

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: AN EXPLORATION INTO NORTH INDIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC: RAGA, ALIF LAILA, AND IMPROVISATION.

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This thesis explores three themes: North Indian classical music, the individual Alif Laila, and the philosophical connection each has to improvisation. The process that was followed to analyze the interactions between *raga* in the North Indian classical tradition and one well-known musician's path within that tradition bridges theory with individual insight. Alif Laila is the individual at the center of the study. As a prominent professional sitarist living in the Washington, D.C. region, her input is analyzed placing focus on individuality within the life of a traditionally trained musician living and teaching in a Western context. Her expression in traditional sharing of musical knowledge from teacher to student, in *raga* performance and in musical philosophy expand upon the new generation of teacher/performers who translate their craft in order to continue their tradition of North Indian classical music. Improvisation, both as a social and musical design, extends the scholarly research and personalized ethnography to complete the thesis.

AN EXPLORATION INTO NORTH INDIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC: *RAGA*, *ALIF*
LAILA, AND IMPROVISATION.

By

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all those I consider mothers in this world. K, A, R, M, A. I cannot thank you enough for your love, your lives, and your constant inspiration.

Without mothers none of us would be here and even fewer of us would choose to be graduate students. Thank you all.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis is an account of a project that illuminates one of the main professional female sitarists living and performing in Washington, D.C. The first section gives an overall background to North Indian classical music, with a particular emphasis on *raga* and the various definitions associated with the musical term. Since my main interaction with this music was with a sitar player, the focus of the *raga* chapter focuses on the melodic aspects and social bond created between musicians. The second section is an ethnography depicting the interpersonal friendship and professional relationship I developed with Alif Laila, a sitarist trained and performing in the North Indian classical tradition. It is Laila who opened my mind and my ears to a deeper understanding of sitar music and her own particular style of performance. The third and final section moves into a more philosophical undertaking, using the idea of improvisation and applying it to the social and musical implications the act of improvisation symbolizes to both performer and viewer.

I set out to develop a more in-depth understanding of a traditional form of music in a way that was tangible and relevant to my surroundings. I did not knowingly step into “the field”— that is to say that my geography did not change while I undertook this project. Instead, my interactions within that geography shifted in focus to create and limit my topic. My work with Alif Laila, my teacher and mentor, was not based on the traditional student-teacher relationship where instrumental pedagogy is at the center of the knowledge-sharing process. Instead, I strengthened the core musical philosophy of individualism within musical structure, and in my work with Alif Laila I was able to realize the importance the music has for

the soloist and the listening audience by observing it from several different viewpoints. At various times acting as audience member, interviewer, student, and stage manager, I moved back and forth between my teacher's knowledge and the scholarship that has been published on North Indian classical music, and came to realize the amount of power the individual holds within the entire tradition, especially when performing that tradition. After focusing on these two worlds (the scholarly and that of one performer's musical reality) I began to question the role improvisation took, not only in the performance of *raga* but also in the livelihoods of those in performance.

Individuality is a concept closely linked to musical creation, musical performance, and ethnomusicological research. Composers represent the artists who create musical language, drawing on personal influences and fusing a musical background to a highly individualized perception of sounds. Performers take the creations of others and individualize those creations in the moment of public presentation. Ethnomusicologists learn and experience the worlds of music on an analytical level with an aim at producing scholarship. During this process the ethnomusicologist takes time to understand and observe the individuality within music and the context that surrounds it. John Blacking explains in his analysis of the Venda that "since both a shared experience and a tendency to move towards more and more *musical* expression are important to Venda music, it is not surprising that the most highly valued communal music combines with an instrumental medium a shared experience which requires a high degree of individuality in community" (Blacking 1971, 66). Bruno Nettl's *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-one Issues and*

Concepts addresses the importance of an ethnomusicological focus on the individual by speculating that “musicians may be much better at providing views of their own lives, and while they may indeed wish to cast themselves in a special kind of light, they probably have more factual data available about themselves in memory than they have about the culture of their people as it may have changed over a series of decades” (Nettl 2005, 178). This combination of specialty on the part of the musician in a cultural context and beneficial insight on the part of the observer of that musician summarizes the roles I attempted to capture during this project’s trajectory.

Although in some senses I have severely limited my ethnomusicological scope by entrusting my musical education to one sitarist,¹ this focused attention has allowed me to operate as an active and respected member of this sitarist’s personal context. I paired the work of scholars with the words, actions, and personal connection this sitarist was willing to share with me. The ability to take scholarly literature and apply it to a musician practiced in the oral tradition of *raga*, one who studied the music at a young age in the *guru-shishya* (master-student) tradition, and one who was willing to share her personalized account of her music provided me with a significant advantage into understanding the modernizing of the tradition and also her own personal insights into the musical process here in the United States.

As this project progressed and my connection to *raga* deepened, my musical awareness also grew. I wanted to train my ear—to be familiar with the music and the instruments used to perform the music. I set out to attend as many concerts as I could

¹ I focused on one individual in contrast to a survey of several musicians living in the area, or a group of musicians acting within a larger cultural context. Alif Laila is not a world renowned artist at this time, but she is quite famous in the Washington, DC and her words and actions prove as valuable data to the ethnomusicological community.

within the mid-Atlantic region. I have been honored to see and hear some of the most significant musicians from India perform in the United States over the past two years. My list includes Pandit Ravi Shankar (sitar) and his daughter Anoushka Shankar (sitar), Shahid Parvez (sitar), Nitin Mita (*tabla*), Eric Fraser (*bansuri*), Kadri Gopalnath (saxophone), the Gundecha Brothers (*dhrupad* singers), Jay Gandhi (*bansuri*), Monir Hossain (*tabla*) and several other prominent performers. At each performance the artist would take time to speak of the power, meaning, and connection the *raga* holds for them personally. By sharing their personal connections to the music with the audience they empowered its members. At each concert it was made clear that aside from the technical training each performer had endured it was, in actuality, the audience members who were creating and adding to the specialness of the event.

Research Methods

While working on this project one of the main connections I explored was the relationship between an individual and her tradition. For the first half of my experience with the music I researched. I delved into almost all the available English-language literature that was available on the history of North Indian classical music: I read about *ragas*, how they are structured, when they can be played, and what they mean. I also spent time simply listening to the music, including vocal *dhrupad* and *khyal* and instrumental *sarod*, *tabla*, sitar, *sarangi*, and *bansuri* music, I developed my ear for the music. Focusing on the drone and the connection between

the drone and soloist, I began to hear the microtonal exchanges that were happening in the music and were explained in more serious work on *raga* theory.

By exploring the meaning, representation, and individuality within a traditional musical genre that has been performed, written about, and analyzed extensively, I did not attempt to break any ethnomusicological molds by theorizing a new method of *raga* analysis. Nor did I attempt to trace one of the main instruments within the tradition throughout history of North Indian, classical tradition in comparison to Western classical traditions. Instead, I pursued both an exploration of the sound and the performer of such sound with the aids of scholarship and a well-known musician trained in the tradition. I used the resources provided for me in my academic setting and stepped into the musical world itself by making contact with a number of classically trained profession musicians, including my cherished teacher.

I worked specifically with Alif Laila, a prominent professional sitarist living and performing in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. Although Laila became a central focus of this thesis and my direct connection to the philosophy behind North Indian classical music and the environment in which it is performed, my sonic education with the music was not solely through Alif Laila's performances. As mentioned above I attended many professional Hindustani instrumental, and some vocal, concerts that took place in the DC metropolitan area as well as further up the East Coast from the fall of 2009 to the spring of 2012. After several of these concerts, I began to notice trends both in the music and in the behavior of audiences who attended them. Also the spaces in which the performances were held seemed to

have a certain affect on the music. These observations led to the following research questions:

- What is the relationship between the musician and their instrument? (History of who has played the instrument, where it was made, age and fragility, features of the instrument, its unique sound, the connection between the action of making sound and the instrument itself, what is the felt relationship).
- How does the level of communication between the musician and the audience during performances shape how performers regard and educate the audience throughout the performance? How do audience response to performances, musical styles, and venue add to the level of importance the musicians place on the audience and audience interaction?
- What is the relationship between the soloist and accompanist(s)? Do they rehearse before a performance? Do they know each other beforehand? How do they find each other for performances, and what is the level of respect between the musicians?

These observations also turned into questions that I developed specifically for Alif Laila as my informant and guide into the professional world of North Indian classical music in DC.²

- How has learning in the *guru-shishya* style—where the individual student-to-*guru* relationship takes place over a long period—affected the relationship between musician and music? How has teaching students in the United States once a week for an hour changed in the translation of pertinent information related to technique, tradition, and musical/instrumental connection?
- What is the program format for formal concerts? How do you prepare for a concert ahead of time? What goes into a program? Are concerts organized with an aim a maintaining some sort of flow?
- What is your role as a sitarist trained in a traditional manner in Bangladesh, but performing in DC?
- As a professional performing artist what spaces are you often performing in and what are you playing for? As performances range from paid gigs to spiritual events—including festivals, concerts for the general public, and lecture/demonstrations for an educated public—how does the space affect performance and the level of interaction between the musicians and their surroundings?

² As our interviews progressed, we addressed a number of different topics including Laila's venue and program choices, her pedagogical choices teaching Western and Westernized students, and her overall musical philosophy.

- Since sitar performance requires tabla, *tambura* or another drone-like instrument, and sometimes includes other forms of accompanying instruments, how are the interactions between other musicians affected by the space?

I worked as her stage manager and personal assistant on the day of performance for most Laila's performances in the DC region over the past two years. I have been able to observe her work as professional sitarist, teacher to Western and Indian students, and Bengali musician interacting with and philosophizing about the world around her. Sitting in on lessons with students for a time, I was able to observe her connection and devotion to her Western student base. Traveling with her to gigs and discussing the performances afterward provided me with a deep and special connection to a musical tradition with which I have been largely unfamiliar for most of my life. Within the Hindustani classical music tradition there is observable individuality that occurs within the musical repertoire. Throughout this thesis process I have highlighted some of the main melodic aspects within North Indian music, especially *raga*, and by analyzing the work I did with Alif Laila, I focused on the social and interconnectedness that derives from working and learning from one's teacher. When one is allowed to connect with a performer in this genre on a personal level, as I was, the individual performer/teacher/professional living with the music in a Western context provides details and insight into the meaning of the tradition and the spiritual connection present in the tradition.

Goals and Significance

This study of North Indian classical music is expansive. I undertook a major project and in my work with Alif Laila have been able to provide the first profile of

her work in the Washington, DC region. Her words represent her individuality as well as the deep ties she has to her Bengali culture and her North Indian musical tradition. Through her passionate and spiritual explanations of her musical background and connection to the music we see an artist in action. We see that although she has been studying and working as a professional musician most of her life, she is still reaching for a higher level of understanding. She is urging to expand her musical knowledge and share the knowledge with her audience. It is through her thoughtful and philosophical explanations of musical terminology and pedagogical techniques that reinforce the value of her words to my thesis project. I did not pick an ordinary or amateur musician to follow, study, and learn from (though there are benefits to such activity) instead I chose a professional female artist. I shared my scholastic background with Laila as she shared her personal background.

The fundamental and historical importance of *raga* within the Hindustani classical music tradition provides the cornerstone for most ethnomusicological work surrounding the music. Primarily focusing on *raga*, the seed from which the tradition of North Indian Classical music grows and blossoms, the second chapter of this thesis will examine the various definitions of *raga* as well as the social and cultural context connected to *raga* by those who perform it. Chapter three paints an ethnographic portrait of Alif Laila, a professional female sitarist performing and teaching North Indian classical music in Washington, DC. Chapter four uncovers some overarching themes on improvisation, which I see as philosophical undercurrent within this and many other traditional musics. Improvisation is an individualized form of musical and social expression that displays the artist's talent as well as their grasp of the

traditions in which they are improvising. Within Chapter four I also analyze two recordings of Laila's *Raga Charukesi* in order to highlight the different approaches she takes with each *raga*. Each chapter connects to three different views of individuality within the North Indian classical tradition. They also follow the process I took in order to reach my current passion for and understanding of the music and the musicians.

Review of Relevant Literature

North Indian classical music is a melodic genre centered on the connection between musicians trained in an oral tradition and the performance of *raga*. Within the North Indian classical genre there are two significant areas of performance: vocal and instrumental. *Drupad*, *khyāl*, and *thumrī* are the three main vocal genres of Hindustani classical music.³ The instrumental genres within North Indian classical music are classified by the specific instrument used to render *ragas*. For example, a sitarist is trained to learn the same *ragas* as a vocalist but the technique required to play the *raga* identifies the instrumentalist as just that, performing a particular style but not a separate genre. Instrumental performers and teachers of the North Indian classical music will often compare the beauty of the instrument to that of the voice. Each instrument, including a percussive instrument such as *tabla*, is used to produce pure sound, a living sound, and a sound that emulates the voice and vocal

³ Known as the oldest genre of vocal performance, “the tradition of *dhrupad* includes a body of musical knowledge, comprising a repertory of melodic modes (*ragas*) and compositions, and a particular style of rendering that repertory in performance” (Widdess 2004, xxiii). *Khyāl* is one of most popular forms of vocal genre in North Indian classical music known for being highly improvisatory allowing “its performers the greatest opportunity and also the greatest challenge to display the depth and breadth of their musical knowledge and skills” (Wade 1997, 11). *Thumrī* “can be regarded as the most popular genre of Hindustani (North Indian) semi-classical music, outranked in the field of Hindustani classical music as a whole only by *khyāl*” (Manuel 1989, ix).

movements. In Allyn Miner's *Sitar and Sarod in the 18th and 19th Centuries* she elaborates on this idea providing an in-depth account of the transference of musical knowledge between vocalist and instrumentalist:

Dhrupad tradition tells us that exchange between vocal music and the *bin* [early version of the sitar] was an ongoing process, the influences moving in both directions. While the *bin* tried to adopt vocal patterns, the voice also took ideas from instrumental techniques⁴ (Miner 1993, 162).

For the purposes of this thesis project my classification of North Indian classical music relates to the instrumental genre performed on sitar; however, I have not limited my initial understanding of the music to solo sitar performance. Instead, I have immersed myself in the scholarly work produced by ethnomusicologists and Indian musicologists written in English and published within the past hundred years. While researching this genre of music through texts about the music, I learned what aspects of the musical tradition had been explored before me and created my project with the hopes to add to the ethnomusicological dialogue. In addition to Laila's personal influence, I also experienced the music through attendance at concerts and lectures by those within the musical community. I was ultimately able to develop a stronger understanding of the musical production and individuality associated with North Indian classical music by working with a professional sitarist living in my area.

