

Conflict and Confluence:

Constructing and Challenging Boundaries
at the
Ahiri Institute for Indian Classical Music and Dance

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For all my teachers.

Introduction

..How to build a new, “modern” world out of an old, legend-haunted civilization, an old culture which we have brought in the heart of a newer one? These questions are all a single, existential question: How are we to live in the world? (Salman Rushdie)¹

One of the most fascinating and complex dimensions of globalization is the interrelationship between old and new ways of inhabiting the world. It is here that we observe that far from there being a linear relationship that brings us from the traditional to the contemporary modern world, [...] what we encounter is a polyphony of voices and knowledges, mediated by new technologies and offered to the public, in the majority of cases, by the structures of the culture industry. (Ana María Ochoa)²

The ways that internationally performing musicians inhabit the world are both old and new. Old, in the sense that musicians and others have traveled throughout many centuries in many places; new, in the sense that the speed of travel and distances covered are far greater now than ever before. Indian classical musicians performing on the transnational concert circuit look back to an idealized past, when their lives could have been spent in one place, their unlimited devotion to music supported by a patron who took care of all their material needs. But much more often, these musicians look forward to the possible global significance of their performances. They are self-appointed cultural ambassadors, representing versions of India on the world stage. Performing traditional classical forms, they present this India to the world;³ performing in

¹ Rushdie 1992:19.

² Ochoa 1998:172 (translation mine, as are all following translations).

³ The musical traditions that I refer to in this thesis as “Indian classical music” might just as well be said to belong to neighboring nations of the subcontinent, as the history of the music extends from well before the establishment of current borders. As the musicians at Ahiri are Indian, and Ahiri advertises itself as an institution promoting awareness of Indian culture in the U.S., I engage with Indian national history and use the terms “Indian classical music,” and “Hindustani music” in this specific context. I have the greatest admiration and respect for the artists who, at other times and in other places, have taught

collaboration with musicians from other areas, they present possibilities for intercultural communication. Their performances and their dialog about those performances express a polyphony of voices and understandings about music, identity, and interculturality to the backdrop of histories of colonialism, classicism, and globalization.

Martin Stokes writes, “An opposition between global and local, system and agency, pessimism and optimism, top-down and bottom-up approaches to globalization...[has] been inscribed firmly in the ethnomusicological approach to globalization from the beginning” (Stokes 2004:50). To this I would add an opposition between similarity and difference, or between the universal and the particular, that has characterized not only ethnomusicological but also popular discourse on music and globalization and is constantly negotiated by people making and remaking spaces for their music in a globalizing world. Following Stokes and Tsing in their emphasis on human agency, I conceive of globalization as “a set of projects with cultural and institutional specificities; projects that construct, refer to, dream of, and fantasize of, in very diverse ways, a world as their zone of operation” (Stokes 2004:50). Taking the interaction between the individual (bottom-up) and the institutional (top-down) as a point of departure, I examine the self-conscious project of globalization expressed in the musical performances and social interactions of a group of musicians at a New York City institution devoted to Indian classical music and dance. While this study is in some sense an attempt to mediate between oppositions, it is not intended to reconcile them. Instead, I hope to portray their simultaneous existence and expedience in the lives of this group.

me about this music, and assure them that my terminology is not meant as a political statement.

Traveling between continents, performing in London, Tokyo, Johannesburg, Buenos Aires, Kolkata and Chennai, to name a few, a group of Indian maestros brought their whirlwind lives to a few months' relative pause during the spring of 2004. Settling at Ahiri house in Forest Hills, Queens, they taught, performed and conducted their personal lives under the auspices of one small part of the culture industry: Ahiri Institute of Indian Classical Music and Dance. There, together with Ahiri's administration, their students, and the audiences at their concerts, these musicians engaged in the continuing task of forming a space for themselves and for their music in New York.

Active as an institution from early 2003 until mid-summer 2004, Ahiri advertised itself in terms of diversity and multiculturalism as much as it emphasized its offerings as specifically Indian and authentically classical (Ahiri 2004b). Its goals included presenting "the very best of Indian culture here in the west," as well as creating a space for collaborations between Indian culture and others (Ahiri 2004b). Director Sridhar Shanmugam often emphasized his belief that "art is a means for universal togetherness," and titled a performance series "Confluence," reflecting his desire to see cultural streams meeting and flowing together as something new. Thus Ahiri valued both traditional and innovative expressions of Indian music, placing simultaneous emphasis on what Sunita S. Mukhi calls "the pinnacle of official Indianness" based on upper-class, upper-caste aesthetics of classicism (Mukhi 2002:4-5), and on change, hybridization, and universality. As Ahiri's official discourse shifted between polarities depending on situation and context, so too did the ways in which musicians expressed themselves.

Ahiri was committed to fostering intercultural communication through performance; thus, my approach to a study of Ahiri's artists takes performance as its

main entry point. I conceive of performance as Ahiri's artists have used the term, informed also by several strands of academic performance theory. As Ahiri's director Sridhar Shanmugam and assistant director Craig Kaufman see it, performance's main function is to communicate. What is communicated depends on the meanings that performers and audiences assign to the events that occur as part of the performance; meaning is thus produced by their social interaction. Performance is separated from everyday activity in two ways: it is bounded in time—"there is a demarcation that this starts and this ends"—and it is marked as special by the artists' craftsmanship and attention to detail.⁴ Along these lines, I wish to emphasize performance as communication, among performers and between performers and audience, in the context of the larger world and with the effect of constructing realities through this social interaction. As Richard Bauman has recognized, performance, like language, can be seen as "a basic means through which social realities are intersubjectively constituted and communicated." (Bauman 1977:43).

During the time I spent with Ahiri, I observed and participated in a series of staged performances and the discourses surrounding them. Having taken bansuri flute lessons at Ahiri in the fall of 2003⁵, I returned in the spring of 2004 to join intern Karen Zhang in documenting Ahiri events. As Karen had already been photographing and making audio and video recordings of performances and daily life, my presence along with her was as smooth an entry into the community as I could have hoped for. Karen and I often worked as a team in documenting events, running at least two cameras, taking

⁴ Interview with Sridhar Shanmugam and Craig Kaufman, 6/9/04.

⁵ I studied with Pt. Raghunath Seth of Bombay, who taught at Ahiri during the fall of 2003 only.

photographs, and sometimes contributing to sound and lighting management for more informal events such as the concerts at Ahiri school. As it became apparent that I liked to conduct interviews, I was also asked to do them formally and on camera for Ahiri's archives and musicians' press kits. Thus I, too, became an Ahiri performer.

I worked most closely with five musicians: Pandit Debashish Bhattacharya, Pandit Subashish Bhattacharya, Pandit T.V. Gopalakrishnan, Devi Neithiyar, and Ustad Shujaat Khan, as well as with directors and dancers/choreographers Sridhar Shanmugam and Craig Kaufman.⁶ These artists formed Ahiri's core group during the spring of 2004⁷, performing together on concerts, spending time together at Ahiri house, working together on various mundane tasks, and occasionally going out together in their minimal free time. The following chapters attempt to communicate the historical circumstances and institutional ideologies with which these artists interacted, and the ways in which their performances and personal views came together in conversations about classicism, tradition, modernization, fusion, spirituality, universalism, and other facets of the musical discourse of similarity and difference.

Chapter one focuses on presentation, looking first at the history of Indian classical musics in the past century with attention to the colonial encounter and the development of classicism. In light of this history, I then critically examine Ahiri's promotional materials that present its goals of intercultural understanding to potential students, audience

⁶ I introduce these musicians here with their preferred professional titles. As in everyday interaction each of their preferred forms of honorific address differs widely, I will reintroduce them with these titles at the beginning of each chapter, at most other times using first names only.

⁷ There were several other artists teaching and performing as part of Ahiri in the early spring of 2004; however, they left New York just as I was beginning my fieldwork and I did not have much contact with them.

members and donors. Chapter two deals with concepts of tradition and modernity or innovation within three Ahiri performances, highlighting ways that musicians negotiate how to be modern and innovative while remaining within classical tradition. Chapter three takes on the topic of “fusion” and intercultural improvisation. Examining two fusion performances and the discourses surrounding them, I focus on the problems and possibilities that recurring tropes of musical universalism, transcendence and spirituality present for creating the connections to which these fusion performances aspire. In conclusion, I look back on these instances of creating and challenging boundaries and borders, discussing their significance in the wider context of the myriad intercultural meetings that characterize contemporary globalization.

Chapter 1: History, Classicism, Multiculturalism and Presentation

The Development of Classicism

Master musicians, students, fellow performers, and audience members all brought their own diverse backgrounds to their interactions as part of Ahiri. Ahiri, then, was a point of articulation where various histories came together. In order to look at the histories important to Ahiri, we must begin with the development of classicism in Indian music during the colonial period. From this stem the histories of Indian classical music within the subcontinent and in Europe and the United States, and the history of interaction between musics of both areas.

Amanda Weidman, in her dissertation on Karnatic music and modernization, argues that as the concept of a canonical classical music tradition arose in England with the decline of the courts and the rise of an urban leisure class enabled by the industrial revolution, itself enabled by colonialism, “the definition of classical music was negotiated simultaneously in metropole and colony, constituting a particularly colonial politics of music” (Weidman 2002:13). As British linguists differentiated between “classical” and “vernacular” languages, British commentators on music differentiated between “vulgar” street music and sophisticated court music, a distinction that was adopted into Indian musical discussions in the late 19th century. Within India, two widely recognized “classical” traditions exist, which share many musical features but also differ widely on many accounts. The southern Karnatic tradition often claims a higher status of Indian cultural purity in comparison with the Persian-influenced Hindustani music of the north. The term “classical” is used differently in Karnatic and Hindustani contexts: music critics writing in English about a Karnatic performance will often praise a

musician's "classicism," referring to the musician's virtuosic execution of a complicated piece using traditional Karnatic forms. In the Hindustani tradition, the most common usage of the term "classical" is as the Hindi genre name *shastriya sangeet*, which differentiates this music from *lok* (folk), pop, or *filmi* genres, and at its most general level, includes the Karnatic tradition. While this paper does not address the particulars of Karnatic-Hindustani conflicts on classicism, it is important to note that the differences exist and influence the way Indian musicians interact, including those at Ahiri. Ahiri's institutional position on the Karnatic-Hindustani divide will be dealt with in the second section of this chapter. For present purposes, it is important to note that the development of an idea of classicism had important effects on both traditions.

Weidman points out that in Western classical music discourse, the term "classical" refers both to a specific historical period and to the music's sophistication, cultural status and authenticity (Weidman 2002:12). It is debatable whether or not Indian musicians look back to a single "classical" period of musical history, though the Akbar period of Moghul rule in the north and the life of Thyagaraja in the south come to mind. With or without a golden age to memorialize as classical, the introduction of this term into Indian discourse about music, in both Karnatic and Hindustani traditions, referenced authenticity, cultural status, and sophistication in relation to 'lower' forms of music, and attributed to it equal status with—thus defining it in relation to—the classical music of the West (Weidman 2002:7).

If Indian raga music came to be portrayed as equal in status with Western classical music, it has also continually been described in contrasting terms. The colonial politics of music contributed to the formation of an opposition between Western and

Indian music, the one characterized by harmony, rationalism and high culture and the other by melody, emotionalism and nature. This opposition both echoed and helped construct the larger East-West opposition, which attributed these same qualities to almost all aspects of culture in each respective area of the world. Within India in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, this opposition helped foster a concept of a uniquely Indian classical music that could then be mobilized in service of nationalism. On an international scale, this opposition fueled orientalist interest in Indian classical music among Westerners, and set the boundaries of a discourse within which Indian musicians could present their music to European and American audiences. Though it is itself a colonial construct, this opposition allowed generations of scholars to describe Indian classical music as pristinely indigenous and unaffected by the colonial encounter. Finally, the very construction of a musical gulf between East and West has led to a genre whose particular reason for existence is to bridge that gulf: “fusion.”

Academic and public discourse about Indian classical music and its entrance into the world music scene highlights both celebrated progress and lamentable loss (Feld 2000). Dan Neuman, in his pioneering 1980 ethnography, turns his analytical focus away from the music itself to the discourses and practices surrounding becoming and being a musician, and describes the rapid changes then taking place in Hindustani music’s social world. Scholarship on Indian classical music following Neuman’s ethnography has further examined the genre’s rise to an internationally recognized canonical classicism in conjunction with the postcolonial project to define India as a nation-state. Central to this has been the project of making music ‘respectable’ in line with bourgeois, largely Brahmin Hindu values at the beginning of the 20th century, in the service of defining

indigenous cultural identity for these largely Anglicized Hindu elites who opposed colonial rule (Qureshi 1991). In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Indian musicologists Drs. Vishnu Bhatkande and Vishnu Paluskar created music conservatories and projects of canonization that set the standards for the discipline of musicology in India. They are now viewed by many as legendary contributors to the definition of India (Bakhle 2002). With the slow dissolution of the court patronage system under colonial rule and its even more rapid disappearance after independence, partition and the establishment of a democratic parliamentary government in India, institutions such as All-India Radio and the schools Bhatkande and Paluskar founded came to play increasingly important roles in the social organization of Indian musical life (Dan Neuman 1980, Dard Neuman 2004, Weidman 2002). While many acclaim these changes for making music education more widely available, others also decry the loss or devaluing of practices unpalatable to newer conceptions of respectability. Among these are the courtesan and temple dancing traditions, and the social status and musical authority of hereditary musical families (Dard Neuman 2004; Weidman 2002). These changes in music's social space are intertwined with socioeconomic issues: decolonization and its accompanying internal strife, increasing use of technologies from the gramophone to the radio to computerized recording studios, and economic and cultural globalization.

While early 20th-century Indian elites adopted classical music as a symbol of Indian nationalism, many Europeans and Americans who encountered Indian music viewed it as a symbol of otherness. As early as the 18th century, British composers incorporated Indian melodies into popular songs for exotic flavor, most notably in the

genre of the ‘Hindustani Air’ (Farrell 1997). Europeans and Americans were often fascinated with aspects of Indian music that seemed to address a perceived lack in their own cultures’ musical repertoires, from the eroticism of courtesans’ dancing to the spiritual aspects of musical philosophy (Farrell 1997). This fascination with exotic otherness was inextricably bound up with the colonial enterprise (Said 1978), and had consequences affecting all involved. Victorian colonial attitudes contributed in no small way to the demise of a space for female courtesan musicians’ performance. At the same time, European musicologists’ scholarship—though often complicit with colonial agendas—also influenced the Indian nationalist discourse that led to the overthrow of British colonial rule (Daniélou 1987; Qureshi 1991; Farrell 1997; Neuman 2004). European musicologists’ Romantic conception of music as a transcendental high art (Goehr 1992) and concomitant fascination with the Hindu scriptural emphasis on sound as a sacred creative force (Daniélou 1987; Beck 1997) fit well with elite Indian nationalists’ emphasis on inner, spiritual freedom and autonomy in resistance to outward colonial domination (Chatterjee 1989).

European and American interest in Indian music has persisted well beyond colonial days, taking various forms. Throughout the first half of the 20th century several Indian musicians, with varied priorities, saw it as their mission to present the rich artistic heritage of India to an outside world that, in their views, had largely misunderstood Indian culture. Hazrat Inayat Khan presented Hindustani music as a spiritual path, and many Indian musicians have subsequently made the spiritual aspects of their music a focal point of presentation to non-Indian audiences. Uday Shankar is credited with revitalizing Indian dance through his internationally renowned dance company, which

emphasized music and dance as high art for cosmopolitan audiences. Venturing out of his older brother Uday's high art world, Ravi Shankar, in his collaboration with the Beatles, helped create a Western pop music 'sitar explosion' in the 1960s, in which Indian music became a symbol of British and North American counterculture (Shankar 1968). Since then, a growing number of musicians have adopted Indian musical idioms into their own work, for example, John Coltrane in jazz, Terry Riley and Philip Glass in Western experimental classical music, and John McLaughlin with his fusion projects, including the band Shakti.

