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# **PPT 1 The Elephant and the Blind Men: Myth-Making, Tracking and Musical Creativity**

**Keynote paper presented at the conference ‘Tracking the Creative Process in Music’, University of Huddersfield, 14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> September 2017**

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## **Abstract**

In the ancient parable of the elephant and the blind men, each man attempts to describe the elephant through feeling a different part of its body - the smooth tusk, the long trunk, the rough skin, and so on - and each reaches a very different understanding of the nature of the animal. Tracking creative processes in music often feels rather like this: each of the methodologies commonly used by scholars working in the various branches of music studies – whether ethnographic, analytical, psychological, and so on - touches on and seems to reveal quite different things about the creative process. In this keynote, I explore some of the themes and issues that have arisen within ethnomusicological studies of musical creativity, through the prism of my own work on Iranian classical music, a tradition in which the performer plays a central creative role and which is therefore usually described as ‘improvised’. I will consider some of the myth-making that surrounds musical creativity in this tradition - and the purpose that such myths serve - as well as exploring the ways in which younger musicians are developing new discursive frameworks for their creative practice. Ultimately, I’m interested in the methodological challenges in bringing together the different parts of the elephant in order to describe and understand creative processes in music more holistically.

## **Introduction**

- First, I'd like to thank the conference organisers for inviting me to deliver this keynote. I'm really delighted to be here.
- **PPT 2 Tracking the Elephant**

I start with the story of the elephant and the blind men, in which each man attempts to describe the elephant through feeling a different part of its body - the smooth tusk, the long trunk, the rough skin, and so on - and each reaches a very different understanding of the nature of the animal. It seems to me that attempting to track creative processes in music is often rather like this: each of the methodologies commonly used by scholars working in the various branches of music studies – whether ethnographic, analytical, psychological, ergonomic and so on – seems to touch on and reveal quite different aspects of the creative process.
- Since the mid-1980s, a central strand of my research has sought to understand creative processes in Iranian classical music - as part of a more general interest in human creativity. And the foremost challenge has been one of methodology: what are the most fruitful ways of approaching and studying the creative process? Coming from the perspective of ethnomusicology, I adopted two two main approaches: the ethnographic – what do musicians say about what they do? (often taken by ethnomusicologists as evidence of how musicians think about what they are doing); and the analytical – what does the music 'itself' tell us? And, as I will describe, what I found was a sharp disjuncture between the two: each told a different story. In this keynote, I explore some of the themes and issues that have arisen in this work. I will consider some of the myth-making that surrounds musical creativity in Iranian classical music, as well as exploring the ways in which younger musicians are developing new conceptual and discursive frameworks for their creative practice. Ultimately, I'm interested in the challenge of bringing together different parts of the elephant in order to understand creative processes in music more holistically.
- The metaphor of tracking is an apposite one, I think, particularly in the sense of following a trail or traces of something which may never truly be revealed; and the

sense of trying to pin down something whose nature changes as soon as it is fixed for long enough to study it.

- So, first some background. Iranian classical music – **PPT 3(1)** *musiqi-ye asil* – was originally a courtly art music tradition which gained a wider public presence from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the arrival of sound recording and concerts, and later broadcasting, and so on. 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-20<sup>th</sup> century and drawing on concepts initially adopted from European music – by local musicians; and they use a term – **PPT 3(2)** *bedāheh-navāzi* – borrowed from the realm of oral poetry. However, this improvisation is always understood to be grounded in knowledge of the canonic repertoire known as *radif*, a collection of several hundred pieces organised by mode and which was formalised in the mid- to late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Originally (and still primarily) transmitted orally, parts of the *radif* came to be notated from the early 20<sup>th</sup> 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 after this is a musician considered ready to start improvising.
- So, the notion of free improvisation has no place in this tradition. But the idea of creative performance has a long history. Descriptions of performance practice in Near Eastern writings from the 10<sup>th</sup> century [CE] onwards show that creative performance was the norm and highly valued, and musicians were expected to be responsive to audiences and to the performance setting (Blum 1998:28-36). Whilst the figure of the composer (as distinct from performer: (*navāzandeh*, ‘instrumentalist’; *khānandeh*, ‘singer’) was not unknown, by the early 18<sup>th</sup> Century named composers had disappeared from the historical record. But, from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, increased contact with European concepts – partly through the arrival of European musicians and later Iranian musicians who travelled and even studied abroad, the introduction of notation, the establishment of formal music education, and so on - led to the emergence of a new figure, the ‘composer’ **PPT 3(3)** (*āhangsāz*, lit: ‘songmaker’), who used notation and whose status was enhanced by association with Western

