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10 }

(Re-)imagining improvisationDISCURSIVE POSITIONS IN IRANIAN MUSIC
FROM CLASSICAL TO JAZZ

Laudan Nooshin

**‘We probably should never have started
calling it improvisation’**

[T]he logic of alterity . . . 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 recognises its own identity. . . . [T]his system of oppositionality is far from stable. . . . Furthermore, the identity that the self recognizes through the other is necessarily mystified. . . . 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.

■ ramer 1995: 34, 37)

In his contribution to a 2012 conference roundtable on ‘Improvisation: object of study and critical paradigm’, Bruno Nettl offered these thoughts on the continued usefulness of the concept of ‘improvisation’ to describe either a

particular kind of music or musical process, quoting from the preface to his 2009 volume edited with Gabriel Solis:

‘We probably should never have started calling it improvisation’ (Nettl 2009, ix): Indeed, I wonder whether all the things we include under the rubric of improvisation have enough in common to justify a collective term. We are talking, after all, about Hindustani and Carnatic raga alapana, about all the things in jazz that Paul Berliner (1994) analysed, about rural folk singers making new variants of traditional songs, about seventeenth-century keyboard players ornamenting, about virtuosos playing cadenzas, about performers in Lukas Foss’s ‘Time Line’, computers that have been taught to improvise, South Slavic singers of epics manipulating basic materials, Persian musicians giving their personal interpretations of the *radif*, accompanists of dance classes doing their thing, young children making up rhymes for games, about nineteenth-century German students creating quodlibets, Franz Schubert improvising in his mind and quickly writing down what has gone through it, about what church organists do when they improvise a fugue, or just play chords to encourage generosity during the offering—I will run out of space trying to be comprehensive. I know I am swimming upstream as music researchers have finally managed to get some recognition for this neglected art. (Nettl 2012)

Writing in the same 2009 volume, Solis expresses similar doubts, suggesting that the ‘book [will] ensure its own obsolescence. . . . [T]he study of improvisation will ultimately melt into the basic paradigms of musical study, so that there may no longer be a rationale for studying it as distinct from the rest of music making’ (9). Such ideas clearly reflect longstanding and ongoing debates over what constitutes ‘improvisation’ and how whatever it is that we think of as improvisation is distinguished from other forms of creative practice. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Nooshin 2003, 2015), such debates are not simply about what distinguishes one mode of musical creation from another, but about decisions as to where the boundaries come to be marked, usually through discourse—boundaries which clearly are highly constructed even as they are presented as ‘natural’. For Nettl and Solis, the grouping together of quite different forms of music in the category of improvisation and their separation ‘from the rest of music making’ is increasingly untenable. They are not alone in calling for

a taxonomy that explores the intersection of improvisation and what one might best call pre-composition, a taxonomy that avoids simply drawing a line between the two but looks at how they overlap and intersect, at what they have in common, at the role of preparation, of following canons, of audience expectation—looking at the many kinds of musical creation holistically. (Nettl 2012: [5])

As Stephen Blum observes, there are ‘plenty of reasons for replacing this system with better sets of categories’ (2009: 240).

Such processes of line-drawing and category-making relate directly to the self–other binaries invoked by Lawrence Kramer in the quotation with which this chapter begins, and they raise important questions about how musical difference is both imagined and articulated through the dominant discourses that come to frame musical practices, conceptually aligning or distinguishing them in particular ways. This chapter will consider such questions in the context of Iranian music, focusing on how discourses of musical creativity have been historically shaped by the ‘logic of alterity’, and specifically on how the concept of improvisation has been mobilized for particular discursive ends.

Since the late 1980s, a central part of my research has sought to understand the underlying creative processes of Iranian classical music (*musiqi-ye asil-e Irāni*), originally a courtly tradition, but one that gained wider public presence from the early twentieth century with the arrival of public concerts, sound recording, broadcasting and so on. Since the performer plays a central creative role in this music, it is usually described as ‘improvised’, both in the literature and—since the mid-twentieth century, drawing on concepts initially adopted from European music—by local musicians, using a term, *bedāheh-navāzi*, taken from oral poetry. At the same time, this improvisation is always understood to be grounded in knowledge of the canonic repertoire, a collection of several hundred short pieces organized by mode and known collectively as the *radif*.¹ The formalization of the *radif* was undertaken in the middle to late nineteenth century by musicians at the royal Qajar courts, and it exists in a number of different but related versions. Originally (and still primarily) transmitted orally, parts of the repertoire came to be notated from the second decade of the twentieth century, and since the 1960s the complete *radif* has been available in both published notations and recordings. The most important part of a musician’s training is the precise memorization of this repertoire, usually in more than one version, a process that takes many years. Only then is a musician considered ready to start improvising, and always on the basis of the learned repertoire.

From the outset, my research was framed as a study of this thing called improvisation, a concept that I accepted uncritically, as did most of the scholars writing about Iranian music on whom I modelled my work. The aim was to understand how musicians improvise—how they move from learned repertoire to creative performance—and thereby to explore the underlying processes by which new music comes into being. To this end, and following similar studies, I selected one section of repertoire (*dastgāh Segāh*) and transcribed and compared a number of performances. I also looked beyond Iran to studies of other ‘improvised’ musics for possible insights that they might offer, thereby setting up a relationship of alterity between those musics that were apparently improvised and those that were not, and unwittingly reifying improvisation as a meaningful category of music-making.

