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In this issue:

Section on improvisation

Tal paddhati (1888)

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Improvisation as Conversation: A Cross-Cultural Context Perspective

Adrian McNeil

While musical improvisation is common to most musical systems around the world, it does not necessarily follow that it is always understood and practised in the same way. In Western musicology, for example, the most common way of thinking about improvisation is to consider it as the opposite of composition. Positioned against this far more dominant practice, improvisation is then assigned a subordinate position, as indicated in the principal reference on music in the West:

In Western culture the musics that are most dependent on improvisation, such as jazz, have traditionally been regarded as inferior to art music, in which pre-composition is considered paramount. (Sadie 2003: Vol. 12, 95)

Even though improvisatory practices have played various roles in different styles of Western classical music over the centuries, nevertheless they have never been a central element of its canon. Based on this experience, it is not surprising that improvisation is ultimately understood as a marginal practice. Its subordinate relationship to composition then frames the ways improvisation is theorised and engaged with, and the cultural value it is subsequently assigned, in this particular context.¹

By way of contrast, improvisation is widely recognised as the central and defining element in the performance of Hindustani classical music. Yet curiously, as has often been pointed out, no single equivalent technical term for improvisation can readily be found in north Indian languages. What is commonly understood in Indian musicology as improvisation, is essentially an extension of, a growth, and not an opposition to, what has already been composed. There are a number of ways this practice can take place, depending on the musical development at hand, and consequently there are number of terms, such as *vistar*, *badhat*, *upaj* and so on, which indicate different ways of elaborating on composed materials. In other words improvisation cannot be said to be the opposite of composition, but in this context it is rather a logical and spontaneous extension of it. Good improvisation in this context is that in which the presence of the composed material is somehow never fully absent. The two elements are tied to the same continuum and this understanding is reflected in the technical terms used in Indian musicology.

¹ This assigning of cultural value to improvisation can not be isolated from broader aesthetic conventions of what constitutes a 'work' of art in Western philosophy, and to the subsequent development of legal structures of ownership, and in particular, copyright.

This concise, yet significant, distinction provides an insight into just how varied musical thought on this issue can be. Despite this Latin based term having currency in wide range of musicological contexts, there is really no universal agreement about what improvisation actually means in music. This is perhaps due to the practice and experience of improvisation in any one context forming its own local universe of understanding. This in itself becomes its own culturally determined and bounded, conceptual and intellectual template. Attempts to apply an Indian template to Western classical music or vice versa ultimately miss the point. In doing so, the tendency is for only those things that are meaningful to that template to end up being recognised, while things which are not recognised by the template remain only partially audible to it or are missed altogether.

The problem then is that as improvisation is understood differently in contemporary Hindustani music than it is in jazz, or Indonesian gamelan music and so on, what are the implications for discussing improvisation in cross-cultural musical collaborations? Do fundamental differences in how improvisation is understood affect how cross-cultural musical collaborations take place? It is obvious that there are no easy answers to this line of inquiry, a situation also not helped by a lack of comparative studies of this subject. One thing is for certain though; cross-cultural collaborations have taken place, and will continue to do so whether or not there is ever a clear universal consensus amongst musicologists of what improvisation is.

Thinking about improvisation in a cross-cultural context

In considering improvisation in this context it may prove wiser not to try and dismantle differences in approach, but rather to try and embrace a broader and much more nuanced understanding of improvisation than is found in Western musicology and subsequently applied elsewhere. Such an inclusive umbrella term could also take into account what may be loosely regarded as improvisatory, or improvisatory type, practices in musics around the world. As discussed in further detail later these practices can be found beyond a straightforward concern with pitch and rhythmic measurements, in more subtle elements of sound quality and intonation, aesthetic conventions and sensibilities, ways of expressing emotions, of articulating ideas, of using dynamics or any number of other considerations that contribute to spontaneous musical communication.

Such an inclusive definition could also embrace like terms such as interpretation, elaboration and spontaneity so as to include a diverse range of creative activities and thought within a broader intercultural understanding of the term. However, this inclusive discourse 'must not deform other cultures by making them speak in the language of ... [a] dominant culture' (Chin 1991: 95). Accordingly, in a cross-cultural context it is important that any discourse on improvisation should not be limited by ideas in any one musicological system, and certainly not by one in which it is largely a subordinate practice.

Instead it makes more sense if it is thought of collectively within its own multi-sited frames of reference, rich with the diverse experience, thought and meaning of many cultures.