Despite the continuing presence of countercultural associations since the 1960s and 70s, the present-day status of Indian classical music in Europe and North America is increasingly that of an institutionalized classical genre. Schools of Indian music have opened in many European and American cities, the first and most famous being the Ali Akbar College of Music in northern California. Besides Ahiri, New York City boasts two other major nonprofit organizations dedicated to teaching and presenting performances of Indian music and dance. These schools include the Kalavant Center, run by tabla player Ustad Kadar Khan, and Chhandayan, run by tabla player Pandit Samir Chatterji. Chhandayan is affiliated with Lotus Fine Arts, at whose studio classes in several Indian dance forms are also taught.⁸ Indian music and dance classes are offered at countless other institutions in the New York area, from neighborhood cultural centers to universities. It is now possible to pursue a bachelor's degree in tabla performance through Hunter College, a CUNY affiliate.⁹ Working within the dominant discourses of classicism, Indian classical musicians and their American students from various

⁸ As this thesis focuses on Ahiri, these other schools will not be examined further.

⁹ Dibyarka Chatterji, son and student of Pt. Samir Chatterji, is pursuing this degree.

backgrounds have secured a place for this Indian music in the Western academy, alongside the Western classical music with which the Indian standard of classicism arose in tandem. Since the advent of Uday Shankar's troupe in the early 1930s, eminent Indian musicians have frequently graced the stages of major concert halls in the U.S. and Europe, halls usually reserved for performances of the best of Western art music. A recent Lincoln Center performance with a particularly classical focus paired an Indian ensemble with the Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra.

Recognition of Diversity

This side-by-side presentation of two classical musics illustrates an outlook of multiculturalism, which values the coexistence of cultural difference under the wider universality of common humanity. In an ideal multicultural world, the varied cultures of different places exist simultaneously, meet, and interact productively, each maintaining its unique individual essence. Many have argued the limitations of multiculturalism as a guiding philosophy—it treats cultures as bounded and unchanging, it encourages traditionalization and classicization at the expense of hybridity and innovation, it maintains constructed oppositions, and it merely presents an alternative hegemony (Gordon and Newfield 1996). In recent years, emphasis in some circles has shifted to *interculturality*, in a move towards recognition of the fluidity of boundaries between what multiculturalism treats as distinct entities (Grimson 2000; Stokes 2004). Ana María Ochoa points out that “The multiplicity of terms that are used to name this idea—diversity, plurality, multiculturalism, ethnic plurality, interculturality—demonstrates that it is a term which recognizes one of the anxieties of this age: that of the rearrangement of

systems of similarities and differences that have organized the public field of social relations and the political imagination of the nation” (Ochoa 2003: 105).

In New York City in 2004, within the context of an increasingly global economy, an accelerating movement of people, culture and capital across all kinds of borders, and a simultaneous creation of new kinds of borders after the passage of the Patriot Act in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, cultural difference has become an increasingly obvious fact of everyday life. Thus an outlook that values and celebrates difference becomes itself increasingly valued. Educational and cultural institutions often invoke and adopt an outlook of multiculturalism as a celebration of cultural differences and resistance to the perceived threat of bland mass-marketed cultural hegemony. Multiculturalism, pluralism and diversity remain major buzzwords within the U.S. educational system, as schools strive to cater to ever more diverse student populations, hoping to combat discrimination and fear. UNESCO, with an avowed mission of preservation of traditional cultural forms of expression, celebrates music as “an expression of cultural diversity,” looking upon culture and diversity as resources to be used in the formation of a world of greater unity (UNESCO 2004; Yúdice 2003). Ahiri, too, makes use of multiculturalism, diversity, and the hope of greater unity to promote itself and the programs it offers, from “purely classical” performances to “fusion” collaborations.

Like multiculturalism, the musical genre of fusion is fundamentally based on differences mediated by larger universalisms. Fusion refers to a blending of two or more different musics, and in the context of Indian classical music has mainly been used to describe musical meetings of East and West, though its application is currently widening

to include other genres and other places. Fusion is often invoked as a metaphor for multicultural harmony: cultures uniting in beautiful music that can be universally enjoyed, each remaining true to its own unique identity. Some musicians who engage in fusion collaborations often stress that to play “good fusion,” each musician involved must be able to competently follow the essential rules of his or her own classical system, retaining its time-honored base, and producing a “fusion based on tradition”. The way that musical styles from different traditions are blended is often invoked as “magic,” leaving unexamined the decisions that musicians must make in bringing styles and forms together. Also left unquestioned is the idea that “everyone” can enjoy the musical product of this meeting, through an elusive quality of recognition that all are assumed to share. While difference is celebrated in the discourses of public schools, governments, international cultural heritage organizations and cultural promoters, little attention is paid to the ramifications of multiculturalism’s underlying assumption that behind these varied and vibrant forms of cultural expression, we are at an essential level all the same. Academic discourse on world music reminds us that this kind of celebration of difference under the rubric of universality often leads to the negation of actual difference, just as the desire to understand and celebrate Indian classical music as a pure, pristine expression of an Indian essence glosses over its complicated colonial past and its relationships with disunities of the present (Feld 2000; Ochoa 1998:177; Weidman 2002:7-10).

While it may seem from this discussion that two camps exist, one devoted to expressing universality and the other devoted to recognizing difference, my experiences with individuals at Ahiri have shown that this is not necessarily the case. These individuals rely on both sameness and difference as two sides of the same issue,

negotiating “the delicate equilibrium between the particular and the universal” (Ochoa 2003: 116). Musicians at Ahiri perform in styles they sometimes define as classical, “light classical,” and fusion, though the exact content of those definitions is constantly shifting. Used to presenting their art on prestigious stages all over the world, they draw on the classical status of their music as a cultural resource in its promotion. Informed by all of these interconnected histories and discourses, they define and construct both difference and sameness, simultaneously setting and ignoring boundaries. This process occurs on both a personal and a public level, mediated at the public level through these musicians’ association with Ahiri. Having examined the historical context of the issues these artists negotiate, I turn now to a discussion of Ahiri as an institution. Looking at its website and a draft grant proposal elucidates some of Ahiri’s ideological commitments, allowing us to conceive of a contemporary setting for the interaction of individuals, their ideas and their histories.

Institutional Discourse: Official Presentation

Ahiri’s promotional material describes the institution as dedicated to promoting Indian classical music as part of a multicultural vision, and to offering students in the United States the best of the Indian *guru-shishya parampara*, or teacher-student tradition.¹⁰ It also differentiates Ahiri from other schools of Indian music in New York¹¹ by proclaiming the higher quality of its education, naming its superior artists as the key to this higher quality. Examining two public texts of Ahiri’s—the March, 2004 content of

¹⁰ “Teacher-student tradition” is a direct translation of the Sanskrit/Hindi term “*guru-shishya parampara*”.

its official website and a draft grant proposal for the 2004 spring concert season—allows us to look at these aspects of Ahiri’s institutional discourse in greater detail. On the website, Ahiri presents itself as first and foremost a school, while in the grant proposal, stage performances take a central role. Together these documents provide a sense of the set of ideas that act as a backdrop to the daily life of Ahiri’s administration, artists, interns and students. Both of these documents are products of multiple authors, including Sridhar Shanmugam, Craig Kaufman, and various interns. Their assertions, implications, disjunctures and ambiguities thus reflect the combination of multiple viewpoints in the same conversation that constitutes Ahiri as an institution. However, I focus less on disjunctures than on common threads within these documents that together elucidate some of Ahiri’s ideological commitments, most notably the idea of the importance of the teacher.

Ahiri’s March 2004 website presents the school as a site for a unique type of education that goes beyond merely learning the craft of music. According to this website, the teaching philosophy at Ahiri “employs the ancient South Asian tradition now known as ‘guru-shishya parampara,’ updated for today’s fast-paced results-driven society.” This point is re-emphasized in a description of Ahiri’s teachers: “Our teachers are not only among the most reputed performers in their fields but also proven gurus and multicultural enthusiasts. Furthermore, Ahiri’s teaching method and our faculty’s living example of its effectiveness can serve as a model well beyond the field of Indian music—into the arts of living, and education itself” (Ahiri 2004b). Here the teacher-student relationship is seen, in the first instance, as representative of a nostalgic past, an ‘ancient tradition’ that both stands in opposition to ‘today’s fast-paced, results-driven society,’ and also continues in

the present but must be updated and modified in order to be employed within a contemporary context that values speed and product, sending the message that through a music education at Ahiri, students will also learn a superior way of life that has stood the test of time. This emphasis on the teacher as a model for musical perfection as well as perfection in all areas of a person's own life is indeed important in Indian musical history. However, in the context of Indian music's history in the U.S., the language of these statements sets up Ahiri's Indian music education as a point of access to an ancient, mystical Other. While the term 'proven gurus' may carry the extremely practical meaning that the teachers at Ahiri have produced successful students, the word 'guru' calls to mind the mythology of Indian music, in which the Mughal-era Hindustani musician Tansen brings rain with raga Megh Malhar and lights fires with Deepak, and 19th-century Karnatic musician Thyagaraja is a South Indian saint. Leaving the words 'guru-shishya parampara' untranslated further mystifies the education offered at Ahiri, adding to the impression that the teachers at Ahiri are not only musical, but also spiritual masters. The fact that there are no direct references to religion, mythology or spirituality on Ahiri's website implies that Ahiri has chosen to distance itself from religious ways of presenting Indian music. Indeed, the spirituality or mysticism invoked by references to ancient tradition and the wisdom of gurus resonates more with another trope common to discourses on art: the idea of an "ethically incomplete subject" being raised to a higher level of humanity through exposure to high culture (Miller and Yúdice 2002:12-15). Here, Ahiri appears to offer the denizens of fast-paced modern American society a chance to uplift themselves through a turn to timeless tradition, authenticated by its roots in that constantly reimagined refuge from frenetic materialism—the mystic East.

We could go down that road, deriding Ahiri's self-presentation as yet another thinly veiled version of orientalist capitalism. However, it is not that simple; rather than offering an escape from hectic activity, Ahiri situates itself and the tradition it represents within that society of motion. Ahiri's teachers are also described as 'multicultural enthusiasts.' Of their students, Ahiri hopes to produce "a new generation of potential maestros, teachers, and culturally rich, multi-culturally minded public connoisseurs" (Ahiri 2004b). Multiculturalism is not discussed here as more than a quality of the teachers' wisdom that students will absorb, and a concept that is important to Ahiri. However, by invoking multiculturalism as part of the wisdom that Ahiri wishes to impart through its particular educational philosophy, Ahiri appeals to those who value motion and innovation along with, or perhaps as part of, timelessness and tradition. Ahiri's vision for presenting tradition in the context of multiculturalism is further developed in its spring 2004 grant proposal.

In this proposal, geared both toward potential corporate sponsors and granting institutions such as the Queens Council for the Arts, Ahiri presents itself as an institution focused on presenting top Indian artists in performance. These performances appear to be a kind of fusion: "now we are melding the traditions of the East with jazz, New York, and contemporary American culture...the most exciting subtleties of Indian music and dance...will be presented via these unifying 'confluences' of art" (Ahiri 2004a). The following passage elucidates many of the issues that Ahiri hopes may flow together in these confluences.

Indian Culture

India. Even its name flows like a river...The land of sacred rivers and ancient culture, motherland of timeless ideas and systematized creativity. The museums

and the literature of the world highlight this phenomenon of grace and meticulousness, profundity and experimentalism. South Asia is also the home of an unquenchable dynamism.

Indian music—and its music-based counterpart, classical dance—may well be the finest example of the character and richness of South Asian culture. With a varied landscape of traditional and classical styles, this art continues to develop in front of us. Amid noteworthy branching into everything from orchestras led by Zubin Mehta to synthesizers pioneered by Amar Bose, and even along the boundaries of Bollywood and Asian hip-hop, one can still hear the original voice of India. In an age of buzzwords like ‘cultural preservation’ and ‘cultural autonomy’, it is our goal to publicly reckon with and share this innovative art within the panoply of world music.

America and Indian Culture

That Indian music is moving into the mainstream of our multicultural society is not a great surprise. Likewise, it is no secret that the market for all things Indian is bolstered by tremendous economic growth of South Asian immigrants in America and the Western world. People of Indian descent now comprise over a tenth of medical professionals in New York, have helped lead the Silicon Valley boom, and accrue more social and political standing every day. Furthermore, Indians are the fastest-growing population within America’s Asian immigrant boom.

Our society is the heart of multiculturalism. It has provided a beacon to lift East Asian cuisine, Latino dance, martial arts, and countless other phenomena. With the development of English-language Indian writers, of India-themed clothing, and films and clubs heavy on Indian style, we have reached a point where people are eager to learn more about the roots of Indian culture (Ahiri 2004a).

This passage, on “Indian Culture” and “America and Indian Culture,” sets up several binary oppositions between India/South Asia and the U.S. Here India, equated with all of South Asia, is presented as having one culture, while the U.S. is ‘a multicultural society.’ India’s one culture is timeless, traditional and classical, its creativity ‘systematized’, and best described by spiritually connotative words such as ‘grace’ and ‘profundity.’ It is a high culture, visible worldwide in museums and literature. While it allows for experimentalism and development, its timeless, original voice continues to break through the cacophony of modernity represented by orchestras and synthesizers.

America's society of multiple cultures, the other side of this opposition, is one of motion and prosperity. References to 'tremendous economic growth' and the Silicon Valley boom imply progress and forward motion of an economic sort. Describing American society as a 'beacon to lift East Asian cuisine, Latino dance, martial arts and countless other phenomena' applies this notion of progress to artistic forms of expression; here in America, they are commodified, fetishized, and this way preserved. The economic association with artistic progress is even clearer in the next sentence, as books, clothing, films and club entertainment are invoked as contributing to the development of American multiculturalism, spurring it on further forward—forward to a point where it can finally turn...back to Indian tradition.

Thus what begins as a set of binary oppositions is transformed, in a final sentence, into a cycle—the reader is taken from the timeless 'land of sacred rivers' to a land of 'booming' speed and growth, then back again to unchanging tradition. The one-word sentence, "India," at the beginning of the passage now acts as a full stop for all this multicultural motion, signifying a return to an original essence, the root of what really matters. On a second reading, another thread becomes visible in this passage: a development narrative, in which Indians begin with timeless classical traditions, interact with a Western Other and produce hybrid innovations, travel to the U.S. and gain economic and social class standing, become competent in bicultural idioms such as English-language literature, and ultimately turn back to their timeless traditions, bringing them to enrich and educate in their new multicultural American home. The sentence "South Asia is also the home of an unquenchable dynamism," difficult to reconcile with the language of binary opposition, fits well within this narrative, locating motion and

innovation in India as well, albeit a motion with fewer economic connotations. In the last paragraph, this Indian sort of motion gains momentum as it becomes unclear who is developing—are the Indian immigrants developing as they gain economic and political status in the U.S., or is it American society, becoming more enlightened as it becomes more acquainted with ‘Indian culture?’ As in the website, this passage again calls to mind the trope of the ethically incomplete subject who can be perfected through contact with superior art or culture.

Here Ahiri makes use of this idea of an imperfect, unfinished subject—the student or audience member—who is educated through a relationship with a master—the teacher and performer, representing cultivated perfection—in order to appeal to the idea of striving for perfection in both the inner realm of personal musical and ethical development, and the social realm of multicultural New York City as a microcosm for the world. Within this discourse, the terms ‘art’ and ‘culture’ often come to be used interchangeably to signify classicized traditional forms of expression that have become important to defining group identity, as in the case of Karnatic and Hindustani music’s histories in building an Indian national consciousness.

In entering into and relying on discourses of classicism, Ahiri places itself within the ongoing development of international elite art worlds, including those of the classical concert circuit, the network of Indian maestros with disciples around the world, and the ongoing classicization of world music through the commodity form and the business of presenting concerts. Central to Ahiri’s presentation of Indian music are the artists, both innovators and carriers of classical tradition, not only in their playing but in their teaching style and relationships with students (*guru-shishya parampara*). The diverse regional,

religious and musical backgrounds of these artists is a point of pride for Ahiri, which can support its image of commitment to multicultural unity by describing its artists as Karnatic and Hindustani, Hindu and Muslim musicians who hail from both northern and southern states of India, perform in different classical traditions and speak as their mother tongues Tamil, Hindi/Urdu and Bangla: a small sample of India's extensive diversity. Here the Karnatic/Hindustani divide, and all of the history that it connotes, becomes one aspect of the many boundaries Ahiri hopes to break down. Ahiri does not emphasize the similarities between these artists—most notably their predominantly high class and high caste heritage—except when these similarities have bearing on another main point of Ahiri's image: that of musical quality and quality of instruction. Ahiri proudly proclaims that its artists are the best in their professions, with a focus on these individuals' abilities that is intertwined with all of Ahiri's claims, goals and ideologies, and at times can seem almost mythological.