The past several decades have been especially fruitful for ethnomusicological scholarship on North Indian classical music. Bonnie Wade (1972, 1979, 1984), Nazir

⁴ This relationship between the voice and instrument is seen as an intrinsic aspect of musical training for students in this tradition. Although I will not be focusing on this close relationship between the voice and instrument specifically, it is worth noting the aural necessities that each performer must master before attempted to understand and render *raga*.

Jairazbhoy (1971, 1975), Allyn Miner (1993), Stephen Slawek (1987), Daniel Neuman (1980, 1985), Charles Capwell (1986), Regula Qureshi (1987, 1990, 1997, 2000), Martin Clayton (2008), and Richard Widdess (1995, 2000) are some of the main scholars who have dedicated their lives to studying the intricacies of the musical structures and traditions within India. Focuses range from the social implications surrounding Indian musicians, and the movement and place of Indian musicians and their audience, to musical analysis and the many complications that arise from transcription and analysis. Other scholarly undertakings include synthesis of the history and traditions found in a particular geographical region of North India and a significant amount of work has been published on the traditions of a musical *gharanas*, or musical families from which *raga* theory continues and is performed. Additionally, there have been serious endeavors to index the literature written on North Indian classical music in collective texts such as *The Garland Encyclopedia Volume 5: South Asia: The Indian Subcontinent*, the *New Grove Dictionary of Music*, and Nazir Ali Jairazbhoy chapter on India in *Ethnomusicology: Historical and Regional Studies*. These large collections provide overall information on each major aspect of the musical genre's of Hindustani classical music by top scholars in the field of ethnomusicology. I used a combination of these readings to ground my understanding of North Indian classical music, separating them into three specific areas of scholarship.

The first and the most important research I relied on to ground my work throughout this thesis can simply be termed "Music in India." The texts within this section include not only titles that directly refer to "music in India," or some variation

such as Wasantha Singh's *Musical India*, in their titles, but also writings that track musical growth and cultural development of the classical music tradition throughout India's history. The second area of focus is termed "Raga Indices": this self-explanatory category consists of work by authors who analyze *ragas*. Classification of *ragas* is one of the most technical areas of literature surrounding North Indian classical music, one that combines musical transcription with musical history of Hindustani music. The last area of research is additional category of influential ethnomusicological writings that range widely in their focus.

Music in India

India has a long history of writings on music, beginning with the chapters on music in the *Natyasastra*, which has been dated variously from the 2nd century BC to the 5th century AD. (Jairazbhoy 1993, 275)

In *The Music of Hindostan*, A.H. Fox Strangways merges historical background, his personal account of music in North India as he wrestles with his understanding over his liking of the music, and the differences that may or may not be present in the arguments between the two. Fox Strangways mainly cites his observations made during his own personal travels throughout India, and his observations of vocal singers.⁵ He analyzes the differences in the idea of history between Indians and Europeans, philosophizing about the level of comfort Western audiences have with the concept of newness within a cultural context compared to the strangeness and unknown of outside cultures. Strangways devotes the main body of

⁵ In his first chapter, Fox Strangways narrates his "musical experiences during a tour through India extending over half a dozen months of 1910-11. The route, determined by other than musical reasons, lay through the Central Provinces, Madras, Bangalore, Mysore, Trichur (exhibition), Travancore, Tanjor, Calcutta, Allahabad (exhibition), Dehra Dun, Lahore, Jhelum, Bhavnagar, Poona."

the book to an ingredient list of the components of Hindustani music. Devoting individual chapters to *raga*, grace (as related to expression), *tala*, form, and melody, and providing detailed transcriptions of each musical concept he heard and experienced, Fox Strangways solidifies the importance of his text within the literature published at the beginning of the twentieth century. His interactions with musicians—mainly amateur but also some professional—during his travels to India, and his ability to transcribe and record as much music as he did support both the relevance of and praise for this text.⁶ It also provided one of the main starting points for Western thinkers, ethnomusicologists, to challenge, explore, and listen to Hindustani classical music.

Where Fox Strangways compared the musical style of North India to dialect, with percussive consonants and flowing vowels suggesting that “it may be predicted that the music will remain metrical rather than rhythmical, vocal rather than instrumental, and individual rather than concerted” (Fox Strangways 1911, 14), O. Gosvami presents music as a person whose lifeline develops and becomes more and more complicated over time. In *The Story of Indian Music*, Gosvami devotes chapters to “The Toddler,” “The Prattler,” and “The Charmer,” in which he unravels the history of the music as well as the development of *raga* theory. By chapter seven, when the musical entity of India is fully formed, Gosvami adds detail and structure to this entity in his section on *raga* analysis by fleshing out the importance of musical embellishments and ornamentations, *rasa*, various times of day dedicated to specific

⁶ Most of the praise expressed for Fox Strangways’ contribution to the ethnomusicological world can be found in Martin Clayton’s “A.H. Fox Strangways and *The Music of Hindostan*: Revisiting Historical Field Recording.”

ragas, the drone and the pulse of the music. Gosvami's text also provides resources for future investigation as well as an index of traditional instruments.

Peggy Holroyde, Wasantha Singh, Bonnie Wade, and Daniel M. Neuman all follow a similar pattern in their individual books. Differences include Wade's inclusion of the music listener in her discussion and understanding of the musical landscape in India in *Music in India: The Classical Traditions*. In her description of a folk ballad she describes how "the performers of the music are integral to the story; the listener is central to the story; and the intense listening situation is important to the outcome" (Wade 1979, 9). Audience knowledge and participation are some of the most notable aspects of the performance practice of North Indian classical music. In the exchange for the performers presenting their musical knowledge, the audience responds with praise in the form of verbal shouts or simply by tapping out the *tala*. The flow between musician and audience—the listening community—is what has carried this tradition through the centuries.

Wade focuses on a range of issues and subjects in her works on Indian music and can easily be said to be one of the most important scholars teaching and continuing to write about North Indian classical music. In her book *Khyāl* she includes a detailed description of notation of *ragas* and specific aspects of *ragas*, using Western notation as well as Hindustani (northern) and Carnatic (southern) notation. Although she cites most of the work produced by ethnomusicologists at the time of her publication, 1979, she neglects Wasantha Singh's *Musical India*, which provides one of the most detailed histories and musical deconstructions of *raga*. Singh points out the microtonal difference that can be heard in a soloist's work, and each rhythmic

cycle the percussionist must master before accompanying any other musician. In his introduction, Singh states that "the object of this book is to elucidate the philosophical and idealistic aspects that are found in the musical culture of India, the backbone of this ancient nation, which has contributed more than her share towards out present civilization" (Singh 1975, ix). In his writing he identifies and transcribes the necessary ingredients that create not only the musical form of the *raga*, but also the *rasa*, the emotional aspect that, a crucial element for most if not all performers of this traditional music, required for the music to be considered at the deepest possible level.

Emmie Te Nijenhuis and Peggy Holroyde both add to this body of work I am categorizing as "Music in India" by providing historical background and aesthetic qualities of *ragas*. Daniel M. Neuman's book *The Life of Music in North India* (1980) is continually cited as a critical text for scholarly understanding of music in India. Along with the typical history of musical analysis the previous authors have touched on in various ways, Neuman provides an ethnomusicological account of being a musician in North India, what he calls an "anthropological account of Hindustani music culture, with the inaudible yet ever-present background of the music itself" (Neuman 1980, 11). Most of the authors previously mentioned have spent time discussing the influence of particular musicians on their work. They have also touched upon the importance of individuals within Hindustani culture. For example, Gosvami provides a history of court musicians playing for the *maharajas* in India. While Bonnie Wade brings her interactions with her teachers to the forefront of her study of vocal music in India in a number of her texts, Daniel Neuman focuses

instead on the social interactions between musicians, both professional and amateur, and their standing within their musical circles as well as in the larger societal context. Assigning roles to the different instrumental and vocal ensembles, Neuman goes into great detail portraying the interconnectedness of North Indian classical music.

Neuman also provides a detailed account of his survey and research within specific *gharanas*—musical families—created to establish social relevance as well as the passing on of nuances specific to a *guru* practiced in the musical tradition. Arguing that *gharanas* represent control and authority over aspects of the classical tradition, he researches the history of several well-known *gharanas* including the Gwalior *gharana* which “is related to the founder of the Seheswan *gharana*, Inayat Khan, the Kirana *gharana*, Bande Ali Kang and the Dagar family (which is conventionally not termed a *gharana*) through the brother founders, Bahram Khan and Haider Khan” (ibid, 152). The complex and seemingly overly detailed family trees are ways of thinking for Indian classical musicians. These *gharanas* represent musical lineages as well as actual familial ones and will be explored in chapter three of this thesis.

Raga Indices

There are many catalogues of *ragas* and *raga* structure that were left untouched during my research process, mostly due to my lack of reading knowledge of Hindi. The texts I did manage to locate and work with focus on *raga* structure, seasons for specific *ragas*, and comparisons between well known *ragas*. Amiya Nath Sanyal’s 1959 work discusses *raga* design. The discussion of the importance of certain notes within the *raga* over others, technical classifications for the *ragas* that

are well-known among musicians and overall principles of *raga* classification prove this text to be quite helpful to a new student of *raga* and of North Indian classical music on a broader level. Sanyal also creates her own notational organization to stress the complexities heard the music.

Nazir Jairazbhoy provides an ethnomusicological account of the classical music tradition within North India as well as extensively notating elements of *ragas* such as the *sruti* or microtonal system but he also dedicates a main section of his book (1971) to transcriptions of *alaps*. He also creates what may be compared to the Western circle of 5ths: what he calls the “circle of *thaats*” that creatively displays the “pentatonic derivatives” helping to center the main pitch on other supportive pitches throughout *raga* performance.

Three other indices make up the main readings in this section, Narendra Kumar Bose’s *Melodic Types of Hindustan: A Scientific Interpretation of the Raga System of Northern India* (1960), Patrick Moutal’s *A Comparative Study of Selected Hindustani Ragas* (1991), and Alain Daniélou’s *The Ragas of Northern Indian Music* (1997). Each text focused on the microtonal system, scale system of *ragas*, and classification groups for *ragas*. These texts are some of the many that have been written, and prove useful in an ethnomusicological setting as reference when listening to *ragas* and attempting to find the *raga* within the actual performance. The notational system and basic terminology used in these texts also provides a strong foundation for ethnomusicologists hoping to interact with musicians practiced in North Indian classical music.

Additional Ethnomusicological Contributions

This final section of the review touches on the work ethnomusicologists have accomplished with regard to North Indian classical music, and how that work has expanded our understanding of this traditional style of music. As part of the Oxford University Press series “Expressing Music, Expressing Culture,” George Ruckert created a “how to” guide to Hindustani music (2004). By use of the accompanying CD, Ruckert teaches rhythmic styles, and parts of Hindustani music (*alap*, *jor*, and *gat*), which allows the reader to hear the music instead of just reading about it. He also provides musical clips of each of the traditional instruments used to play Hindustani music, again providing the reader with a sonic context for the images often linked with genres of this tradition.

James Sadler Hamilton (1989) focuses in on the most well-known instrument, aside from the voice, linked to North Indian music. He charts the history of the “morphology” of the long-bodied lute that influenced the modern sitar design. Using the Hornbostel-Sachs classification system, Hamilton maps out the regions of India, Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan noting the changes and influences each different lute had on other lute styles. A new addition he adds to ethnomusicological data on North Indian classical instrumentation is the inclusion of detailed illustrations of these different lutes; specifically sitar body changes, but also the pegs that are used in tuning of the seven-stringed sitar.

Four years after James Hamilton’s book was published, Allyn Miner’s similarly themed work, *Sitar and Sarod in the 18th and 19th Centuries* (1993), was

published. Miner, one of the leading scholars on these instruments as they connect to North Indian classical music and also the traditional music of North India on a larger scale, focuses on the height of popularity and acceptance of the sitar and *sarod*.

Miner uses primary source material from some of the first Western accounts of sitar music in India, instead of sketching the sitar she provides different stills including Slovyns et al.'s portraits from their "Musical Instruments of Northern India" collection, and a number of artistic works housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum in Kensington, UK.

Regula Qureshi finishes up this list of ethnomusicological thinkers who have provided groundbreaking work in the study of North Indian classical music in the past few decades. Qureshi's work had a large influence over my entire thinking about Hindustani music and how to approach and understand the traditional, oral transmission of musical knowledge. Her work with the "Master Musicians of India" (2007) follows the lives of three hereditary *sarangi* players from Delhi and her interactions with them as student, ethnomusicologist, interviewer, and dear friend. Her relationship with Sabri Khan, one of her main informants, and his family members is relatively reflective of my own relationship towards my teacher, Alif Laila. In order to speak with these musicians trained and entrenched in a tradition, one must be able to provide working knowledge of the music both by listening and speaking about it but also, and especially in Qureshi's case, by playing it. Although Qureshi's work on North Indian classical music extends much further than this book the information that comes out in her interviews with this musical family and the informal interview format in which her findings are presented proved central to my

study of the music and the musicians who continue the traditional style of musical transmission.⁷

⁷ See “Confronting the Social: Mode of Production and the Sublime for (Indian) Art Music, and “The Indian Sarangi: Sound of Affect, Site of Contest”.

Chapter 2: The Fundamentals of *Raga* within North Indian Classical Music

The Construction of *Raga*

The Importance of *Sam*

The instruments, teaching techniques, histories, and the enduring future of this tradition of music making work and add to the sound and structure of the *raga* in order to connect with the listening audience. A *raga* acts as a fluid musical representation flowing between philosophical and melodic interpretations. The concept of *raga*, although far from the only musical means through which North Indian classical music is transmitted, is the main ingredient in the genre. While undertaking this thesis project I focused most the melodic structure and societal meaning connected to *raga*.

Raga is the central musical concept of classical music from both Northern and Southern India. South Indian traditional music seems largely untouched by major influences from outside countries, drawing more on the musical innovations from within the region (Viswanathan and Allen 2004, 13). The lower region of India benefited more from lack of influence from surrounding regions, which allowed for saturation into the Carnatic tradition, both vocal and instrumental genres. Northern India, in contrast, has been in a musical exchange with the surrounding countries and slowly, over time, and has fused certain musical techniques and sound into the traditional form of the music. Within this varied soundscape of influence in the

Hindustani region, which refers not only to the northern region of India but also to surrounding countries, specifically Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan, the classical music tradition continues to be in flux drawing on multiple sites for musical inspiration (Qureshi 2007, 1). Thus the term Hindustani classical music links musicians to the history of the place and the birthplace of their music in North India, rather than being an identifying feature of a musician's specific faith or political standing.