It then follows that difference becomes indicative of, and inimical to, the heterogeneity of a widely-practised musical idiom. What can emerge out of this is the recognition and acceptance of a greatly enhanced understanding of improvisation distilled out of the experience of multiple styles and idioms. When all such strands are considered together, the possibility then opens up of a much broader, collectively enhanced truth about what improvisation might actually be. While such a complex task is certainly desirable and not impossible, it remains to be seen whether or not it can be achieved. A degree of diplomacy and sensitivity needs to be exercised to embrace this mode of thinking. Even if this does not happen at least in the process of trying, our own understanding of why there is difference and how to creatively engage with this difference will be greatly enhanced.

The lack of documented reference points currently available on this subject does not necessarily mean that some theorisation of improvisation in a cross-cultural context is not possible. However in doing so, it may be better first of all to leave out any thoughts of devising systematised practical methodologies and neatly laid out strategies by which the melding together of different types of musics and improvisatory practices can be achieved. Rather it is probably best to start by considering the broader conditions and processes through which performers can establish meaningful dialogues in cross-cultural collaborations. At a later stage specific practical devices and approaches can then be more effectively considered in the light of how they contribute to this broader framework.

Considered in this way, improvisation can acquire a looseness of definition similar to how we might think about a conversation unfolding. Likewise, there are many formats through which cross-cultural musical dialogues between performers can, and have, taken place. This can potentially include any number of participants and musical styles for any one occasion or ongoing period. Obviously, it is not feasible to consider such a range of possibilities here; therefore for the sake of convenience, discussion in this paper is limited to the specific configuration of two adept performers working together using two different systems of music. In recent times there has been no shortage of examples of this particular configuration of cross-cultural music. In this regard recordings made by Ry Cooder with Ali Farka Toure, Shujaat Khan with Kayhan Kalhor, Bob Brozman with Debashish Bhattacharya, John McLaughlin with Zakir Hussain and so on, particularly come to mind. From many such instances it becomes clear that some musical styles will inherently lend themselves to cross-cultural blending more so than others. Further, it may also be the case that the general principles observed when two individuals collaborate could also prove to be relevant to a range of other formats involving greater numbers of musicians and styles.

Whatever the context may be, it is fair to say that the most immediate thing that confronts performers involved in cross-cultural collaborations, is the degree of difference that is felt between their respective musics. This demarcation comes about because cross-cultural exchanges often rely on the use of different musical languages, with their own sets of musical vocabularies, syntax and grammars. These elements are the very things that distinguish one type of music from another, whether it be predominantly based on harmonic, modal, melodic or rhythmic oriented building blocks or any particular combination of these. This difference is further challenged by the need to find ways to reconcile more detailed stylistic issues such as form, intonation, sound quality, articulation and so on.

However, in order to think about and hopefully realise the potential of cross-cultural collaborations more effectively, it is possible, and desirable, to move beyond the impediments thrown up by the intervention of such immediate differences. In one of the tales of the Mathnawi by Jalaluddin Rumi, the Persian poet long ago described how a mouse and a frog met by a river and despite the innate differences of these two unlikely conversation partners, they nevertheless are able to communicate with each other by giving voice to their own spontaneous outpouring from within.² Rumi's poem inspires us to think about cross-cultural exchanges in a subtle and creative way in which an overwhelming desire to communicate somehow inspires a spontaneous outpouring from within. From this starting point, the conversation partners look to grab hold of, and play with, whatever materials are at hand, in order to facilitate this dialogue. It is in this broader sense that these two very different creatures set about improvising their conversation.

In this sense, musical improvisation can be thought of more as the unfolding of a process rather than as a specific set of outcomes. It can be understood to be influenced by the same processes, conditions and outcomes as might effect a conversation. Whether one wants to describe the ensuing conversation in terms of improvisation as it is thought about in Western or Indian musicology, doesn't really matter. This is because what is of primary importance, as Rumi suggests, is the deep desire to communicate.

While the poet provides us with this creative navigation point, many recent examples have demonstrated, with varying degrees of success the range of possibilities that can exist for communicating across cultural boundaries through improvisation. In the process, examples such as those cited above have taken on challenges of trying to combine different tuning systems, instrumentation, musical styles, sound production, performance practices, aesthetic conventions and so on. The degree of difficulty of this challenge varies not only according to the types of musics involved, but also, perhaps just importantly, according to the personal knowledge and expertise each musician

² This story was also the inspiration for the 1994 collaboration 'A Meeting by the River' by Ry Cooder and Viswa Mohan Bhatt which was awarded a Grammy for World Music in the United States.

is able to bring to a particular collaboration. Due to this, it is reasonable to expect that there are potentially as many ways of engaging in a dialogue as there are potential conversation partners. Of greater interest, is not so much the conversation partners themselves, but the less obvious consideration of what is actually being communicated. This brings into focus the question of what communication may, or may not, be regarded as successful.

