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Improvisation in Iranian and Indian music

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By “improvisation”, a term now much debated within Western musicology and ethnomusicology, we refer to those aspects of a musical performance that are generated by the performer. Even the performance of a pre-composed musical work, fully notated by the composer, will usually include elements that are not pre-determined, such as nuances, ornamentation or variations added by the performer in the course of performance, and today most musicologists recognize such elements as “improvisation” (following Nettl (1974)). In both Iranian and Indian music, however, the performer’s contribution appears to be much greater than this: the performer does not reproduce a written score, and pre-composed, memorized material seems to account for a relatively small proportion of a complete performance of a *rāga* or *dastgah*. The questions therefore arise, whether the terms “composition” and “improvisation” are adequate in such circumstances, and whether the techniques or processes of performance in Iranian and Indian traditions are similar or different.

Indeed, it is interesting that few scholars have hitherto attempted to compare the ways in which musicians in these two historically-connected traditions conceptualise, learn and practice creative performance. This paper aims to present some preliminary ideas on this question.

We will start by examining how far, in each tradition, “improvisation” is an indigenous concept, and how far it may be a concept introduced from the West. We will then consider how performance is taught and learned in Iran and India. Finally, we will consider what happens in performance.

1. Is improvisation an indigenous concept?

In the case of Iranian classical music, whilst creative performance lies at the heart of this music, the concept of “improvisation” and associated terminology is relatively new, and has been heavily influenced by the arrival, from the early 20th century, of European ideas about composition as an activity separate from performance. However, the concept of improvisation gradually became naturalised, and the term *bedaheh navazi* (“spontaneous playing”), borrowed from the realm of oral poetry, was adopted by musicians as an equivalent to “improvisation”. Both the concept and the terminology are now widely accepted and used by Iranian musicians.

However, it is important to note that, as in many so-called “improvised” traditions, the performance of Iranian classical music is far from “free” but is rooted in extensive knowledge of a canonic repertoire known as the *radif*, a collection of several hundred pieces (or *gusheh*) organised according to mode into the twelve *dastgah*. This repertoire is never performed as such, but is memorised by pupils and becomes the starting point for creative performance.

Whilst the concept of improvisation is therefore widely accepted in Iran today, it seems necessary to examine it in the light of a number of factors. Firstly, the relationship between learnt *radif* and creative performance varies from one *gusheh* to another: in some cases, performance is closer to what might in western music be termed “interpretation” of a pre-composed piece; in others, musicians are much freer in performance. In other words, performance practice covers a spectrum which is inadequately reflected by the blanket term “improvisation”. Secondly, detailed analysis of *gushehs* which lie towards the “freer” end of the spectrum reveal just how *compositional* this music is, suggesting that a term such as “composition in performance” might be more appropriate than “improvisation”. By “compositional”, we mean to imply a certain quality of considered crafting usually associated with written notation.

Indeed, looking at the work of Western scholars writing in the early to mid-20th century, it can be seen that the use of the term “improvisation”, and in particular its positioning in a dualistic relationship with “composition”, was part of a process by which Iranian and other musics were defined as “other” in relation to Western music. Since the 1970’s, however, Western scholars have increasingly recognized, on the one hand, that performance of notated music involves an element of spontaneous reconstruction, and, on the other hand, that music that is not notated can nevertheless include relatively fixed, memorized materials and structures (Nettl 1974; Treitler 1974). It may therefore be that the processes of improvisation in Iranian music are more similar than previously recognized to processes of composition in pre-composed, notated music such as Western classical music (Nooshin 2003).

In Indian pre-modern theoretical sources, there is no explicit theorizing of the concept of improvisation. But there are indications in treatises such as the 13th century *Saṅgītaratnākara*, by Śārṅgadeva, that certain aspects of performance were the responsibility of the performer rather than of the composer; though of course the performer and composer were ideally the same person. A case where the performer’s input was expected is *ālāpa*, the unmetered, wordless unfolding of a rāga, which then, as still today, could precede the singing or playing of a fixed metrical composition. The term *anibaddha* “unconstrained” which is often applied to *ālāpa* does not necessarily imply spontaneous composition, but rather denotes the absence of the structural constraints – *tāla*, lyrics etc. – characteristic of songs (*prabandha*).

