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PERSPECTIVES ON MUSIC IDEAS AND THEORIES

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Improvisation : The Indian Cultural Perspective

I would like to begin by stating my basic position in the time-honoured *sutra*-way for a later elaboration and better debate.

Some Intriguing Questions/Observations

At the outset, some issues need to be faced or at least mentioned:

- It is natural and inevitable that music-practitioners hailing from different systems and cultures would locate the debate about a fundamental phenomenon, such as that of improvisation, in relation to their own respective systems. Racine, the well known French dramatist used to say, "When I say I understand Shakespeare, I mean I understand Shakespeare in relation to Racine." To view the entire, emerging, and multi-coloured spectrum of interpretations of the phenomenon would require rising above the debate and that would be a philosopher's task — both unenviable and difficult.
- Considering the actual performing practice, is it not correct to say that Indian art music is not as improvised as it is imagined to be, and Western art music may not be as pre-composed as it is made out to be? I suspect that those equipped with a real comparative knowledge of multiple

music systems would be more than willing to join in chorus to question the assumed uniqueness of Indian musical improvisation.

Even if one cursorily glances through standard documented sources, Western art music historically offers significant instances of improvisation in identifiable periods. Thus: (1) 1200–1700 AD: vocal music had descant in which, while one voice held onto the Plain Song, the other improvised, (2) 1700–1800 AD: instrumental music consisted of division, i.e. a practice according to which the player redistributed melody and/or tune while playing, (3) The keyboard-music included 'figured bass' that consisted of harpsichord playing patterns supportive to the main music-stream, (4) Around 1800 AD, the vogue came into being in which chord-development was left to the instrumentalist. Prelude, Toccata, Fantasia, etc., easily come to mind, (5) Instrumental music began introducing noticeable ornamentation which was abundantly improvised, and (6) Finally, concerto-s earmark cadenza for improvisation.

It appears that much of non-Indian discussion of the concept of improvisation has two main thrusts. To make changes in the already memorised or notated music presents one shade of the meaning. The other connotation refers to the introduction of musical changes not related to the memorised or notated music. Interestingly, there is one more term in circulation related to the phenomenon, and that is extemporisation. Normally this term is understood to emphasise the unexpected, sudden, or 'at the eleventh hour' kind of manifestation of the performing impulse.

- It may not be incorrect to say that change, variation, modification, deviation, spontaneity, development, elaboration, invention-discovery-innovation or transformation/distortion, and finally improvisation, are roads leading to the musical Rome of creation!

Even if one believes that successful creation is the ultimate goal, it is essential to distinguish the listed procedures/processes and

similar other concepts to fully understand improvisation. Secondly, and somewhat uncharitably, I must note that the immediate motives for improvisation may sometimes be less noble! To confuse the accompanists, audiences or to cover up one's lapses etc. may also be the immediate causes of 'improvisation'.

- Further, it is desirable and possible to check whether improvisation — if it is an Indian trait — is also operation in other walks of life in India. I suggest that because improvisation is linked to performance, and as performance is not confined to music alone, it may be advisable to examine improvisatory procedures, etc., in other areas of life. If improvisation is a distinctive, performing, and Indian feature then, in all probability, it has extra-musical conceptual as also technical parallels. The musical *avatar* of improvisation needs to be placed in the larger cultural perspective to gain clues vital to its nature.

And while we are at it, we should not forget that Indian music is not confined to art music alone! The totality of Indian music consists of six concurrently running streams of music, all enjoying long durations and wide regional distribution. Admittedly the proportion of improvisation is not and cannot be the same in the categorical sextet. For an exhaustive musical analysis of the concept, sizable and carefully chosen samples from all six musical categories must be examined

- A disturbing question needs to be asked at this stage of the inquiry, before we plunge into Indian cultural depths! Has the non-Indian thinking on Indian music imposed on us the concept, especially in connection with Indian art music? Have we accepted this orientation gladly because improvisation is lauded as an indicator of meritorious musicality?
- Improvisation, at least in the context of Indian music seems to have become a charged word comparable to words such as *Ma* (माँ : mother!) or *mera desh* (मेरा देश : my country!) in

Bollywood movies! It has therefore become necessary to examine the phenomenon with some academic detachment and precision.

