

Creativity in perpetual motion: Listening in the development of expertise in the Karnatic classical singing tradition of South India

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ABSTRACT: Designed to facilitate qualitative insight into the teaching and learning of advanced singing within the fundamentally oral tradition of Karnatic classical music, this research is located at the interstices of the sociology of music education and ethnomusicology. During an extensive fieldwork period in South India, data was collected from interviews with masters (*gurus*) and students (*shishyas*) involved directly in Karnatic singing training and from observations of formal and informal learning environments, outside institutional contexts, associated with nine *guru-shishya* 'hubs'. This article focuses on listening in the teaching and learning processes and its significance for the development of a *shishya's* musical and vocal development. At all stages of the training, different modes of listening are pivotal in facilitating knowledge of stylistic boundaries, visceral understanding of critical ineffable nuances, a heightened awareness of particular vocal capabilities, and the accumulation of a personalised bank of musical ideas from which a singer can draw in the moment of live performance. Considered central to vital expression within the tradition, Karnatic singers continue to develop and hone an individual 'voice' throughout their lives, drawing creative inspiration from their listening for unique expression within the compositional (*kalpita sangita*) and improvisatory (*manodharma sangita*) dimensions of the music.

KEY WORDS: singing pedagogy, formal and informal music learning, oral transmission, listening in music learning, Indian classical music, music improvisation

MOTIVATION

Experiences and observations over 25 years within the Western classical tradition as soprano soloist and music educator have led to this investigation of advanced singing pedagogy, from the perspectives of both teacher and student, within a very different cultural context. Fascinated by the complexities of developing skill and expertise with an instrument that is essentially internal and 'hidden', I have spent much of my career exploring ways to optimize vocal freedom for individual expression within Western classical music performance. With a view to facilitating a renewed perspective on my own tradition's processes of teaching and learning, to question and perhaps re-evaluate certain aspects of Western classical voice training, my research concerns the transmission and development of skill in advanced solo vocal performance within the Karnatic classical tradition of South India – a tradition that is fundamentally oral. This paper focuses on listening in the teaching and learning processes and its significance for development of an individual 'voice' for the expression of both compositional and improvisatory material in Karnatic music performance.

METHODOLOGY

Much insight into world music pedagogies, including those embedded in Western music traditions (e.g. Bennett, 1980; Berliner, 1994; Kingsbury, 1988; Nettl, 1995; Rice, 1994), comes from ethnomusicology. Since Merriam identified learning as a central theoretical concern of the discipline, writing a full chapter on it in his seminal work *The Anthropology of Music* (1964), the theme of teaching and learning has been given considerable attention (Rice, 2003).

Stemming from a deeply held belief that music is far more than an art and entertainment, that the musical 'work' is inseparable from its production and reception, ethnomusicologists have explored music systems from the 'inside' as 'participant-observers' in the field. In the process of developing musical skill *in situ* over an extended period, usually under the guidance of a single indigenous expert, not only is the structure of the music "apprehended operationally" (Baily, 2001, p. 94), but researchers become attuned to the socio-cultural context of learning, teaching and performing. Turning their attention increasingly to the *how* (Blacking, 1967) and the *why* (Seeger, 1987) of music transmission, researchers gain greater understanding of the perceptions of those who make the music or for whom it is particularly significant or meaningful.

Much culturally situated knowledge of the teaching and learning of Indian classical music has been acquired using this methodological research tool. Tending to focus on instrumental music, many such studies address the topic of music education in the context of a broader examination (e.g. Brown, 1965; Higgins, 1994; Kippen, 1988; Neuman, 1990). While an understanding of the *what* of Indian classical music transmission is at the core of this research, particularly in relation to singing traditions (e.g. Sanyal & Widdess, 2004; Wade, 1984) and those musical and cultural dimensions specific to the Karnatic tradition of South India (e.g. Catlin, 1980; Cormack, 1992; Ravikiran, 2006; Viswanathan 1977; Weidman, 2006), the methodological approach is more profoundly influenced by ethnomusicological monographs of oral traditions where music teaching and learning are the central focus. These studies examine pedagogical processes in detail: in Hindustani classical instrumental

and vocal music (Booth, 1986; Morris, 2004; Scott, 1997), non-classical Indian music traditions (Groesbeck, 1995), other non-European music traditions (Feay-Shaw, 2002; Halliwell, 1994; Wong, 2001) and folk music traditions (Garrison, 1985; Ramnarine, 2003; Veblen, 1991). Located at the interstices of the sociology of music education and ethnomusicology, this research also draws on issues of cultural diversity in music education (e.g. Campbell, 1991; Schippers, 2010) and the significance of orality within informal learning environments of non-classical Western musics (e.g. Bennett, 1980; Berliner, 1994; Campbell, 1995; Green, 2001; Lilliestam, 1996). Employing different combinations of ethnographic methodologies with different levels of cultural immersion, these studies seek to explicate indigenous understandings of musical transmission.

