

Fixity and Flexibility: From Musical Structure to Cultural Structure¹

BONNIE C. WADE
University of California, Berkeley

RÉSUMÉ

Au lieu de prendre l'approche fonctionnaliste d'étudier la musique à l'intérieur de la culture, cet article propose une approche "structuraliste-fonctionnaliste": plus spécifiquement, plutôt que d'étudier d'abord la culture et ensuite se demander comment la musique s'y intègre, étudier la musique d'abord et ensuite définir la culture en terme de musique. Les possibilités de cette approche sont explorées au moyen d'un principe structurel de la musique classique du nord de l'Inde, l'interaction entre la fixité et la flexibilité, c'est-à-dire, entre la composition traditionnelle et l'improvisation.

This is a theoretical essay on the subject of ethnomusicology, presented via the medium of information and questions on Indian classical music. The format of presentation consists of generalizations, *because no in-depth knowledge of Indian classical musical traditions is assumed for the reader*, and also because the information is primarily a springboard for questions that

¹ This essay was originally presented in skeletal form for a public lecture at the University of California, Berkeley, February, 1975. It was later presented in elaborated form at the Regional meeting of the Northeast Chapter of the American Anthropological Association, Potsdam, New York, April, 1975. I especially wish to thank my fellow ethnomusicologists, Dr. Roxane Carlisle of Carleton University and of the National Museum of Man, Ottawa, and Prof. Daniel Neuman, Department of Anthropology, Dartmouth College for encouraging me to present these ideas in print.

demonstrate what this author considers to be possibilities for an ethnomusicological approach to the study of music.²

Until recently, most ethnomusicology has been of two types. Ethnomusicologists trained primarily in music usually have undertaken musicological studies of non-Western musics; most work on Indian classical music, for example, is musicological, passing under the rubric of ethnomusicology because the subject matter is not Western music. Ethnomusicologists trained primarily in anthropology have undertaken studies of music and musical cultures from the vantage point of the so-called functionalist approach to music; i.e., examination of the function of music in culture.

The ethnomusicological approach I am suggesting, as applicable to any music and musical culture, is one that takes cognizance of structure. Implicit in this approach is a strong grounding in music analysis and firm understanding of musical structure without which, I believe, it is not possible to understand the subtleties of the music and thus the musical culture with which one is working. The basis for my belief in the need for training in analysis of music structures is generated by the realization that ethnomusicological methodology, to be a methodology, must proceed from the music itself. Heretofore, practically all ethnomusicological method has utilized the methodology of various disciplines, especially anthropology and musicology, rather than attempting to develop a methodology of its own. This short paper, then, is an attempt to establish a schema for an ethnomusicological method which derives from analysis of structure as well as function of music and application of same to an understanding of the structure as well as function of the musical culture of which the music is a part. Hence the subtitle, "from Musical Structure to Cultural Structure."

The conceptual scheme of this essay derives from the perceived duality in Indian musical structure and in Indian culture and

² For an introduction to Indian classical music, see the author's forthcoming volume, *Introduction to Indian Classical Music* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, October 1976). For a detailed statement of definitions, methodologies, and theories as regards the author's view of ethnomusicology, see her introduction to the end-of-the-year review of "ethnomusicology" books for *Notes* (Spring 1976).

society. Indic civilization frequently is referred to as one of “unity and diversity,” of “stasis yet mobility,” and other dichotomous generalizations. It is commonplace to say this duality is inherent in all cultures, but in the Indic purview the juxtaposition of dual concepts seems particularly implicit as well as explicit. In the past ethnomusicologists or other scholars of Indian classical music might have taken concepts such as these *from the culture* and applied them *to the music*. What I propose to do here is to take dual concepts *from the music* and apply them *to the culture*, i.e. applying conceptual polarities from the musical structure to cultural structure. In particular, I have chosen to work with concepts of fixity and flexibility, composed and improvised.