culture. By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, the binary conceptual division between composition (*āhang-sāzi*) and improvisation (*bedāheh-navāzi*) was widely accepted, and with it the idea that Iranian classical music is predominantly improvised.

- Improvisation now occupies a central conceptual position in the music culture: it is referred to regularly in programme and album liner notes and some teachers have even started to discuss aspects of improvisation with pupils, something which rarely happened in the past. All of those who I interviewed or corresponded with used the term *bedāheh-navāzi* (or simply ‘improvisation’ in English) readily.
- And so, from the outset, my work was framed as a study of this thing – improvisation – a concept which I accepted uncritically, as did pretty much all of the scholars writing about Iranian music at that time, and on whom I modelled my work. I selected one section of repertoire called **PPT 3(4) *dastgāh Segāh*** and transcribed a number of performances, which I then compared analytically. My research had a single aim: to understand the underlying processes by which musicians improvise. Essentially, that meant tracking the relationship between memorised model – the *radif* – and the performances based on it and to understand how musicians move from the relatively fixed canonic repertoire to ‘improvised’ performance, particularly since none of this is verbalised by teachers?
- And there were two main methodological challenges:
  - (1) First was to identify a suitable analytical approach for studying improvisational process. Most extant models - whether Iranian or other - are product-based, and depend on first fixing the musical flow – the pinning down of the proverbial butterfly as it were - through transcription and then extrapolating backwards: effectively tracking the creative process through studying its products. I was acutely aware of the limitations of this approach and the question of whether – or to what extent – **product can evidence process.**
  - (2) Second, as my research progressed – and as I’ve noted - I discovered that the dual methods of (a) ethnography, talking to musicians, on the one hand; and (b) transcription and analysis on the other, told quite different stories. Although the

Iranian classical system is highly theorised – with a great deal of local terminology – this does not usually extend to detailed aspects of performance practice. Even during training, teachers rarely talk about performance as such and are concerned solely with transmitting the *radif* repertoire. I found that where musicians *did* talk about performance, the discourses tended to be framed in quite general, often quasi-mystical or spiritual terms; questions about improvisation most often elicited responses along the lines that this is a matter of inspiration and therefore beyond explanation.

- In contrast to these discourses, however, my analyses showed the music to be highly structured - I would argue compositional - with many patterns and regularities in the ways in which musical material – motifs, phrases and other musical ideas –are extended and developed in performance.
- In other words, there was a sharp disjuncture between musicians’ discourses of improvisational freedom - albeit always understood as underpinned by the *radif* - and the analytical findings; the relationship between discourse and practice was far from straightforward and was certainly not the case that the former could be used to explain the latter, as is often assumed in ethnomusicology. Rather, musician discourses on creativity participate in a level of myth-making that becomes something to be explained rather than explain.
- And it was this that led me to question the dominant discourses around creativity, which reify improvisation and the supposedly ephemeral nature of this music. I was of course already familiar with Bruno Nettl’s work in this area and particularly his landmark 1974 article ‘Thoughts on Improvisation: A Comparative Approach’ (*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 in fact developed through his own 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 – dependent 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.

