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## **Krithi: *Cows at the Beach*: Improvising Carnatic-Jazz**

**Toby Wren and Ghatam Suresh Vaidyanathan**

### **Alapana**

*When we make music in this in-between space, in this hybrid sonic universe, the idea that results in a “perfect” performance is laughable. From the first musical statement there is a volatility, a risk, a negotiation of meaning. But these misunderstandings and dissonances are just as important as synergy and agreement when we seek to know someone through music. Creating an environment where this can happen is both an aesthetic and ethical mission.*

### **Pallavi: *Cows at the Beach* (Toby and Suresh)**

In our view, the appeal of intercultural improvisation is not only the potential for musical novelty, but also the way that intercultural collaborations can foreground the differences between musical cultures. The potential misunderstandings due to cultural differences provide us as musicians the opportunity to examine the assumptions we make in our own music-making, and to learn and grow. Like any meaningful engagement with another culture, these musical interactions offer the opportunity for reflection and the potential to develop perspective. As Michael Ryan points out in the introduction to his book, *Cultural Studies: A Practical Introduction*, “[c]ulture becomes visible when we travel between ‘cultures’” (viii). Other writers have referred to this space where cultures meet and undergo intercultural exchange as a “contact zone.”<sup>1</sup> When we grow up within a musical system, especially one as deep and robust as is found in Carnatic music or jazz music, we are acquiring a musical operating system, and a way of approaching and understanding the world. The limits of this epistemology might only become visible in the border zone between cultures, and when we critically reflect on the basis of our knowledge.

As authors and musicians, we were raised to speak different mother-tongues, both linguistically and musically. In this essay, as in performance, we attempt to make sense in an intercultural “third space” (Bhabha)—speaking together, but allowing our different registers and epistemologies to emerge. We are both professional musicians with training in a specific genre, but with appetites for experimentation.

Suresh is known primarily as a master practitioner in the Carnatic tradition, but he has collaborated with musicians from diverse traditions across the world. Toby is known as a jazz composer and guitarist in Australia, whose interest in intercultural projects has led him down a research path that now finds him primarily an educator and academic. Our musical enculturation and expertise in our own musical frameworks, along with an appreciation and curiosity for each other’s frameworks, provides us an opportunity to interact musically and to draw different conclusions in our writing. We hope these differences will become apparent in the text. To facilitate the same kind of dialogue in this essay that we find in musical performance, we have adopted the form of the Carnatic *krithi*, a highly flexible Carnatic song form that allows for a balance of collective “composed” statements, and frequent exchange of individual “improvised” statements. As authors and musicians, we believe that both musical and textual dialogues are important. Mikhail Bakhtin uses the term “dialogism” to describe the ways in which, “various social ‘languages’ come to interact with one another” (282), and Stephen Feld invokes the idea

of “dialogic editing” (Feld 190) to engender a greater diversity of voices in ethnographic writing (190-191).

The current section, the *Pallavi*, is a “composed” joint statement of the main themes, and it is followed by individual *niravals* (improvisations on the Pallavi themes). The second section, the *Anupallavi*, introduces new thematic materials and is similarly followed by “solo” *niravals*, and a *kalpanaswaram* (improvisational dialogue). The final “composed” section, the reprise of the Pallavi, functions as a concluding statement.<sup>2</sup> In the “composed” sections such as the one you are reading now, we are speaking together, developing the main themes of the composition, and when we perform *niraval*, we are individually improvising on the themes that arise. The dialogic form of the writing therefore illuminates the intercultural differences that emerge in the musical collaborations, whilst reflecting the different registers of discourse of its participants. The dominant register in this article reflects the requirements of western academic publication and is not intended to privilege any one culture or speaker. We hope that by creating music and text in this way, we can bring the audience or reader into the discussion by making explicit the kinds of negotiations that intercultural music-making and writing necessitates.

Any discussion of intercultural work is unavoidably situated within discourses of power and knowledge. The ideas of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and many others has sensitized us to the history of unequal exchange between the west and its Others.<sup>3</sup> This history is an important philosophical basis for our intercultural work, directly implicated in the dialogic basis of our collaboration. While dialogic improvisation and writing are key methodologies for redefining and decentering dominant narratives, we also acknowledge that there are other inequalities embedded in the context. The musical project that we are writing about can be seen as problematic in the aftermath: it was facilitated with western institutional structures that privilege canon and reinforce western privilege, including the relationship between a privileged colony (Australia) and a post-colonial country (India). In addition, the participants are exclusively cis-male, reflecting a history of gender imbalance in both traditions, and the performances of Carnatic music, jazz, and “Carnatic-jazz” are themselves associated with a highly literate and privileged class of musician and audience. While these factors are not extra-musical, and they undoubtedly influence the production of the music and our interpretation of it, in this essay our conversation focuses on the specific musical events that occurred and what they reveal about musical language and improvisation. Also outside our scope is a discussion of the ways in which patronage, pedagogy, and the changing economic factors related to the production of both Carnatic and jazz cultures has changed over time.