The primary generalization I am going to explore is: *At present greater emphasis is placed on improvisation in North Indian classical music than in South Indian classical music — relatively speaking.* Lest South Indian music enthusiasts become agitated at this statement, let me stress the final phrase — “relatively speaking.” Improvisation is certainly at the heart of several types of South Indian music.

First, a word of explanation about the division of India into North and South Indian classical music traditions. A key to understanding Indic civilization is to realize that the subcontinent has been subject to recurring waves of invaders. The Indian subcontinent has, for as long as the historical process can be traced, housed innumerable culture groups. The earliest, pre-Aryan civilization for which we have some substantive information is the Harappa culture, a city-based civilization extending north to south nearly 1000 miles along the Indus valley, and including such other sites as Mohenjo Daro. It has been suggested, with growing linguistic evidence, that this was the culture of Dravidian, proto-Tamil speaking peoples.

From about the second millennium BC groups of Aryas (Indo-European peoples) filtered into the subcontinent. Gradually they settled over a wide geographical area and either routed or imposed their culture on indigenous Dravidian and other ethnic subdivisions of the subcontinent. Records of the Aryan civilization, transmitted in the Sanskrit language, consist largely of literature — hymns and epics — and also of treatises on many subjects,

among them music. Music treatises from the early centuries AD reveal an already greatly theorized musical system.

Relatively recently in the history of the subcontinent groups of Islamic-culture peoples began to settle into the subcontinent.³ By the eleventh century AD their political rule began to take hold and Islamic-dominated culture at the top layers of society began to spread, particularly in the northern part of the subcontinent.

The major point to keep in mind in this long-recorded historical process is the pattern of culture movement that resulted from these periodic invasions. As each wave of invaders trickled then poured through the northwestern reaches, the peoples they found in the northern areas, through time either fled toward the south sections of the subcontinent or were absorbed by the alien groups. The Aryan invasion of India was one that covered centuries and involved many ethnic groups. So, too, was the invasion of peoples of the Islamic belief system the product of centuries and diverse ethnic groups. Thus, in the northern regions of the subcontinent we have rather an accordion effect, of spacing and impacting of sub-cultures, while in the southern regions timing and spacing of peoples in retreat would seem to have allowed for consolidation and conservation of indigenous traditions — as indigenous traditions were perceived through time. Pertinent to our discussion here are those dual effects, particularly as they concern music, after the permanentizing of rule in the North by culture groups of the Islamic faith.

In the North the literary and court language changed from Sanskrit to Persian. In increasing numbers through time, musicians employed in Muslim courts converted to Islam. The ancient treatises in Sanskrit became less and less meaningful, and reference

³ Peoples of Islamic faith arrived in three different waves. In the early eighth century small groups of Arab merchants, reaching by sea, settled temporarily in the Sind, around present-day Karachi, Pakistan. From the tenth century, bands of Afghani tribesmen came, in periodic invasions, through the northwest passes, more to plunder than to proselytize. This second segment of invaders endured and began to establish sultanates. But the third, and most enduring wave, and the one we associate with Muslim influence in India, were groups of Turki, Persian, Afghani, and Mongol people, from the end of the eleventh century. These persisted in the North and, eventually, with the triumph of Babar, in 1526 established the Mughal Empire.

to older traditions would appear to have decreased in importance. However, many learned Hindus — musicians among them — are said to have left the North for the southern part of the subcontinent where [Aryan] culture flourished relatively untouched, even at the top levels of society. In the South, knowledge of Sanskrit and the Sanskritic tradition of musical scholarship continued.

In all the writings on classical music the overall picture is one of a common ancient tradition that provided a set of basic musical concepts. But the practices based on those principles began to differ in North and South, and by the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries those differences began to show up in theoretical writings in a codified fashion. In time, the musical concepts themselves were recognized to be somewhat different on such a widespread basis that the differences were associated with geographic regions: Hindustani tradition in the North, Karnatak in the South. That process of change in musical practice and theory has been documented to some extent, but not altogether clearly.

