Novelty That Must Be Subtle: Continuity, Innovation and 'Improvisation' in North Indian Music

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" He did not play his *tāns* the way his teacher taught him."

"If Madhav Gudi sings in a *mehfil* and gets *dād* [applause], to whom does the *dād* belong? To Bhimsen! [Gudi's teacher]"[1]

The two quotations above, which I will revisit later in the paper, encapsulate something of a conundrum in North Indian classical performance, a conundrum which may also apply in other musical styles. The first criticises a performer who has not executed a series of fast notes, *tāns*, in such a way as to be identifiable as those taught by his teacher. He is understood by the commentator to have, in some sense, failed. The author of the second statement is similarly critical of a performer who, in the context of potentially the most highly critical performance environment, the private concert or *mehfil,* has gained applause by reproducing the singing of his teacher, with no readily discernable element of individualism. It is important to note that these views do not necessarily represent succinct summaries of the critical stances of diametrically opposed musical minds; it is conceivable that a listener might be equally perturbed by a lack of reference to inherited tradition *and* an absence of individuality in performance. In this paper, I will attempt to investigate and reconcile these seemingly contradictory criticisms by problematizing the role of 'improvisation' in North Indian classical music with specific focus on the melodic structure of the vocal genre known as *khayāl.*[2]

Modern scholarship has long attenuated, if not eliminated many of the negative connotations that were once associated with the word 'improvisation' or of the many approaches to music-making so characterised. At the same time, any cross-cultural use of the idea, indeed any use of the word itself in a musical discourse to which it is alien, needs to account for a range of interpretations and validations of practice, both within and without the tradition to which the word is being imported. Aside from arousing concerns about the persistence of negative tropes on improvisation, the word may afford an inadequate or even incorrect focus in the perception of performance—a focus on what is novel and different. As the first of the above quotations suggests, it is necessary to understand that what occurs in North Indian performance is as much a re-presentation and reconfiguration of previously inherited, learned, formulated, and planned materials, and that a performance may be validated through reference to such re-presentation. Thus the performance becomes a reiteration of tradition, that cohesive and prevalent value in Indian society. What, then, may be the understanding of 'improvisation,' or even the utility of such a concept, in a tradition which prizes intergenerational continuity and preservation as much as, if not more, than innovation? At the same time, the second quotation indicates that there are limits to the validation of a performance that has been shaped by such constrained reproduction and continuity alone.

My further contention is that melodic construction may derive aspects of its overall form and quality from, and may be understood in reference to, a cluster of ideas that attempt to reconcile a socially validated and hierarchically underscored conservatism with an acceptance of individual innovation. Melodic moments may then be understood as performed subjectivities standing at temporal interstices between tradition and contemporaneity, the broadly cultural and the individual. Though I argue from a deductive consideration of cultural, social, and even ethical imperatives, I also show how such a set of ideas may be manifested in music itself.

Improvisation, *upaj*, *vistār*.

As will be well understood, generalisation through the use of the word 'improvisation' is dangerous. There simply cannot be a single and simple definition of improvisation that adequately pins down its essential nature or that enables it to be cleanly contrasted with another form of musical activity that might be called,

say, 'composition.' All music making involves some sort of model, or template, or preform, even at the most basic level of planning, and some sort of reworking of and departure from this in performance (Shepherd 159; Cook 112-113; Nettl, "Improvisation" n.p.).[3] The manner in which this mixture is achieved, understood, and valorised is of course culture-specific. To use the term 'improvisation' in almost any 'translational' way either glosses over the cultural specificity of the practice and its interpretation, or conceptually bundles the practice with other musical traditions that have been so called. Though North Indian music is frequently described as improvised, most terms used to discuss what actually takes place in a performance carry rather different implications; they may, like the terms *upaj* (to grow)[4] and *vistār* (to spread out), describe general or specific processes of exposition or development, or they may refer to specific types of singing or playing. There has also been some resistance to the term improvisation in total (Van der Meer 142-3), or to some of its implications (Ranade 119; Deshpande 41, 52; Parrikar n.p.).

The widely-held but largely Western idea that when one hears a performance of Indian music one hears "an improvisation" can be critiqued from three perspectives.

1. The assumption that Indian musicians' approach to performance is somehow either loosely planned or even unconscious.

2. Flowing from this, the idea that the music is 'less well structured' than, say, its European classical counterparts.

3. Despite whatever caveats might be offered about models and departures in performance, the notion of 'improvisation' focuses on what is different in and specific to particular performances, rather than what is re-presented from performance to performance, and in the Indian context, from teacher to student.