In this essay, we confine ourselves to our specific context, providing a detailed and subjective interpretation of a single collaborative musical concert. Our discussion occurs in relation to two recordings from the *Cows at the Beach* concert presented during the 2013 *Encounters: India* festival in Brisbane, Australia: “4 Speed Korvai” (Kaaraikkudi), and “Longing for Layam” (Kaaraikkudi and Wren). The compositions themselves are based on a discursive intercultural model<sup>4</sup> in which the musicians developed the final form of the work at the time of performance. The recordings therefore provide an opportunity to hear the ways in which the musicians juxtapose their culturally acquired methods of making music. In our unpacking of the musical events in these performances we attempt to reveal some of the situational factors that reveal these cultural differences, and the effects that these differences had on the music as performed.

In line with the aims of this journal, we hope to reveal the ways in which social and cultural practices are negotiated through improvisation, and to trouble the notion that there can be a single definition of improvisation by revealing the diversity of practices that improvisation entails. Through our reflections on *Cows at the Beach*, we hope to reveal the ways in which culture is

performed and negotiated through improvisation and the different levels of dialogue that are occurring during performance.

### **Niraval 1: *Before the Concert* (Suresh)**

*The moment a musician conceives the concept of fusing or collaborating, there are things that come to our mind about how we might need to compromise. Firstly, we try to create a platform to attempt a “perfect understanding”: one in which the performers are supporting each other’s ideas. But there are some areas of interpretation and execution where we differ. If there are certain musical ideas that do not agree at all cross-culturally, there is a tendency to try to keep those out of the performance or compromise on our individual approaches in the hope of making a more cohesive performance.*

*Secondly, there are also certain times when we compromise our musical ideas on account of the tradition, or the acceptability of ideas to the audience, whether they are a predominantly Carnatic or western or a jazz audience. And thirdly, and perhaps most interestingly, there are some conventions that are set into the minds of the musicians so deeply that they may not understand that the other musicians could have a difference of opinion: such as the relative importance of certain beats within a meter or thalam, or the specific frequencies of a swaram (note) in relation to other swarams. These are aspects of the tradition that we have acquired without our knowledge.*

*Even before we discuss the music that we performed, there are assumptions that might affect the concert: things of which we are aware because of our position of difference, because we are visitors to Australia. For example, food, which may initially seem like a trivial issue. Hindu religion occupies a central role in our lives, filtering into almost every aspect of what we do as musicians and people, and of course, an important element of that is vegetarianism. Where in India, every restaurant offers you “veg” or “non-veg” as standard, in Australia there is rarely a choice for a vegetarian—there may be one item on the menu. So, this puts into our mind a concern about whether we will be able to access appropriate food after the concert.*

*Another aspect is that in Australian concerts, the food will be before the concert at 7 or 7:30. Everybody eats, their stomachs are full—but we are not used to that. The musicians from India especially, we are not used to having a full stomach when we sit on the floor to play the concert. It is quite uncomfortable, actually. And we definitely expect dinner after the concert, so then I have to remember to tell Toby that I have to have dinner later, and once I have told it to you, it goes into your mind that “Suresh and Mani Sir (Guru Kaaraikudi Mani) want to have dinner after the concert,” and then there is a tension in your mind to take care of those things as well. If you are just surrounded by your own musicians, then all of you guys go to the restaurant and eat before the concert and maybe after the concert you just have a drink and go home: there is no discussion, no remembering, no tension. But now, during the concert, you will be wondering where to take us afterwards: what restaurants will be open that late? Will they have appropriate food? Perhaps these thoughts will not intrude while you are actually playing a solo, for example, but perhaps when someone else is playing a solo it will cross your mind. Perhaps it will even cause you to be distracted and accompany differently, or to miss a cue.*

### **Niraval 2 (Toby)**

*I hadn’t even considered that we would discuss food! Of course, it makes perfect sense, because I remember the opposite situation when I played in Chennai in 2013. In this particular concert, I met the musicians at the hall for the rehearsal, which went for several hours, and after*