Despite dramatic societal changes in modern India and influences from the diverse pedagogic approaches of a global diasporic community, the special contact between master (guru) and disciple (*shishya*) is still considered fundamental to the transmission of musical expertise in contemporary Karnatic vocal training. While *shishyas* today are unlikely to experience the traditional total learning environment of *gurukulavasam*,¹ the guru-*shishya* relationship remains pivotal in providing a community of “situated learning” (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Where conditions militate against supporting ‘traditional’ aspects of the relationship, fundamental principles would seem to be kept alive, in spirit if not in practice, through various adaptive strategies (Grimmer, 2011). To facilitate a broad understanding of vocal transmission in these changing environments, data was collected from nine guru-*shishya* ‘hubs’ using a variety of methodological tools, rather than from direct experience of a single teaching and learning context.

DATA COLLECTION

Extensive fieldwork was undertaken between 2006 and 2008 in South Indian urban centres, including Mysore, Bangalore and Chennai. Designed to facilitate qualitative insight into both formal and informal contexts for teaching and learning outside institutional environments, two layers of data were collected.

Primary data include lesson observations (principally one-to-one with some group classes); observations of *shishyas* in the company of their guru outside the lesson environment; observations of music-related *shishya* activities without the guru present; and in-depth interviews with gurus and their *shishyas*. Nine gurus (six male, three female) and 15 *shishyas* (six male, nine female) were involved; some were interviewed and observed on several occasions across the fieldwork period. Secondary data were drawn from more general observations of the socio-cultural context of performance and from conversations with other parties connected less directly to the teaching and learning of Karnatic singing. These included music academics, *rasikas*² and Hindustani musicians, both performers and gurus.

¹ *Gurukulavasam* (Sanskrit) refers to a traditional method in which the disciple lived with the guru, learning music by a process of slow absorption and serving the guru as a member of his or her household. For a closer examination of *gurukulavasam* in the post-colonial politics of music in South India see Weidman (2006).

² Literally meaning “one who can experience *rasa*” (essence, beauty), this Sanskrit term is used to describe a discerning listener or connoisseur of poetry, dance and fine arts.

KARNATIC MUSIC OF SOUTH INDIA: THE FUNDAMENTALS OF A CLASSICAL TRADITION

While the two classical musics of India share essential elements, including certain *ragas* (melody types), Karnatic music is strikingly different from its Hindustani counterpart:³ improvisatory boundaries are determined more profoundly by the rendition of compositions; ornamental articulation is given greater emphasis, resulting in a particular vocal production; textual content is predominantly religious; and the typical ensemble has some different instrumentation.⁴ In addition, the socio-cultural history of each canonical style has given rise to different pedagogies and associated social networks.

Karnatic music involves an unusual combination of compositions (*kalpita sangita*) and a wide range of improvisatory possibilities (*manodharma sangita*). Rather than being mutually exclusive modes of musical activity, they are integrated and intertwined; the former are perceived as flexible, the latter as structured. Within certain boundaries determined by a particular stylistic school (*bani*), certain freedoms are possible when rendering a composition, whilst improvisation is profoundly influenced by and structured according to the composition to which it relates. Developing awareness of the subtle effects of form on *raga*, understanding what is fixed within what is flexible, is fundamental in the training (Viswanathan & Cormack, 1998):

The principles that govern the compositional rendition have to be as strong as the principles that govern improvisatory music... When you sing, the boundary doesn't exist. That's the beauty of it to me. And the most important thing in freedom is discipline (Nandi, guru).

So there is an interesting dialectic that arises in Karnatic music between the concepts of improvisation and composition. While creativity and originality are essential characteristics of vivid performance, fidelity to the composition is considered critical:

The beauty is that we have fabulous compositions that are like our nucleus to create music... The compositional kernel is like a musical 'root' that provides a structure, a 'bedrock' for improvisation... The hand in glove fashion by which composed music and improvisatory music go together is very unique in this form (Nandi, guru).

