

Tagore's 'Musical' Gift to Brussels: The Beginning of Organology

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Figure 1 Tagore Portrait, MIM-Brussels.

Raja Sir Sourindro Mohun Tagore (1840–1914) was the earliest Indian musicologist to write extensively on Indian music in English. Tagore authored at least forty works on music theory and pedagogy, gifted musical instruments and books across Europe and America, received knighthoods from over thirty countries, and was awarded two honorary doctorates in music from the West—all without ever leaving his hometown, Calcutta!

Beyond his role as a pedagogue in the late nineteenth century, Tagore emerged as a principal 'giver' of 'Hindu music' to the West once his authority was legitimized by Western academia. His Doctor of Music degree from the University of Philadelphia in 1875 enabled him to position himself as the foremost authority on Indian music both within India and abroad. As India's 'musical spokesperson,' Tagore's gifts to Europe and America functioned as acts of musical diplomacy,

mediating cultural knowledge between Britain's largest colony and the imperial West. Tagore's gift of musical instruments, presented as material evidence of India's 'ancient' civilization, embodied the continuity of an unbroken musical tradition from a Sanskrit past to the colonial present.

In November 1876, Tagore sent his first major consignment—ninety-eight musical instruments along with numerous books on music—to King Leopold II of Belgium through the Belgian Mission in Calcutta. This act inaugurated sustained exchanges between Tagore and Belgium, resulting in official correspondences, publication of detailed catalogues of his donations in Belgian journals, reciprocal gifts of music books, his election as an Associate Member of the Royal Academy of Belgium, and his appointment as Knight Commander of the Order of Leopold in August 1877.

Upon arrival in Brussels, Tagore's gift was divided into two collections: thirteen books were sent to the Royal Academy of Belgium, while the ninety-eight musical instruments were transferred to the Royal Conservatory of Music. P. De Decker, Minister of State and Member of the Royal Academy, forwarded the books to François-Auguste Gevaert, Director of the Academy and a leading authority on musical aesthetics. After receiving the 'magnificent invoice of books' Gevaert wrote back to Decker with much enthusiasm: "These works are for me a *complete revelation* and they are from a historical point of view of *immense interest*."¹ He also became eager to make this knowledge available to the European public:

"I am indeed happy and proud to be thus able to attract the attention of the European *Musicologues* upon the person and the works of Sourindro Mohun Tagore. . . Everything offers an immense interest: *for the first time we learn something positive on the music of the extreme East.*"²

In his letter of acknowledgement on behalf of King Leopold-II, Decker wrote back to Tagore addressing him as the 'son of excellence'— thanking him for his 'kindness' in donating such 'numerous and interesting publications' on Indian music, and added that Gevaert would read a report of the book-collection at an early meeting of the Academy, where he will propose Tagore's acceptance as an *Associate Member of the Royal Academy of Belgium*.³

Through this first encounter with a European monarch, Tagore could establish himself as the principal musical authority from the East. Belgian officials entrusted him with what they termed the responsibility of initiating the West into the ancient musical literature of India through translation and publication. This moment marked a significant episode in Indo-European musical exchange and the production of musicological knowledge.

The second component of Tagore's gift—the collection of Indian musical instruments—proved especially influential. Carefully curated and systematically organized, the collection was intended to demonstrate the sophistication of India's ancient musical culture. Each consignment was accompanied by explanatory texts, catalogues, and visual materials that rationalized the instruments within a classificatory framework.

In December 1876, the instrument collection was transferred to the Royal Conservatory of Music in Brussels, forming the foundational core of what became the Musical Instruments Museum (MIM). When the museum opened on 1 February 1877, its explicit didactic purpose was to expose students to early musical instruments.⁴ Victor-Charles Mahillon (1841–1924), the museum's first curator, described Tagore's gift as '*the most beautiful and interesting collection of all that*' he had

¹ *Public Opinion*, Supplement, 35.

² *Public Opinion*, 15 (italics mine).

³ *Public Opinion*, Supplement, 13.

⁴ See, <http://www.mim.be/history> (italics mine)

even encountered and requested Tagore's assistance in cataloguing it. The collection comprised all four categories of instruments: thirty-five string instruments, twenty-nine rhythmic instruments, twenty wind instruments including flutes and conches, and fourteen percussion instruments.



Figure 2: The “Vina” family of instruments: MIM, Brussels.

The visual staging of India's ancient musical culture culminated in a tabloid-sized poster titled *Short Notices of Hindu Musical Instruments*, included in Tagore's gift to King Leopold II. This poster presented concise descriptions of eighty-nine instruments arranged in three columns, visually

adapting the classificatory logic of *Yantra Kosh*. Alongside this tabloid, Tagore sent key texts on musical instruments, including *Yantra Khetra Dipika* (1872), *Harmonium Sutra* (1874), *Yantra Kosh* (1875), and *Mridanga Manjari* (1875), all in Bengali, as well as *Hindu Music by Various Authors* (1875), which introduced European readers to the fourfold Indian classification system based on sound-producing material through the articles of Captain Augustus Willard and Francis Gladwin: *tat* (string), *anaddha* (skin), *ghana* (solid), and *sushir* (wind).

