

Arnold Bake and his wife, Corrie, with Rabindranath Tagore and Bhimrao Sastri at Shantiniketan, c. 1926–27.

Arnold Bake and the songs of Rabindranath Tagore

BOB VAN DER LINDEN

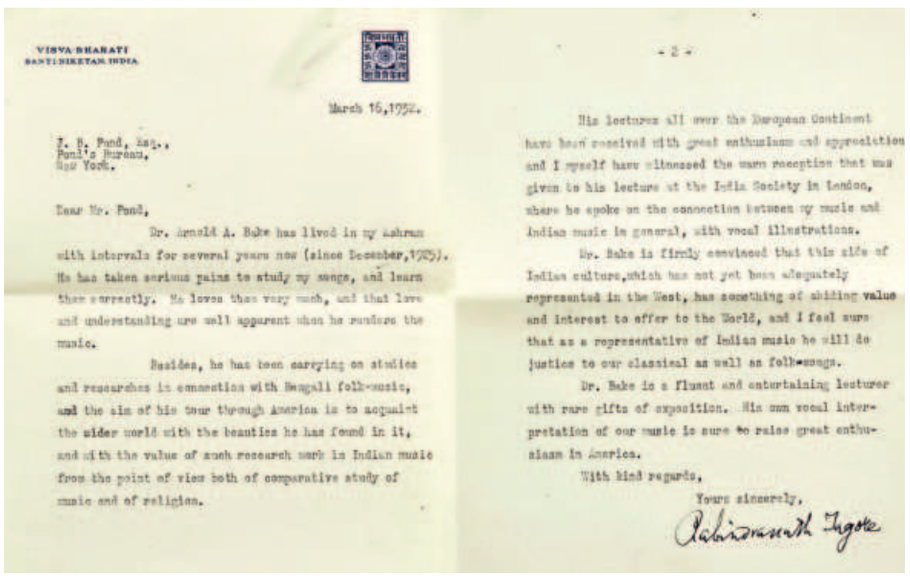
As a student of music(ology) and modern South Asian history, I have long been attracted to the archive of Arnold Bake (1899–1963), the Dutch singer and pioneering scholar of South Asian music and culture. In fact, I think that the history of South Asian (ethno-)musicology cannot be fully understood without a discussion of his achievements and influence.

Between 1925 and 1956, Bake spent nearly seventeen years in the Indian subcontinent, which he traversed from Kanyakumari to Ladakh and from Lahore to Dhaka. He not only studied Sanskrit treatises on music theory and the practice of North Indian 'Hindustani' art music, but also successfully performed the songs of the Bengali cultural icon Rabindranath Tagore, as well as Bengali and Nepali folk songs, during hundreds of lecture-recitals in India, Europe and the United States.

In addition, Bake made numerous, often irreplaceable, recordings, films and photographs of South Asian folk musicians and dancers. He had an excellent command of Sanskrit and Bengali, and contemporary Indologists praised his knowledge of Sanskrit treatises on music theory. For the last fifteen years of his life, he taught Indian music at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies. He was the first to teach the subject at a Western university and was generally regarded as *the* authority on it. Through his countless public lectures and radio broadcasts, Bake familiarised non-academic Western audiences with South Asian music. He also played a leading role in various British and international research associations, including the International Folk Music Council, of which he was a founding member. Besides two books, Arnold wrote over a hundred articles and reviews, mainly in English but also in Dutch, German and French. He was known for being very sociable yet humble, and he was much loved for his wit.

Eventually, Bengali *kirtan* became the genre that Bake knew best. His two-hour performance as a lead singer, wearing a *dhoti* and sitting cross-legged among other musicians in front of a few hundred Indians at a temple in Brindavan in 1945, was one of the highlights of his life. Yet, in this article, I will focus on Arnold's ideas about and performances of Tagore's songs, which he studied at Shantiniketan (later Visva-Bharati) with Rabindranath himself and his nephew Dinendranath Tagore, because these aspects of his work are little known.

Tagore composed an oeuvre of over 2,000 Bengali songs, known as *Rabindra Sangit*, and he felt 'that his greatest gift was for music, and it was this that he should try to communicate to the outside world'. He constantly used musical metaphors in his writings, and there is a connection between his music and his painting. Even so, his songs remain atypical compositions because of their combination of elements drawn mainly from Hindustani music (*khayal*, though not its improvisations, which he never liked, and especially *dhrupad*), Baul songs, Bengali *kirtan* and British folk songs. Overall, he questioned conventions in Indian art music practice that were sanctioned solely by tradition. Thus, he regularised the rhythm in his melodies, leaving out 'detailed florid ornamentation and the rhythmical ambiguity which is so much part of a classical vocal performance'. Likewise, he created several new talas and was never a purist in his use of *ragas*.



