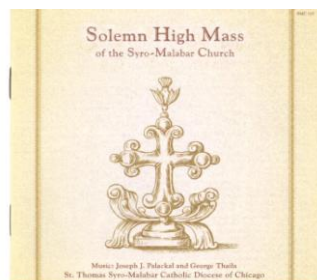


## Excerpts from the liner notes to *Solemn High Mass of the Syro-Malabar Church*



### **EAST MEETS EAST, IN THE WEST**

George Thaila and I share similar musical backgrounds. We both grew up in the 1950s, listening to and singing Syriac chants in our respective Syro-Malabar parishes in Kerala. The liturgy was still in Syriac; we learned to sing the chants often without understanding the meaning of the text. Even after the vernacularization of liturgy in the 1960s, old Syriac melodies that originated in the Syriac churches in West Asia continued to be in vogue, as they are today, and we sang them with the new Malayalam text. In our later years we received training in Indian classical vocal music, Thaila in the Karnātak (South Indian) tradition at Madras University in Chennai, and myself in the Hindustāni (North Indian) tradition at Maharaja Sayajirao University in Baroda. We met for the first time in New York in 1990, soon after our arrival there from India. Since then, we have collaborated on several occasions to conduct church choirs and give stage performances of Christian bhajans and Syriac chants.

These shared historical and musical experiences directly and indirectly influenced the compositional process. In many instances, Thaila and I turned to the Syriac and Indian classical traditions for inspiration. For example, the performance practice of singing the same melody in three ascending pitch registers in # 1 & 5 probably developed in the Syriac tradition and later reached the Latin Church; it is prevalent even today in the Roman Catholic churches in the performance of "This is the wood of the Cross" (*Ecce lignum crucis*) in the Good Friday service (a Syriac translation of this chant sung in three ascending pitch registers can be heard in # 20 in the CD, *Qambel Māran: Syriac Chants from South India*). The *Sūrāya*, in # 6, is an example of adapting a melody that is associated with a Syriac chant to a text in English; the source of this melody is the Hymn to the Blessed Virgin, *B'eda d'yāwmān* (on this festival day) in # 29 in the CD, *Qambel Māran*.

The use of rāg-s in some of the melodies is limited to their scalar structures, ascending and descending patterns, and hierarchy of pitches. The characteristic vocal inflection and prescriptive ornamentations (*gamakam*) of specific scale degrees are not prominent in the present renditions. It is not clear at this point if those features would blend themselves as well into the phonetics of

the text in English as into texts in Indian languages. However, in due course, singers who have received training in Indian classical traditions might experiment with these melodies and bring in their own ideas of incorporating such features into the renditions and provide avenues for more intercultural dialogue.

A case in point is the Anthem of the Mysteries in # 9. The melody here is bound strictly by the scalar structure of the pentatonic rāg Mālkauns (Hindōlam, in the Karnātak tradition): C Â– Eb Â– F Â– Ab Â– Bb (pitches are relative, not absolute). It is supported by *sruti* (drone) on tamburu; as is customary for the performance of this rag in the North Indian tradition, the first string of the tamburu is tuned to F. Starting from C, the home-note (*griha swar*), the melody gradually ascends to C in the upper octave and then descends to F. Most of the melodic activity is centered on F which is the predominant (*vādi*) or the life-note (*jeeva swaram*) of the rāg. All these might give the general impression of a fair treatment of rāg Mālkauns in the Anthem; it is not so. From the point of view of music theory, a few crucial elements are lacking; among them is the ornamentation of Eb and Ab that are usually approached from the notes above them, i. e., F to Eb, and Bb to Ab. At the end of the Anthem, listeners are left with a sonic spectrum of tones and overtones from the tamburu: F in the lower octave from the first string with its overtone in C, C in the middle octave from the two middle strings with their overtones in G, and C in the lower octave from the fourth string with its overtones in E and G. Among these pitches, E and G are alien (*vivādi*) to the scale of Mālkauns, and so is A-natural from the concluding F major chord. What is more significant is that the resolution of the Anthem is not in this sonic spectrum, but in the meaningful silence that it leads to. Rāg Bhūpāli (Mōhanam, in the Karnātak tradition) is used differently in Trisagion in # 5 and in the Salutation and Dialogue in # 11. This pentatonic rāg has the following scale: C Â– D Â– E - G Â– A. The first three verses in the Trisagion are sung in the manner (mode) of Bhūpāli, using the conventional scale degrees. These three verses are built around the "thrice holy," but the fourth verse is different: "Have mercy on us." This thematic shift in the text is related to the account of the spiritual experience of Prophet Isaiah. After seeing the vision of the Lord of hosts and listening to the "thrice holy," Isaiah became intensely aware of his unworthiness and cried out, "Woe is me, I am doomed! For I am a man of unclean spirits" (Is 6: 5). It may be noted that in the performance of this hymn in the Syrian Orthodox (Antiochene) liturgy, "Have mercy on us" is often accompanied by prostration as a symbolic gesture to affirm the worshipper's unworthiness. The change in the theme and the ensuing mood of the last verse of Trisagion is treated here specially by bringing an alien (*vivādi*) note to the scale of Bhūpāli, the flat third degree (Eb), on the word "mercy." Similarly, the Salutation in # 11 is in the manner of Bhūpāli. The celebrant's greeting and the community's response are well within the melodic framework of the rāg. However, in the following Dialogue, a new note (Bb) is introduced to highlight the phrase "O Glorious King."

Rāg Kēdār is the point of reference in Holy Holy Holy in # 12. The melody starts on the middle C and gradually builds energy and enthusiasm toward climax on C in the upper octave. In contrast to the descending melodic movement on "thrice holy" in "Our Father" and the Anthem of the Mysteries, the "thrice holy" here progresses in an ascending motion. The melody of "thrice holy" is established within the range of a perfect fifth from C to G. And the second most important phrase in the hymn, "Hosanna in the highest," is highlighted within the range of a perfect fifth from F to C in the upper octave. The word "highest" matches with C in the upper octave, the highest pitch in the melody.

The decision to appropriate Syriac and rāga-based music that are associated with their respective geographies and histories came after sustained attempts to study the complex history of the Syro-Malabar Church and its liturgy. The original Syriac texts of the hymns in this CD came from the Middle East to India where they survived for several centuries in a multi-religious, multi-cultural, and multi-linguistic milieu. The journey of the text in the recent past meant a shift in the linguistic context, from Syriac, a Semitic language, to the translations in Malayalam with its Dravidian affiliation, and from there to English with its Indo-European connection. In the second half of the twentieth century when large numbers of Syro-Malabar Christians began to emigrate mostly for economic reasons, they brought along with them the liturgical texts and memories of their melodies. However, the children born in the adopted countries were removed from the linguistic and musical experiences of their parents. Just as Aramaic became the colloquial language of the Jewish children born and raised in Babylonia during the second exile, English has become the language of intimacy and emotion to the second generation Syro-Malabar Christians. The musical choices made for this setting, beside being a metaphor for the ongoing cultural synthesis occurring in their lives, is part of an attempt to bridge the immediate present to the distant past.

**Dedicated to Mathias Mundadan, C. M. I.**

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