This characterization gives the artists themselves great power within Ahiri, as they are not required to publicly agree with official advertising and pronouncements, but merely to present themselves in roles to which they have long been accustomed—those of the world-class concert performer and dedicated teacher. Ahiri provides most of them with the means to come to the U.S., and once they arrive supplies all they need—a place to live, a place to teach, and a pre-organized series of performances. As members of Ahiri, the artists are linked to Ahiri's ideology, but as artists they are seen as visionary individuals pursuing their own goals toward preserving, promoting, innovating and transforming Indian music and its place in world society. We move now to these artists, their performances, their music, and what they have to say about it all.

Chapter 2: A Tradition of Innovation: Discourses in Performance

In his landmark study of north Indian classical music's social structure, Dan Neuman argues that built into the structure of this music's social life are adaptive mechanisms that have enabled it to thrive through centuries of social, political and economic change, continuously adjusting to the demands of the times. Perhaps the most important of these mechanisms is musicians' constant reference to an idealized past: "there is...not only a past which molds and personifies the "tradition" but also a tradition of representing a past which, however unreachable, is always available as a model for the present...whether it is the sixteen hours of riaz [practice] shaping a living legend or the musical battles of a thousand years past, these all exist for Indian musicians and their disciples as the tradition which lies at the root of the present" (Dan Neuman 1980:231). In the context of present-day demands on musicians, "[new or innovative] strategies can be adopted as long as they have validity in the past, a past which can be selected and brought forward like an obscure rag to answer the demands of the present" (Dan Neuman 1980:234). Neuman then suggests that this tradition of selective mobilization of the past, with a cyclic ideology reminiscent of the role of the beat *sam* as both beginning and end of a musical phrase, encompasses and moves beyond the "supposed dichotomy of tradition and modernity" (Dan Neuman 1980:236).

However, the dichotomy of tradition and modernity is very much mobilized in Indian musical discourse. Dard Neuman, Dan Neuman's son, fellow anthropologist and practitioner of north Indian music, reemphasizes this aspect of discourse and practice, phrasing it in more dialectical terms: "While the dominant narrative spins tirelessly around themes of "purity" of raga and proper training, the dominant performance presents

movements and marches into aesthetically "impure" territory" (Dard Neuman 2004:191). This march into unorthodox performance, he says, is traditionally the domain of the accomplished maestro, and thus provides a way for aspiring maestros to assume and proclaim their status (Dard Neuman 2004:191). Among Ahiri's artists, heated debates continue around maestros' innovative moves. I argue here that Ahiri's artists use the dichotomies of purity and impurity, tradition and modernity, past and present, in dialectical oppositions as a way of defining their art and its place in the present and future. While Dard Neuman's phrase situates this dialectic in terms of performance versus narrative, music versus speech about music, I attempt to show here that the line is not so clearly drawn; spoken performances and performed narratives argue both sides of tradition-modernity debates. This chapter examines three performances of speech, music and dance: Subashish Bhattacharya's press kit interview, Shujaat Khan's sitar performance in Carnegie Hall, and Sridhar Shanmugam's dance performance at the Theater for the New City. Analyzing the performances along with the conversations surrounding them, I explore the interaction between individuals of differing commitments and the way they attempt to define an acceptable path for Indian artists and their art.

Promoting the Future of Indian Music: Subashish Bhattacharya's Press Kit

Interview

It's almost midnight, and frustrations are running high at Ahiri house in Queens. Video intern Karen Zhang and I are taping the press-kit interviews of north Indian musicians Debashish Bhattacharya, who plays slide guitars of his own design, and Subashish Bhattacharya, Debashish's younger brother, who plays the tabla. Having

completed Debashish's interview in director Sridhar Shanmugam's absence, Karen and I have just endured a barrage of questions at Sridhar's arrival: where are my Indian clothes? (Forgotten). Why the setup of bare-bulbed lamps from all over the house? (We couldn't get the floodlight to stop flickering). Whose phone is that ringing, why isn't it off? (Relax! We're taking a break). Fixing the floodlight with a flick of an overlooked switch, Sridhar sends a you-should-know-better look in Karen's direction and settles down in an armchair across the room to oversee Subashish's interview. Sridhar's friend Anand and I remove the extra lamps, Karen redoes her white-balance, and I take my seat next to Subashish on the couch.

"Subashish, how are you doing tonight..." I begin and then stop, laughing. "Cut, cut, I forgot to say *ji*." As he is closer to my own age than to that of his brother and Ahiri's other master musicians, and lacks the attitude of a polished veteran Pandit, it is sometimes harder for me to think of Subashish in honorific terms, and thus adding the honorific suffix "*ji*" does not always come automatically, especially while I'm thinking of how best to phrase my first interview question. He himself is having a hard time with this interview. He fumbles with what he thinks might be expected of him—explanations about the tabla and his gurus—but Sridhar stops him: "we want to know about you! Everyone has already heard enough about tabla. And of course it is wonderful that you are from a musical family, but what are your hopes and dreams as an artist? How are you going to contribute to the future of Indian music?" While wonderfully articulate in describing how he improvises and works with different kinds of sounds, Subashish has no ready answers regarding a grand career trajectory and contribution to the future of Indian music. After a few aborted takes I find a satisfactory line of questioning. As he prefers

to discuss directly about the sounds of music rather than make pronouncements about what his music-making will mean, I lead him in the direction of style: what styles have influenced his playing, and how does he change styles according to who he is playing with? This inspires him to mention his experiences playing for Bollywood films, and the new musical possibilities that this kind of playing offered. At the mention of Bollywood, Sridhar stiffens. When Subashish finishes his thought, Sridhar signals for me to wrap up the interview. Afterwards, Subashish jokingly complains to Sridhar, "you gave me the hardest time today. What ambition? I don't have any ambition!" Sridhar responds, "That's why you are a *true* artist." Debashish and Anand nod in agreement—though the night's conversation so far has been about visions for musical contribution to society on a grand scale, all four of them now acknowledge the value of Subashish's primary concern with the sounds he creates in concert with other individuals. Debashish, Subashish, Sridhar, and Anand disappear into the kitchen to finally make dinner. Exhausted, Karen and I begin to pack up our equipment and return the living room furniture to its proper places.

These press-kit video interviews often seemed more difficult than actually putting on musical performances. Instead of asking musicians to perform their meticulously cultivated art, these interviews ask them to perform *about* that art, abstracting away from the music to the level of speech about music. The interviews were formal and ritualized: we were meant to dress up in clothes suitable for a concert performance, preferably Indian clothes, and the living room was turned into a stage set reminiscent of television talk shows. With Sridhar as director, we as camera people, interviewers, and interviewees had to put his goals for these interviews' utility before our personal goals

and impulses: Karen wanted to take more experimental shots, but she was told to keep the camera at one angle. I wanted to let the artists I was interviewing ramble on, deciding themselves what topics were important to talk about, but I was told to keep the questions short and frequent. I was also given specific topics to concentrate on: teaching Indian music to Western students, and the future of Indian music in an age of globalization. Sridhar's goal with these videos was to include them in press kits sent to music schools and universities, to promote these artists as consummate gurus with cross-culturally sensitive teaching methods and cosmopolitan musical outlooks: Ahiri's vision in packaged form. More than any other type of Ahiri-sponsored performance, these interviews foregrounded the tensions between institutional expectations, here represented by Sridhar's direction of the video interviews, and individual points of view.

For some of us, adjusting to these expectations was relatively easy—Karen set her camera at a fixed angle, and I adjusted my focus from the interview of the artist to the process of the interview. Among the artists, feeling at ease within these press-kit interviews appeared to depend on experience with the formal artist interview as a speech genre. In this case, for Debashish, the more experienced master, ready with answers about his artistic and social visions, complete with the requisite amount of deference to gurus and studied humility about his own accomplishments, the formal interview was a performance genre that he had mastered, and within which he felt at ease. For Subashish, unaccustomed to interviews so focused on himself, phrasing his language about music, dreams and goals in an acceptable way was a major challenge. He began with tropes of musical translation, presenting the tabla to an audience with no prior knowledge of the instrument, and then moved into what Sridhar saw as the equally tired category of

describing one's musical education within a gharana. Subashish's discussion of style seemed to fall more in line with Sridhar's vision of presentation, until he mentioned Bollywood. A more experienced interviewee would perhaps have tacitly understood that in this interview, which was to be used to advertise Ahiri as an institute that could provide something as close as possible to the ideal traditional Indian teacher-student relationship known as guru-shishya parampara to north American schools and universities, "lowbrow," commercial Bollywood music would not be an accepted topic of discussion. Or, conversely, a more experienced interviewee might have been able to integrate a discussion of Bollywood music into a presentation of himself as a classically trained, classical player with a modern vision that draws from and encompasses all musical styles, including those considered by some to be less sophisticated. The emergence of a hot-button issue could have been avoided with ready answers based on anticipation of this interview's advertising function. Moreover, an interviewer more committed to presenting Ahiri's vision through these interviews might not have followed the line of questioning far enough to get into the topic of Bollywood music.

This performance and its accompanying conversations, along with the others in this chapter, illustrate some of the ways in which these artists are addressing the larger questions of defining their art: what is an acceptable collaboration? What is an acceptable innovation? What is classical music, and what is Indian music? These questions often develop between individuals on the subject of performances—one function of which is the larger-scale communication of messages regarding the answers to these questions. Through the performance of music or speech about music, artists establish a definition for their art. In the setting of Ahiri, where definitions are

established to some extent on an institutional basis, it is possible for an artist's individual views and experience to be marginalized when these views clash with the ways in which the institution wants to present itself. In this situation with Sridhar as director, of Ahiri and of the process of making videos to represent Ahiri through its artists, Sridhar's opinions stand for the institutional point of view, though this is not always the case. His act of cutting off the interview when Subashish began to talk about Bollywood is indicative of this kind of institutional marginalization, a discrediting of Subashish's opinions based on a desire for Ahiri to be seen in a certain way.

Though Subashish's point of view may have been silenced at the level of institutional representation, his opinions came through loud and clear in the kitchen of Ahiri house. While making dinner, Sridhar told Subashish he should never mention Bollywood music in connection with Ahiri. Before long they were engaged in a heated debate. In the part of this debate reproduced here, Sridhar argues that Bollywood music is short-lived, has no basis in tradition, and has no place in a discussion of classical music. Subashish, more comfortable now that he is off-camera and back in casual clothes, argues that it is blending traditions, it is authentic in its own right, and that it has a central place in the discussion about collaboration within art. The following exchange demonstrates how their different priorities, expressed above in their conversation about the press-kit interview, place them in a situation where their arguments are almost mutually unintelligible:

Subashish Bhattacharya: Why I mentioned the Bollywood music—my

vision—Bollywood music is a—if you make, if you go to the Bollywood music genre, if you go to the film music genre, you have to learn. Other stuff. To play with all sorts of recording musicians at the time with the studio work. And you have to have the knowledge of basic rhythmic structure which most of the classical tabla players don't know.

Sridhar Shanmugam: That is a--

Subashish Bhattacharya: No no. They play, they accompany—listen to me—they play classical very nice, and when the *bhajan*¹² part is come they play bullshit most of the time.

Sridhar Shanmugam: That's because of the individual artist

Subashish Bhattacharya: No! Not individual. It's more than just the artist!

Subashish further clarifies why he mentioned Bollywood music in his interview, in answer to one of my questions about collaborations with other artists and genres.

Subashish Bhattacharya: She asked me about the collaboration, if you ask me about the collaboration--

Sridhar Shanmugam: We talk about the east-west collaboration or the north-south collaboration-

Subashish Bhattacharya: If you ask me about east-west collaboration I must mention Bollywood music. Because from our childhood we learn, we

¹² Bhajan is a genre of Hindu devotional song that is traditionally accompanied by harmonium and tabla. Its straightforward strophic forms are popular in film music.

listen Bollywood music. And Bollywood music first time in India, they collaborated with the western music.

Sridhar responds,

Sridhar Shanmugam: I'm feeling very sad, you know, because we are talking about something totally on a different level. And we just brought it back to Bollywood? Bollywood, what has it made to the music industry?¹³ What has it made, contributed to the great music industry? You might say big ragas we understood because of that? These great masters who created it [i.e. classical music] they made them [audiences] understand the ragas because the ragas were, again, traditional.

Subashish Bhattacharya: *I'm not talking about that!*¹⁴

This exchange demonstrates that Sridhar and Subashish are, in fact, talking about different things. Subashish argues that Bollywood music requires different skills than classical playing, implying that it necessitates an equally important level of virtuosity in multiple genres and also allows the crossover classical musician a chance to develop in new musical areas. It fits perfectly into a discussion of collaborations between genres, east-west, north-south, or otherwise, because it is the most visible, if not the first, Indian musical genre in which musical ideas from both Indian and western traditions are

¹³ As noted in the following paragraph, Sridhar's reference to the "music industry" refers not to the business of producing and marketing commercial recordings per se, but to the project of promoting Indian classical music for the enrichment of listeners' lives and continuation of cultural heritage.

¹⁴ Sridhar Shanmugam, Subashish Bhattacharya, 6/4/04.

consistently used together. To Subashish, Bollywood music is another authentic genre of Indian music that he has heard since childhood. His argument, like the bulk of his interview, is about style; collaboration between genres is a way to explore creativity with sound and ways of crafting beauty sonically. There is no genre hierarchy in Subashish's conception of the relationship between classical and Bollywood music; his value judgments are made about musicians' interest in crossing genres and understanding new forms. It is not that classical players cannot accompany bhajans because they are incompetent players, but because they have limited their ideas of what styles are important to understand to classical music only, and thus have not deigned to learn the intricacies of bhajan playing and other genres common in film.

While Subashish uses “style” to place classical and Bollywood music on an equal footing, Sridhar uses “tradition” to restate his perception of Bollywood music as lowbrow and unworthy of mention on the same level as classical music. He is not thinking of creativity and style within the sound of the music, as is Subashish, but rather of its contribution to the greater good of society. He implies here that good music exquisitely reveals the nuances of great ragas, helping listeners to understand and appreciate them. Sridhar's idea of the "great music industry" does not refer to the enterprise of releasing commercial recordings, but rather to the project of promoting Indian classical music for the enrichment of listeners' lives. His rhetoric recalls the language of ethical incompleteness used in Ahiri's website and grant proposal, advertising the institution as a source of moral edification. Within this discourse, for music to uplift and edify the masses it must be part of a long-standing cultural tradition, connecting listeners to their cultural heritage (Miller and Yudice 2002). Sridhar states, "We speak of the east-west

collaboration and the north-south collaboration," referring here to fusion projects between classicized genres of Indian and western music, and between the Hindustani and Karnatic traditions. This implies that for a collaboration to be considered part of this cultural uplifting project, the genres involved must be sufficiently classical. Sridhar himself is no stranger to collaborations, having been a member of an avant-garde modern dance company for over twenty years.¹⁵ His own choreography is a fusion of styles, as will be discussed below. He also considers Indian folk or vernacular music an important part of the cultural heritage that he wishes to promote outside of India. All together, Sridhar's rhetoric in this discussion reflects the prevalent discourse of modern institutional cultural politics, in which certain genres become increasingly viewed as classical as they are identified with values of maintaining tradition, or preserving cultural uniqueness in the face of an onslaught of modern hybridity disconnected from a shared, valued cultural past and represented by such genres as Bollywood.

Though I have suggested that this position and Subashish's concentration on style may be mutually unintelligible, I do not mean to suggest that Subashish and Sridhar, or any exponents of these two positions, do not understand each other. Rather, they refuse here to discuss the subject on each other's terms, and thus talk past each other though each knows full well, on some level, what the other is saying. I also do not intend to identify Subashish as an exponent of modernity and Sridhar as a representative of tradition; both of their positions are in fact very modern and very traditional, as the idea of tradition and cultural heritage as non-renewable resources is a development of the modern era (Yudice 2003:1), and the exchange of musical styles has been the mechanism

¹⁵ Sridhar was a founding member, and one of the first male dancers, in Chandralekha's dance company.

for developing traditions throughout history. To widen the picture of coexisting discourses on tradition and modernity among Ahiri's artists, I turn now to another performance.

