

## Time upon Time: Arnold Bake in Bengal

You said, . . . you didn't mind leaving behind  
objects of desire  
you had collected over twenty-five years. . .

Only the photographs you mourned  
The beloved sepia of one family tree  
Since you are the reason why your fathers lived;  
But who'll believe now  
That you lived at all?

'Poem for Joseph', Robin Ngangom

'Time upon Time: Arnold Bake in Bengal', an exhibition of field recordings by The Travelling Archive, in collaboration with the Centre for Interdisciplinary Arts, Kala Bhavan, Santiniketan. At Nandan Gallery, 7-15 March 2016.

As such, Robin Ngangom's 'Poem for Joseph', written about political strife and dislocation in Manipur, has nothing to do with our exhibition. Yet, in the sepia sounds of Arnold Bake's wax cylinders of nearly 80 years ago, in our photos of his photos, in his writings, from 1937, '48 or '63, his letters home to his mother written Wednesday after Wednesday from Santiniketan, in his concert notes, scribbles in notebooks, draft radio programmes, or in his soundless footage from Kenduli or Mongoldihi, it is this 'family tree' from the world of Arnold Bake which seems to give us shade. In this exhibition, fortunately for us, we do not 'mourn' the loss of the 'beloved sepia' of that family tree, but celebrate its presence in our lives. It gives meaning to our work; from it we claim a part of our ancestry.

In the early twentieth century, a time when the discipline of ethnomusicology was still in its infancy, Arnold Bake (1899-1963) was among the first of the researcher-collectors who found their way to South Asia. Trained in Sanskrit and Indology under Professors Jean-Philippe Vogel and Willem Caland at the Dutch universities of Leiden and Utrecht respectively, Bake took up residency at Santiniketan in order to study Damodar Misra's *Sangitadarpana* for his doctoral research. He worked closely with Rabindranath Tagore, in an attempt to study, collect, preserve, and distribute his songs and poetry.

The Travelling Archive is a project in field recording in Bengal, which we—sound recordist Sukanta Majumdar and I, Moushumi Bhowmik, a singer and writer—began in 2003. We first encountered his recordings in the archives of the British Library in London in those early days, and have remained connected to his work ever since. Bake's work very much constitutes the creation of an archive. He began his work in Bengal, although later he made recordings across India, Sri Lanka and Nepal. Interestingly, while his work from other parts of India has been studied and restudied, there has so far not been any concerted effort to 'listen' in any depth to Bake's recordings from Bengal. Nevertheless, his efforts at recording and, in some cases, preserving the music of Bengal, during his many trips to and extended stay in the region between 1925 and 1956, have left us a treasure trove of sounds, images, and film. He also wrote privately in his letters home, especially to his mother, about his experiences and thoughts. These letters read not unlike an anthropologist's notebook; while his wife, Cornelia, kept notes about daily affairs in her diary. Bake also published essays in journals about the music he studied and collected, and taught too, mainly at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London.

There are large overlaps between Arnold Bake and our work, both from a topographical and an archival perspective. This means that, in many ways, songs and sounds that are part of our work are drawn from the same well as Bake's recordings all those years ago. This exhibition is thus an attempt to unravel the threads of archival material to demonstrate how past, present and future are intertwined.

In 2013, we had created a piece of work for an art exhibition on early sound recording in India called *Footsteps of Sound*. In that work we keep coming back to two questions: How do we listen to Arnold Bake today? Can we hear him in our work? The point for us is this: that the 'today' of *Footsteps* is yesterday now; and in the interim, our listening to the world and to the world of Bake has grown and moved and become more layered as well as tangled up in time.

It is a strange feeling to listen to these wax cylinders. You listen once, listen again and slowly the sound grows on you. Physically and materially, time is written on these cylinders. The noise, the hiss of the machine, the cracks and crevices on the body of the cylinder, all reveal themselves in their sound. At first you hear little else besides the 'noise'. Then gradually you hear more. This listening changes, not only because you can hear better and can separate the song from the other sounds, like separating grain from chaff, but also because the meanings of grain and chaff have changed for you in the meantime. You now know something about the machine, the details of the cans which Bake was sending to Berlin, the woman he was recording in Naogaon. Your listening changes also because you are more familiar with the story of the song; you know more about the time, something about the genre, the composer. Hence, when Chitralekha Chowdhury says she was taught by Shantidev Ghosh, you hear shadows of her teacher in her voice (although the particular recording in question was not a cylinder, but recorded on a reel-to-reel recorder). Or, when you have heard the Mainadal kirtanias sing for hours their Nandotsab or Niyomsheba songs, and you listen to a recording from the archives marked 'Kenduli' on their catalogue, then you think, this cannot be Kenduli, perhaps this was Mainadal, or maybe a team from Mainadal was singing at Kenduli? Such details you begin to hear despite the 'noise' which covers the surface of the recordings.