VISVA-BHARATI
SANTINIKETAN INDIA

March 16,1932.

J. B. Pond, Esq.,
Pond's Bureau,
New York.

Dear Mr. Pond,

Dr. Arnold A. Bake has lived in my Ashram with intervals for several years now (since December,1925). He has taken serious pains to study my songs, and learn them correctly. He loves them very much, and that love and understanding are well apparent when he renders the music.

Besides, he has been carrying on studies and researches in connection with Bengali folk-music, and the aim of his tour through America is to acquaint the wider world with the beauties he has found in it, and with the value of such research work in Indian music from the point of view both of comparative study of music and of religion.

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His lectures all over the European Continent have been received with great enthusiasm and appreciation and I myself have witnessed the warm reception that was given to his lecture at the India Society in London, where he spoke on the connection between my music and Indian music in general, with vocal illustrations.

Dr. Bake is firmly convinced that this side of Indian culture,which has not yet been adequately represented in the West, has something of abiding value and interest to offer to the World, and I feel sure that as a representative of Indian music he will do justice to our classical as well as folk-songs.

Dr. Bake is a fluent and entertaining lecturer with rare gifts of exposition. His own vocal interpretation of our music is sure to raise great enthusiasm in America.

With kind regards,

Yours sincerely,

Rabindranath Tagore

A letter of recommendation written by Rabindranath Tagore for Arnold Bake in 1932.

Like Indian nationalist music reformers, Tagore was strongly attracted to the idea of modernising Indian music. Thus, he established a Department of Music at Shantiniketan and was in favour of the notation of his songs. In his criticism of traditional Indian art music-making, nonetheless, Tagore was more radical than Indian nationalist music reformers. Like Arnold Bake, for instance, he complained that Indian singers neglected their instruments and stage presentation. In contrast, he was very impressed by the vocal quality of Western singers, as well as by the fact that Western musicians, unlike their Indian counterparts, tuned their instruments before going on stage.

Bake shared Tagore's modernist nostalgia for 'village India' and the belief that Bengali folk culture and music embodied the 'soul of the people', unhampered by modern civilisation. In fact, he believed that Tagore's songs were 'unthinkable without the Bengali folk-songs, very much in the same way as the music of several modern European composers is unthinkable without the background of the folksongs of their respective countries'. The idea that 'half of Rabindranath's lifework' would be lost to posterity after his death prompted him to transcribe some of Tagore's songs into staff notation.

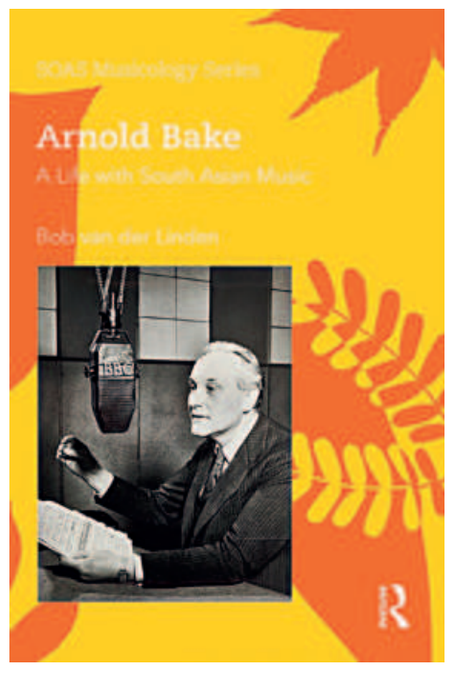
In 1935, Bake's Twenty-Six Songs of Rabindranath Tagore was published by Geuthner in Paris. It was dedicated to Rabindranath, who authorised its publication, and to the memory of Dinendranath, who had died that same year. Of course, his transcriptions represent only his interpretations of the singing of Tagore and, more particularly, Dinendranath, as is also evident from his own performances of these songs (recordings of which exist) in a rather European classical style. Nonetheless, Bake's singing and notations were regarded as 'authentic' by audiences in India and the West. One reason for this was undoubtedly that he was regarded as an authority in the field. After all, he had studied with Indian masters, and his singing had been praised by Tagore himself.

Yet the main explanation for the acceptance of Arnold's singing as 'authentic' was his embodiment of the songs and his knowledge of Bengali, both of which people associated with India. Here, no doubt, he was helped by the trope of 'spiritual' India, as well as by dominant ideas about musical authenticity and the performance of folk songs as being 'honest', 'naked', 'direct', 'restrained', etc. The fact that Arnold sang solo, with sweeping hand movements punctuated by snaps of his fingers rather than with harmonic accompaniment, undeniably contributed to this aura of authenticity as well.