Passing on the Tradition: Shujaat Khan and *Ghazal* in Carnegie Hall

Sitarist Ustad Vilayat Khan had been scheduled to perform at Carnegie Hall on May 22nd, 2004. After he passed away on March 13th, his two sons Hidayat and Shujaat Hussain Khan, also sitarists, were invited to perform in his stead. Entitled "Passing on the Tradition: A Tribute to Ustad Vilayat Khan," this concert was in itself a performance of passing on the tradition, from the atmosphere in the green room to the presentation of personnel on stage, and, of course, the music played.

As this was not an Ahiri-sponsored performance I did not have a ticket, and upon hearing this Shujaat, who was sponsored by Ahiri and lived at Ahiri house, said he would see what he could do. What he could do was to have me join his students in the traditional disciple's role: seated behind the master on stage. So, a few hours before the scheduled performance I arrived at the back entrance of Carnegie Hall, along with Shujaat and five of his students. Except for me and one other man, the other students were all of Indian or Pakistani descent. The most senior student present carried Shujaat's sitar, while another student carried his own, which Shujaat had insisted be brought as a backup. Another student carried a bag full of embroidered cloths to spread on the stage floor for us to sit on, and we all carried bags containing our best Indian clothes.

Once inside, the task fell to us to make everything ready. The atmosphere among the group of students with their teacher was one of relative intimacy, as it was clear that some students had known each other for a long time. Shujaat was relaxed and friendly,

but made it clear that he wanted things done exactly as he requested. He gave us all orders, often in Hindi, sometimes forgetting to switch to English for the one student among us who understood no Hindi, and becoming momentarily angry when this student put his feet on the dressing room coffee table—a major affront to many South Asians, but something he could only have known had he been told. The student received a stern lecture about posture and proper placement of feet, and two of us were instructed to make sure he did not forget on stage. As Shujaat supervised every detail, the one female student and I spread the cloths out around the central rug on which Shujaat and tabla player Abhiman Kaushal would sit. When they were arranged to his satisfaction, we joined the men in the green room. One student was tuning the extra sitar, which Shujaat wanted on stage in case he broke a string. Another had been given the task of ironing Shujaat's white cotton kurta, and he began attacking it with copious amounts of spray starch, his efforts rewarded when Shujaat entered, peeled the layers apart, and exclaimed, "this is how ironing should be done!" Shujaat decided where we would all sit on stage, in what order we would enter, and what we would each carry: Shujaat's sitar, the extra sitar, Shujaat's wallet, a minidisc recorder, a pouch with extra plectrums and other sitar paraphernalia, and a small pillow. Those of us in the flashiest outfits sat closest to the audience.

Earlier, Shujaat had explained to me the importance he placed on the details of presentation, which begins, he said, long before the performance starts. Professional, congenial dealing with the management of the hall was important to him, as were personal interactions with the hall's staff on the day of the performance. Criticizing a common practice among some Indian performers of getting into arguments with sound

engineers during the middle of a performance, he emphasized that sound checks should be efficiently conducted, with no adjustments after the performance has started. Rugs provided for the musicians on stage should be of the style used in South Asia, and all on stage should wear Indian clothing, that is, kurta pyjamas for men, and for women, salwar kameez or saris.

For this particular performance, Shujaat explained that he wanted us all on stage in order to illustrate the continuity of his family's musical tradition from his father, through him, to his students. Once the stage was set, a recent photograph of Ustad Vilayat Khan was projected onto the wall for the audience to see as they entered. The performance then progressed from the memory of the father, to the first half of the concert featuring the younger "up-and-coming" son Hidayat, to the second half featuring the established son Shujaat, surrounded by his students to whom he was passing along the tradition. While all of our actions on stage carried some symbolic significance, I felt like my role in this performance was more theatrical than the roles of Shujaat's actual students, being neither a sitarist or a student of his. When I mentioned this to Shujaat, he responded that it didn't matter since I am also a student of this music, though not his student. This attitude demonstrates that he is not concerned only with passing on his family's tradition, but with perpetuating the tradition of Indian classical music as a whole. Sitting on the Carnegie Hall stage in a red and white beaded Benarasi salwar kameez, properly cross-legged and attentive to the maestros, I the American flute student may be including myself among the ranks of sitar disciples to hear a concert, but to the audience I represent one more recipient of Indian classical music's traditional knowledge, both the

tradition and my participation in it legitimized by a performance on one of the quintessential stages of classicism in the west.

In his detailed management of the performance of passing on the tradition, Shujaat is defining how he wants "the tradition" to be understood: as an Indian musician, he is concerned with how all Indian musicians, and by extension their Indian music, are perceived by worldwide audiences; hence his insistence on professionalism and Indian appearance. As heir to a world-famous lineage, he wishes to present the valued aspects of this tradition as family succession being extended globally. As a performer and innovator with the title of Ustad himself, he wants to carry on in his father's tradition of innovation. Dard Neuman, in describing how challenging musical orthodoxy is a characteristic of being an Ustad, cites a late-1960s interview with Vilayat Khan:

But I take always this drastic steps...in my life...and I was always thrown out...perhaps I will be beaten by the artists in India...[but] I will prove [to] them these sorts of things. Every raga I will say, "sa re ga ma pa dha ni sa, sa ni dha pa ma ga re sa." This is every raga (Nazir Jhairazhboy collection, ARCE No. 1:47:84, cited in Dard Neuman 2004:190).

He goes on to state that he will perform "Bhopali, a five note raga, with all seven notes in the scale without affronting the character of Bhopali" (Dard Neuman 2004:190).

Neuman suggests that while Vilayat Khan presents his innovations as exceptions to the rule, the rule in fact accommodates these explorations.

While there is an explicit code against such expeditions, in the hands of the established maestro such expeditions are common and valued. The issue, then, concerns not the *entitlements of a maestro* but the contestation over *who is entitled* to consider him or herself a maestro. Once a musician *feels himself* an experienced master, all bets are off. He might not be assessed and treated as an entitled maestro but he will perform as one (Dard Neuman 2004:190, italics in original).

As is usually the case with such innovative moves, Shujaat's latest innovation has met with mixed responses. For the last several months, Shujaat has been singing poetic Urdu language songs known as *ghazals* as finale pieces in his concerts at major classical venues such as Carnegie and Royal Albert halls, accompanying himself on the sitar. Ustad Vilayat Khan often sang at his concerts, accompanying himself in the same manner, and here Shujaat can be seen as following in his father's footsteps (though he denies that his singing has anything to do with his father). However, the important distinction, which makes Shujaat's singing even more innovative, is that Ustad Vilayat Khan did not to my knowledge sing ghazals in his classical concerts. Singing ghazals at concerts of classical music may not raise many eyebrows among audiences unfamiliar with the musical genres of the subcontinent, but to some Indian classical performers it is tantamount to sacrilege. Those who hold this opinion often voice their disagreement in terms of the differences between the genres of ghazal and *khayal*.

Regula Qureshi provides the following summary definition of ghazal:

The ghazal is the principal poetic genre of Urdu, a form of Persianized Hindi that originated as the language of Muslim culture and religion in South Asia and became a lingua franca as well as the source of this widely cultivated and appreciated poetic idiom. Highly formalized, stylized, and rich in metaphor, the ghazal serves the expression of emotion and cognition in a rarefied, universalized, yet intimate way through its main subject: love, both human and spiritual (Qureshi 1990:458).

Ghazals can be religious or secular, sung or chanted. Sung ghazals can be further divided into art and popular song, including film music. Ghazal is usually described as a "light classical" or "accessible" musical genre, and along with the song genres of thumri and dadra, was cultivated mainly within the courts and the courtesans' salons until changing political and economic conditions brought about these institutions' demise in the

twentieth century. As ghazal is first and foremost a genre of poetry, its primary characteristic is text. Accordingly, sung ghazals are characterized by "a strong ethos of textual precedence and musical subordination" (Qureshi 1990:460).

Khayal, on the other hand, is more focused on musical elaboration. "Khayal" or "khyal" is an Arabic word that means "imagination." Originally used to describe a vocal genre which, like ghazal, rose to prominence during the period of Moghul rule, in the twentieth century the term khayal has come to describe both vocal and instrumental music played in the characteristic form of this genre. Khayal has become the most important vocal genre in twentieth century north Indian classical music, and with some modifications to its form has become a major instrumental genre as well. Vocal and instrumental khayal are now the representative genres of classicism and tradition within north Indian classical music. As Shujaat Khan says, "we all play khayal."¹⁶ Bonnie Wade describes the major characteristic of khayal form-musical improvisation on a composition: "a khyal includes a short composition ... which acts as a springboard from which the artist improvises in various styles, stretching his imagination but remaining within the dictates of rag and tal (Wade 1973:443). The compositions in vocal khayal are usually based on two couplets of poetry, often love poetry associated with the Hindu deity Krishna and the *bhakti* devotional tradition. When the khayal form is employed in instrumental music, the same compositions are often played, whether or not musicians know the words. Imagination, in khayal, refers not to the emotions evoked by the text-music combination as in ghazal, but to the creativity of the performers in elaborating upon the melodic material of the composition in virtuosic improvisation. Thus khayal

¹⁶ Interview with Shujaat Khan, 5/31/04.

performance is characterized by an ethos of musical precedence and textual subordination.

Debashish and Subashish Bhattacharya rely on the same characteristics of ghazal and classical khayal that Regula Qureshi and Bonnie Wade have noted, placing them in opposition to each other to show me why the two genres should not be performed on the same program:

Anna Stirr: You don't like ghazal singing?

Debashish Bhattacharya: Yes, I like it, but it should be in a ghazal program, not in the classical program.

Subashish Bhattacharya: I don't like when people sing ghazals in classical programs.

Anna Stirr: What is it about ghazals that doesn't mix?

Debashish Bhattacharya: Ghazal is different.

Anna Stirr: Well I know they're different things--

Debashish Bhattacharya: But why ghazal not in the classical program? Ghazal is the poetry, it is not--

Subashish Bhattacharya: Point is: people who are seated there, come there to listen to classical music. Classical music means khayal music, imaginary music. Not ghazal music. Ghazal music we have to put on another concert.

Anna Stirr: So ghazal music is poetry based, and khayal is...

Subashish Bhattacharya: Yes, poetry

Debashish Bhattacharya: Rag based.

Anna Stirr: Ok, rag based.

Subashish Bhattacharya: There is also poetry but poetry's part is really less. Imagination part is much more, melodic structure and rhythm. In ghazal— much more dominated by poetry.

Debashish Bhattacharya: Love poetry.

Subashish Bhattacharya: Love poetry. Romantic poetry.

Anna Stirr : And why do they not mix? What is it about them?

Subashish Bhattacharya: That's why they do not mix. It is different thing. I mean if you go to a funeral, everybody's crying and everybody's sad, you cannot laugh there. It's not a socially accepted thing at least.

Anna Stirr: So it's really that strong of a separation?

Debashish Bhattacharya: Ghazal is completely like flattering or crying for the— flattering, or crying for the fiancé or lover. The lyric is the main attraction. So in a ghazal the ambiance is different. People sit there with alcohol, with a rose. They put scent, they sit down like hanging out, and their eyes...

Debashish sprawls out in his chair and shuts his eyes halfway, mimicking someone stoned.

Anna Stirr: So it's the social connotation that's different.

Debashish Bhattacharya: Of course! ¹⁷

From the beginning of this conversation, Debashish and Subashish's point is not that classical artists should not perform ghazal, but that ghazal does not belong in the same program as khayal. It is inappropriate, akin to laughing at a funeral. Defining the

¹⁷ Debashish and Subashish Bhattacharya, 6/4/04.

genres first in musical terms—the one text-based, the other musical improvisation-based—they then stress the social differences between the two. This is interesting considering that it has become common practice to perform a *thumri*—another text-based light classical genre with the same association with the courtesan's salon—as a finale piece in most classical khayal concerts, and Shujaat has merely substituted ghazal for thumri. Several explanations could be posited for this,¹⁸ but what is important here is, as in Subashish and Sridhar's discussion about Bollywood music, a genre is denied acceptance into the world of classical music on the grounds that it is not sufficiently classical, and thus not appropriate, musically or socially, in a classical context.

Shujaat himself does not seem worried about others' views on his ghazal performance; stressing that he is "not an activist" for the social mobility of musical genres, he acknowledges ghazal's status as "light classical" or "semi-classical" and notes

¹⁸ I would venture to suggest that ghazal has not become the accepted classical genre that thumri has due to the following reasons: first, one can sing ghazals without the specific knowledge of rags necessary to perform khayal and, to some extent, thumri. As Peter Manuel notes, "A gazal [sic] may be set to melodies in virtually any rag, although the singer is at liberty to prevaricate from the rag; alternately, modes may be employed which do not correspond to any particular rag. (in this sense, gazal differs from thumri, which has its own repertoire of some two dozen light rag). Thus, a singer, lacking training in and familiarity with classical rag may still compose and sing suitable gazal melodies" (Manuel 1989:99). Ghazal is thus the least musically virtuosic of light-classical forms, if virtuosity is defined by a musician's ability to improvise within a rag and tal. (With the devaluing of the courtesan's art comes the devaluing of other forms of virtuosity in performance, such as *nankha* and *abhinaya*). Second, the fact that ghazal is first and foremost a genre of poetry, with a long and established tradition apart from singing, may cause musicians more hesitation to change the form or separate the words from the music, as has been done in the growing genre of instrumental thumri. When Shujaat Khan performs ghazals, he sings and accompanies himself on the sitar; if he were performing a thumri, he would probably just play it on the sitar, perhaps even adding a longer alap and other formal features not traditionally found in vocal thumri. Third, the exclusion of ghazal from the ranks of appropriate classical genres may be due to its rise to prominence among the ranks of more commodified commercial music, such as pop and film songs.

that he plays purely classical music too, referring to his choice to perform ghazals and others' disagreement with his playing them as a matter of personal taste:

There's a whole group of people who like it. And so they force me, they bug me and request me to do something. And you know something, there's a whole bunch of people who don't like it. I know them. And they say things like why does he sing? So I don't understand, it's like someone saying, "why does he eat an omelette?" And I say "come on man, if you don't want to watch him eat an omelette just go and watch him when he's eating the toast." So I do play very pure classical music and I hope people understand that if they like classical music, I do that too, and they're welcome to pick and choose what kind of concert they want to come to and what they enjoy, their kind of music. But I'm a musician and I have many different ideas, thoughts, imaginations and I like to explore. So I'm doing it.¹⁹

Here Shujaat does not deny the existence of a distinction between "light classical" and "pure classical" music. In advising others to pick and choose, he also does not address the more specific issue of mixing genres on one concert. He insists that he is not advocating anything, and he would most likely view the classicization of ghazal as a dubious cause at best. However, viewed along with his heightened awareness of details of presentation, his "unorthodox" inclusion of a ghazal in this particular classical performance entitled "passing on the tradition," is a kind of statement, perhaps having more to do with his status as an ustad and homage to his father than with ghazal or khayal. In performing ghazals along with khayal in concerts billed as 'classical,' Shujaat demonstrates and exercises his status and privilege as a maestro, the unorthodox performance and the ensuing debates continuing a dialectical relationship between orthodoxy or tradition and innovation or progress. In a performance honoring and remembering a great Ustad, himself at once a symbol of tradition and a performer of

¹⁹ Interview with Shujaat Khan, 5/31/04.

unorthodox raga forms, a sung ghazal with sitar accompaniment could be seen as an appropriate finale.

Outside Orthodox Expectations: Sridhar Shanmugam's Choreography

Both Subashish Bhattacharya's press-kit interview and Shujaat Khan's Carnegie Hall performance took place in contexts that privileged tradition, as a mark of authenticity in a promotional package and as a continuing practice in a memorial concert for a great Ustad. These contexts prompted the performers to privilege tradition in their own choices of presentation, and framed the ways in which non-performers commented on these events. In these situations where traditionality is privileged, discussions and debates about the performances focused on demarcating boundaries. The answer to the question, "what is an acceptable innovation within the classical tradition?" was phrased in negative terms: not Bollywood, and not ghazal. Or more specifically, Bollywood music should not be promoted in a performance with the aim of advertising guru-shishya parampara, and ghazal should not be sung on a program with khayal. But what happens when an Indian classical artist's performance takes place in a context that values transgressive innovation over orthodox traditional presentation? When we examine the premier of two of Sridhar Shanmugam's dance pieces in the downtown scene, the discourse shifts focus from defining boundaries to emphasizing universality. The idea of a cycle, drawing from and creatively mobilizing the past to justify present actions, rooting these actions strongly in tradition, and the universalizing potential of this focus on cyclical time is illustrated in Sridhar's choreography and his discussion of his intentions as a choreographer.

