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Seed ideas and creativity in Hindustani raga music: beyond the composition–improvisation dialectic

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ABSTRACT

While Hindustani music is often celebrated around the world as a powerful improvising tradition, paradoxically no equivalent term for 'improvisation' exists in the lexicon of Hindustani music. Terms such as *badhat*, *vistaar* and *upaj*, which signify growth, expansion and spontaneity, are often conflated with Western notions of improvisation—yet Ranade has alerted us to the unintended consequences that arise from the use of the term 'improvisation' in the context of Hindustani music. When creative growth and expansion are expressed as improvisation they are re-inscribed with the values and experiences of another ontology, and in the process these concepts become detached from the broader resonance they have in their source culture. This article argues that a model of fixed seed ideas which are creatively expanded or grown during the performance of a raga provides a more culturally relevant and appropriate conceptual and analytical framework for understanding the processes of spontaneity and creativity in Hindustani music than is possible through a dialectic formulated around the terms 'composition' and 'improvisation'.

KEYWORDS

Musical creativity; improvisation; improvisatory practices; Hindustani music; seed ideas

Introduction

For the last couple of centuries, the twin musical processes of composition and improvisation have been dialectically linked in the Western musicological imagination: it seems that any discussion of improvisation cannot help mentioning composition in one way or another. Laudan Nooshin draws our attention to the fact that:

... whilst most acknowledge the difficulties with definition, few diagnose the problem as rooted in an essentialized binary construct which developed in the context of one specific music tradition (European art music) at a particular historical moment, in response to particular musical needs. (2015: 21)

Leaving aside why this dialectic retains such prominence today, a recurrent theme in recent scholarship on improvisation is that such a simplistic binary fails to represent the complexity of a greater and more diverse musical reality. In a previous discussion, Nooshin noted that 'many of the discourses surrounding improvisation and composition continue to depend on the reification of particular aspects of music-making and that, whatever their musical merit, there are important ideological implications' (2003: 242).

Some two decades ago, Bruno Nettl noted that case studies of improvisation had largely focused on three areas: South Asia, Iran and jazz studies (1998: 3). Since then an increasing number of ethnomusicological publications have addressed a widening number of musical cultures. While reflection upon and engagement with the term improvisation has not been really challenged in many instances, some authors have reflected on the consequences of imposing the term—and the specific historical, cultural and ideological issues that gave rise to it—universally, on all musical practices and creativity.

Given the ubiquity with which improvisation is entwined in Western music scholarship, questioning the universality of the term might seem somewhat reactionary. At the same time, failure to consider this issue risks unnecessarily limiting our ability to engage with broader issues of creativity in music. Stephen Blum describes a ‘reification of “improvisation” that would inspire us to look for its manifestation in different cultures’ (2009: 254). Elsewhere, he rightly points out that:

improvisation ... is a topic that forces us to confront formidable problems of translation. Different translations are possible, and we must ask what alternative terms might have been used by performers or by outside observers to denote each component in a sequence of actions. (Blum 1998: 28)

Cautionary statements about the need to consider spontaneity and creativity in its own cultural context date back some decades, as Habib Hassan Touma indicates in his article on the ‘improvisatory process’ in Arabic *taqasim*:

In order to render a clear and comprehensible account of this phenomenon, it is above all necessary to avoid the definitions and technical terms used in European music and to rid oneself of the opinions expressed by European writers on this subject. (1971: 38)

Nooshin has likewise stated that she has ‘become increasingly uneasy with the predominantly essentialist and dualistic discourses’ about improvisation in Iranian art music, *musiqi-e-assil* (2003: 245), a line of thought developed further in her recent book (Nooshin 2015). Writing about ‘improvisation’ in Arabic music, Ali Jihad Racy also asserts that ‘ethnomusicologists and Western scholars in general appear to take an extremely compartmentalized approach to studying the creative phenomenon’ (1998: 108).

In this discussion I explore the relevance of the term ‘improvisation’ in framing creativity and spontaneity in the performance of Hindustani music. It is certainly not uncommon to come across the terms composition and improvisation in discussions of Hindustani music. Even so, it is clear to anyone with some acquaintance with Hindustani music that these concepts do not signify the same thing as they do in the music and musical thought of nineteenth-century Western classical music, twentieth-century bebop or the practices of international copyright laws, although it is seldom articulated what these differences may be.

Ashok Da. Ranade, a prominent scholar of Hindustani music, points out that the uncritical introduction of terms such as improvisation into the lexicon and musical imagination of Hindustani music needs to be approached with caution:

Has the non-Indian thinking on Indian music imposed on us this concept, especially in connection with Indian art music? Have we accepted this orientation gladly because improvisation is lauded as an indicator of a meritorious musicality? (2008: 216)

While this question may have been addressed in jazz via the improvisation as ‘freedom’ trope, the question of whom, or what, bestows merit in the Indian context, and for what purpose, does warrant further scrutiny. Nevertheless, putting aside questions of the appropriateness and relevance of the term ‘improvisation’ to Hindustani music for the time being, it is enough to note that the terms ‘composition’ and ‘improvisation’ are often encountered in discussions of Hindustani music, especially when such discussions take place in non-Indian languages such as English. Even so, it is commonly understood that these terms do not signify the same thing as they do in the music and musical thought of, as already stated for example, nineteenth-century Western classical music or twentieth-century be-bop jazz, although it is seldom articulated what these differences may be.