- However, despite my own ambivalence about the concept of improvisation, I was at the same time intensely aware of Iranian musicians' continued use of the term to describe what they consider a central, indeed defining aspect of their music. And so it was that I shifted from thinking about improvisation as an *analytical* category of musical process; to improvisation as a *discursive* tool, deployed strategically by musicians. I became interested in the discursive work that the *concept* of improvisation does; and in the impact of this on musical practice; and in particular, in musical creativity as a site of alterity-construction.
- At this point I'd like to play some examples, to provide a concrete musical context for the discussion and specifically to illustrate some of the compositional procedures which I identified. I start with a single example: the second main section (or *gusheh*) of **PPT 4** *dastgāh Segāh* – called *zābol* - from a performance by Farhang Sharif on *tār* (long-necked plucked lute). This is an unpublished recording from about 1970. I'll talk through the music first – quick skim - notation on slide (quite small).
- The opening of *zābol* is characterised by two phrases: the first moves from the starting pitch, *e-koron* (approximate half-flat), to emphasise the focal pitch of the piece - *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, usually at a phrase end. 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 B<sup>3(ii)</sup> (starting at the end of stave 1) in which the extension of (1) is based on the phrase opening; with a second extension (starting half-way through stave 2) leading to a climax on 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 B<sup>4(ii)</sup> 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)). **Example 1 (PPT 4)**

- So - what the body of analysis 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 (having to skim through) **PPT 5**; and the reverse is also true: the same basic phrase or musical material is developed differently using different principles **PPT 6**. Chloe Alagband-Zadeh has noted something similar in north Indian classical music with **PPT 7(1)** '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 **PPT 7(2)** '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 is very different from the idea, found in much of the earlier literature, that creative performance simply involves the memorisation of alternative versions of phrases and their later selection and re-arrangement in the manner of a mosaic or 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 sections of repertoire feature such abstraction: in less central *gushehs* such as *maqlub*, material and techniques learnt 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’.
- So coming back to our elephant: even when my analyses seemed to reveal interesting things about creative processes – and bearing in mind that none of this was verbalised by musicians - the status of my findings remained ambiguous, given

(1) the disjuncture between what musicians say about what they do and what the analysis reveals; and this is particularly problematic in the context of ethnomusicology where there has tended to be a hierarchy of knowledge privileging the ethnographic over the analytical;

(2) related to this, concerns about the use of ‘western’ methodologies in analysing Iranian (and other) music;

and (3) the question of whether one can in any case come to an understanding of creative process through examining its products.

- 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 at least three possible explanations: (a) that these principles are a manifestation of subliminal processes of which musicians are not consciously aware; or (b) if they are, are unwilling to articulate, perhaps because that would work against the dominant discourse of creative freedom and processes of myth-making by which musicians seek to promote a certain mystical aura, which in part validates the music and gives it gravitas as something transcendent which can’t be explained – setting it against

the mundaneness of something that can be analysed and explained in somewhat banal ‘nuts and bolts’ terms; or, (c) alternatively, is it possible, I asked myself, **that my chosen analytical methodology *itself* led to such principles emerging from the music?** This aligns with constructivist understandings of culture as (I quote from Gary Tomlinson):

**PPT 8** ... 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’, *19<sup>th</sup>-Century Music*, 7(3): 350-62).

- In the same way, perhaps 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 suggest culturally-transcendent patterns which point to possible commonalities in human cognitive processes. If, as some have argued, 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 have 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 (writing about Turkmen music) 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.

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 brief examples among many that I could have presented:

- 1) **PPT 9 Example 2** the first from a performance of *Segāh* by Jamshid Andalibi on *nei* (2:33 to 2:47);
- 2) **PPT 10 Example 3** from a *khyāl* performance by Bhimsen Joshi (my thanks to Chloe Alaghband-Zadeh for this one);
- 3) **PPT 11 Example 4** an extract from the overture to *The Italian Girl in Algiers* by Rossini
- 4) **PPT 12 Example 5** a phrase from the opening of the 3<sup>rd</sup> movement of Brahms' Piano Quintet in F minor (here the second extension based on a variation of the phrase opening). <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.