By the nineteenth century one of the performance practices that had become different involved the relative amount of fixed and improvised in musical performance. When this first became a distinguishable differentiation between North and South is impossible to say. Although it is difficult to demonstrate what is meant by fixed and improvisatory without recourse to musical sound, let me attempt to explain it briefly in words.

The two primary performances genres in South India are *kriti* and the *ragam-tanam-pallavi* sequence. A *kriti* is a traditional composition, a song; it is likely that the composer of the song is known. Many *kriti* are notated — albeit in skeleton form. *Kriti* are appropriate for varying performance contexts and the events in the performance of a *kriti* depend on that context. In a formal concert situation where an accomplished artist is featured, more esoteric *kriti* will be heard and improvisation will be an important element in those performances. When groups of music lovers gather for informal music-making with the expectation that even those who are not particularly accomplished will contribute a *kriti* or two in the course of the evening, *kriti* will be heard that are more accessible musically and improvisation may or may not be

part of the performance. Two or three persons might even sing such a composition together.

In North Indian classical music there is no parallel to the *kṛiti*, in the sense that a traditional composition could be sung by a group, with improvisation an optional part of the performance. Notations are far fewer in Hindustani tradition; improvisation is the heart of every classical music genre in the North.

The second most prominent South Indian performance genre is *ragam-tanam-pallavi*. It is an improvisational genre performed primarily by concert artists; only one short passage of melody (ten seconds or so long) is “composed” — the *pallavi* of the long, improvised *pallavi* section of the performance sequence. The North Indian performance genre that most closely parallels that sequence is the instrumental *alap-jor-jhala-gat*, in which the *gat* is the only “composed” melodic element and it, too, is an extremely brief melody.

For the purpose of relating this particular performance practice to a wider Indic cultural sphere, it is necessary to take a somewhat closer look at the practice itself. In these types of performances, in both Hindustani and Karnatak traditions, the musical elements besides the compositions that are considered “fixed” are the *rāga* and the *tāla*, or the mode and the meter which provide the material for both the compositions and improvisation. In addition, the song’s text is fixed. Improvisation in a performance of a *kṛiti* includes manipulation of the text, of the melody within the context of the mode, and rhythmic play within the context of the meter. More specifically, certain types of manipulation of the text, melody, and rhythm are associated with *kṛiti* improvisation; this can be explained only in musical terms and is too specific for this article.

My working definition of improvisation here, then, is flexibility in the manipulation of those fixed musical and textual constructs. My working generalization here is based on the fact that the degree of flexibility — in terms of time in a performance allotted to improvisation — is much greater on the whole in North Indian classical music than in South Indian classical music — relatively speaking. Mode and meter are still the underpinnings of North

Indian performances but the role of compositions is considerably smaller.

If I were to ask musical questions about this “composed” vs. “improvised” business, I could ask such things as: In an improvised performance, how much in fact is FIXED? And how much of that which is fixed is composed “on the spot” and how much is traditional — that is to say, learned from someone else?

If learned from someone else, who is that someone? What is the sense of “ownership” of a melody? Is it proper to “learn” it by hearing it in another performance and adopt it? Or is it associated with a tradition and passed on as a piece of property? Whose property is it? The composer’s? Or does ownership matter? Is in fact the composer known? Further, does it matter if the composer is known? What is the relationship between composer (if any) and performer in an improvisatory performance?

If the fixed material is learned, what was the method of transmission — oral or written? If written, what is the relationship between what is written and what is performed? How much of the tradition is written? Why was it written? If it was written, who wrote it down?

If it was transmitted orally, is an effort made to render it exactly as learned, i.e. to preserve it? Or can it be changed? If it can be changed in performance, then what is traditional about it?