At the same time, it has often been pointed out that there is no single term in any Indian languages that carries the same meaning as improvisation does in English. This in itself alerts us to the idea that the musical processes at play in Hindustani music are conceived differently and perhaps cannot be meaningfully accommodated within such a term. Ranade notes that:

what is significant is that not much voluntarily undertaken discussion of improvisation is available in musicological literature, even in regional languages! (2008: 217)

The emphasis here on ‘voluntarily undertaken discussion’ carries a cautionary note concerning the imposition of a distinct ‘concept’ of improvisation in Hindustani music.

How, then, might we approach an analysis of performance creativity in Hindustani music that is not mediated primarily through these two ‘imposed’ terms? To this end, I seek to identify and explore more culturally and musically relevant ways to frame to such an inquiry. In doing so I draw upon Hindustani music and terms that signify musical processes which might be considered improvisatory practices in other contexts. Of significance here are terms such as *vistaar* and *badhat* that imply an inherent sense of expansion or growth, and *upaj* and *andaaz* that describe processes of creativity and invention. I aim to explore the creative musical process in Hindustani music from the vantage point of the expansion and growth of fixed material in performance.

Qualifying and defining degrees of fixedness

To approach the idea of expansion or growth as a creative dynamic in Hindustani music, it is necessary first to ask: what is the fixed element or ‘thing’ that is open to expansion? To the extent that ragas contain melodic elements which are ‘fixed’ and unalterable, they can be thought of as being ‘composed’, yet the boundaries of such ‘fixedness’ are not always clearly delineated and there is no stark distinction between ‘fixed’ and ‘unfixed’ material: rather, as my later discussion explores, there is a fundamental sense of a necessary and organic connection between the two. In turn, this condition of being simultaneously fixed and open-ended makes the expansion and growth of fixed elements in the course of performance both possible and desirable. The contemporary scholar and celebrated performer Aneesh Pradhan suggests that what may be regarded as fixed is not rigidly followed:

I think the whole issue in the Indian context is related to the absence of the ‘absolute’. Traditionally, we don’t have absolute pitch or rhythm (now we have A440 and bpm, but even these are not uniformly accepted), and the ‘relative’ nature of things also probably impacts

the way we look at compositions, thus making space for interpretations of even what may be considered 'fixed', as in the case of *raag* or *bandish*. Both are more seed ideas than fixed elements. This flexibility is also seen in the categorising of genres, e.g. some *chhota khayals* were sung as *bandish ki thumri* and the difference was palpable in the manner of rendition or the method of 'improvisation'.¹

Further, whether this state of 'fixedness' in Hindustani music can be thought of as 'composition' is itself an intriguing issue. The notion of 'composition' has been written about in various ways in Indian music treatises over the centuries, and different significations of the term have been formulated according to the musical practice of the time and place. In the *Tarjuma-i-Manakutuhala & Risala-i-Ragadarpana* (compiled in the seventeenth century), various song forms [*tasnifat*] are outlined and a division between *margi* and *desi* forms is noted (Faqirullah (Nawab Saif Khan) 1996 [1666]: 93).² This Persian-Indian description carries with it the cultural syncreticism of Hindustani music of the age. Composition is understood as a 'song form' and these song forms arise from the *surs* [tones] of a raga.

A different perspective is provided by the earlier Sanskrit text *Sangitasiromani*, written in 1428. This treatise mentions forms that are no longer in practice; nevertheless, a similar typology can still be discerned in contemporary practice:

One should know that *prabandha*, *vastu* and *rupaka* are the three names of composed music based on regular words and the other [phrasal elements]. Their internal structure is only slightly different. When the sections contain all the phrasal elements, i.e. regular words etc. separately or combined, it is considered to be a *prabandha* (lit. composition). Something which is exclusively composed of regular words and musical metre is called a *vastu* (lit. thing). When there is scope for developing the melodic form (*raga*) and other elements (*raga-dyaropa*), the composed music is called a *rupaka* (lit. form). (Te Nijenhuis 1992: 356)

While the concept of 'composition' has long been, and still is, evident in traditional musical thought in India, the function, positioning and aesthetic role of the composition in performance is inherently different from how it is understood and works in most Western musical contexts. In both Persianised and Sanskritised perspectives of Hindustani music, the 'composition' is taken to be a component embedded in the larger unfolding of a raga in performance, not an independent bounded entity against which the concept of improvisation can be oppositionally positioned, as will be discussed further in the following.

The articulation of distinct but interrelated layers of fixedness further complicates any attempt to identify exactly what is fixed (or composed) in raga music. Out of these layers of fixedness, the most fundamental can be located in the melodic ingredients that define the raga itself. Next come the song-form types composed according to the confines of the raga (*dhrupad*, *bara khyal*, *chiz*, *gat*, etc.) and the particular *bandish* [song] chosen for rendition, contemporary manifestations of the earlier compositional types already mentioned. The function and prominence of these songs forms vary depending on the style and the context of performance. Added to these two levels is the fixedness of the rhythmic framework, *tala*, in which these song types are set. In addition, other levels of pre-determined seed melodic and rhythmic devices can be drawn upon in the performance, providing launching pads for other types of creative expansion and growth of the raga.