Individual expression of the raga

Raga, the foundation of melodic composition and improvisation in Indian classical music, is a complex entity. Definitions, particularly those excluding knowledge gained from practical experience, seem to fall short of encapsulating its multi-faceted dimensions (Viswanathan & Cormack, 1998). Van der Meer suggests that "we must refrain from definition" (van der Meer, 1980, p. 3), perceiving that the profound implications of *raga* grow and become clear only in the course of study. Nevertheless, many musicians seem to understand the *raga* as a 'musical entity' or 'framework' that behaves according to its context for the generation of melodies and moods. Traditionally defined as *laksana*, this *raga* 'grammar' includes not just the scale but treatment of individual tones, phrases and an overall shape or 'gestalt' (*svarupa*). Ranade states that *raga* itself is "a result of processing the scale" (Ranade, 1990,

³ The bifurcation of Indian classical music is first mentioned in Haripala Deva Kallinatha's fourteenth-century Sanskrit treatise, *Sangita Sudhakara*. A distinction is made between *Karnataka sangita* and *Hindustani sangit*.

⁴ For example, the *mrdangam* (double-faced wooden drum) in Karnatic music performance replaces the *tabla* of the Hindustani tradition.

p. 74). Bringing a subtle shift to our understanding of the teaching and learning processes, this definition suggests that *shishyas* learn how to generate *ragas* in their training.

Enormous praise is given to artists who continually change and develop their *raga*-generation in performance. “Neither a guru copy nor a collage of unrelated things” (Rajani, *shishya*), individual expression in this context requires a spontaneous re-creation of *raga*, moment to moment, according to a musician’s mood, interplay with fellow performers and other external stimuli such as the audience:

A great musician, he always sings the same *raga*. Even if he sings the same *raga* 100 times, a thousand times, he sings it in different ways. Great men do different things, I mean, the same things differently (Rama, *shishya*).

Critical ineffable dimensions

Just as with the ‘feel’ in jazz and the expressive qualities in Western classical music performance that exist between and around the note-to-note structure represented by staff notation, there are equally ineffable musical dimensions considered fundamental to vital Karnatic vocal performance. Whilst these intangible dimensions might manifest through a musical device, an ornamental execution (*gamaka*)⁵ or the structural development of an improvised *alap* section,⁶ participants do not use technical or analytical terminology to describe them. Instead they try to encapsulate their essence in expressions such as: that “touch of beauty that is music” (Nandi, guru); that “pure devotion that comes innately from the bottom of the heart, without unnecessary gimmicks or intonations” (Shyam, *shishya*); that “feel that has to be created in the flow of the music” (Nandi, guru); that “devotion and deep yearning that brings out the philosophical content of the *sahitya* (text) and the spiritual content of the music” (Naresh, *shishya*). Though understated in much scholarly research on the classical music of India, particularly in relation to its teaching and learning,⁷ a strong “spiritual component” seems evident here (Slawek, 1996).

One of the participant gurus, using a rather more prosaic term to describe a particularly elusive yet vital musical dimension, explains how difficult it is to teach:

Musical elegance, that’s what makes me say aha. It’s not the line that makes me say aha. It’s that one élan, panache that comes with that line that actually makes me phwa and it’s a line I’ll have heard a million times, a zillion times. But when it comes with *that*, there’s something that hits you and says wow (Nandi, guru).

I have two students who have sung ... one who will sing all the right way of improvisation. The process is right, I can’t find one fault in what the person is singing. But there is that thing that’s missing. Now how do I teach this student to get that thing? It’s impossible. And there’s this other person who will make 27 mistakes by the time he sings four phrases, but when he sings one phrase right, I’m intuitively saying ah, that’s that, you know, that other element which I have not figured a way of explaining... How am I

⁵ A note (*svara*) can be properly defined only when the ornament (*gamaka*) traditionally associated with it is considered. *Svaras* derive their colour and individuality from this ‘ornamentation’. The characteristics of a *gamaka* can vary according to the tempo, the duration of the note being ornamented and the improvisatory form.

⁶ *Alapana*, one of five improvisatory forms performed in Karnatic music, “can be described as a melodic improvisation in free rhythm, using syllables of no meaningful significance, set within the framework of a single *raga*” (Viswanathan et al., 1998, p. 219).