Sridhar's pieces, *Trinethra* and *Synapse*, were winning entries in the Yangtze Repertory Theatre's competition for works by Asian artists in New York. These pieces were performed at the Theater for the New City, in the East Village, along with the works of the competition's two other winners, choreographers from Taiwan and the Philippines. The choreographers and the show's producers hailed from all over Asia, and the dancers' backgrounds extended the show's transnational participation to Europe, North and South America. The pieces dealt with concepts applicable to any place: war, exile, "The Hurt We Embrace," "Ebb & Flow." All of the pieces could have been described as "grounded in tradition," but in very different ways. The two other choreographers' pieces demonstrated strong ballet backgrounds along with Martha Graham-style modern dance and, in one instance, tango—all traditions of choreography easily recognizable even to an audience member without a dance background. Compared to these pieces, Sridhar's seemed to depart further from any definite stylistic tradition. His program notes describe *Trinethra* (and *Synapse*, which used the same music and style of choreography), as "rooted in the traditional Indian classical *Bharatnatyam*²⁰ style, with yoga and contemporary influences, featuring music specially created by classical Karnatic Indian musicians" (Yangtze Repertory Theatre 2004).

Sridhar's program notes also specify that his pieces were built on a principle of Indian philosophy in the Brahmanical Hindu tradition: divisions of concepts into threes, as espoused in texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita*. Program notes for *Trinethra* state that

²⁰ Bharatnatyam is a widely promulgated form of Indian classical dance, rooted in the historical tradition of temple dancers and classicized much in the same way as Indian classical musics, during the 20th century. The name Bharatanatyam was coined in the 1930s and encompasses several styles of dance. For more on the development of Bharatanatyam as classical dance, see Ohanti 1990 and O'Shea 1998.

the Sanskrit title refers to the ‘three views’--“philosophical notions of a divine triumvirate, of spiritual and mundane and worldly worlds, and of the seer—seen—view itself” (Shanmugam 2004). Program notes for *Synapse* further universalize these concepts of three, with biological analogies to nerve synapses and to the life cycle:

The dance connotes the kinetic and potential energy of nerve-endings, while pointing to a deeper consideration of mind: both the spiritual concept of Mind and the physical mind, notably the human one. It is a journey from animal-like uncertainty to ego-centered clinging and finally into a unifying calm (as per the Sanskrit concepts of tamasic, rajasic and sattvic.) *Synapse* is an amalgamation of Indian-contemporary concepts. An intuitively choreographed work, its music and development are based on the participating artists’ creativity (Shanmugam 2004).

In these program notes, Sridhar locates his work at an intersection of a traditional past and modern present, within Indian stylistic and philosophical traditions, and within the universal realm of common humanity, connecting the philosophical and the biological.

The performance of *Synapse* begins with a poem. To the low hum of a sruti box drone in the background, Sridhar, dressed in Bharatnatyam costume, reads from center stage what we all have printed in our programs—“A poem by Mukha Chang.” Later I learn from Sridhar that Mukha Chang is the name Sridhar and Craig use for works they create together--this poem, though, was Craig’s creation. Sridhar walks offstage, behind T.V. Gopalakrishnan, Devi Neithiyar, and Subashish Bhattacharya, who are seated on a rug, stage left, unamplified. The sruti box drone is turned up, and the dancers take their places: in the foreground, Sridhar and Maura in Bharatnatyam costume. In the middle, Craig, bare-chested in beige shorts. At the far back, six women in gauzy, flowing white tunics and leggings, moving as a close group. Devi begins an alap, and the dancers begin their three levels of movement: Sridhar and Maura in dynamic interaction—more contact improv than Bharatnatyam, Craig deliberately, smoothly performing a cycle of yoga

poses in sequence, and the women at the back inching across the stage, arms held out to one side. TVG joins Devi with singing and a mridangam beat, and Subashish adds coloristic touches on the tabla. They are improvising, in a sort of shortened khayal-like form; Devi starts with a few phrases of a composition, but the tempo stays steady, the energy constant. The dance seems to me to be enacting three levels to the passage of time. I wonder if there is supposed to be a narrative within this performance—how will Sridhar show time passing, on three levels, within the bounded segment of time that is this performance? With so little change in each group’s types of movement, will there be an ending? As Devi, Sridhar and Subashish come to the end of a cycle and complete a final tan, Devi draws out one long last note over the ringing echo of tabla and mridangam. The dancers all face forward, pointing their fingers at the audience.

I come to realize that the narrative, the plot movement in the story enacted in this segment of time, is Craig’s sequence of yoga poses. His asana, cyclical in space, connotes a cyclical idea of time. The women at the back represent something unchanging, while Sridhar and Maura are enacting the day-to-day process of differentiation. When I tell Sridhar this interpretation later, he says, “that is a thing which I did. And we used the word mind instead of time. And the idea of mind and time seems to be interlinked”. According to Sridhar, Craig’s actions in the piece represent this link: “the mind grows with the body...from birth to death it’s one cycle. So that’s why I put Craig as one cycle where he just makes that movement for the entire period, from the floor level, lying down, bringing up the legs, and making the full *yogasana* which is complete 22 minutes that we do the show.” The women at the back of the stage are the “inner focus of a person,” pure and unchanging: “If you look the back of the brain ... it is

a straight clean line where the sattvic, the pure quality of the brain is always there.” At the front of the stage, the forefront of consciousness, is “the second level of where you want to be, differentiating yourself between male, female and you want to achieve, you want to take into action, these actions are shown by Maura and me.” The dancers’ final action, pointing their fingers at the audience, is meant to signify that this mind, existing in time, is each one of us, and to relate the action on stage to its context in society: “society is responsible for what you think, what you do and what you are.”

Sridhar goes on to explain that his choreography is “universal,” while at the same time strongly rooted in his own background, his childhood in his hometown of Chennai and his training in Bharatnatyam. He mentions the *Natyashastra* not as a foundational text of Indian dance and theater only, but of performance art worldwide: “it talks about every principle which people have been talking in the world.” For Sridhar, the personal and the universal are connected cyclically, as demonstrated in *Synapse*:

For me everything is revolving, see when I sit and talk to you again, it goes back to what my tradition talks about, what my culture talks about. You know everything is related to my childhood because that is the foundation which was given by my parents, by the school which I studied from, by the institution where I learned dance from. So it’s like that, you know the foundation is—what you learn can become universal. What you are—how can you stretch it towards and offer it towards all, in exchange with all, with everything around the world (Shanmugam 2004).

This interaction of the universal and the particular has become central to Sridhar’s career as a dancer, choreographer, and promoter of the arts. Addressing purists, he asks, “if Indian classical dance form is one segment of the huge universe of dance, why can’t I interact with all my relatives and cousin dancers?” His interaction has taken him further afield than that of Subashish Bhattacharya or Shujaat Khan, but he continues to relate it to his Indian classical training. He hopes that his work will lead to breaking boundaries,

breaking borders. Yet as we have seen, in certain situations, he himself comes across as a purist, drawing boundaries. The same is true in Subashish Bhattacharya's situation—at one time, his position can be seen as representing a progressive unity, and at another time he too draws boundaries, using tradition to justify both moves.

In Sridhar's case, the reason for this shift appears to be that of context. Presenting a performance along with other choreographers of modern dance, Sridhar does not call his choreography Indian, and does not attempt to place it within the Indian classical tradition of orthodoxy. Where Sridhar takes issue with Subashish and Bollywood, and where Subashish and Debashish take issue with Shujaat and ghazal, is the act of presenting something unorthodox in a situation where orthodoxy is an important component of the performance as defined by its context, utility and audience expectations. This kind of presenting the unorthodox as orthodox, Sridhar argues with respect to Bollywood, detracts from the project of moral edification of audiences through performance art. As Dard Neuman and Shujaat Khan have pointed out, unorthodoxy in performance is part of a long-standing tradition among Indian classical musicians. The debates around unorthodox performance in the context of orthodoxy continue, the changing definitions of what is sufficiently classical contributing to the perpetuation of existing features of the tradition and to the adoption of innovative practices, creating, eventually, new orthodoxies complete with valid connections to the ever-expanding past.

If unorthodox performances within a tradition of orthodoxy become valid through recourse to the past, that same past can also lend credibility to new types of performances outside the domain of orthodox tradition. Sridhar locates his choreography outside of the sphere of the Indian, outside of the sphere of tradition. Yet classicism and his own past

figure prominently in his pieces described here, from their philosophical underpinnings to their sonic and visual presentation; it is important to Sridhar that his “universal” performance rely on “classical Karnatic musicians” (even though one of those musicians is a north Indian tabla player), and that he and the East Asian-American dancer Maura Lee appear in Bharatnatyam costume. In reaching out to the world, he circles back to his past.

In their innovations or their objections to innovative moves, these artists are not only justifying the present by reference to the past, but also deciding which practices are possible or acceptable in the present. Anthropologist Michael Jackson addresses this process: “Though individuals speak, act, and work toward belonging to a world of others, they simultaneously strive to experience themselves as world makers” (Jackson 1998:8). While situating themselves within a tradition by appealing to the past, these artists choose their paths toward the future. The tension between opposing opinions in these artists’ speech and actions, and in the work of performing, creates a dynamic present that references both past and future.

Chapter 3 The Search for a Musical Universal: Fusion and Confusion

In a conversation about improvisation in various musical genres of the world, Karnatic vocalist and mridangam player Pandit T.V. Gopalakrishnan, known widely as “TVG” exclaimed to me, “Baroque music IS Indian music! Is that clear to you?”²¹ It wasn’t clear—I didn’t understand. How could Baroque music be Indian music? I came to understand later, when TVG’s daughter and disciple Devi Neithiyar elaborated on this perspective. She credited him as her guru with instilling in her an openness to all types of music, an education that emphasized listening and imitating to learn anything and everything. Devi expressed this openness as a characteristic of Indian music—not Hindustani or Karnatic, classical, folk, or popular, but Indian music in general, bringing all music into its vast fold.

It’s an all-encompassing music. It has everything. I feel like it’s almost like the final end of music, where there’s room for everything. So that...be it spiritualism, be it creativity, entertainment, be it for your soul—everything, for anybody or anyone, there is room for in Indian music.²²

While it was also evident that both TVG and Devi understood their conception of all-encompassing Indian music to contain a hierarchy of styles and types ranked according to the standards of a classical Karnatic aesthetic, their emphasis was on its universality. In addition to TVG and Devi, Sridhar, Craig, Shujaat, Debashish and Subashish often expressed similar ideas regarding the universality of music, dance, and other arts. Indeed, Ahiri’s goals included promoting unity across cultural differences through musical performance. In the context of Indian music as “world” music, ideals of

²¹ Interview with T.V. Gopalakrishnan, 5/27/04.

²² Interview with Devi Neithiyar, 5/28/04. She uses the terms “spiritualism” and “spirituality” interchangeably, as does Debashish.

universality are most often invoked at fusion performances, the meeting of musicians from different traditions symbolizing multicultural harmony. These ideals are often expressed in terms of spirituality. Entering into a discussion of musical universalism by way of the common representations of Indian classical music, world music and fusion as spiritual music, in this chapter I examine two fusion performances. Both were presented in terms of cross-cultural unity and spirituality; the first was considered unsuccessful by those involved, while the second was enthusiastically received by all participants. While the previous chapter dealt mainly with constructions of difference, I focus here on the construction of similarity. On the levels of discourse and of music making, how is music made “universal?”

“Masters Of Spirit” at Joe’s Pub: Confusion

In collaboration with another New York music nonprofit, Great Drum Foundation, Ahiri sponsored a fusion concert at Joe’s Pub on May 21, 2004. Performing in this concert were Debashish Bhattacharya on Hindustani slide guitar, T.V. Gopalakrishnan on Karnatic-style vocals and mridangam²³, Chinese erhu²⁴ player Bao’an Cao, Ecuadorian flutist Hilario Soto, and Great Drum’s founder, jazz drummer Franklin Kiermeyer from New York. Debashish and TVG had known each other, but not really played together, at Ahiri, while Hilario Soto, Bao’an Cao, and Franklin Kiermeyer had played together before at Great Drum Foundation’s monthly improvisation session, “Sound Revelation NYC.” Billed as “Masters of Spirit,” the premise of the concert was

²³ The main drum of Karnatic classical music, which plays a similar role to the tabla in Hindustani classical music. The major difference between the roles of the two drums is that the mridangam, unlike the tabla, does not delineate the rhythmic cycle for the rest of the musicians; unlike the tabla, it is not a timekeeper.

²⁴ A bowed string instrument played while held upright on the musician’s lap.

the musical coming together of five different “masters” from five different “traditions of spiritual music” (Kiermeyer 2004).

In a recorded interview available on Great Drum Foundation’s website,²⁵ Franklin Kiermeyer asserts essentially that music speaks for itself (Kiermeyer 2003). He discusses his belief that everyone can find something to identify with in all music, and that there is a powerful connection to be found when musics rooted in tradition are brought together to create his vision of spiritual music. To him, this universal characteristic of music is in itself spirituality. About the performance at Joe’s Pub, he said, “none of these musicians are leaving their traditions—it’s all being done at the same time. We want to show that at the heart, it’s all the same.” In his program notes, Franklin Kiermeyer described the philosophy behind this performance:

In *Masters of Spirit*, each musician's mastery serves the same goal--unleashing the heart of compassion that lies at the root of each of their seemingly disparate traditions. Bringing artists of such diverse backgrounds together on the same stage may seem a recipe for discord, but instead something wonderful happens. Through the magic of improvisation, they reach a stage of letting go. Faith in the moment allows them to let go of the boundaries that limit the self. Playing together, it is not that each musician is open to foreign sound, but instead, to an expansiveness where nothing is foreign. Without deviating from their own deep traditions, the musicians transcend the oceans that might seem to separate them (Kiermeyer 2004).

Thus the basis for this spiritual union of musical masters from different traditions is a transcendental state which they reach through improvisation. Bracketing for the moment the possibility of this kind of transcendent experience, my own experience looking at Great Drum’s website illustrates the disjuncture between Kiermeyer’s vision and his product.

²⁵ This interview/promotional music video is no longer available.

Before the day of the performance, Franklin Kiermeyer asked me to interview the artists for a documentary about the event. A friend and I looked at the website for information about Great Drum and the types of documentaries they produced. My initial reaction was mostly positive; overlooking the site's visual orientalism, the ideals expressed in the foundation's mission statement, of promoting diversity and finding a musical common ground, seemed like noble goals similar to those of many small nonprofits. My friend did not bother with the words printed on the page and reacted only to the music, describing it as "horrible cacophony." In the end, I had to agree. There was no denying that neither of us found the sounds of Great Drum Foundation's promotional music video to be pleasant, but the ideals expressed in the text of the site left me wanting—perhaps somewhat naïvely—to give Great Drum Foundation the benefit of the doubt.

This left me wondering: can music ever be said to "speak for itself?" Amanda Weidman offers an emphatic "no," using as an example her Karnatic violin teacher's suggestion of envisioning Indira Gandhi's aquiline nose in order to play *alapana* with proper feeling. For Weidman, this demonstrates that "the most superficial features could, in this way—almost by accident—produce something deeply moving" (Weidman 2002:357). Instead of "speaking for itself," music "provokes us to speak for it, about it. The gap between what music is and what we can say or write is productive; it does not end discourse, but rather keeps it going" (Weidman 2002:357). This formulation places music as an equal participant in communication alongside language: though devoid of inherent meaning, it can still provoke reaction based on the meanings people assign to it. My conversation with my friend illustrates this idea's salience; what was written about

the music colored my perception of the music, while my friend's reaction to the music influenced his interpretation of the words.

