A subtle novelty : The valorisation of creativity within North Indian classical music

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This paper investigates two interrelated aspects of North Indian classical music. The first is the practice of *sangat*, melodic accompaniment in vocal music, whereby an instrumentalist shadows the vocal soloist. This practice is to be understood as being a homology of the processes of teaching and transmission. The second interrelated aspect is the ingrained notion, that North Indian music is ‘improvised’. Aside from arguments of the fallacy of binary distinctions between ‘improvisation’ and ‘composition’, empirically, it is also necessary to understand that what occurs in performance is a re-presentation and reconfiguration of previously inherited, learned and planned materials.

“He did not play his *ta ns* the way his teacher taught him.”

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

In performances of North Indian or Hindustani classical vocal music there are three essential elements: the vocal solo, a rhythmic accompaniment, and what is frequently referred to as a ‘drone’. In addition to these a fourth element is commonly added; a melodic accompaniment, known as *sangat*. In the most general terms, the melodic accompanist imitates or doubles the singer’s lines, usually with some degree of variation, and continues playing whilst the soloist is not singing. (1) In a musical system that has otherwise stripped to the minimum requirements for the exposition of melody, this practice may seem anomalous. However, it arises as one solution to enduring aural-aesthetic needs for both continuity of sound and richness of timbre: what I call a ‘saturation aesthetic’. (2) The accompanist sustains the sound of the voice, ensuring continuity both at the micro-level, from one tone to the next, as well as at the macro-level of continuous melodic outpouring. It expresses the saturation aesthetic synchronically, in expanding richness, and diachronically, in aiding continuity in a manner that is far more subtle than the functional idea of ‘filling in the gaps’, and the generalised notion of ‘supporting’ with which the practice is frequently described.

Thomas Turino pointed out recently that “musical forms that ‘sound like,’ that is resemble, in some way, other parts of social experience are received as true, good, and natural”, asserting the importance of “feelings of iconicity or ‘naturalness’ created through the correspondence of style across different practices” (1999, 234). *Sangat* has iconic and even practical qualities readily understood with reference to a cluster of ideas and practices: pedagogy, transmission, long-term continuity, commentary, and authorship. These qualities are effectively and ‘naturally’ created by the use of a second melodic line that 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.
The imitative process by which Indian music is traditionally taught is so widely known that to cite studies that address this seems almost superfluous. Moreover, studies of Indian music that do not primarily investigate pedagogy frequently discuss it as a related issue. The processes of tuition and transmission are so entwined with the nature of the music as sound and as cultural practice as to make the exclusion of any one of these unlikely. The ability to rapidly absorb and accurately reproduce large chunks of musical data is essential to the musician. In order to accompany, the accompanist draws on a basic skill held by all Indian musicians, soloists and accompanists alike, a skill without which they would simply not learn: the ability to repeat. In performance, the melodic accompanist presents a ‘compressed’ version of what occurs during teaching: repeating the phrase of the ‘leader’.

It is worth further pursuing the analogy between the learning of music, and the act of accompaniment. Both are ideally hierarchic in nature. The accompanist remains largely subordinate to the soloist's performance, from the overall choices of material and method through to the finest details. The accompaniment brings about a temporary ‘preservation’ of the soloist's performance, much as teaching brings about an inter-generational preservation, continuity writ large, of the singer's g_yak_.

Following through the analogy, sangat may be thought of as a microcosm of a process of transmission that places seemingly contradictory emphases on the ability to reproduce with exactitude and to perform with individuality. Though accompanists are frequently said to play ‘exactly’ what the singer has sung, sangat maintains a more or less subtle differentiation from the line of the soloist. To totalise and simply dismiss this differentiation as unavoidable, accidental, due to the fallibility of the accompanist and the limitations of the instrument, or to laud it as intentional, born of a subaltern desire to ‘do it differently’, or to usurp the authority of the soloist, are both inadequate. I maintain that the value of sangat, as opposed to a natural, artificial or even conceptual echo, lies in its nature as a voice at once derived from and complementary of the soloist. The details of such ‘derivativeness’ and ‘complementarity’ represent a complex assemblage of intentional, contingent, accidental or maybe even unconscious revoicings and discrepancies.

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. I believe that sangat has a literary analogue in the Indian practice of the ‘gloss’. The gloss is the least independent manifestation of the more general practice of the bhasya (‘commentary’), which Comans maintains is a fundamental means of incremental development within Indian intellectual traditions (Personal communications, 1995 and 1999).
Sheldon Pollock’s article on theory and practice in traditional Indian thought outlines the rhetoric (as opposed to total reality) of a conservatism that has at its heart the notion that ‘knowledge’ is permanent and fixed.

no 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 (1985, 515. My Italics)

He then goes on to quote the Kashmiri logician Jayatabha’s statement that “one should consider novelty only in rephrasing the older truths of the ancients in modern terminology”. At first this assessment seems extraordinarily harsh, totalising, even hackle-raising. A close look at Pollock’s summary shows that he has in fact not denied innovation, but 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.

The bhasya and the gloss are fundamentally intertextual in that they both demonstrate and assume total knowledge of the text that is glossed, or even include that text in its entirety. They therefore assume, even argue, 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 (1992: 128)

The practice of bhasya may range enormously in scope. At one extreme a work such as Shankaracharya’s commentary on the Bhagavad Gita may be considered more of an “independent religious and philosophical essay”, in that it orients itself more to the establishment of the philosophy of Vedanta than to explication of the Gita itself (Winternitz 1967: 488). At the other extreme are those glosses that merely repeat and explain basic meanings (see Rowell 1992: 128), and the jottings of later manuscript owners, scribbled on a space on the palm leaf, or interpolated as a new leaf between the old.