There are also references to elements in the performance of a metrical *prabandha* composition that are not considered part of the *prabandha* itself, and must therefore have been generated by the performer; terms for such elements include *prayoga*, *rūpakālaṭi* and *sthāya*, and they are described as intervening between sections of the composition and between repetitions of the refrain (Powers *et al.* 2001; Sanyal and Widdess 2004:245–7). Thus it is clear that some parts of a performance in the pre-Islamic period

of Indian music could be pre-composed and others generated by the performer, but this distinction is not articulated in terms of improvisation as opposed to composition.

Today, North Indian musicians use a number of terms to contrast pre-composed and improvised aspects of performance. A composition, termed *bandiś* in vocal music or *gat* in instrumental music, may remain relatively unchanged from one performance to the next, may be attributed to a named composer, and may be performed by the composer and by other musicians. Other aspects of performance, which must be generated by the performer and may vary from one performance to another, have particular names according to their style and position in the overall plan of the performance, such as *ālāp*, *joṛ*, *laykāri*, *tān* etc. A general term for these variable aspects of performance is *upaj*, “original idea, invention”, from the verb *upajñā*, meaning to grow, to spring up, hence to “spring to mind”. Similarly the name of the predominant vocal genre, *khyāl*, meaning “thought, imagination”, seems to reinforce the idea of the performer’s creative contribution. These are not, however, historically grounded theoretical terms, and *khyāl* as a genre of musical composition and performance entered the classical repertoire only in the 17th century.

In South Indian classical music, a distinction is made between music that is *kalpita*, “made, fabricated, composed” – that is, *kṛiti* and other compositions – and *kalpana*, “forming in the imagination” – that is, improvisation; the latter is also called *manodharma* “the rule of the heart”. According to Kassebaum (2000) these terms were invented by the musicologist P. Sambamoorthy in the early 20th century. Thus, though the musical phenomena in question no doubt already existed, this way of formulating an opposition between composition and improvisation appears to be relatively modern.

The opposition between “composition” and “improvisation” therefore seems to be no more clear cut in Indian music than in Iranian music. Since the 1970’s many commentators on Indian music have observed that what appears to be spontaneously improvised music may in fact be based on memorized or rehearsed material; what is spontaneous is the decision to use a particular phrase or sequence of phrases at a given moment in the performance (Deva 1974:17; Van Der Meer 1980: 142f; Slawek 1998; Kippen 2000 etc). For example, Jairazbhoy wrote in 1971:

The degree of creativity in...extempore passages is not easily assessed, for in playing the same *rāg* and *tāl* again and again, musicians acquire musical habits and evolve favourite phrases which may recur from time to time. It is, however, when the musician is performing beyond his normal capacity that the music becomes “alive”. (1971:31)

The distinction between composition and improvisation is therefore artificially rigid, as in practice there is a sliding scale between the spontaneous and the pre-planned, and the same performance may draw on elements from different points along that scale.

As in the Iranian case, the idea that Indian music is spontaneously improvised may be the result of Western observers attempting to characterise Indian music as different from Western music. 18th and 19th century writers on Indian music in English were not primarily interested in matters of performance, and so largely ignored the

contribution of performers; an exception is Augustus Willard, who noted in 1834 that compositions were performed with “slight variation almost ad lib.” (1834:62). In 19th century Europe, the musical art-work came to be seen as a concrete, inviolable object, like a work of visual art or a literary text (Goehr 1992). Consequently, almost all elements of improvisation, apart from nuances of rhythm and dynamic, had been excluded from the performance of Western classical music by the early 20th century. Writing in 1914, the music critic A.H. Fox Strangways romanticised improvisation as showing the idyllic freedom of Indian music as compared with Western music: “Are there not singers among us”, he writes, “who have felt a desire to break loose...from the trammels of our tonality...and to let the melody bear them along on light wings of fancy; to find, in fact, a music which is free like that of the woods in spring-time...? Something of this is in the careless profusion and the unstudied rapture of Indian song” (1914: 342). Many Western musicians and listeners, sharing Fox Strangways’ yearning for musical freedom, turned to popular music, especially jazz, and also to Indian music, which became popular in the ‘60’s and 70’s through the live performances, radio broadcasts and recordings of Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar Khan, Vilayat and Imrat Khan, and others. Thus improvisation came to be viewed in the West as a positive attribute of Indian music, and it can be argued that the present popular understanding of Indian music as something spontaneously improvised is itself partly the product of Western values and perceptions, as in Iran.