This seed of North Indian classical music, the *raga*, is realized as a musical concept that is often explained in non-musical terms. Direct definitions of *raga* have been theorized and contested throughout history but there is no doubt that *raga* is one of the most important melodic concepts in the classical tradition of music in North India. Reflecting the philosophy of performance and a melodic structure; a *raga* is as individual as the artist who is performing it. Nazir Jairazbhoy illuminates the delicate nature of *raga*:

The concept of *rag* is based on the idea that certain characteristic patterns of notes evoke a heightened state of emotion. These patterns of notes are a fusion of scalar and melodic elements, and each *rag* can be described in terms of its ascending and descending lines (which may involve 'turns') as well as its characteristic melodic figures in which certain intervals are emphasized and attention is focused on particular notes. More than two hundred *ragas* are extant and each is a melodic basis for composition and improvisation. Most of the *ragas* have been in existence for several centuries and have evolved to their present form as a result of successive interpretations by generations of musicians. (Jairazbhoy 1971a, 28)

Wasantha W. Singh states similarly that "a *raga* should not be mistaken for a key because a singer uses the one pitch that best suits his voice, irrespective of how many various *ragas* he may sing" (Singh 1975, 102). Wim van der Meer adds that "to understand the psychological effect of a *raga*, it is necessary to know the inner

meaning of the notes and how their combination creates a particular effect on the mind” (Meer 1980, 217). Additionally, Peggy Holroyde states that “a *raga* is not a horizontal plane packed with dense chords travelling sideways, but moves forwards and backwards within a cone, endlessly in tension due to its own centrifugal pull” (Holroyde 1972, 250).

Although some *ragas* have the same amount of notes, the sonic shape of each *raga* varies considerably.⁸ Thus, each performance of a *raga* is unique: although the structure and flow of a particular *raga* played by a particular musician may be similar, one can only grasp a *raga* in a specific way once. There are no exact replications of *ragas* nor is that the aim when an artist is performing. A singular melodic line supported by a rhythmic and drone-like accompaniment focuses attention on the *raga* being performed and availability of movement throughout the performance of the *raga*. This melodic line is the focal point for all musicians engaged in the performance of Hindustani music: throughout the performance, the performer develops a connection between the music and the audience to the mood of the *raga*. With the drone of the *tambura* and the accompanying *tabla* line, the essence of the *raga* is experienced.

“Fundamental to *raga* theory is the distinction between *sruti*, the infinite gradations of pitch that the voice (and most Indian melodic instruments) can produce, and *svara*, the selected pitches from which scales, *ragas*, and melodies are constructed” (Widdess 1999, 67). *Sruti* is the name given to microtones, or to the microtonal divisions of the octave, most commonly twenty-two in number.

⁸ There are similarities between different *ragas* and as will be discussed in the section on *rasa* those *ragas* are grouped together, played at certain times of day or during specific seasons.

Intonation is central to the sounding of *srutis*, and to the entire genre of *raga*: the vibration of the string affects the sound of the overtone. “The total number of *srutis* in the octave, twenty-two, is only incidental, being determined by the size of the unit of measure. It did not imply that there were twenty-two tones in the octave” (Jairazbhoy 1975, 54). The struck note must be allowed to ring, and through that the *sruti* can be heard, this action is similar to listening for an overtone. Through different performance styles one may or may not hear *sruti* distinctly after each elongated phrase: some sound rarely and when they do, they energize the audience to an audible level. These *sruti* form the fundamental base upon which the notes of the *raga* can be placed leading to the formation of an entire *raga*.

Each *sruti* has its own emotional association as well, depending on how the string or voice manipulates the vibration. “The Hindus have divided the tones of their musical scale into hues and shades which are minute musical intervals or tones, called *srutis*, just as hues and shades of colors are separated into various degrees of color tones or color schemes” (Singh 1975, 38). Even though the *sruti* are not the first sounds heard in *raga* performance, they are the supporting tones that ensure the intonation and purity within the *raga*. *Sruti* become the fundamental base upon which the entire *raga* builds both in note value and in emotional content: even the smallest of vibrations in North Indian music are directly linked to an emotional connection to the music.

Immediately building upon the *sruti* the *svara*— or *svar*— are the individual scale degrees in Indian classical music. *Sadj*, *Risabh*, *Gandhar*, *Madhyam*, *Pancam*, *Dhaivat*, and *Nisad* (often shortened to Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha, and Ni) are the

Hindi names given to the seven scale degrees, or specific intervals, used in combination to create all *ragas*. In connection with the philosophy of Indian music where notes are not simply meant to be manipulated, rearranged, and memorized, the meaning behind *svara* connects deeply with an emotional attachment that adds to the meaning of *raga*. *Svara* are then not only the building blocks of the melodic structure of any *raga*, but they also build the emotional connection and meaning within each *raga*.

Different *ragas* contain different *svara*: not all *ragas* must contain all seven tones, and often it is the case that only five of the seven are employed. Specific restrictions are made with regards to the movement between intervals, depending on the *raga*, but certain inclusions are necessary to validate any combination of notes making up a *raga*. “In every *rāg* two notes, in theory, are given greater importance than the others. These notes are called *vadi*—sonant, and *samavadi*—consonant (Jairazbhoy 1971, 42).” Comparable to the tonic in Western music, *Sa* holds the main focus in *raga* and cannot be flattened or sharped, but must always remain pure and unmanipulated. It should not be assumed that there is a specific hierarchy of notes within *svara*, however because these *svara* are understood to be an organized formation of notes that make up a scale, and there are specific notes that shape the form.

The fundamental sound of any *raga*, the recognizable tones of each *raga*, and the flow of all *raga* depend on *svara*. Each *raga*'s rules and sonic restrictions limit the movement and placement of *svara* but central focus is always given to *Sa*, the tonic base for all *ragas*. An example of the upward/downward shift in the notes of

the *svara* can be heard in *Raga Dipaka*: in the ascent the third is sharped and the fifth is flattened, while in the descent the sixth is removed, and the second is flattened.

Despite the centrality of *svara* in *raga*, very little generalized research has been done on the topic in its entirety. When a scale system is studied, especially one that could fit the Western idea of a scale system relatively well, there may be a lack of communication between the ethnomusicologist and his or her test subject. Listening to each individual note played with *tambura* accompaniment builds the understanding of *raga*'s entirety.

Knowing how each note connects with the next, and the relationships between notes both ascending and descending, provides the main vocabulary for *raga* and enriches the *raga* performance for performer and listening audience. In addition to the melodic components of the *raga*, there are countless factors that go into an actual performance. The next subsections of this chapter expand upon some of the main structural and social components that I observed.

The Drone

In most instrumental *raga* performances, the first musical sound that is heard is the drone, played either by *tambura*, machine, or iPod application. After a few informal lessons on the *tambura* and through observation of several *tambura* players, I have realized the skill necessary to master this instrument, to be on stage performing and continually producing a drone with no pause can be an exhausting task. The *tambura* is the musical instrument or sounding body that provides accompaniment within both Northern and Southern classical music traditions. It provides a

continuous base of support for the melody by sounding the tonic, *Sa*, and one or two other notes within the *raga* being performed. The typical *tambura* has four metal strings, is fretless, and has resonating fibers on the bridge that extend the sound of the instrument. Held on the knee in a similar position to that of the sitarist, the *tambura* player sits cross-legged and plucks the strings the middle and index fingers, middle plucking the first of the four strings and the index finger plucking the other three. The hand is held in an upright position with fingers extending upwards and the outside of each finger being the location where skin meets string. This technique allows the strings to resonate longer and without the interruption of other fingers dampening the sound quality. In O. Gosvami's *The Story of Indian Music: Its Growth and Synthesis*, he describes the *tambura*:

The drone is not a single composite note in which are merged, besides the primes, several harmonics in the form of upper partials and combination notes. Of course the primes always predominate both the intensity and duration, especially the note of the two middle wires *Pa* and *Ma* serving as the base of the secondary note. The drone is thus a harmony engendered by the primes, their upper partials and their synthesis, the combined notes. (Gosvami 1957, 98)

Certain artists allow the sound of the *tambura* to ring within the performance space for a few minutes before performing. The moments after the performance site is quieted by the arrival of the soloist, when all that is heard is the drone of the *tambura*, signifies the moment of formal connection begins between the entire audience and the performing musicians. The artist must match the *tambura*, and likewise, "the use of the drone particularizes and strengthens the modal effect and broadens the scope of variation in the *Ragas* having structural affinities" (Gosvami 1957, 99).

Alap: Exposition of the Raga

The beginning moments of a *raga*, lasting from five minutes to the better part of an hour in some cases—particularly if the *tabla* player shows up late, which was in the case in one of the performances I observed this year—are known as *alap*. Through *alap* the performer outlines the *raga*, addressing the main notes that make up the *raga* in order to center the listening audience in the *raga*'s mood and tone, allowing both practiced musician and first time listener to connect to the sound. *Alap* is presented in a free rhythm, and is usually the slowest part of the *raga* performance; in addition, the artist tends to be repetitive in this section in order to really form the sense of the *raga* in the audience's ear. Small ornamentations and stylistic features will identify the performer's originality in the presentation of the *raga* right from the beginning of the *alap*. One does not have to hear the compositional aspect of a *raga* in order to identify the more famous North Indian classical instrumentalists and especially when working with a teacher, the student will immediately recognize his/her teacher's sound.

In the *alap*, the melodic character of the specific *raga* is explored and unlocked by the use of improvisational technique. The *alap* identifies the *raga* to the listening audience, acting as the prologue to the composition (*gat*). It is also the threshold for musical listeners to cross over into the *raga*. Experienced listeners, musicians, and students of the North Indian classical style may take an instant to recognize a particular *raga* as presented in *alap*; they flow directly over this threshold. New listeners, or even audience members who have loved Indian music all

their lives but have only experienced the *raga* in performance need time to deliberately and consciously pass over the threshold.

It is often the case that a North Indian classical concert in the DC metro area will last from two to three hours within which time two to three *ragas* are generally presented, along with the addition of a folk tune or piece that is shorter but holds special meaning for the performer. In order to sit in one space for two hours, the Western audience especially needs to be comfortable and connected. In *alap*, we are given time to process the sound of the *raga*, the shape the *raga* may take, and the basis for the hour-long performance we are about to hear. The more practiced and experienced the performer, the quicker the audience is able to connect to the sound, to be drawn into the mood of the *raga*. As a good friend and practicing North Indian musician once casually put it: “performance of *alap* is a sharing of some of that vibration and energy and mood that has been generated through practice” (personal communication).

Gharana and the Guru-Shishya Parampara

The relationship between teacher and student is known as the *guru-shishya parampara* and is, in essence, a bond between a master musician and student based on total devotion and submission to the music and the instrument through which the sound is produced. It is through this bond and the idea of this bond that surrounded my relationship with Alif Laila. My work has largely dealt with a specific musician, the background of her tradition, and the ways in which she has transformed that tradition to her current surroundings.

Throughout the history of the Hindustani classical music tradition, students were often born into a musical family practicing the art of music in the *guru-shishya* tradition, which was passed down through hereditary means by the musically gifted male members of the family (Qureshi 2007, 1). Specific musical families, such as Dagar, the lineage of Ustad Allauddin Khan, the Gwalior *gharana*, or the Atrauli *gharana*, still exist and retain respect from the musical community. These musical lineages produce specific ways to render *raga*, and have perfected certain techniques used to perform *ragas*. Essentially, it was the traditions and specific treatment of *ragas* perfected in these *gharanas* that eventually made them recognizable to other students of *raga*, and these traditions created schools of music through their bloodlines: “it is thus a compound of social feature (the membership) and cultural feature (musical style)” (Newman 1980, 146). Traditionally, families belonging to a *gharana* practiced the art of relaying musical knowledge from one generation to the next, and the music and the particular style of one *gharana* became the basis for playing, understanding, and critiquing music within the Hindustani classical style.⁹

Over time the *gharana* system has expanded to include a student base that was not necessarily connected through the blood line of the *guru*. The tradition shifted to accommodate these new students, but only so far as to welcome them into the system that was already in place: the student, though unrelated, still became a part of the *guru*'s family. This practice still remains in certain areas of India, depending on the *guru*, but with the constant influence of global ideology, the *guru-shishya* system has

⁹ The students/disciples, who were typically related by blood, spent the early years of their lives listening, leaning, and practicing with their *guru*. Serious musical training typically usually began at a very young age; a student within this musical style is able to connect the sounds of the life that surrounds him/her into the music.

had to adapt once more. A student may not be able to live with their *guru* while involved in intensive study (usually the first ten years of practice in the tradition), but the respect, the devotion and the support given to the *guru* is still expected. Much as the sitar, for example, serves as the instrument through which musicians are able to transcend themselves into the music, the *guru* acts as the instrument through which the importance, the intricacies, and the sound of the music are transferred to the student. Neuman states that “the *guru* enculturates the shishya into musical life. He transmits two elements, neither of which is available through any other medium of instruction: a body of knowledge which is both secret and esoteric, and the way a musician must lead his life. This totally musical life provides important evidence that social relations between musicians are indeed systematic. It comprehends a subculture in India which cuts across the boundaries of sex, religion, age, caste, territory, language, as well as time, yet includes all these as internal categorical distinctions” (Neuman 1980, 50).

An examination of the *guru-shishya* style of pedagogy and musical transmission raises a number of issues related to oral traditions in general. Ideas of authorship, meaning, and memory come to the forefront of analysis, and ideas of cultural connection to the music also arise. How does the relationship evoke the disciple’s connection to the music? When does the music produce an individualized meaning to the disciple? How does the *guru* transmit the musical knowledge to his or her disciples? How much self-preservation goes into the transmission of this music? These questions and many more rely on the *guru*’s position within the musical transmission. By requiring full devotion of the self to the *guru* and by allowing the

guru control over the musical, mental and physical aspects of the tradition the association can be made to a religious order. Submission to a higher power, in this case music, suggests more of a devotional requirement than a focus on humanity. The *guru* acts as the teacher to the higher consciousness, to the deepest level of sound through music, but s/he is still human, even though most students tend not to think so. Schippers addresses this point as he contextualizes the idea of the *guru* in the twenty-first century: “although it is common to think of the *guru* as a person who generates divine musicianship in his pupils as a matter of course, most *gurus* find it understandably difficult to link up to this profile” (Shippers 2007, 3).