Ahiri's president Mahesh Naithani was reticent in his pre-show comments about the possible outcome of this collaboration. He told me, "You have to reach out. So reach out is through experimentation, we don't know what will work because we can't read your mind. But, through this process a lot of things will come and germinate and create something beautiful. May not be today, may not be tomorrow. But one day something will come out and be very interesting." At the time, I got the feeling that he was being very diplomatic about his expectations, and that the underlying subtext to these comments was "though this particular performance might not end up being all that great, these kinds of experiments are necessary—the more you reach out, the more chances there are to connect."²⁶ His comment, "we can't read your mind," is telling when applied to this situation. According to Mahesh, Sridhar, and TVG, the one rehearsal broke down when some members of the group decided that the best way to perform on stage would be to "let things flow," and let improvisational inspiration come without recourse to planning. These musicians talked as if they believed that the music would "speak for itself," enveloping performers and audience alike in simultaneous spiritual connection as musicians drew from a universal source of inspiration. While they may have been imagining the performance in terms of free improvisation, in which Franklin Kiermeyer and Bao'an Cao regularly participate, the "anything goes" flexibility of free improvisation was foreign to TVG and Debashish, who were used to arranging music

²⁶ Interview with Mahesh Naithani, 5/20/04.

formally before a performance, and who felt that the lack of formal planning would inevitably lead to disaster. A shared vision had not been established.

A shared social vision also appeared to be elusive among these musicians and their backing institutions. In setting up for the concert, an argument occurred about seating: used to receiving top billing and center stage placement as a senior Pandit, TVG was not pleased with his placement off to the side at stage left. He argued that he would not be able to hear the other musicians. Franklin emphasized that the sound crew would take care of that through the monitors, and that it was important to this performance to present everyone as equal. Thus they would all perform seated in a relative semicircle, with TVG and Debashish on raised platforms instead of chairs. The flutist, Hilario Soto, objected to this as he preferred to perform standing. Eventually, the semicircle arrangement won out with minor adjustments: Soto would perform standing, and step to the back of the stage when not playing. Sound check followed; as each instrumentalist insisted on having their microphone set for an optimum solo sound, the result on the tiny Joe's Pub stage was that the sound of the drum kit, sound-checked last, bled over into all the other microphones, overpowering the other instruments. Devi, listening at the back of the room, mentioned this, but nothing was changed. Then, the musicians were all provided with dinner by Great Drum, while other Ahiri members—Sridhar, Craig, Karen and myself—were not. Sridhar perceived this as a major slight of Ahiri by Great Drum. He was also concerned about the number of camera people filming the show—six of us—which to him suggested a commercial production, which Ahiri had not authorized. I was confused, as Great Drum's website clearly stated their mission to make and distribute documentary films about cross-cultural musical events. As showtime drew nearer, all

involved seemed to grow more and more suspicious of each other's motives, becoming less inclined to engage with each other, conversationally or otherwise.

“Spirits of Egos”

After all this, I went into the performance wondering how the musical conversation among “masters of spirit” would progress, more than halfway expecting a total lack of coordination. I was surprised by the evidence that some things had been coordinated ahead of time; papers that all kept at their sides suggested some sort of a set list, and papers pulled out at the beginning of certain tunes suggested that some structural features of the music had been written down.

The tension between what George Lewis calls "ideologies and methodologies of music making" (Lewis 2004:15) in this group was clear in the first piece, becoming more evident as the performance went on. As everyone's expectations about what they were doing were a little bit different, and no one seemed to want to defer to anyone else, confusion began to reign and it seemed that instead of uniting, the musicians were interacting at cross purposes. This was particularly clear as Debashish and Franklin “fought” over rhythmic structure: Debashish, along with TVG, was used to clearly established rhythmic cycles, and a major part of their improvisational repertoire included rhythmic interaction with each other over an established pulse. Franklin's drumming style was coloristic and unmetred; in the manner of bebop drummers he used different rhythmic patterns to demarcate formal sections, without indicating a pulse.

In the first piece, which opened with a sruti box drone²⁷, a strike of Franklin's gong, and a vocal solo from TVG, Franklin changed colors, going, for example, from a quiet dynamic on the cymbal to a higher level on the hi-hat and snare when TVG finished his opening solo and Cao began his. After Cao finished his solo, Debashish took his turn, coming in with a completely different melody, and Franklin stepped up the dynamic and the frequency of his articulations another notch. Debashish ended his solo with a tihai,²⁸ at the end of which Franklin struck the bass drum, demonstrating his awareness of the tihai's structural significance. Franklin then began his own solo, switching from brushes to sticks and making greater use of the cymbals and hi-hat, still without evidencing a pulse. His solo was shorter than the others because Debashish came back in, playing in a very structured, metered fashion as if to say "follow me!" Franklin continued to play soloistically with sticks, not brushes, allowing Debashish to lead him in two tihais, finishing together. Soto entered with his flute solo, and Franklin switched back to brushes on the cymbals and snare, taking his dynamic down slightly. Soto played long, lyrical tones, not responding to the jocular grace note figures that Debashish kept inserting in an attempt to start a "dialog". Quietly, underneath the rest of the texture, TVG began tuning his mridangam. After Soto's solo, Cao took another solo, playing virtuosic runs and sweeping octave jumps on the erhu and engaging with Debashish's jocular interjections over Franklin's continued coloristic wash of sound. Cao finished his solo on a perfect V-I cadence, and the audience applauded. However, it was unclear if this was actually meant to be the end of the piece, or if perhaps TVG had been tuning up

²⁷ An electronic replacement for the drone instrument called tanpura.

²⁸ A cadential pattern in which the same melody is repeated three times in quick succession to finish on the first beat of a rhythmic cycle.

for a mridangam solo meant to end the piece. After the audience's applause and only a few moments of silence, TVG began on the mridangam, starting what turned out to be another piece but seemed also to be an extension of the first. Thus it was apparent that aspects of the performance from rhythmic structure to when to finish had not been agreed upon, neither through pre-performance discussion nor through careful listening and reacting while playing on stage.

The gulf between Ahiri and Great Drum widened post-performance when the heads of each organization disagreed about acceptable use of the video footage I and several others had taken. This argument was the last straw after a disappointing concert, and members of Ahiri and of Great Drum left angry and frustrated, planning no future collaborations. Audience reaction was also lukewarm; for example, during the performance many audience members concentrated on socializing with each other instead of giving the music their full attention, and TVG's three students who attended the performance, while reluctant to criticize anyone in particular, agreed that they had not enjoyed it as much as they had expected.

In the days following this performance, I asked the opinions of the musicians and organizers who had participated. In Sridhar's opinion, lack of leadership was this group's main problem. He was frustrated by each musician's refusal to listen to others' ideas prior to the show, and by their related attempts to lead the stage performance in different directions. He discussed the outcome of the performance in terms of the musicians' social interaction on and off stage:

For me it's a question of it was not at all balanced. They did not rehearse, each one was just trying to show that they are great, they are great, they are great, and ultimately the concept is just ruined. "Masters of Spirit"—ultimately it's just

spirits of egos. That's all it was. And really it did not work out that way...Couldn't they think what they wanted to do?²⁹

Sridhar also believed, along with TVG, that the performance would have been more successful if more of the music had been arranged beforehand. He stressed that TVG had been ready to take responsibility for this, as he had been arranging music for large orchestras of varying instruments since 1953: “he kept offering. He said ‘it’s not going to work, I’m sure it’s going to be a failure, it’s going to be a flop.’”

Debashish also thought that the performance was a failure “because of the very badly arranged musical forms”. He also did not think that the other musicians besides TVG were “qualified” to play with him; in his understanding, they had not attained a sufficient level of musical competence. Debashish specified the things he believed were necessary to understand music: melodic and rhythmic forms. He noted that music without a sense of stable pitch, and without a pulse, was impossible for him to understand. To him, a thorough understanding of melodic forms included melodic complexity; one of the reasons he thought Soto wasn't up to snuff was that his instrument was tuned to a pentatonic scale, and thus could not reproduce all melodies that Debashish might have wished to use in their performance. Debashish was very critical of Franklin Kiermeyer's unmetered style of playing: “there was no signature, there was no time frame given [in] what he's doing. Putting so many, so many sounds in a given unit of time doesn't make sense to bring the other sound to come and join and relax there. It was a complete nuisance.”³⁰

²⁹ Interview with Sridhar Shanmugam, 6/9/04.

³⁰ Interview with Debashish Bhattacharya, 5/27/04.

While I did not talk to Franklin about this aspect of the performance, his decision to play in this style suggests that he hadn't thought about the possibility that others in the group might not understand what he was doing. Writing about the intercultural community of musicians who practice free improvisation, Jason Stanyek explains that this type of music making is "a set of beliefs or ideologies about what music is or what it could be." It is not so much his characterization of free improvisation that is relevant here, but rather his explanation that "these particular performers are part of a symbolic community of improvisers who share a commitment to a specific, albeit extremely flexible, musical practice" (Stanyek 2004:45). In other words, in the practice of performance the music is not speaking for itself; rather, musicians interact according to the ideology that frames their practice. This kind of ideological unity is sometimes described as "culture." In framing this performance with unity, spirituality, and what Stanyek calls the music-as-a-universal-language trope (Stanyek 2004:44), Great Drum and Ahiri inadvertently cut off the possibility for dialog between differing ideologies of music, one which privileged the lack of formal structure and one which demanded a formal grounding. As it was, the decision to let music magically speak for itself led again to "cacophony," musically on stage and socially between Ahiri, Great Drum and the individual musicians.

This performance then stands as an example of what many have pointed out: that the emphasis on the universal in attitudes of multiculturalism often serves to erase real problems, robbing events of cultural confluence of their potential to initiate productive dialog. As Ana María Ochoa points out in a discussion of authenticity and the universalizing world music scene, "Magic does not only liberate; it also entraps" (Ochoa

1998:180). The questions then remain: Is there a place for spirituality in musical interaction? And how, if we cannot depend on a universal language of music to magically unite us, can we make music work as a means of productive intercultural communication?

Possibilities for Inspiration

When I asked for TVG's thoughts about "Masters of Spirit" at Joe's Pub, he was quite tactful, phrasing his comments in terms of the possibilities he saw for fusion collaborations in general. His ideas provide a useful framework for interpreting fusion performances.

The main—the crux of our music that I practice, that's Indian music, it's Karnatic music, which is practiced continuously for more than 2000 years, the same system of music, is that it is always the provision for improvisation. From the way we did today, we have the freedom to improvise but within the parameters of the grammar of music, the grammar of lyrics, grammar of rhythm and aesthetics. So this is something fantastic—whenever I perform in such a group I always try to look at the grammar of where I can fit in, so sometimes I might not be able to play at all. But then I find the grammar somewhere, I find the aesthetic somewhere. So then I create. Sometimes I lead, sometimes I join just following. But ultimately the whole thing is about—in such kinds of music, enjoyment. Beauty, pleasure, and the individual's spark coming out of the individual. This is interesting for me to see...The spark comes in different ways. One way is the musician projects his own spark. And the music carries it and holds it up. That's one way, it takes a lot of experience. But sometimes instrument itself is inspiring. When you hear the instrument it's inspiring. For the musician it might sound simple, but for the listener it's very special, very nice. So this can happen. And sometimes what happens is that you get some inspiration from others. So you transcend the instrument, you transcend your music, and you go one with the audience, the listeners. And something special comes out. There can be all these things.³¹

TVG's comments bring Debashish's perspective together with Franklin's hope for a spiritual unity, and Devi's ideas of universality. At first, his comments recall Karnatic

³¹ Interview with T.V. Gopalakrishnan, 5/28/04.

classicism with their emphasis on a musical grammar, a structure within which to improvise. But his latter comments seem to fit more with the rhetoric of free improvisation as Stanyek describes it, with his emphasis on flexibility, listening, and balance between self and ensemble (Stanyek 2004:44-47). Mutual enjoyment is the goal of intercultural fusion, and included under the category of enjoyment is the feeling of transcendental connection that may be experienced, perhaps only for a fleeting moment, as performers and listeners “get inspiration from others.” It is the social act of communication that is the first step toward a unifying performance.

Spirituality, Indian Music, and Finding Universals

It is important to note that TVG does not phrase his idea of “transcendence” in religious terms, or even in terms specific to Karnatic music. It is also important to note his observation that beauty and pleasure in music can be experienced without that transcendent state, as a musician’s personal presence or the sound of an instrument inspires. With these statements, TVG reminds us that transcendental musical experience is something that happens only in those rare moments when everything comes together; it is a particularly special kind of enjoyment. Obviously, promotion and advertising cannot guarantee audience members an experience that rises above the mundane in 45 minutes while eating, drinking, socializing and listening at Joe’s Pub. Yet, the possibility of this sort of experience is continually invoked in the promotion especially of Indian classical and fusion performances, most often with reference to spirituality. For the purposes of this chapter I consider spirituality broadly to include religious practice, transcendental musical experience, and everything in between. Preserving the ambiguity of the term

allows us to examine the different meanings it takes on in different settings, while maintaining some sense of interconnectedness among them.

Spirituality has long been associated with Indian music in the West, and continues to be an umbrella term under which non-western classical and popular musics are marketed. For example, the Chelsea club Satalla calls itself “The Temple of World Music,”³² and the World Music Institute promotes “Mystical Music of Constantinople” among its offerings for the spring of 2005.³³ As far as fusion with Indian music goes, Lotus Music and Dance in Chelsea offers a Music of Meditation concert that features “guest musicians from Eastern, Western, and African disciplines playing together” with American sarodist Daisy Paradis.³⁴ Indian classical musicians Ravi Shankar and Hazrat Inayat Khan are well known for their promotion of music as spiritual activity, from their respective Hindu and Muslim perspectives.³⁵

The prevailing discourse on spirituality in Indian music is rooted in Brahmanical Hindu philosophy that describes sound as the creative force behind all existence.³⁶ Western Orientalist scholarly interest in Brahmanical Hindu philosophy contributed to a growing popular interest in Hindu cosmology; as groups such as the Theosophical Society emerged among Western Indophiles, so too did an interest in the relationship between Hindu philosophies of sound and Indian music as practiced and performed. Both Western and Indian scholars of Sanskrit, religion, and musicology have produced a

³² www.satallany.com

³³ WMI Brochure, Dec. 2004-Mar. 2005

³⁴ Advertisement in WMI Brochure, Dec. 2004-Mar. 2005

³⁵ See Ravi Shankar’s 1968 movie *RAGA*, and autobiographies *My Music, My Life* (1968) and *Raga Mala* (1999). For Hazrat Inayat Khan’s Sufi explanation of music as spiritual activity, see his collected lectures, published as *The Music of Life* (1983).

³⁶ See Beck 1997.

large body of literature on this topic.³⁷ Since the advent of studies of meditation and yoga in terms of cognitive science in the 1970s,³⁸ the connection of music with spirituality through Hindu sonic philosophy has increasingly been phrased in scientific terms.³⁹ Muslim mysticism has also contributed to the discourse of spirituality in Indian music, as Sufi thought advocates music as a way to reach ecstatic states that eventually lead to knowledge of God.⁴⁰ Finally, the discourses about spirituality in Indian music have made a lasting impression on discourses about spirituality in music in general. Jazz critic Joachim Ernst Berendt titled his 1983 book on sound and spirituality *The World is Sound—Nada Brahma*, referencing Indian philosophy and music while asserting that “This book is not about India...This is a book about us. It refers to modern Western man” (Berendt 1983: 15).

Ahiri’s assistant director Craig Kaufman notes that references to spirituality and actions associated with it carry different connotations—both positive and negative—in India and in the US. While an action such as burning incense at a concert can be a relatively mundane ritual of respect to gods and gurus when performed by an Indian Hindu musician, to many Americans, the smell of Nag Champa connotes a dorm room at a liberally minded college, walls draped in Indian-print tapestries, candles burning along with the incense to cover up the smell of marijuana smoke. Or, it conjures up images of orange-robed former suburbanites, heads newly shaven, chanting “Hare Krishna, Hare Ram” and handing out proselytizing literature in train stations and airports: images that to

³⁷ See Beck 1997.

³⁸ See Maharishi Institute list of studies online at <http://www.spiritual-center.org/peace/research.htm>.

³⁹ See Capra 1975; Berendt 1983.