- One may ask: how many terms and concepts from Indian musicology clearly refer to improvisation? A keen ethnomusicologist like Bruno Nettl has stated that significantly, Asian musicians and musicology do not have explicit terms for improvisation. He therefore has also concluded that improvisation may not be a consciously accepted phenomenon in these and similar other cultures. Indeed, in Hindustani musicology and music-behaviour, *upaj* (उपज : broadly meaning creation) seems to be the only oft-used concept and term in this context. In a way, the term and the concept of *anibaddha* music is also a good candidate. However, what is significant is that not much 'voluntarily undertaken discussion' of improvisation is available in Indian musicological literature — even in regional languages!

(To distinguish 'improvisation' from 'spontaneity', I have employed the terms *tatkalasphoorta* {तत्कालस्फूर्ति} and *uspfoorta* {उस्फूर्ति} respectively to stand for 'improvised' and 'spontaneous'.)

Performance and Improvisation in a Wider Spectrum

In recent times, performance-studies have been undertaken in diverse disciplines such as linguistics, anthropology, communication studies, literary theory, and aesthetics. They have discussed performance in a new light. Performance is regarded as an important channel of communication-processes and is therefore placed and appreciated in a wider framework. Hence, performing functions are detected, advocated, and evaluated in the context of ordinary human pursuits as also with reference to endeavours generally grouped as artistic, aesthetic, creative, etc. This is the reason why the 'performing culture' of every human group needs a close look before its 'cultural' or

'artistic' performances are discussed. The original, wider, and more fundamental connotation of performance refers to a voluntary initiation and completion of a purposeful action (and that too not confined to us bipeds!) Performance, as an act designed to show off skills, etc., to others is a thrust or meaning bestowed on the concept at a later stage in human history!

Coming back to the artistic or aesthetic aspect, performance has today found a secure place in painting, sculpture, as well as literature. Action-painting, mobile sculpture, cut-and-paste fiction, theatrical presentations in which the audience determines the last, i.e. the final act, or manifestations that resort to other participatory modes — all bear testimony to the increasing, changing, and culturally more ambitious roles allotted to the performance-phenomenon. In sum, it can be stated that painters, sculptors, creative writers, and theatre-workers obviously sensed that the basic philosophy of performance and features related to performance are helpful in breaking the shackles of convention and routine or mechanical expression which often bind every art. Hence they have advocated ideas, resorted to procedures, and devised techniques related to performance that have often brought on them severe and ungenerous criticism from many quarters!

Expectedly, current thinking about the linked phenomenon of improvisation is also undergoing a sea-change. The growing appreciation of interactive processes and their amazingly rapid spread through innovative technology, etc., can be better understood and utilised with this background.

Contribution of Ethnomusicology

Ethnomusicologists have rightly and seriously dwelt on the music-improvisation relationship. Their writings on the theme contain many insights we would do well to remember in our discussions.

What is Improvisation?

From different categories, fields, and arts I shall quote/describe some examples of actions that have improvisatory flavour. Some are

directly connected to music while some are related to other fields, but they bring home the multiple aspects of the phenomenon.

Improvisatory Flavour in Different Walks of Life in India

(1) 'Vannaka' in Jyotireshwara's *Varna Ratnakara* (13th–14th century)

Vannaka (lit. a describer) was a person who belonged to the class of itinerant story-tellers described by Jyotireshwara. Whenever common events such as war, marriage, flood, coronation, etc., occurred in the stories the Vannaka employed stock descriptions but changed place-names or patrons' names, descriptions of the locale, etc., as required.