Taken together, these multiple levels of fixed elements constitute what might be thought of as the fixed architecture, scaffolding or framework for performing raga

music: a discussion that seeks to reveal the creative potential and expansive dimensions on which this music is constructed must simultaneously consider all these levels. With this in mind, I begin here by focusing on the most fundamental level, the fixed melodic elements of the raga itself. General observations about processes of growth and expansion on this fundamental level are also relevant to the fixed musical elements contained in the other levels, as will be discussed later.

Leaving aside the plethora of theoretical definitions and explanations of raga for the time being, what is of interest at this point of the discussion is the simple proposition that all ragas contain fixed, ‘composed’ elements. While it is clear that new ragas are being ‘composed’ all the time, what is less clear is to what extent they can be regarded as a ‘composition’? An overwhelming number of ragas do not have an identifiable composer. For example, the origins of the parent ragas of Hindustani music (*Malkauns*, *Bhairav*, *Megh*, *Shri*, *Hindol* and *Deepak*) go back many hundreds of years and have not been assigned to any single composer; rather, they are understood as belonging to, and constituting, the tradition itself. But other ragas (e.g., *Miyan ki Malhar*, *Bilas Khani Todi*, *Ramdasi Todi*) are associated with known historical figures (here, Tansen, Bilas Khan and Ramdas respectively) who are conventionally acknowledged as their composers. Other ragas are said to ‘belong’ to a *gharana* [musical lineage], such as *Lalit-Bhairav* does to Gwalior or *Hemant* does to Maihar.³ Other ragas, such as *Indira Kalyan* (Hariprasad Chaurasia) and *Mohan Kauns* (Ravi Shankar), have been introduced in recent times by musicians who have been credited as their composers. However, in none of these examples are the ragas themselves considered to be ‘compositions’.

Nevertheless, while some ragas are acknowledged to have composers and some are not, the pertinent issues here are: at what point does the ‘fixed’ boundary of a raga start to assume a state of ‘un-fixedness’; how does one account for the difference between the two; what are the creative processes involved; and, lastly, how do these align with wider aesthetic sensibilities that inform the music? In order to address these somewhat complex questions, we must consider how fixed elements can be located within a raga, and the extent to which these elements have the capacity to determine the latitude and processes of ‘un-fixedness’ in performance.

In its most fundamental form, the fixedness of a raga can be discerned in two broad defining elements. One of these is a fixed, organised inventory of melodic ingredients; the other is a methodology for preparing and ‘cooking’ these ingredients in the course of a performance.⁴ While arguably both are fixed in one way or another, the most obviously fixed and open to systematic articulation are the melodic ingredients themselves. The other dimension of raga, the performance methodology, is not so straightforward, and will be considered separately later on.

Fixed melodic ingredients

The inventory of melodic ingredients of a raga refers to the arrangement of *swars* [notes] in ascending and descending order of pitch (the *aroha-avroha*) of the raga, and its tetrachord configuration in the *purvang* (lower half of the *saptak* [octave]),⁵ *uttarang* (upper half of the *saptak*) and a hierarchy of melodic importance/weight placed on assigned notes: *vadi* [principal], *samvadi* [next most important], *anuvadi* [all other notes in the raga] and *vivadi* [notes omitted or sparingly used in a raga] *swars* within the *aroha-avroha*. This

inventory also includes the contours and paths available for moving through this hierarchical melodic configuration [*chalan*], the function and aesthetic affect of each *swar* within the overall arrangement, the ways in which each note relates to the other and the ways of moving from one note, or position in the *aroha-avroha*, to another. Besides this lies another complex and powerfully nuanced layer of *shrutis* [microtones and microtonal inflections]. In Hindustani music theory, these three principal layers of melodic activity have been theorised and respectively arranged into the following typology: *vadi bheda*, *chalan bheda* and *uccharan bheda*—in this context, the term '*bheda*' indicates a 'distinct layer'.⁶

At the level of *vadi bheda*, the melodic ingredients of the *aroha* [ascending order of notes] and *avroha* [descending] are fixed. These ingredients are modified and given character through their designation within a melodic hierarchy. That is to say, some notes are assigned a greater importance over others and become the *vadi* or *samvadi swar* within the inventory (i.e. the principal or secondary guide tone), or the *anuvadi* [remaining] and the *vivadi* [dissonant] *swars*. This hierarchy is further defined through the assignment of characteristic properties to certain notes. These properties include such elements as *nyasa* [stable], *deergha* [elongated], *bahutva* [recurrent] and so on: these distinctions add further shape and definition to the prescribed inventory of notes. The formulation of the *vadi bheda* creates a fixed set of melodic ingredients and relationships that gives a raga its most basic melodic shape and skeletal form. The hierarchical place and specific melodic characteristics assigned to certain notes also extend this basic scalar material into the realms of modal practice: not as modes are understood in the melodically tempered harmonic environment of jazz, but more as they are theorised in the *maqams* of West Asian music systems.⁷ Nevertheless these melodic ingredients are still 'raw' and in a sense can be thought of aesthetically 'uncooked' or 'unprepared' when left at this stage.