Rarely is the entire idea of the *guru-shishya* tradition examined with anything but a supportive and welcoming embrace. One artist I worked with mentioned similarly that “Indian classical music is an oral tradition, but sometimes I think it would be more accurate to say it is a tradition of transference of power and understanding...somehow in the long history, without being written, the music has survived and takes so many different forms” (personal communication 2010).¹⁰

Rasa and Emotive Aspects

Art is impression and expression on one side and representation and communication on the other. The impressions or ideas received from the outer world after exciting, clashing or corresponding with the experience or experiences stored within are synthesized by the force of contemplative spirit (which is a cognitive force), otherwise called intuition, and ‘pass by means of either words or lines or colors or

¹⁰ The discussions I have had with musicians all support the idea that the *guru*’s role not only inspires the musical spirituality of a musician, but also inspires the way that a musician moves through the world. Students of this discipline, whether raised in a *gharana* or coming from a more Westernized community, are all devoted to North Indian classical music at an inspirational level. Their view of the music is much deeper than what the scholarship written, especially when translated into the English language can uncover.

tones imitating the joy passion or the suffering condition of the soul' becoming expression and representation. Expression is the actuality of intuition. (Gosvami 1957, 216)

The final component I examined while studying North Indian classical music and Alif Laila was *rasa*. It often seems to be the case that during a performance, especially in the moments of heightened intensity that occur within *ragas*, that the audience is lifted into a heightened level of engagement, rather than one of passive observation. It becomes visible in many of ways that the performance is an interactive experience between musicians and audience. It is as if audience members and performers alike are attuned to the knowledge that *ragas* have a history (there is a felt expansiveness and exclusiveness within *raga* performance) and an emotional attachment that can be physically felt in the course of performance. Not being able to psychologically assess the fullness of reason behind this meditative state or the “feeling” that seems to fill the venue when a professional Hindustani musician plays, I attribute it to a concept clearly linked to North Indian classical music: that is *rasa*.

Emotion, intensity, flavor, and energy are not simply terms that correlate directly with my personal experience with the music, specifically within *raga*; these are, in fact, necessary for an acceptable performance Hindustani classical music. *Raga* are meant to be performed for audiences who take part in the shape of the mood and energy depending on how verbally interactive they are with the artist and these are, for the most part, largely educated audiences with respect to the *raga* and to the music. As if the technicality and skill of the rapid note variations and memory are not impressive enough, the artist must connect others into this spiritual experience of the

raga. This feeling, this emotion, and this necessary ingredient within a *raga* is known as *rasa*:

The word *rasa* has three aspects—physical, psychological, and meta-physical. In the physical sense *rasa* is used to denote juice or essence...the second stage is that in which the psyche participates in the experience of *rasa*, when the juice of the orange is rolled on the tongue and its taste relished...here both the brain and the mind operate- the brain sends the impulse regarding the taste of juice, how delectable or otherwise it is; the mind compares and correlates past experiences and figures out the actual quality of the juice. Here *rasa* connotes flavor or taste...the third and most significant aspect is the meta-physical. Some even call it spiritual. Here *rasa* is used to connote an experience which is outside the orbit of the mundane, pragmatism self-centered ego. (Gautam 2001, 78)

Rasa can be easily connected with passion and ecstasy, neither of which is unfamiliar to the Western classical performer or listener. The differences between these two musical cultures are more numerous than has been documented and cannot be addressed within the confines of this thesis; this point is presented only to draw attention to distinctions between understandings of music. Most Western audiences can be moved by a performance simply because the musicians are emphasizing what the score denotes. In the case of a Hindustani classical audience, the emotion must be realized in order for the piece, the improvisation, and the energy level of the *raga* to stay afloat. There is no beauty without *rasa* and at the same time there is no *raga* without *rasa*.

Chapter 3: The Individual

As an ethnomusicology student exits the classroom and enters the context that houses her desired musical focus, one of her primary goals is to find a teacher. In order to understand the music and musicians performing the music, the student connects with an individual actively participating in the culture and tradition of a particular musical genre. This relationship takes time to mature and is fostered by the hardship of practice, misunderstandings, and self-conscious musical exchanges, as well as submission and dedication on the part of the student. The teacher hopefully provides patience, the technique required to master the musical instrument and musical genre, and strength, and also serves as the model for the student to follow. My student-teacher relationship with sitarist Alif Laila blossomed in such a way and ultimately led to my focus on her as a substantial part of my thesis project.

Alif Laila is a professional musician and thus spends her life performing and teaching Hindustani classical music. By looking at Alif Laila, along with the data collected about the traditions of North Indian classical music tradition examined in the previous chapter, I add to the importance of the place of the individual within an ethnomusicological setting and question the argument that our teachers are the ones who are shaping our ethnomusicological experience. I questioned the place and actions of Laila, asking her questions in formal interviews as well as in off-the-cuff discussions in moments of confusion. I wanted to know how her teaching affects the progression/appreciation of North Indian classical music, what it is that she views as the most important standards to uphold while teaching sitar in Washington, DC, how she connects to the audiences at her concerts, and how living in Washington, DC, has

changed her music, if at all. My questions were virtually unending; by the time Laila and I decided to turn our conversations into data for a Masters thesis, we had already developed a strong friendship. Her individualized experience from student to performer to teacher is presented throughout this next chapter.

Ethnomusicology and the Individual

The *World of Music* journal featured an issue on “ethnomusicology and the individual” in which six authors described and analyzed the importance of the individual within their field of study. Jonathan Stock introduces the volume by stating that “ethnomusicologists have turned to biography as a result of three trends”:

- 1) Fieldwork: we encounter and observe musical individuals, sometimes (but not always) in environments where musical individuality is a marked characteristic of the musical culture as a whole
- 2) Reappraisal of the politics of representation in ethnographic writing has encouraged us to document more closely the interactions of specific individuals
- 3) New notions of culture themselves place greater emphasis on individual role and agency, thus stimulating us to look in more length at the individual choices made by musicians and others. (Stock 2001, 1)

These trends have led to what Stock calls a “new focus of attention” on the individual: he believes that by placing ethnographic attention on the individual and focusing attention on the impact the individual has upon a musical style and history, a deeper overall understanding of the music can be reached (Stock 2001, 5). The form this attention takes in ethnomusicological literature tends to be grouped in two large houses: the ethnographic house and the biographical house. Both look at the

individual in varying ways, and through various periods of time. There seems to be a freedom within the ethnographic house to focus on a moment in a performer's life rather than on the entirety of that life, and both houses challenge the authenticity and meaning behind a musical experience by placing the individual at the center of analysis.

Musical biographies such as Timothy Rice's 1994 work on his teacher Kostadin Varimezov in *May it Fill Your Soul* prove to be exemplary examples of an ethnomusicologist documenting his teacher. Rice follows a trajectory of the study of the individual's life and music, and the history of the place where Kostadin and his wife, Todara, lived and worked comes into a more defined light. Rice explains the experience of playing Bulgarian music and the act musical creation through words of his individual teacher, and mixes with it the societal expectation through an ethnomusicologist's eyes and ears. Virginia Danielson's *"The Voice of Egypt:" Umm Kulthum, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century* (1997) covers the life of Umm Kulthum with an aim to preserving the reality of a musical star whose legacy has continued long after her death. In *Two Men and Music* (2005), Janaki Bakhle historicizes and contextualizes the work of Vishnu Narayan Nhatkhande and Vishnu Digambar Paluskar, who essentially saved and re-directed the flow of North Indian classical music and teaching techniques during the late nineteenth century. Working in a historical context, Bakhle works through the lives of these two musicians in order to shape what is now considered modern Indian classical music.

Sharing the rest of the space on an ethnomusicological bookshelf set aside for individual musicians, one will find ethnographies of individuals within larger cultural settings. David Harnish's article "A Hermeneutical Arc in the Life of Balinese Musician, I Made Lebah" (2001) adds a philosophical stance to his work with a Balinese drum and gamelan teacher, where he tried to understand how his teacher understands, learns, and teaches, music and the affects Lebah had on his world by being such a well-known and masterful musician. By using a hermeneutical arc, Harnish expands upon the idea that once a thing is learned it is forever shifted in one's perception and can only be added to. Experience adds to experience and so forth.¹¹ When music is at the center of one's life, one's being, how does that affect his daily living? Through Harnish's hermeneutical analysis, he explains Lebah's desire to share his music with everyone, native and non-native alike. By experiencing music on a much deeper level than any amateur could, Lebah opens his world to all.

In Helen Rees' article on "He Yi'an's ninety musical years," she addresses the large amount of biographical information on He, but also discusses the larger subject of musical biographies within Chinese culture. "The level of attention paid to individual musicians in Chinese writing on Chinese traditional music...runs the full gamut from hero worship and detailed biography for nationally known and ideologically prominent artist...to complete anonymity in some widely disseminated authoritative anthologies and textbooks" (Rees 2001, 45). By writing about He Yi'an, she provides an example of one musician's experience throughout life:

"through 85 tumultuous years of local and national history on China's geographical

¹¹ Harnish details Lebah's life and musical interactions as moments that add up to Lebah's entire being. He philosophizes the life of his teacher, making sense of the musical and historical progression that followed this one individual.

and cultural periphery and how his actions influenced the experience of others who came into contact with the tradition”(ibid).

“What is rarely addressed—or is taken for granted—is the (cross)cultural and social context that surrounds and informs individuals’ words and actions, not excluding the guiding hand of an interviewer and a compiler’s typical agenda” (Qureshi 2007, 5). Regula Qureshi layers biography, interviewing, and open recording to give shape to lives of several *sarangi* players living in Northern India.¹² As Qureshi lets the tape run we hear these professional *sarangi* players speaking about their histories, the most memorable moments in their musical lives, and their care for their student (Qureshi), something that impressed them enough through her playing and through her connections with these men that they allowed her to be involved in their candidness. The reader becomes a participant at Qureshi’s thread-tying ceremony—though only in part, because the sacredness of the event is a very private affair—without immediate analysis of meaning or feeling.

Collections of the world’s music continue to grow, yet the main connection to the music, often our instrumental teachers who spend the time to teach the musical technique, still resides on the margins of ethnomusicological thought and writing. As musicians and ethnomusicologists we carry personal connections to the music and to our teachers, and by transmitting the musical knowledge entrusted to us by those teachers, we are communicating with a number of musicians at one time and creating one sounding thing—the music. In his *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-One Issues and Concepts*, Nettl justifies of the importance of the individual. He states that

¹² I use this phrase “open recording” to refer to recording the environment in which the teaching/learning is taking place with an aim simply to absorb the surroundings rather than question them.

“to ethnomusicology, the rare of musical phenomenon experienced by one person in a single day or throughout a lifetime is of great interest” (Nettl 2005, 174).

The rest of this chapter focuses on an individual I have had the immense pleasure and privilege to know. There is only so much that can be said about our friendship at this time, but our relationship leaves me with a sense that our journey together has only begun and will continue to grow throughout the years.

Case Study: Teaching and Studying Sitar in the Washington, DC Metro Area

As transmitter to audience, teacher to student, soloist to accompanist, and mediator between instrument and music, the professional performer within the North Indian classical tradition affects the continuation, rate of change, and influence of the music upon the listener. The featured artist acts not only as a physical representation of the tradition (their presence and posture on stage, their traditional dress consisting of *sari* for women or *sherwani* for men, and their interactions with their accompanists throughout the performance), but also as an individual who has entered the realm of professionalism within the tradition. It is only after years of practice and submission to the teachings of one’s *guru* that an individual can be elevated to the professional level. Professional status represents the ability of the performer to re-present their *guru*’s style, often representational of an entire *gharana* lineage, while adding improvisational passages to the *raga* being presented.

A presentation of a *raga* in concert serves as a spiritual, almost meditative, experience for both performer and listener, as we explored in the section on *rasa* in the previous chapter. It also, and quite possibly more important from a scholarly

stance, connects the soloist in the moment of performance to a sonic representation of India and its culture and history.¹³ While performing and improvising in concert the soloist is calling upon years of training in order to communicate the beauty of the *raga* and the interconnectedness of that *raga* to a present, physical moment in time.

Meeting Alif

I first met Alif Laila at a small performance in the Karne Wellness Center in Windsor Mill, MD in October, 2009. A friend of mine, who was and still is one of Laila's devoted sitar students, invited me to the concert. Chairs and cushions were arranged in a small, softly lit, yoga studio that had been transformed for the concert with a small stage decorated with colorful tapestries. Alif Laila, a noted professional *sitarist*, along with the *tabla* player hired to accompany her sat at the front of the room, while the small audience sat quietly on chairs and pillows. I had no knowledge that while sitting there listening to the beautiful music on a quiet, rainy, evening, I was listening to my future teacher. She played a program consisting of two *ragas*, each taking about an hour each to render, followed by a folk song from her native Bangladesh that she sang in addition to playing it on the sitar.

I was introduced to Laila after the concert over a cup of tea, and it seemed that between her energy of playing a wonderful concert and my energy of having been a part of such a concert a connection was sparked. We spoke briefly of the music and her performance, and she asked about my musical background and was delighted to

¹³ "If I'm playing with a musician, I am not playing with a musician alone; I am playing with a tradition. I am playing with generations of what's gone before. When I approach him, I am already approaching him with the familiarity of what he represents. And having done that, that's already an icebreaker" (Zakir Hussain, *Raga Unveiled*, 1:50:00).

hear that I was classically trained in both piano and upright bass but had also chosen to expand my musical understanding by performing jazz and tango music on the bass. She was drawn to my passion for her music and my curiosity about her musical background. We discussed the feeling of the evening and special ambiance the room provided. The small warm studio seemed to be allowing for a heightened sense of spirituality and peaceful awareness throughout the concert.¹⁴ We eventually ended the conversation with the hope that we might again have the chance to speak about life and music, and possibly play music together in the future.

It was after attending that first concert of Laila's that my interest was piqued and I began my long journey towards an understanding of North Indian classical music and the musicians who were taught to perform it on a professional level. Through my exchanges with Laila, and by eventually taking on the role of her stage manager, I developed a bond that allowed me to question her music and her teaching technique, and to work through an understanding of *raga* with her. I questioned how a musician is able to grow and create an individual sound when bound to such a strict oral tradition, and Laila provided me with a direction to search out answers to such questions. Instead of becoming one of Laila's sitar students, a role that would restrict my understanding to the techniques required to play an instrument through devoting years to the development of a high quality sound from that instrument, I worked with her, and by doing so she allowed my questions, no matter how naive they might have seemed, and helped me work through a way to better listen to the music: she believes that listening is the basis for all musical understanding.

