

The Unsung Architects: The Role of Goan Christian and Parsi Arrangers in Shaping Golden-Era Bollywood Music

Prof. Kunal Ingle

Professor Department of Music, University of Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

ABSTRACT

Music arrangement is a process of embellishing and adorning the main melodic line composed by the composer. It includes things like *harmonisation, melodic paraphrasing, orchestration, or development of the formal structure*. Arranging differs from orchestration in the sense that the latter is limited to the assignment of notes to instruments for performance by an orchestra, concert band, or other musical ensemble. Arranging involves adding compositional techniques, such as new thematic material for introductions, transitions, or modulations, and endings. The first arrangers of Bollywood were mostly the Goan musicians. Goa was ruled over by the Portuguese for quite a long time. That is the reason why the musicians of Goa got to learn Western classical music. Their hold over staff notation also proved to be another feather in their cap when it came to the art of music arrangement. When we look back at the Golden Era of Hindi cinema, we see that the history almost always credits the famous music directors, lyricists, and playback singers for the timeless classics of that time. Yet the rich, Western-style orchestral arrangements, sophisticated countermelodies, and complex harmonies that actually brought these melodies to life were rarely their creation alone. Instead, they were largely built in the shadows by Goan Christian and Parsi arrangers who operated with minimal recognition. Bringing a unique blend of Portuguese-influenced church band education, jazz club experience, and Western staff notation skills into Bombay's single-microphone studio setups, figures like *Anthony Gonsalves, Sebastian D'Souza, and the Kersi Lord* practically reinvented how Hindi film songs were structured. This paper looks into the overlooked craftsmanship of these behind-the-scenes heroes. It traces how they took simple modal tunes and made them into intricate, polyphonic soundtracks. In spite of the intense analogue recording limits, they managed to adorn Indian melodies with Western techniques of arrangement. It also uncovers how these marginalised studio musicians served as the true musical bridge between Indian melody and Western symphonic form, examining why their profound impact was left uncredited for decades until the digital era finally swept their craft aside.

KEYWORDS: Bollywood Music Arrangement, Goan Musicians, Parsi Arrangers, Western Orchestration, Golden-Era Hindi Cinema.

INTRODUCTION

The development of Hindi film music during the mid-twentieth century took place within a collaborative studio environment, where musical ideas were shaped through the interaction of composers, arrangers, instrumentalists, conductors and recording personnel. It was quite a social process. These processes

formed an important part of the sound of Hindi cinema. Hindi film songs increasingly drew upon a wide range of instrumental and harmonic possibilities.

Within this environment, musicians from different cultural and musical backgrounds brought distinct forms of training and experience into Bombay's film studios. Goan Christian musicians were associated with Western musical education, notation and ensemble performance, while Parsi musicians also contributed to the city's evolving orchestral and popular-music practices. Their work developed within a shared professional environment, although their individual roles and contributions varied considerably.

This paper therefore begins by considering the musical foundations that enabled these musicians to work within the film industry, before examining their contributions to arrangement and orchestration. It then considers the role of selected Goan Christian and Parsi musicians in the development of Hindi film music. The discussion concludes by considering the question of recognition and the place of arrangers within the broader history of film-music production.

THE ARRANGERS IN INDIAN FILM MUSIC

In the Indian scenario, music director was the one who composed the melodic line. It was actually the arranger, who decorated it by doing various things like writing appropriate harmony for each bar, deciding the parts to be played as interludes and preludes, choosing the types of instruments to be played according to the vibe of the song, writing parts for bass and strings, deciding the routine of the song amongst other jobs. Among other things, an arranger used to compose the countermelodies, write the musical interludes, beginnings, and endings, and develop the orchestration i.e., combining the sounds and textures of various musical instruments (Beaster-Jones, 2015, p. 53).^[1] The task of incorporating Western harmony into film songs also generally fell to arrangers since, until very recently, few music directors had an extensive understanding of harmony. Hence, we see that the importance of arrangers in the music scene was immense. In her study of Golden Era song production, Dean (2014) highlights that "this vital aspect of a song was the responsibility of the "arranger" who had the audio production under his command" (p. 121).^[3] But it is really disturbing to know that these people never got their due in terms of recognition and credits in the earlier times, leave alone the royalties.