The *chalan bheda* lays out defined pathways and contours for moving through the inventory of melodic material. The *chalan* [movement, progression, transit] provides outlines for melodic development by prescribing specific and fixed ways that guide movement through and between the inventory of notes outlined in the *vadi bheda*. The *chalan* is concerned with patterns of melodic movement built on the melodic skeleton of the *vadi bheda* whose effect is to establish the raga *rupa* (the overall melodic shape/contour/form of the rag in its proper proportion). It provides fixed approaches for grouping or combining notes into clusters within a limited melodic interval, or into more open linear progressions, which in turn provide the basis for the construction of melodic phrases. The inherent possibilities outlined in the *chalan bheda* further modify the *vadi bheda* by adding shape and dimension to the basic melodic inventory. The *chalan* and shape of the raga are further defined by *pakad* [characteristic phrases] through which the identity of a raga can most immediately be recognised.

Fixed elements at the level of the *uccharan bheda* (microtonal articulation, inflection and ornamentation) can be located in pre-established idioms and conventions rather than in any measurable compositional process. Because of this, it is the level most resistant to verbal explication. The free-flowing use of microtonal movements and inflections can provide an emotional flavouring to the notes and phrases and generate intangible expressive qualities, aesthetic nuances and other tantalisingly sensuous properties. These musical dimensions correspond with the poetics/flavour/affect of the raga and cannot readily be inventoried or formularised. Amongst Hindustani musicians, it is not uncommon for

metaphors, often related to gustatory sensations, to be enlisted to initiate or engage in a discussion of performance approaches to the *uccharan* layer of raga, one example being the reference to a samosa and mint chutney to describe the respective ‘flavours’ of the lower and upper tetrachords of the afternoon raga *Madhuwanti* (McNeil 1993: 77–78). The *uccharan bheda* further modifies the *vadi bheda* and *chalan bheda*, intensifying emotional flavour and affect.

When these three areas of melodic configuration and activity are considered together, they encapsulate the fundamental and quantifiably fixed elements of a raga. The degree of ‘fixedness’, or that which is not variable, is most discernible in the first and second layers, while the realisation of microtonal and intonation elements leave room for varying the fixedness of the third layer in performance according to individual preferences or the aesthetic conventions of a *gharana*. Yet composed melodic materials can be discerned in all three of these levels. To extend the cooking analogy, the *vadi bheda* can be likened to the raw ingredients, the *chalan bheda* to how these ingredients are to be shaped and prepared for cooking and the *uccharan bheda* to the flavourings to be used. Just as it is impossible to pick out all of the spices from the gravy of a dish once it is cooked, the same is true in terms of microtonal elements [*shrutis*] in the performance of a raga. If nothing else, the configuration of the fixed elements in a raga certainly stretches notions of what a ‘composition’ is, or can be.

The ‘fixedness’ of method

The performance of a raga is dependent upon the balance between its melodic inventory and an appropriate method for engaging with this material in performance. Genres such as *dhrupad*, *khyal* and *thumri* each provide distinct and different, systematic performance frameworks and methods that assist the expanding, growing or ‘cooking’ of the fixed elements of the inventory. The creative challenge for a performer is to realise the possibilities provided by the fixed elements for revealing the full manifestation or *rupa* [form] of the raga appropriate to the relevant performance context.⁸ The ways these frameworks are realised generally—and the method(s) followed specifically in any given situation—are determined by the conventions and requirements of the genre being performed, the creative preferences and approaches of the *gharana* to which the musician belongs and the training and performance skills of the individual musician. The frameworks and methods employed may vary according to whether the raga is performed by a vocalist or an instrumentalist; further, a major distinction can be made between the performance of a raga in the *anibaddh* or *nibaddh* sections.⁹ Skilled performers can develop expertise in the frameworks of multiple genres. They can also gain knowledge of, and competency in, ways of varying the frameworks and methods of each genre according to their own creative preferences.

The potential scope that the method of each genre offers a musician to explore a raga is nevertheless broad. For example, the framework for expanding or ‘cooking’ the melodic ingredients of a raga in two distinct and contrasting performance contexts such as *dhrupad alap* (the complex opening section of a *dhrupad* performance) and *chhota khyal* (the final faster section of a *khyal* performance) enable different possibilities and scope. If a gustatory comparison can be made between these two examples, then the method in which the fixed melodic materials of a raga are worked within a *dhrupad*

alap can be likened to the slow cooking process in which the ingredients simmer in a large *degchi* [earthenware pot] buried in the ground for a day or two, whereas the method of a *chhota khyal* allows for the fixed melodic ingredients to be cooked in a short amount of time in a smaller pan on a higher heat.¹⁰ The same ingredients are used but the aesthetic qualities of each differ in performance.

To what extent can these performance methods be understood as being fixed? Even though methods are certainly fixed by convention and anticipated in performance, it would be inappropriate to call them compositions: they may be selectively skipped, varied, modified, substituted, truncated, amalgamated or extended in the course of a performance by an individual artist. This manipulation of the performance method can be decided beforehand, or continually adjusted in the moment. Pradhan is of the following opinion:

I don't think either Indian musicians or Indian and Western writers regard performative [sic] methods as being fixed or even part of a composition. In fact, they believe these are totally spontaneous, which is not the case as we all know. At best, the arrangement of material is spontaneous. In other words, the sequential development or *silsila* is prescribed, but what happens within that is open to spontaneous arrangement.¹¹

