

Ray Centenary Tribute

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Dimensions of Ray's Music for *Charulata*



The debate of the musical compositions, both on the soundtrack and in the choice of songs, is a never-ending one. In this essay, the author has tried to put together several theories on the music drawn from the works and theoretical observations of different experts and critics, including Ray himself.

Is the Structure of *Charulata* designed on the lines of a Mozart¹ Composition?

Musically, Ray referred to *Charulata* as his string quintet (two violins, two violas and a cello), with Charu as first violin, Amal as second violin, Bhupati as cello, that is the three dominant characters, and Umapada and Mandakini as the two violas who,

¹ Ray's apprenticeship in Western classical music began in boyhood, with horn gramophones, borrowed discs and a battered harmonium. At age 13, Ray and his friend Anil Gupta, began hunting for bargains in the music shops of Calcutta. Their earliest exciting discovery was the first movement of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*. Gupta introduced Ray to Beethoven's biography by Schindler and Donald Tovey's *Essays on Rhythm*. Soon after, they stumbled on Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nacht Music* and he lost his sleep that night. Gupta, himself a Mozart scholar, put his finger on the similarity between Mozart's compositions and the musical

though not dominant, are still essential characters for the quintet. It is a beautiful, musical simile.² Western classical music critic Kishore Chatterjee takes this argument further and insists that Ray structured the characters along the orchestration and composition of a specific and very original composition of the great Austrian composer, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.³ Art historian Partha Mitter revealed to us something of

choreography of Ray's films. "Nobody can improve one note of Mozart. His music is beautiful, logical, symmetrical and inevitable – like Manik's films at their best," said Gupta. (Source: Sumit Mitra: "The Genius of Satyajit Ray" in *India Today*, February 15, 1983, p.73.)

² Adi Gazder : "In Tune with Ray – On the Set and Off it" in *The Statesman Miscellany*, October 11, 1992, pp.10-11.

³ Ujjal Chakrabarti : "Charulata Keno Sangeet-er Moto – Kee Bhaabe?" – a discussion (in Bengali)

Ray's Mozartian sensibility. He writes: "Ray spoke vividly of how Mozart (and Verdi) had solved the problem of treating a dramatic situation musically through the interplay of multiple, concurrent vocal parts. What I did not realise then was the profoundly musical and even operative nature of Ray's own sensibility."⁴ Ray once observed, "films and music have so much in common. Both unfold over a period of time; both are concerned with pace and rhythm and contrast; both can be described in terms of mood – sad, cheerful, pensive, boisterous, tragic and jubilant. But this resemblance applies only to Western classical music. Since our music is improvised, its pattern and duration are flexible...Also, the structure of Indian music is decorative, not dramatic."⁵

Charulata is like a particular chamber composition of Mozart. It cannot be placed on par with a 'symphony' composition because it has just five characters like a quintet has five instruments. Symphony music is composed of many musical instruments of varied kinds creating a completely different kind of 'grandeur' in terms of music. Chamber compositions are subtle and understated. In *Charulata*, the emotions are soft, low-key, yet clear and articulate. Mozart's compositions are known for their expressions of exuberance, joy and a sense of complacency, of pleasure. Mozart also composed musical pieces that expressed sorrow and pathos. But they were fewer in number. In his short 36-year-old life, Mozart created 626 musical compositions. Interestingly however, all his compositions that were 'sad' go under the label of "String Quintet in G-Minor." *Charulata* is a fine, smooth fusion of the happy and the sad, of the joy of love and the sorrow of parting, of the spontaneous thrill of having discovered love, followed by the hurt of betrayal. The sorrow and pathos - of parting and of loneliness, is the dominant emotion in the film.

The entire structure of *Charulata* bears a striking resemblance to Mozart's "G-Minor String

Quintet, K.516" according to Kishore Chatterjee.¹ Mozart composed only three major pieces in the G-Minor scale, of which two are 'symphonies' and one is a 'chamber music' piece. Mozart felt sadness and pathos were ideally created in the G-Minor scale. The two Symphonies he composed in G-Minor cannot be linked here because of its use of more than five instruments. This G-Minor String Quintet K.516 is the sole chamber piece Mozart composed in which pathos is the only emotion that reigns from beginning to end. The spirit of *Charulata* and the emotional fluctuations the five characters go through is contained within this Mozart composition. All incidents in the story - the drama, the conflict, the climax, are confined to these five characters alone.