As I became analytically immersed in the music, however, I increasingly came to question the usefulness of the concept of improvisation in relation to this music. In particular, analysis showed performances to be highly structured in ways that seemed to contradict the dominant discourses around creative practice. For example, it was possible to identify what might be termed ‘compositional principles’ or ‘developmental procedures’ as well as patterns and regularities in the ways in which musical material (motifs, phrases and other ideas) was extended and developed in performance. I also found that individual sections of repertoire differed considerably in the degree to which they were varied in performance (see Nooshin 1996, 2015). While this aspect of the music is rarely articulated or discussed by musicians, it was clear that performances involved a certain amount of pre-planning—musicians’ discourses to the contrary notwithstanding. This analytical work led me to problematize the normative and blanket labelling of the music as ‘improvised’, and its positioning as oppositional to both ‘non-improvised performance’ and ‘composition’—particularly the latter. I was of course familiar with Nettl’s work in this area, and notably his landmark article ‘Thoughts on improvisation: a comparative approach’ (1974), in which he suggests 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 a number of music scholars at this time no doubt reflected a broader discomfort with binary constructions, but Nettl was the first to apply this to the domain of creativity. While this was certainly an important paradigm shift at a time when the discourses were so polarized, my work suggested that the continuum model, based as it was on the existing reified categories, perhaps did not go far enough. If it was to go beyond alterity, a more holistic understanding of creative processes would ultimately require a dissolution of the composition/improvisation dichotomy altogether.

What began as a minor frustration with the limitations of essentialised categories for thinking about and discussing creative processes grew over the years as I grappled with the relationship between the improvisational and the compositional across a range of musics. From the early days of my research, I had found the ease with which scholars invoked dualisms of all kinds troubling: between written and oral/aural, art and folk, high and low, ‘authentic’ and (consequently) ‘inauthentic’, ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’, composed and improvised. However, it was the ‘new musicology’, including the work of Kramer, as well as the broader fields of critical theory and post-colonial studies, that revealed these pairings not as isolated phenomena but as part of a complex network of alterity-construction. As a consequence, binaries that I had previously held to be relatively innocuous were now loaded with ideological significance. I became particularly attentive to the ways in which the discourses around creativity—both musicological and lay—served as a vehicle

for marking and essentialising difference, and to the ways in which the central paradigms of ethno/musicology have been reliant on binary thinking more generally.

Not only did the concept of improvisation seem to have limited explanatory power in relation to what was happening in the music (more often serving to mystify than to clarify), but I also came to understand that its representation as something entirely different from composition in popular and academic discourse was ideologically freighted.² Ultimately, I found the term so unsatisfactory that I stopped using it in my analytical work, with the result that I often felt as though I was ‘swimming upstream’, to borrow Nettl’s metaphor. Regardless of my own ambivalence, the concept remains absolutely central to the music culture and the broader body of literature on Iranian music: the starting point for almost any discussion or publication on this music is the indisputable fact that Iranian music is improvised.

So it was that my attention shifted from thinking about improvisation as an analytical category which could help explain musical process to seeing improvisation as a discursive tool deployed for particular ends, something to be explained rather than to explain. As Elsdon observes, ‘the very idea of improvisation is so unstable, fragile, contingent, that we would do well to observe the way in which it is formed, and the reasons it is invoked’ (2012: 7). Specifically, in light of the fascinating disjuncture between musicians’ discourses of creative freedom (albeit underpinned by the *radif*) and the analytical evidence that showed the music to be highly structured, I became interested in the discursive work of improvisation as a concept and its impact on musical practice. In what follows, I consider some of the ways in which improvisation has come to be understood, constructed and imagined in Iran, and how such imaginings have changed in recent years as performers have sought to strategically align or ‘dis-align’ their music, on the basis of, and at the same time serving to construct, particular understandings of ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’. I consider how the verbal discourses around creative practice serve to mark musical boundaries, taking on a global dimension in recent years as musicians position their music within a wider domain of improvisation through which the music accrues new kinds of associations—such as the idea of ‘improvisation as freedom’, or as a means to invoke cross-cultural universalities. I address these issues with reference to ~~discourses within three musical~~ genres: Iranian classical music, jazz and what I term contemporary classical music.

The discursive domain of improvisation: creativity as an ‘icon of difference’

The idea of creativity in performance is nothing new to Iranian classical music and its predecessors, as evidenced in writings dating back as far back as the

tenth century CE, when it was a highly valued practice and musicians were expected to be responsive to listeners and performance settings (Blum 1998: 28–36). While the early historical record also includes named ‘composers’, by the early eighteenth century these had largely disappeared, in contrast to the neighbouring Ottoman tradition (Wright 2009: 27). However, greater contact between Iran and Europe during the nineteenth century led to the movement of musicians in both directions: European musicians visited and even worked in Iran, and Iranian musicians travelled to Europe, initially as part of the court entourage for state visits, and later to study—which in turn paved the way for new ideas and practices, most notably the introduction of notation. An important outcome of such changes was in relation to creative roles and specifically the emergence of the ‘composer’ (*āhangsāz*, lit. ‘songmaker’)³, who recorded his (invariably ‘his’) musical ideas using notation and whose status was enhanced by association with European culture. As this new figure became established, it was necessary to mark the distinction between the ‘composer’ and his Other, the traditional performer who had previously been ‘unmarked’.

