

Pandit Vijay Raghav Rao



Pandit Vijay Raghav Rao’s inventive work for fiction and documentary films blur the boundary between the music composer and the sound designer.

In the year 1969 Indian filmmaker Mrinal Sen entered into a collaboration with Pandit Vijay Raghav Rao, a composer who worked as a music director for the state newsreel agency Films Division, known to cinephiles as “FD”. Sen wanted Rao to compose music for *Bhuvan Shome* – a film credited to have started the Indian New Cinema movement of the 1960s and 70s. Rao, was a Hindustani classical musician and played the flute. He was also a musicologist of sorts, with a vast knowledge of diverse traditions ranging from Indian folk music to western classical, from film Hindi music to rock ‘n’ roll.

Mrinal Sen was already familiar with Rao’s work as a film composer and his command over various forms and genres of music. Pandit-ji’s unconventional scores for Films Division short films, especially for the famed trio of SNS Sastry, Sukdev and Pramod Pati en-

deared him to Sen as he embarked on *Bhuvan Shome*. Given Sen’s experimental and formalist agenda he needed a collaborator who could think differently from mainstream Indian film composers. Vijay Raghav Rao was the ideal candidate, because at FD, he not just scored music, but contributed to the overall soundtrack in the short documentaries, working with both musical and non-musical sounds. The idea of film sound design was yet to be acknowledged as a legitimate category in the 1960s, which is why Rao has only been credited only as a composer for both his short documentaries and feature films.

Sound Design

Sound design is now understood as the craft of shaping the soundscape of a film, including the task of creating artificial sounds or gleaning them from the environment. In Hol-

lywood, the nomination sound designer came into existence in the 1970s and was used to describe creative manipulation and inventive application of sound. Technicians such as Ben Burt, Alan Splet, and Walter Murch came to be known as sound designers. The designation sound designer started circulating in India only in the late 1990s and was an outcome of the adoption of digital technology in sound post-production work.

Raghav Rao was a musician and a film composer and definitely not a film sound worker. He not only composed film scores in the conventional sense of the term but also fashioned the entire soundtrack, co-opting the role of a sound designer. His sonic design for the Pramod Pati's experimental short film *Explorer* has one of the most original and complex image-sound play in Indian cinema. The quirky soundtrack of this 7-minute long extraordinary short film brilliantly matches the avant-garde style adopted by Pati. An animator by training, Pati loved juxtaposing apparently unrelated images and sounds to shock and jar the viewer in the manner of Soviet era films by Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov. He combined this approach with animation techniques like stop-motion and traditional cell animation. Vijay Raghav Rao's sound design incorporates a wide array of non-musical effects which are cleverly blended together with specially composed pieces – most often with an astonishing level of discordance. Rao was not only composing a 'film score' in the traditional sense, but combining various sounds – acoustic instruments, electronic synthesisers, folk music, classical vocals, and various effects such as drones, whistling sounds – in the process creating a mind-boggling aural melange.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=asQ9TgvEKvI> (link to the film **Explorer by Pramod Pati**)

A similar sound design by Vijay Raghav Rao is evident in Pati's animated short film of 2-minute duration called *Claxplosion* – a film-

ic comment on population explosion and family planning. Rao's command over film sound



and his astute sense of sound design and mixing are evident in the delightful, self-reflexive 15-minute work by S N Sastry called *And I Make Short Films*. This film, which has seen a recent surge of critical interest, raises important questions about the role of the documentary filmmaker, the social and political reality of contemporary India, the limits of documentary representation, even implicitly critiquing FD and its bureaucratic functioning. The soundtrack begins with a deft mix of Rao's trademark high tempo *taan*, synthesised high-pitched tones, sounds of crowds, an elephant's trumpet, explosions, accompanying the rapidly cut montage scene of stock footage taken from various FD newsreels. The entire soundtrack of this film is made of a 'clutter' of intricately woven strands of classical vocals, Hindi film songs, dialogues, manipulated effects, and sounds from various well-known documentaries made by FD during the 1960s.

Pandit Vijay Raghav Rao's deliberate use of 'clutter' and 'noise' in his FD work has a strong similarity to *musique concrète* - a French term which refers to music woven together from strands of pre-recorded music or effects, natural sounds, using acoustic or electronic manipulations. *Musique concrète* as a concept and a musical practice was formulated by the French musicologist Pierre Schaeffer in the 1940s. Rao's discordant film soundtracks, which combined music with non-musical sounds could be regarded as the first known

use of the principle of *musique concrète* by an Indian musician.



Rao and Mrinal Sen

He continued with his experimental approach while working with Mrinal Sen – in his films *Bhuvan Shome* (1969), *Interview* (1971), *Ek Aadhuri Kahaani* (1972), and *Oka Oori Katha* (1977). Rao's 'experimental' music for *Bhuvan Shome* (1969) grew organically out of the hybrid and self-reflexive idiom adopted by Sen. The early montage sequence in the film which pokes fun at Mr Shome as a quintessential Bengali, is constructed from newsreel footage, still photographs, and animation. The scene is accompanied by a sound assemblage of Bengali folk music, western instrumental phrases, voice distortions, the sound of bombs, the din of crowds, and echoing political speeches. The soundtrack and images sometimes correspond to each other, but this relationship is systematically disrupted through editing. While sound of the rest of *Bhuvan Shome* is devoid of the creative use of clutter that we see in the montage scene, it flits between Indian classical, Kathi-wari folk tunes, electronic and natural sound effects. For intense moments, Sen and Rao strategically used sounds as a counterpoint to the visuals, a carryover from Rao's sound design for the FD films. This is a style continued into Sen's other films from this period, especially in the most politically charged films from the Calcutta Trilogy of *Interview* (1970), *Calcutta 71* (1971), and *Padatik* (1973).



Legacy

Pandit Vijay Raghav Rao migrated to the United States in the 1980s and stopped composing and designing sound for films. Till his demise in the year 2011, he devoted his time teaching and popularising Indian Classical music in the west. In a way, his career parallels that of Pandit Ravi Shankar and Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, both of whom moved to the west and continued their work there. Like Ravi Shankar's score for Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1955) and Ali Akbar Khan's score on Ritwik Ghatak's *Ajantrik* (1958), *Bhuvan Shome* remains a seminal work in Indian film music. But what sets Rao apart from Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar Khan was the experimental nature of his contribution to film music and sound and his radical departures from Indian classical music, despite being a trained musician himself.

Musician Ananda Shankar, son of dancer maestro Uday Shankar, who worked as a music director with Sen on *Padatik*, *Calcutta 71* and *Chorus*, drew largely from Vijay Raghav Rao's music. It was a ready template that he could work on and develop further. With the concept of sound design now entrenched in Indian films, a lot of what Rao achieved is now taken over by professional sound engineers and recordists. However, given that sound designers in contemporary India do not have the background in music that Vijay Raghav Rao had, this Films Division veteran and art cinema stalwart remains a curious exception in the history of Indian music.

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