Umapada and Mandakini appear to be in the background, yet both are crucial to the events and to the changes these bring about in the lives of the other three. Umapada betrays the trust his brother-in-law places in him. It shocks Bhupati into realizing that never mind how close one thinks people are, they are not beyond betraying one's trust. Amal realizes that he too, has betrayed Bhupati in a different way. When Amal goes away, it is Charu who feels betrayed by the two men in her life – Bhupati, her husband, who has 'sentenced' her to a life of loneliness, and Amal, who ran away like a coward when he realized that their relationship was treading on dangerous ground. Mandakini, Umapada's simple wife, offers a counterpoint to Charu who finds in her, a rival for Amal's attentions. When the two go away, followed by Amal, they trigger off a chain of apparently simple events in Charu and Bhupati's life that has repercussions deeper than are immediately apparent.

The sound of the violin is sensitive, soft, and has an undercurrent of sweet pathos in it. So, Amal and Charu are the two 'violins' in this String Quintet in G-Minor – K.516. They are two sensitive, soft and romantic human beings. The Cello on the other hand has a serious, grave and sombre tone. It also has an

between Amitabha Chatterjee and Kishore Chatterjee from Anirudhha Dhar's Panchali Thekey Oscar, serialised in *Sananda* (Anand Bazar Patrika Group of Publications, Calcutta, pp.100-103. (The date and month of the issue are not found in the clipping – author)

⁴ Quoted by Raghubir Singh in "The River" in *Sunday*, May 3 – 9, 1992, p.56.

⁵ *Ibid.* Ujjal Chakrabarti, in *Sananda* n.4 above, p.101

aura of indifference. Bhupati thus, represents the Cello. The two violas in the Mozart quintet offer background support, instruments that are not directly involved in creating the final composition, but lend themselves critically to the three major instruments to help reach the climactic notes in the entire piece. Umapada and his wife Mandakini symbolize the two violas in the 'Mozart composition' that defines *Charulata*. The violas intensify the mood of sorrow and pathos created by the two violins.

The structure of this particular Mozart composition, which Ray reportedly listened to over and over again since he was a young man, became so much a part of him that it influenced his thinking when he designed the script for *Charulata* and fleshed out the five characters in the film. Inspired by Mozart's 'abstract choreography of sounds' in this piece, Ray converted this to a 'choreography of human bodies' because the movements of the characters, the composition of each frame in the film, the pacing and the rhythm of their entries and exits into and from these frames, are reminiscent of the 'musical movements' of the five different string instruments in Mozart's String Quintet in G-Minor K.516, a composition he created in the last stages of his life. Thus, it is tinged with the pathos and the melancholy drawn from Mozart's entire life, never mind its brief span. Ray transformed the 'listening musical choreography' of Mozart into a 'visual choreography' of cinema, proving that one element of art – music- can quite smoothly be transported into another form – cinema – with equal finesse and great emotional impact.

The music of *Charulata* has become iconic in the history of music in world cinema. Ray picked up the main tune from a famous Tagore number *momo chitney niti nrittey ke je naachey* as the theme music and extended it into a long, melodious and very subtle signature tune that created the effect of water flowing down like a very slow undercurrent throughout the film. The tune gets embedded into the film and plants itself in the minds of the audience as well. The words of the song or the song itself are never articulated throughout the film. Even in the opening scene when Charu picks out a book by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, she begins to hum "Bankim Bankim"

in a musical chant repeatedly which makes an intriguing impact focussing on the loneliness of Charu.

Later, when Charu is swinging on the swing in their unkempt garden, she begins to slowly render the Tagore number *phoole phoole dhole dhole bayu keeba mridu baaye* roughly meaning "A touch of sweetness in the breeze that softly cradles buds today."

Tagore songs are full of descriptive power, besides being evocative. Tagore's melodies, according to the late critic and film scholar Chidananda Dasgupta (*Calcutta Film Letter in Illustrated Weekly of India*, January 17, 1965), "invariably parallel his description in worlds, be it a mood or a landscape, a time of day or season. I was therefore, very pleased to see Ray compose his best film music so far purely in terms of variations on a theme taken from Tagore."