Taken together, the melodic inventory and method provide the basic scaffolding for the performance of a raga. There are fixed elements in both, but the nature, function and degree of that fixedness differs substantially between them. One focuses on the fixed ingredients and their preparation, and the other on a method and framework for growing or expanding their potential, or 'cooking' the melodic ingredients. But to say that the realisation of a raga in performance can be expressed only in terms of fixed ingredients developed through fixed frameworks and methods is to ignore another essential, yet highly elusive element: the nature of the embodied creative process itself. According to my cooking analogy, if the fixed ingredients of the raga are the ingredients and the method determines the vessel in which the ingredients are to be cooked, fire is also required to create the dish. Accounting for this metaphorical 'fire' in the creative process is challenging, because it concerns states of being, emotions, the infinitely variable role of individual agency and the struggle with terminology and language with which to approach the issue. Approaching a similar issue in relation to Iranian music, Nooshin comments:

... unlike certain aspects of the music such as modal structures, for which there is a relatively rich body of associated technical terminology and which are therefore readily discussed by musicians, creative processes are rarely talked about. Whether the growing awareness will eventually lead to the development of terminology in this area remains to be seen. (2003: 264)

Theorising fixed elements in Hindustani music as seed ideas

Ranade's suggestion that what happens in music should not be regarded as completely divorced from what happens in other areas of cultural expression and practice in India is a useful starting point from which to explore this idea (2008: 216). What concepts in other cultural, intellectual and creative domains might mirror the creative process of expanding or growing fixed materials in musical performance? One such concept that seems particularly relevant to understanding how the fixed materials in a raga work is that of 'seed ideas'. Lewis Rowell has appropriately drawn attention to significance of the concept of the *bij* [lit. seed] in traditional musical thought:

... truth exists in the form of a seed or kernel—a nuclear idea of enormous potential but in need of analysis and elaboration before its full range of meanings can begin to become apparent. In the effort to understand why Indian music thought is the way it is, it will be necessary to keep this image constantly before us. (1992: 24)

This correspondence itself remains a seed idea in Rowell's study, but it is a powerful representation of the function of the fixed material of a raga in performance. Just as a tiny seed of a tree has the capacity to grow into an enormous organism, the fixed melodic, rhythmic and structural materials of a raga (its seed ideas) have a similar potential for growth in the context of a performance. This idea is implied in principal technical terms in the lexicon of Hindustani music: *vistaar* [unfolding, flowing out of], *badhat* [increasing, expanding, growing] and *upaj* [growth, yield].

The primary seed idea, the raga itself, can perhaps find its most potent capacity for expansion within the *anibaddh* section or the *alap* of a raga. Medieval treatises such as *Sangitsiromani* describe *alap* in terms of the melodic ingredients of a raga and the performance structure of the genre:

Musical development (*alapti*, lit. expatiation) is the revelation of the raga. It is also called *alap*. It is of two kinds, on account of a distinction between melodic structure (raga) and formal structure (*rupaka*). When it has no bearing on the formal structure it is considered to be the *alapti* of the raga. (Te Nijenhuis 1992: 519)¹²

The seed idea of the raga and its 'expatiation' is also the principal underlying process in the *nibaddh* section, but here another seed idea—the song type—also becomes part of the performance. The *anibaddh* and *nibaddh* sections of a performance are sometimes differentiated on the grounds that the latter is bound to a *tala* (a fixed rhythmic cycle) and the former is not. But the difference between *anibaddh* and *nibaddh* can perhaps also be accounted for in the fact that the latter also contains the embedded seed idea of a '*bandish/tasnif*' [song], situated within the seed idea of the raga.

A *bandish* has the potential to reveal or emphasise characteristics of the raga *rupa* (conventional, unique or anything in between), in an encapsulated seed idea. On one hand, a *bandish* is intrinsically related to the composed materials of the raga. On the other hand, the arrangement of the melodic elements encapsulated in the *bandish* and its relationship to the *tala* become its own seed idea. The challenge for practitioners is to locate this *bandish* in the performance of a raga and the overall expansion of its fixed, seed material. In effect, two seed ideas are active at the same time: the greater expansion of the raga and the expansion of the *bandish* through raga. Of all the melodic seed ideas in Hindustani music, the *bandish* comes closest to the idea of a composition as a bounded and distinct entity, even though its greater function is as a seed idea. This might explain why in many cases the 'composer' of a *bandish* is known, not least because their pen names [*takhallus*] are incorporated into the text of the song, as happens in *dhrupad* and *khyal*. At the same time, there is an important point of difference between the *bandish* and more circumscribed notions of composition that, for example, is resonant with a nineteenth-century Western classical musicological imagination: the former is as a launching pad for creativity within the conventions of the *nibaddh* section, not a complete and intentionally bounded text.

Bandishes are sometimes composed with the intention of providing an unusual or innovative aspect of the raga *rupa* [shape/form/gestalt] for the practitioner to explore in the

nibaddh section. This aspect can be anticipated in the *anibaddh* section or it can contrast with the raga *rupa* developed in the *alap*. For example, there are *bandishes* in raga *yaman* that have been composed to omit Pa (the fifth note), a *bahutva swar* in the standard melodic inventory of this major raga.¹³ In the expansion of the *bandish*, the convention is to also avoid placing much emphasis on Pa in the *nibaddh* section. This could contrast with the treatment of the raga in the *alap* section in which Pa might be featured prominently.