It is quite obvious that there can be no hard and fixed rules to determine what works and what does not work in a conversation. It is reasonable to say that it cannot be based on two simultaneous monologues undertaken by two strangers on two unrelated topics. Similarly, effective communication does not occur in a musical collaboration if either of the partners fails to listen or respond to the other. There can be no conversation also, despite any urge to communicate, if either partner through a lack of skill is unable to express themselves in a coherent way. At the same time, it can be equally obvious when a conversation becomes tedious, as may happen for example if it is boorishly dominated by one individual. At other times, a dialogue can find both partners effortlessly connecting to a common wavelength. This connection can create the right conditions to lead to a lively exchange of ideas, feelings, and words which in the hands of adepts can be creatively acknowledged, explored, extended, interpreted in new ways and so on.

It is reasonable to say that a conversation cannot take place without being prompted by an urge or desire to communicate. This desire or urge can also prompt a mutual search for things in common, which can play an important role in the conversation. Regardless of what is eventually found, it is the search for meeting points and common areas of understanding in the course of the musical collaboration that ensures the ensuing conversation. A dialogue is often initiated during the act of delving into the inventories of musical materials and processes at hand and sorting out what is relevant to the task at hand. The styles chosen, the rough ideas of how materials might fit together and inklings of what the result might be, also meaningfully contribute to the broader process of improvisation, even before a note is played. The ensuing musical conversation can then be further enriched by searching for contrasting, and complementary, musical devices around which a conversation can flow. If a particular connection or rapport is established in the process then such a joint effort becomes even more meaningful. No matter how difficult it may be to articulate what rapport or meaning may actually be in a musical environment, at the same time it is somewhat paradoxical that it is an easy thing to discern if it is not there. Even if this cannot be seriously accepted as another dimension in which improvisation takes place, then it is still something that should not be entirely discounted from any such consideration.

With this in mind, perhaps some other considerations can be mentioned that perhaps help establish and maintain a connection between conversation partners. Even though they may defy ready systemisation, nevertheless, some of these considerations are not unfamiliar to our day to day experiences. It can

be the case, for example, that a conversation between like minds might generate a mutual feeling of ease, even though those involved may have been previously unknown to each other. It is also possible that a conversation may be enhanced if each partner is familiar with the abilities, preferences and character of the other, with this familiarity allowing greater scope for the depth and flow of the communication. It can sometimes occur through the taking of risk, as when a performer moves outside of their comfort zone in an attempt to arrive at something new. This might involve going beyond the confines of their own style or set of musical conventions and while trying to engage with the inflections, nuances and ideas of another system. Sometimes this effort can also serve as a device to propel the collaboration towards a richer exchange.

Having suggested this, however, it is also acknowledged that the opposite of each scenario can also be equally true. For example, in certain situations a close familiarity can also end up being a hindrance to the spontaneity of a conversation if musical statements or expressions are so well known and anticipated that they invoke only mechanical responses. It may also be the case that the willingness to take risks may end up generating feelings of self-consciousness if they do not come off, or perhaps competitiveness if they do, both of which can prove to be hindrances to the free flow of a conversation. Taken altogether though, an open and creative engagement of these considerations ultimately serve to elevate a conversation and musical improvisation to a heightened level and the status of an art form.

Improvisation and aesthetics in a cross-cultural context

There are expectations in many improvisatory music cultures that a compelling performance should create a special aesthetic effect. Many terms are in use around the world that signify this effect. This performance quality is recognised and understood, in different ways and to varying degrees of complexity from one culture to the next. The intention here is not to compare them in any way other than to say that they are all aesthetic terms that indicate a performance is somehow imbued with a heightened emotional state. What distinguishes one term from another comes down to the meaning of the effect in each context and how it is achieved. Some musical traditions have codified this aspect of performance to a high degree of detailed analysis and systemisation while others regard it as self-manifest, and leave it to be explained as such.

Such a quality is easily recognised by aficionados of Flamenco music who call it *duende*. “The Duende is not in the throat, the duende comes up from inside, up from the very soles of the feet”.³ In Blues music a similar property is described in terms of the “*mojo* working”, a form of powerful magic.

³ www.musicpsyche.org/Lorca_Duende.htm

Adrian McNeil

When it occurs in Jazz, the music is said to be “cookin’”. In the mystical tradition of Persian and Central Asian Sufi music it becomes an ecstatic state *Hal*. In Hindustani music the phenomenon is explained through the highly sophisticated *rasa* theory.

By *rasa* we mean a transcendent mode of emotional awareness by which all aspects of a performance are integrated, an awareness that rises above the circumstances that created it and generalizes the individual emotion state of the spectators into a single emotional “field” (Rowell 1992: 328).

