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**Keynote Paper for ‘Analysis, Cognition and Ethnomusicology’
Third International Conference on Analytical Approaches to World Music (AAWM
2014)/Annual Conference of the British Forum for Ethnomusicology (BFE 2014)**

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Re-Imagining Difference: Musical Analysis, Alterity and the Creative Process

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Introduction

- **PPT 1** What are most fruitful ways that we, as musicologists, can approach the study of creative processes? This is a question that has dogged and intrigued me since the mid-1980s when I started researching Iranian classical music. In this keynote, I explore various issues arising from this work and consider a number of themes, including hierarchies and dualities of knowledge; and the ways in which notions of musical difference have been imagined and articulated; and are being re-imagined today.
- A central theme is that of alterity – (something that has come up in the other keynotes in this conference) and I therefore begin with some extended passages from the work of Lawrence Kramer, which has provided something of a theoretical compass for my thinking in this area. In his 1995 book *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* Kramer observes that:

PPT 2 By the turn of the 1990s, literary and social theory was laying heavy stress on the discursive logic through which dominant ideologies commonly route their power. We can call this the logic of alterity. It works by setting up oppositions between a normative unitary self, usually invested with universal significance, and a plurality of deviant or imperfect others. The others are defined by negation; they are everything the self is not, the mirrors in which the self recognizes its own identity. As we will see, this system of oppositionality is far from stable ... Furthermore, the identity that the self recognizes through the other is necessarily mystified ... (34)

PPT 3 [The argument of this chapter is that] music has been closely tied to the logic of alterity since the mid-eighteenth century at the latest ... “Music” in this context refers not so much to an acoustic phenomenon as to an object constituted in representation. It is music as a cultural trope produced by music aesthetics, imaginative literature, and, reflexively, by musical composition. (35)

PPT4 ... In its most persuasive and therefore most problematical forms, the logic of alterity invests the other with considerable allure and even with a measure of (usually arcane) power and truth. Yet the underlying hierarchical principle remains in force, and even gains in force, when the self gives the other some latitude to play seductively against the norm ... Self-other binaries gain in force when they admit ambiguities, hover or withdraw behind a variety of intermediate forms, show that certain terms count as self here and other there, substitute one opposition for another, mix the terms of parallel oppositions, and in general complicate or defer the recognition of their own role. (37)

(from Chapter 2: 'From the Other to the Object. Music as a Cultural Trope')

- Whilst Kramer acknowledges that **PPT 5(1)** 'Not all dualities are automatically or consistently oppressive, nor are all historically oppressive dualities readily expendable as elements in art and thought. Nonetheless, binary thinking must clearly be understood as a historical, not just a conceptual, phenomenon, the consequences of which have too often been inhumane or worse' (1995:38-9) and he warns somewhat dramatically perhaps that **PPT 5(2)** 'we risk allying ourselves with the cultural agenda of domination whenever we embrace a duality, however abstract or depoliticized, that repeats the logic of alterity. The energies of valuation have high voltage; a duality is a treacherous instrument to ply'. (1995:41)
- In 2003 I published an article in the *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* in which I examined some of the ways in which discourses around musical creativity have been historically shaped by this logic of alterity - and in particular the oppositional positioning of 'normative' composition against its Other - improvisation. Today I'd like to extend this discussion and consider more closely the intersection of analysis and alterity. This is a rather personal account and I start by unravelling the trajectory of my earlier work and how it was musical analysis *specifically* that more or less obliged me to take notice of alterity, something that was far from my mind when I started this research. Underlying everything that I discuss is the question of whether there is a place beyond alterity or is our understanding of the world inescapably tied to binary thinking? To return to Kramer, how can **PPT 6** 'both music and musicology [may] inventively undo the logic of alterity they are also historically fated to reproduce. What are the possibilities of opening out the categories of self and other so that they appear ...

not as the first principles of a conceptual or political order, but as temporary limits in a dynamic, open-ended process' (1995:49).

PPT 7(1) So, Setting the Scene

- Since the mid-1980s, my research on Iranian classical music - *musiqi-ye asil* – has sought to understand the underlying processes by which new music comes into being. This is a tradition in which the performer plays a central creative role and is therefore most often described as ‘improvised’, both in the literature and – since the mid-20th century and drawing on concepts initially adopted from European music – by local musicians; using a term - *bedāheh-navāzi* – borrowed from the realm of oral poetry. And so, at the outset, I framed my work as a study of improvisational practice and explored the ways that other scholars of improvised musics had approached similar questions, drawing on ideas such as the use of oral formulae and schemata, as well as parallels with other areas of human creativity, most notably language.
- I decided early on to focus on a section of repertoire called *dastgāh Segāh* - and to transcribe and compare a number of improvised performances. I perhaps need to pause and explain that Iranian classical music is based on a canonic repertoire known as *radif*, a collection of several hundred pieces organised by mode into the twelve *dastgāh*. This formalisation of the repertoire was undertaken in the mid- to late 19th century and the *radif* exists in a number of different but related versions. Originally (and still primarily) transmitted orally, parts of the *radif* came to be notated from the second decade of the 20th century, and since the 1960s the complete *radif* has been available in published form, both notated and in sound. The most important part of a musician’s training is the precise memorisation of the *radif*, usually in more than one version, a process that takes many years. Only once the repertoire has been fully internalised is a musician considered ready to start improvising – and always on the basis of the canonic repertoire - the notion of free improvisation has no place in this tradition.
- So my starting point for exploring creative process was to trace the relationship between learnt model – the *radif* - and performance: how do musicians move from the relatively

fixed canonic repertoire to the ‘improvised’ performances based on it? And there were two main methodological challenges:

- First was to identify a suitable analytical approach for studying improvisational *process*. Most extant models for analysing improvised musics - whether Iranian or other - are product-based, and depend on first fixing the musical flow – the pinning down of the proverbial butterfly - through transcription and then extrapolating backwards: effectively understanding creative processes through studying their products. I was acutely aware of the potential drawbacks and the question of whether – or to what extent – product can evidence process. Clearly much musicological analysis of art music composition is predicated on the assumption that it can. But can one study improvisational process in this way?
- My analytical thinking at that time was shaped by various debates within ethnomusicology, in particular that between the universal and the culture-specific: are we dealing with *music* as a universal phenomenon to which similar analytical tools can be applied; or with *musics* (in the plural) - culturally-specific expressions requiring culturally-relevant tools? My earlier training had equipped me with the ‘culturally-specific’ analytical tools of Euro-American musicology; and my later introduction to ethnomusicology brought me to the more universalist – at least in aspiration - ideas and methods of Seeger, Kolinski, Rahn, and so on. Whilst this debate was clearly informed by what Kramer calls the ‘logic of alterity’ – and how we understand sameness and difference - the ideological dimensions of such boundary-marking were rarely acknowledged. At the same time, there was a move towards breaking down self-other binaries, as the tide turned towards a focus on local conceptualisation, ethno-theory and working in dialogue, and later collaboration with musicians, exemplified by such landmark publications as Neil Sorrell’s *Indian Music in Performance* with musician Ram Narayan (1980) or Bruno Nettl’s work with Ali Jihad Racy, followed by similar collaborative research by Richard Widdess, James Kippen, David Hughes, and others.
- Such models of collaborative working, in some cases with musicians as co-researchers, were very appealing. But such are the way of things that one’s choice of methodology is not always a matter of free will. There probably could not have been a worse period to

begin researching Iranian music than the mid-1980s with Iran still in relative turmoil following the 1979 revolution, and the ongoing war with Iraq. At a time when the very future of Iranian music seemed to be at stake and with musicians struggling to survive under government restrictions, conducting research on improvisational processes seemed esoteric to say the least. In hindsight, perhaps my descent into detailed transcription and analysis was a way of seeking refuge in something solid and tangible amidst the upheaval and uncertainty of those years. In any case, since travel to Iran was impossible and with research funding that I risked losing, the ideal scenario of spending extended time with, and benefitting from the input of musicians in Iran who knew the tradition well simply wasn't an option; the few musicians who lived in the UK had limited knowledge of the repertoire, and those who occasionally visited to give concerts were only here for short periods. I caught such moments as best I could, conducted interviews, corresponded with musicians, and so on. My point is that largely by force of circumstance my initial research focused primarily on what the analysis told me and less on musician's discourses, a rather odd state of affairs for an ethnomusicologist; and one that continued to trouble me even as I ploughed on, mindful of the PhD clock ticking. I was also increasingly aware that this kind of analytical work was starting to go out of fashion within ethnomusicology, as new areas of interest such as identity, gender, diaspora, and so on, opened up in the late 1980s. With my head deep in analysis, I largely missed both the emergence of the New Musicology and the arrival of ideas from postcolonial studies that were later to figure so centrally in my thinking.

- An important issue which arose from this concerned the hierarchy of knowledge, and the tendency to privilege the ethnographic over the analytical. Presenting my findings at conferences in the late 1980s and early 90s, the question I was most often asked – quite reasonably – was: ‘the analysis is all well and good, but what do the *musicians* say about what they're doing?’ As I say, a reasonable question, but one that rests on an assumed direct and causal relationship between what musicians say, what they do, and underlying cognitive processes. As my research progressed and I was able to work more closely with musicians, I discovered that this relationship is far from straightforward and that the dual methods of (a) ethnography and (b) transcription and analysis don't always tell the same story. In fact, whilst the Iranian classical system is highly theorised – with a great deal of local terminology - such theorisation

does not usually extend to detailed aspects of performance practice; something that many commentators have noted. Even during training, teachers rarely discuss aspects of performance and are ostensibly concerned solely with transmitting the *radif*.

Where musicians do talk about performance this tends to be framed in quite general, often quasi-mystical or spiritual terms; questions about improvisation most often elicit responses along the lines that this is a matter of inspiration and therefore beyond explanation.