In addition to the seed ideas of the raga and those of the *bandish*, other smaller seed ideas can also be inserted throughout a performance. How these are woven into the larger unfolding of the *rupa* of the raga depends on the type and function of the seed idea, the adeptness of the performer, the idiom and conventions of the genre and the specific performance context. Seed ideas of different significance and affect can be embedded in the larger expansion of the fixed elements of the raga itself. At the same time, these smaller seeds also engage with, and are limited by, this larger unfolding. The form and function of seed ideas vary immensely because each can be alternately and simultaneously comprised of melodic, rhythmic and structural materials. A seed idea can even arise spontaneously from a completely accidental occurrence, such as a mistake. The conventions and performance frameworks of each musical genre encourage a multiplicity of outcomes from the process of expansion of seed ideas within seed ideas. Yet despite this multiplicity of creative and aesthetic conventions, the same dynamic and organic connection between the seed and its expanded form can be discerned in one way or another across genres.

Starting to theorise the expansion and growth of seed ideas

Compared with the examination of fixed materials and seed ideas, the creative means, processes and thought by which the expansion, growth and flow of these ideas takes place is a much more complex and somewhat oceanic topic. Leaving aside the difficulty in accounting for such processes in practical musical terms, how might such a discussion even be framed? What informs or guides a musician in how they creatively work seed ideas? How do musicians learn and practice to do so? How is this knowledge then applied and realised in performance? These questions direct us towards the elusive issue of creativity in Hindustani music and how it informs the 'art' of this music. Here I seek to outline an ontology of the expansion of seed ideas.¹⁴

As a starting point it may be useful to consider the place of *upaj* and *andaaz* and the significations that these commonly used terms acquire in a music context. It is not unusual to encounter these terms in discussions in Hindi about musical competency and artistic imagination. As a noun, *upaj* can refer to the 'yield' of the expansion, and as a verb it implies the processes that produce that yield and its qualities. Here, *andaaz* indicates the 'style' by which that expansion growth is 'figured out' by the mind or feelings of the performer. Both terms sit well with the concepts of *vistaar* and *badhat* described earlier, with both *upaj* and *andaaz* situated in the embodied experiences of a performer.

In aesthetic terms, the quality and affect of the process of creative expansion on the musician, on the their audience and on the realisation of the depth of form inherent in each raga can be approached in terms of *rasa* theory.¹⁵ Enough has been written about

this theory and how it informs, amongst other things, the elusive and intangible issues of aesthetic intensity and emotional flavour:

More generally, the Indian aesthetic tradition builds its account of aesthetic experience from a psychology of emotions, and this serves as the basis for analysing aesthetic breakthroughs. *Rasa* theory offers an explanation for the power and inter-subjectivity of aesthetic experience that serves as an alternative to both the Kantian interplay of intellectual faculties and Hume's generic sentiment of taste. (Higgins 2007: 50–51)

In the musical context of Hindustani music, *rasa* theory contributes to the articulation of a sense of 'taste' that guides an artist in performance, carrying with it the cultural authority of a wider philosophical and intellectual tradition, and it is through this aesthetic concept that the artistic and creative impact of the performance can be approached.

Philosophical insights from the extensive philosophical, spiritual and intellectual heritage of India can, as noted by Clarke and Kini, also 'offer a hermeneutic resource' (2011: 15) that may illuminate the deeper implications of a musical practice; in this case, the experiential, embodied creative processes and aesthetic sensibilities that inform the intangible aspects of *vistaar*, *badhat*, *upaj* and *andaaz*, which might otherwise resist articulation. The dynamic between *bij* [seed] and *upaj* [yield] in a performance context can also be framed in broader elemental principles as expounded in esoteric realms of tantric philosophy:

The *tattva* [essence, principle, fixed reality] is the bestower of peace (and salvation) which is knowable *sat tattva*, which possesses the nature of complete expansion and which manifests its knowledge growingly. *Sritantralokah*. (Chatterjee, 2008: 33; emphases added)

Here the concept of *bij* can be aligned with the principle of *tattva* and the conceptualisation of its expansion in terms of the realisation of the full form or truth of that *tattva*, which in the case of a raga is its adeptly expanded *rupa*. Another approach to understanding this creative process can perhaps be found in the *Brhadarnyaka Upanishad* written around 2700 years ago:

there is a metaphor of a spider sitting at the centre of the web, issuing and reabsorbing its thread in concentric circles, all held at one point ... The spider's threads symmetrically expand into a visible circumference, and though there are divergent lines in between and varying distances to be spanned they can all be track back to the central point of the web. (Khanna 1979: 10)¹⁶

This image of a spider's web helps to imagine how smaller orbits of activity, the concentric shapes that make up the web, come together into a larger one in the process of producing the overall expansion of the raga and realising its larger *rupa* [form].

This process can be technically grounded in the many terms that denote the various processes, techniques, strategies or sensibilities of expansion. Terms such as *gatkari*, *laykari*, *bolbant*, *tanbazi* and so on indicate a variety of fixed seed materials (*gat*, *laya*, *bol*, *tan*, etc.) and also the specific idiomatic conventions of how each should be expanded or grown. Other terms such as *qaida* (lit. 'system', but specifically a composition type in the tabla solo repertoire) both identify the type of fixed seed material—in this case the fixed, composed theme of a particular tabla composition—and exacting structures for expanding this theme.¹⁷ Common to all these technical terms is the idea of a fixed centre and a relatively variable periphery—like the spider's web. A fixed central point is

expanded in time, eventually revealing a coherent larger design; an ongoing, organic connection links the fixed point in the centre and what is being expanded. Ranade characterises the performance of a raga as a dynamic interaction between a relatively fixed core and relatively variable peripherals (2008: 222). Analogies and metaphors like the spider web and gustatory sensibilities provide a narrative approach by which creativity through expansion can be framed.