¹⁴ As an audience member I remember feeling as if we were all somehow transported into a meditative space together through the sound of her sitar.

After working with her as her stage manager it became apparent that our friendship was developing into a very special connection. Laila guided my understanding of her music by introducing me to her accompanying musicians at each performance, inviting me to special performances of musicians who were on tour in the United States from India, and eventually allowing me to record our formal interviews: she entrusted her personalized experience within North Indian classical tradition to me. Through our serious interaction on the day of performances, when I was part of the production of her performance, as well as in conversations that lasted long into the night on the issues of music, spirituality, art, religion, love, and our connection to nature, Laila opened my eyes and my ears to the grandness of Hindustani music.¹⁵ She has connected me to artists from all over the world and aided in my personal understanding through interviews, casual conversation and sound meditation.

Methodology

When Laila and I decided to turn our work, conversations, and dinners into formal interviews that would eventually become the basis for my Master's thesis, she left the details up to me. In most of her interactions with others she acts very much as an artist, offering up the essential kernels of sound information and leaving the overall logistics to those in more managerial positions. At the beginning of each of these formal interviews, she acted in a very similar manner, answering only the questions posed. As we became more and more familiar with the formal interview

¹⁵ Laila often draws on her education as an artist as aiding to her passion for *sitar*. She received her Bachelor's degree from the College of Fine Arts in Dhaka, Bangladesh, with a focus on watercolor.

process, however, our interviews turned into in-depth conversations on each topic. Laila would in turn ask me what I thought of particular topics, and instead of restricting our roles as interviewer and interviewee. I embraced this format and ended up collecting quite a lot of information from Laila's life and music, keeping our interviews on track but allowing some freedom in our exchanges. As a strong and caring person, Alif Laila has translated much of her life, her dreams, and her musical understanding for me, and I believe that through our time together we have created a bond that will last a lifetime.

The main interest that sustained my work with Alif Laila was in capturing a moment in a musician's life in order to collect as much information as possible on her musical tradition and how she translated that tradition for a wider audience through performance and teaching. Although Alif Laila is not yet regarded as a true *guru* by the Hindustani classical community, her musical ambition and performance circuit have significantly grown in the past several years proving that she is still growing and reaching for that level of musical perfection. Her musical context extends to India, her native Bangladesh, Europe, and the United States, where she collaborates with professional *tabla* players and other instrumentalists belonging to the North Indian classical tradition. She has also extended her musical collaborations to include jazz musicians, electro-acoustic composers, and film composers.¹⁶ One of the main reasons I think our relationship has flourished is because of her idea of the connectivity of all musics and musicians. She explained to me once, with respect to my place in her music, that:

¹⁶ Laila just had the formal release of her newest project: "I Am a River," a DVD that features her artwork with background *sitar* music accompanied by Tanmoy Bose on *tabla* and Bernhard Ullrich on saxophone.

We are all going for the center but we are in a different place on the Earth. We are all aware of the high energy. To me it is a great joy and very impressive the way you are at this age you are trying to understand the other path. I don't have to teach you anything, the only thing I have to teach you are just a few words. You already know a lot. I am delighted because that proves that all music is the same. We are all trying to reach that musical center in different forms. You are very receptive, very sensitive, and perceptive but because of your ethnomusicological choice your mind is much more open than a classical violin player.

I proved that I was truly interested in the music she performs and because of that Laila accepted me in the role of student and became quite candid about her personal experiences during performances and teaching lessons, and just by living as a professional female sitarist in this world. It is precisely this openness that caused me to make her a central aspect of this thesis project.

I organized and separated interviews to focus on three areas of Laila's life and music that seemed to hold the most importance: the structure of her performances, her pedagogical technique when teaching in her studio in Bethesda, MD, and her personal view of the meaning behind her music—especially *raga* technique. I drew inspiration from Timothy Rice's model of time, space, and metaphor in questioning Laila's modern adaptations of her traditional teaching style. My questions about her pedagogical approach allowed her to define her stance in the tradition. I wanted to find out if she saw herself as a *guru* and how important the traditions of respect and devotion to the music were in her expectations for her Western and Westernized students. How did she adapt her teaching technique to fit within the one-or-two hour lessons with her students? What did she expect, with regard to the musical tradition she was raised in, from her students?

Rice's analysis of metaphor's ability to "make claims about the nature of music and that bring music closer to other domains of human experience" added to my understanding of Laila's experience as a musician as well as the way in which she takes influence from the world around her and incorporates it into her musical world (Rice 2003, 159). I drew on Rice's idea of the shared, yet abstract, space occupied by musicians and the ethnomusicologists studying them.¹⁷ The geographical distance between Laila's apartment and my own is approximately ten miles: we share a world, yet our musical encounters and daily lives are very different. How does this affect our musical interactions? How does the close distance between us, and accessibility to her music, affect my learning relationship and her willingness to taking me on as a student?

The large majority of my information was obtained through formal interview sessions lasting between one-and-a half and two hours at least once a month. Interviews were usually based around a general theme (e.g., pedagogical techniques, gender issues, musical theory, connection through music) and almost always evolved into a sharing of ideas around certain questions that were asked. During formal interviews Laila took it upon herself not to answer the questions as directly and curtly as possible, but instead to teach me about this music through her answers. Admiring me as her student, she took time when connecting her theory and musical history to my current understanding of North Indian classical music, which grew as our

¹⁷ I was particularly influenced by Rice's statement that "the space of musical experience and ethnography I am proposing here is shared, in structure at least, by us all; it is the conceptual space in which musical ethnography and music experience co-occur for both scholars, musicians, and audiences and in that limited sense is postmodern. It is the space in which scholars, musicians, and audiences know the passage of time, savor music's differing essences, meanings, and metaphoric connections to other domains of culture, and feel the gradations of power as we move (if at times only conceptually) from locale to locale." (Rice 2003, 173-174).

interviews and my academic explorations deepened. My observations, musical connections, and influences between the music and musician were three themes of participation I tried to keep in the forefront of my mind throughout my study.

The flow of our interviews became quite natural and comfortable for both of us, always beginning with my introduction to the overall thematic shape I wanted each interview to form. Two significant interviews that we had together, both lasting over an hour, are used in this thesis. The first of these two interviews focused on Laila's musical background, her ideas, and the meanings associated with some of the basic but complex ideas related to her music (her musical philosophy). For example one of the first questions I asked her was, "What is a *raga/raag*?" I also asked her about the challenges she faces teaching to Western/Westernized students, and the difference she observes between her own musical education and the one she imparts upon her students. Our second interview covered the idea of Laila's work here in the DC metropolitan area, issues that arise from her becoming a professional female *sitarist* and questions about her interactions with her accompanying musicians as well as her audience. I asked questions: Do you deal with audience expectations at all? Do you know who will be in the audience, maybe for a certain concert a larger Indian community is expected?

I was able to work through certain aspects of Hindustani music with a musician who has dedicated her entire life to the musical tradition. This strengthened my bond with Laila, and she was also amazed at some of the questions I posed and my overall eagerness about the music, but it also opened my mind to an interrelated

philosophy of music and how the individual musicians factor into our lives and are adding to the overall knowledge of music within the ethnomusicological community.

Field Sites

While in Laila's home music studio, I sat in on a few lessons with her students and focused on how she transmits the form and meaning behind the music and instrument to a student, introducing them to the musical techniques and customs. With verbal permission from both student and teacher, I sat quietly in the background and tried to remain as still as possible so as not disturb the student or make either the student or Laila more self-conscious than usual within the lesson. It was in this studio that I also conducted my formal interviews with Laila. Instead of interviewing Laila on "my turf"—somewhere where I was most comfortable—or in a public place where I would have to battle added distractions, I interviewed Laila where she was most comfortable. Her studio provides a space that is her own, disconnected from the outside world. The main room she teaches in contains two chairs, a low table, and several rugs and pillows for her students to sit on during lessons. Surrounded by her artwork, her two beloved sitars, and other influences from her life, Alif would draw from her surroundings to put certain musical concepts into practice. She used her tangible art work to describe her intangible art.

At the concert performances I was often appointed by Laila to the role of videographer or assistant sound technician. She made sure that there was a video recording made of each performance she gave, and would often post clips on her blog. She trusted me to maintain the balance levels of the sitar, *tabla*, and *tambura* in some of the various venues she performed in. Knowing that I had a musician's ear

and was familiar with her sound and her instrument, she often talked to the sound technician ahead of time and had me sit with him/her. This reassured Laila that her sound was understood. When able to simply watch Alif Laila's performances I would often document the audience (size, diversity, and interaction with the music) as well as musical interaction between different players. The length of concerts, attire, level of respect for performer, and the overall affect of what is going on while the music was is being played have shaped my study of the concert performances.

Meeting with Laila at her house, we often began our time together in a friendly manner, exchanging life updates, drinking tea and eating cookies (she knew that I loved sweets). We would often discuss past concerts or upcoming performances, focusing on what aspects really worked in a previous concert and which should be avoided in upcoming ones. After a while we would both ready ourselves for the formal interviews. In these interviews I would introduce the general theme, so that she would be comfortable and have some talking points generating in her mind, and then we would sit and proceed with the knowledge-sharing process. I used an Edirol recorder to capture our conversations, allowing Laila to be freer with her words and our flow of dialogue to move more fluidly.¹⁸ When Laila speaks about music, especially about her music and her tradition, she requires attention to her words yet at the same time needs to know that the flow of exchange is more than one-way. With the aid of the recording device we would often attempt to solve issues of how to put into words what she does with certain aspects of her music. At times we ended up coming to similar understandings at the same time: I was able to elaborate

¹⁸ We first tried interviews without recording devices and we both spoke so fast the dialogue would suffer because I had to stop and write everything down.

on an idea and with that she went deeper into detail on a given topic because she was feeding off of my engagement and knew that I was not just interviewing her for the sake of the interview, but using the information she provided to understand the music. Her words are presented in segments within the ethnography below.

Alif Laila

Upon attending one of Alif Laila's concerts in the United States one will most likely hear the host introduce her as follows:

Alif Laila was born and raised in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Her connection with the arts was very deep since early childhood. After initial training in vocal music, she was eventually inspired to learn the sitar by her mother, Shehida in Dhaka, Bangladesh. She was trained on a "one to one" basis in the techniques and compositions of the classical music by Ustad Mir Qasem Khan, nephew of Ustad Allauddin Khan, founder of the Senia Maihar School of music. She was fortunate to receive guidance from teachers like Partha Chatterjee and Krishna Bhatt and blessings from Ustad Ali Akbar Khan. She has performed extensively in many prestigious venues in Bangladesh, India and the USA. World renowned tabla artists like Pandit Anindo Chatterjee, Ustad Taari Khan have recorded with her. In 2007 her DVD 'Hridayaragam' was presented at The Smithsonian. She has recently recorded another DVD, Strings of Resonance, presenting the Indian Classical music as a mirror of the heritage of the land. With devotion and dedication Alif embraces the sitar as the instrument of her soul. (Laila 2012)

Alif Laila spent eight years of her childhood under the guidance of her first teacher and main *guru*, Ustad Mir Qasem Khan, nephew of the renowned *sarod* player Ustad Allauddin Khan. She remembers that Qasem Khan "used to come to my house in Dhaka...first he would come and we would have tea in the garden, sit out in the garden, calm down, and then come inside. It was a very long process; the whole evening would go like that. A tabla player would come, every time I had a lesson a tabla player would come and play with my practice. They were long evenings of beautiful time." Her sitar practice began in a group setting for a short time until Khan

and Laila's mother realized her potential with the instrument. She then became an exclusive student of Khan in the traditional *guru-shishya parampara*.

After years of studying with Khan and pursuing sitar performance in Bangladesh, Laila traveled for a while with her husband and two young children. Her husband found a permanent job in the United States and the family moved to the East Coast twenty or so years ago. Sacrificing her music to maintain her home and raise her children, the sitar sat in the background for most of Laila's adult life, although she would awake at three AM some mornings in order to practice without being bothered by the world around her. Her love for sitar deepened in these years of motherhood and now that her children are adults and she is a free and independent woman, considering herself a true American, her passion and professional appearance is soaring in the Washington, DC metropolitan region as well as abroad.¹⁹

Ethnography

Ethnographer, social anthropologist, and media expert Danah Boyd's paper presentation at the 2007 Society for Social Studies of Science (4S) conference began with the idea that "at its most surface level, ethnography is about writing culture. In practice, it's about diving into a particular culture and working to understand that culture on its own terms, interpreting signals to understand underlying signs" (Boyd 2007). Although my work focuses on one individual, rather than an entire culture, Boyd's geographical framework and the borders of that framework challenge the individual to remain within a tradition while sharing it in a modern context. Over the

¹⁹ Alif Laila was the featured artist at the Bangladeshi Embassy this Spring, in celebration of forty years of prosperity between Bangladesh and the United States. As stage manager for the event, I was privileged to see my teacher presented with such an honor.

past year, my explorations in North Indian classical performance have taken me up the East Coast rather extensively (attending performances in New York City; Oneonta, NY; Providence, RI, etc), and my direct link to the music and my teacher (and my informant in many ways) has become very important to me. Our physical location frames us in a global city where one is able to interact with people from all over the world in several different contexts, a central context being the arts. Through personal connection we have developed our communication and connection to the music.

Laila is framed within the DC metropolitan area and DC is her base of operation and her local environment. Although she travels to Europe, Bangladesh, and India throughout the year, her home is here in Washington, DC, and she has explained that she identifies as an American as well as a Bengali woman. I saw, and continue to see, Laila as a connection between Indian classical music and the West. She performs her tradition onstage with prominent *tabla* accompanists living in the region. She translates traditional concepts related to sitar and Hindustani classical music in her home studio in a way that connects to her modern, westernized student base. Her ideas about music, however, blend the tradition's expectations with her own musical theory and her own musical meaning. She relies on her historical background, her strict practice techniques, and her unwavering musical theory while creating new collaborations with artists.