If I were a musicologist my first inclination would be to look at this matter historically, to ask how great a part improvisation played in musical performance in ancient times, in the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries, and even in the nineteenth century. The documentation for that is scarce, however; Indian musicologists were theorists, and wrote of the melodic system as a system and single melodic modes as such rather than speaking in detail to the events of a particular type of performance.

The belief of South Indian musicians has been that their present-day musical traditions are those that existed in ancient times and South Indians have held the North responsible for departing from those traditions. In South Indian perception that is a negative thing. In the area of melodic theory, however, it is

now admitted that change must have taken place in the South, as well. A second possibility — but one not supported by lore — is that the musical traditions in the North are the more traditional ones. It is, of course, most likely that traditions have changed in both North and South through time.

What I would like to bring to the fore here are the sorts of things we could look at ethnomusicologically to learn from Indian music about Indic culture by this one general statement that much greater emphasis is placed on improvisation in North India than in South India.

In a society which is as stratified socially and economically as the Indian culture is, and where the stratification is upheld by religious sanctions, what is the relationship between fixed and improvised — or should I say — fixed and flexible? Has there been in recent centuries perhaps a greater degree of flexibility in the social system in North India than in the South to parallel the greater degree of flexibility in musical performance? It is not an unreasonable question. It is said of the Punjabis of north-west India, for example, that they are the group most receptive to change of all the people of the subcontinent because their territory lies in the path of communication and incursion through the mountains that separate India from West Asia and they have had to live with constant change for many, many centuries. North India faced what was potentially a very disruptive series of changes when peoples of Muslim faith settled in, and were absorbed into the greater Indian civilization. Or conversely, did the socio-cultural situation in the North become more rigid under Muslim rule, and the arts increasingly become relied upon as one means of expressing a sense of flexibility?

As mentioned before, in the face of incompatible cultural ideas many learned Hindus left North India for the southern reaches of the subcontinent where even at the height of Mughal rule the interference in Hindu lifeways seems to have been less severe. Is it possible that the degree of *awareness* of socio-cultural differences led to a hardening in the attitude toward flexibility in the South which was ultimately reflected in diverse facets of cultural life, including music? Could the threat to what was Hindu have resulted in a desire for preservation, and the desire for

preservation resulted in such processes as the notating of musical compositions and the standardization of musical pedagogical techniques when they had not been important before? It would appear that retention of specific compositions through teaching has resulted in a growing body of compositions which have been known for so long that they can be dubbed a repertoire of traditional compositions. We must rely on historians of Indian culture to aid us in putting this musical change in perspective with the greater culture's change.

The Hindu or Muslim political domination had one indisputable effect on the musical world and this may have had a great deal to do with the degree of improvisation in performances: the contexts of performances under Hindu kings were private court and home situations to be sure, but at *public* temple festivities, the best musicians were heard, as well. This was apparently the custom throughout India. Under Muslim rulers the public in the North lost all opportunity of hearing classical music because such music plays no part in Muslim religious festivities. The cloistered Muslim courts became the arena and knowledge of classical music was limited to the elite few. In those circumstances attention to the fine detail that improvisation demands had free reign. In the South the temple performance tradition continued unabated, and in fact was the base for continuity when royal courts declined. It is possible that in South India the general audiences at public occasions demanded music which could be more easily enjoyed (i.e. less improvisatory) so the repertoire of traditional songs developed along with improvised *ragam-tanam-pallavi* that could satisfy the better educated musical taste in more conducive performance contexts.

Another facet of the improvisatory vs. composed contrast is the relative attention which is paid to the individual performer or the individual composer. In the South individual composers have been remembered and some revered as Hindu saints. The most famous of Karnatak composers lived in the nineteenth century; they are spoken of as the trinity — Tyagaraja, Syama Sastri, and Muttuswami Dikshitar. All were from the same geographic area, all were archetypes of the Hindu musician-type, and all are still written about with a consistency in types of statements. After

centuries in which the fame of composers was scattered in nature, this trinity suddenly became extremely prominent. I would ask why. True, they were all good composers. But Sastri's compositions are scarcely written for a run-of-the-mill musical audience. I would suggest that events were happening in the greater culture that brought about the enormous amount of attention to the compositions of those men — particularly the continuing unabating adulation that their works receive.

