



Folk Melody of Bangladesh

বাংলাদেশের লোকজ সুর

Mélo die folklorique du Bangladesh

AN ANTHOLOGY OF BANGLADESH FOLK MUSIC IN STANDARD NOTATION

Compiled and Edited by Iftekhar Anwar

COVER ILLUSTRATION: LUBNA CHARYA

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Taking folk melodies of Bangladesh TO THE WORLD

Review of 'Folk Melody of Bangladesh: An Anthology of Bangladesh Folk Music in Standard Notation' (2004), compiled and edited by Iftekhar Anwar

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ASRAR CHOWDHURY

Folk Melody of Bangladesh: An Anthology of Bangladesh Folk Music in Standard Notation is a music anthology that compiles 204 carefully chosen folk songs of Bangladesh that date from the 16th century. Iftekhar Anwar headed a team that compiled and edited the songs. The team presented the songs in staff notation with an international audience in mind. Alliance Française de Dhaka distributed the anthology as part of their 65 years of cultural cooperation between Bangladesh and France.

The dream started in 2004. Iftekhar was an undergraduate student in music at Arizona State University in the USA. He fostered two desires: First, how could he spread Western classical music in Bangladesh? Second, how could he spread the ethnic music of Bangladesh to an international audience?

Iftekhar returned to Bangladesh in 2009. The next year, he started the Classical Music Academy of Dhaka. As time went, his second desire became stronger. The stage for *Folk Melody of Bangladesh* was set in 2014. However, the journey required epic teamwork to compile an anthology for an international audience.

The anthology starts with testimonials, a preface, an introduction, acknowledgments, and a pronunciation guide. Chapter 1 introduces the reader to different folk music schools in Bangladesh, instruments, and stylistic conventions. The section on instruments describes folk instruments well enough that a person from another culture can identify which of their instruments could be a substitute. For instance, the dotara could substitute an oud in Arabia. Chapters 2 to 7 present folk songs based on regions. Chapter 8 includes one popular song, the origin and creator of which could not be confirmed. However, local sources acknowledged it to Harashnath Ganguly. At the end, there are Bangla lyrics, a glossary, and a bibliography. Some parts are presented in Bangla, while others in English and in French.

For the writer, the first hurdle was to identify the genres of folk music in Bangladesh. The team used the demarcation AKM Shah Nawaz and

Masud Imran identified based on ancient localities in their *Manchitre Banglar Itihas* (first published in 2011).

The second hurdle was the oral tradition through which tunes and melodies passed down from one generation to the next. Over time and space, pronunciations and dialects, choice of words, lyrics, and melodies have changed, so it was very difficult to verify the authenticity of many folk songs today. To address this challenge, the editorial team chose popular songs whose tunes and melodies have become canonical over time.

Based on the above, the anthology includes songs of giants like Fakir Lalon Shah, Hason Raja, Jasimuddin, Abdul Latif, Sheikh Bhanu, and Hemanga Biswas. The anthology also includes songs of lesser giants. This made the anthology broad in its perspective.

The third hurdle was identifying a reference tune. Where possible, the team relied on official recordings. This included recordings of Abbasuddin Ahmed, Sachin Dev Burman, Abdul Alim, Amar Paul, Hemanga Biswas, Nirmalendu Chowdhury, Farida Parveen, Rathindranath Roy, Chandana Majumder, Kiran Chandra Roy, Momtaz Begum, Nina Hamid, Sayem Rana, Shamarin Dewan, and others. In other instances, the team visited different shrines and places where popular tunes have been preserved over generations.

The fourth hurdle was to present songs to an international audience. Standard staff notation can express notes, pitch, and tempo. It can also tell the reader how to perform a tune. Folk songs in Bangladesh evolve around four (or five) popular taals. These taals, presented through time signatures, were: 3/4 (Dadra, Jhumur), 4/4 (Kaharba), 5/4 (Jhaptal), and 7/4 (Teora). The tempo (loy) was presented through BMP (beats per minute) or through Prestissimo (quick tempo).

The next hurdle was determining notes and their duration within each bar. This took time. The team repeatedly listened to identify the correct notes and their durations inside each bar in reference to the chosen signature tune.

The staff notations were presented in a single layer. They are suitable for vocals and instruments that emphasise single notes like that

of a bansuri. For string (guitar) and reed (piano) instruments, additional layers can be added by musicians.

Where possible, each staff notation presentation included the name of the composer and/or lyricist, with their birth and death years, and which part of Bangladesh they originate from. The team also mentioned the source of the recordings with a short description of each song.

The next challenge was language. The team used the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). The IPA broke down each word, syllable by syllable, to bring out nuances of the language. This was synchronised with the notes.

The final question—how could the team be sure that non-Bangla-speaking people would be able to pronounce Bangla with relative accuracy? A group of musicians from Columbia University performed two songs in a vocal and instrumental orchestration. Their performance gave confidence to the team that a non-Bangla-speaking audience can pronounce and perform Bangla folk tunes using the anthology.