Equivalents also exist in Arabic classical music where the same type of effect is recognised as a type of ecstasy that is generated by distinct yet interrelated processes. This approach to music is beautifully articulated through the concepts of *tarab* and *saltanah*.

The general concept of *tarab* refers to both the traditional secular music as a genre and to the overall ecstatic sensation connected with that music and experience by various participants in the musical process. By comparison, the musical term *saltanah* (apparently from the verb *tasaltana*, “to dominate”, “to reign over” or “to experience a sense of authority”) may be translated as “modal ecstasy” (Racy 1998: 100).

Taken along with the qualities of *ruh* (soul) and *ihsas* (feeling), they endow Arabic music with an aesthetic dimension that imbues a performance with both meaning and power.

These few examples provide enough of an indication as to how widespread the recognition of this aesthetic quality or state is and the importance that its realisation is to a successful performance. Whilst there are multiple terms in use around the world to describe its presence and effects, each term is itself deeply connected with its own musical system and ways of looking at the world. Consequently, its properties and effects are explained in terms of this framework. Nevertheless as signifiers of an widely recognised aesthetic state, all these terms describe essentially the same thing: the invocation and communication of a heightened emotional state. This state of being and becoming is commonly understood to profoundly influence the performer, the music, and what it communicated to the audience through performance.

It is also what Rumi describes poetically as the spontaneous outpouring from within. At this level of communication, the obvious and immediate differences of the two unlike creatures he mentions can be bypassed. It is this quality that endows music with its highest meaning, no matter how abstract and difficult to pin down this may be. It is also one of a number of levels which effects improvisation. But because it is something that is widely understood it can be a particularly useful shared conduit for communicating cross-culturally. Of the potentially multiple levels on which improvisation can take place, it is certainly the most sublime and probably the most difficult to en-

gage in. It cannot be taught because it is a quality that is either inherent in a musician or not. In the hands of adepts it is revealed as something very powerful because it can elevate music to its highest level as an art form.

This discussion has tried to explore the idea that the process of improvisation in its broadest sense can take place on multiple levels. Beyond a concern with musical materials and processes, musicians can, and often do, improvise on their feelings, on their relationship with their muse, and on their interaction with the audience. All of these levels of musical engagement are relevant to how improvisation can be thought about and how it might work in a cross-cultural collaboration. Approached in this way, improvisation moves beyond a concern for just playing notes to one that acknowledges that it can become a form of musical communication that can take place across and between multiple creative dimensions.

Some practical considerations for improvising in cross-cultural contexts

Such a discussion may have some place in the ways cross-cultural improvisation can be theorised, but how this thinking could be practically realised is a different matter altogether. Musicians will always manage to find innovative and new ways of pursuing collaboration on a practical level, whether this be through familiarisation and the pre-thinking out of strategies or alternately just through intuitively responding to a given situation, or something else altogether. The point is that there are limitless ways of collaborating through improvisation and therefore the process will always remain open-ended. In the end, whether it succeeds or not will come down to the artistry of those involved and their realisation of the source material brought to the collaboration.

With this in mind the following discussion considers two examples of cross-cultural collaboration. In doing so there is no suggestion that they are special in any way, or that they contain any insights that would contribute to the construction of a systematised methodology for such collaborations, regardless of whether this is ever likely to happen. Rather they are approached as recollections about some musical ideas that seemed to work at a particular time. They presented an opportunity to give further thought about how a musical conversation might occur through improvisation in a cross-cultural context. Both of these examples involve Hindustani music, and specifically the sarod, a well known string instrument.⁴ In one of the examples it is in collaboration

⁴ This particular sarod was in the design of the Maihar gharana although there is no reason to expect that other designs of sarod would be equally appropriate in this context.

with the Arabic classical 'ud and the other with the Blues guitar.⁵ Both of these collaborations were based on personal experience and were developed slowly over a dozen or so rehearsals, performances and finally recordings over a period of two years or more. Other performers may well choose to approach these situations differently, but this is what happened on these occasions. The following accounts of the two improvisations do not attempt to describe these experiences in any detail other than might be helpful to this discussion.

(i) Arabic music and Hindustani music

This concerns a piece that was a result of a collaboration between performers of the Egyptian 'ud and Hindustani sarod. There are no major discernible differences in construction between the 'ud in Egypt and elsewhere although differences do exist in its repertory and playing style from country to country. However, there is no need to be concerned with those here nor to engage in a detailed comparison between Arabic and Hindustani musical systems. It is well known that the two systems are very different in terms of sound production, form, intonation, instrumentation and so on. Further, processes and conventions for improvising with these elements also differ very substantially between the two systems. Detailed studies and many recordings of both these musics provide a good indication of the nature of these differences.