2. How do musicians learn to improvise?

One of the keys to understanding the concept and practice of improvisation is to explore the teaching and learning processes. Traditionally, the Iranian repertoire of the *radif* was transmitted orally from teacher to pupil – piece by piece, line by line – a process that took many years. Significantly, improvisation was not taught as such: pupils were simply required to memorise the repertoire precisely by rote. At the same time, repeated repetition of a passage by a teacher would show how it might be varied, and the attempts of individual students to make their own variations, and the teacher’s corrections where necessary, further established the possibilities and boundaries of acceptable improvisation. In addition, students were expected to memorise different versions of the *radif*, usually from different teachers representing different stylistic traditions, thereby further expanding their repertoire of variations and improvisatory techniques.

Despite the institutionalisation of music education and the availability of published, notated and recorded versions of the canonic repertoire, by and large, the essential processes of teaching and learning have changed little over the past few decades. In recent years, a few teachers have started to discuss improvisational techniques with their pupils, largely in response to the demands of a new generation of musicians who are both more broadly musically educated than their predecessors (indeed, many classical musicians are now university graduates in music), and also very aware of improvised traditions outside Iran – including Indian music – which Iranian musicians often mention in discussion.

The process of learning to improvise as described for Iranian music therefore concurs with the “imitation – assimilation – innovation” model proposed by Paul Berliner (1994:120) in his study of jazz improvisation: by imitating and memorising different versions of the *radif*, as well as listening to performances by their teachers and others, pupils subliminally assimilate the basic variational and compositional techniques which later allow them to engage in creative performance.

In India, a counterpart to the notated *radif* of Iranian music is perhaps Bhatkhande’s monumental 6-volume collection of vocal music, the *Kramik Pustak-Mālikā*, published in various editions between 1920 and 1960. This and similar printed collections produced by other authors were connected with the growth in the early 20th century of music colleges as a modernising, institutional, literate mode of music instruction, contrasting with the purely oral transmission of music among hereditary musicians.

The *traditional* mode of instruction in North India relies on a very intimate but authoritarian relationship between the teacher and the disciple (Silver 1976, Owens 1983 etc.). The disciple owes the teacher absolute loyalty in return for the teacher’s trust in passing on the secrets of the art. In instrumental music especially, there is little scope for the student to exercise his own initiative: rather, he must learn vast amounts of memorized material, not only compositions, but also *ālāps*, *tāns* and other types of material that would normally be considered “improvised”. Intensive practice is required, extending over years, before this material is mastered and the student can begin to go beyond it. Traditionally it would be unthinkable to go to another teacher, except perhaps a teacher from the same hereditary family or stylistic tradition; students might be forbidden even to listen to performers from other traditions (Silver 1976), though these traditional attitudes are now more relaxed. Traditional teaching methods might therefore be thought to promote imitation and memorization rather than improvisation. Yet alongside formal training, students regularly hear their teachers perform, and thus learn how far an accomplished artist can spontaneously transform memorized material in performance. In vocal music, a variety of teaching methods has been documented, some again based on extensive memorization, others allowing more freedom to the pupil to recreate in his own way what he has learned (Sanyal and Widdess 2004:129–135). In general, Indian music resembles Iranian music in the extent to which imitation and memorization are the fundamental learning processes, even though it does not have a universally recognized, memorized and notated repertoire like the *radif*.

3. What happens in performance?

Detailed analysis of non-metrical instrumental improvisation in Iranian classical music reveals a range of compositional strategies from which musicians draw at the time of performance, including various types of extension, contraction, sequential patterns and other developmental techniques, largely learnt through memorising the *radif* and through other listening experiences. However, what also becomes clear is that musicians are not simply involved in juxtaposing ideas in the manner of a patchwork: once the *radif* has been memorised, it seems that musicians are able subliminally to abstract basic compositional principles, and to develop these further in performance.

One example of such a principle is what may be called “extended repetition” (there is no local terminology for any of these techniques), which functions partly as a tension-building device in the music and which usually lasts for a complete phrase. In its most basic form, extended repetition comprises an initial idea – usually a motif or a short phrase – which is first repeated and then extended, often up to a pitch climax and down again to complete the phrase. Examples 1(a) and (b) illustrate the basic structure of extended repetition, as it is found in two different improvised performances of *gusheh mokhalef* from the section of repertoire known as *dastgah Segah*. In each case, the principle of extended repetition has been applied in performance in the context of different musical material.