It was the music director who remained in the limelight and the arrangers and musicians were always the unsung heroes of Bollywood music inspite of playing a major role. The arrangers in the earlier times were mostly Goan musicians. They had known the art of arranging because the influence of the Portugese. They were all well versed with the music notation and western music theory was their strength. Amongst the famous Goan arrangers were Anthony Gonsalves, A.B. Albuquerque, Peter Dorado along with Ram Singh made the ARP Party - Army band, Antonio Xavier Vaz (Chic Chocolate), Johny Gomes, Sebastian Dsouza, Dattaram, Frank Fernandes, Robert, Chic Correa, Martin Pinto, C Franko, Albert D'Costa, Arthur Perera, Chris Perry, Albino Fernandes, Brass Gonsalves - Soprano Saxophone player, Jessie Joe, Rock Lazares, Dinesh Ghate to name a few. Along with the Goan arrangers, the Parsi arrangers and musicians were also in picture like Kawas Lord (a renowned percussionist and drummer), Berger Lord (drummer) Kersi Lord (Arranger, Percussionist), Homi Mullan (a percussionist who played more than 30 percussion instruments), etc. Besides the arrangers, there were many renowned musicians like V Balsara (Piano), Zareen Daruwala Sharma (Sarod), Gudi Sarwai (Accordion) Bahadur Nanji (Arranger & Organ player), Manohari Singh (Flute, Saxophone), Suman Raj (Flute) Basu Chakravarti (Drums), Tony Vaz (Guitar) Raees Khan (Sitar) Hariprasad Chaurasia (Flute), Maruti Rao Keer (Tabla, Duggi), Bhanu Gupta

(Guitar) ,Ramesh Aiyar (Guitar)Ashok Sharma (Sitar) to name a few. They played a vital role in making the music of bollywood's golden era, a thing to be remembered and cherished forever.