*that I was expecting to have dinner before the concert, but there was no time to do so. I was so hungry! Throughout the concert I was thinking about what restaurants would still be open when we finished. It is difficult to say what the effect of these factors is on the music itself. There are multiple situational issues that could affect the comfort of the musicians. For me, a full stomach is not an issue, because I rarely sit on the floor to play. Yet the idea of sitting and playing makes me aware of another aspect of performance and comfort. Because Carnatic musicians always sit on the floor to perform, they are able to achieve consistency through that practice. Your physical relationship to the stage and your instrument is essentially always the same. By contrast, I prefer to sit on a stool to perform, and rely on venues to have one. But actually, stools all feel different, are different heights. Some are quite uncomfortable, so I am leaving to chance a crucial element of my physical relationship to the instrument and to the audience. We also have to consider the way we relate to each other in this intercultural setting. It is no good for me to stand if you are sitting on the floor—we have virtually no chance to interact. In Cows at the Beach, we achieved some parity by placing you and Mani Sir on a riser, and for the western musicians to sit on chairs, but it is always an issue we have to confront when organizing the concert.*

### **Niraval 3 (Suresh)**

*Beyond the food and the staging there is an obvious disjunct between the dress of the jazz musicians and the Carnatic musicians: between the way we present ourselves to the audience. The custom for many of the jazz musicians is to wear black when performing, whereas we wear colourful dhotis or, when playing with Mani Sir, we dress in white. Actually, this is a good contrast because it clearly shows the different backgrounds of the musicians and shows that we are performing interculturally. The fact that we share a stage demonstrates our unity, but we can also show our values and culture through the way we style ourselves individually.*

*These differences also give cues to the audience. The fact that we dressed according to our individual cultures demonstrates where we come from musically. It shows that we wish to develop ideas around difference, rather than a homogenous fusion that erases difference. In this concert we were openly looking for those moments of “cultural dissonance” as a basis for a more experimental approach, but at other times we try and avoid musical ideas that are too difficult for the other tradition to engage with. Historically you can see this in fusion music. The musicians play those aspects of the tradition that are easiest to combine: a groove, a static chord progression, and not too many gamakas (ornaments).*

### **Niraval 4 (Toby)**

*Semiotic cues, such as the clothing we wear on stage, are important in establishing the musicians’ identities, but they also reveal the relationships that we have to culture. If our aesthetic was to create a new style of music, one that was not necessarily based on Carnatic or jazz musics (if that were even possible), we might choose not to dress in ways that represented the cultures with which we are affiliated. By choosing to retain our distinctive modes of dress, we are making a choice, conscious or not, to be representative of a culture. This choice has implications for the marketability of the event, as well as pointing towards structures of privilege. And while we might represent our culture, we also know that cultures are constituted by individuals and texts, as Clifford Geertz pointed out (448). As improvising musicians, we are rearticulating and embodying our culture’s texts. We are individuals performing pitched and unpitched sounds in time, that are all within the definition of “music,” yet we can instantly recognize music that is culturally different, and that can be located in different times and places,*

*and within different groups of peoples. The concert platform in intercultural music becomes a contact zone in which such “travel” and encounter can take place.*

*There are artistic and ethical gains to be had by acknowledging difference in intercultural improvisation. Having musicians on the jazz stage who are clearly identifiable as coming from a position of difference, can have the effect of de-centering the dominant view of jazz as democratic: the idea that jazz is somehow flexible enough to be able to incorporate any other form of music. Jazz’s hybrid roots and the way it has continually incorporated other forms might lead some to believe that jazz can somehow magically facilitate all other improvised forms—that the west still represents the ultimate progression of musical complexity as insinuated by the early literature of comparative musicology. The ubiquity of fusion projects in jazz creates an impression that jazz musicians are somehow uniquely able to absorb outside influences and perform across cultural boundaries. By situating the intercultural performance as an improvisational dialogue, we create a space of exchange where we are all equally challenged by what we hear and have to respond to.*