- So this brings me to the second methodological challenge: the *disjuncture* between musicians' discourses of creative freedom, albeit underpinned by the *radif*, and the analytical evidence which, as I found, seemed to reveal a high degree of structural consistency, even suggesting a certain amount of pre-planning, musicians' discourses to the contrary notwithstanding. Perhaps more importantly, I was able to identify patterns and regularities in the ways in which musical material – motifs, phrases and other musical ideas – were extended and developed in performance: analysis showed the music to be structured around a series of what might be termed 'compositional principles' or 'developmental procedures', none of which are articulated or discussed by musicians.
- I will illustrate some of these in a moment, but I should just clarify that the main focus today is less on specific principles or procedures, but rather how it was detailed analytical engagement that led me to problematise the dominant discourses around creativity, which reify the concept of improvisation –*bedāheh-navāzi* - and the oral and ephemeral nature of Iranian classical music - against something more planned and structured as represented by composition (*āhang-sāzi*; usually implying *notated* composition). **PPT 7(2)** I was of course already familiar with Nettl's work in this area and particularly his landmark article 'Thoughts on Improvisation: A Comparative Approach' (1974, *The Musical Quarterly* 60(1):1-19) and his suggestion that the relationship between improvisation and composition might be better understood as a continuum rather than in oppositional terms (ideas that were, incidentally, developed through his work on Iranian classical music). The use of continua by other music scholars at this time no doubt reflected a broader unease with binary categories, but Nettl was the first to apply this to the arena of creativity. Whilst Nettl's work was an

important paradigm shift at a time when the discourses were *so* polarised, my analyses suggested that the continuum model – based as it was on the extant reified categories – perhaps did not go far enough in the direction of a more holistic understanding of creative processes, and the relationship between the compositional and the improvisational.

PPT 8(1) Hierarchies of Knowledge

- So the first important point is that my critique of the extant binary categories, and the ensuing interest in alterity, emerged directly from the analytical – rather than the ethnographic – encounter. It was in fact an entirely unforeseen outcome of that encounter and one which sat uncomfortably within the hierarchies of knowledge already mentioned: it's all well and good if the findings of musical analysis align with musicians' discourses or if they are able to corroborate these in some way; but what happens where there is or can be no such corroboration due to the absence of an appropriate communicative discourse? I'm reminded here of Peter Kivy's comments on discourses of 'authenticity' in so-called 'Historically Informed Performance' and how validation only works in one direction. Discussing the tension between so-called 'historical authenticity' and aesthetics, Kivy notes that the former has:

PPT 8(2) ... begun to overpower what might be called 'reasons of the ear' to the extent that it no longer seems intellectually respectable, in musical circles, to adduce reasons of the ear against the claims of historical authenticity. In other words, now reasons of the ear, although they have not ceased to be relevant, have become relevant in only one direction. If you like the way authenticity sounds, that may be a reason in its favour; but if you don't, or if you like something else better, that is, from the critical point of view, no reason at all. (1995: xi) (from *Authenticities: Philosophical Reflections on Musical Performance*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press).

- Similarly, the validation of analytical knowledge within ethnomusicology has often seemed to work primarily in one direction: if the findings happen to align with musician discourses, it is readily accepted, even celebrated. But where analysis is not or cannot be corroborated by discourse, this is the point at which the hierarchy of knowledge comes into play: at the risk of overgeneralising, it has been my experience that if analytical evidence and discourse do not align or even contradict one another, then the

former has often been held to have less truth value and relegated to a lower rung on the hierarchy. In such cases, rather than exploring what the productive tension between discourse and analytical evidence might reveal, ethnomusicological analysis has – at least in the past - become peripherised because of its ambiguous truth status. And one of the main reasons for this comes down to another binary: the fact that such analysis is often undertaken by cultural outsiders using ‘outsider’ methodologies. It’s perhaps worth noting that this potential to devalue or peripherise analysis has not tended to be the case within ‘mainstream’ musicology, because there is not usually a relationship of alterity between the analyst and analysed; nor between discourse and practice in as much as musicologists have, at least until recently, not focused on the former. As soon as a relationship of alterity comes into play, so too does the hierarchy of knowledge, and with it a certain moral imperative concerning who has the right to study which music and in what way.

PPT 9(1) Dualities of Knowledge

- From time to time such debates become so polarised as to argue for a ‘duality of knowledge’. A good example is an article published in 2003 in the journal *Asian Music* by former University of Tehran lecturer Azin Movahed, a somewhat polemical attack on what she calls ‘the western hegemonic tradition of musicology’ (2003/4:86), and heavily informed by nationalist and postcolonial paradigms. Movahed describes how after the 1979 revolution, Iranian musicology sought to:

PPT 9(2) ... establish its own norms of scholarship and scientific enquiry (86) ... Realizing the necessity to examine their own music on grounds free from the influence of western views, Iranian musicians are now challenging the intensive imposition of western musical thought upon their music and prolifically writing and helping the development of indigenous musicology and scholarship ... (2003:88) (from ‘Religious Supremacy, Anti-Imperialist Nationhood and Persian Musicology After the 1979 Revolution’, *Asian Music* 35(1):85-113)

- Reviewing literature published in Iran between 1979 and 2001, Movahed sets up a divide between scholars in Iran and **PPT 10(1)** ‘western ethnomusicologists and Iranian musicologists trained in the west’ (107), who she claims are:

Unable to unfold the magnitude of layers necessary in the study of Persian music. Many indigenous musicians share a common concern that western

methodologies are incompatible with eastern philosophical interpretations and ignore the sophisticated expressive dimensions entwined in Persian music. (107-8)

- Following this argument, Movahed dismisses a whole body of literature, including valuable work by scholars such as Mohammad Taghi Massoudieh, known by many as the father of Iranian musicology and who studied in Europe. In fact, musicologists in Iran continue to use similar methods to those outside – if still largely rooted in positivist and structuralist approaches – and the idea that Iranian musicology can only develop its own identity through the wholesale rejection of ‘western’ methods is certainly not a view universally shared by local scholars who variously describe their work as **PPT 10(2)** ‘a combination of Western musicological and analytical study with Iranian musicology’ (Mohammad Azadehfar 2006:8; he doesn’t elaborate on what the latter comprises); others are keen to describe their analytical methods as **PPT 10(3)** ‘compatible with international principles [*montabeq bar osool-e beynohmelali*]’ (Jalal Zolfonoun 2001:24).
- It may be instructive at this point to contrast Movahed’s views with those of Kofi Agawu who, in the context of Africanist musicology, has argued strongly against hierarchies or dualities of knowledge:

PPT 11 How not to analyse African music? There is obviously no way not to analyse African music. Any and all ways are acceptable. An analysis that lacks value does not yet exist which is not to deny that, depending on the reasons for a particular adjudication, some approaches may prove more or less useful. We must therefore reject all ethnomusicological cautions about analysis because their aim is not to empower African scholars and musicians but to reinforce certain metropolitan privileges. (2003:180) (from *Representing African Music. Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions*. Routledge: New York and London).

- Clearly, the debate is about more than scholarly method: for Movahed, the development of an ‘anti-imperialist’ musicology based on **PPT 12(1)** ‘alternative concepts that deviate[d] from the western methodologies’ (85) represents a stand against the hegemony of the West. In contrast, for Agawu such essentialising of scholarly difference is precisely the kind of colonial mindset that disempowers the other:

PPT 12(2) The idea that, beyond certain superficial modes of expression, European and African knowledge exist in separate radically different spheres originated in European thought, not in African thinking. It was (and continues to be) produced in European discourse and sold to Africans, a number of whom have bought it, just as they have internalized the colonizer's image of themselves. (2003:180-1)

The Musical Evidence

- I will return to hierarchies of knowledge. At this point I'd like to play some examples, both to illustrate some of the developmental procedures mentioned earlier and to provide a concrete musical context for some of the issues. I start with a single example: the second main section (or *gusheh*) of *dastgāh Segāh* – called *zābol* - from a performance by Farhang Sharif on *tār* (the long-necked plucked lute). This is an unpublished recording from around 1970.
- **PPT 13** The opening of *zābol* is characterised by two phrases: the first moves from the starting pitch, *e-koron* (approximate half-flat), to emphasise the central pitch of *zābol* - *g*; the second phrase (here in the upper octave) usually begins with a characteristic motif (*f, g, a-koron, g*) followed by an exploration of the area between *f* and *a-koron*. In this performance, 5-note motif (i) becomes the basis for a developmental procedure which I have called extended repetition: this is essentially a tension-building device in which an original idea – usually a motif or a short phrase – is stated and repeated (once or more) and then extended in some way, often (but not always) up to a climax and a descent to pause. In the course of analysis I identified hundreds of examples of extended repetition, varied in different ways: either in relation to where the extension starts, which part of the original phrase is extended; the number of extensions, and so on. In order to make sense of this wealth of variation, I categorised the different kinds of extended repetition, so in what we're about to hear, there is an example of procedure B³⁽ⁱⁱ⁾ (starting right at the end of stave 1) in which the extension of (1) (in brackets) is based on the phrase opening; with a second extension (starting half-way through stave 2) leading to a climax on the upper *c* and a descent to *g* at the beginning of stave 3. Following a pause, motif (i) is stated 3 times before moving via a downward sequence to the opening pitch (*e-koron*) at the start of stave 4. Shifting back to the upper octave, we hear extended repetition B⁴⁽ⁱⁱ⁾ where the extension is based on the three note motif

(ii) (g, f, e-*koron*), taken from the end of (1) and leading to a climax on a-*koron* and eventual rest on e-*koron*; the phrase ends with two motifs characteristic of *Segāh* ((iii) and (iv)). **PLAY Example 1**