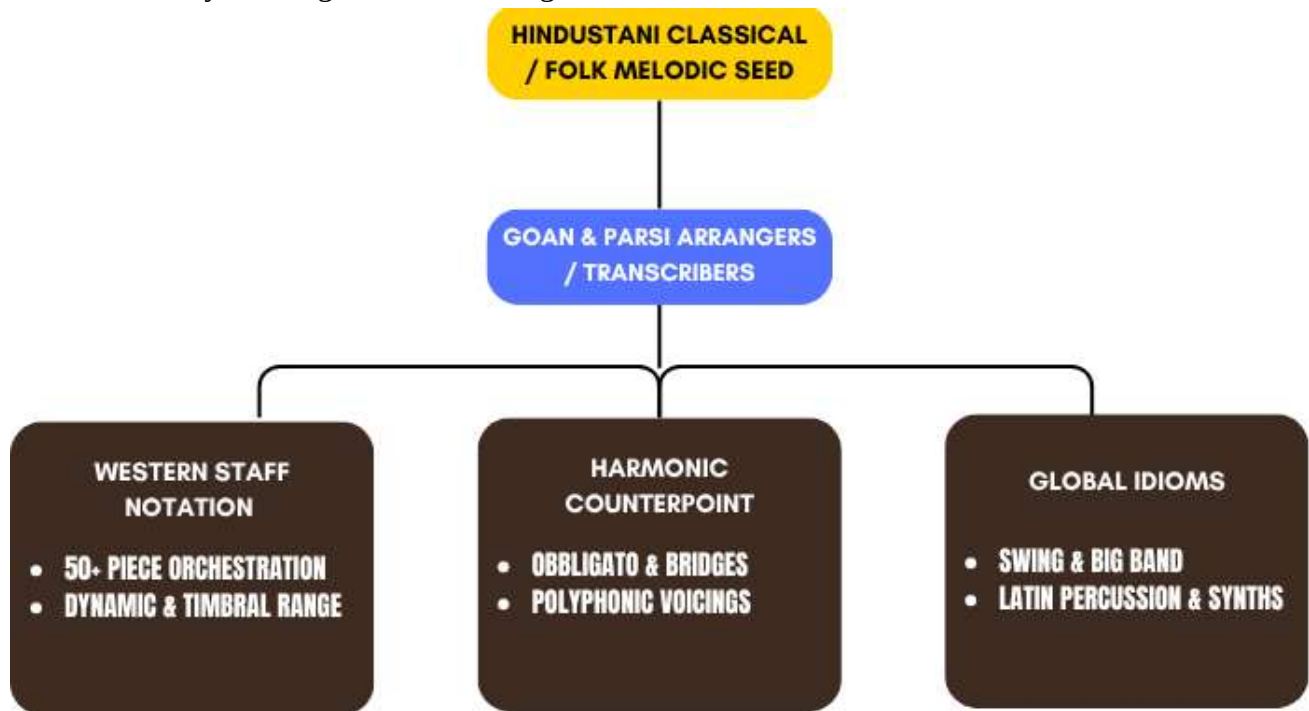


Chart depicting the role of music arrangers

KEY PIONEERS AND THEIR INNOVATIONS

The mid-twentieth century marked a pivotal shift in the studio production of Hindi film song, as "in the 1940s, the film song started to make leaps in complexity, both in terms of its composition and orchestration" (Bhateja, 2021, p. 7) ^[2] Anthony Gonsalves, Sebastian D'Souza and Chic Chocolate were among the prominent Goan musicians who helped establish the foundations of orchestral arrangement in Hindi cinema. Gonsalves introduced a systematic approach to score-writing through staff notation and individual instrumental parts. Over a 20-year career beginning with *Dholak* (1951), Gonsalves arranged nearly 1,000 songs and demonstrated extraordinary orchestral control, frequently directing studio sections of up to 50 violinists at a time. Beyond his studio work, Gonsalves served as a foundational teacher to major figures in film music; composer Pyarelal studied violin under Gonsalves in his youth, learning essential left-hand and right-hand techniques. Laxmikant-Pyarelal later paid homage to Pyarelal's teacher by naming their famous song in *Amar Akbar Anthony* after him. (*The Economic Times*, 2011) ^[4] Sebastian D'Souza, particularly through his long association with Shankar-Jaikishan, expanded the harmonic and orchestral vocabulary of Hindi film music through counter-melodies, obligato and Western harmonic techniques. By incorporating Western counterpoint, cadences, and harmonic variations absorbed from European symphonic traditions, "he is largely responsible for changing the entire harmonic structure of the hindi film song to create an extremely listenable full body of sound behind the voice of the singer" ("Sebastian D'Souza," n.d., para. 1) ^[6]. In 1958, saxophonist and flautist Manohari Singh migrated from Calcutta to Bombay under Salil Chowdhury's mentorship, introducing key woodwind interludes and background orchestration to S.D. Burman's folk-based melodies starting with *Sitaron Se Aage* (Lalwani, 2012). ^[5] Chic Chocolate, the jazz trumpeter and bandleader who worked closely with C. Ramchandra,

brought swing, brass and Latin-influenced textures into popular film music, evident in songs such as “Gore Gore O Banke Chore” (*Samadhi*, 1950) and “Shola Jo Bhadke” (*Albela*, 1951).