#### **Niraval 4 (Suresh)**

*There appear to be some projects that are designed to facilitate dialogue between performers and some that are not. I think that you can hear when the musicians are able to interact and explore. Shakti is one of the shining examples of this. Another great example is the first known recording of Carnatic-jazz made by All India Radio in 1953, which was recently rediscovered and shared on a website devoted to the story of Bombay’s jazz age (Fernandes). The recording is of Dave Brubeck’s trio and the great mridangam artist, Pallani Subramania Pillai, and it clearly demonstrates a dialogic approach replete with musical misunderstandings and negotiations.<sup>5</sup> For the most part, it is an exchange between drummer Joe Morello and Pillai. The two trade rhythmic improvisations, and each performs incredible improvisations based on their inherited traditions, inspired by the spontaneous musical encounter with difference. There is a moment in which these differences are clearly highlighted. As is common practice in Carnatic rhythmic performance, at one point Pillai changes to khanda nadai (quintuplet subdivision), in which he is evidently just as adept as chatusram or tisram (semiquavers or triplets). Morello seems to realize what Pillai has done, but is unable to follow him, as that subdivision is rarely, if ever, explored in jazz. He wryly remarks, “yeah . . . alright!,” to the general amusement of the studio audience before changing back to a triplet subdivision for his solo.*

#### **Anupallavi: The Rehearsal Process (Toby and Suresh)**

One of the more important factors in the project development was the negotiation of performer hierarchies. There is a sense that observing the correct protocols for respect is more important to Indian musicians than it is to jazz musicians, but the basis for that respect is understood equally well by jazz musicians, who show a similar reverence towards their senior musicians—although it is often less formally demonstrated. In the *Cows at the Beach* concert, for example, the violinist John Rodgers is more experienced and senior than Wren. While musicians are not given to overt displays of reverence in the tradition of jazz in Australia, this does not mean that respect is absent. Inviting an established musician to contribute to a concert carries an implication that their musical ideas are valuable to the concert. In both Carnatic and jazz contexts it would be unusual to attempt to limit the contributions of a senior musician.

The power implicit in hierarchical relationships between performers is carefully constructed and implicated in exchanges at various levels. In the case of the *Cows at the Beach* ensemble, the hierarchy was clearly understood and accepted by all of the musicians involved—a power

transaction that enables as it limits. It is a hierarchy based on seniority and expertise. Guru Kaaraikkudi Mani, more commonly referred to as “Mani Sir,” is one of the most senior percussionists in Carnatic music. He has played with many of the legends of Carnatic music as well as teaching students all over the world about Carnatic rhythm. Even for musicians unfamiliar with Carnatic music, Mani Sir’s reputation precedes him. He is renowned for his clarity and precision on the mridangam, the principal percussion instrument of Carnatic music, and for raising the profile of the mridangam in fusion work with his *Sruthi Laya Ensemble*.<sup>6</sup> Mani Sir’s sustained endorsement of Suresh has contributed to raising his profile in Carnatic music, and Mani Sir’s involvement in *Cows at the Beach* was a significant factor in the resulting full house for the performance. When it comes to the performance, the hierarchical relationship between performers also has implications. Despite being one of the most respected and versatile percussionists in the world, in this concert Suresh’s contribution was necessarily tempered due to the protocols of respect afforded to Mani Sir. These protocols have a direct effect on the music as performed, even during improvisations, where authority and experience can influence—and even direct—the course of events. This hierarchy is another external circumstance, one that is perhaps more visible due to the intercultural context, but one that no doubt exists in any group improvisational setting.

It is also unlikely that the concert itself would have proceeded without following the correct protocols of respectful exchange over a number of years. Toby had been a student of Mani Sir’s since 2006, and has been a strong advocate for his work, including arranging two artist residencies in Australia for him in 2009 and 2011. The suggestion for the concert was to perform works by various composers within the group, with further development of the compositions to occur under Mani Sir’s guidance. Many of the decisions relating to the concert that would normally be made by the initiator/organizer of the concert in a jazz setting—including further arranging of musical materials in rehearsals, the order of performance, and seating arrangements—were made by Mani Sir alone, or with his consultation. Acknowledgment of Mani Sir’s expertise and authority regarding the concert particulars and during the performance was not a hollow gesture of respect, but of naturally wishing to engage his vast experience and expertise.

The concert arose out of Toby’s PhD research, and explicitly explored musical devices that would encourage musical dialogue to develop on the stage. However, it was also important that the concert contained compositions by a number of the collaborators:

No Can Do (Wren, T.)

Spilt Coffee (Wren, T. & Beier, T.)

Longing for Layam (Kaaraikkudi Mani)

Viv’s Bum Dance (Rodgers, J.)

4 Speed Korvai (Kaaraikkudi Mani, & Wren, T.)

Nataraja (Wren, T.)