⁴⁰ See Dan Neuman 1980:62-68; Khan 1983; Qureshi 1986.

many signify an adolescent abdication from reality. For some, these connotations have already become associated with the sounds of Indian music—to them, sitar and tabla are the sounds of a (neo?)hippie and Hare Krishna counterculture from which they wish to distance themselves. Along with Ahiri’s president Mahesh Naithani, Craig insists that Ahiri steer clear of promoting musicians as spiritual masters, sticking to the more widely accepted discourses of classicism and multiculturalism. Thus “Masters of Spirit” at Joe’s Pub was an exception to the rule. Many of Ahiri’s musicians have strong opinions on the place of spirituality in musical performance and practice. Some understand mentioning the spiritual in conjunction with music as a mere promotional strategy, while others view their music practice and performance as part of an admirable spiritual path. Their opinions together demonstrate some of the varied perspectives that arise as musicians negotiate previously existing discourses of representation to present their music, their goals, and themselves.

Perspectives on Spirituality

When asked if his music and religious practice were related, TVG, the self-proclaimed “dyed-in-the-wool Brahmin” replied, “They are not, actually. I don’t think many musicians think about their religion when they practice.”⁴¹ Dan Neuman notes that the separation of music and religion is also typical among the north Indian musicians with whom he worked, but adds that the connection of music and the divine—what many today would refer to as spirituality—remains strong (Dan Neuman 1980:62). However, he adds, though the spiritual, devotional aspect of music is always a part of music-related

⁴¹ Interview with T.V. Gopalakrishnan, 5/28/04.

discourse, “in practice, this devotional aspect is left as the concern of the saintly ones who are known from the past” (Dan Neuman 1980:63). Thus, while 19th and 20th century Western scholarship on Indian music may not have separated the two, in most Indian musicians’ minds, religion and spirituality are two different things. The perspectives highlighted here take up Neuman’s second point: the definition of spirituality, and its place in a musician’s life.

Shujaat Khan states clearly that Indian classical music is entertainment, taking issue with those who characterize it as more spiritual than other musics. He does not blame Western Orientalism for the notion that Indian music is more spiritual than anything else, but lays the responsibility for this perception squarely on the shoulders of Indian musicians. He says that though the generation of musicians before him may have promoted themselves as swamis, Indian classical music is “a pure entertainment thing”.⁴²

Shujaat and Debashish both believe that money is the reason many Indian musicians have placed so much emphasis on the religious or spiritual aspects of their music when presenting it to Western audiences. Viewing Western Orientalism as something to be exploited for financial gain, these musicians present themselves as spiritual masters hoping to cash in on audience naïveté. Debashish notes that this is indeed an effective marketing strategy “because incense sticks and lord Buddha’s statue [have] sold in the West most. After silk.”⁴³ From Shujaat’s perspective, these musicians give both music and spirituality a bad name. If they are really singing only for God, he argues heatedly, they should sing in a temple and not take any money for it:

⁴² Interview with Shujaat Khan, 5/31/04.

⁴³ Interview with Debashish Bhattacharya, 6/4/04.

And if you do take money and you're fucking around with women and drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes and traveling around the world and furthering your damn career, then why the hell are you saying that this is spiritual music? Go sit in a temple and sing for God, and eat what is given to you. Don't chase Mercedes and silk. That is reality.⁴⁴

This opinion is common to many Hindustani musicians—that truly spiritual musical activity is separate from all worldly concerns, especially from the exchange of money. Shujaat extends this view to apply to anything that requires discipline, stressing its private, individual significance. He explains,

When we sit down and play eight hours a day, we practice all night, yeah, we are attaining a kind of spirituality, a depth, somewhere that every other human being doesn't go to. But so does a sportsman who runs a marathon and he practices running forty miles a day—when you're right there, all alone by yourself in this whole world with no one there to help you, you're doing this all alone, yes, you do attain a different level. But that doesn't make us special.⁴⁵

For these reasons, Shujaat is especially angered by other musicians' promoting themselves as spiritual masters in order to further their careers. He hopes that more people will adopt his perspective, saying “let my younger generation just stand up and say yeah, we're in the entertainment business, we are performers, we get up there and perform!” Though he stresses music's role as entertainment, this does not mean that he believes it is mere escapism. Rather, he alludes to the emotions or *rasas*⁴⁶ that performers communicate through their music, including, for example, sensuality, anger, jealousy, beauty and spiritual feeling.

Thus, to Shujaat, spirituality in music can be the goal of individual discipline, or one of the emotions that a musician attempts to communicate through his or her

⁴⁴ Interview with Shujaat Khan, 5/31/04.

⁴⁵ Interview with Shujaat Khan, 5/31/04.

⁴⁶ Classical Indian music and theater traditions cite nine canonical forms of emotion or *rasa* that can be conveyed through music or on stage. Many rags are characterized by a combination of several *rasas*.

performance, but it is never the main message of a musical performance. Neither is it necessarily a central characteristic of a musician's life. He sums up his position on spirituality and Indian classical music by saying, "somehow [Indian classical music] is getting stuck in 'oh, this is a spiritual music which is only in the temples,' when it should be accepted that it's like any other music, it's entertainment, and which also has that— that different element that has depth and everything but still, it is still a performance."⁴⁷ In other words, an individual musician's discipline, which some may call spiritual, can lend depth to his or her performance, but that performance is entertainment—music shared with an audience, meant for enjoyment.

Sridhar places a similar importance on the relationship of performers with an audience, using language that in many ways directly contradicts Shujaat's opinions. According to Sridhar, his dance productions are not entertainment, they are a kind of prayer, and an attempt to engage the audience spiritually by taking audience members to a "higher level." He explains, "Dance is such that the stage, where I perform, the performance space as such is my temple and the prayers are my movements. And people working with me and me, myself, we are on the path of spirituality...and we want to take the audience along with us."⁴⁸ What Shujaat talks about as entertainment—the presentation of music to an audience—Sridhar discusses in terms of a "spiritual path," but both emphasize the interaction among performers and between performers and audience as the key sites for a performance's success.

To Sridhar, a performance must always communicate a message of some sort, something that can be understood on multiple levels and that aims to be transformative.

⁴⁷ Interview with Shujaat Khan, 5/31/04.

⁴⁸ Interview with Sridhar Shanmugam, 6/9/04.

He says, “the concept is my passion for bringing the world together through music and dance and theater.” When putting together a performance, he is proud of the fact that he uses any and all dancers who wish to participate, choreographing with their individual abilities in mind. He involves the dancers in the process of creating the piece: “We sit and chat, we go have dinner together, and then we talk about it...That [dialog] should contribute toward the concept and that should also transform the artist to a different level.” The performance, then, brings the audience into the discussion, as dancers, musicians and audience members all participate in their own roles. The resulting shared experience, Sridhar hopes, will unite performers and audience spiritually, contributing to a wider understanding of “universal togetherness.” Unlike Shujaat, who emphasizes spiritual discipline as an individual endeavor separate from performance’s goal of entertainment, Sridhar presents spirituality within his performances as a key element of performers’ and audiences’ social interaction.

Sridhar has devoted the past several years of his life to promoting this vision of universal togetherness through various nonprofit organizations. Combining this fact with his serious attention to detail in performances created around spiritual concepts, it is safe to say that he is not using the idea of spirituality in performance solely for personal advancement or financial gain, but rather out of sincere convictions. He returns over and over to the idea of universal common humanity, expressing it most poetically in his explanation of the Sanskrit sloka that he understands to be most important and relevant to his own life. According to Sridhar’s understanding of this sloka, the common element to all of humanity is an innate divinity—“every woman is the goddess, every man is the god.” From the perspective of this belief, what better way to work towards an

understanding of human commonalities than to appeal to the spiritual as integral to the social. His reason for expanding the work he does beyond the dance tradition in which he was trained is thus based on deep spiritual convictions—the conviction that fusion collaborations are important because spirituality is social, and the social is spiritual.

Shujaat’s and Sridhar’s conceptions of spirituality define it as an individual path of discipline, and as a social way of being. Another way of viewing spirituality is rooted in sensory experience, and it is this view that TVG uses when discussing his interest in music therapy. Using the language of Hindu cosmology and of modern science, TVG expresses his desire “to build a better research into the understanding of the sound frequencies, how they influence humans and other living things. As a product of classical music, on the level of spiritual and the level of meditation.” His Hindu beliefs inform his explanation of the relationship between sound and matter, including the human body:

There is a Sanskrit sloka that says “I bow [to Shiva] with my head and my mind.” The body is made of *nada* [sound]...All the holistic sciences have accepted that the universe *is* the sound that is immanent in the universe. The *ahata nada* [struck sound]⁴⁹ the *pranava nada*, the *omkara* [fundamental syllable] is the basis [for all creation]. And all the gods and goddesses when you talk about the essence, it is *pranava*, the Om.⁵⁰

According to this view, the human body and the divine essence all stem from a fundamental, original sound. Thus the sounds we hear, including musical sound, affect us at all levels. Though it would be easy to divide these levels into body and mind, TVG’s explanation suggests that the body and mind are the same—when the person bows before Shiva, the embodiment of the divine, both the body and the mind bow. And at the

⁴⁹ Brahmanical Hindu cosmology describes two levels of sound in existence: the anahata nada, or unstruck sound, which is latent within all things, exists before matter, and is equated with Brahman or God; and the ahata nada, or struck sound, which by sounding creates matter. Ahata nada comes from, and returns to, anahata nada.

⁵⁰ Interview with Sridhar Shanmugam, 6/9/04.

level of their essence, body, mind, and divinity are all the same. Therefore any way of understanding spirituality as the connection between the human and the divine, or between the self and the world at large, is related to the human body and sensory experiences. The body is the site of connection. Debashish has similar thoughts about spirituality as an integral part of the body and of all human activity:

It is a part of you—you think, you breathe spirituality, you eat spirituality, you have sex spiritually—everything is spiritual! When the spirit is connected, any work you do, is spiritual. I don't know about goats and chickens, whether they have spirituality, but every human being has spiritualism.⁵¹

What Debashish is stressing here is that spirituality is ordinary, as ordinary as breathing, eating and sex. As an individual discipline, a way of social being, or a felt identification with the divine (or human) Other, spirituality, to Debashish, is common to all human life. As Raymond Williams notes that culture is ordinary, as a “whole way of life,” (Williams 1958) so too is spirituality an ordinary part of that life. The key for me in his statement though, is the phrase, “when the spirit is connected.” Carrying out ordinary tasks “spiritually” here becomes a synonym for living life with an awareness of oneself as a part of a larger composite whole: not just the individual and society, but society as made up of individuals—not just self and other but recognition of self as other and others as other selves. A sensory experience of connectedness.

Enjoyment, Connection, and the Possibility of Transcendence: A Social Act

Thus spirituality comes to stand for many ideals of universality—an archetypal personal quest in which musicians, athletes, and all who follow some sort of discipline may engage regardless of their religion; a way of social being, and a felt connection with

⁵¹ Interview with Debashish Bhattacharya, 6/4/04. He uses “spirituality” and “spiritualism” interchangeably.

the world outside oneself. While Debashish assures us that these universal ideals are ordinary, they are all implicated in a discussion of the extraordinary musical moment. TVG describes this flash of the extraordinary as the transcendental moment of musical communication when musicians “get inspiration from others” which allows them to transcend the instrument and the music to become “one with the audience, the listeners.” According to Great Drum’s literature and the prevailing discourse about spirituality and the magic of improvisation, it is the music that speaks—the music directly causes a “magical” unity to occur. For TVG, these moments are produced through social interaction—an “inspiration from others” that allows musicians to engage each other and their audiences in *making* music. This interaction could be viewed as Sridhar sees it—as a prayerful offering of talent and skill—or it could be seen without any vestiges of spirituality, but it is nevertheless a specific social way of being, inviting others to watch, listen, and play along with oneself and responding in turn to what they communicate. The transcendental moment, or flash of the extraordinary, corresponds with TVG’s sensory-ontological idea of spirituality as felt experience. Stemming from the social interaction of playing and listening, it is a momentary, fleeting sense of identification with the world beyond oneself.

It is possible, theoretically, for this kind of moment to happen for any individual in any kind of musical interaction. The lesson of the “Masters of Spirit” performance, however, is that these things don’t just happen. To create a musical climate in which the possibility for extraordinary inspiration exists, requires a social atmosphere in which musicians can musically and/or verbally negotiate the technical aspects of playing together. I turn now to another fusion performance where this element was present, and

examine how musicians worked together to produce an atmosphere of camaraderie, successful musical experimentation, and perhaps a few “transcendental moments.”

The Ahiri Guitar Jam: Fusion

Debashish and I are sitting on the couches at Ahiri house, and his cell phone rings. He picks it up, and I can hear his student’s voice on the other end. “Guru ji! I really wanted to thank you for everything at the jam last night. You’ve opened our minds by enabling us to play such powerful music.” They chat for a few minutes, and afterwards he tells me, “That was Mary Lee. She says that at first she was embarrassed because she forgot how to play her song, but that when everybody joined in she gained confidence. I’m so glad...”

The previous night Debashish and Subashish had led a highly successful jam at the Ahiri school. Musicians of widely differing backgrounds and ability levels played together and listened to each other play. In a marked contrast to the previous Ahiri/Great Drum Foundation fusion attempt, musicians and audience members left the guitar jam excited, satisfied and inspired. Students of prominent jam participants connected with each other, and gained confidence while playing together with each other and their teachers, as Mary Lee expressed in her conversation with Debashish the next day. An audience member with a radio show enlisted Debashish and Subashish to be on his show. Two beginning guitar students who had confided to me at the beginning of the show, “all we can play is Brown Eyed Girl,” left inspired to practice, but also wishing they had brought their instruments; they felt they could have found a role within the group even

with their limited abilities. All in all, this guitar jam created an inclusive and positive atmosphere for all in attendance.

Mary Lee credited her guru Debashish with creating this atmosphere. Trevor Lawrence, an established professional guitarist in New York, also credited Debashish and Subashish with creating a comfortable space for open musical communication. Kenny Wessel, jazz guitarist and veteran of Ornette Coleman's band, added his voice to the slew of compliments that Debashish and Subashish received on the jam's success. So what exactly did they do correctly?

In comparison with the Joe's Pub performance with Great Drum, several things were immediately apparent in Debashish's relaxed, inclusive efforts to make everyone feel at home, musically and socially establishing a common ground. These efforts included the arrangement of the room, the pre-jam banter, Debashish's speech at the jam's outset, and the efforts to make sure everyone was "on the same page" musically throughout the session. Also important was that besides Subashish on tabla and one lone violinist, everyone was playing a guitar.

The jam took place in Ahiri's dance studio/performance space at the Midtown school. As I set up my camera, other students were helping Debashish and Subashish lay out the rug where they would sit, and other musicians were plugging in amps, tuning guitars, and conversing among themselves. The room was gradually arranged into a circle of guitarists, with the major players Debashish, Subashish, Kenny, Trevor, acoustic bassist Jerome Harris, and singer/songwriter Leni Stern along the room's back wall. Debashish and Subashish were set apart from this lineup by their central place on the requisite Persian rug; all others sat directly on the carpeted floor. Electric guitarists

clustered near Kenny's side of the room, near outlets and amps, and other acoustic players began to circle around, filling out the room's periphery. Audience members—about half the number of jam participants—sat behind the far side of the musicians' circle, facing the wall of prominent players. As participants trickled in late, Debashish encouraged them all to ready their instruments, constantly announcing, “it's in D, in D!” to remind all to tune their guitars into dropped-D, and perhaps also to think about what they could play in the key of D. When all were settled, he motioned for Ahiri president Mahesh Naithani to introduce the jam, and followed Mahesh's speech with one of his own:

In two minutes we will start our session. I say it's not a session, it's a meeting point. It's a beginning of a new time. From my childhood I had always envisioned that sometime in my life I would be able to live and breathe and sing in the community of guitars. But when I grew up I found there was no such community in India. I am still trying to create in India a guitar village. But in the west, New York has been a prime point—I've traveled a lot—so it is always a good idea to have my own community of guitarist brothers and sisters—a fraternity of international guitarists. And so I expressed that wish to my saheb, Mahesh ji, and he said well, let's do it! And I met all of you guys. Some of you have learned something from me and I have also learned many things from you guys who have been my students, and then some of you are my contemporaries like Kenny Wessel, Leni, Jerome, Trevor, and many others. So today is really exchanging musical phrases between the guitarists and others, and that is why we are together tonight.