The first two points need only a little attention. Though largely 'outgrown' stereotypes, they do both feed on and feed some quite problematic understandings, so they must be addressed. In addition, I believe it is worth summarising the way such notions are historically located in the discourse around Indian music. The third point, however, I think is critical in that it impedes understanding of the social validation of musicians and their activities by distorting these relative to what has 'come before.'

Bailey's complaint, from the 1970s, that "improvisation is generally viewed as a musical conjuring trick, a doubtful experiment, or even a vulgar habit" (ix) is less relevant in the light of more recent thinking. Nevertheless, that such old notions linger on in frequently accessed sources is shown not only by the subsequent republication and currency of Bailey's work, but by two definitions cited by Berliner in his *Thinking Jazz* (1994). The first is drawn from *Webster's Dictionary*: "to compose, or simultaneously compose and perform, on the spur of the moment and without any preparation," and the second, given by Apel in the *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, is the "art of performing music spontaneously, without the aid of manuscript, sketches, or memory" (1-2). As recently as 1998, Nettl felt compelled to write that "in the conception of the art music world, improvisation embodies the absence of precise planning and discipline" ("An Art Neglected" 7). This view finds its most extreme manifestation in the idea that improvisation is not an act of 'conscious' music making: "Western classical musicians are more inclined to see the quality of improvisation as emotional rather than intellectual, as free rather than controlled" (10).

Without straying too far, it is worth noting that comparable ideas of Indian music have an established history, perhaps stemming in part from a crude racialism during the colonial period. Fox Strangways, in his influential and still reprinted 1914 work, *The Music of Hindostan,* describes the skill of "extemporization" as being "an inherited instinct of the race" (8). Ferand, in the broad-ranging introduction to his 1961 anthology of improvisation, describes *rāgas* as "melody models that lived on in the musical subconsciousness of a race or a people" (5), and Bailey's primary consultant for his chapter on Indian music, Viram Jasani, says, "ours is a very intuitive music" (9). The 'upside' of this is that whilst drawing on the unconscious might be dismissed as "a conjuring trick," it may also be interpreted as revelatory of a greater element of "truth." As Deshpande writes, "Indian music is prone to be meditative and contemplative [. . .]. [It] seeks to express the mysterious movement of man's sub-conscious; it tries to get at the very bottom of the sub-conscious" (161). [5] The idea of drawing on the subconscious has been fostered by numerous performers, and may be reinforced by a closed-eyed, self-contained demeanour, a demeanour that is gradually transformed in the course of the performance. A vocal soloist will frequently be seen to commence singing with the head bowed slightly, the eyes closed. As the performance intensifies in terms of dynamics, register, volume, and articulation, the performer gradually assumes a more 'extroverted' manner: the eyes

open, which engages fellow performers and even the audience more thoroughly; hand gestures become larger and more frequent; and the performer may even talk to his or her fellow players and to the audience. The overall impression is that musical intensification accompanies and expresses a journey from the internal to the external, from the subconscious to the interpersonal, from individualism to communitas.

To some extent, I suspect that the long-standing association of Indian performance with an almost meditative act may have something to do with the appearance of Indian music to western audiences in the mid-1960s. In his study of the contemporaneous emergence of progressive rock, Moore notes that improvisation "is surrounded by myths that treat it as somehow magical, in that it purports to bypass the mind's conscious mechanisms, providing a vehicle for performers to express themselves in a fashion unmediated by any other concerns, thus bringing them closer to pre-verbal or pre-conceptual expression" (73). The counter-cultural notion of 'expanding your consciousness' 'found direct expression in extended improvisations" (67). In this environment, Indian music became a metaphor for a particular kind of psychic or spiritual freedom.

Historically, it was the music of North India that drew such attention in the West. The two classical traditions of India, the North Indian or Hindustani tradition, and the South Indian or Carnatic tradition share many common features, but they also differ in many respects. They became thoroughly distinct by the sixteenth century, and subsequently continued to develop along separate trajectories within differing social and aesthetic climates. Most importantly for this paper, the procedures for delivering a performance of the musical 'givens' vary, and the level of obvious constraint on the performer is greater in South India.

In comparing Hindustani and Carnatic music, Bailey creates an analogy between improvisation and broader social and cultural freedoms: "Hindustani music [. . .] reflects the synthesis [of Indian and central and West Asian elements] it has undergone and is less restricted by inherited convention [. . .]. One effect of this division is that there is a much heavier emphasis on improvisation to be found in Hindustani than in Carnatic music" (1). He then links this to theological and textual issues. North Indian music is "freer" because it is both less subjected to theological scrutiny, and less restricted by both religious text and by text in general. I turn my attention briefly to text, and not immediately to theology.