The composition “Longing for Layam”, written by Kaaraikkudi Mani, was dictated to Toby during lessons in Chennai in 2013. The composition title refers to Mani Sir’s dedication to rhythmic practice, a dedication that he likens to a lifelong love. The composition is in *misra chapu* (equivalent to 7/8), but the melody employs a variety of approaches in the seven pulse cycle,

including combinations of phrases that cross several bars before re-engaging with the *thalam* (metre), a challenge for western musicians (see Video 3: “Longing for Layam” excerpt). It is an important piece in the program, because it is the only composition written from an entirely Carnatic perspective on fusion. The other work that features in the discussion below is the composition 4 *Speed Korvai*, which includes a melodic setting of a *korvai* (rhythmic composition) by Kaaraikudi Mani.

### Niraval 5: Playing “Carnatic” (Suresh)

*You will notice that we are constantly changing and adapting the way we play to the situation we find ourselves in. The context is of the utmost importance, and we always attempt to play in a way that is appropriate to the situation. Playing with western musicians, I am constantly inspired to try different things. Just for one example, I have tried to emulate the sound of a drummer using a cross-stick and hi-hat to accompany a short ensemble chord. I cannot change the sound of the ghatam (clay pot) very much, but still I try to bring something of my impression of that sound into the instrument, and perhaps this changes (in a subtle way) the sound, or the approach, of my accompaniment.*

*Of course, there are inevitably aspects of our performance that are so encultured that we cannot understand how other musicians could have a difference of opinion. Because Mani Sir has a very great input into the music for the performance, he must constantly assess whether an idea that he has, is able to be played or interpreted correctly by the musicians involved. I remember a situation in which he suggested a *koraippu* (a mathematical reduction in turns of improvisation) to a particular bass player. To Mani Sir it seemed to be the simplest solution. In fact, it was such a specific idea—a *koraippu* is not only Indian, but a South Indian Carnatic idea—that even a non-Carnatic South Indian musician will not be tuned in to this approach. For Mani Sir, he can play *koraippu* without even thinking about it, but for another musician, it may be an unnecessarily strict structure for an improvisation. For this bass player, it placed all kinds of restrictions on the way that he was able to improvise. The more you have to think about in terms of rhythm or structure, the less mental energy you are able to devote to improvising.*

*On the other hand, Mani Sir can be very sensitive to the abilities of western musicians as well. In developing the compositions in rehearsal, he will temper the complexity of the ideas depending on what he perceives the abilities of the other musicians to be. In the case of this concert this was not an issue, because he knows you (Toby) have many years of study, and John and Tunji (Beier) also have been working on Carnatic ideas for a long time. In a rehearsal for another concert, Mani Sir was giving a drummer, Adam (King), very simple ideas to play. Mani Sir had already sent Adam a set of fairly complex ideas for the concert, but he assumed that Adam would not have practiced them. But Adam said “you sent some other ideas that I have already worked on and I am ready with those.” Mani Sir did not believe him actually, because he did not want Adam to make a bad attempt at the complex ideas. Then I said “maybe we should give it a try.” Mani Sir was telling me in Tamil “no, no, I don’t want to embarrass him, let’s not do it.” I said “I think he has worked on it, he might be ready with it.” He played perfectly and Adam responded exactly the way we wanted him to. Mani Sir was so happy, because he found a drummer that could respond the way he wanted.*

*After all, Mani Sir expects any musician in his terms to adapt to play the Carnatic system. It doesn’t mean he ridicules someone who is on a different wavelength—he would not do that—but he would be very cautious not to bother him with even slightly complex ideas. Again, he would not tell him that it is too simple don’t bother. . . if you tell somebody—if you come and tell me, “Suresh, this is too much of a jazz idea I don’t want you to bother,” then I get provoked to*



*work on that more and prove that I can do it. So it is the same thing with you guys as well, when I come and tell you, “this is too much of a gamaka (melodic ornamentation), this is only possible with the veena (South Indian plucked string instrument),” then you will jump on it and maybe say, “give me time, Suresh. I will work on it and come back to you.” That is the musician’s attitude, regardless of which system we belong to. We all wish to improve and learn, and to prove ourselves in performance. All these things are considerations when you compose and come to the stage where you play with other musicians.*

*However, the compromises we make have effects that go beyond the immediate playing situation. In the case of Mani Sir, who is involved in so many intercultural collaborations, the tempering of the complexity of his ideas has an effect on the Carnatic-jazz genre itself. Over time, if we always avoid the kind of rhythmic complexity that is so important in Carnatic music when we collaborate with western musicians, the effect is that certain distinctive elements of Carnatic practice tend to be omitted in intercultural performances. I was reminded when I listened back to our performance that during this concert, we attempted some more advanced ideas. For example, we played in different nadais (subdivisions) in the tani avarthanam (percussion solo), and we even play a misra koraippu (a reduction in turns based on articulations of phrases of seven) (see Video 1: “4 speed korvai”, percussion). I think that is good, because we know that the other musicians can understand our ideas, and even if you lose your place, you simply stop putting thalam (clapping), and then wait until you know your place to begin again. In this way we can create more of a dialogue, because we are not compromising to such an extent.*

