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PUTHEN PĀNA: A MUSICAL STUDY

by

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TO

MY FATHER
CONTENTS

List of Illustrations 2
Preface 3
Introduction 5

Chapter I
Christianity in India 11

Chapter II
History of Christian Music in India 30
  Early Christian Era 30
  Liturgical Music of the St. Thomas Christians 31
    after 1498 32
  Liturgical Music of the Jacobite and Syro-
    Malankara Churches 37
  Liturgical Music of the Mar Thoma Church 39
  Liturgical Music of the Latin Church 39
  Music of the Protestant Churches 40
  Other Christian Musical Genres 41

Chapter III
Life and Works of J.E. Hanxleden 50

Chapter IV
Literary Aspects of Puthen pāna 57

Chapter V
Musical Study of Puthen pāna 75
  Performance Context 75
  Music of the Twelfth pādam 84
  Music of the Tenth pādam 114

Conclusions 134
Appendix 139
Bibliography 140
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Map of India 9
Chart of the History of the St. Thomas Christians 10
Map of Kerala 49
PREFACE

The music of Puthen pāna is an important part of the memories of my childhood. I grew up listening to Puthen pāna at home and Syriac liturgical music in our parish church in Kerala, South India. At that time it did not occur to me that the two musical styles were related or that one day I would study them. Today, the practice of singing Puthen pāna and Syriac liturgical music are on the decline. A few melodies of Syriac chants are still sung in Kerala, but Puthen pāna is hardly ever performed. The average age of people who can sing Puthen pāna is steadily on the increase, and there has been no attempt to record their performances. This study aims to preserve the Puthen pāna tradition and to create a new interest in Christian music of India.

Many people contributed to this study. I am grateful to the informants from the Kerala communities in New York and India, who found time to sing for me and answer my questions. I am specially thankful to Dr. Barbara Hampton who has been my guide and mentor all through my academic pursuits in the United States. Dr. Hampton's insightful comments and queries helped in clarifying many issues related to this study. I thank Dr. Meena Alexander for reading this manuscript and for her valuable suggestions. I am also indebted to Dr. Joseph Aquilina for his support and
encouragement and to Dr. Irene Zaderenko for her assistance. Finally, I want to express my gratitude to all the professors who taught me at Hunter College and the Graduate Center.
INTRODUCTION

Puthen pāna (new song) is a case in point for cultural communication at multiple levels. Its author, John Ernest Hanxleden (1681-1732), popularly known as Arnos Pathiri, was a German Jesuit missionary. He went to Kerala in the south-west coast of India, learned Sanskrit and Malayalam,¹ and used these languages to write many books, religious as well as secular. Among his works, Puthen pāna, which narrates Biblical events, became the most popular.

Pāna tradition, a capella singing² of devotional songs at home and at temple precincts, has been prevalent among the Hindus. As an attempt to indigenize the Christian faith, Hanxleden modelled Puthen pāna after the already-popular Jñānappāna (Song of Divine Wisdom) of Poonthanam Nambudiri. Poonthanam was a highly honored Hindu mystic poet of Kerala who lived in the sixteenth century. Like Poonthanam, Hanxleden used the Malayalam language to write his poem. At the time of Hanxleden, Malayalam was the

¹ Malayalam belongs to the South-Indian branch of the Dravidian family of languages and is the official language of the present state of Kerala. Malayalam struck out on its own by 10th century. Today it is spoken by 35 million people, according to the Manorama Yearbook (1994:464-465).

² The verb more commonly used in Malayalam for singing pāna is pāna vāyikkuka which literally means "to read pana," regardless of the application of pitch and rhythm usually associated with the act of singing. The verb pātuka (to sing) is used less frequently with reference to pāna.
language of the common people, while Sanskrit was the language of the elite and learned classes. Even though the Christians enjoyed high social standing, the learning of Sanskrit was the exclusive privilege of the Brahmin sects and, therefore, not accessible to them.