One of the major performance structures in South Indian music is built by a type of variation procedure known as *niraval.* A line of text is repeated, with the relationship of syllables to the time-cycle being retained while the pitches are varied. Though there is no exact analogue of this process in North India, both chordophonic (string instrumental) performance and solo playing on the paired hand-drums, the *tablā,* offer comparable forms. Chordophonic soloists frequently use fixed plucking patterns with varied melodies, especially in the composition or *gat* sections of the performance.[6] Similarly in the solo *tablā* performance genre, *qa'ida,* the player is expected to perform variations on a cyclical composition of drum strokes or *bols* (mnemonic syllables). Kippen points out that the character of the original *qa'ida* must be maintained within each variation, by keeping "large chunks of the basic sentences as reference points" (167). Bailey, with his equation of improvisation and freedom, might feel that such constraints are limiting, but for the Indian musician they may simply be thought of as a challenge, elements of a "game," in which "improvisers purposefully place themselves in difficult situations in order to prove their ability to escape from them by solving their musical problems of logic and consistency" (Nettl, "An Art Neglected" 16). It may be that this takes precedence over the need to express some homology of freedom. Bailey's work does, however, draw attention to the potential for an ideational understanding of Indian performance, linking specifically musical practices to broader social ideologies.

The largely Western interpretation of Indian performances as structurally deficient stems back at least to Fox Strangways: "We can hardly imagine a composition without a main climax and a coda: an Indian singer simply stops when he has sung enough" (91). [7] As early as 1951, Indian scholars were disputing this notion. Ranade states that "the progression of Indian music is not the work of a rhapsodic improvisation as some—chiefly Western critics—suppose" (119). Deshpande offers a slightly rhetorical defence of the intensification procedures used in the style of a group of performers collectively known as the Jaipur-Atrauli *gharānā*:[8]

> This gharana [sic] has given a great deal of attention to the principle of 'design' worked out
> in detail [. . .]. [T]he implication [of Fox Strangways] is that in Indian music recitals there is no
> overall plan, no notion of an organic construction, and therefore no inevitable end [. . .].
> Jaipur style is the most fitting answer to that criticism. (52)

It is worth noting that this particular *gharānā* is associated with performances that adopt some of the formal, rhythmic, and procedural strictness associated with the older vocal style called *dhrupad*, in contrast to the more flexible *khayāl* style under discussion here.

In hearing the overall form of a North Indian performance, what is most obvious is that the music involves some sort of intensification, certain trajectories that to some extent overlap: from low to high, slow to fast, and from attenuation to foregrounding of the rhythm. In a recent work, Martin Clayton emphasises the linearity of this music, partially in response to the nonsensical description of Indian music as 'cyclical.' He draws on a distinction made by Jonathan Kramer between "directed linearity" and "non-directed linearity." In the latter, "the sense of motion remains, but the goal is equivocal." Clayton argues for the idea of linearity, but against teleology, apart from the obvious movement to the upper tonic, since there is no fixed or definable goal in the parameters of this intensification (25). Now, it is a moot point as to whether teleology or even a resultant metaphorical 'structure' can exist as some sort of separate reification (sonata form being the best-known and debated example) or only exists as part of either a musician's pre-plan or a listener-analyst's post-hoc interpretation of what has been heard. But I suggest, most strongly, that Indian singers are quite aware of their vocal range, the speed at which they might sing, the level of clearly articulated subdivision that they can, or wish, to manage on a particular occasion. These elements may well form clear parts of the performer's pre-plan, and performances must therefore be understood as teleologically construed prior to execution, even if such aspects of teleology cannot be apparent to the listener till afterwards. The strength of this intensification, which may be understood as formal or affective, or both, is sufficiently great for it to draw attention purely to process; one scholar, Lewis Rowell goes as far as describing Indian music as "pure process" (qtd. in Clayton 14). In critiquing Rowell's position, Clayton observes that the study of Indian music has frequently emphasised process rather than the objects manipulated (14). Objects are thus reduced to mere indicators of such processes, the manner in which they are used gaining more attention than their inherent quality or importance.