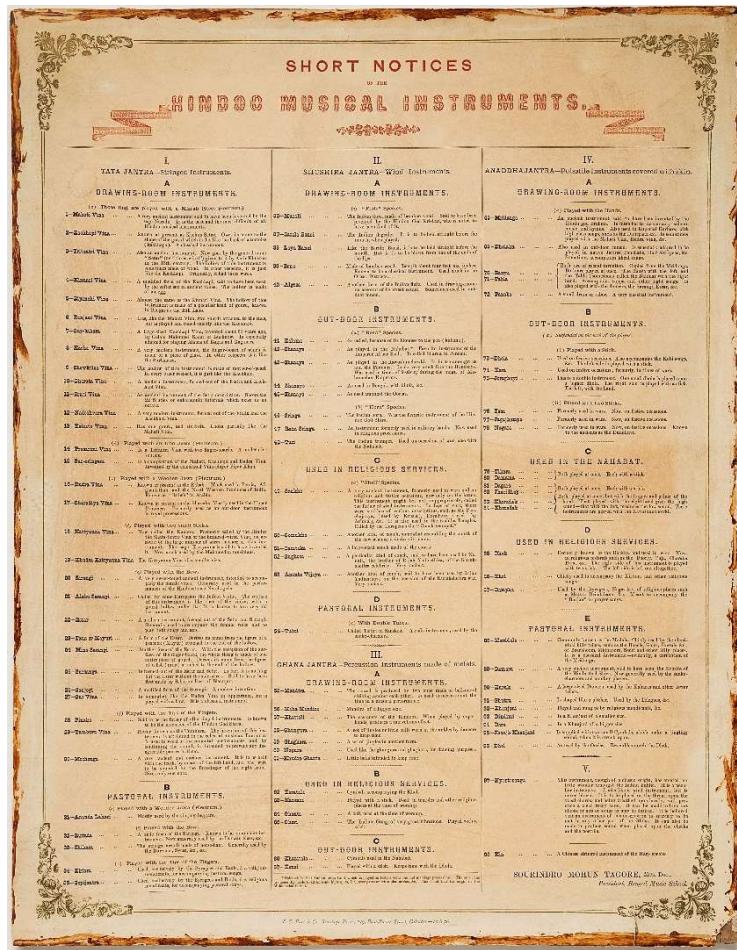


Figure 3 Short Notices of Hindu Musical Instruments, MIM Brussels

In this specially commissioned tabloid, Tagore expanded this system by introducing additional classificatory layers. Beyond material sources of sound, instruments were organized by performance context—domestic, outdoor, religious, or pastoral—and by mechanical processes of sound production, including playing techniques, hand movements, and accessory materials. These silent yet systematic interventions silently made its way into the making of a ‘science’ of musical instrument classification.

Four years later, in 1880, Mahillon published *Catalogue descriptif et analytique du Musée Instrumental du Conservatoire Royal de Musique de Bruxelles*, which introduced the four-part

Indian classification system to Western organology without any alterations. Tagore's musical instruments served as important case-study for Mahillon because he strongly felt that the '*embryo of all sound organs*' could be found in the non-European instruments. Although Mahillon mentioned in the preface of his catalogue that '*some didactic materials . . . turned out to be pivotally helpful as far as the study of history and instrumental organology is concerned*,'⁵ he officially acknowledged Tagore only for the '*information . . . relative to the music and to the instruments*,' and chose to remain silent about Tagore's 'pivotal help' in the development of this system through the books and the tabloid.

In 1914, Erich von Hornbostel and Curt Sachs adopted Mahillon's system in their seminal work on organology first published in the *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, modelling it on the Dewey Decimal Classification. The Hornbostel-Sachs classification, which is the foundational system of modern Organology, then originated from the Indian classificatory system—mediated by Tagore and transmitted through Belgium—to the world. As Nazir Ali Jairazbhoy later observed, Tagore functioned as the principal 'catalytic agent' in this global knowledge production.⁶

The exchange of gifts also fostered a personal relationship between Tagore and the Belgian King, extending beyond official honors to private correspondence and invitations to family events. While the Chief of the Royal Cabinet invited Tagore for Her Royal Highness' marriage to the Imperial Crown Prince of Austria, the King of Belgium congratulated Tagore on his eldest son's marriage with a personal autographed letter.

Yet Tagore's generosity was not disinterested. His donations were strategically aligned with his aspiration to affiliate with prestigious European institutions. While sending his gift to King Leopold-II, Tagore must have already requested for his membership at the Royal Academy of Belgium; Mahillon highlighted in his letter to Tagore that the Belgian Consul has charged him to *use his influence* in order to obtain the title of *Corresponding Member of the Academy of Belgium* for Tagore and that he was happy to see Gevaert favorably inclined to meet his request.⁷ Tagore's effort was rewarded when, in January 1877, the Royal Academy of Belgium elected him an *Associate Member*, followed by his investiture as Knight Commander of the Order of Leopold in August the same year.⁸

⁵ The English translation is done by Swarnadip Chatterjee from the Original work in French.

⁶ See, Jairazbhoy, "The Beginnings of Organology," 67.

⁷ *Public Opinion*, 19.

⁸ *Public Opinion*, 123.

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