## **Niraval 6: Developing Form Through Improvisation (Toby)**

*The ways in which we compromise indicates so much about our cultural subjectivities. When we are actually performing, there are compromises that occur which speak to how approaches to improvisation differ between Carnatic and jazz cultures. That doesn’t mean that all Carnatic musicians play the same as one another, or that all jazz musicians play the same way, but we can still acknowledge that there are different frames of reference. This acknowledgement enhances our understanding of the context of improvisation. The way in which jazz and Carnatic musicians respond to and develop musical form through improvisation is so different that it requires some form of mediation to move beyond, either at the composition stage or through sensitive negotiation in performance.*

*For the jazz musician, song form is almost always circular, which itself arises from the importance we place on harmony. That is, after we have played a song through, it is the harmony that we repeat as a basis for developing improvisational variation. It becomes necessary to repeat the harmonic form exactly as it appeared in the song in order to retain group cohesion and audible similarity to the composition. In this way, jazz improvisation occurs on top of, and in some sense independent of, the long harmonic cycle that repeats beneath it. In Carnatic music, the most important element of a composition, after the song lyrics, is the melodic setting. In the absence of harmony, Carnatic melody takes on a level of detail far beyond western melodic conception—a level of detail most western listeners don’t even hear. In turn, this affects the way that improvisation occurs, as there is no harmonic form to cycle. Rather, each line of a composition can become the subject of improvisational variation (niraval). In effect, the form of the composition then becomes highly variable in performance due to this flexible approach to developing improvisations on pre-composed materials.*

*Analyzing the recorded literature of Carnatic-jazz for my doctoral dissertation (Wren, “Improvising Culture”), led me to the view that many Carnatic-jazz performances tend to*

*gravitate towards a compromise on both of these positions. Firstly, harmonic cycles are most often avoided as they require Carnatic musicians to count an exceedingly large number of bars, which could unnecessarily constrain their contribution. They are also avoided because the structurally important points in a harmonic cycle require advanced acquired knowledge of the conventions of western harmony, and because it is difficult to reconcile Carnatic rhythmic compositions (moras and korvais) within a harmonic framework. Secondly, taking improvisational turns at developing variations on a line of the composition, as is the Carnatic practice, is also avoided, as this seems to impose a similar constraint upon jazz musicians unused to giving abbreviated improvisational responses. The result of avoiding both of these characteristic aspects of musical style is that we are left with the less challenging elements of each approach: a melody played without variation and solos taken sequentially for an indeterminate duration on a static harmony. While this may be an enabling musical structure for some musicians, it could also be argued to be restrictive, and simplistic, for others.*

### **Kalpanaswaram: “4 Speed Korvai”**

**Toby Wren (TW):** I am interested to know what you make of the alapana (non-rhythmic improvisational introduction) that John [Rodgers]<sup>7</sup> plays, because it is not a traditional Carnatic alapana (see Video 1: “4 Speed Korvai,” *via* alapana).

**Ghatam Suresh (GS):** It was sounding very different, basically, and I was curious about knowing what inspired him to play like that. Maybe there are jazz compositions where a solo of that kind happens, I do not know, or maybe you told him that there is a section called alapana in Carnatic music concerts where there is no other player going with the soloist, and also it is non-rhythmical. It was sounding different to me basically, but there was some common ground for interpretation, because he was conforming to the scale, right? As much as possible. I mean he was showing variations here and there, but mostly he was confined to the scale that you had chosen, and also, he was doing later. . . what do you call it?

**TW:** Arpeggios?

**GS:** The arpeggios. That is also very similar to the *madhyama kala*, the double speed ideas that Carnatic violinists play. But I can also understand that John is not exposed to the Carnatic listening as much as you are. That I can see. In your case, your exposure to Carnatic music is reflected in your playing and in your solos. As a Carnatic musician, for me, I could not see the progress, the development in what he played. There is always a way of progressing in alapana that is understood by a Carnatic musician. Depending on the ragam of course, but they will start with the tonic note and perhaps then go to the fourth, and then the octave, sometimes they go to the upper octave, sometimes the lower, and then eventually it comes back and then to the double speed and then ends on the tonic again. So, this we are used to, and we are used to the infinite variation that is possible within that structure. So, frankly speaking there was not that much of a variation in John's alapana for me. Maybe he was thinking he could not take too much liberty, that could be the reason, since he was told to show a Carnatic kind of discipline. He was doing an attempt on playing a raga.