The presentation of folk songs of Bangladesh in staff notation is not unique. Khandaker Nurul Alam went to what was then West Pakistan to learn notational music and compiled some folk songs in staff notation. However, they lacked academic depth. The notation was not suitable for performance in orchestration. This is where *Folk Melody of Bangladesh* stands out.

For the first time, *Folk Melody of Bangladesh* presents an anthology of folk music in Bangladesh in standard staff notation with IPA. It will now be possible for non-Bangla-speaking people to sing the lyrics and perform with instruments in orchestration. It can be an academic exercise, as well as a journey into a rich cultural heritage. The anthology is also a starting point for others to spread the folk tunes of Bangladesh to a global audience.

The writer of the book, Iftekhar Anwar, is the founder and director of Classical Music Academy in Dhaka; the academy has its chamber orchestra.

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BOOK REVIEW: GRAPHIC NOVEL

Down the rabbit hole of science and art

Review of 'Einstein in Kafkaland: How Albert Fell Down the Rabbit Hole and Came Up With the Universe' (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024)

ISRAR HASAN

The city of Prague, now the capital of the Czech Republic, was once the breeding hotspot of the 20th century's greatest writers, scientists, scholars, and activists. Amongst Prague's intellectual elite would be the household names of Kafka, the anguished native son, and Einstein, the reluctant and perplexed immigrant, whose destinies would be entwined with the city itself in the pivotal years of both their trajectories.

Albert Einstein and Franz Kafka remain exemplary luminaries in their respective fields of science and art. Einstein, renowned for his discovery and articulation of the theory of relativity, is a celebrity in pop culture, with his name being synonymous with the word genius. The brooding Kafka is a trailblazer in world literature whose name is entwined with the unpleasant and deeply jarring literary genre that we now refer to as "Kafkaesque". These towering figures present a bygone era of intellectual flourishing before the destruction of European Jewry in World War II.

Ken Krimsten's charmingly dizzying graphic novel, *Einstein in*

This is during the same period that Kafka starts to pen his iconic short story, "The Judgment", that would propel him to literary superstardom.

Owing to frequent salon gatherings of Europe's foremost intellectuals, who happen to be mostly Jewish, Krimsten captures the philosophical undertones of the period with both of these two geniuses searching for "the truth", which means letting go of the past and challenging their own masters and the idea of "the creator" itself. Peering deep into their personal lives, Krimsten fleshes out the deep points of consternation in the lives of the two geniuses. These include interesting epithets in both their lives that are often glossed over. For Einstein, it would be tackling his arch nemesis, Max Abraham; the overbearing shadow of the loss of his first child, Lieserl; and his faltering marriage. For Kafka, whose early years were shaped under the domineering shadow of his father, it is in his friendship with Max Brod that he finds a safety valve of trust and understanding. Brod is the man responsible for safeguarding Kafka's works after being ordered by Kafka himself to burn them after his death.



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

Kafkaland: How Albert Fell Down the Rabbit Hole and Came Up With the Universe, delves into the time when Einstein and Kafka met in Prague in 1911-1912. Deep diving into personal archives, diaries, letters, and personal testimonials of Einstein and Kafka, Krimsten opens a portal to a time of intellectual flowering amidst individual anxious travails of self-loathing, self-discovery, and self-understanding.

Narrated by the famed skeleton of Prague's astronomical tower, the imagery employed in the graphic novel is drawn in shades of aqua blue, white, and black. The story opens where the patent clerk, Einstein, arrives with his wife, Mileva, and his two sons, hoping for an intellectual breakthrough in what will later come to be known as the famed "theory of relativity". Aside from that, the *TIME* magazine crowned "person of the century" has to save two other vital aspects of his life: his marriage and prospects of a good job. Kafka—the patron saint of anxiety for many of us, still a far cry from being the "prophet of literature"—is a struggling 28-year-old insurance executive tired of the monotonous routine of modern life.

While Kafka does feature in the story, the main character is Einstein himself. Drawing on symbolic gestures inspired by Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865)—from surreal treatments of time to whimsical character designs—Krimsten takes us on Einstein's journey to genius. Along the way, we encounter Einstein in emotive dialogues with God and Euclid, Kafka appearing as an enigmatic Cheshire Cat, and the imaginary expanse of a scientist grappling with questions of the universe, art, and logic. It's a captivating journey that blurs the lines between science and art, inviting readers into the mind of a genius through a wonderland of intellectual discovery.

The novel offers a deeply meditative exploration of the worlds of science and art, drawing readers into the same rabbit hole as Einstein, in search of something quite bigger than ourselves. In doing so, Krimsten once again establishes the graphic novel as a literary genre that synthesises the power of thought, art, and imaginative reasoning.

Israr Hasan is currently working as researcher in a public health institute.

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