Alongside the Goan musicians, Parsi musicians also played an important role in shaping the evolving sound of Hindi cinema. Cawas Lord and his sons Kersi and Bujji Lord became particularly associated with percussion, orchestration and experimentation. Cawas Lord’s work helped expand the rhythmic palette of film music through instruments associated with jazz and Latin percussion. Kersi Lord, trained under Anthony Gonsalves, further extended this musical vocabulary through his work with instruments such as the accordion, vibraphone, xylophone and glockenspiel. Reflecting on Lord’s multi-instrumental mastery, composer Kiran Thakrar observed: “He was a great accordion player... bongo player... drummer... keyboard player... [and] glockenspiel... And he was one of the greatest music arrangers in the Bollywood industry” As Thakrar recalled from their studio collaborations, “His harmonisation was incredibly detailed. He also used some very unusual chords in between—chords that we would not normally hear in typical Bollywood songs. He used many added notes within chords and introduced jazzy chords at certain places”. This meticulousness extended to his preliminary preparation; Lord frequently isolated himself outside of Mumbai prior to recording sessions purely “to concentrate on and create the arrangement” for a project (K. Thakrar, personal communication, September 17, 2026). His collaborations with composers including Naushad and R. D. Burman also took arrangement into the emerging electronic era. His use of synthesizers, electronic effects and unconventional rhythmic structures, notably in the *Shalimar* (1978) title theme, demonstrated how new technology could be integrated with established orchestral practices. Together, these musicians illustrate the gradual transformation of Hindi film music from predominantly acoustic orchestration towards a more experimental and electronically expanded sound.

THE CRAFT AND INVISIBLE LABOUR OF ARRANGERS IN THE ANALOUGE ERA

The work of early film arrangers was shaped by the *technical limitations of the recording studio*. In the mono and early recording era, the large orchestras were recorded largely live. There was hardly any scope for correcting individual parts later. The arranger therefore had to carefully plan the instrumentation. The balance between sections had to be maintained before the recording. The physical placement of musicians and instruments also became part of the arranging process. This made the arranger responsible not only for the musical idea, but also for how it would translate into the recording. Despite this significant creative and technical responsibility, arrangers rarely received recognition comparable to the music directors. They were often treated as assistants, while the music director remained the public face of the composition. Arrangers also generally received session-based payments rather than the continued recognition or royalties associated with the principal creators.

The arrival of synthesizers and electronic instruments in the 1970s and 1980s further changed the arranger’s role. Musicians such as Kersi Lord experimented with these technologies while retaining the principles of orchestration and arrangement developed during the acoustic era. Thus, technological change did not simply replace musicians, but it also transformed the tools through which arrangers shaped the sound of Hindi film music.

CONCLUSION

The Golden Era of Bollywood music was not simply the product of isolated melodic brilliance, it was an inter-cultural and polyphonic synthesis. Goan Christian and Parsi arrangers served as cultural and technical intermediaries. By layering Western harmony, counterpoint, swing, Latin rhythm, and electronic

experimentation under Indian melody, they built the acoustic framework of modern Indian popular culture. The contribution of these architects of India's cinematic soundscape needs to be acknowledged.

REFERENCES

1. **Beaster-Jones, J. (2015).** Bollywood Sounds: The Cosmopolitan Mediations of Hindi Film Song. Oxford University Press.
2. **Bhateja, R. (2021).** Western influence on Bollywood music (Unpublished master's critical review C33496166). Leeds Beckett University.
3. **Dean, J. S. J. (2014).** The melodramatic voice in Hindi cinema [Doctoral dissertation, Macquarie University].
4. **India's first 'music arranger', the legendary Anthony Gonsalves. (2011, September 18).** The Economic Times. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/media/entertainment/indias-first-music-arranger-the-legendary-anthony-gonsalves/articleshow/9930197.cms>
5. **Lalwani, M. (2012, June 24).** Music arranger Manohari Singh on S.D. Burman (Part I) [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ph97nRMREUg>
6. **Sebastian D'Souza. (n.d.). [PDF document].** Hindi Film Songs. https://hindi-films-songs.com/books/Sebastian_DSouza.pdf