This leads me to the most crucial reason for questioning simple descriptions of Indian music as predominately 'improvised': the term focuses on process and difference rather than the re-presentation of fixed material. Most discussions emphasise that it is pre-existing material that is worked on in performance: compositions, stock phrases, and cadential devices such as the *tihāī,* a thrice-stated phrase that concludes a section of performance with great accuracy of timing. Existing phrases are stretched or compressed, and the same may happen to motives from the phrases; further motives may be prefixed, infixed and suffixed. Phrases may be broken up or telescoped with others, and motives or phrases may be sequenced through different registers. As Neumann states:

> The improvisations themselves are usually made up of previously worked-out phrases, musical elements put together in unique ways for each performance. The intricacy of the structure of these musical elements and the ingenuity of the architectural assembly establish the degree of creativity and inspiration in a performance. (*The Life of Music* 23)

Leaving aside whether this reworking of the material itself is spontaneous (see Slawek) or pre-planned (see Van der Meer 143), the important point that I want to draw here is that valorisation of a performance may depend as much, if not more, on the quality of the pre-composed materials, and on the accuracy of their re-presentation, than on the novelty and inventiveness of a performer in re-presenting them. Here I reiterate the extreme views quoted in the epigraphs at the beginning of this paper; one critical of the non-preservation of pre-composed material, the other critical of an inability to go beyond it.

" He did not play his *tāns* the way his teacher taught him."

" If Madhav Gudi sings in a *mehfil* and gets *dād* [applause], to whom does the *dād* belong? To Bhimsen! [Gudi's teacher]"

Far from being a simple transcultural term, 'improvisation' is best analysed and defined within very specific musical and cultural contexts as the following close reading of a *khayāl* performance shows.

Re-presentation and variation in practice.

I will focus on two moments that most completely juxtapose fixed material to individual performance: 1) the introduction of a recognisable composition within a *khayāl* performance; and 2) the subsequent use of a fragment of that composition as a cadential device. Most *khayāl* performances open with a section of

music called *ālāp* that has no readily discernible pulse, is not accompanied by *tablā,* and utilises only vocables. After the *ālāp,* at a moment also marked by the introduction of the *tāla* (a fixed and explicated rhythmic cycle), something involving semantic text is sung. If asked what sort of thing this is, a listener will reply with words that may be generically translated as "composition": *"bandish," "cīz,"* or even *"khayāl"* (in a second sense of a type of composition, rather than in the sense of a performance genre). Here the listener is identifying a fixed entity. During the performance, however, the composition is presented in an individual manner that varies from any 'scored' version that the singer might have used, such that "it is often impossible to determine what the true or the basic form of the composition is" (Clayton 133). I suggest that there is none, that the composition is in a state of permanent flux and cannot be separated from its 'improvisatory' delivery. [9]

The specific example I will use is drawn from my own experience. When I first began to study Indian music, my teacher suggested that, as I was a professional cellist, I should attempt to play Indian music on cello rather than learn a new instrument. Subsequently, I also began to concentrate on providing melodic accompaniment for singers, rather than on solo performance. Such accompaniment, called *sangat,* is usually provided by a musician playing either a bowed chordophone, the *sāraṇgī,* or an Indian adaptation of the European harmonium.[10] This practice, though sometimes incorrectly defined as 'simultaneous improvisation,' is more generally described as an imitation or doubling of the singer's lines, usually with some degree of variation, and a filling of the gaps whilst the soloist is not singing.[11] The beauties of becoming an accompanist for me were manifold. I was given direct access to high quality materials, and engaged in complex processes, more than likely before I would have been ready for them had I been attempting to be a soloist. At the same time, I was spared the daunting task of having to be responsible for the overall construction of a performance. *Sangat* is a practice that would appear to be far more constrained by performance convention and by musical hierarchy than soloistic melodic development might be by the demands of intergenerational transmission. Nevertheless, even though imitation is both immediate and conventionally thought of being 'as close to exact as possible,' subtle differentiations are made. This second melodic line is at the same time dependent, acknowledging its ultimate source in the utterance of the singer, and differentiated, a demonstrably 'variant' line created by another. In short, by adopting the role of a musical servant, I was able work in proximity to the core of the performance tradition, whilst simultaneously satisfying any need for independence with brief solo moments.[12]