- So - what the body of analysis – which compared 30 improvised performances of *dastgāh Segāh* (ranging from 10 minutes to over an hour) – showed, among other things, was a number of structural principles and compositional techniques (including extended repetition) which seem to be *abstractable* in the sense that the same principle is found in different performances by different performers, applied to different musical material, as in this example **PPT 14**; and the reverse is also true: the same basic phrase or musical material is developed differently using different principles (**PPT 15**). Chloe Alaghband-Zadeh has noted something similar in Hindustani music where the **PPT 16** ‘repeated use of abstract musical strategies [which] produce entirely different musical phrases’ (2012); and David Fossum also observes in the context of Turkmen *dutar* music that ‘Ahal School musicians seem to absorb “compositional principles” in the process of learning a pre-composed repertoire ... [and subsequently] apply these “principles” at appropriate moments in the inherited composition’ (2010:180-1). In the case of Iranian music, the analysis suggested that musical material and techniques or strategies learnt together in the *radif* or through informal listening become cognitively abstracted from one another, and subsequently re-applied in different contexts in performance. This seemed to contradict the idea, found in much of the literature, that performance simply involves the memorisation of alternative versions of phrases and their later selection and re-arrangement in the manner of a patchwork. Rather, that learnt procedures are abstracted and applied in different contexts and with different musical material, something which also suggested parallels with other areas of human creativity such as language.
- But the analysis also showed that not all *gushehs* feature such abstraction: in less central *gushehs* such as *hazin*, material and techniques in the *radif* are maintained as a unit in performance, and there is less variation from one rendition to another such that performance practice in these *gushehs* might more appropriately be termed ‘variation’ or ‘interpretation’, rather than ‘improvisation’.

- In other words, through detailed analytical engagement I identified certain structural principles, as well as a range of performance practice, all of which led me to problematise the normative positioning, and blanket labelling, of this music as ‘improvised’.
- **PPT 17(1)** But – coming back to hierarchies of knowledge – the point is that even when my analyses seemed to reveal interesting things about underlying processes – and bearing in mind that much of this was inaccessible through ethnographic methods – the status of the findings remained ambiguous, given (a) the disjuncture between analysis and discourse; (b) the problematics of studying process through product; and (c) concerns such as those expressed by Movahed about the imposition of ‘western’ methodologies on Iranian music. Reflecting on this, and specifically that there appear to be structural principles in the music that are not articulated by musicians, there seemed to me to be three possible explanations: these principles are either a manifestation of subliminal processes of which musicians are not consciously aware; or if they are, are unwilling to articulate (perhaps because they contradict the dominant discourse of creative freedom); or, alternatively, is it possible, I asked myself, that the methodologies *themselves* led such principles to emerge from the music? This position aligns with interpretivist and constructivist understandings of culture as (I quote from Gary Tomlinson):

PPT 17(2) ... a construction of the historian, taking shape and gaining coherence from the reciprocal (and rich and haphazard) interaction of his evolving assumptions with his increasingly meaningful data, the events he selects for inclusion in the context [according to this view] there is no culture of Bali except for the anthropologists’ construal – his thick description – of it, so there is no culture of sixteenth-century Mantua apart from our interpretation ... As Collingwood put it, speaking only of history: ‘There *is* no past, except for a person involved in the historical mode of experience; and for him the past is what he carefully and critically thinks it to be.’ It is clear as well that the artifacts of culture exist for us only insofar as we perceive meaning in them in a cultural web. And this holds alike for Balinese shadow-plays, the puppets used in them, the poem that Monteverdi set to music, and Mozart’s G-minor Symphony. (1984:357) (from ‘The Web of Culture. A Context for Musicology’, *19th-Century Music*, 7(3): 350-62).

- In the same way, could it be that my analytical findings have no ‘truth value’ in themselves, but exist only in so far as the application of certain methodologies have rendered them real?
- Such questions become even more complex when analysis seems to uncover culturally-transcendent patterns which suggest possible commonalities in human cognitive processes. If, as Movahed argues, analysis should only ever be conducted in a culturally-relative mode, then how does one understand such patterns? Taking the case of extended repetition, I’ve been struck by instances of what seem to be the same basic structure in different musics, and which other scholars have also brought to my attention. For example, David Fossum reports that ‘on two occasions in Summer 2009, musicians I was interviewing pointed out ways that they had used a device akin to Nooshin’s “extended repetition” to intentionally change a piece’ (2010:180-1). This is not something I have explored extensively - and I’m certainly not proposing some kind of universal musical structure – I don’t think. And yet ... extended repetition seems to satisfy certain principles of anticipation and release, and it’s perhaps worth exploring what the ‘cross-musical’ implications might be. Here are just four examples among many that I could have presented: 1) the first from a performance of *Segāh* by Jamshid Andalibi on *nei* **PPT 18 Example 2** (2:33 to 2:47; 2) from a *khyāl* performance by Bhimsen Joshi (my thanks to Chloë Alaghband-Zadeh for this one) **PPT 19 Example 3**; 3) an extract from the overture to *The Italian Girl in Algiers* by Rossini **PPT 20 Example 4**; and 4) a phrase from the opening of the 3rd movement of Brahms’ Piano Quintet in F minor (here the second extension based on a variation of the phrase opening). **PPT 21 Example 5** <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ov4Ie988V3Y> (25:52). Such phrases were of particular interest to me since they seemed to evidence similar structures - and possibly underlying processes - in both ‘improvised’ and ‘composed’ musics.