As a result, a new binary division between composer/composition and performer/improvisation entered the music culture, and with it came the relegation of Iranian classical music to the new category of ‘improvised’. Not surprisingly, these new categories of creative practice took some time to become established and were regularly contested, particularly by older musicians. Thus, During reports an early anecdote about the court musician Hossein Gholi (d. 1915) who, on being ‘asked why he did not “compose” fixed pieces like his pupils, ... replied haughtily: “what I compose is what I play”’ (During 1987: 34), thereby challenging the new binary categories.

Even as late as the 1960s, there was a perception among some masters that improvisation gave musicians licence to transgress traditional limits; evidently this was based on a certain understanding of the term at a time when ‘improvisation as freedom’ was the dominant discourse in Europe and North America, an understanding that appeared to contradict the ethos of discipline and training so central to Iranian classical music.⁴ According to Nettl and Foltin, ‘Those who had been in contact with Western musicians and with Western ways of thinking about music were familiar with the concept and accepted it readily. Others, however, were somewhat baffled by it’ (1972: 12). They report that many musicians continued to think in terms not of ‘improvisation’ but simply of ‘performance’, with the differences between renditions a normal part of the tradition. This view was endorsed by musician Dariush Talai (in Shahrnazdar 2004a: 96), who compares the musical performer to a reciter of poetry, and suggests that it would be better to refer to ‘performance’ (*ejrā*) or ‘interpretation’ (*ravāyat*), rather than ‘improvisation’ (*bedāheh-navāzi*).

Whatever its complex history, by the 1970s the idea of improvisation and the term *bedāheh-navāzi* had become fully accepted into the music culture, eventually coming to occupy a central conceptual position, indeed a defining element

of the music. It was referred to regularly in programme and album liner notes, with some teachers starting to discuss aspects of improvisation with pupils—something that had rarely happened in the past.

The establishment of formal higher education in music in Iran in the 1960s encouraged greater reflexivity among musicians in relation to creative performance and a wider acceptance of the concept, as did musicians' growing contact with and familiarity with discourses outside Iran, including writings by Euro-American scholars and recordings which regularly framed the music as 'improvised'. All of the musicians with whom I spoke or corresponded during my research readily used the term *bedāheh-navāzi* (or simply 'improvisation'), and their discourses emphasized the absolute rigour of the training process on the one hand, and on the other an idealized, spiritual and quasi-mystical idea of improvisation as a matter of inspiration that was beyond explanation. These quotations from prominent masters illustrate the latter and are typical of musicians' discourses on the topic:

This is really something intuitive. The musician has experienced and felt [*hes*] it and it comes naturally [*tabi'i*]. It is not worked out [consciously] [*hesāb nemikoneh*]. It is intuitive, but based on what a musician has already heard. He doesn't think about it—'now I'll go up one pitch, now I'll come down again' [in the case of sequence]—it just happens like that. (Faramarz Payvar, interview, 8 Nov. 1990)⁵

Improvisation has a close relationship with the unconscious, a relationship from outside oneself, like an inspiration [*elhām*]. But it doesn't come about for everyone. (Shahram Nazeri, interview, 23 Apr. 2010)

In improvisation if you have feeling [*hes*] and concentration [*tamarkoz*] the choice of direction [*masir*] is not very much up to you; it's the feeling that takes you forward. Now, if these feelings are blended [*tarkib*] with those of other musicians, the result is something magical. (Hossein Alizadeh, in Shahrnazar 2004b: 126)

The last quotation is in reference to Alizadeh's 'Concert-e Nava',⁶ which he describes as 'completely improvised', in the sense of involving no prior planning, unlike some of his other works.⁷

In his work on jazz, Elsdon notes the tension between talking 'about a practice we label as improvisation, while at the same time talking about the idea of improvisation—two things which share the same term, but which operate in a complex relationship in which they are sometimes mutually supportive, and sometimes in open conflict' (2012: 7).⁸ Similarly, in the case of Iranian classical music, I have been fascinated by the contrast between improvisation as an *idea* (seen in its reification and separation from composition and its representation

in contemporary musical culture by the naturalized and rarely questioned discourses discussed above) and improvisation as *practice* (the analytical evidence for which shows the music to be highly structured and compositional). This disjuncture invites a number of possible explanations, but I am particularly interested here in the idea of improvisation as a site of alterity-construction, and creativity as an ‘icon of difference’, to paraphrase Michael Tenzer (2000: 435).

In order to explore this further, it is important to understand that the emergence of binary thinking in relation to creative practice described above was part of broader processes of social change in Iran which began in the late nineteenth century and which gathered pace in the twentieth. This is not to suggest that aspects of binary thought were previously absent (mind–body dualism, for example, has a long history in Iran), but that increased contact with European music, terminologies and concepts encouraged particular ways of thinking about musical difference. As with many other countries in the early twentieth century, Iran’s encounter with modernizing 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 modernization on the one hand and more traditional factions on the other, with modernity positively valenced through official discourses. This tension was reflected in the various dualities underpinning musical thought: between a largely undifferentiated ‘West’ (*qarb*) and a similarly essentialised ‘East’ (*sharq*), and between tradition and modernity, improvised and composed, oral and written, and so on. Those dualisms relating to creative process arguably served as the primary markers of difference between Western art music (or Western-style notated compositions by Iranians) and (‘improvised’) Iranian classical music. One of the most disturbing indicators of this ‘discourse of difference’ was that from the early twentieth century, Western (art) music came to be labelled as ‘scientific’ (*elmi*) and Iranian music as its unscientific (*qayr-e elmi*) ‘other’. While this discursive formation is encountered less frequently today, it is still occasionally invoked and represents a vestige of historical ‘self-othering’ in which Western music was normatively understood as ‘scientific’ and superior (see Nooshin 2015: 40–1).