Both performers had received orthodox training in their respective systems for many years. Some knowledge of each other's musical systems was also brought to the project. At a general level, both were aware of these differences and broadly how the collaboration would be confined by them. This was also balanced by the basic understanding, on a theoretical level at least, that Arabic classical music and Hindustani classical music share some fundamental melodic principles in common. Knowing that both systems were based on complex modal systems it was decided to try and identify the meeting points between their melodic organisations and forms. Once potential areas of commonality were established, they were slowly worked on over a few rehearsals. In the process some stylistic and structural approaches started to emerge. The following outlines a little of how this occurred.

- Melodic Materials

Some Arabic maqams share a common inventory of notes with Hindustani ragas. However, the ways both are structured and how they may be elaborated differ significantly. Both have been the subject of enough studies, so

⁵ Both collaborations were based on my personal experience with two well known musicians in Australia. The Egyptian 'ud was played by Joseph Tawadros and the contemporary Blues guitar by Guy Strazzullo. The collaborations took place between 2002 and 2005.

there is no need to point out the differences between them here.⁶ It was decided that the entry point into the collaboration was to be raga Kirwani. No particular reason can be cited for choosing this raga over another or for not choosing a maqam, other than that it seemed to suit the instruments and the temperament of the occasion.

In Hindustani music, Kirwani has a fairly open and straightforward structure, but in performance it is a raga that has conventionally established melodic contours going beyond a free and arbitrary elaboration of its straightforward scale (in this case 1 2 b3 4 5 b6 7 or *Sa Re ga ma Pa dha Ni*). There was no major problem in finding a common tuning for the instruments and B (*sa-fayed saat*) was established as the tonic note or *sa*.⁷

There is substantial difference in how raga and maqam operate as performance models.⁸ Although a raga was used as a departure point to establish communication, it was decided from the beginning that this be neither a performance of a raga nor an equivalent maqam. This meant that while the presence of both would be still be felt in the collaboration, an attempt would be made to reach beyond these frameworks and to try and converse through an approach that lay somewhere between the two. After a while some common areas of form suggested themselves. A common improvisatory practice on the solo 'ud in the Egyptian style is to traverse from one mode to another in a seamless way. Skill is needed in being able to gracefully set up the departure and entry points from one maqam to another. By contrast, performances of contemporary Hindustani music prefer to elaborate on a single raga, whether this is of short or long duration. However, there is also a performance model in Hindustani music called ragamala – literally a garland of ragas. As the name suggests, a performance in this style is based on the skillful and often spontaneous movement through a string of ragas, an elaborate sequence which forms a modal tapestry. As with the maqam, a well developed skill is necessary in order to be able to move seamlessly and graciously between them.

Although the 'ud player basically transposed the scale of Kirwani into the performance model of a maqam, some of the melodic grammar of the raga also carried across. The improvisation on the sarod started with some phrases of the raga but then followed the modal journeys of 'ud by going into a ragamala style. Over twenty minutes or so, a conversation developed around suggesting, then responding to, a range of melodic ideas one after the other, from simple to complex. In the process each performer made reference to

⁶ For example, Perera (1994) and Atre (2000) for discussion of the performance structure of a raga and Touma (1996) and Racy (2003) for information on maqam performance.

⁷ Problems are often encountered with other modal instruments that maintain a fixed tonic.

⁸ Two basic sources that outline these performance models are Slawek and Touma.

Adrian McNeil

their own musical character but also incorporated something of the other's stylistic approach and ideas into their playing, which then became the subject for further improvisation. Comments on each other's playing passed back and forth via direct or indirect reference to each other's musical statements.

- *Form and Rhythm*

The practice and theory of rhythmic organisation of Arabic and Hindustani systems are also quite different. This is evident in the way rhythm is played on their percussion instruments but also how it is approached on plucked lutes like the sarod and the 'ud. This is not the place to expand on the nature of the differences between them, as they are vast and would make a worthwhile study on their own. Nevertheless, from within these differences, again a couple of meeting points can be discerned. These were evident in the tendency towards cyclical rather than linear engagement with time, as expressed in the way rhythmic cycles are employed, the accommodation of asymmetrical rhythms (for example the combination of units of three and two beats) and a reliance on a more or less regular pulse during introductory improvisatory sections of the maqam and the *jod* section of an *alap*.

In order to engender greater freedom in phrasing and elaboration of ideas, it was decided on this occasion not to set the improvisation to a rhythmic cycle but to concentrate on working with a regular pulse (of around one beat per second) that gradually increased in tempo throughout the piece – a musical form common to Arabic and Hindustani music. This became the basis for the rhythmic framework of the improvisation and provided a common structure to the collaboration. It also allowed the instruments to meet on equal terms, to feel free to play both idiomatically and also to reference each other's playing. It opened up a potential space for virtuoso playing. Taken together these conditions all helped the improvisation to flow.