- 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. Indeed, somewhat wearied by these binaries, by the moralising authenticist discourses of more traditionalist musicians and by the constant struggle to validate my findings, 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, on returning to the classical music after a number of years, to find some younger musicians trained in the classical music openly discussing creative processes – often quite eloquently – and developing new approaches to performance and discursive frameworks for their work. Given my earlier experience, this was a methodological dream come true: to find musicians eager to discuss their work and to describe in detail the processes by which their

music comes into being was quite a new experience and a welcome contrast to the – mainly older - musicians I worked with in my earlier research who rarely talked about practice and when they did, tended to insist that what was looking for was beyond explanation.

- These changes have largely been made possible by the emergence of a new kind of musician: broadly-educated graduates, cosmopolitan and internationalist in outlook, many formally trained in techniques of composition, some educated abroad, and so on. A very different kind of musician from when I started my research.
- So, in the second half of my talk, I'll discuss the work of two such musicians: **PPT 13(1)** Amir Eslami (b.1971), a performer of *nei* (end blown flute) and university lecturer; and Hooshyar Khayam (b.1978), a pianist trained in western classical music, but who also studied *radif* on the *kamāncheh* spike fiddle and who formerly taught at Tehran's Art University. Both are composers (in the normative sense) as well as performers, and have won international awards for their work. Amir and Hooshyar have known each other for many years, but were working in quite separate musical spheres: Hooshyar as a (Western) classically trained pianist; Amir as an Iranian classical musician. Indeed, somewhat astonishingly, this album represents the first collaboration between musicians from these different musical backgrounds, and part of the creative challenge has been to find a common language. In 2009 they started collaborating and the following year released an album entitled *All of You (Tamām-e To)*, **PPT 13(2)** published by Hermes, a Tehran-based label which has played an important role in promoting contemporary music in Iran.
- So I'll present some examples of these musicians' descriptions of the creative processes by which some of the pieces on this album came into being. Amir described how their musical relationship started:

**PPT 14** AE (in Persian): It was very interesting. Hooshyar had released an album called *Thousand Acacias* [solo piano album]. On the first track he just plays the piano strings with his bare hands. I really like this track. And one day, when I came home from the

university – and this was not a good time for me - I looked out the album. I put on the first track and suddenly felt like playing. The piece was in *dashti* mode and somehow resonated with how I was feeling. I reached for my *nei* box, took an instrument at random and started improvising. By some co-incidence the *nei* was tuned to the same mode [since the *nei* has fixed pitches, performers use different instruments to play in different modes]. I recorded a line over the piano. The two lines worked well together and I decided to improvise again over the piano part, and to record it. (26.11.10) [NB in these interviews, Hooshyar spoke mainly in English whilst Amir spoke in Persian. Quotations from Amir translated by me].

- In all, Amir recorded three improvisations over the pre-existing piano piece; he then mixed these and emailed the track to Hooshyar:

**PPT 15 (1) HK** (in English): It was a bad day, a very blue day and we were experiencing harsh times, socially speaking. And then I received an mp3 file from Amir. And the subject of the email was ‘??’, I remember that very clearly. And when I opened it there was no explanation. I listened to the file with my wife, and we were both so affected by the music that we started to cry. It was a fascinating experience, a very hurtful experience I have to say, because it opened up something inside us which had been there for a long time. So I phoned Amir. It was after midnight. And I said, ‘listen, we have to start working together, there’s no way round it’. And that is how our working together started. It was an instant decision. And it stayed exactly like this even when we would sit and talk about making a new piece, even if our discussions were long, when we went to the recording room the process would be instant, very very fast. (16.7.11).

- **PPT 15 (2)** This was the genesis of the piece ‘*Zakhmeh*’ (‘Strum’, 4’26”), which appears as recorded by Amir as track 3 on the album): a classically-trained *nei* player improvising over a pre-recorded piano track. As Hooshyar explained: **PPT 15(3)** ‘I felt that there was something I wanted to say [in the original piano piece] that I couldn’t, but that my friend was able to’. The sonic result is somewhat disturbing, perhaps reflecting the political backdrop – this was just after the contested 2009 presidential elections. Note the context of isolation: there are no other musicians physically present, and no audience. I’ll play the beginning of the piece, which starts with harsh strumming on piano [d, e-flat, f and g]. Anyone familiar with Iranian music will find the sounds quite unusual.