There are interesting parallels with Iran elsewhere. For example, Amanda Weidman discusses the case of South India, where much binary thinking in relation to music and sound also emerged directly from the dichotomies between modernity and tradition. As she argues, following the work of Mitchell (2000):

Modernity is thus not a purely Western or European project; on the contrary, it is constituted in and by the colonial encounter. . . . [M]odernity 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. (Weidman 2006: 6–7)

Weidman discusses how these colonizing binaries served to ‘orchestrate the ways in which Western classical music and Indian classical music, defined by their mutual opposition, are allowed to meet’ (ibid.: 5). In the case of Karnatic music, local discourses focused on the centrality of the voice and oral tradition, which were positioned in opposition 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. (ibid.: 246)

What is interesting, then, is how such ‘discourses of difference’, rooted in broader social binaries, come to frame musical practices, aligning or distinguishing them in particular ways. As Weidman (2006) argues, the vocal nature of Indian music and its ties to orality came to stand for the difference between South Indian classical music and Western music, for tradition and ‘authenticity’. In Iran, it wasn’t the voice–instrument divide that represented the central axis of significance; rather, the mapping of musical difference depended on positioning the oral, ephemeral and improvised nature of Iranian classical music against something apparently more planned and structured as represented by Western notions of (notated) composition. Indeed, the concept of ‘improvisation’ can arguably ~~be sustained relationally only~~ in this way: it has no meaning outside its relationship with ‘composition’. Talking to me about creative practice, Iranian classical musicians regularly invoked such discourses of difference and presented these two domains as entirely separate and incompatible. For them there was no question but that within the accepted categories, Iranian classical music was improvised.

For many years, I anxiously sought to understand and reconcile the differences between improvisation as an idea (based on talking to musicians, published interviews and the broader literature) and improvisation as practice (based on musical analysis). In particular, my ethnomusicological training had led me to assume a direct and causal relationship between what musicians say and what they do, and the primacy of the former in explaining the latter. Only

later did I come to understand that in the case of Iran there was no such necessary relationship, that in fact the purpose of the discourses is not to explain the inner workings of the music but something else entirely: both an identity marker used to invoke musical and cultural difference, and specifically to distinguish Iranian classical music ('traditional', 'improvised', 'oral') from Western and Western-style art music composition ('modern', 'composed', 'notated'), and a form of validating mystique. In relation to the latter, Elsdon notes, 'there is capital to be gained by claiming the status of improvised. . . . Music gains a particular kind of potential when it is understood as being improvised, a potential which affords particular kinds of listening experiences and interpretations' (2012: 2, 7). The latter is noticeable in the orientalist positioning of Iranian classical music as found in its global circulation, where concerts, recordings, musician websites and so on fetishize improvisation and enable musicians to project themselves and their music in certain ways. But the same is also found 'at home'. One musician I spoke to reported on a series of concerts by a highly respected performer, held on consecutive nights in Tehran in the late 2000s and billed as '*Bedāheh-navāzi dar Dastgāh-e Māhur*' ('Improvisation in *Dastgāh Māhur*'). Having attended all three performances, this musician noted that they were almost identical. Rather than interpret this as a lack of musical skill, however, he took it as an indication that the material had been worked on, rather in the manner of a composition:

It is improvisation, but improvisation that has been worked on beforehand; it has a structure. He wants to play something new. It isn't *radif* but he has worked on the basis of *radif* and he plays that all three nights. The person who attends the concert once accepts it [as improvisation]; but when I go to all three, I see that he has played the same thing. (Anonymous, interview, summer 2013)

The idea of improvisation that has been worked on might seem to be a contradiction but is in fact indicative of a move away from the kinds of polarized binaries discussed above. I return to this below.

Discursive alignments with jazz

Alongside the dominant discourses of creativity described above, I have been intrigued to find others that seem to pull in the opposite direction: to connect rather than separate, and specifically to connect Iranian classical music with other ostensibly 'improvised' traditions. Such alignments represent the other side of the discursive coin. Indeed, it is interesting that the concept of improvisation has, over the last thirty years or so, encouraged musicians to think of their music in a wider global context as belonging to a broad 'family' of improvised musics. Thus, musicians often sought to explain creative processes for

me by drawing parallels, and even suggesting a special affinity between Iranian classical music and these other musics. Dariush Talai, for instance, described his interest in ‘musics which are close to the culture of Iranian music such as Indian music, Arabic music, Turkish music and even jazz’ (in Shahrnazdar 2004a: 133), and Indian classical music and jazz were often cited in this way by musicians that I spoke to. Alongside such ‘discourses of affinity’, based on a perceived connection between Iranian classical music and other improvised genres, there have been a number of collaborations in recent years. These include an early partnership between Hossein Alizadeh and percussionist Madjid Khaladj with Indian musicians Rajiv Taranath (*sarod*) and Swapan Chaudhuri (*tablā*), with concerts in the USA and Europe in the autumn of 1997; the group ‘Ghazal’, with Iranian *kamāncheh* player Kayhan Kalhor and Indian musicians, Shujaat Khan (*sitār*) and Swapan Chaudhuri (*tablā*), which has produced four albums to date⁹; and a joint album with Kalhor and Turkish musician Erdal Erzincan (*The Wind*, 2006, ECM).