Examples 1(a) and (b)

Now consider three phrases taken from different performances of the same *dastgah* in which the basic principle of extended repetition is varied: in Example 2(a) the initial idea (1) is repeated, but in this case the extension on (3) is formed only from the opening 4 notes of (1). Similarly, in Example 2(b), it is the last two notes of (1) which form the basis for the extension of the phrase; and in Example 2(c), the extension is formed from three notes taken from the middle of (1).

Examples 2(a), (b) and (c)

While it is only possible to present a few short examples here, such examples illustrate the ways in which musicians exercise compositional choice in generating phrases in performance drawing on learnt and abstracted principles and techniques. In using extended repetition, for example, musicians can decide whether to extend the whole or part of (1), how many times to repeat the extended pattern, and so on. Moreover, there are many other aspects of such phrases which are open to choice: using different motivic patterns; varying repetition (2) in relation to (1); extending the phrase on repetition (2) (or (4) or even (5)) rather than (3); using octave transposition; and so on. Musicians are therefore able continually to re-combine ideas in the process of composing new phrases.

In the performance of a longer passage of music, techniques such as extended repetition operate in the context of a complete *gusheh*, with its specific modal structure and other characteristics, and in relation to various other techniques such as sequential patterning and motivic development. Musicians shape and structure individual phrases and complete *gushehs* in performance by bringing together a wide range of musical material and compositional techniques such as exact and varied repetition, sequencing, and various types of extension and contraction, as well as motivic patterns and phrase shapes learnt during training and subsequently applied creatively in different contexts. In particular, the shared motivic vocabulary and the tension and release embodied in the various types of phrase extension – and particularly extended repetition – play an important role in lending coherence and shape to the *gusheh*. In seeking to understand better the underlying processes involved in creative performance, such analyses reveal a tightness and consistency of musical construction which is clearly “compositional” in nature (Nooshin 2003).

In Indian music, improvisation can be partly understood in terms of a small number of fundamental processes of development. These include:

(1) *melodic expansion (vistār)*: the gradual widening of range to include successively higher, and/or lower, pitches. This process can be seen both in the development of an individual phrase, and in the structuring of each large section of a performance. The reverse process, a gradual contraction of melodic range, can also occur, for example in the final descent of an *ālāp* or the descending phase of a *tān*.

(2) *rhythmic intensification*: on the large scale, there is a gradual increase in tempo or rhythmic density, with different technical procedures becoming available at each new tempo. On the small scale, an individual motif can be progressively reduced in length at successive repetitions.

(3) *permutation*: repetition of a limited set of pitches or melodic motif, with some re-ordering of pitches, so far as the constraints of the *rāga* permit.

(4) *development of individual pitches*: a single pitch may for a time be treated as the focus of attention or “subject of discussion”; such a pitch may be repeated, emphasised, prolonged, and/or taken as the concluding note of successive phrases. The development of successively higher scale degrees in *vistār* (see (1)) can overlap rather than following in rigid succession. Typically, the next higher pitch is hinted at during the development of the previous pitch, before becoming the focus of attention in its turn.

(5) *sequential transposition (alaṃkāṛ)*: a melodic motif is repeated several times starting on successively higher or lower degrees of the scale. An *alaṃkāṛ* pattern usually has to be modified as it unfolds to conform to the melodic grammar of the *rāga*, and for this reason sequential transposition tends to be less prominent in Indian music than in Iranian music.

Examples of all these processes can be seen in ex. 3, from an *ālāp* played on the sarod by Ustād Wajahat Khan. Such processes of development are used not only in *ālāp* but in all stages of an instrumental or vocal *rāga* performance.

Example 3

Sometimes these developmental processes are combined into what appear to be compositional strategies, similar to “extended repetition” in Iranian music; such a strategy can be used at different stages of a performance, in performances of different *rāgas*, and by different performers. For example, Slawek writes that in *joṛ* (a stage of *ālāp* played with a regular rhythmic pulse), as played by members of the Imdād Khān gharānā, “a common approach to phrase construction...is to begin with continuous stroking on one pitch..., then ... the phrase expands outward from the beginning pitch, until a climax is reached with a virtuosic flourish” (1998). A version of this compositional strategy, or “dynamic generative program” to use Slawek’s term, can be seen in Ex. 4, a passage of *joṛ* played by Wajahat Khan, a member of the Imdād Khān gharānā. After repeating a single pitch at the opening of the extract, Wajahat Khan later introduces a small melodic and rhythmic motif (a). This is then repeated and extended,

at first through permutation of pitches and rhythmic contraction, and then through expansion of its pitch material. This leads to a wide-ranging concluding phrase, based on a sequentially-transposed *alamkār* pattern, which rises to a climax at high pitch and returns to the tonic. This technique of concentrating initially on a small group of pitches, then eventually breaking free by the use of a sequential pattern, is reminiscent of the examples of extended repetition in Iranian music presented earlier (see especially ex. 1b).