**PPT 15(4) Example 6: first 1 min of *Zakhmeh* (track 3).**

- Over the following months, Amir and Hooshyar recorded a further 9 pieces. It should be quite clear: this music is rooted in the sounds and ethos of the classical musics, but few would consider it to be part of that tradition; it takes inspiration from the *radif* but lies outside the specific *radif* repertoire.
- Through their collaborative work, Amir and Hooshyar have developed certain principles around what they call **PPT 16(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'. They have given several presentations in Iran and abroad setting out the key differences between their approach and what they call 'traditional improvisation' **PPT 16(2)** (*bedāheh-navāzi-e sonnati*), including: prior discussion and agreement on certain things, unlike traditional practice where only the broad modal area is agreed in advance; taking inspiration from the *radif* and its modes but not following them exactly; the use of harmony and polyphony; and drawing on literary and/or dramatic ideas. An important aspect of the music is the intensely collaborative nature of the creative process, which goes well beyond that usually found in Iranian classical music where improvisational practice is predominantly solo, even in group renditions, where musicians take turns to play. Also notable is the use of extended techniques, rarely heard in Iranian music: Hooshyar strums and plucks the piano strings and strikes the instrument body; Amir uses the *nei* percussively and generates sounds through rapid covering and uncovering of finger holes and breathing effects, as well as simultaneous singing and playing (a technique found in certain rural traditions) as in the piece '*Khiāl*' ('Illusion', track 6, 3''35"), which I'll come back to in a moment.
- One of the most striking aspects of Amir and Hooshyar's new approach - and which contrasts with the discourses of older musicians - is the foregrounding of compositional thinking, what they describe as **PPT 16(3)** '*negāh-e āhangsāzāneh*' ('a compositional view/approach') or '*tafakor-e āhangsāzi*' ('compositional thinking'), and central to which is a reconfiguring of the discursive relationship between improvisation and composition, previously held to be distinct domains:

**PPT 16 (4)** (HK) 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 17(1)** ‘improvisation that is supported by compositional thinking’ (Eslami 26.11.10), these musicians are clearly seeking to challenge the dominant binary discourses of creative practice and to bridge the divide between the ‘improvisational’ and the ‘compositional’. This is how Hooshyar describes their working methods:

**PPT 17 (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)

- *Khiāl* is one of the least obviously structured tracks on the album. Hooshyar described how it came into being, with the musicians initially working on their own improvisationally and subsequently assembling the resulting materials in a compositional manner:

**PPT 18** HK: Now, ‘*Khiāl*’ is interesting. I went to my room one night and I 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 I asked Amir to come 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, two completely separate events. And then Amir went home and I started my personal improvisation on these. I took the sonic events

and I 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.

### Play Opening of *Khiāl* EXAMPLE 7

- When discussing the music, Amir and Hooshyar use a level of analytical discourse, including motivic analysis, identifying themes and their development, and using terms such as **PPT 19(1)** *gostaresh* (‘expansion’) and *degargoan-shodan* (‘transformation’), which is quite new to Iranian music. They also discuss another characteristic: an economy of material, as they explore themes, sometimes exhaustively, in a compositional way, building up from a **PPT 19(2)** ‘nucleus’ (‘*hasteh*’) rather than stringing together many different ideas without exploring their full potential, which is how they characterised traditional improvisation for me. In fact, this contradicts my own analyses of traditional practice which, as I have discussed, revealed a *strong* element of compositional development – but which is, crucially, never explicitly discussed by musicians.
- One notable aspect of this album is the absence of any audience interaction in the creative process. This is not particularly unusual, of course, but in Iran there is an added dimension in that all public performance requires government approval and the process of gaining a permit can be lengthy and complex; so many musicians prefer to perform in private and post music online or release CDs, which still needs a permit but which can be less stressful than for live performance. Many musicians described for me the feeling of working in a vacuum, and I think it’s interesting to think about how much the impact of audiences on creative processes can be taken for granted until musicians are denied them. Another musician I have worked with, ‘*ud*’ player Negar Boubon, described this:

**PPT 19(3)** The whole process, then, is only completed when you can come to a final product and share it with some true “listeners”; which gives me a chance to hear it through their ears and see my creation through their minds’ eyes. Without this final stage, one would always



feel unfinished with the work and such feeling can easily work against the creative process, making it happen less frequently. This need for having your work received by some audience is crucial to make your inner self believe that you have really given birth to what you've been cooking; something that I think is usually mistaken for the need of the artist to be praised. I personally find these two things very different. (Negar Boubon, personal correspondence, August 2017)

- Like Amir and Hooshyar, Negar was also very articulate about the creative processes involved in her music. Here's one brief example:

**PPT 20** For instance, track 5 of my solo album – 'Continu' - the piece titled 'Gharghab' (in Persian) ('deep waters' in English). The whole piece was based on the very first phrase, the first 3 seconds of the piece, and built as I performed it in the studio. And that 1<sup>st</sup> phrase was a discovery that later was combined with my other findings about flowing rhythms and short minimalist-like connecting phrases. (Negar Boubon, personal correspondence, August 2017)

#### **Example 8. Opening of *Gharghab* (from the album *Continu*), 1 min**

- Amir, Hooshyar and Negar are part of a small but growing body of musicians seeking to redefine their relationship with the *radif* and with tradition: these musicians are more connected with the outside world, are able to access a wide range of musics and ways of *thinking* about music and about creativity, and are ready to challenge long-established frameworks for creative practice. Their work evidences some of the important changes that have taken place in relation to creative processes in Iranian music in recent years.
- What I find particularly interesting about Amir and Hooshyar is that they have developed a clear framework for their creative practice, and made it available in the public domain –giving presentations in Iran and abroad - with an eagerness – indeed, a veritable excess of discourse - that was something of a relief compared with the reticence of older musicians. They certainly display a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between the compositional and the improvisational and, more broadly an intellectual-analytical approach to performance which includes a new articulation of compositional intent.

- So what are the implications of this for our understanding of creative process? Does this over-saturation of discourse actually make it easier to track such processes? In some ways, the relationship between discourse and practice is no less complex than it was in the earlier period of discursive drought. I would say that there is a strong sense that the carefully crafted narratives of some younger musicians is as much a performance (after Goffman 1959) as their music, as much to be explained as to explain. For one thing, these musicians are intensely conscious of how they are viewed by others, included from outside Iran, in a way that previous generations would not have been. So, I've been particularly interested in the creative ways in which these younger musicians talk about creative process, how they use and manipulate language, and what such discourses tell us about other aspects of culture; and despite the surfeit of discourse, I'm not convinced that these musicians are any more aware of the deeper, more subliminal aspects of creative process than their predecessors.

## **Conclusion**

- So, to conclude briefly. Tracking the creative processes in music for me has meant navigating between the myth-making and binary discourses of older musicians, the more recent self-crafted narratives of more worldly younger musicians, and the music 'itself'. As an analytic-conceptual tool for understanding creative process in Iranian music, I have not found the concept of 'improvisation' particularly helpful. However, for musicians, the discursive domain of 'improvisation' represents a fertile arena for positioning themselves and their music in particular ways. Regardless of how such concepts enter the tradition – or their explanatory power (or otherwise) in relation to the music 'itself' - the discourses around creative process take on a life of their own. If undertaking musical analysis is the equivalent of feeling the elephant's trunk and ethnography like feeling its ears, what other parts of the animal might the many other methodological approaches – for instance, the study of cognitive processes, ergonomic factors - the ways in which human-instrument interaction shape creativity, something I have also looked at but not had time to talk about today - contextual factors, and so on, - what parts of the animal might these feel like, what stories might they tell, and is it possible – or desirable even - to bring these together in a more holistic understanding of creative processes in music? **PPT 21**