In short, why is the individual composer in the South adulated, where in the North little attention is paid to who composed what — as might be expected when compositions themselves are of little importance? Is the South Indian composer an innovator or someone who upholds the tradition most manifestly? If a Karnatak performer, too, is singled out for attention, is the reason for this similar to the reason for a composer's prominence? What other individuals are spotlighted in South Indian culture, and why? Is there a pattern of thought about outstanding individuals which runs through various facets of the culture from music to politics?

In the North it is the outstanding artist (who could be called a composer in the improvisatory performance) who receives the adulation. Again the question could be asked why? Is it because he is an innovator in some sense of the words, or is the truest to a particular tradition? And again, is there a correspondence between the reasons for his prominence and the prominence of individuals in other facets of life in North India?

This inquiry is as potentially endless as an improvised Indian musical performance. In sum, I hope I have demonstrated, through a musical generalization observed in the structure of Indian classical music and musical culture, a mode for interpretations about the structure of the culture and society in which Indian musics and musical cultures flourish. These theoretical constructs are the lines of enquiry which I believe are part of the ethnomusicological approach to the study of music.

REFERENCES

For those who are interested in further exploring musical structure and cultural structure and their potential and real relationships, I offer a very select list of works.

MUSICAL STUDIES

For the most recent survey in the English language — indeed in any language — of Indian classical music and musical culture see:

WADE, Bonnie C.

1976 *Introduction to Indian Classical Musics* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

For those particularly interested in melodic structure and the overall concept of *rāga* one should consult:

JAIRAZBHOY, Nazir A.

1971 *The Rags of North Indian Music*, Middleton: Wesleyan University Press.

POWERS, Harold Stone

1958 "The background of the South Indian raga-system", Unpub. PhD. dissertation, Princeton University.

For particular attention to metric structure and the overall concept of *tāla* one should consult:

BROWN, Robert E.

1965/1974 *The Mrdanga: A Study of Drumming in South India*, Ann Arbor: University Microfilms.

and for North Indian (or the Hindustani tradition):

STEWART, Rebecca

1974 *The Tabla in Perspective*, Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, and sources cited in both studies.

A general study of musical culture is:

NEUMAN, Daniel

1974 *The Cultural Structure and Social Organization of Musicians in India: The Perspective from Delhi*, Ann Arbor: University Microfilms.

A major study of a genre of music in musico-cultural perspective is:

WADE, Bonnie C.

1971 *Khyāl: A Study in Hindustani Classical Vocal Music*, Ann Arbor: University Microfilms.

STUDIES OF INDIC CULTURE

BASHAM, A.L.

- 1968 *The Wonder that was India: A Survey of the History and Culture of the Subcontinent Before the Coming of the Muslims.* 3rd ed., New York: Taplinger.

COHN, Bernard S.

- 1971 *India: The Social Anthropology of a Civilization,* Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

DUMONT, Louis

- 1970 *Homo Hierarchus: The Caste System and its Implications,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

MANDELBAUM, David G.

- 1972 *Society in India.* 2 vols., Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

SINGER, Milton, ed.

- 1958 *Traditional India: Structure and Change,* Philadelphia: American Folklore Society.
- 1972 *When a Great Tradition Modernizes. An Anthropological Approach to Indian Civilization,* New York, Praeger.

SINGER, Milton and Bernard S. COHN, eds.

- 1968 *Structure and Change in Indian Society,* Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co.

SRINIVAS, M.N.

- 1968 *Social Change in Modern India,* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

The Bibliographies cited in each of the works noted under Musical Studies and Studies of Indic Culture provide a fairly comprehensive list of the work available in areas of music and musical culture of India.