(2) Dangti Powada:

This is a folk form — a kind of ballad-singing performed in Maharashtra. The host invites the performer, i.e. the composer-singer, for a function or ceremony, etc. The performer observes the entire event and then at a suitable time sings a ballad consisting of praise of the patron, description of the event and pithy comments on the personalities, etc.

(3) Ustad Faiyaz Khan's (1886–1950) rendering of *Raga Barwa*:

(*Biram rahe manmohan*) in which the second line of the *antara* (*sab ban dhund aye*) usually reaches only up to the octave note. However, depending on the condition of his voice and mood the Ustad would take it to the note 'Ma' in the Higher octave to make the phrase more appealing and brighter.

(4) Ustad Alladiya Khan's (1855–1946) *Jawari*-making:

The bridge (*ghodi*) of a *tanpura* is to be levelled in a specific manner to ensure that the strings passing over it can vibrate with adequate resonating efficacy. This task of levelling the bridge is generally known as *Jawari*-making.

Ustad Alladiya Khan — the founder of the Atrauli Gharana of Hindustani Khayal-singing — was once asked to give a performance by a patron but the *tanpura* provided to the Ustad had a bridge (*ghodi*) with a terribly uneven surface and consequently the strings could not provide the necessary resonant sound. The Ustad — not waiting for the professional repairer, etc. — picked up a piece of brick and with it managed to polish the bridge!

AIR-staff *Jawari*-making!

In a *tanpura* a thread is passed under the string and over the bridge to create harmonics to enrich the sound of the strings. In many stations of the All India Radio, the thread is not readily available and the staff-artist who is scheduled to play the *tanpura* would not hesitate to pull out a thread from a carpet spread in the studio and use it to get over the difficulty!

(5) *Bonito*-blowing technique taught with a straw:

I was recording a player of *Bonito* — a bird-whistle. He displayed considerable blowing skill in playing a fairly long melody on this primitive instrument. When I asked how he trains his son in this task he (successively) asked me to bring a glass, fill half of it with water, then bring a straw and blow in the glass. Blowing in the water in the glass, and producing bubbles in the required speed and frequency was the test to be passed by a prospective *Bonito*-player before he was allowed to touch the instrument!

(6) Shahir Ram Joshi's (1758–1812) *Arya* on Ghorpade.

Ram Joshi was a well-known singer of *Lavani* and also a *keertankar* (giver of musico-religious discourse) from Maharashtra. He was performing a *keertana* for a prince called Ghorpade of a small state. Ram Joshi learnt that the Ghorpade was a stingy patron — always worried about how much he would have to pay to the performers, etc.! Hence, while singing during the *keertana*, Ram Joshi spontaneously composed a verse in which, making a *pun* on the name Ghorpade (*ghor* =

anxiety, *pade* = causes) he sang “God is the giver — why are you worried” (meaning Ghor pade?)

(7) Pt. Vazebuwa's singing of '*Moortimant bhiti*' (*bhint*):

Pt. Ramkrishnabuwa Vaze (1872–1943), was a versatile singer, and an imaginative composer. He was also shrewd and witty. Once he was performing for a wealthy but not-so-knowledgeable patron. While the concert was in progress, the patron asked Vazebuwa to sing a stage-song which had recently become popular. The song was for a young heroine about to be married to a much older bridegroom. It began with the words, '*Moortimant bhiti pudhe majsamor rahili*' (meaning 'in front of me stands terror personified'). Vazebuwa feeling insulted and sensing the ignorance of the patron sang the tune but with the words, '*Moortimant bhint pudhe majsamor rahili*' in which the word 'bhint' means a 'wall'! Of course he camouflaged the word suitably!

(8) '*Jane akal sab*':

In an identical situation an ignorant patron's command prompted a singer to compose and present a composition in a prestigious *raga* called *Savani Kalyan* in Hindustani *khayal* music. The composition, beginning with the words '*Jane akal sab*' has the import: “Everybody knows how ignorant you are — though you consider yourselves very knowledgeable. I have seen many like you in this world who de-value the art of the meritorious.”