While the historico-geo-politico-social threads between Iranian, Arabic, Turkish and South Asian (particularly Hindustani) musics are fairly clear, the exact nature of the ‘closeness’ invoked by Talai and others between Iranian classical music and jazz is less obvious. Why invoke jazz, with its lack of historical or musical connection to Iranian music, rather than any other of the many possible candidates from the imaginary family of improvisation? I believe that the answer lies in the various symbolic meanings that have become attached to jazz in Iran, and that have been strongly influenced by broader globally circulating discourses. In this section I consider how such discourses have provided for a conceptual alignment that has no musical basis beyond the idea that both Iranian classical music and jazz are ‘improvised’. Specifically, there are two metaphoric domains that seem particularly significant and that I have encountered both in discourse and less explicitly through the various activities around jazz in Iran. These are ‘jazz as universalism’ and ‘jazz as freedom’. I discuss each in turn.¹⁰

While very much a minority interest, there has been a small jazz scene in Iran since before the 1979 [revolution](#), and today there are a number of Iranian jazz musicians, both in Iran and in diaspora (see Nooshin, 2016).¹¹ It is also worth noting that compared with other forms of Euro-American popular music such as rock and pop, jazz has been less affected by government restrictions since 1979. This is largely due to its historical associations with intellectualism, which have afforded it a somewhat malleable status, allowing it to be positioned on the ‘art’ side of the art–popular divide, and rendering it less problematic in terms of government policy.¹² For many musicians [to](#) whom I talked, jazz seems to embody a universalist ethos which is particularly attractive to a certain section of Iran’s sizeable youth population, including many musicians who have sought to disengage from, and in some cases actively challenge, the prevalent nationalistic discourses of official government rhetoric, as well as those that

have long informed Iranian music culture. Despite its low profile compared with other popular music genres, jazz is interesting for the ways in which it has provided a space for cross-musical/cultural collaborations rarely seen in Iran. This was particularly noticeable in the relatively liberal cultural climate of the early to mid-2000s, when the idea of ‘dialogue among civilizations’ was promoted during the Presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005). Such collaborations have typically involved Iranian (classical and other) musicians and visiting European (particularly French) jazz musicians, and several have resulted in commercial albums.¹³

One such collaboration took place in the summer of 2003 at the Sa’ad Abad Palace (a former residence of the Shah where concerts are now held) in an affluent part of north Tehran. Co-sponsored by the French Embassy, it brought together French jazz musician Matthieu Donarier and Iranian bagpipes (*ney ambān*) player Saeed Shanbehzadeh and his band playing a fusion of jazz and the music of Shanbehzadeh’s native Bushehr in the southern gulf region. Another French–Iranian collaboration took place in the same summer, also in north Tehran at the Niavaran Cultural Centre, organized by Hermes Records¹⁴ and the Cultural Centre of the French Embassy to mark Fête de la Musique (International Music Day) on 21 June. The concert is documented on the album *Paris-Tehran Project* (2004) and involved two bands: the Iranian Shargh Music Ensemble and the France-based Alain Brunet Didgeridoo Orchestra. Musicians included *tablā* player Darshan Jot Singh Anand and the Iranian musician Morteza Esmaili on didgeridoo and Jew’s harp. The music was largely jazz-inspired but also included strong elements of ‘world-fusion’. According to the liner notes, the concert was originally intended to be in three parts, with each band performing separately and then together. In the event, the concert turned into what is described as ‘a complete Jam Concert from the beginning to the end under the name of Paris-Tehran Project’.

In 2005, Hermes released another album, *Spring in Niavaran*, with highlights from several concerts in the Niavaran Cultural Centre (in May and June 2004), with visiting jazz and folk musicians from France (Christophe Joneau Trio and Hamon Martin Quartet) and Sweden (Bazar Blå, with guest Iranian musicians Ali Boustan on *oud* and Ali Rahimi on *tombak*), and the Persiano Ensemble with Norwegian clarinetist Kjetil Selvik and Iranian musicians Mohammad Reza Ebrahmimi (*oud*) and Ali Samadour (voice and percussion). The groups perform separately as well as together for several pieces, and track 4 (‘Ghazal’), listed as ‘jam session’ in the liner notes, is a particularly striking fusion of French-style jazz with Middle Eastern rhythms and sonorities (Audio Example 10.1).

There have also been other, more recent collaborations. For example, the album *Songs from a Persian Garden* (2007) is a recording of a concert at the Italian Embassy in Tehran in May 2007 with vocalist sisters Marjan and Mahsa Vahdat, Iranian musicians Atabak Elyasi (*setār*) and Amir Eslami (*nei*), and four

Norwegian jazz musicians: Knut Reiersrud (guitar), Audun Erlien (bass), David Wallumrod (keyboards) and Rune Arnesen (drums and percussion). Musically, the collaboration largely comprises the overlaying of Persian vocals onto an accompaniment in which jazz and Iranian music meet but rarely merge. Since the lyrics (which are all in Persian, except for track 7, a blending of the Iranian lullaby ‘*Gole Laleh*’ and ‘She’s Got the Whole World in her Hands’) tend to dominate the texture and because none of the singing is in a jazz style, jazz elements are largely confined to the accompaniment and rarely foregrounded. Of the Iranian performers, only the *nei* player, Amir Eslami, occasionally moves into a jazz idiom.