- *Aesthetics*

This particular collaboration was publicly performed and recorded on a number of occasions, along with other attempts at combining the two instruments. The framework mentioned above resulted in some moments of emotional spontaneity and lucidity and during which the improvisation also assumed the role of a vehicle which could enable the communication of something else. Whether this 'something else' can be described in terms of *rasa* or *saltanah*, is perhaps not the best way to think about it. Given the looseness with which the two musics were put together, the exploratory nature of the process, and a certain unevenness in its outcome, it is probably inappropriate to grace this modest effort with the weight of these two significant aesthetic ideals. Nevertheless it can be said that what happened during the times when feelings did connect in the performance, was that the music acquired a certain coherence over and above the notes being played. No matter how one would want to describe this quality, it helped the conversation flow freely at the points

where it occurred. In turn these moments further inspired the improvisation and became reference points from which a consciousness of the great body of difference between the two systems of music seemed to retreat.

(ii) Blues and Hindustani Music

This second example is based on collaboration between performers of the Blues guitar and the sarod from which some performances and a seven-minute recording resulted. The acoustic guitar used in this instance was a standard nylon string instrument that was not otherwise modified. Again it is not the intention here to try and compare or contrast Hindustani music and Blues, as again there is also enough available information that documents their respective, and very different, musical properties and styles. The following discussion rather is a brief commentary exploring one of many potential ways that a musical conversation between the sarod and blues guitar can be approached.

For this collaboration, each musician had some experience of the other's musical style and this rudimentary background knowledge helped to bring into focus some obvious points of difference early on. The most immediate of these differences were those of the harmonic cycle of blues and the fixed tonic limitations of a modal instrument such as the sarod. The set-up of the instrument, especially with regard to the drone strings, makes it difficult to consider a harmonic role for the instrument. Nevertheless, the entry-point decided on for the project was the twelve-bar blues form. It was felt that without this defining element, one of the basic building blocks of this collaboration would be absent and the ensuing musical conversation would lack a framework or be one-sided.

- Harmonic and Melodic Materials

The primary role of the guitar was to maintain the standard blues chord progression in C along with suitable substitute chords. The harmonic progression of twelve bar blues is straightforward, based around three primary chords, the tonic (I)(*Sa*), the subdominant (IV)(*Ma*) and the dominant (V)(*Pa*). The twelve-bar progression contains four beats to a bar and is arranged in its most basic form as follows:

Bar Chord

1	I	2	I	3	I	4	I
5	IV	6	IV	7	I	8	I
9	V	10	IV	11	I	12	I

That is, four bars of the tonic chord (I), two bars of the subdominant chord (IV), two bars of the tonic chord (I), one bar of the dominant chord (V), one bar of the subdominant chord (IV) and two bars of the tonic chord (I)⁹ On the surface, the tonic of the blues scale would appear to shift with each chord change in the progression. Despite the problems that this might raise for a fixed tonic instrument like the sarod, it became evident that it is still possible to perform with the same tonic and hence in the same mode throughout.

The basic melodic materials played by the guitar during solos were based around the pentatonic blues scale (1 b3 4 5 b7 i.e. *Sa ga ma Pa ni* – to which b5 i.e. *tivra ma* is also added). C (*safayed ek*) was chosen a suitable tonic because it is a pitch that both instruments could easily accommodate. An equivalent melodic framework for the sarod that could be used is the raga Mishra Dhani i.e. 1 b3 4 5 b7 – *Sa ga ma Pa ni* but also using blue notes 3 b5 and #7 – or *vivadi* ('dissonant') notes *Ga Ma* and *Ni*. Through the course of the cycle the sarod could maintain this raga with the same *Sa*, but just needed to change the *vadi* (the most prominent note) and *samvadi* (the second most prominent note) with each chord change. This is similar to the method by which ragas such as *Bhupali* and *Deshkar* (1 2 3 5 6 or *Sa Re Ga Pa Dha*) are distinguished from each other. While both ragas share the same pitches and intervals, they are nevertheless recognised as quite distinct precisely because of the different placements of their *vadi* and *samvadi* notes.

A meeting-point between the twelve-bar Blues in Hindustani music, in terms of idiom, style and sentiment, can be discerned in the *dhun* and *thumri* genres. The approach to melodic elaboration, along with the range and scope for improvisation found in these two genres share some common points with the Blues, especially in the use of *vivadi* or 'blue' notes. The major difference between these two genres and Blues is that in the latter, the *vadi* note of the basic scale uses changes throughout the piece. However, a similar melodic device is also occasionally used in *bolbanao ki thumri*, where in Bhairavi, for example, the focus of the raga is varied by shifting its *vadi* from *Sa* to *ma*.