The following is an example of a *khayāl cīz,* as taught to me by the singer, Sumathi Krishnan, a few days before a performance in which I was to accompany her. It is in a twelve-beat *tāla* (time-cycle) called *vilambit ektal*, which begins after the first 5 notes which act as an upbeat or anacrusis to the composition (marked with a bracket).
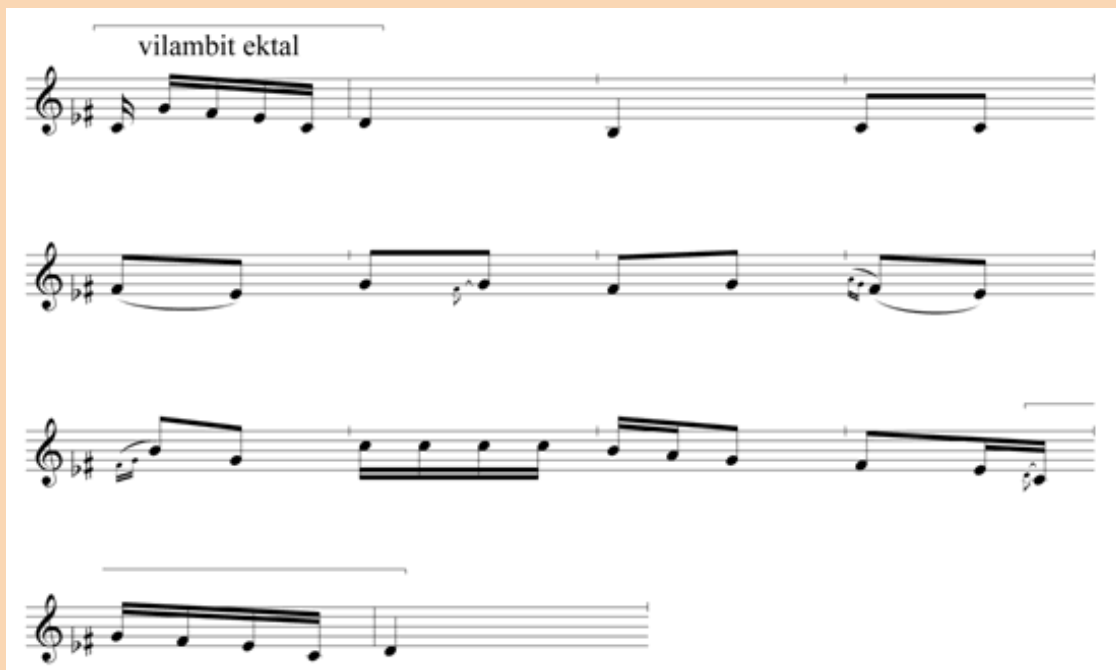
Example 1: cīz in rāg Madhuvanti[13]

The actual process of teaching was oral-aural, and over the telephone. Though this was far from ideal, it was necessitated by circumstances, and in some way emphasises the separation of the *cīz* from both musical and pedagogic contexts. Ms. Krishnan regarded the *cīz* as sufficiently concrete, or at least

sufficiently amenable to de-contextualised presentation, to relay it in a context that was both musically and pedagogically eccentric. I initially notated the example in Indian notation, subsequently transcribing it to Western staff notation. The actual presentation by Ms. Krishnan and me may be heard below.

*** audio : *cīz* presentation (2.7 MB) ***

In the following notation, the *cīz* as performed is notated on the top staff, whilst the pitches of the *cīz* as 'learnt' by me are given on the second staff. Each beat of the original twelve beat time-cycle, represented in Example 1 by a quarter note, is here represented by the duration of a whole-note. The degree and quality of ornamentation should be quite apparent to both ear and eye. Noteworthy is the increase in complexity in the second half of the excerpt, which both shapes the specific presentation and reflects the original *cīz*. Some further features should be pointed out. The rhythmic complexity of the notation is not meant to convey a rigorous subdivision of the beat on the part of the singer.[14] Instead, it is meant to show the manner in which the performer attenuates the beat by 'floating' across the pulse: the co-incidences of the original melody notes help to show this, as does the fact that in most cases, no pitch is articulated on the actual beats. Finally, Ms. Krishnan returns to a fairly 'unadorned' rendition of the *cīz* in the last few notes of the cycle. This five note phrase (marked with a bracket) also forms the anacrucis in the first version, is known as the *mukhda,* and acts as a cadence marker throughout the performance.

performed version

'learnt' version

vilambit ektal (12 slow beats)

Example 2: Top staff, *cīz* as performed; lower staff, *cīz* as learnt by author.

The difference between the two versions should not be regarded as evidence that the original teaching process, or even the original notation, were inadequate. The 'telephone lesson' enabled me to grasp the overall shape of the *cīz* in advance, and to learn the *mukhda* (though the critical listener will notice that, at the beginning of the excerpt, I perform this more quickly than the soloist). The two versions simply represent single 'points' in the composition's fluid history. In the course of this performance, as with many *khayāl* performances, the *cīz* was never repeated in its entirety. Only the *mukhda* was consistently re-used.

Acting as a cadence marker, the *mukhda* both accumulates and resolves the tension between the freedom of singing and the underlying meter, and it sectionalises the overall performance. Thus it may represent a juxtaposition between recognisable fixity and immediate variation. In order to achieve its function, and to communicate this to an audience, the *mukhda* must be readily recognisable. At the same time, it is inevitably performed with a degree of individuality.