Our first formal interview challenged the strength of our relationship. I asked Laila "what is *raga*?" and received a direct answer. Such a question can never be answered fully, and if Laila felt that I was in any way uncommitted or just looking for

an easy answer she would not answer that question at all. By asking this question at the start of the formal interview process, I tested our relationship. The subsequent section follows our conversation:

There are many technical and very historical definitions and definitely the Pundits and the *gurus* who have, you know, endless knowledge have described it in a more structured way, in a more analytical and logical way, but I would say to me what is a raga in my experience its like traveling for some time, in a mood, with some few notes that are composed to create that mood/melody and you are travelling with it as if you are going through from this world to another world, an endless experience. A raga will take you from this earth somewhere else and the raga has its mood. So you are travelling in a mood, a vibration, as if riding a flying horse. The raga takes you and to get to that level it takes about a lifetime, almost, you are trying to get that basically. A raga is something to yearn for, there are few notes, there's a structure, there's a mood, there's a character in that, there's a vibration. So each raga takes you through the universe in different ways. It has a very definite mood about it and then the speed, the way you start it, the slower speed will tell you something then it becomes more and you experience something else in the same rag. So different experiences depending on how you are playing the melody, in structure, and of course respecting it fully and really paying full devotion to that experience, to that raga, to that mood in that moment.

Me: And so, it changes every time essentially because of that, but the raga itself comes, not in the sense of a package, but it comes with a mood association for every raga. So, before you even play it, when you think about putting it on your program or when you think about teaching it to your student, you have this mood in mind. How do you change your mindset in order to match the mood of the raga? What is the preparation you put yourself through?

Laila: If it is a performance based question then you look into it in a way of what would you like the performance to be like. You choose a raga that will match that scenario, who will be attending the concert and it could be presented in so many infinite ways. So you really do have to kind of create your own kind of mood and connection to each raga. Each raga you can play in it thousands of ways, infinite ways, details, so you choose it in that way, the time of the day, the people who are coming, where the venue is: is it up on a mountain, is it in a little room, is it in a big hall? So, yes I think about it and devote, silently connect with it two or three days earlier before the performance. And I generally, there are sometimes the mood might change there are lots of Indian performers, I'm sure you've heard, that they don't plan out their programs, but it's a little different for me, I am in the West and a lot

of time the programs are written way before and I don't want to jump around too much so I've gotten into the habit of actually disciplining myself and if I'm performing, in a formal performance, if the raga is already chosen, I try to stick to it, very seldom do I switch it. It is almost like you are exhibiting something, you know what the people are coming for before the performance begins.

Observing her social and musical interactions on the day of a performance before the concert (i.e., the time she spends setting up a performance space to aesthetically match the look she has in mind for the space, or the communications between her and her *tabla* and *tambura* accompanists) allowed me time to develop a myriad of questions surrounding her social status as such a performer. These questions addressed concert order (how she decides the order of the *ragas* she presents in order to maintain a steady flow throughout the performance), the professional level of the *tabla* accompanist she hired for the event, the choice of concert venue, and the routine (if any) she follows in order to prepare herself for a presentation of *raga* in concert.

Laila would always comment about how her *sari* represented the *ragas* she was playing during the performance. Everything seemed so planned by the time of the performance, each performance seemed to have a particular theme and the two or three *ragas* she would perform during a given concert seemed to reflect that theme not only to the musicians performing but also to the audience engaging with the sound. Working as her stage manager I began to realize that she had taken time to match her mood, outfit, and conversation with the audience to the *ragas*. These observations led to questions of planning *ragas*, how long ahead of time she decided what she would be sharing with the audience in a rendering, and how she prepared for the performance on the day of the concert. I had experienced concerts by world-

renowned Hindustani instrumentalists where there was no printed program and there seemed to be no preparation ahead of time for the *ragas* that were performed: did Laila ever make snap decisions on stage with regard to her programs? How far in advance was the organization of the concert arranged? The following is a transcription of our interview on the subject.

Me: What is the organizational style of your programs; this is something I have always wanted to know? The flow of each raga is so beautiful that you can't help but know that it was hopefully planned in advance or at least thought of in advance, the transition between one to the other, the mood that you present in your first raga and the transition from that to whatever the next one is going to be. I'm wondering, from the thousands of options you have, how do you go about organizing a program each time?

Laila: I think about what kind of a journey I will let my audience to have. What would I imagine? The rhythmic part is important.

Me: Ah yes, the laya, the tala.

Laila: Yes, I can present the same raga in a completely different mood if I want to take the audience on a different ride, say carousel ride, and I'm the person who is controlling the speed. Each day it will be different, each program. So I have to decide what type of ride am I going to take the audience on and I have to plan that. Basically, Raag Yaman, which is a very serious raga, I can really start in a very different way, but I would not do that sometimes because I know that that will be overwhelming for some people in a certain gathering, in some other maybe I will, so I choose tempo, or a tala, which will be much more appropriate which will be easier for them to grasp. Wherever I think it is appropriate I change the composition to that.

Me: And that, then, involves direct communication between you and the tabla player; because you let him know what the speed of each will be.

Laila: Of course, because I am the main person and the tabla is helping me artistically and also musically, portraying what I am trying to portray. The tabla is a great element which helps me to portray what I'm portraying. Imagine how sensitive the tabla player has to be and how artistic! The tabla player has to be absolutely focused and my person, my spirit.

Me: Yes, and on your subtleties in your performance. Bass players act similarly in performance, you have to be aware of everyone who is playing because something could change in an instant and the bass player has to support that, you feel it. I've

noticed a number of times you have steer it, very tiny subtleties, and some are faster than others at picking up the change but they do realize it and move with you.

Laila: Yes, and I choose tabla players who I love and they know Laila is going to do these things and they are also very very cooperative, very nice, you know, they are wonderful. I choose musicians, the tabla players based on their sensitivities and professionalism.

Me: Well that moves us beautifully into playing with others and the balance and the unbalance of it. One idea that I am interested in is the collaboration and the other is the expectation. You, as a sitarist, are the center; you are the focus and it is often that you are able to choose your accompanist, is that usually how it works?

Laila: Yea, depending on the funding but definitely, even if there is less funding, I will still choose who is best in that category.

Me: Can the tabla player expect anything from you? How are they coming to the music, to the performance, if you can answer that? Maybe you've met this artist a couple of times, maybe you've never met, what needs to be there in order for there to be a solid musical experience?

Laila: My, my, this is a very good question, whoa, amazing question. It is so good. That is the thing, the pre-connection and the knowledge, the devotion of both the artist should be on the same level. It doesn't matter where he is living, but if I hear his music I will know. We are already connected in an infinite number of years that doesn't matter where he is, how many times I have sat with him, it is the sensitivity, the connection, the deep knowledge, the full devotion to the music is necessary in both the artists to come together. And, of course, little things will be better and better the more you sit together but still, even if you don't sit together, everything is known to us. Every nuance we know, this comes like this, this is supposed to move like that, but the tabla player has to be very sensitive. In that case I would give a whole lot of credit to the tabla player for being so receptive and so alert but his knowledge has to be very deep and very sensitive and also very receptive to the artist's music.

Me: And from the tabla players perspective, but also from your perspective as well, it comes as a featured instrumentalist, you were saying when you starting to learn sitar, a tabla player would come in. So in that moment you are experiencing and learning a raga but at the same time you have the tabla there. You are realizing how they interact, you are learning the tal. Do you know, I don't know if you'll be able to answer this, but how does it work the other way around. The tabla player, is it just through working with other instrumentalists, they have to listen to music on their own time, how do they gain the knowledge to be able to play so many different styles with so many different people.

Laila: There are different factors, it happens in a well rounded way. They have to listen to sitar, they have to listen to vocal, they have a whole lot of work to do.”

As a Western music student with the aim of traveling to India to learn the fundamentals of a traditional instrument, my expectations as a student are to be completely devoted to my teacher and his/her musical guidance throughout my lessons. As I studied more about the *guru-shishya parampara* relationship and how it is regarded as one of the most crucial elements making up the oral transmission of this music, I began to question how a traditional musician can begin to teach in this way to a westernized student.

Laila’s student base is made up of Americans, Indian-Americans, and a few Indians who have moved to the United States to pursue work in DC. These students do not live with Laila, and they do not watch her practice, as was once the custom of those students dedicated to learning this music in the traditional manner. So, I asked Laila about her interactions with her students trying to understand how much information can be given in the span of a one-or-two lesson with a student once a week.

Laila: But even to this day, when I teach, I’m living in the West I am teaching Westerners and even Indians who are here are Westernized in a way, the relationship with my students are almost the same way...in a way. As much as possible I try to create a very personal connection and each person needs personal attention with their music. Group lessons are very good also because you have people who come in that build the energy and whoever wants personal attention. If anyone stands out they can come to my home for individual traditional lessons, to build a lifelong relationship. All of the students I have had, even those who have stopped playing for some reason, are deeply connected to me.

Me: Yes, I feel that I have come to this music from a very different direction but I feel the connection. There is a musical connection with you even when you take the instruments away, one can feel that.

Laila: That is a very traditional way to look at it and every *guru*-*shishya* builds this relationship.

Me: In the traditional *guru*-*shishya*, the student themselves are entrusted to learning the music but also paying a high level of respect to their *guru*. Touching the feet, taking care of the *guru*, bringing them tea, feeding them, run errands for them, do you emphasize any sort of exchange; do your students understand that sense of the tradition?

Laila: Most students do. You would like the student to be honest and respectful to me and that is my greatest reward in a sense. The expectation is equal to whatever I am giving. It's a two way road; it is not just the student who is taking care of the teacher. I tend to think that I expect the same things as the traditional teacher but in a different form. The student is helping to make the tea and take care of teacher but the teacher is providing something that can be found or bought no where else in the world if that connection really grows. The teaching of music is actually very abstract in a way. When the teacher wants to give they can give even more if the student reciprocates in a very respectful and loving manner. Even knowledge gets blocks when that relationship is not there. It is not only in music, in every aspect of knowledge a great teacher will give more fluidly to someone who is connected to him respectfully, with love, with sincerity. I wouldn't confine this to only music, and not only to Indian classical music.

If a student asks me 'Alif can I warm up your tea?' it's just like heaven. Not that I can't but it's just so beautiful, the whole vibration changes. Not that that person has to do it every time like military rule but spontaneously, if it happens, it is very beautiful. Just that gesture, I think, really makes a huge difference to me. I would never want to impose on anyone in this society but it is just so special. Once the vibration is beautiful everything flows much better.

Me: I feel it makes sense because if they are comfortable enough to ask you if you want more tea there is guard that has gone down. Organic.

Laila: Organic, absolutely I think that is very important.

As the concerts begin, Laila is introduced by whoever hosts her performance. She follows their introduction with a personal greeting to the audience along with an introduction to the musicians who have attended to accompany her, always including a high level of praise and respect for their availability and the expertise they hold within the community. Dressed in a lavish *sari* that often seems to match the mood of her concerts, she relates the concert to a mood immediately, in order to begin to

draw the audience into the meditative state that is often welcomed at North Indian raga performance. She may use nature as her inspiration for the ragas chosen (the color of the leaves outside, the weather). At times she will draw on the inspiration of the changing seasons, since a time of change within nature also acts as a time of change for us as individuals. Laila performs late-afternoon and evening concerts, and draws on the repertoire of ragas that can be played and performed at those times. Whatever her inspiration may be for the performance, she always shares it with the audience which creates a shared space for all in attendance. As we sit there listening to her, we think of our moods related to the weather, the warmth we desired over the past couple of rainy days, or the beautiful tree we sat under admiring the colors of Fall, and we connect with Laila and her theme in a personalized way, and begin to quiet our minds from outside distractions and open our ears to the music.

During these performances I devoted much of my focus to her music, as it is a learning experience for me as a student trying to learn as much as possible from the music. I also recorded my observations of the audience during concerts. Who is in attendance (age range, demographic, student, fan, first time listener), who verbally responds after an especially virtuosic demonstration, who seems to follow the music, and how does Laila manage to interact with her audience throughout the performance? In one-on-one dialogue with Laila, I asked performance-related questions, asking Laila to elaborate on her musical growth within the Washington DC metropolitan area and her interactions with her students, in addition to the connections she creates with her listening audiences. Laila is an acting part of a larger system of traditional music that resides all over the world. As she continues to play

her music, teach her musical tradition to students, and perform (locally or internationally) she is expanding the knowledge of this system and the cultural components of which it is made up. This is not to say that when Laila performs she is performing India or what India looks and even sounds like today. She is a representation of what Indian musicians have developed over hundreds of years. Her music, her *ragas*, her physical appearance, and her communication with the audience transport those listening into a state of sonic meditation.

Me: How is it living in DC and performing in a more metropolitan environment?

Laila: In one word it's great. Because there is so much. The philosophy of music is to reach out to the world and I get the whole world in DC. That's nice, this is multicultural environment, lots of diversity, so I actually enjoy it in fact when someone tells me before a performance 'oh, we need to tell all the Indian people,' I actually get shaken up. Why do we need to tell only the Indian community, just tell all people. I love it, to be honest.

Me: So you see DC as having this sort of global community within in it?

Laila: Yes, such diversity, it's wonderful. Many types of people.

Me: Just being in this city, it is global but it is also detached from your home, and as a woman I am wondering if there is anything you've noticed not only playing as a sitarist but as a female sitarist in the performance aspect. Are you affected by gender in anyway, is that an issue?

Laila: Becoming a profession was an issue, not from the Western culture but from the Eastern, because I was not born into a musical family and I don't have the lineage. In the DC area there is a very positive, receptive feeling that I get, especially from the audience. I have always been received with warmth and love wherever I have performed but to get into the core of it is a little difficult. But here in the DC area people make me feel very special and they receive my music very beautifully and being a female, I get a lot of attention because there are very few female sitar players. They always come and ask me that question 'so we don't see much female sitar players, how come?'

Me: So they, the audience members bring it up to you?

Laila: They always bring it up and it's quite nice.

Me: I asked you last meeting when we were talking about ragas, you were saying a couple days before hand you sort of gear yourself up for the performance, you get into the mindset. So, more directly linked to that, what goes into a performance of North Indian classical music aside from the music? Taking the music away, what do you have to do before the performance?

Laila: Basically, you know, you have to be calm because performances are a real life thing and my performances depend a lot on outside elements, the sound system, the acoustics of the hall, the turn out, what type of arrangement, what is the space. It is so physically connected with everything so the unpredictability is always there and it is a little edgy, but that edgy part you have to just take it easy, calm down. The most preparation is to be calm. Open to anything but you have to kind of meditate that it will be fine, everything will be fine.

Me: How do you see yourself in the music? A more straightforward question is what is your role in the music, when you are performing? In the moment when sound is being perceived in performance, what is your role?