Outside Iran, a recent ~~example of a~~ collaboration involving Iranian music and jazz was between Mehdi Rostami (*setār*), Adib Rostami (*kamāncheh*), Pouya Mahmoudi (guitar) and jazz saxophonist and clarinetist Gilad Atzmon at a concert billed as ‘Jazz East’ (King’s Place, London, 7 Mar. 2015). Indeed, worth noting in relation to the discursive alignment of Iranian music and jazz is the appearance of a number of Iranian musicians at the London Jazz Festival (Ardavan Kamkar in 2000, Kayhan Kalhor in 2011) and other such events in recent years. Examples such as these again raise questions about the reification of improvisation and the reasoning by which Iranian classical music’s positioning as an ‘improvised’ genre renders it a suitable candidate for inclusion in a jazz festival. Of course, events such as the London Jazz Festival tend to spread their eclectic nets wide, and Iranian classical music is by no means the only ‘non-jazz’ genre to have been embraced in this way. Nevertheless, its inclusion in jazz events outside Iran is interesting given the discursive connections between Iranian music and jazz made by musicians within Iran—although it may tell us more about the reification of improvisation more generally than about ~~Iran~~ per se.

Irrespective of the artistic merits or truly collaborative nature of such projects, what is of interest here is the symbolic investment in collaborations of this kind which typically present jazz as a culturally neutral ground on which ideas of universalism and cross-cultural understanding can be played out. With its malleable sense of place, jazz seems to offer a fertile space for encounters of this kind, along with the idea of jazz as transformative. As the producer of *Songs from a Persian Garden*, Erik Hillestad, writes in the liner notes: ‘We need a new image of Iran in our time. We need to see an image different from the one promoted in the Western media’, the implication being that music, in this case jazz, can play a role in this ‘image transformation’. Interestingly, in the late 1990s, jazz was also mobilized by a government organization in Iran as a symbol of cross-cultural dialogue, with a seminar on jazz at the Centre for Dialogue Among Civilisations in Tehran, established in 1999 during Khatami’s presidency and closely associated with reformist ideas (it was closed in 2007; Tazmini 2009: 139).¹⁵ This linking of jazz with cross-cultural encounter and ‘universality’ has no doubt been influenced by similar discourses outside Iran, particularly since those who make such linkages tended to be younger musicians who are more aware of and knowledgeable about a range of musics than

earlier generations. Such musicians are generally well educated and from relatively affluent backgrounds, as well as cosmopolitan in outlook, particularly through their engagement with digital communications technologies (which arrived in Iran in the early 1990s and became more widely available from the late 1990s), and (for some) through travel. These tropes are particularly interesting in light of earlier debates, as documented by scholars such as Ingrid Monson (1998: 157–9), who describes similar ideas at work in the ‘transnationalism’ of jazz musicians such as John Coltrane and Miles Davis, starting in the late 1940s and reaching a height in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

As well as invoking jazz as a universalizing medium, many Iranian musicians talked about jazz and other forms of improvised performance as an expression of individual and social freedom. This powerful metaphoric association has of course been noted by many writers, including Monson:

Improvisation has often been taken as a metaphor for freedom, both musical and social, especially in jazz. . . . That it might be possible to experience or even create freedom through improvisation—a process simultaneously musical, personal, and cultural—was a belief held by many in the jazz world of the 1950s and 1960s. This utopian vision remains prominent in contemporary jazz aesthetics. (1998: 149, 163)

And yet it is interesting that in the context of Iranian classical music, while the discourses emphasize performers’ *musical* freedom, improvisation itself rarely serves as a utopian metaphor of personal or social freedom as described by Monson. It is therefore worth asking whether indirectly referencing such symbolic meanings through alignments with jazz is, for younger musicians, a way of obliquely indexing freedoms which do not have a space for expression within the classical tradition itself—at least not through the practice of improvisation (they may be found, for instance, in some lyrics). A good example of the symbolic connection between jazz and notions of personal freedom in the context of Iran can be seen in *Sedā-ye Dovvom* (lit.: ‘Second Voice’, translated as *Back Vocal*; Mirtahmasb 2004), a documentary film about restrictions on female singers in Iran where solo singing in public (other than to female-only audiences) has been prohibited since 1979. At the same time, singers find creative ways of making their voices heard, including through various ‘loopholes’ such as the fact that group singing is allowed.¹⁶ The film includes a scene from a concert given by the experimental Piccolo Band at Tehran’s Farabi Hall in 2002, in which a brief jazz/scat-style solo (which ~~therefore was~~ technically illegal) by female vocalist Sara Naeeni takes on immense symbolic power in creating a ‘temporary autonomous zone’¹⁷ which signifies the singer’s (and listeners’) freedom. The solo lasts only 30 seconds, but its significance is clear to the audience, whose response is ecstatic; as she finishes her solo, Naeeni raises her eyebrows and attempts to contain a smile.¹⁸ The symbolic connection between improvisation and notions of freedom, both personal and political, is clear.

Returning to the earlier points, one might argue that such conceptual alignments between Iranian classical music and jazz simply reinforce the binaries and the reification of improvisation described above. On the other hand, examining the broader discourses around jazz in Iran suggests a more complex picture of the discursive work of improvisation in this context in allowing musicians to signify the value that they place on personal freedom and on notions of universality, as well as demonstrating their ‘cosmopolitan capital’ in the form of knowledge about other musics—and all of this on the basis of a highly tenuous musical connection. Not for the first time, discourse is deployed to align music in particular ways, playing with notions of sameness and difference that may have very little to do with ‘the music itself’, allowing musicians to position themselves and their music strategically as bona fide members of the ‘improvisation club’ and as part of a global network of improvised musics.