(9) Nanasaheb Phatak shutting off an over-enthusiastic actor:

Phatak was a well-known actor specialising in stylised Shakespearean theatre in Maharashtra during the early part of the 20th century. In one of his plays, an over-enthusiastic actor enacted the role of a messenger. He used to overact with violent gesticulations, just to deliver a message to the King that the enemy-forces have reached the borders of the State. Phatak, who was playing the King decided to cut the actor to size and the moment the messenger took his entry Phatak, with imperious gestures thundered, “I know from your face what

you are going to say! Get out without uttering a word!" The poor actor had to make his exit in silence!

(10) Prop-misplacement and Phatak's response:

The same Phatak was supposed to play the hero who finally slays the villain with the royal sword. But to his horror Phatak found that the scabbard of the sword provided to him had no sword but only the handle! However, Phatak loosing no time, gave a contemptuous laughter and said, "But why do I need a sword to do away with a lowly villain like you — I should just strangle you!"

(11) This is from another stratum of the Indian culture.

Bhimulpinnu (descending from Bhima in Mahabharata) is the god of the Baiga tribal people. Every three years the image of the God is to be freshly drawn. The question arises: what should be the appearance of the God? It is solved in an interesting manner. What the worshipper sees in his dreams on the previous night becomes the image he draws the next day!

Improvisation as a Phenomenon

From these illustrations, certain general features emerge:

1. Principle of chance (The Aleatory Principle)
2. Element of risk
3. Desire to be liberated/different/creative
4. Desire to be subtle
5. Dynamic interaction between a relatively fixed core and relatively variable peripherals
6. Today's improvisation may become the codified or the pre-composed of tomorrow, thus keeping the challenge alive!

Improvisation is a performing phenomenon mainly identifiable because of its two functions: one immediate and the other — rather contingently — later.

The immediate function is liberation of the performer and the performance from a habitual, rigidly-grooved, predictable, and perhaps a common or vulgarised act of expression.

In the final analysis, improvisation is not a mere last-minute or forced/unforced deviation from a pre-planned actualisation of a musical idea. It is a qualitative, experience-enriching, open-ended, and considerably methodical movement away from the performing action initially conceived or planned. As such, all improvisation consists of the attainment of an equilibrium struck between the essentially constant part of the performance-content and its variable elements.

Notation, score, or any other means of representing music by transcending the auditory mode is designed to 'fix' that part. This part is not expected to explore the improvisatory aspect of music-making. However, this may not be the only way to 'fix' the desired part of the content. Music can be partially or entirely fixed in the mind; and thus effectively taken out of the purview of improvisatory processes. Today, a large portion of Indian art music follows this strategy. Two phenomena are thus clearly involved: a performance-plan and the actual performance. Improvisation may be appreciated as a manifestation of the dynamic interrelationship between the performance-plan and performance as an act.

Though improvisation is related to everything that a performance may consist of, the discussion of the phenomenon may centre on any selected aspect forming the core of the concerned performance.

With this background, I submit that musical improvisation in India is conceived in the broader framework of the four *abhinaya-marga-s* propounded by Bharata. In reality, Bharata's *abhinaya-marga-s* (*kayik, angik, vachik, aharya, and sattvik*) are the basic avenues of communication (संज्ञापन). A performer performs in the selected avenue or in its combination as outlined in the performance-plan which he or the external initiator has originally created.

It is necessary to remember that all communication is essentially composite, though the active component factors or sensibilities may

vary in number, proportion, and intensity of application as far as the final message is concerned.

Musical improvisation thus becomes a complex phenomenon requiring a multi-levelled analysis and structural examination.

A controlled, last-minute, conscious (or largely so) shift from the originally intended and planned employment of communicating avenue(s) or at least in the agency earlier selected, culminates in the improvisation described earlier.

In music-making, the parallelogram of forces of the *abhinayamarga*-s is matched on a lower and immediate level created by melodic, rhythmic, textual, and formatting (or genre-governing) forces.