He goes on to add, "The words of the original song evoke the stirring of unknown impulses within the mind, and the melody echoes this perfectly, but even without knowing the words, one is affected by the same feeling listening to the music with the images. It is as if the images in the film have taken the place of the words in the song, created the same perfect blend, and adding an inexpressible depth to what is expressed in word and image."

According to Ray's own personal take on his music in *Charulata*, refuting some of the comments presented by Chidananda Dasgupta (*Illustrated Weekly of India* February 28, 1965), he writes, "It is true that the title music of *Charulata* uses the melody of a Tagore song, and that variations of parts of the melody constitute some further material for the background music; but to say that the background music is composed purely in terms of variations on a theme from Tagore is wrong."

He goes on to explain further, "there are actually four main musical motifs in the film. The **first**, which is the first piece of music to occur in the main body of the film, is used as an evocation of *Charulata*'s loneliness. This is the principal motif and occurs six times in the film. The **second** original motif is first heard with the tragic outcome of the hint of the tragic outcome of the story; in the scene where

Charu breaks down in the presence of Amal and reveals the true nature of her feelings. This motif, written for the lower strings, really comes into its own in the scene in the printing press where Amal discovers Bhupati in a state of profound disillusionment. A **third** motif is based on the Scotch tune that also serves as the basis for the Tagore song *phule phule dhole dhole* which both Amal and Charu sing in the film. The longest single of music in the film – when Bhupati and Amal expatiate on the charms of England – is based on this tune. The **fourth** motif is of course, based on the Tagore song which (Chidananda) Dasgupta mentions. But this occurs invariably in combination with one or more of the three other motifs mentioned.

“Besides these four and their variations, the film uses other music in snatches as well as in extended compositions which have nothing to do with Tagore. The second longest piece of music in the film accompanies Charu’s recollection of her childhood. This has a Bengali folk basis. In terms of duration, the Tagore music takes up 11 minutes out of a total of nearly 45 minutes of background music” Ray concludes.

One may note that neither Ray nor Dasgupta make any reference, direct or indirect, to the song lip-synced by Amal to voice given by Kishore Kumar

which is also a Tagore number that goes *aami chini go chini tomare ogo bideshini*. Amal does not notice that as he wanders across the room, pointing at one of the oval-framed portraits of a White lady to symbolise the ‘*bideshini*’ (foreigner) in the song, Charu has seated herself on the settee and has covered her face with her hands like a coy bride. When she removes her hands from her face, her eyes are filled with a happiness she is trying to hide and then turns to the floor catching Amal’s tattered pair of slippers. This leads to another link to another object in the story. Amal approaches her replacing the word *bideshini* with *bouthakurani*ⁱⁱ in the last refrain and touches her affectionately on the chin. By then, Charu has become fully aware of her feelings for Amal. She rises from the settee, says ‘shush’ in mock anger and the scene ends there.

This scene does not exist in Tagore’s original story, nor does the story contain any comparable scene. Why then, did Ray write it in? This five-minute sequence, writes Ray, is an example of the power of *compression* of the medium of cinema. It explains several things at the same time, which a work of literature will need pages to describe, and then too, may not be able to capture with the same intensity.

ⁱⁱ *Bouthaan* or *Bouthakurani* is an outdated, turn-of-the-century form of address the husband’s younger brother used for an older brother’s wife. With time, this has been truncated and modernised to *Boudi*. The word *bou* in Bengali, means both ‘wife’ and ‘daughter-in-law.’ The added ‘*thaan*’ refers to a female who is senior either in terms of chronological age, or relationship (wife of an older brother) or both. The ‘connotative’ function of this address is that the minute it is used as a direct form of address, it suggests a sweet relationship between the one that uses it (the husband’s younger brother) and the one it is used on (his older brother’s wife.) This relationship has no similarity with the bonding that exists between a blood brother and sister, or between first cousins. Nor does it have the physical intimacy that sustains between a husband and his wife. It is a relationship which, when probed, defies an articulate definition and it is this ‘unrecognizable’ area lying between the defined and the ambiguous, and the possibilities that lie therein, that both Tagore and Ray, sought, through their own different ways and language, to bring to light. Manisha Roy’s *Bengali Women*, published in 1972, gives a detailed account of the social construction of sex roles in upper middle-class Bengali society.