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Review of *Mountainous Sound Spaces: Listening to History and Music in the Utarakhand Himalayas* by Andrew Alter

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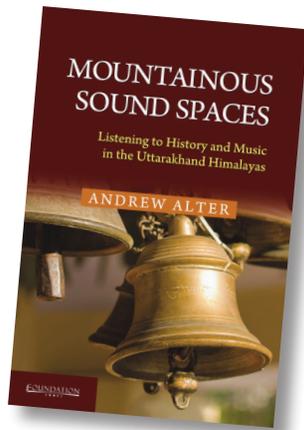
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Book Reviews



**Mountainous Sound Spaces:
Listening to History and Music in the
Uttarakhand Himalayas.**

Andrew Alter. New Delhi: Foundation Books, 2014. 179 pages. ISBN 978-93-82993-32-2.

Reviewed by Jason Busniewski

In *Mountainous Sound Spaces*, Andrew Alter invites both academic and popular audiences to consider music and its role in the creation of space in the Indian Central Himalayan state of Uttarakhand. In doing so, he draws a distinction between place and space, the former being primarily a matter of a physical location and its resonances, with the latter representing cultural and discursive constructions that deploy elements such as sound to conceptually order an experienced and/or imagined world. Within Uttarakhand Alter focuses on the region of Garhwal, a rural region in the northwestern part of the state, and nearly all the music discussed comes from this area. The

book presents a rich introduction to the music of the Garhwal as well as deeper dives into a variety of musical concepts and practices informed by Alter's decades of study in the region. It is a valuable addition to an ethnomusicological literature that has historically tended to privilege South Asia's Hindustani and Karnatak classical musics over the region's many vernacular traditions, including those at its Himalayan periphery. The book is also a significant work of organology (the study of musical instruments), discussing and contextualizing instruments both common and rare in the region, including the *ḍhol* and *damauñ* (a pair of drums, played together outdoors), the *hurki* and *thālī* (a tension drum and metal plate, played together indoors), the Scottish Great Highland Bagpipe (introduced to Garhwal and neighboring Kumaon during the colonial period), the *nagārā* (a kettledrum), the *raṅsiṅghā* (a natural trumpet), and various flutes.

Over the course of nine interconnected essays, some of which represent updated versions of previously published articles, Alter draws on decades of research to examine and link together a range of musical practices. The opening chapters recall Garhwal's royal and colonial pasts. In the first of these, Alter explores the Garhwali bagpiping tradition and traces the instrument's use in processional ensembles from the pipe bands of the British (and now Indian) Army

to present-day wedding bands in which it accompanies the *ḍhol* and *damauñ* drums. While there are occasional incorrect details (such as misidentifying the pitches of the bagpipe's drones), this chapter offers significant information on an instrumental tradition on which virtually nothing has been written. The second chapter examines the *nagārā* and *raṅsiṅghā* as remnants of the *naubat* ensembles maintained by Mughal and Rajput states, and presents it as sonic and material evidence of earlier migrations to the region from what is now the Indian state of Rajasthan, likely including by the former Garhwali royal family.

The possession of devotees by various deities is a major part of Garhwali Hinduism, and Chapter Three explores it through the performance of vocal genres such as *pawārā* and *jāgar*. Accompanied by the sounds of the *hurki* and *thālī*, the *hurkiyā* sings of heroes and deities who frequently come to possess listeners and cause them to dance. Alter's consideration of these genres begins an extended discussion of orality/aurality continued in Chapter Four with regard to the *pawārā* tradition and throughout the rest of the book. This reflects not only the theme of the creation and maintenance of sound spaces but also the creative practices and traditions of the frequently non- or only partially literate musicians who make this possible.

Chapter Five describes the folkloric context of the flute, or rather flutes,

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as terms vary, and the exact identities of the instruments referred to in various sources can be unclear and seem to be elided conceptually. Much of this ambiguity reflects the fact that while the sound of the flute is associated with the Garhwal Himalayas, flutes of any kind are rarely played there. Flutes are significantly more likely to be encountered as disembodied sounds on commercial recordings or as objects within stories than to be experienced in person. Nonetheless, the flute's scarcity does not render it insignificant. Like a number of other musical instruments in Garhwal, the flute is believed to be imbued with spiritual power. This power, however, seems to have a greater tendency to be dangerous than that of other instruments, as illustrated by tales such as the *pawārā* of Jitu Bagadwal, in which the protagonist is ultimately killed by mountain sprites (Alter's term) attracted to the instrument's music.

Chapters Six and Seven explore the *ḍhol* and *damauñ*, outdoor ritual and processional drums, and the body of orally/aurally transmitted drum knowledge that accompanies them. Part of this drum knowledge is the drumming itself both as a physical act and as oralized as *bol*, syllables which imitate the sounds of the *ḍhol-damauñ* pair and serve as a mnemonic aid yet defy attempts to use them as a consistently exact source of written notation. Nonetheless, both *bol* and elements of Western notation are

used together to give approximate illustrations of *ḍhol-damauñ* rhythms from this point forward. Garhwali drum knowledge also involves esoteric knowledge about drumming, its spiritual power, and its supernatural origins. Alter argues that these ideas show the influence of Gorakhpant̃h tantric sects and describes how they exist partly in written form in a text called *Ḍhol Sāgar* ("The Ocean of Drumming"), itself seemingly the remnants of a larger tantric text.

These various elements come together in the final two chapters and epilogue. In Chapter Eight, Alter describes the celebration of a festival (*melā*) in a small Garhwali town as it (re-)enacts the coming of a deity from the neighboring region of Kumaon to the town as the spoils of war. Here, the music of the *ḍhol* and *damauñ* invokes the presence of the deity and (re) creates a historical and supernatural space in which devotees interact with a mythological/historical past, affirming the relationship between people, place, and deity. Alter uses the event as an opportunity for a practical demonstration of the relationship between drumming and drum knowledge, possession, processions, place, and the creation and maintenance of sacred space.

The last chapter discusses the regional popular music industry, especially during the heyday of the cassette era in the 1980s and '90s, how it draws on and commodifies

traditional genres, and how it has used various sonic markers to create an imagined mountainous space in the mind of the listener. These sonic markers include not only traditional Garhwali instruments such as the *hurki* and *thālī* but also the sound of the *santūr* (a hammered dulcimer played in Kashmir) and flute used to signify the Himalayas more generally by the broader Indian popular and film music industry. The connections made in these final chapters are further solidified in a short epilogue that considers various sonic tropes running throughout the book and Garhwali sound spaces more generally.

Mountainous Sound Spaces offers much to readers, whether they are academically inclined or simply appreciative of the Himalayan region and its musics. Alter demonstrates a mastery that comes from decades of research into Garhwali drumming and vocal genres, and this knowledge is easily passed on through the book's detailed yet accessible writing.

Jason Busniewski is a PhD candidate in music at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where his research focuses on the bagpiping tradition of India's Garhwal Himalayas.