Melodic improvisation in the blues idiom is varied and open to many different approaches. On occasion it can be quite complicated melodically and demanding technically, as is evident in the thousands of recordings commercially available. Improvisation can also sometimes draw upon a range of vocal conventions and melody types that are often associated with the Blues. This framework is open enough for various types of melodic ornamentation to be included, and particularly for the characteristic use of slight microtonal inflections intended to increase the emotional content of a musical phrase. By extension it is also open enough to accommodate the melodic devices found in *thumri* or *dhun* styles, such as *meend*, *murki*, *zamzama*, *ghaseet* and so

⁹ Introductory as well as detailed explanations of the Blues progression is readily available on the internet, e.g.

www.music.vt.edu/musicdictionary/appendix/blues/Bluesprogression.html

on¹⁰. Further, the Blues framework is also potentially open enough to accommodate the ways of melodic phrasing and the working musical ideas found in the light classical Hindustani genres – its *gayaki ang* – particularly in how improvisation can centre on and around the words of a song, and its fragments.

- *Form and Rhythm*

In this collaboration it was decided that the guitar should be played in the style of a ballad, one of the accepted ways in which the blues progression can be rendered in a relatively slow tempo. This particular tempo was chosen because it could allow for the maximum amount of space to accommodate intricate melodic ornamentations and phrases. The primary role of the guitar was to establish and maintain the harmonic cycle through the twelve bar chordal progression. The harmonic progression was played both with and without the substitution of chords on the guitar, which is a common technique for adding beauty and substance to the harmonic cycle. Over this harmonic cycle, the sarod started to improvise melodically using Mishra Dhani first of all with *Sa* as vadi, which then shifted to *Ma* at the fifth bar, then back to *Sa* on the seventh bar, *Pa* on the ninth bar and so on, following the form of the harmonic progression eventually to arrive back on *Sa* at the beginning of the following cycle.

Even though this progression is commonly described in Blues as a harmonic cycle, it can equally be approached as a rhythmic cycle, as might occur in Hindustani music. When the twelve bars of four beats of the harmonic progression are also understood to comprise a rhythmic cycle of forty-eight beats (i.e. twelve *vibhags* or sections of four beats) then this opens up the Blues progression to the rhythmic conventions and materials of Hindustani music – such as *chhand* (groove), *layakari* (polyrhythm) and *tehai* (rhythmic cadences). Within the 48 beat cycle it could be said that there are two khali matras on the 16th and 32nd beats. Or alternately it can be thought of as one cycle of *vilambit ektal* (a slow twelve beat cycle) with each *matra* (beat) divided into four subdivisions. This approach can disarm some of the differences in thinking about cycles between the two types of music.

- *Aesthetics*

Transposing the melodic style of the dhun or thumri into the Blues harmonic setting created the potential for new responses between the musicians involved in this collaboration. It was as though the Blues had a new conversation partner. In this example the collaboration kept one framework intact on to which a different but complementary melodic approach was transposed. If one day a technique could be developed on the sarod whereby chords could effectively and convincingly be played in order to keep the harmonic cycle

¹⁰ See Ranade (1990) for a useful explanation of these specific classes of melodic ornamentation.

for the guitar to improvise melodically, then this would take this conversation to another level.

Even in its present form, some sort of meeting-point could be discerned in the equivalence of the *karuna* (pathos, melancholy) *rasa* which was created within the Mishra Dhani melodic framework and the emotional flavour and intention of the type of Blues that engages with the melancholy of separation, of being downtrodden or of being hard done by. It is through recourse to, and elaboration of, this common sentiment that the conversation unfolds. This intersection of moods and its expression through musical materials provide the means for articulating two different perspectives on this shared emotional state through improvisation.

Conclusion: What makes cross-cultural collaborations work, or not?

In the end, a systematised approach to whether or not a collaboration works as a musical conversation may prove too elusive to pin down. This is not so much due to the diverse materials and processes involved in cross-cultural collaborations, but more because of the many different ways of thinking about music that exist. Accordingly it may be the case that what might be regarded as innovative in one context, could be equally dismissed as trite in another. It is for this reason that ideas of meaning and value in cross-cultural improvisations are perhaps more relevant to the innovation of the processes involved than to assigning any universal value or musical status to any one outcome.