Hanxleden employed Dravidian meters, which are different from Sanskrit meters. Dravidian meters are commonly used in both Hindu religious and secular poetry and can be sung in several ways. For Puthen pāna performance, Christians adapted the music style of Chaldeo-Syrian liturgy from the Syrian churches in Kerala. The result was a unique style of singing Puthen pāna and new ways of singing the Dravidian meters.

Today, the practice of singing Puthen pāna is declining. So far, there has been no attempt to systematically document the melodies in the form of audiovisual recordings or music transcriptions. Arnold Bake (1889-1963) made extensive audio field recordings of the performance genres of South India, mainly Kerala, in 1938. Although he recorded many Christian genres, he did not record Puthen pāna. Probably Bake was not in Kerala during

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1 From a recent communication from India, I understand that Christ Hall, a Jesuit institution at Kozhikode, Kerala, is planning to make an audio recording of Puthenpāna.

2 I listened to a copy of these recordings preserved at the Center for Ethnomusicology at the American Institute of Indian Studies, New Delhi, in October, 1988. In 1984 Nazir Jairazbhoy and Amy Catlin did field work in South India and
the liturgical season of Lent or did not have an opportunity to attend a Christian wake, the two most common occasions on which *Puthen pāna* is sung in the present century.

As a literary work, *Puthen pāna* has gained much scholarly attention in the past (P.J. Thomas [1935] 1989; Nair 1974; Ulakamthara 1982; Thermadham 1983; Manavalan 1990). However, its musical aspects have virtually been unexplored. Generally, Indian Christian music has received very little attention from scholars either in India or abroad.  

According to traditional belief, Christianity was preached in India in the very first century. Historical evidence indicates the presence of Christian liturgy in Kerala from the fourth century. Yet, there has been no attempt to write a history of Christian music in India. The present study attempts to fill some of these gaps by reconstructing the history of Christian music and placing *Puthen pāna* in that general framework. The study also aims at understanding and explaining the musical aspects of *Puthen pāna* within its social and historical context and examining those factors that played a key role in the videotaped the performance genres documented by Bake in 1938-39 for a longitudinal and comparative study, which did not include *Puthen pāna*.

1 It may be noted that "Christian music" is not mentioned at all in an otherwise extensive entry on Indian music in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (Sadie 1980:vol.IX, 69-166).
process of communication within and between cultures.

A survey of research on Indian music shows that the focus of studies in the last three decades has been the "High" classical traditions: North Indian (Hindustani) and South Indian (Karnatak) music with special emphasis on the North Indian tradition. Local styles have received comparatively much less attention. *Puthen pana* is a local form from South India. Yet, it is a product of cross-cultural communication at a larger level and sheds light on the processes of formation of important musical traditions in the country.

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Map of India, showing the places mentioned in this study.
HISTORY OF THE ST. THOMAS CHRISTIANS

A.D.

52 Arrival of St. Thomas the Apostle

345 Arrival of Thomas of Cana with Persian Christians

First Christian Community in India

Introduction of Syriac liturgy (Allegiance to the Patriarch of Persia)

Ethnic division among the St. Thomas Christians

Southerners (Knanaya)

Northerners

1498 Arrival of the Portuguese and establishment of the Latin Church

1599 Synod of Diamper; Latin rule over St. Thomas Christians

Revolt against the Latin rule

1653 Jacobites (Allegiance to the Patriarch of Antioch)

1700 Arrival of Hanxleden

1850 Jacobites' contact with the Anglicans

Mar Thoma Church

Jacobite Syrian or Syrian Orthodox Church (Allegiance to the Patriarch of Antioch)

1896 Autonomy of the Syrian Christians

1930 A group of Jacobites enters into communion with Rome

Syro-Malankara Catholic Church

Jacobite Syrian or Syrian Orthodox Church (Allegiance to Rome)