Melodic स्वर	तारता pitch, गरिमा volume, गुणवैशिष्ट्य timbre
Tempo लय	आघात-निराघात stressed/unstressed, गतिभेद slow, medium, etc., महत्त्वदर्शन मार्ग mode of accentuation, प्रत्यक्षता perceivability
Text सहिता	सार्थ भाषिक linguistic meaningful (गद्य prose, पद्य verse, काव्य poem, नाट्यात्म dramatic), निरर्थक भाषिक non-sensical linguistic, ध्वन्याधारित onomatopoeic
Genre प्रकार	एक single genre, समिश्र combined

On a subtler level, further nuanced operations of the phenomenon are possible. For example, in the melodic aspect, internal substitution between dimensions of sound such as pitch, volume, and timbre can be contemplated. As the performing conditions became more controllable, volume could be explored with more purposefulness in the modern times. Timbre is obviously the most challenging dimension and it can safely be heralded as the most potent avenue of musical improvisation.

In the rhythmic aspect, similar process may take place through employing degrees of forcefulness in accentuation, or through stretching the limits of what is accepted as regular, and finally through making it perceivable through dimensions other than sound.

In the linguistic/textual aspect, the structuring of units, shifts in the basic modes namely, prose-verse-poetry-theatric, provide the logical ways to improvise.

Finally, genre-dividing boundaries may shift subtly or radically due to improvisation.

Intra-art substitution of expressive channels is improvisation and the inter-art substitution of a similar kind may be a mixed, combined, or composite expression.

Specifically Musical Features

- Changing performing conditions indicate that pitch and volume are losing their ascendancy and it is the dimension of timbre which offers more scope for expressive improvisatory endeavour.
- Rhythm lends itself more easily to improvisation than tunes.
- Today, fusion is mostly favoured as a strategy to move out of one's own, indigenous musical culture. Consequently, language and literary aspects of the text are considered problematic. Multilingualism in the texts or focussing on the sound-aspect of the text appear to be inevitable consequences.
- Improvisation has been mentioned mostly in positive terms. For example, it is described as the suddenness of creative impulse. Bergson has perceptively referred to it as a 'constantly incomplete process'!

Danielou, an assiduous student of Indian music from an Indian perspective, once remarked that "Improvised structures are never expressions of complete freedom or a result of chance. They follow strict rules of association and use a number of symbols, i.e. words conveying precise notions within the rigid structures of the grammar of a particular language. Probably due to limitations of notations and the complex calculated nature of harmonic relations, the Western world has lost the ability to improvise."

Improvisation in Theatre

In theatric discussions, improvisation has frequently figured but literature on it is scattered and cannot be described as abundant. In the light of the growing importance of improvisation in experimental theatre and the high theoretical regard it appears to enjoy, this is somewhat surprising!

However, the elusive character of performance has been noted. Ralph Richardson, noting 8 p.m. as the time at which the curtains went up, once said, "At three minutes past eight, you must dream!" Sandra Caruso, who has written on the subject, mentions a dictum of one of her teachers, "Act, before you think!"

Theatre-training often relies on giving background information, character details, and structured situations to provide a skeleton around which improvised dialogues, etc., are to build the dramatic expression. It has been rightly pointed out that the aim is the actors' development and not the audiences' entertainment. Appreciation of Bharata's *abhinayamarga* is likely to increase the variety and effectiveness of improvisation.

Even if the source of the skeletal structure is known or identifiable, the attempt should not be to reproduce it or to put up a variation of the original. In fact the improvised product might be exactly the opposite of the original! We are advised, "Step in their shoes but walk as you would!" Obviously, the aim is the qualitative expansion of the spectrum of expressive possibilities.

We are also told, "An ounce of behaviour is worth a pound of words." In other words, the non-verbal, non-comic, non-classifiable, and the subtle are the main improvisatory components.

Without going in for an extensive statement, I have made reference to some important features of the theatric perspective on improvisation because music and theatre enjoy a mutual and intrinsic performing relationship.