Paradoxically, it is probably much easier to discern when things do not work than the other way around. Those collaborations in which a connection between performers is not established bring to mind the image and sound of two stereo systems facing each other, randomly programmed to play two soundtracks simultaneously. Sometimes out of sheer luck such an arrangement can actually produce moments of interest, but mostly it is incoherent because the process of mixing the two musics is left to chance and to the generosity of the mind of the listener, as there can be no input by the musicians involved. Like two independent monologues that just happen to be going on at the same time, the soundtracks do not speak to each other. The trouble is that some cross-cultural collaborations can sound like this as well. The technical and emotional contribution of the musician to the effectiveness of a collaboration cannot be underplayed. It seems unfair therefore to lay the blame of any failure on any incompatibility between musics involved in a collaboration. More reasonably, and realistically, the blame can be imputed to the musicians involved and what they bring to the collaboration.

When a collaboration does not work it can sometimes be imputed to an inability or unwillingness, of one or both partners, to adjust their musical and personal outlook and approach. Consequently, there is little commitment to bending the material or style they are working with in order to reach a common point from which a musical conversation can develop. On other occasions the hindering of communication may result from undue competitive-

ness; an inadequate amount of knowledge of the materials brought to a collaboration; an insensitivity to difference, or under-developed musical skills. Further, a collaboration sometimes may be unconvincing simply due to the lack of sufficient practice and prior thought. In the world of fusion music it is not uncommon for collaborative performances to be preceded by one or two quick rehearsals, or even just realised then and there on stage, under the justification that it is improvised music. On the odd occasion this can work, and when it does this is usually because of the very special skills of those involved. However most times it does not, strongly suggesting that improvised doesn't necessarily imply unplanned.

The two examples discussed above highlight some specific issues about the role of improvisation in a cross-cultural collaboration. They are two insignificant attempts amongst countless to have taken place over the centuries, to combine musical systems. Whether they can be regarded as musically successful or not from the perspective of Arabic, Blues or Hindustani aesthetics will understandably always remain open to interpretation and speculation. The processes by which they were put together, however, can provide an insight into the way that strategies for, and ways of thinking about, collaborations can be formulated and applied.

The first piece involved the performers thinking beyond the established and fixed reference points of *raga* and *maqam*. It set out to find common points between these two around which improvisation could elaborate, whether this improvisation occurs on the level of melody, rhythm and form, or through abstract aesthetic engagement with the qualities of *saltanah* or *rasa*. The second example involved adding a new element to a pre-existing idiom. It transposed something of the universe of Hindustani melodic and rhythmic practice and sensibility on to another musical universe, which remained largely intact. The contribution of the *gayaki ang* (or Hindustani singing style) to the melodic idiom of the Blues was felt in how it provided this genre with a new melodic and emotional flavour and how it suggested that it could also be opened up to accommodate different forms of rhythmic elaboration. Essentially this collaboration consisted of the re-working of one idiom via the process of stretching it melodically and rhythmically in new ways, by adapting and applying the melodic style and rhythmic approach of one type of music to the harmonic framework of another. This differs from the first example in which the collaboration kept moving outside the framework of each system to try and establish a new common ground for collaborative improvisation.

Deliberating on what may or may not be meaningful in music is by no means a new or novel field of thought. Because of the body of literature available on this subject we know that there are so many ways in which this issue has been interpreted. What is new though, are attempts to work out the relevance of these efforts and how they might apply to cross-cultural collaborations. If anything could be said to emerge clearly out of this discussion, perhaps it should be that meaning in cross-cultural improvisatory collaborations comes

when the integrity of each source music is maintained while something new is created, or when an existing musical framework is given a new flavour. These two conditions, out of a potentially unlimited number of others, can create a favourable artistic space in which the qualities of *rasa*, *saltanah*, *mojo*, *duende* and so on can intermingle. It is the effect of this intermingling that makes for a good musical conversation. Both retain something of their own flavour and style, but there is also the hint of a new musical space opening up – the product of that meeting-point.

Rumi probably had nothing of this in mind when he wrote his *Mathnawi*. Beyond the theorising and recollection of experiences, he was perhaps suggesting that in the end it is really the spontaneous outpouring from within that counts in any form of communication. Perhaps we can learn from this morsel of wisdom that the thing we probably most desire in music lies in the poetics of the art and not in theoretical models. Improvisation is one way to explore this sensibility spontaneously. But in the process it is inevitable that difference in a cross-cultural context needs to be negotiated with great sensitivity and performers perhaps need to be ready to 'kindly adjust'. As Rumi suggests, meaningful communication through music ultimately comes when:

the speech in my heart is (coming) from the place of good fortune,
because there is a window from (one) heart to (another) heart.¹¹

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¹¹ 'How To Know Another', *Mathnawi* VI: 4900-4916

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