Example 4

This compositional technique is not restricted to use in the *joṛ* stage of performance, but can also be employed in the metrical stage, as the basis for *toḍā* and *tān* improvisations between repetitions of the pre-composed *gat* melody.

Thus Indian musicians, like their Iranian counterparts, use compositional techniques that can be deployed in different musical circumstances – in different speeds, in metrical and non-metrical stages of the performance, in different *rāgas*, and by different performers. A mature performer is in command of so many such strategies that they appear in endlessly different guises, variations and combinations, and in realizations that may sometimes be rehearsed or remembered, sometimes adapted from music previously performed (or heard), and sometimes spontaneously created at the moment of performance.

Conclusions

Our comparative consideration of improvisation in Iranian and Indian music, drawing on examples of contemporary instrumental performance, has indicated some striking parallels that deserve further study. At the conceptual level, both in Iran and India, a binary opposition between “improvisation” and “composition” seems to have assumed importance in relatively recent history, partly as a result of Western constructions of the differences between Western and “other” musics. Teaching and learning music, both in Iran and India, traditionally rely on very extensive memorization of repertoire and technique, an approach that in Iran has resulted in the concept of a fixed repertoire (*radif*) that can be memorized, notated and printed, though not normally performed in its fixed version. In performance, both in Iran and India, musicians go beyond what has been memorized: the melodic material of *gusheh* and *rāga* can be developed by the use of “compositional” strategies that are applicable in different modes and different performance styles. These ensure musical coherence and help to generate tension and release, momentum and intensity, and are thus similar in function to compositional techniques in non-improvised music such as Western art-music.

In both Iranian and Indian music, the terms “composition” and “improvisation” imply an over-simplified distinction that reflects Western pre-conceptions rather than the complexities of musical reality. The Iranian or Indian performer is also a composer, who composes his or her performance using a combination of memorized materials, reusable compositional strategies and spontaneous inspiration.

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Music examples

Examples 1(a) and (b)

(a) Faramarz Payvar (*santur*), gusheh: *mokhālef*

□

(b) Mohammad Reza Lotfi (*tār*), gusheh: *mokhalef*

□

Musical notation for Mohammad Reza Lotfi's piece, consisting of four staves. The first staff shows a melodic line with a bracketed section labeled "motif (x)" and two notes marked (1) and (2). The second staff continues the melody with notes marked (3) → (1), (2), and (3) →. The third and fourth staves show further melodic development.

□

Examples 2(a), 2(b) and 2(c).

(a) Reza Shafeian (*santur*), gusheh: *mokhalef*

Musical notation for Reza Shafeian's piece, consisting of two staves. The first staff shows a melodic line with a bracketed section labeled "motif (x)" and notes marked (1), (2), and (3) →. A bracket labeled "8ve" spans from note (2) to note (3). The second staff continues the melody with notes marked (1), (2), (3), and (4) →.

(b) Lotfi (*tār*), gusheh: *zābol*

motif (y)

(1) (2)

ending of (1)

(1) (2) (3) (4)

(c) Ahmad Ebadi (*setār*), *darāmad*

(1) (2) (3)

middle of (1)

(1) (2) (3) (4) (5) (6) (7)

Example 3: Wajahat Khan (*sarod*), extract from *ālāp*, rāga: Rāgeśrī

melodic expansion

S N. D. N. S R R S N. N. R S S N. D. N. S RS N. D. N. S G G

development of individual pitch (e'/ga) — continues to end of extract

G R S N. S G G G G D. N. D. G G G

sequential transposition sequential transposition

G. M. D. N. S G G G G G R R R S S S N.

sequential transposition

S S N. S D. N. S N. S G G G R S S N. S G G R S D. N. R

permutation

R S N. D. N. G G RS D. G. M. D. N. G G N. R R N. S

rhythmic intensification melodic expansion

D. N. D. S N. R S G G G D. S N. D. G. M. D. N. S D. N. N. S G G G M S G

sequential transposition

G S S G G M S G S S M G M G M M M