Creativity as an Icon of Difference

- To sum up so far: it was the process of analysis and the ensuing questions about hierarchies of knowledge - between verbal discourse and analytical evidence; and between local and universal/western approaches – that for me opened the window to an understanding of alterity. It was a journey that took many years, starting as a minor

frustration with the inadequacies of the essentialised categories for thinking about and discussing creative process, but which grew over the years as I grappled to understand the relationship between - and the interpenetration of - the improvisational and the compositional; but without the scholarly tools to theorise the underlying problem. Until, somewhat belatedly I encountered the work of Kramer and other New Musicologists in the mid-1990s, and the broader field of postcolonial studies, and it was this that brought me to a consciousness of the extent to which the discourses of ethno/musicology have and continue to be reliant on binary thinking and a whole series of dualisms: between written and oral/aural; composed and improvised; art and folk; high and low; ‘authentic’ and (consequently) ‘inauthentic’; ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’; and so on. From the earliest years of my musical training, I had found the ease with which scholars invoked such dualisms troubling; but it was only now that I came to understand these not as isolated phenomena but part of a complex network of alterity-construction.

- And once the window was open (to switch metaphors), the ripples went off in quite unexpected directions and I found myself looking at familiar things in quite different ways. Binaries which until that point had simply been an innocuous irritation became loaded with ideological significance. In particular I became attentive for the first time to the ways in which discourses of creativity have served as a way of marking and essentialising ‘otherness’. Both within western scholarly and lay thinking about music and in Iran, creativity has served as an ‘icon of difference’ (to borrow a phrase from Michael Tenzer). **PPT 22(1)**
- In Iran, the emergence of binary thinking in relation to creative practice - in particular the division between the act of improvisation (*bedāheh-navāzi*) and composition (*āhang-sāzi*), and between the figure of composer (using notation) and performer - was part of broader processes of social change which began in the late 19th, and gathered pace in the early 20th, century. Whilst the figure of the composer (as distinct from performer [*navāzandeh*, ‘instrumentalist’; *khānandeh*, ‘singer’]) was not previously unknown, according to Owen Wright by the early 18th century named composers had disappeared from the historical record (2009). However, increased contact with European concepts – partly through the arrival of European in Iran musicians and later Iranian musicians who travelled abroad, the introduction of notation, the establishment

of formal music education, and so on - led to the emergence of a new figure, the ‘composer’ [*āhangsāz*, lit: ‘songmaker’], who used notation and whose status was enhanced by association with Western culture. By the mid-20th century, the conceptual division between composition and improvisation was widely accepted, and with it the idea that Iranian classical music is predominantly improvised.

- This is not to suggest that aspects of binary thought were formerly absent - but that increased contact with European music, its terminologies and concepts, encouraged particular ways of thinking about musical difference. Like many other countries in the early 20th century, Iran’s encounter with modernising forces was tied up with (quasi)-colonial relations of prestige and power. In particular, under the rule of Reza Shah Pahlavi (from 1925), the social arena became dominated by a struggle between proponents of modernisation, and more traditional factions, with modernity positively valenced through official discourses. This tension was reflected in the various discourses underpinning musical thought: between a largely undifferentiated ‘West’ (*qarb*) and a similarly essentialised ‘East’ (*sharq*), between tradition and modernity, improvised and composed, oral and written, and so on. Among the many binaries, those relating to creative process arguably served as the primary markers of difference between Western music (or Western-style compositions by Iranians) and Iranian classical music. One of the most disturbing indicators of this ‘discourse of difference’ was that from the early 20th century, Western (art) music came to be labelled as ‘scientific’ (*elmi*) and Iranian music its unscientific [*qayr-e elmi*] ‘Other’. Whilst this discursive formation has been critiqued and is encountered less frequently today, it is still used and represents a vestige of historical ‘self-othering’ in which Western music was normatively understood as ‘scientific’ and superior.
- There are interesting parallels with the case of Iran elsewhere. For instance, in her incisive analysis of the postcolonial politics of sound in South India, Amanda Weidman suggests that much binary thinking emerged in relation to the clear dichotomy set up between modernity and tradition, itself largely constructed through colonial encounters:

PPT 22(2) Modernity is thus not a purely Western or European project; on the contrary, it is constituted in and by the colonial encounter ...

modernity can be seen as a discursive formation which has naturalized particular ways of thinking dependent on a series of familiar binaries: secular vs. sacred, content vs. form, rational vs. nonrational, mind vs. body, public vs. private, and, not least, tradition vs. modernity. Indeed, one of the most powerful ways in which the project of modernity operates is by defining itself as representative of rationality, progress, change, and universality, in opposition to “tradition”, a category which comes to stand for all that is irrational or emotional, stagnant, ancient, and local (Bauman and Briggs 2003). Such oppositions gain currency, of course, by being mapped as the difference between the west and the non-west. (2006:6-7). (from *Singing the Classical. Voicing the Modern. The Postcolonial Politics of Music in South India*. Durham and London: Duke University Press).