Considered from a purely practical angle, the diversity of the range of approaches, genres, styles, schools of thought and practice which together constitute Hindustani music makes it inherently difficult to account for this entire gamut of creativity. Treading carefully here, however, some defined practical techniques and strategies to expand fixed musical ideas are nevertheless commonly encountered across traditional training methods. From a pedagogical perspective, these techniques are usually understood by both teacher and student to constitute a type of strategy defined by, and applied to, a specific type of seed idea or fixed material. In this sense they are typically first encountered as discrete entities, and eventually combined with other strategies.

In the initial stages of training, students usually encounter exercises in *paltas* (sequences formed out of clusters of notes, from the verb *palatna* ‘to turn around’). Training in *paltas* usually starts with learning and practising straightforward sequences built upon melodic clusters of three, four, five, six, seven or more notes firstly in straightforward patterns, such as 1 2 3 4, 2 3 4 5, 3 4 5 6 and so on, up and down a scale or following the *aroha* and *avroha* of the raga. More advanced *paltas* work melodic shapes and patterns within a cluster of notes that contain ascending and descending motion within the base pattern, for example such as 1 7 1 2 1 2 1 2 3 2, 3 2 4 3 4 and so on. Other types of *paltas* work with small or large intervals within the pattern itself, such as 1 2 1 3 2 3 1 2, 2 3 2 4 3 2 4 and so on, which can then be transposed up the scale of the raga one note at a time. Over the course of training, students learn or devise dozens and sometimes hundreds of *paltas*. These patterns can be adapted to the form of the raga and then be applied to work it through *tans* [fast melodic passages that can take on highly elaborate designs].

A *palta* may then be set within a *layakari* [rhythmic] pattern drawing upon the seed elements of a raga as encountered in a *bandish* which is then also punctuated with *tans*. The simultaneity of combined approaches makes it hard to discern them as discreet entities in the course of a performance. Even so, they are often taught independently, and the student is expected to internalise and to develop facility in each through long and intensive periods of *riyaz* [practice] with the stated or unstated expectation that they eventually will be able to spontaneously combine strategies in their performance in order to produce even more potent methods to explore the fixed seed materials embedded in a raga.

Applying a different combination of techniques to the same seed idea or fixed material provides another dimension to this discussion. Take for example the ways that *tans* in a *chhota khyal* are worked to punctuate the simultaneous expansion of the fixed elements of a *bandish*, and how this ability comes from having learnt pre-composed *tans*, and at the same time many dozens of *paltas* from which *tans* can be constructed in the course of a performance. Training in the mathematical *merukhandi* system of melodic permutations and combinations provides further depth to efforts to compose *tans* spontaneously.¹⁸ The ability to effortlessly weave these *tans* into an elaboration of the fixed elements of a *bandish* reveals a command over—and internalisation of—a number of processes that are then woven together simultaneously. Training in these foundational

techniques is not usually acquired through any systematic, linear method. Rather, a part of one element may be taught in one session and then after a few months further possibilities to develop and apply the element in different raga contexts will be given and then practised. Realisation and command over the range of possibilities for expanding a single pattern might continue to develop over many years.

Each of these frameworks provides a particular vantage point from which to consider the concept of *vistaar*-related and *badhat*-related forms of creativity in Hindustani music. Each reveals an important and distinct dimension to this creative practice that identifies and acknowledges the different modes of engagement involved, from the tangibly quantifiable to the intangibly qualitative. When taken together, the combination of all these vantage points starts to reveal the multidimensionality and complexity of creative practice and thought in Hindustani music. This combination, along with other frameworks not considered here, also opens up the possibility for an analytical approach to performance creativity and spontaneity in Hindustani music, one hermeneutically informed by an interconnected and culturally grounded set of approaches and sensibilities—and one that reveals an ontology which significantly differs from Western approaches to the term ‘improvisation’.¹⁹

Conclusion

It became evident early on in this discussion that, as in many other musical contexts, simplistic interpretations of improvisation as an opposition to composition are not really helpful in trying to understand how creative practices work in the performance of raga. This is especially so given the complex configurations of composed materials in Hindustani music and how they function as launching pads for creative outcomes—rather than as the creative outcome itself. Spontaneous creativity in the performance of a raga is better represented through the idea of the growth and expansion of these composed materials, which function as seed ideas for that creativity. Framing creativity in this way grounds musical processes in the thought and practices of traditional forms of knowledge and ways of knowing in India.

This process of growing or expansion is often conflated with Western notions of improvisation. Ranade has alerted us to the unintended consequences that can arise from the use of the term ‘improvisation’ in the context of Hindustani music, a term which carries Western ideological and historical baggage on the one hand, and on the other displaces the nuances of traditional Indian thought that gave rise to the creative practice in the first place. Taking this a step further, it may even be reasonable to ask, rather than uncritically impose a term like improvisation onto the creative practices of Hindustani music, whether considering musical thought and practice in Hindustani music might perhaps help provide more nuanced ways of framing and articulating improvisatory practices in Western genres, such as jazz? Recognising and embracing these nuances more widely cannot help but strengthen ethnomusicological scholarship on improvisation.