The Non-Indian Musical Perspective

It has been noted that in the West, traditional musicology regarded improvisation as unimportant and an interest mainly picked up after Afro-Asian musical systems became objects of study. The general literature on improvisation therefore deals largely with the phenomenon in Western music and while doing so, attempts to gain a historical perspective on the role that improvisatory processes have played in the performance practice of the past. Thus, this literature pointed out that improvisation-techniques are detected in the work of Baroque composers and generally in the music of those who worked rapidly, spontaneously, and copiously.

Generally, two kinds of views are held: (a) Some scholars dwell on the relevance of the concept to non-Western — especially tribal music-s — which, being without notation, are basically regarded as improvised, and (b) Some others confine the idea of improvisation to systems which have a notation system and from which the improviser departs. In the context of these views, none of the two angles of the concept can explain non-Western music in which one cannot easily distinguish between improvisation and composition. The relationship of improvisation to composition is a complex one, on which there is no general agreement.

Bruno Nettl (*Thoughts on Improvisation*, Vol. IX, Jan. 1974, pp. 1-14) a keen ethnomusicologist working on many musical systems, pointed out that it was Ernst Ferand who scholastically considered improvisation first, in 1938. However, Ernst Ferand's *Die Improvisation in der Musik* (Zurich: 1938), was largely ignored perhaps because improvisation was viewed as a matter of craftsmanship, ornamentation, etc.

Nettl further argues that the two conflicting views about improvisation are: (1) It cannot exist without notation and composition, since it starts where notation ends, and (2) It is found only in non-Western systems of music. Dwelling on the improvisation

and composition dichotomy, he says that it can be briefly described as: improvisation is spontaneous, primitive, and natural, while composition is calculated, sophisticated, and artificial. One may classify composition as slow and rapid and regard improvisation as the latter. Improvisation and composition are to be viewed as two forms of the same thing.

According to Nettl, yet another important distinction needs to be made between improvisation and variation.

In Nettl's opinion, the standard devices of improvisation can be identified as: (1) repetition, (2) melodic sequence, (3) simple variation of short phrases, (4) starting two successive sections with the same motifs, and (5) increasing section-length progressively in a performance. However, he rightly notes that as these are also found in composed music, it is perhaps their distribution that is more important.

Nettl argues that all improvisation needs a model. The improviser, let us hypothesise, always has something given to work from, which we may call his model. To what extent does the model comprise the material that is actually heard by the student or the performer? This directs us to the role of teaching. What is overlooked is the fact that inaudible or minimally audible models exist in a number of cultures, but particularly in Western music.

There are very diverse kinds of models used in the world of improvisation: (a) We may take it that each model — be it a tune, a theoretical construct, or a model with typical melodic tunes — consists of a series of obligatory musical events which must be observed, either absolutely or with some sort of frequency to keep the model intact, (b) models vary in audibility (does the music include everything that ultimately will emerge in performance?) and also in density, (c) Asian models have a time-oriented approach, i.e. have beginnings—ends, and they consist of thought sequences, etc., as obligatory musical events, (d) density means less freedom to the artist; Jazz is relatively dense, Persian music has medium density, and Arabic and Indian

music-s lack in density. He adds that in these music-s, which are said to be improvised, a number of compositional techniques and devices at the micro-compositional level appear to be characteristic. All these are also present in set compositions of certain cultures. Density of repertoire is a useful concept. By it is indicated the degree to which separate units of a repertoire are similar, whether or not genetically related. Or putting it differently, one may ask how close or far apart musically, the units, pieces, or songs may be from each other. An analogous concept is historical density, i.e. the rate at which the piece or the repertoire changes. We can simply call this component the dynamics of the tradition, but it is here that the lack of documentation stands in the way.

Improvisation is to be distinguished from some processes. Terminological clusters which come into play when improvisation is understood, explained, or discussed should also be carefully noted. Finally, it is necessary to examine how, to what extent, and in what context, Indian terminology corresponds to these.