- Weidman considers how such colonizing binaries were used to **PPT 23(1)** ‘orchestrate the ways in which Western classical music and Indian classical music, defined by their mutual opposition, are allowed to meet’ (2006:5). For Karnatic music, local discourses promoted the centrality of the voice and oral tradition, which were:

... used to oppose Karnatic music to a generalized idea of Western music: whereas Western music is instrumental, Karnatic is vocal; whereas Western music is “technologically” superior, Karnatic is more “spiritual”; whereas Western music can be played just by looking at written music (or so the stereotype goes), Karnatic is passed on through *gurukulavsam*, a centuries-long oral tradition and a system of teaching that technology cannot duplicate. (2006:246)

- The important point here is that such ‘discourses of difference’ come to frame musical practices, aligning them or distinguishing them in particular ways. Thus, **PPT 23(2)** ‘the vocal nature of Indian music and its ties to oral tradition – came to stand for [this] essential difference between South Indian classical music and western music’. In Iran, it wasn’t the voice/instrument divide that acquired significance; rather, the mapping of difference was played out through discourses that emphasised the oral, ephemeral and improvised nature of Iranian music against something more planned and structured as represented by Western notions of composition.
- Among the many other ripples emanating from my encounter with alterity, one that I’d like to mention briefly is in relation to the *radif*, the authority invested in it, and how this repertoire has served to ‘discipline’ Iranian music. Again, this is something that emerged from an earlier discomfort with dualistic discourses, in this case around

notions of purity and authenticity which first gained currency in the 1960s. Through an awareness of alterity, I found myself thinking about how, as with processes of canon-formation - the privileging of one body of repertoire over others – elsewhere, the *radif* has arguably acted **PPT 24** ‘as an instrument of exclusion, one which legitimates and reinforces the identities and values of those who exercise cultural power’ (Samson 2001:7; from ‘Canon (iii)’, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (2nd edn). Volume 5:6-7. London: Macmillan).

- And I believe that one of the ways in which it does this is through the inscription of difference: as a system of knowledge, the *radif* depends on a series of binary positionings according to which the normative is urban (vs rural), male (vs female), high-art (vs popular), (originally/authentically) court music (vs public), Persian-centric (vs regional ethnicities; also Iranian vs ‘foreign’), spiritual (vs corporeal), and so on. And this subsuming of Others - whether in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, and so on - takes place in what is *presented* as a complete, all-embracing repertoire, and even iconic of nationhood. Whilst Iran’s geographic and other diversity is indexed through the names of pieces, these are contained within, and domesticated on the terms of, the dominant culture. So, whilst the *radif* is presented as a simple musical repertoire and starting point for creative performance, and as operating ‘outside power’, in fact it exercises considerable power, partly through its associated discourses of purity, authenticity and tradition.

PPT 25(1) Re-imagining Difference; Transcending Difference

- Through the many years that I have worked on Iranian classical music, I’ve often wondered what form a discourse that went beyond the rather unhelpful improvisation/composition binary might take. To come back to my earlier question, is there a place beyond alterity, or is our understanding of the world inescapably tied to such dualisms? Indeed, somewhat wearied by these binaries, by the moralising discourses of more traditionalist factions, particularly around the *radif*, and by the constant struggle to validate my analysis, I moved away from the classical music and spent several years researching and writing about popular music and youth culture in Iran.

- Imagine my surprise and delight then, when returning to the classical music about 4 years ago, for the purpose of completing a book, I found that some younger musicians are developing new approaches to performance *and* discursive frameworks for creative practice, some of which align with my earlier thinking; and they are also challenging the authority of the *radif*.
- So I'll conclude by talking briefly about two musicians who exemplify this trend: **PPT 25(2)** Amir Eslami (b.1971), a performer of *nei* who teaches at Tehran Art University; and Hooshyar Khayam (b.1978), a pianist trained in western classical music, and who also studied *radif* on the *kamāncheh* spike fiddle and who formerly taught at the same university. Both are composers (in the normative sense) as well as performers, and have won international awards. Amir and Hooshyar have known each other for years, but were working in quite separate musical spheres. In 2009 they started collaborating and the following year released an album entitled *All of You (Tamām-e To)* **PPT 25(3)** published by Hermes, a Tehran-based label which promotes contemporary Iranian music. The album is rooted in the sounds and ethos of Iranian classical music and takes inspiration from the *radif* but lies outside the specific *radif* repertoire.
- Some of you may have heard me talk about Amir and Hooshyar's music before; of particular relevance to the current discussion is that through their collaborative work, they have developed certain principles around what they call **PPT 26(1)** '*shiveh-ye novin-e bedāheh-navāzi dar musiqi-ye Irani*', which they translate into English as 'A New Approach to Improvisation in Persian Music'; and central to this is a radical reconfiguring of the discursive relationship between improvisation and composition. This is how Hooshyar describes their music:

PPT 26(2) All these tracks are improvisations, but some are worked out improvisations and some are just raw improvisation, entirely from scratch from beginning to end. We even played in a dark room so as to focus entirely on the music. But others are not like that. They have been worked out. They are ideas that we discussed what we wanted to do. Nevertheless, we think of these as improvisational because of the 'in the moment' [*dar lahzeh*] development of ideas. But we think of them as a different kind of improvisation from traditional improvisation. (interview 16.7.11)

