. After this, she decided to branch out into ethnomusicology, inspired by her long-standing admiration for Indian classical music. She was awarded an AHRC grant for her masters' degree in ethnomusicology at the School of Oriental and African Studies. She has also spent several months studying Indian classical vocal music informally with her *guruji*, Sunanda Sharma, in Delhi.

Her PhD research is an analytical examination of the North Indian classical genre *thumrī* in the second half of the twentieth century: she is interesting in looking at the (extra-musical) connotations of musical features and hopes to uncover the social motivations which lie behind musicians' stylistic decisions. Her work is influenced by theory developed in the diverse fields of semiotics, cognitive science (schema theory), gender studies and traditional musical analysis. She has presented papers on the analysis of Indian classical music at the School of Oriental and African Studies and at the Theory and Analysis Graduate Students' conference organised by the Society for Music Analysis (UK). (Her paper for the SMA was awarded the prize for the best paper presented at the conference.)