In 1961, Bake argued that Tagore had been especially attracted to Baul music and kirtan because of the essential relationship between words and melody that was inherent in these genres but had been lost in contemporary Indian art music. Tagore wanted to restore the meaning and importance of words in his compositions, 'away from the flourishes and ornaments for their own sake and the urge to stun the audience with their sheer virtuosity'. Thus, after recognising the completeness of European classical compositions and folk songs, Arnold continued, Tagore became 'the first composer in India to regard his songs as inviolable entities'.

He explained: Tagore's attitude towards his compositions was much more akin to that of a Western composer. The tune as given is the one that was intended for those words. His ornaments were brought in where he wanted them and where they, as he felt, heightened the inner meaning of the words. By changing them or leaving them out, or worse, adding new ones indiscriminately, the very purpose of the melody, to carry the words above the sphere of everyday life, was defeated. The consequence is that we have here a body of song with regard to which one can speak of an 'authentic' version. That this authentic version is the way in which Dinendranath gave them stands to reason.

Unquestionably, Bake approached Tagore's songs as 'a sort of fetish', and this approach paralleled that of European folk song collectors. But did Tagore see his own songs as 'inviolable entities', and is the idea of an 'authentic' version of them not peculiar, given that he relied almost entirely on the memories of Dinendranath and others? As the poet wrote in 1928: My own testimony with regard to my compositions is always untrustworthy. My songs, for example: I'm always thinking up tunes for them. I sing the tunes to whoever happens to be at hand. Thereafter, responsibility for the tunes rests entirely with my pupils. If later I try to sing them, they are quite ready to say that I've got them wrong. I frequently have to accept correction from them at this.



Book cover of *Arnold Bake: A Life with South Asian Music (2018)* by Bob van der Linden, published by Routledge, featuring a photograph of Bake singing a song by Rabindranath Tagore for the BBC in 1947.

After his death in 1941, Tagore was canonised as Bengal's greatest creative artist; two of his songs were also immortalised as the national anthems of India (*Jana Gana Mana*) and Bangladesh (*Amar Shonar Bangla*). For many Bengalis in West Bengal, Bangladesh and the Bengali diaspora, Hindus and Muslims alike, singing or listening to Rabindra Sangit has taken on the role of a personal religion. Accordingly, the authentic performance of Rabindra Sangit became a subject of debate under the supervision of the Visva-Bharati Music Board, which held the copyright to Tagore's songs between 1941 and 2001. Ironically, even several recordings of Dinendranath were forbidden from being released.

The point, however, is that, except when sung by the master himself, Tagore's songs were, of course, never entirely authentic but always interpretations. In addition, there are numerous examples showing that Tagore had a very liberal attitude towards interpretations of his own songs. As in Bake's case, for instance, he consistently supported Bhimrao Shastri in singing and teaching them at Shantiniketan, even though the Maharashtrian's Bengali pronunciation was not always correct. Similarly, Tagore did not mind the use of chords for accompaniment, provided they were played on the piano rather than the harmonium, an instrument he loathed and banned at Visva-Bharati.

In 1941, Tagore wrote to his student and the later doyen of *Rabindra Sangit*, Santidev Ghosh: 'the treasure of my songs is within you. It will be your duty to disseminate these songs correctly'. In *Rabindrasangeet Vichitra* (1972), Ghosh explains that discussions about the authentic performance of Tagore's songs are futile because, had the poet considered the topic important, 'he would certainly have written something about it'. However, he did not leave behind 'any direction or order about the right to sing his songs'. On the contrary, 'he encouraged all to sing, without making any assessment' because he trusted that 'the good singers would come up by their own merit and would survive, while the bad ones would by themselves be extinct'.

Unquestionably, Tagore had a strong urge to speak for and to all humankind, and not just to his fellow Bengalis. His support for Bake's projects shows that he wanted his songs to be known throughout the world and was committed to cross-cultural communication. His open-minded attitude towards the 'authenticity' and translation of his writings and songs should therefore be understood in the context of his universal humanism and internationalism. At the same time, significantly, Tagore's position as both a traditionalist Bengali and an internationalist is reflected in his songs. Through them, he was not only deeply connected to the people and culture of Bengal but was also able to transcend literary and musical conventions and express himself aesthetically as a modernist. He never chose between traditionalism and universalism because he believed that one could only be cosmopolitan with a profound knowledge of one's own tradition.

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