This was the longest speech made by anyone for the rest of the night, and it set the tone for the evening: we are all guitarists (though we can make room in our ranks to include Subashish and the violinist), we are creating a stronger community based on this fact, and we can all learn from each other. The focus of the jam was thus on commonalities. Trevor Lawrence summed up the progression of the evening: “when people arrive it's always a little bit stiff and nobody knows who anybody is. And after we play, though

you haven't spoken you kind of feel like you know each other. So I think this kind of thing has that effect—it builds community.”⁵²

Debashish asked a young, nervous East Asian-American man to begin the jam. The man nervously introduced himself as a New Yorker and recent graduate of law school, and then shyly began to play a quiet, arpeggiated melody. Debashish tapped his guitar in rhythm, and Subashish came in quietly, marking strong beats on the left-hand tabla only. After a few more measures, Jerome joined in with a bass line, and Trevor and Leni added a quiet background of rhythmically strummed chords. This first effort lasted about three minutes, as other players hesitated to join in right away. Debashish congratulated him on a good start, handing leadership to Trevor, who responded with an equally short, but more upbeat selection. This time more people took the risk of joining in, still with some hesitation. The next tune was led by Kenny Wessel and Jerome Harris, after which Leni Stern took the lead with a blues number. While the prominent musicians led, the students began to take more risks, rhythmically strumming the chord progressions and playing out more loudly as they gained confidence. Debashish then asked three students in turn to lead with tunes that they had prepared together based on gats in particular rags, helping the students venture into new improvisational territory.

Verbal and Musical Collaborative Leadership

Kenny Wessel was particularly laudatory of Debashish's leadership, noting that “Debashish is someone who's particularly flexible and open. He's really able to go—to play with someone like me, who isn't going to play the right notes in the raga at the right

⁵² Interview with Trever Lawrence, 5/26/04.

time. But he has a respect for just the communication.”⁵³ It was clear that Debashish was performing the role of facilitator tonight, putting all jam participants at ease and making them feel comfortable stepping out of their musical comfort zones. Part of this included choices of musical styles that were both challenging and comfortably familiar to the jam participants. When his own students played, Debashish and Subashish used a more Hindustani musical grammar, playing in a *tal* and challenging students’ ability to reproduce complicated runs (*tans*), for example. In these cases, musicians unfamiliar with Hindustani musical structures followed along as best they could, and felt that their participation was welcome. These musicians also had plenty of opportunities to lead. When they set a tune, harmonic progression became the musical base for all to build on. The success of Debashish and Subashish’s welcoming attitude was apparent as prominent musicians joined in to support students’ performances, and students added what they could to senior musicians’ performances. During the second half of the show it became even more apparent as all joined in together on several blues tunes in a row. The familiar blues progression gave all present a chance to contribute to the best of their abilities.

Along with Debashish’s role in creating a comfortable atmosphere for experimentation, Subashish also played an important musical role in facilitating the success of the guitar jam. Trevor Lawrence and his students commented on Subashish’s ability to “hold things together.” Throughout the night, I was intrigued by Subashish’s ability to tailor his *tabla* style to the widely differing characters of the guitarists’ performances. At the intermission, he commented on the variety of scales and “good songs,” saying that he changed his style according to the feeling each new song gave him.

⁵³ Interview with Kenny Wessel, 5/26/04.

Paying close attention to phrasing, lyrics, form, dynamics, and especially body language of the other musicians, he adjusted the patterns he was playing on the tabla, sometimes drawing inspiration from their body movements as they played their own instruments.⁵⁴

When I first talked to Subashish about style, I felt like he was positioning himself as a follower instead of a leader, one who always adjusts to others instead of taking the music in his own direction. When I asked him if he saw himself as always following the other musicians, he described their interaction instead as “like a relationship,” meaning a relationship in which each participant plays a different but equally important part, or a collaborative kind of shared leadership.⁵⁵ Later, in his press-kit interview when Sridhar encouraged him to articulate his individual ambitions, he said,

When I am accompanying or I am going to play, they are playing their music and I am just sitting with my tabla. And I don't know what they're going to play, because I never listened to the music before. They start playing their music, and I feel, suddenly I feel ok, I try to feel their feelings. What kind of music they are producing. Then if you—it depends on how you're listening. I told you I always try to listen to their music, to feel their own feelings, their pulse, then I try to play tabla on top of it. And try to mix my imagination with their imagination. This is my ambition and my ultimate—I mean thinking—to play tabla, not to play my own stuff, to play with them and compose with them, in my imagination and their imagination, and it's—when it's really blended, it makes a beautiful music.⁵⁶

Thus Subashish sees the goal of group improvisation as “blending imaginations,” acting with a feeling or awareness of others, and of the progression of the music, communicated through listening and body language, to create beautiful sounds. At this jam, while he followed the sounds he heard as the initiators of each song began, his grooves inspired others to join in, adding their own imaginations to the mix in turn. Along with Debashish's inspiring introductory speech and warm introduction of each new performer,

⁵⁴ Interview with Subashish Bhattacharya, 5/26/04.

⁵⁵ Interview with Subashish Bhattacharya, 5/26/04.

⁵⁶ Interview with Subashish Bhattacharya, 6/4/04.

Subashish's detailed attention to the nuances of each song also allowed the group to come together easily; the atmosphere that was created here assured all participants that they would be heard. That is, everyone knew that everyone else was truly listening. While it is difficult to know if any jam participants or audience members experienced "transcendental musical moments," there was no question that this group "got inspiration from each other," leaving those who played and those who listened satisfied.

"Inspiration from Others:" Spirituality and Creating Commonalities

Returning to the question that began this chapter, How is music made universal? It is useful to note some conceptions of communication. Alejandro Grimson writes, "To communicate is "to place in common," it is to make something common and public. In order to make something common, it is supposed, there must be something previously existing in common, a shared sense of certain things" (Grimson 2000:16). Stanyek says much the same thing; as musicians from all over the world who perform free improvisation are united by what one of his interlocutors calls a "global discourse," the community created by this discourse and practice "cuts across boundaries and borders without actually dismantling those divisions; it is simultaneously intercultural and intracultural" (Stanyek 2004:45). Along these lines I have argued that for participants in a fusion performance to view the performance as successful, a social atmosphere in which commonalities can be created must be put in place. The "shared sense of certain things" necessary to create a common culture, however fleeting, begins with a balance between listening and speaking or playing, an awareness of oneself in a collaborative, constantly communicative relationship with others.

In the post-jam taped interviews that I conducted for Ahiri, I was asked to bring up the topic of spirituality—Ahiri wanted to know if anyone considered jamming with Indian musicians to be a spiritual activity. Trevor Lawrence mentioned that though he himself did not see this or any music he played as particularly spiritual, he had noticed that there were many people who did. He connected this feeling to atmospheres where “people are comfortable and connecting,” noting that at workshops and jams people meet and play together, afterwards feeling “this spiritual connection that we never really thought would happen.”⁵⁷ Kenny Wessel described the discipline necessary to be “open to the sound,” and present in the moment to create music in communication with others, as a spiritual discipline. He explained, “that communication with other people on a kind of wordless sort of spontaneous level, and creating something beautiful out of nothing—there definitely is a spiritual element to it.”⁵⁸ Spirituality, to these two musicians as well as to Ahiri’s performers, is best described in terms of communication. As described by Shujaat, Sridhar, TVG and Debashish, the concepts of discipline, social interaction, and sensory experience are also present within Trevor and Kenny’s sense of what spirituality means.

Though spirituality and communication are linked in these musicians’ understanding of the terms and the actions and feelings they denote, what is communicated remains diverse and unpredictable, and with this diversity the concept of spirituality retains its ambiguity. This ambiguity is useful in creating senses of universality in various situations, but whatever can be called universal in these fusion performances is thus particular to its time, place, and to the people involved. Yet the

⁵⁷ Interview with Trevor Lawrence, 5/26/04.

⁵⁸ Interview with Kenny Wessel, 5/26/04.

desire to find or create a feeling of universality, be it spiritual or simply communal, remains. Concerns about “universalizing” discourse’s tendency to homogenize, excluding real difference and real problems from its celebration of commonalities, are well founded and must not be dismissed. However, equally important to recognize is the desire, in the face of obvious differences, not to homogenize but to connect, to communicate, to understand.

Conclusions

In a conversation about collaborations, Sridhar once remarked, “This huge house, this huge family, we are all under one roof.” Though in the context of this conversation he was referring to the entire world, his statement recalls several other houses, under whose roofs varied individuals meet: the concert hall or other performance space, and Ahiri house itself.

TVG and Devi’s last concert of the spring, titled *Sangeetha Sandhya* (Musical Evening) took place on June 6th, 2004, at the Hindu Temple Auditorium in Flushing, Queens. The performing group consisted of TVG, Devi, Subashish, a 13-year-old Tamilian-American mridangam student of TVG’s, a violinist and a keyboardist. Sridhar emceed the concert, which in addition to the group’s performances, included a presentation by the local city councilman, an award ceremony for a college scholarship given to a young Bharatnatyam dancer, and a presentation of gifts of appreciation to a number of organizers and honored guests, including a Hollywood producer who had come to see TVG perform. The audience was mainly Indian, multigenerational, and as far as I could tell, mostly Tamil-speaking. Five non-South Asians stuck out in the audience: Karen Zhang, myself and a friend, the Hollywood producer, and a Japanese man who said he had learned of the concert through bhajan sessions he attended at the Hindu Temple. The first half of the concert was devoted to Karnatic classical music, and the second half was comprised of “lighter” pieces in styles and languages from all over India. Presented as a demonstration of Devi’s versatility of repertoire, these lighter pieces were also meant to be a multicultural showcase of Indian regional music. For the final

number, in a nod to their current place of residence, the group performed a Thyagaraja kriti written in the Western C major, with runs in scales and thirds.

This concert exemplified much of the spirit of Ahiri's multicultural goals. Devi's performance of multiple styles advocated both a celebration of Indian regional diversity and a unity among Indians in all places, including the New York diaspora. Subashish's presence on stage, playing south Indian rhythmic patterns on a north Indian instrument, further highlighted this performance of unity in diversity. The councilman's speech brought the focus to the here and now: performers and audience were all participants in the creation of a community in New York City. The college scholarship for the Bharatnatyam dancer showed the Indian community's commitment to continuing traditions, and the formal thanks and acknowledgement of organizers and honored guests publicly reinforced the ties between individuals and institutions that had worked together on this performance. The Thyagaraja kriti that ended the performance reminded us of history: over a hundred years ago, musics and musicians of India and of the West were already engaged in conversations.

Over the course of the spring semester, I asked the musicians and other residents of Ahiri house about their private community, their conversations among themselves. Did they consider themselves friends? Did they ever play together? Craig discussed life at Ahiri house in terms of the work of intercultural community building. He said, "the process along the way has been good and we've all learned good stuff, like Karen here she's from China, she's just like any other student in videography, she's getting—not blitzed, but she's aware that she eats bacon and for these guys [the vegetarians] that's horrible—you know, it's good, we're working, we're all sort of pushing the edges of our

shells.”⁵⁹ Shujaat noted the difficulty of their living arrangement: “all of us have very different agendas, and timings and personalities so it’s very difficult to be friends. There’s seniority, people are younger, older, and there’s different languages, different food...” At parties, I noticed that groups tended to form among linguistic lines, and at dinnertime, vegetarians and non-vegetarians would take turns preparing food. Besides Subashish’s and Debashish’s performances with TVG at the Hindu Temple and at Joe’s Pub, Shujaat noted only one instance in which Ahiri musicians from different traditions had played together spontaneously and without a performance to prepare for. However, he was not dismayed by what he saw as “a very natural social separation.” He elaborated, “We do meet, we sit, chat, we watch a movie, but I don’t think there’s very much of a music thing going on. And that’s not because we don’t respect each other musically, it’s just that we’re different people.”⁶⁰ Shujaat was content with individual differences, enjoying the company of his Ahiri housemates in times of relaxation. This is not to say, however, that he didn’t get involved in arguments with others or that he never disagreed. His views on the place of spirituality in Indian musicians’ performances, for example, put him into conflict with many. However, in my conversation with him he discussed the social separation and prioritized relaxing interactions at Ahiri house as if in welcome contrast to the sometimes difficult and demanding daily work of intercultural communication that he and the other Ahiri artists performed.

As Jason Stanyek puts it, “Interculturalism thrives on both proximity and difference” (Stanyek 2004:44). As Ahiri’s artists work to create a space for their music in the world they imagine as their zone of operation, they engage with the history of

⁵⁹ Interview with Craig Kaufman, 5/19/04.

⁶⁰ Interview with Shujaat Khan, 5/31/04.

previous projects of intercultural musical interaction, and with the ideology that their institution espouses. In discussing definitions and directions for their art, they use such oppositions as tradition and modernity, past and future, to negotiate a dynamic present. In relating the music they play to the musics others play, the language of universality and spirituality becomes both a blessing and a curse upon fusion performances, in some situations erasing difference and avoiding real, pressing issues, and in others creating constructive connections.

The connections forged and the boundaries drawn by Ahiri's artists are momentary and shifting, but purposeful. As such, they are perhaps best described using Stuart Hall's concept of articulation. Stanyek notes that in Hall's usage, an articulation is not a random association, but rather:

the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. You have to ask, under what circumstances can a connection be forged or made? (Hall 1980, quoted in Stanyek 2004:46).

Articulations are momentary meetings in which, in contrast to Sridhar's more utopian conception of confluence, previously existing structures of dominance and subordination remain, whether or not they are openly acknowledged (Hall 1980). In performing togetherness, past divisions remain, but the new combinations that these performances create can restructure these divisions in productive ways. The aim of this thesis has been to convey an experience of these articulations, situated in their historical, institutional, social, and personal contexts. It is my hope that this kind of analysis can inspire us to examine globalization not as a set of invisible forces requiring abstract analysis of concepts far removed from the quotidian, but rather as a set of projects envisioned and pursued by individuals, with their desires and contradictions, in their everyday lives. In

this ethnography of globalization, lived experience is key—the knowledge and acknowledgement of diversity within one’s social world and within oneself is what creates a space for meaningful, constructive intercultural interaction.

Epilogue

The day before Debashish and Subashish were to leave for Kolkata, they performed with guitarist Bob Brozman at the Rough Guide to World Music's anniversary party at Joe's Pub. Ahiri was breaking up—all the other artists had left for India, Sridhar and Craig had moved elsewhere in Queens, and Karen had moved to Flushing. Ahiri house was empty. However, someone still considered this performance an Ahiri event, because there Karen and I were with our cameras.

After the performance, a group of us went out to dinner at an Indian restaurant a few blocks away. Debashish, Subashish, Karen, and I were joined by Debashish's student Edward from California, and one of New York's grande dames of the Indian music-loving community, Misha. Debashish picked the first restaurant he saw with musicians in the window, and we all filed in to a long table. As Debashish, Subashish and Misha listened to the musicians play, they realized that the sitarist was no ordinary restaurant musician. Listening to the way he constructed his raga, guesses were thrown out as to where he had been trained—Delhi? Benares? No, somewhere in Pakistan. Lahore? Eventually, Misha went up and asked, apologizing also for the insult of eating while he played. He was from Pakistan, but had studied in Delhi with Inayat Khan, father of Vilayat Khan and grandfather of Shujaat Khan. Misha began to look wistful, saying, “his style reminds me of Khansaheb.”

The sitarist began to play rag Bhairavi, initiating more reminiscence among Debashish, Subashish and Misha: “Do you remember Khansaheb's recording of Bhairavi? I could play it by memory when I was 17. This was how we learned. He was the guru of us all.” Having heard the conversation about this recording, the sitarist began

quoting passages from it. Debashish, Subashish, the sitarist and the tabla player exchanged smiles and glances of appreciative recognition as Karen, Edward and I sat, half-comprehending and impressed. Misha hid her head in her hands. When Debashish asked what was wrong, she looked up and whispered through tears, “Khansaheb is gone.” Debashish reached out and held her hand. “Didi-bhai, Khansaheb is not gone. He is everywhere...” Someone else reassured her, “don’t cry Didi.” Debashish retorted, “Let her cry! It is good to cry—music should have that power. No one cries anymore.” And the two Bengali brothers, the Californian student of Hindustani guitar, the videographer from Beijing, and the ethnomusicology student from Columbia University sat silently listening as the Pakistani sitarist and Indian tabla player paid homage to Ustad Vilayat Khan with the strains of rag Bhairavi in a late night New York restaurant, and Misha cried.

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