Laila: My role is as mediator. There is this thing and through me there is something passing and I give it out. I am very responsive. I don't own the music, when it's passing through me (music is every flowing eternal), so when it is passing through me I have this responsibility of how that will pass through and go to the audience. That is a very highly philosophical way of putting it but I know you understand what I'm saying. I always say that through me I am trying my best, I always say I am trying my best to do a good job to portray this raga, and I can't do anything more than my best, more or less.

Me: How do you interact with your audience, and just take that however you want to I guess whether during the performance of after, anything.

Laila: Almost like a hostess, almost like I'm hosting this whole space, the feeling, the spirituality, I'm like a hostess. I want to make my audience feel good. I'll take care of them, when my students come it is the same way, I have to be calm, I have to be together. The role is the same, there are many many more people I will not do any less. I am the element through which the music is presented and I want the audience to be connected to whatever I am going to do. The first thing is to make them feel comfortable, easy, how to make them receptive, no negativity, if there is something going on, something horrible, just don't even mention it. Even mentioning it verbally makes and affect on the mind. Act as if nothing has happened. One time Nitin Mitta came one hour after the performance started and we could have made a big deal about that.

Me: I remember that, that was in DC, it was so fluid that exchange.

Laila: I actually played alap and after alap you're supposed to start the gat but instead of gat I started jor alap and jorgah alap and all of sudden I saw him, and he was there

and he came up. So that's what I do, the first thing I do is to connect to the audience as people not as a speech giver, just me and them first, then comes the music. If I don't connect with them, I want to look them in the eye. Not give too much substance because the music will tell everything, but I do say whatever my feelings are and I personalize my concerts much more than I have seen. It is almost as if I am about to start a painting and I talk about, this is what I'm going to paint and these are the colors I am going to use. 'So today we are going to see this.

Observing the interaction between soloist and audience members during the concert performances, I asked Alif Laila about the role of the audience and how important their energy, knowledge, and reaction to the music affected each performance. I drew analytical influence from Daniel Neuman's analysis of the relationship between the soloist and accompanist within traditional Hindustani performances (Neuman 1980, 92-94). I applied some of his social analysis to examine the relationships that occur between the performing musicians and between the soloist and the audience during the course of performance. Neuman's philosophy is that:

The soloist is the artist. He is primarily responsible for the total musical performance-as I have indicated everything from the initial tuning and choice of particular composition to the overall shape, progression, and duration of it. The performance, in short, is an expression of the soloist's creative powers and his particular style. The accompanist is an artisan. He fills in some of the spaces and provides some of the embellishment, always however within the musical framework which the soloist defines and provides. Most significant, however, is that the accompanist performs a role which is interchangeable with other individuals. (Neuman 1977, 238-239)

As a stage manager I was able to observe Laila's relationship between herself as soloist and her accompanist, especially the *tabla* player before, during, and after performances, I was able to ask Laila directly about her interactions and social exchanges with the *tabla* players that come to accompany her at her concerts in DC. It is often the case that an instrumental soloist will hire a *tabla* player for the day of the concert, choosing one that she has heard in the past and knows will be able to

provide acceptable accompaniment. There are rarely any rehearsals before the performance. The two musicians arrive at the concert site a few hours in advance, change into their professional attire, and simply talk about the flow of the concert. I was often setting up the stage and Laila when her *tabla* player talked about specifics: Laila would tell him how fast she wanted to take certain passages of the *raga* and other small details and the conversation would end: the two would then drink tea and warm up before the performance.

It seems that at times, in both performance and conversational settings Laila thinks of herself as a representation of music. She has recently gained a new freedom and lives and teaches in her beautiful home/studio, having already raised two sons to adulthood, and she has embraced this freedom fully. Her daily routine revolves around music, spending morning hours on practicing and meditation with her sound, afternoons for business (arranging student lessons, setting up studio time for her new album, talking with her financial supporters, and preparing for the occasional photo-shoot or filming of a music video.) She flows like a river through her music and musical responsibilities, and at this point in her life it seems that the river is expanding rapidly. She is hoping to begin a non-profit organization for American and Indian students alike to learn to play in group sitar lessons, in a context similar to the one where she was first introduced to sitar. These lessons would be focused on the instrument as well as the theory, history and art behind the music. Her goal is to spread her love of *raga* to Western students and to deepen their understanding of her instrument and music.

A Life in Music; A Life of Music

Laila looks at life as if it is music and when discussing the form of a *raga* or the ingredients in the special deserts she occasionally makes for me, everything comes back to music. I remember one night when we were discussing her upcoming performances and recordings in India. Laila made a beautiful dessert and I couldn't figure out what I was eating. I asked her what she used to make this little treat and she said simply "ricotta cheese and saffron," followed by a scolding, as she reminded me that "the ingredients only matter so much, it's how they are prepared that makes the taste, similar to a *raga*. You are eating a *raga*! How do you feel?" As we both laughed at this outburst, I realized that this is how she visualizes most processes in life, as a particular *raga*. A river of sound accompaniment, that changes form when it needs to carries Laila as she teaches, performs, and travels as a traditionally trained musician in a very nontraditional world.

A common pastoral image linked with music, more specifically with genres of with music, is that of a river. The vastness of some rivers, the changes the water endures while moving through the river, and the shapes the river creates over time are all ideas that can be easily used to discuss a particular music's journey through time, through performance, and through observation. Rivers are most typically observed, and distance is present between the viewer and the current. Occasionally one may enter the river, flow down it by the use of some transportation device down, or even build over the river, creating a bridge between present cognition and further analysis. The situation I find myself in seems to be quite different from the above examples of

the river/music image. With my interactions, interviews, and lessons with Alif Laila I find myself observing an artist who is submerged in the music she teaches and performs. Laila has surrounded herself with the music she plays. Rooted with one foot in Bangladesh and India and the other in Washington, DC, Laila is creating for herself an international appeal. Laila is constantly exploring new avenues for her musical passion to explore, collaborating with Indian classical musicians in the US and India as well as creating more modern presentations of her music, with a film featuring jazz and modern classical musicians. The film follows Laila musically through her life, recounting childhood passions and times of confusion and despair, and moves into her new and enlightened present.

The more I reflect on this river analogy the more it seems like an extremely relevant comparison to Laila's life through and with music. What is it that rivers do? When sitting on the banks of a river, depending on the vantage point, one sees a river "performing" or "acting" in a number of ways. Rivers carry, they flow, they are continuous and appear different at each viewing point along their length due to the surrounding nature environment. Rivers swell and taper off at times, they transport, they attract, harbor, supply, and run; they are continuous and always being added to. Although a river is not a living thing, it affects and acts and interacts. Many would argue that idea that music is not a living thing—it is created by humans and labeled as such—but I believe the river analogy links well with Laila's ideal musical world. Her music is a fast and flowing river which she runs through. With her music, Laila connects her audiences to the river of Hindustani music. She is the vessel through which the music flows, and her sitar acts as the instrument of translation. The sitar

provides a link between the tradition, innovation, and fusion of her personal musical expression to her audience. In interviews and informal interactions, Laila has expanded on the importance of an audience, whether or not they are educated in the form and style of her music. She feels it is important to share Hindustani music with the world, as many artists from the North Indian region have felt. Laila has stated many times that the differences between American or Western music and Indian music are vast but that this should not be a deterrent for any individual, especially a musician. Through our formal interviews and teachings she shared with me these ideas and many more regarding her teaching style, background and training in sitar, her understanding of *raga* and Hindustani music, and many more veins of an oral traditional music that until meeting her I was quite unaware of.

There were two interview sessions where I ended our conversation by asking the same question: “what is music to you?” It is a fairly straightforward, open-ended question that allows for reflection on the interview that just happened as well as improvised thinking in the moment. Most any musician will come up with a different answer if asked “what is music to you” at different times: this question challenges the creativity of the moment as well as the emotional connection to one’s craft in the moment. The reasons behind asking this question were purely out of curiosity; when I was planning to ask them, I wanted to see how open Laila would be with me, because even though we were very close it is likely that someone has asked this question before and she may have developed a generic answer. The question also allows her to say anything she may have wanted to address in the interview that I did not touch on.

These were the two answers I received:

1st Interview

Me: Yes, and so the question I have for you is what is music to you?

Laila: At this point, it has changed so much, but I think that it is like destiny to me and you know how destiny is? You step into it with ignorance that is what it's about. I had no clue what I was getting into. Destiny is something that you are attracted to and you don't even know, just like love in a way. So music is to me destiny with life. It is like a beautiful marriage, this marriage never makes me sad, it's like the more hurdles it makes me much happier and much more devoted it is opposite a marriage with a human being. So music to me is like my destiny which is a constant struggle but beautiful journey in a sense that bliss and spirituality, like a religion. I can relate to every religion. When I see a Catholic praying, I feel like 'yes, let it out,' if I see a Muslim doing a namas, the same thing comes to my mind. This is what music has done to me. It is amazing. I have more respect for each religion but this is a religion which involves all religion and everything comes together. It's too huge. The more I'm getting deeper into music, the more it is happening. The journey took me to a place where I realized that this was medium, it could have come through any other medium, but this is my medium. Imagine how strongly I'm being carried through life, my music carries me. It is my vehicle. I can feel it, every moment, even the moments of sadness and desperation are not ugly, it is present and I am with it because I experience it in my instrument. In every instrument, if you are really dedicating, you will get there. You will reach this feeling. You have to know your balance. You have to know the real balance between reality and your utopian wishes. You have to be careful. You do have to be very realistic to be a musician. You have to have some realistic goals so you can still pursue your dream, your search for your soul. You can't search for your soul up in the air, you have to be on the ground all the time. Musician is a dreamer in the real world. Music has taught me to be realistic also because without that realistic effort the dream doesn't come true. You have to be focused and down to earth because physical time is reality and you can't jump over it, this is what music has done to me and what music is to me.

2nd interview

Me: So we'll end with the same question as last time and that is the very overwhelming question of what is music to you?

Laila: Again?

Me: Yes, just anything that comes to mind.

Laila: It's my healer; it heals me in so many ways. It's a healing energy certainly, music and to me music leads me to every moment, music is helping me to stay calm and be exciting. It's almost as if music has taken me over. Music, basically, it is

protecting me. I feel that my whole life and music has fused, we have become one. I imagine the energy, the flow of music, like a river and the music has taken me into its flow and the water feels so good. That is what music is to me. I'm a river, I can't stop, I won't stop and music has done this to me, it has taught me how to flow. It doesn't matter what you're flowing to or where you're flowing from, I can't imagine being stagnant, I can't imagine being stopped for anything. To me, every person is part of the music also. Just because I am by myself doesn't mean that. Without people there is no music, just like without people there is not god. It's not only me, it's everyone together. Music cannot come to life if people are not giving their love to it. It's so beautiful in that way, this is what music has done.

Me: Very nice, lovely.

Laila: I mean, thank god [both laugh]. Music has made us not only forgiving but reaching out to people and you and I we do that in our day to day lives.

Me: Thank you, that was beautiful.

The time I spent with Alif Laila during this particularly intensive interview process was rewarding and inspirational but also highly informative. The benefits of working with and being able to observe her in action have been recounted throughout this chapter, but her influence continues. She is the prominent performing female sitarist in the Washington, DC area at this time and her influence and performing endeavors are growing steadily. She has brought a pedagogical style of teacher North Indian classical music on sitar to the Washington, DC area, continuing the transmission of the music and the technique required to sustain that music. Her words give light to a current trend in teaching students who are new to North Indian classical music and have a Westernized view of how to learn music. Laila will not write down the *gat* of any *raga* she teaches, instead, she patiently teaches her students to learn by ear. Laila's musical philosophy that music is a bonding force to all that live in this world show us the strength in her musical background and her personal devotion to the music she performs. The most lasting and lingering affect Laila has

on all those who meet her is her personality. Her willingness to share her ideas with me as an ethnomusicology student and take time to teach me her traditions, shows that beyond the tradition and what she has learned throughout her years as a professional sitarist, she is a musician at heart.

There was a sense as I was gathering the data for this chapter that I was catching Laila in a moment, not yet at her peak but certainly beyond a plateau of performing. Her passion extends, as does her professional career, and she is now able to pursue a multitude of performing/collaborating options. Her passion remains based in the North Indian classical tradition, and she continues *raga* in performance, but she is now using that base to ground her as she extends in various musical directions. She will soon begin collaborations with jazz musicians as well as Western classical musicians to “jam”, finding her voice among others and, knowing her, producing an eclectic collection of musicians to help her continued success in the West.

Chapter 4: *Vistar*- Improvisation in Design and Practice

“Call it magic, or spirit, or skill, as you wish, but the spark that set improvisation in motion comes on top of committed labor. Without the fuel of training, the spark would have nothing to burn.” (Albright and Gere 2003, xv)

The final part of this thesis examines the improvisational act. This brief chapter symbolizes the last piece my musical and philosophical exploration within this thesis project overall. Improvisation is a fluid expression of new ideas within a familiar framework, the expression of one’s imagination in action. In between layers of connection, memory, and imagination, the freedom of expression that improvisation requires flourishes. Improvisation draws attention to interconnectedness as a social action and has repercussions for musical individuality within the context of performance.