This exhibition primarily concerns itself with sound, but it is also about image and about other forms of 'recording'. Where does a sound or image, a name or a notation, take us? There are other listenings too which this exhibition tries to unfold. It is not only about listening to an old sound, but it is about listening to that old sound *now*. The now is important here. And how that now prompts us to listen and respond. To take an example, the archives of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London have manuscripts of Arnold Bake in their holdings. These were Bake's own notation of the kirtan he learned from various teachers in Calcutta in the 1940s. In the manuscript, we hear something of what Bake must have heard, for he put down as notation his own listening. We try in our own way to listen to Bake's listening now. We work with the English composer, Oliver Weeks, who plays on his piano the notation he reads on the manuscript, then sings it too. He then sends us recordings of his reading and singing. To add another layer of listening and recording to this, we take the recording made by Oliver to practising kirtanias and try to make sense of what they hear in them. The result is complex. Time is wrapped around time, listening entwines with listening, recordings in memory, and recordings in text and recordings in sound are woven into each other.

The five soundtracks created for this exhibition deal with these many ways of recording, listening and interpreting.

'Who was Jaura Khatun?' takes its cue from an archival entry and goes off on a journey of its own to create a story of absence and presence.

'The Story of a White Wall' deals with the process of selective listening and remembering. Out of a two-hour recording session, what is it we remember most clearly? What is it which seems unimportant to us? What seems more significant? And, why? This soundtrack deals with the politics of remembering and thus the politics of our 'listening' to history.

'Listening' is a fairly simple soundtrack, where we present the listening process as sound. You can take a photograph of someone seeing an image; but how do you record listening? All the characters on this soundtrack have some personal connection with Bake's archival material. What happens when we take an ancestor's voice or image to someone? How do they respond? Alan Jabbour, Director of the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, has written in 1984: 'To the scholars they [old recordings] provided fascinating documents for the study of cultural history, but for the spiritual heirs

of the traditions the cylinders documented, the recordings had the greater intimacy of being 'somebody's grandfather'.

'Liederen van Tagore' is about Bake as the listener and interpreter of sound. It is about Bake's relationship with Gurudev, and with the world of his music and with others who were also part of that world.

'Kirtan' is about the lifelong admiration Arnold Bake as a student of music felt for the form of song called 'kirtan'.

The images on display at this exhibition bring out many aspects of the life of Arnold Bake and they speak for themselves. They also tell stories about Bake, his personal life, his friends, teachers and colleagues. In addition, they create the larger world in which to place Arnold Bake, also telling stories about others with whom his life was connected, and about those who were vitally important for the time and world which they built and lived in too. In addition there are word pictures on the walls. Some stand alone, some may be read in relation to other images.

Letters played a vital role in Bake's life; letters play a vital role in this research and in our storytelling. Translated by Jan-Sijmen Zwarts, they open up for us windows into the world of Arnold Bake. Hence, letters become a physical presence in this exhibition – page after page of typed script, letters to a mother we do not know much about, whose response to her son's long letters we cannot know. This exhibition is as much about what we can know and what we can't, what we choose to know and what we don't.

'Time upon Time' is created with archival material; at the same time this exhibition draws attention to the future of archiving by commenting on the very concept of the archive. With support of the India Foundation for the Arts (IFA) through their Archival and Museum Fellowship, and a Scaliger Fellowship from Leiden University, the exhibition explores resources from several archives within India and abroad, including the British Library, Archives and Research Center for Ethnomusicology of the American Institute of Indian studies (ARCE-AIIS), SOAS and Rabindra Bhavan, Santiniketan. In so doing, the exhibition strives to layer archive upon archive as a way to examine the way archives are constructed. In the archives section of our display, where the computer is presented as the repository of material from several archives, we present the recordings received as well as the recordings we have made, in provenance. So, at one level, the Archives are objective and dry. At the same time, it is in the presentation of this unedited, uninterpreted material that our subjectivity gets recorded; in the way we arrange these archives, or the way we present their catalogues. Should we present them as they are presented by the archives, say with a gap in information which we know as a gap, or do we intervene in the matter? Furthermore, what do we do with related material which we consider to be vitally precious and important to this exhibition, but which we have found freely on the internet? Can we see the internet as a new kind of archive now?

'Time upon Time' is meant to be an interactive experience of a work in progress. The Travelling Archive is interested in studying sound and image as historical material. Seeing and listening can trigger memory and thus lead to the further unravelling of history. Therefore, visitors to the exhibition are encouraged to contribute their own memories and experiences to The Travelling Archive. Words, voices, sounds, images, and other contributions will be recorded on site by The Travelling Archive in their 'studio' set up within the space of the exhibition.

Moushumi Bhowmik, 7 March 2016  
Santiniketan.