I am suggesting that one of the attractive, or ‘natural’ qualities of sangat is that it demonstrates a “correspondence of style” with the processes of commentary which are “at the root of a large part of classical Indian literature” (Dimock 1974: 2). It appreciatively appropriates the soloist’s creation and provides a gloss upon it: he who appreciates appropriates. In addition, by creating d_d, a ‘feedback’ from accompanist to soloist, it provides affirmation of the ‘truth’ of the singer’s performance (with a few exceptions): towards the singer it offers an appropriate appreciation. This understanding may be enriched by remembering that it also demonstrates a
“correspondence of style” with processes of teaching, of transmission, and ultimately of long term-musical continuity. These processes themselves may be thought of as commentarial, even hypothesised as a rescension: sangat is bhasya to the singer’s bhasya to their guru’s bhasya upon the ‘eternal’ r_{ga}.

The ‘correspondence of style’ between sangat, teaching, and transmission offers, I believe, an interesting viewpoint from which to consider the nature of ‘improvisation’ in Indian music, and the degree to which associated novelty is validated. 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, template, preform and some sort of reworking of and departure from this in performance (see Cook 1990, 112-113, Nettl 2001). The manner in which this mixture is achieved, understood and validated is of course culture-specific. To use ‘improvisation’ as a term in almost any ‘translational’ way either glosses over the cultural specificity of the practice, or simply bundles it with other musical traditions that have been so called. Though North Indian music is frequently described as such, most terms used to discuss what actually takes place in a performance do not carry these implications: they may describe general or specific processes of exposition, or specific types of singing or playing. There has also been some resistance to the term in total (Van der Meer 1980, 142-3), or to some of its implications of lack of planning or structure (Ranade 1951, 119, Deshpande 1961, 41, 52, Parrikar 1999, n.p.).

But I believe that the most crucial reason for questioning simple descriptions of Indian music as ‘improvised’ is that the term focuses on process and difference rather than the representation of fixed material. Most discussions emphasise that it is pre-existing material that is worked on in performance: compositions, stock phrases, tihais. Leaving aside whether this reworking of this material itself is spontaneous (see Slawek) or pre-planned (see Van der Meer), the important point that I want to draw here is that validation of a performance may depend as much, if not more, on the quality of the pre-composed materials, than on the novelty and inventiveness of a performer in representing them. Two extreme views on this were given in the quotes 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 this.(5)

I offer a simple example. After the _l_p of a khay_l performance, at a moment also marked by the introduction of a fixed and explicated rhythmic cycle, something involving text is sung. If asked what this is, a listener will reply “bandish” or “c_z” or “khay_l” (in the sense of a type of composition, rather than in the sense of a performance genre) or “composition”. Identification here is clearly of the fixed entity, not the individual manner in which it is
presented. That manner varies from any “score” version that the singer might have used, the simplified version that might be used to “teach” the melodic accompanist, and even within the performance, such that, to quote one writer, “it is often impossible to determine what the true or the basic form of the composition is” (Clayton 2000, 133). I suggest that there is none, that the composition cannot be separated from its ‘improvisatory’ delivery.

Compositions are frequently seen as little more than raw material, entities which fix the $r_ga$ and $t_la$ for a performance, provide a cadential phrase and textual figures for subsequent improvisation. This undervalues the degree to which the performance of a composition is also a statement of musical pedigree and inheritance. Performers may be lauded by the breadth, historical depth, and rarity of the “givens” that they bring to performance; compositions, $r_gas$, etc., or critiqued for a failure to do so. In concentrating on this aspect of the music, the all-important notions of parampar_ (discipleship succession, the path of transmission) and samprad_ya (or tradition, in the sense of the handing from one to another of materials), central to the validation of performance, 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: improvisation as a term used to assess unavoidably focuses on difference.

Both the specific practice of sangat and the general act of performance are offering representation and reconfiguration of previously inherited, learned and planned materials. Both may be understood with reference to an intellectual and artistic tradition that validates change that is incremental, subtle and reorganisational.
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Notes

(1) *Sangat* forms the subject matter of my doctoral dissertation (2001). For definitions in more widely available literature, see

(2) For David Henderson’s term, see Slawek 1998, 365. I am indebted to Prof. Henderson for the permission to use this term. This aesthetic also finds expression in several of the basic phenomena of Indian music: the continuous *tamb_r_*, the intermittent plucking of *cik_r_* (drone) strings, the resonant haze of *tarab* (sympathetic strings), and in the use of substantial, perhaps excessive, reverberation and delay in modern amplification.


(4) These include, but are by no means simply explained by, the fallibility of the process of imitation, the limitations of the instrument, the need to reconcile ‘exactness’ with ‘speed’, by either speeding up the replication or by eliding phrases so as to reach certain goals simultaneously, as well as the need to respond to a ‘mistake’ on the part of a soloist by either ignoring it, by correcting it, or by reinforcing it. Though performance has been understood as a site in which the authority of the soloist is challenged by the accompanist, the all important primacy of the vocal line is largely unthreatened by *sangat*. At the same time, in a classic division-of-labour, aesthetic qualities that could feasibly be created by voice alone are enhanced through reliance on a differentiated voice. Qureshi has pointed out that greater prestige accrues to a person who, though capable of performing a particular function for themselves, takes on the role of patron, and engages the service of another (2000, 31). The possibility of using artificial echo is largely unexplored.

(5) The two quotes are from my own teacher, Ashok Roy, and from Senders 1998.
References