In her account on “Reading Improvisation in Flamenco and Postmodern Dance,” Michelle Heffner Hayes defines “the paradox of improvisation: it is neither truly spontaneous nor fully choreographed...performers learn to make rapid compositional choices based on their knowledge of a system of meaning” (Hayes 2003, 106). David Hughes expresses the idea that “premature improvisation is not only impractical, it is also disrespectful of the tradition and its bearers” in his account on eager SOAS students wishing to jump over fundamental techniques and right into improvisation (Solis 2004, 267). Anthropologist Karin Barber, in her chapter in *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*, she dissects improvisation, and she finds that it stems from our need for “form-giving activity” and the ability to recognize what diverts from the form (Ingold 2007, 33). Derek Bailey challenges that “among improvising musicians there is endless speculation about its nature but only an

academic would have the temerity to mount a theory of improvisations" (Bailey 1993, x). Recently ethnomusicologists have been using improvisation as a link to the social as well as musical actions that take place within communities, cultures that use improvisation as a form of musical communication. Without a firm grounding in technique, a devoted commitment to the instrument, and an accomplished understanding of the overall artistic structure I believe that improvisation cannot fully grow.²⁰

Nettl (1974, 1998, and 2009) historicizes improvisation including the relevance of Ernst Ferand's *Die Improvisation in der Musik* as one of the first significant texts on improvisational studies. Nettle's continued interest on the subject of improvisation led him to collaborate on an edited volume on improvisation with Melinda Russell; their collection provides one of the most detailed accounts of current ethnomusicological thinking on improvisation. In this text, *In the Course of Performance*, they introduce improvisation as an understudied component of musical form, one that musicologists often judge as lesser compared to composed music or as a conceptually lacking "that precision of planning, complexity of relationships, and interrelationships so abstruse as to be discernible only with sophisticated analytical techniques characterized by the great masterworks" (Nettl and Russell 1998, 8). Not only do the authors in this collection highlight the different studies that have focused on improvisation in cultural and ethnomusicological settings he also includes a number of broader articles written to expand the conversation and establish the

²⁰ Since the artist who is improvising is relying on memory, musical cues, and imagination in the moment, the more experience and connection with the format and expectation of the music, the stronger the improvised performance.

importance of studies on improvisation. In his chapter, Steven Slawek analyzes improvisation throughout North Indian music:

...improvisation in North Indian music is a complex process involving precomposed fixed pieces; rehearsed patterns; spontaneous creation of new material based on conventional models, including both paradigmatic and syntagmatic fields; spontaneous creation of new material through the launching of dynamic, generative “programs”; interactive creativity involving feedback between the soloist and accompanist and between the performers and audience; and the self-reflexive awareness of one’s own compositional activity and expressiveness during the act of musical creation (Slawek 1998, 363).

David Sudnow explores improvisation musically and physically in “Way of the Hand,” focusing on the body as a means towards improvisation. Body consciousness is to be understood as acting as the producer of improvisational action. Paul Berliner’s extensive work on jazz dissects the moments where musicians know how to improvise or how to “rework” the piece before it is played, altering the melody or the form slightly and this is also seen as a form of improvisation (Berliner 1994, 225). Each of these authors view the fluidity of improvisation in various ways, some directly looking at improvisation versus composition or controlled musical text, others providing cultural contexts for the freedom improvisation allows within genres of music.

Ethnomusicologists link improvisation to the communities and cultures that use improvisation as a form of musical communication. Nettl (1974, 1998, and 2009) historicizes improvisation including the relevance of Ernst Ferand’s *Die Improvisation in der Musik* as one of the first significant texts on improvisational studies. There is also a strong focus on the pedagogy associated with improvisation. How does one teach improvisation and when? In *Sync or Swarm: Improvising Music*

in a Complex Age, David Borgo wrestles this latter concept stating that it's not so much the notes that become the focus of improvisation, but the way in which the notes are presented. "And how you play them comes at least as much from your physical connection with the instrument as from any mental awareness or intellectual planning" (Borgo 2005, 36). In a way, one improvises and learns to improvise when the teacher deems it appropriate or when one simply begins to improvise. In David Hughes' article on improvisation he identifies this idea of "appropriate creativity" when evaluating when academic music students can improvise in their ensembles (Hughes 2004, 280). The trouble in a classroom ensemble setting comes in translating the meaning behind improvisation, what it means when the native performer is allowed to improvise. Hughes defends the ensemble made up of academic students and their desire to open themselves to learn a new music and musical technique and surmises that "...as in any genre of any music, improvisation must be based on knowledge of the parameters of the genre" (ibid, 281).

Improvisation has been analyzed as a part of a musical composition in Western jazz music, many musical styles of South Asia and the Middle East, and Latin American dance musics (Nettl and Russell 1998). The improvisers themselves have also expressed the effects of improvisation, sometimes as part of an improvisational performance. Dance and movement theorists have been discussing and exploring improvisational techniques for a number of decades, and jazz musicians and theorists have been waxing about the ingredients required in order to improvise correctly since the inception of the genre. As Paul Berliner portrays improvisation he solidifies this moment of creativeness: "traveling along the contour

of an evolving phrase, improvisers may envision the uninflected model of an upcoming pattern, but add interest to its performance by bending its tones or varying its timbral qualities” (Berliner 1994, 187).

As a practicing jazz musician I have been trained, in a sense, to improvise. It requires a letting go of self-confidence, almost the entire self, as you stand on stage or in a dimly lit jazz club and attempt to communicate the raw musical thinking that comes to mind. In that moment you are using the information that is known (the composition of the jazz piece you are improvising upon, the actual chord changes within that composition, your personal connections to the song, how it makes you feel) while experiencing the larger unknown (what you want/think, translated to your audience through your musical instrument: audiences’ and accompanists reactions: the length and flow of improvisation). Jazz musicians are communicating between themselves and the emotion the song has produced within them and their immediate musical communities as all performing musicians tend to do. There is an appropriate place for improvisation within jazz repertoire. It is often assumed that improvisation on a large scale will be left for the solo section of the piece. Some variations in melody may be added throughout what is termed the “head,” as long as all musicians involved are familiar with the piece being played, but more often than not the solo section is the reserved space for jazz musicians to share their musical ideas, explore musical possibilities, and communicate with not only the other musicians but also with the audience.

Analysis of Two *Alaps* in *Raga Charukeshi*

In Hindustani classical music, improvisation is sprinkled throughout the performance. Beginning with the *alap* section, the very introduction of the *raga*, the soloist improvises on the themes of the *raga*. The *alap* is unmetred and untimed, it can go as long as the soloist deems appropriate and it serves to introduce common phrases that will be heard within the *raga*. A crucial use of improvisation throughout the *raga*, and particularly within the *alap*, is to extend to aesthetic value of the composition. These pieces are being presented from an artist's memory, a memory that is linked not only to the hours of practice the musician has spent memorizing it, but also to the passion relayed to them by their teacher. Among these memories comes the need to create an individualized and personal rendition of the *raga*, which is where the improvisatorial material comes in. The improvisation that occurs within the *alap* and throughout the *raga* creates a space where the performer connects with the specific audience. Producing something in the moment, while overall themes may sound familiar to those knowledgeable about the music, creates a special moment for all involved. There is a heightened energy when the performer improvises; there is an emotional connection between the artist and musical instrument as well as an emotional connection from the audience to the performer.

This pressure, intensity, and emotional connection between performer and audience in the moments of improvisation occur not only in music, but in most other performing arts including dance. Dance theorists have added a significant amount of scholarship to improvisational studies. Improvisation in the modern dance community in the United States has been theorized into three main components:

awareness, boundary, and ownership in action (Albright and Gere 2003). Movement in the moment based on layers of memory, connection and imagination allows the artist the freedom of pure expression. Similar to other performing arts, improvisation is a technique that is learned and explored only after a firm grounding in the traditional, and expected, routine is mastered. The analysis below serves as the last piece of my project but also continues my engagement with North Indian classical music. I have time-transcribed two different recordings of Alif Laila's rendition of *Raga Charukeshi* in order to stress this idea of improvisation within the music.

Raga Charukeshi originates from the Carnatic, South Indian style of classical performance but has recently been adopted into the repertoires of a number of North Indian classical musicians. In the liner notes to *Meditation with Sitar*, Laila describes *Charukeshi* as “the design of an endless tapestry in space. The melody seems to flow into infinity, connecting with the unknown. The resonance of the raga leaves the mind and heart for more of its mysterious charm”; this is a *raga* that is performed mid-day or late-night.

In the first track "Alif- Inner Voice" *Raga Charukeshi* is presented in *alap*, *jor*, *gat* in *rupak*, *gat* in *teental*, and *jhal* with tabla and tambura accompaniment. The *alap*—improvisational introduction—will be analyzed below. *Jor* refers to rhythmic beginnings of the formal composition: in this recording—as in most performances—it is presented by sitar and tambura alone. *Gat* in *rupak* refers to the introduction of the tabla accompaniment in *rupak* (seven beat *tal*); *gat* in *teental* refers to the progression of the composition in a 16 beat *tal*, much faster than the *rupak* section, representing the climactic center of the raga. The final section, *Jhal* or *Jhala*, ends

the piece as the sitarist strums the stings of the sitar alternating between the fretted main strings and the sympathetic secondary strings. In the alap of Charukeshi “Inner Voice” we hear a string of melodic phrases shifting focus on both the Sam and the flat dha and ni.

Time Sequence for Charukeshi- Alap, Jor, Gat in Rupak, Gat in teental



The notes of the *raga*

Sa Re Ga Ma Pa dha ni Sa ni dha Pa Ma Ga Re Sa

00:00-00:30 Silence

00:31-00:43 Tambura Drone

00:44-00:50 The notes of the *raga* are played on sitar (played twice) in descending order beginning on Ga

00:51 Alap begins

10:36 sitar introduces the composition section of the raga, cue to listener as well as to tabla accompanist

10:44 *Gat* begins with *tabla* accompaniment

A closer look at the Alap:

10

ni dha dha Sa ni Sa ni dha ni Re ni

17

Sa ni Re Re ni dha dha dha ni Sa ni dha Pa Pa Pa dha Pa dha

22

Pa Ma Ga Ga Re Ga Ma Ma Ga Sa dha ni

29

Sa Re dha Pa Ma

35

Ga Ma Pa Ma Ga Ma Pa Ma Pa Ma dha

40

Pa Ma Ga Sa Sa dha

46

ni Re Sa

Figure 1: The opening min 00:00-02:15

First ten seconds are silent on the track. This silence may be an intentional way for the listener to quiet his/her mind in preparation for the *raga*.

Sam is played for the first time at about one min in.

Very slow movement between notes, with no grace-note like shifts in between notes. She only bends the notes at the beginning, allowing the ear to find *Sa* and to relax into the mood of the *raga*.

Spending minutes 00:01:22-00:02:45 in the lower register, ending on a particularly loud and resonant *Sa* before jumping back up in the central register for the remainder of the *alap*.

She now adds more decoration to notes and between notes, preparing the listener for the tempo changes that will occur in the *gat* or compositional section of *rag Charukeshi*.

Most of the movement toward *Sam* is upward whereas when downward motion focuses on *dha*.

She continually hits her sympathetic strings, allowing for the melody line to be supported not only by the drone of the *tambura* but by her own instrument as well.

Allows for gaps right before hitting *Sam*, we want and our ears are begging for *Sam* by the time she plays it.

At minute 00:07:00 *Jor* begins as Laila pushes the tempo

At minute 10:21- *Jor* ends and the *Gat* in *rupak* (the formal composition) begins

In the second track, “Alif- Meditation,” Raga Charukeshi is presented in *Alap*, *Jor*, and *Jhala* with only *tambura* accompaniment. The liner notes specify that because of the lack of the *tabla* there is not a distinct moment where the *alap* ends and the formal composition begins, and they sort of stream together. In the *alap* of *Charukeshi* "Meditation" there is more emphasis placed on the individual notes rather than melodic phrasing. The register is also much more restricted in this *alap* compared to the other. Laila divides the presentation of the *alap* between two distinctive octaves rather than showing the entire range of the *sitar*.

Time Sequence for Charukeshi- *Alap*, *Jor*, *Jhala*

The notes of the *raga* with original tonic:



00:00- 00:15 Tambura Drone

00:16-00:25 The notes of the *raga* are played on sitar (played twice) in descending order beginning with *Ma*

00:26 *Alap* begins

01:22 *Sam* is sounded as the focal point of the *raga* and as a cue to the listener. She plays it relatively loudly, emphasizing its importance.

03:33-03:48 slowly draws out the approach to *Sa*.

03:48-05:46 she remains in the lower register of the sitar, something she is known for. Draws the audience into that meditative state...creates a very drowsy mood.

07:19 the *Jor* section begins.

Closer look at the *alap*:

From min1:22-2:39

Laila plays in the lowest register of the sitar. Letting the *Pa*, *Ma* and *Ga* ring with vibration on the notes and very little melodic movement between notes.

The introduction of *Pa* for the first time, growing the sonic field and hinting that *Pa* will work as transitory note in the actual composition.

Min 2:40 represents a phrase that one will continually to hear within the *alap* and throughout the composition (*dha*, *ni*, *Re*, *Sa* played equally with little movement between notes)

After min 2:40 she keeps gradually moving up the sitar's register, only moving down in phrases between notes.

Spending from min 00:03:11-00:06:00 in the lower register.

Min 6:38-6:41-

Speeds up, the *jor* begins at min 07:34.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Improvisation is one of the rawest forms of musical expression that I have yet to come across in my travels. Artists express themselves through very individualized and practiced techniques. They bend cultural norms and expectations with their performance, and thus expand the cultural expectations of artists within the whole. Ending this thesis on the idea of improvisation represents my continual curiosity for the spontaneous, the special, and the imaginative aspects of music. We are all creators, if only for a moment, and because of our grounding (our traditions, customs, cares, and norms) we sometimes open up the possibility of exploration into what that grounding can support. Musicians extend, challenge, destroy, and embrace expectations through performance in a way that highlights their role in the context they inhabit.

Throughout this project I have experienced a great deal of North Indian classical music, and realized how infinite a true understanding of the music can be. By analyzing and experiencing a tradition through scholarship one quickly becomes aware of what is missing: when reading about *rasa* and the joy connected with *raga* performance, for example, it is difficult to fully connect. But through a practiced listening (both to live performances and recordings), the scholarship that has been accomplished in the English language proves quite useful indeed. In highlighting my experience with North Indian classical music in this thesis, I hope the reader comes away with an understanding of the main points associated with the tradition but also

of the challenges that occur when trying to interact with the tradition in a limited fashion.

In recent decades the idea of tradition in North Indian classical music has broadened considerably, with large numbers of professional musicians touring the United States each year and sharing their music and their philosophies. Washington, DC and the surrounding area has become a location not to be missed by the top performers of the tradition, there are also several accomplished teachers living in the area, including Alif Laila. This accessibility to the music has made this thesis a reality. Alif Laila provides a representation of her tradition and through her work with me her individual experiences now enter the continuation of ethnomusicological focus on the individual.

Reflecting on the work we have done together throughout the time we have known each other there has been a growing realization that Laila's function as a within the North Indian classical music. She sees herself in this role and at most performances actively promotes the tradition from which her music stems at most performances and her passion for her music strengthens as she continues to teach and perform. Her location in Washington, DC and within the musical community empower her drive to continue to grow musically but also to reach a broader audience, she is inspired by her surroundings and continually moves in flux between aiming to inspire this community and feed of the inspiration it provides her. Additionally, the newness she brings to the music, through variations that personalize her teaching style, collaborations with other professional musicians outside the North

Indian classical tradition, and improvisational techniques all solidify her as an individual within tradition.

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