Notes

1. Personal communication with Aneesh Pradhan, October 2016.
2. The terms *margi* (pertaining to a path, a way) and *desi* (pertaining to a region) describe a division of musical ideology and practice that precedes the eighteenth century. The division

is sometimes understood in musicological terms of ‘classical’ and ‘folk traditions’ (see Vatsyayan [1981] and McNeil [1992] for further elaboration). Some musicians, such as my teachers Ashok Roy and Prof. Sachindranath Roy, have suggested that the division can also indicate a distinction between the practice of music as a ritual path [*marg*] towards self-realisation and the practice of music otherwise.

3. *Gharanas* have variously been defined as a Musico-aesthetic ideology, a social grouping clustered around a hereditary lineage or a ‘school’ of music (see Ranade 1990: 62).
4. Analogies between food and music in India were first noted in the *Natyasastra* (written somewhere between the second century BCE and the second century CE). Such analogies are commonplace in the oral narrative of Hindustani music both as pedagogic devices and also a means of expressing aesthetic correspondences. See Dhar (2001, 2005) and McNeil (1993, 2015) for further elaboration of the correspondences between raga and food and cooking.
5. *Saptak* is usually translated in English as ‘octave’ but which here denotes the basic seven [*sapt*] notes, or as Ranade opines the seven [*sapt*] more plausibly ‘is related to the intervals between two notes, and not to the notes themselves’ (1990: 80).
6. The particular typology of raga presented here is prominent amongst a number of Indian musicologists such as Ramashray Jha and Ashok Ranade. It has perhaps been most clearly articulated by Jha (2000).
7. See, for example, Racy (1998).
8. While *rupa* is a Sanskrit/Hindi word, the Urdu word *tasveer* [image, picture, representation] is also sometimes used to signify the form of a raga. There are differences in the degree of the scope that each raga provides for exploration. Primary ragas such as *yaman* are regarded as being almost unlimited in scope, whereas minor ragas (raginis) such as *durga* are regarded as having less inherent scope for exploration.
9. *Anibaddh* is most commonly translated as unbound in a musical context and *nibaddh* as bound. In terms of performance practice, they are commonly used in modern times to distinguish between the *alap* and those sections set to *tala*. Interestingly, in translating (chapter 12 verse 4) of the medieval treatise on music, *Sangitasiromani*, Te Nijenhuis interprets *anibaddh* as improvised (lit. not composed) and *nibaddh* as composed in the context of the understanding of music practice in the fifteenth century (1992: 356).
10. See Perera (1994) for a detailed account of the methods for realising a raga in dhrupad *alap* (*anibaddh*) and Slawek (1987) for an account of the methods in the *nibaddh* sections of an instrumental performance.
11. Aneesh Pradhan, personal communication, October 2016.
12. ‘The *alapti* is called *alap* when word syllables (*aksara*) are not used in it’ (Te Nijenhuis 1992: 579). Interesting here is the use of the word *expatiation*, which carries the meanings of wandering about at large, and also of expansion, spreading, extending, broadening. These terms also fit well with the concepts discussed in the previous section.
13. A useful discussion of raga *yaman* is available online: <http://www.parrikar.org/hindustani/kalyan/> (accessed 2 June 2016).
14. Further investigation into what informs the process of expansion might also consider a range of allied lines of inquiry, such as the embodied—muscle memory, patterns, gesture—and the enculturated—taste, emotional flavour and sound preferences. For the time being, this discussion follows more of a philosophical line of inquiry into the stimuli and reference points of creativity.
15. The theory was expounded in the Sanskrit treatise the *Natyasastra* of Bharat Muni written sometime between the second century BCE and the second century CE.
16. The *Brhadarnyaka Upanishad* (2-1-20) states: ‘This is illustrated thus: As in the world a spider, which is well known to be one entity, moves along the thread which is not different from itself—and there is no other auxiliary to its movement but itself— and as from one homogeneous fire tiny sparks, little specks of fire, fly in different ways, or in numbers; as these two illustrations show activity even in the absence of any difference regarding

auxiliaries, is also in natural unity before the activity starts just *so from this Self* (Madhavananda 1950: 290–291).

17. See Kippen (2005: 161) for a discussion of *qaida* (also transliterated as *khyada*).
18. This system is based on the strategy of mathematically generating as many permutations and combinations as possible within a given cluster of notes. For example, within a cluster of four notes (1 2 3 4) there are 64 possible combinations, such as 1 1 1 1, 1 2 3 4, 1 2 4 3, 2 1 3 4, 4 4 4 4 and so on. This system can generate its own series of patterns which can be tailored to the form of a raga.
19. The relevance of the term ‘spontaneity’ to the performance of a raga is another issue best left for another discussion. Given that there is no corresponding term in Indian languages for improvisation, it is not really surprising that an equivalent correspondence for ‘spontaneity’ is not to be found either. Noting this absence, Ranade has coined the term *tatkalsphoorta* to describe the sense of immediacy, as a quality that permeates the process of expansion of fixed or given elements in performance: “To distinguish “improvisation” from “spontaneity”, I have employed the terms *tatkalsphoorta* and *usphoorta* respectively to stand for “improvised” and “spontaneous” (2008: 217). This line of inquiry should perhaps be developed further.

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