The ‘new wave’: transcending difference?

Through the many years that I have worked on Iranian classical music, I have often wondered what form a discourse that went beyond the improvisation–composition binary might take, and, more broadly, what the possibilities are for discourses that transcend alterity and that ‘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). Or is our understanding of the world inescapably tied to such dualisms? The discourses of creativity that dominated my earlier research on Iranian classical music remain deeply embedded in the music culture, but in recent years some classically trained musicians have started to deconstruct such discourses, as well as experimenting with creative practices that for the first time challenge the hegemony of the *radif* as the sole framework for performance. These changes point to radically new ways of thinking about improvisation and its relationship with composition, something that in part can be attributed to the now well-established body of graduate musicians who are less prepared than their predecessors to follow tradition for its own sake. In this final section, I focus on two musicians who exemplify this trend: Amir Eslami, a performer of *nei* (end-blown flute) and a composer who gained a BA and MA at the University of Tehran, and who taught composition at the Tehran Art University until 2015; and Hooshyar Khayam, a pianist and composer with a BA from Tehran Art University, specializing in piano performance, but who also studied *radif* for four years on *kamāncheh* (spike fiddle) and holds a DMA in composition from the University of Cincinnati. Until 2011, Hooshyar also taught at Tehran Art University.

Amir and Hooshyar had known each other for many years, but were operating in quite separate musical spheres, Hooshyar as a (Western) classical pianist and Amir as an Iranian classical musician. In 2009 they began working together

and the following year released an album, *All of You (Tamām-e To*, Hermes Records), the first collaboration between musicians from these particular musical backgrounds. The music is rooted in the sounds and ethos of Iranian classical music; it takes inspiration from the *radif* but lies outside the specific *radif* repertoire and therefore is not part of the classical tradition, strictly speaking.¹⁹ As I have discussed elsewhere (Nooshin 2015: 162–77), through their collaborative work Amir and Hooshyar have developed what they refer to as ‘*shiveh-ye novin-e bedāheh-navāzi dar musiqi-ye Irani*’ (which they translate into English as ‘a new approach to improvisation in Persian music’). This is how Hooshyar describes the 2010 album:

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 with author, London, 16 July 2011)

One of the most striking aspects of this new approach is a shift from the polarized discourses of the classical tradition discussed earlier to a foregrounding of compositional thinking in relation to performance. In interview, they expressed this variously as ‘*negāh-e āhāngsāzāneh*’ (‘a compositional view/approach’), ‘*tafaktor-e āhāngsāzi*’ (‘compositional thinking’) or ‘improvisation that is supported by compositional thinking’ (interview with author, London, 26 Nov. 2011). Hooshyar explains:

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. (ibid.)

In using phrases such as ‘worked-out improvisation’ or ‘improvisation that is supported by compositional thinking’, these musicians are clearly seeking to reconfigure the relationship between improvisation and composition and, once more, to blur the line between ‘performer’ and ‘composer’, bridging the conceptual divide that has dominated Iranian classical music for decades and returning to the discourses that predated the arrival of European ideas about creative roles. No doubt such ideas have been influenced by their training in composition: like many music graduates, Amir and Hooshyar have both studied (and, in the case of Amir, taught) composition as well as performance, and both have won international awards for their work (see Nooshin 2015: 163).

Amir and Hooshyar have made their ideas available in the public domain with an eagerness that contrasts starkly with earlier generations of musicians. In interview they described their working practices in detail for me, including the processes by which pieces such as ‘*Khiāl*’ (‘Illusion’, track 6 on the album) came into being—a piece on which the musicians initially worked alone improvisationally, subsequently assembling the resulting materials in a more collaborative and compositional manner (see Nooshin 2015: 170–1). Their description involved a level of analytical detail—including motivic analysis, identifying themes and their development, and using terms such as *gostaresh* (‘expansion’) and *degargoan-shodan* (‘transformation’)—and an articulation of compositional intent (in the context of an ostensibly improvised tradition) that is quite new to Iranian music. Amir and Hooshyar also discussed what they considered to be an important characteristic of their music: an economy of material as they explore themes, sometimes exhaustively, building up from a ‘nucleus’ (*hasteh*) rather than stringing together assorted ideas without realizing their full potential, which is how they described what they referred to as ‘traditional improvisation’ (*bedāheh-navāzi-ye sonnati*). Their description contrasts with my analyses of traditional practice, which, as noted earlier, revealed a strong element of compositional development that—crucially—is rarely explicitly discussed by musicians. Amir and Hooshyar’s approach is significant in the way it both challenges the normative binary discourses (between improvisation and composition) and sets up a new binary between their own practice and ‘traditional improvisation’—a binary which is not borne out by my analytical findings, but which for them nonetheless performs important cultural work.