**TW:** That is so different to the way that I hear it! But of course, John is “speaking my language.” I feel strangely defensive actually, because for me there is a lot of variation in what he plays. There was intentionally little discussion about what an alapana was before I asked John to play one. I knew he would know generally what alapana was, so I simply asked him if he would do one, with no further explanation of what that meant. I think his idea was to take the idea of having a mode or scale, like a ragam, and to develop his own material in his own way and not

try and sound like he wanted to play Carnatic music. Instead we hear his own influences, like folk and country music, like J. S. Bach. And, when he starts playing arpeggios, it becomes a variation on the initial theme. The arpeggios have a consistent figuration, but they create change by varying the notes in the chords. For me, the interest comes from this harmonic change, but I am used to listening to harmony and listening for harmonic change.

**GS:** I frankly admit that I was looking at it from the Carnatic point of view. I had the glasses of a Carnatic musician on, but I was also concentrating to find the similarity of approach.

**TW:** And I am sure that I have a different impression of a lot of Carnatic music to you because of my “jazz glasses.” I think these different understandings are fascinating. It makes me think of my own playing, because if I do alapana, I have all these questions and tensions in my mind about what to play, about how to blend Carnatic and jazz, and in what quantities. It depends, of course, who is in the audience, because I don’t want to sound like “a bad Carnatic musician.” At the same time, I don’t want to play straight jazz. Because I have in my head musical ideas from both traditions, I want to be somewhere in the middle. I was very aware of it when I played in Chennai and Bangalore (in January 2013) and the audiences were completely Carnatic *rasikas* (expert listeners). I was aware that I was somehow representing jazz, but what did the audience think that jazz was? Was it Count Basie, Michael Bublé, or Guitar Prasanna? So, there was a question of what they expected me to play as a “jazz musician,” and how to resolve that with my own style. I felt that I had to touch on certain jazz archetypes in my soloing in order to contextualize my own practice in a way that I don’t feel obliged to do in Australia. Also, I felt very unsure about using Carnatic sounds or ideas and how that might be perceived. I would never want it to be perceived that I was being patronizing, for example. Of course, I could just ignore all of those concerns and play the way I normally do. Does this resonate with you?

**GS:** Yes, for me a serious musician will always have these concerns. For you or Sandy (Evans) or Adrian (Sherriff), and other musicians that I met in Europe, they realize the seriousness of the Carnatic music listener. However, we Carnatic musicians should admit that we have limitations in our knowledge of jazz music, so we cannot fully understand the approach of a jazz player who is playing in a Carnatic music concert. I think it is good to consider the balance of cultures when performing. You want to give the jazz content and your own style within jazz, and you are trying to limit the Carnatic but still trying to make an attempt on some things. And, Carnatic audiences will always interpret those attempts according to their experiences as listeners. For example, if I give you a major scale for an improvisation, it contains the same notes as *Shankarabharanam*, which is a popular raga in South India. Perhaps given the space, you will be able to give glimpses of a *Shankarabharanam* here and there, but it may not exactly sound like a Carnatic musician playing *Shankarabharanam*. You will still impress the audience with your *Shankarabharanam* because they will think “well, his attempt is good,” though you would expect more than that. . .

**TW:** Yes (laughs)!

## **Pallavi Reprise: Conclusion**

The preceding niravals have demonstrated that musicians from different backgrounds will inevitably make assumptions based upon the many years of enculturation in their respective musical systems. Musicians develop preferences for sounds, practices, and processes through repeated exercise of critical musicianship within a culture. Culture is vitally important for setting the limitations on what may acceptably constitute both tradition and innovation. Where many intercultural works attempt to resolve intercultural dissonances through compositional means, or

circumvent them in rehearsals, in *Cows at the Beach* they were used productively, left until the performance stage to be resolved. The negotiation and resolution of these dissonances became a vital element of the spectacle of performance and the resulting intercultural-dialogue-as-aesthetic.