Example 3 shows various presentations of the *mukhda* (bracketed) at the ends of seven consecutive sections of a performance by Lakshman Krishnarao Pandit. (The sections themselves are not shown here.) Three things may be observed. The first is the general shape of the *mukhda*: F#-Eb-F#-A | F#-A-B-C. The second is the manner in which this is varied in successive instances. Finally, on the second stave of each bracketed pair, the efforts of the *sāraṇgī* accompanist to catch the *mukhda,* in its varied guises, are notated. (The circled numbers represent the *āvart* or time-cycle which commences at each of statement of the *mukhda*; the timings refer to the location within the original recording.) Clearly, variation in the *mukhda* is demonstrated by both the soloist and accompanist, yet the melodic shape is always recognizable.

Example 3: mukhda presentations from Lakshmman Krishnarao Pandit, *Puriya*

Compositions are frequently disregarded by Westerners as little more than raw material, entities that fix the *rāga* and *tāla,* respectively the pitch system and rhythmic cycle used in the performance, and provide cadential phrases and musical and textual figures for subsequent improvisation.[15] This undervalues the degree to which the performance of a composition is also a statement of musical pedigree and inheritance. Performers may be lauded for the breadth, historical depth, and rarity of the 'givens' that they bring to performance (compositions and *rāgas*) or critiqued for a failure to do so. In concentrating on this aspect of the music, the social validation of the unique performance is achieved: the all-important notions of *paramparā* (discipleship, succession, the path of transmission) and *sampradāya* (or tradition, in the sense of the handing from one to another of materials) are invoked. These critical notions involve the manipulation of concrete musical materials, demonstrably passed from teacher to student, rather than an inheritance of 'processes' alone. The *cīz* in *rāg Madhuvanti* offers a discrete, almost tangible token of a tradition of which I have acquired a miniscule part. Though this *cīz* is available in printed sources, under other circumstances, in the context of a more traditional discipleship and path of transmission, such a *cīz* may be a highly valued, even jealously guarded token.

Performance, tradition, ideation.

In arriving at a consideration of supra-musical ideas such as discipleship and tradition, I find myself set upon the same path that I noted earlier in Bailey's work, where he links degrees of improvisation to different types of social and even theological freedom. Is the balancing of tradition and the individuality of the performer explicable through reference to a further set of ideas? If performance is not necessarily explained in regular musical discourse through reference to the supra-musical, what ideas link the performed subjectivity of the musician to broader streams in Indian culture?

As Thomas Turino has pointed out, "musical forms that 'sound like,' that is resemble, in some way, other parts of social experience are received as true, good, and natural." He asserts the importance of "feelings of iconicity or 'naturalness' created through the correspondence of style across different practices" (234). I suggest that performance has iconic qualities that may be readily understood with reference to a cluster of ideas and practices: transmission, long-term continuity, commentary, and authorship.

The hallmarks of traditional Indian musical teaching and learning are strenuous study and exacting repetition in a rigorously hierarchic situation. In re-presenting materials so acquired, performers both acknowledge the effectiveness of traditional pedagogy, and bring about an inter-generational preservation of the teacher's style. It then becomes all the more pertinent to ask "to whom does the consequent applause belong?" Performance must do more than reproduce, however. What it effectively offers is a microcosm of a process of transmission that places seemingly contradictory emphases on the ability to reproduce with exactitude and to perform with individuality.

At a discussion group on Indian philosophy a few years ago, the Sanskritist Michael Comans suggested that the aphorism "He who appreciates appropriates, he who appropriates appreciates" was characteristic of some areas of Indian intellectual activity. Traditionally trained performers may have no argument with such a proposition; much of their training consisted of learning how to copy, and the importance of copying was reinforced by a strict hierarchic system involving the absolute authority of teacher over student. At the same time, something must be added. I believe that musical performance may have a literary analogue in the Indian intellectual practice the *bhasya,* or commentary, which Comans maintains is a fundamental means of incremental development within Indian intellectual traditions (Personal communication).

Sheldon Pollock's article on theory and practice in traditional Indian thought outlines the rhetoric (as opposed to reality) of a conservatism that has at its heart the notion that 'knowledge' is permanent and fixed.

> [N]o originality of thought, no brand-new insights, notions, perceptions, but only the attempt better and more clearly to grasp and explain the antecedent, always already formulated truth. All Indian learning accordingly *perceives* itself and indeed *presents* itself largely as commentary on the primordial *sastras.* (515, my italics)

Pollock then goes on to quote the Kashmiri logician Jayatabhaṭṭa's statement that "one should consider novelty only in rephrasing the older truths of the ancients in modern terminology" (515). At first this assessment seems extraordinarily harsh and totalising. A close look at Pollock's summary shows that he has not in fact denied innovation, but has attempted to convey how it might be "*perceived*" and "*presented.*" The conservatism that Pollock discusses is not necessarily directly suppressive of all innovation, but demonstrates and defines how innovation is understood, accepted, and valorised within Indian society.