- One of the most striking aspects of this new approach - and the discourses around it - is the foregrounding of compositional thinking, what Amir and Hooshyar call **PPT 27(1)** ‘*negāh-e āhāngsāzāneh*’ (‘a compositional view/approach’) or ‘*tafakor-e āhangsāzi*’ (‘compositional thinking’):

PPT 27(2) We shape it structurally, we think about it. This is where it comes close to composition. They *are* compositions, we work them out. I think what we are doing has both qualities. We both have the experience of pure improvisation, but the common concept is that of structure. (interview 26.11.10)

- In using terms such as ‘worked out’ or ‘pre-thought’ improvisation or as **PPT 27(3)** ‘improvisation that is supported by compositional thinking’ (Eslami 26.11.10), these musicians are clearly seeking to challenge the dominant discourses of creative practice and to bridge the divide between the ‘improvisational’ and the ‘compositional’. I’d like to quote from Hooshyar’s description of how one piece was created: the musicians initially working alone improvisationally and the resulting materials subsequently assembled in a compositional manner:

PPT 28 HK: Now, ‘*Khiāl*’ is interesting. I went to my room one night and started playing on places of the piano which you normally wouldn’t. I played all the harmonics, pizzicato, hitting on the iron and on the back of the instrument, on the body – well, I wouldn’t say hitting because I was really caressing my instrument. And I was enjoying it. So, I gathered a large pile of sonic events and I put them into my computer. And then Amir came over. And he went to the room alone and played whatever he wanted. Of course, we had talked about the tonality, about what I was trying to get ...

LN: So, it was two completely separate events?

HK: Yes. And then Amir went home and I started my personal improvisation on these. I took the sonic events and started to build the work. I put on the drone which I had had in mind. And then I started to insert these events, upon each other, and modify them. So, the composition started to take shape. And then I called Amir again and we started to work on it together, and he played some more. And this is what ‘*Khiāl*’ is. Now, when you listen to ‘*Khiāl*’ you absolutely wouldn’t guess how it’s put together. (interview 16.7.11)

Example 6: 1:30 opening of ‘*Khiāl*’

- What is so interesting about Amir and Hooshyar is that they have articulated a clear framework for their creative practice, and made it available in the public domain –at conferences and seminars in Iran and abroad - with an eagerness that stands in stark contrast with earlier practices. Further, when discussing the music they invoke a level of analytical detail, including motivic analysis, identifying themes and their development, and using terms such as *gostaresh* (‘expansion’) and *degargooshodan* (‘transformation’); and this is quite new to Iranian music.
- Given my earlier experience, this was a methodological dream come true: to have musicians talk through the details of pieces, describing to me the processes by which the music came into being, and with both enthusiasm *and* an understanding of what it is I am trying to find out, in contrast to the mystified and reticent responses of earlier participants who largely insisted that what I was looking for was beyond explanation.
- So what are the implications of this new trend in relation to alterity and for the hierarchies of analytical knowledge? Certainly these musicians evidence a new kind of intellectual-analytical approach to performance, including the articulation of compositional intent and a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between the compositional and the improvisational.
- In terms of hierarchies of knowledge and where my own work sits: without doubt I felt more validated in being able to draw on musician discourses to support my understanding of what was happening in the music – there was a palpable feeling as I presented this work at conferences of my analysis climbing up the hierarchy. But I also couldn’t help feeling something else – a delayed vindication perhaps, or a renewed unease with the hierarchy – that many years on from my primary research here were musicians telling me things and using discourses that aligned very closely with my earlier findings, findings which at that time had slipped down the hierarchy for want of discursive corroboration.
- And there is also the question of whether this new ostensibly more straightforward relationship between discourse and practice is quite what it seems. Amir and Hooshyar belong to a generation of broadly-educated music graduates, cosmopolitan

in outlook and experience, formally trained in techniques of composition, and so on: a very different kind of musician even from when I started this research, more connected with the outside world and able to access a wide range of musics and different ways of *thinking* about music and about creativity. Listening to them talk, one gets a strong sense a carefully crafted narrative: whether in interviews, or in public presentations, the story they tell is arguably as much a performance as the music itself.

- Amir and Hooshyar are part of a small but growing number of musicians who are challenging traditional binaries and articulating new understandings of creative practice that – to return to Kramer – **PPT 29(1)** ‘appear ... not as the first principles of a conceptual or political order, but as temporary limits in a dynamic, open-ended process’ (Kramer 1995:49). And part of me wonders whether, in contrast to earlier discourses in which, as I have described, creativity serves as an icon of difference, for these outward-looking cosmopolitan musicians the discursive space becomes somewhere to imagine something else: alternative musical practices that connect rather than divide, that transcend alterity and go beyond the binaries of improvisation/composition, tradition/modernity, east/west, and so on. **PPT 29(2)**

Conclusion

- So, to conclude: from hierarchies of knowledge, to the ways in which notions of musical difference – or sameness - have been imagined and articulated, alterity is deeply implicated in the analytical process. Yet its workings are often hidden. Whether or not it is ultimately possible, or desirable even, to go beyond alterity, I argue that a greater awareness of its workings, and its logic, is crucial in understanding the underlying operations of power both within musical traditions and in our own disciplines.