Our conversation has implications for how we think about improvisation, and the relationship between musicians and culture. One aspect of this is the idea of different interpretative frames. In one respect, it should not be surprising that individual musicians have different perspectives and understandings. Yet, it *is* surprising that even in a musical collaboration that seeks to present a cohesive performance, there is such notable difference in apprehension of the simplest musical moment (such as a solo violin improvisation). The different interpretive frames, and our different musical vocabularies, seem to be attributable to enculturation. Through social and cultural engagement, we establish and reinforce various different associations and preferences. In practice, and especially in intercultural practice, this can result in a musical phrase taking on a different meaning—even in relation to the meter or the tonality of a work—that can have compounding effects in a musical performance.

We consider performance in intercultural space to constitute a dialogue at two different levels. Most obviously, there is a dialogue between cultures, where individual musicians act as representatives of their culture, enacting and juxtaposing their culturally acquired knowledges. But there is also a dialogue between individual performers and the memorial (tradition), as they mediate that which is inherited and shared, and that which they create in the moment. Their understanding of tradition is also subjective, as is the ability of individual musicians to assimilate and internalize Other ways of listening, thinking, and acting. Taken together, these levels of dialogic intertextuality shed light on our understanding of improvisation itself, as a process of rearticulation and elaboration on tradition.<sup>8</sup>

As many writers on improvisation have discovered, musicians build a store of intonations—a “tool-kit,” to use David Reck’s terminology—which simplifies the cognition both of the improviser and of the audience member. That is, the improviser and the listener proceed from a point of familiarity, from shared archetypes, and from there develop acceptable innovations. This understanding of improvisation goes some of the way towards answering questions posed by cognitive science about the limits to human processing and the unfathomable complexity of improvisation. Jeff Pressing, for example, proposed a cognitive scheme for improvisation, but stopped short of defining the method by which improvisers choose a continuation. Similarly, Bruno Nettl identified choice as the “the most significant question for scholars investigating the process” (16). Our suggestion here is that improvisation is a result of enculturation and the exercise of particular preferences over time.<sup>9</sup> The enculturation of musicians within a cultural form, and the exercising of preferences for different sounds over time and through practice, constitutes a dynamic method in which improvisation both rearticulates and innovates. Improvisational choice then becomes an exercise of musicians acting within and for culture.

Perhaps the most important point of this discussion is the acknowledgement and celebration of difference. While people may intuitively understand that cultures differ, it may still be challenging to appreciate the music of other cultures because they are founded on different kinds of aesthetic appreciation. It is also the case that these cultures have historically excluded the voices of women and other minorities, and that a more active decentering of dominant narratives is a necessary part of the intercultural project. It is our hope that by turning towards a more processual, dialogic approach and by situating improvisation as a methodology for intercultural interactions, we can create space for alternative narratives, and avoid the homogenizing tendencies of intercultural projects in the popular world music sphere. In our

writing and in our musical approach, improvisation is essential and conversational, revealing synergies and dissonances. Improvisation is an attempt to aestheticize dialogue itself.

In the Kalpanaswaram section, our conversation about the violin *alapana* revealed how differently we perceived the same musical events. The extent to which our interpretation of this event differs was also a surprise to us, because we consider ourselves well-versed in musical practices across Carnatic and jazz traditions. It serves as a humbling reminder of the extent to which we may consider intercultural music-making an ongoing project. As Christopher Adler notes, the intercultural text “once released into the world, is subject to the divergent interpretive apparatuses of the musical cultures implicated in the work” (32). It is these potentially divergent readings and potential new expressions that continue to make intercultural music-making an endeavour that can confound and delight us. Clearly, there is much left to be discussed.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For example, see example Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone;” Clifford, *Routes*; Bendrups, “Pacific Festivals as Dynamic Contact Zones.”

<sup>2</sup> For a more complete explanation of Carnatic *krithi* form, see Viswanathan & Allen, *Music in South India*, 15.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Said, *Orientalism*; Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*; Kraidy, *Hybridity*; Gomez-Pena, *The Global Bizarre*.

<sup>4</sup> For further clarification see Wren, *Improvising Culture*, doctoral dissertation, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> For more information on this topic see [http://www.tajmahalfoxtrot.com/?page\\_id=56](http://www.tajmahalfoxtrot.com/?page_id=56).

<sup>6</sup> For more information see Kaaraikudi Mani, *Sruthi Laya Melodies*, 1984.

<sup>7</sup> John Rodgers is an Australian composer and multi-instrumentalist with a long history of engaging with Indian classical rhythmic concepts.

<sup>8</sup> See for example Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, 1994, for an analysis of the way in which musicians enact and negotiate their cultural heritage.

<sup>9</sup> See Wren, *Improvising Culture*, doctoral dissertation.

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