The *bhasya* is fundamentally inter-textual in that it both demonstrates and assumes total knowledge of the original text, or even includes that text in its entirety. It therefore assumes, even argues, the basic or total 'correctness' of the original text. In Rowell's words, "the virtue of the commentary was that it allowed full explication while at the same time preserving the authoritative form of the text being explained" (128).

I suggest that performance that strikes a balance between the seemingly conflicting aims of tradition and individuality may demonstrate a "correspondence of style" with such processes of commentary which are "at the root of a large part of classical Indian literature" (Dimock 2). By subtle variation of the givens, the performer offers an individualised commentary, drawing in to the performance event a validation of him- or herself through accurate reference to tradition, to transmission, and ultimately to long-term musical continuity. The performer becomes author, but at the same time acknowledges earlier authorship. Performance stands at the end of a recension; the performance is the singer's *bhasya* to their guru's *bhasya* upon the 'eternal' *rāga.*

Conclusions

North Indian classical music performance encapsulates a dialogue between the demands of reproduction and distinctiveness, intergenerational continuity and contemporary subjectivity. Earlier pejorative uses of 'improvisation' have been debunked. What is still current is the need to avoid using the word in such a way as to only validate novelty, distinctiveness, and subjectivity without acknowledging conservatism, reproduction, and continuity. A culturally appropriate understanding of improvisation in Indian classical music must include the concept of subtle variation.

Interpretative weight needs to be given to what is re-presented from performance to performance, from teacher to student, avoiding the trope on 'improvisation' that values only what is different in, and specific to, particular performances. Thus, by shifting our 'attention' in understanding, a more 'culturally grounded' appreciation of performance is gained, one that stems from a primary acknowledgement of the 'objects manipulated' rather than processes alone, to refer back to Clayton's comments. Using *cīz* and *mukhda* to exemplify my argument focuses attention on the most recognisable of inherited and transmitted *objects.* Whereas other patterings and fixed objects may pass unnoticed in the *process* of performance, *cīz* and *mukhda* must be readily and immediately recognisable. Thus subtle variation becomes the performer's aim and achievement. Emphasis on innovation in improvisation may cause such subtlety to pass unnoticed.

A performance of Indian classical music offers re-presentation and reconfiguration of previously inherited, learned and planned materials. The public subjectivity of the performing musician is created at the interstices of tradition and individual action. It may be understood with reference to an intellectual and artistic tradition that validates change that is variational, incremental, and subtle.

Notes

[1] The two quotations are from my own teacher, Ashok Roy, and from Senders.

[2] It must first be understood that, in spite of the greater popularity of North Indian instrumental music outside India, solo vocal music is both more highly regarded and normative; instrumental genres and performance styles are frequently explained with reference to vocal genres. Of the currently practised vocal genres, *khayāl* is by far the most popular. Relative to the older genre of *dhrupad,* it is less formalised and more varied in overall structure, offers a greater range of techniques of musical development and vocalisation, and affords performers far greater scope for individuality or at least variety in how these various elements are integrated. Thus, as Wade writes, "*khayāl* is that vocal genre [. . .] which allows its performers the greatest opportunity and also the greatest challenge to display the depth and breadth of their musical knowledge and skills" (11). For an outline of the structures of *khayāl,* see Wade's text, or any number of general texts on North Indian music. Pertinent aspects of the *khayāl's* formal structure will be discussed where relevant to this paper.

[3] The question of whether *some* music may exist *entirely* without preplanning may be semantic or even philosophical: must preplanning or a template be expressed in terms which are themselves readily understood as music? Can a template be discounted if it merely indicates time and context, as in Cage's (in)famous work, or if it consists of rules of interaction which must be applied regardless of content, as in John Zorn's *Cobra?* It is interesting that these two works stem from an attitude towards improvisation that George Lewis describes as the "Eurological notion of pure spontaneity," citing in addition Larry Soloman's definition of the "improvisational ideal" as "without preconceived formulation, scoring, or content" (107). Lewis' argument is subtle, complex, and thoroughly grounded in a critique of the contestation between Eurological and Afrological approaches to improvisation. Finally, he seems to disavow the necessity of the preform in favour of an emphasis on the form "created" and "discovered" as we "interact with our environment" (115). I would suggest that the environment itself is a template, and that our reactions and interactions are never wholly unconstrained. These considerations do lead us far from the choice of pitch patterns in North Indian performance.