Amir and Hooshyar belong to a generation of broadly educated musicians, cosmopolitan and internationalist in outlook and experience, formally trained in techniques of composition, some educated abroad. They are a very different kind of musician from when I started my research: more connected with the outside world, and able to access a spectrum of musics and ways of *thinking* about music and about creativity. And they are not the only ones seeking to redefine their relationship with tradition, challenging accepted binaries and articulating new understandings of creative practice. From time to time such questions are aired publicly, offering an interesting insight into changing local understandings of creative practice and its associated discourses. An example is a seminar held in January 2011 at the Shahr-e Ketāb bookshop in Tehran soon after the release of *All of You*, which focused on that album. This was part of an ongoing series of public events organized by Hermes, and it generated much interest among musicians and others involved in the local arts scene. The panel comprised Amir and Hooshyar, together with Hermes director Ramin Sadighi and music critic, composer and lecturer Kiavash Sahebnassagh. Panel members discussed the album and answered questions from the audience. One of the central points of discussion was around the definition of, and the need to redefine

(or at least refine our understanding of), improvisation and its relationship with composition. Ramin Sadighi observed:

Many people will ask, for example, when Mr Alizadeh and Pejman Hadadi go on stage, are they really improvising—only? We know that they will have already decided to work, for example in the mode [māyeh] of *Navā*. At least the starting point is agreed. It isn't that they just go on stage and see whatever happens. It is possible to philosophize about this and talk about inspiration coming from the heavens, and so on, but it isn't like that. We know that artists draw from what they have learnt and what is around them, and make decisions about what to play. It is after the initial decisions are made that they can give themselves some freedom. . . . So I want to ask what kind of improvisation is this that the *nei* has been over-dubbed 12 times, for example [referring to the piece '*Khiyāl*']? This is not improvisation. This is Mr Amir Eslami who has gone into the studio and played a line 12 times and these have been put on top of one another. In no way can we count this as improvisation.²⁰

Hooshyar responded by problematizing the binary itself:

I think it's possible to define these words in a different way [from the past], particularly improvisation [*bedāheh*]. . . . Until a certain point, we could separate these and say 'this is in the genre of improvisation' and 'this is in the genre of composition [*āhangsāzi*]', and these are separate from one another. But it's a very difficult thing to do, and not correct. . . . Is it because it happens in the moment that we call it improvised? Or if it doesn't happen in the moment and gets written down on paper, we call it composition? This separation has taken shape in our minds through our musical education: that improvisation is a thing that you play and you don't write, and composition is something that you write and maybe gets played later, and you have to practise it. If you don't practise it, it isn't composition. This way of thinking has changed somewhat. It can be improvisation and it can be composition as well.

Contributing to the discussion, Kiavash Sahebnassagh suggested that one might think in terms not only of *bedāheh-navāzi*, but also of what he called *bedāheh-andishi* ('improvisational thinking')—'where two people working together make an agreement [*qarār*] and define an aim [*maqсад*] beforehand, for example to make these pieces in the space [*fazā*] of [mode] *Dashti* and with a hint [*sāyeh*, lit. 'shadow'] of *Navā*'—and even *bedāheh-nevisi* ('improvisational writing'), again suggesting a move away from simple binaries.²¹ This kind of discussion around discourses of creative practice is quite new, and a seminar of this kind would have been unimaginable even ten years ago. It gives a flavour of some of the ideas now coming to the fore.

So what are the implications of this new trend for how improvisation is understood and imagined in Iran? It is clear that the work of Amir and Hooshyar evinces 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 that depends on alignment rather than opposition. Indeed, given my earlier experiences, to have musicians talk through the details of pieces with enthusiasm and understanding was a methodological dream come true, contrasted with the mystified and reticent responses of earlier participants who largely insisted that what I was looking for was beyond explanation. But more than this, in talking about their music Amir and Hooshyar present a carefully crafted narrative: in interviews and public presentations at conferences and seminars in Iran and abroad, the story they tell is arguably as much a performance as the music itself. And the story is in part about transcending earlier binary thinking in relation to creative practice. But, as with the case of alignments with jazz discussed earlier, it is also about enabling musicians to invoke cross-cultural universalities and to present themselves as well-informed about musical practices (in this case, compositional practices²²) outside Iran, thereby accruing cultural capital. For these outward-looking cosmopolitan musicians, the discursive space comes to represent a particular way of being in the world, somewhere to invoke musical practices that connect rather than divide, that transcend alterity and go beyond the binaries of improvisation–composition, tradition–modernity, East–West, and local–global, for particular strategic ends. That they can do so only by setting up a new axis of difference—with ‘traditional improvisation’ presented (against the analytical evidence) as less compositional by virtue of those musicians’ silence about the compositional process—shows the complex relationship between discourse and practice. It also suggests that attempts to transcend relationships of alterity may inevitably create new ones.

Concluding thoughts

As an analytic-conceptual tool for understanding creative processes in Iranian music, I have not found improvisation to be a particularly helpful descriptor or category. I thus concur with the several authors quoted at the start of this chapter that from a scholarly point of view, the ‘rationale for studying it as distinct from the rest of music making’ (Solis 2009: 9) has become increasingly untenable. From the perspective of Iranian musicians, however, the discursive domain of ‘improvisation’ clearly represents a fertile arena for drawing conceptual alignments of identity or alterity with other musical traditions based around certain understandings of ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’. This chapter has explored some of the ways in which such alignments work in different musical contexts and their role in shaping the discourses around creative practice.

The issue of alterity has been central throughout, and whether it is ultimately possible—or desirable—to go beyond alterity, I argue that a greater awareness of its workings and logic is important in understanding the underlying operations of power within specific musical traditions and in scholarly work. In the case of Iran, the importance of improvisation as a concept seems to lie less in its ability to describe musical process and more in enabling musicians to position themselves and their music in particular ways. Regardless of how the concept entered the tradition (or how accurately it describes the music), it has taken on a life of its own, adapted to meet the needs of a complex musico-cultural web, and acquiring heightened resonance in an increasingly globalized world.

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