[4] The term *upaj* does carry connotations of invention. However, though some musicians may imply something of this in using the term, others may use it, as did my first teacher, almost as a noun, to refer to a specific section of the performance. The word is often translated as 'to render'.

[5] This of course is not restricted to understandings of Indian music. Johan Schenk, describing Beethoven, writes that, in his improvisation, "the creative genius gradually unveiled his deeply felt soul-portraits" (qtd. in Ferand 21). Interestingly Ferand, in describing Beethoven's improvising, cannot resist a little bit of unverifiable canonisation: "Beethoven's supreme art of improvising on the piano represents a peak in the history of solo extempore playing that was probably never surpassed, or even reached again" (21). Zonis, writing of Persian classical music, says that "a musician is often unable to explain precisely what he is doing during his improvisation. Likewise, Persian music theorists, considering improvisation to be intuitive, do not consider it in their writings" (98).

[6] These sections follow the introduction of a fixed time-cycle, or *tāla,* to the performance, which is normally co-incident with a *gat.*

[7] Though Fox Strangways writes this, he hardly heard the music as formless; he refers to it as "Rondo" form (89), and notes that "there was something most satisfying in the sweep of the periods, apparently haphazard but really conforming to a strict law" (90).

[8] *Gharānā* literally means 'of the house.' *Gharānās* are both genealogical and pedagogical lineages of performers who adhere more or less closely to a common style of performance. Part of the variety and vigour of *khayāl* as a genre may be attributed to the different stylistic constellations associated with different *gharānās.* For a substantial discussion of both the general definition of *gharānā* and their specific styles see Wade, and Neuman "The Life of Music."

[9] Similarly, Kippen's discussion of the permutative, substitutive and repetitive processes of *qa'ida* drumming asserts that "each variation . . . is a reconstitution of the piece, like a view of the same object from a slightly different angle" (119). This suggests that the focus is on the object, not on the process alone.

[10] The term *sangat* may also apply to the rhythmic accompaniment.

[11] *Sangat* forms the subject matter of my doctoral dissertation (2001). For definitions in more widely available literature, see Sahukar, Neuman, Wade, Bor.

[12] Though the use of cello might seem antipathetic to ethnomusicological ideals of participant-observation (the process by which one learns about another music by as-close-to-total engagement with as many of its aspects as possible), other Westerners have achieved high levels of performance of North Indian classical music on cello, most notably Nancy Lesh from the United States, and Saskia de Haas-Rao from the Netherlands. I have given a fuller exposition of the utility of becoming an accompanist in my paper, "Entering the Palace."

[13] The seven named basic pitches of North Indian music correspond reasonably to the notes of the major scale. Since absolute pitch is not an issue in my studies, notational simplicity and ease of comparison across different examples is achieved by using 'C' as a tonic. A *rāga* may use a basic scale that lowers one or more of the second, third, sixth and seventh degrees, and/or raises the fourth degree. Though many *rāgas* may use both modified and unmodified versions of these pitches, for the most part, one or other version of the pitch is theorised as the 'norm' for the entire performance of that *rāga.* Consequently, modifications, such as the lowered third and the raised fourth degree of the current example, may be notated as what appear to be key-signatures.

Indian music places a premium on continuity of sound and the ubiquity of the 'in-between,' "melody as stream" rather than "melody as chain," to use Seeger's distinction (185). This might be represented graphically, rather than through use of the quantisation of Western staff notation. However, as Widdess writes, "the advantages of using a single notation of many different cultures outweigh, in the present context, the attractions of culture-specific [or scholar-specific] notations, which offer no possibility of comparative study" (xii). Furthermore, a graphic notation of 'melody as stream' would negate the very clear sense of 'note' that pertains in emic conception, transmission, and perception of music. In Indian music, tones are not "convenient but sometimes misleading abstractions" (Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology* 78, drawing on Herzog), but very real, named node points within the stream.

[14] In notating thus, I assume (or plead) that the reader will be able to understand such sections as 'free,' rather than rigid. In avoiding use of say a time-space notation, I have decided that the risk of giving the false impression of rhythmic proportion and regularity is outweighed by a presentation which I believe is assimilated with optimum ease and efficiency by the reader versed in Western notation.

[15] Neuman wrote in 1980 that "the significance of a composition then is not in exhibiting itself, but rather in exhibiting the rāg . . . . This would be equivalent in the Western tradition to saying that a composition was written and is performed to demonstrate the quality of its key" (23). Here Neuman not only undervalues composition, but also makes an unwarranted aesthetic equation between *rāga* and key. Indian musicians themselves may not be entirely blameless in the fostering of this idea: performances are always introduced by named *rāga,* but compositions are seldom named.

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