⁷ Shankar (1968) discusses the devotional nature of the guru-*shishya* relationship, while Neuman (1980) and Simms (1994) touch upon the spiritual component of music practice.

supposed to get that across? You can't. But that's where listening helps. They absorb this by listening to other artists (Nandi, guru).

Woven into the very fabric of this oral pedagogy, the act of intense close listening is perceived to be the only way to grasp and absorb critical ineffable musical dimensions.

A CONTINUUM OF LISTENING IN THE LEARNING

An eminent guru interviewed for this research describes three stages in the training of a Karnatic singer as "initiation, absorption and introspection" (Jaya, guru). Maintaining the concept of these three learning phases, this section highlights the development of a *shishya's* listening capabilities. Reflecting a central theme in many of the interviews, Prada (*shishya*) explains that "the prerequisite for learning is listening... You absorb so much from listening. It makes such a difference to your understanding of music." The articulation of this tripartite listening and learning trajectory is employed to facilitate the investigation. In reality the acquisition of skills in this context is not linear: learning occurs along a continuum as a *shishya* gradually moves from an intensely monitored process, guided by the guru, to an autonomous iterative process that continues for life.

Developed out of research concerning the learning processes of Western popular musicians, Green's listening theory provides a useful framework through which to examine this material (Green, 2001, pp. 23-24). Emphasising their fluid, indiscrete nature, Green describes three main types of listening: purposive, attentive and distracted. Whilst the purposive and attentive modes might involve similar levels of focus upon musical detail, the latter is likely to inhabit a different psychological space, requiring less conscious or systematic concentration, for it is "without any specific aim of learning something in order to be able to play, remember, compare or describe it afterwards" (Green, 2001, p. 24). The distracted listening mode is far less active and often occurs when music is being played or listened to for pleasure or enjoyment. The music is heard but the attention given to it is intermittent. Particularly when rehearsing material for a 'covers' session, Green notes that Western pop musicians frequently pass from one listening mode to another, possibly even experiencing all types, during their preparations (Green, 2001, pp. 31-32).

Initiation: 'being shaped' by the guru

At early stages of the training, to establish a solid musical foundation, the *shishya* is expected to work comprehensively with a guru, to 'be shaped' by the master of a particular stylistic school (*bani*). To avoid confusion, the *shishya* is advised to surrender wholeheartedly to a single *bani* exponent. Through 'blind' copying of the guru's singing over an extended period, a *shishya* begins to embody the musical nuances of a particular lineage. With a predominance of 'purposive' listening, often a solitary activity for Western pop musicians copying recordings (Green, 2001, pp. 61-64), this process marks the beginning of the accumulation of an armoury of musical knowledge within a particular stylistic paradigm.

Traditionally in the training of the arts in India, this developmental stage involved an intense, essentially unconscious absorption in the total learning environment of *gurukulavasam*. Regarded as part of the family and living in the guru's household, a *shishya* used to be assimilated into the guru's schedule. Ranked higher than biological parent, a metaphysical entity representing God and both parents, the guru assumed ultimate

authority, in part predicated upon the *shishya's* devotion and total obedience. As the guru was living, eating, breathing and sleeping music (Neuman, 1990, p. 54), so the *shishya* absorbed the atmosphere of the art, inadvertently internalising both musical knowledge and a broader foundation of contextual information.

Contemporary *shishyas* in modern India are unlikely to experience this kind of musical immersion. Nevertheless, one of the participants involved in the research, brought up by her mother, a guru of Karnatic vocal music, describes the outcome of her enculturation in an unusually music-filled environment:⁸

Once I listen, that listen-imprint goes to my mind and then that involuntarily transforms to notes that I use. A transformation takes place in my mind and immediately I sing... It's subconscious... It just comes. My mind immediately grasps the music that way... It happens to me automatically. I don't even come to know that I am doing it (Rama, *shishya*).

Analogous with the 'just listening' quality of Green's 'distracted' mode (Green, 2001, pp. 64-69), Rama seems to have given intermittent attention to the music going on around her as a child. Akin to infant language learning, music transmission seems to have been an essentially unconscious process, much associated with having fun in the company of her mother:

I have grown up with music so I don't really remember when I first heard it... I never used to sit in front of her [my mother] and learn music like some formal training. Sometimes she used to be cooking or washing vessels and I'm just in front of her. She would sing and then I would sing (Rama, *shishya*).

This audio extract of a musical exchange between Rama and her mother recorded during an interview helps to demonstrate the extent to which significant musical detail, including the production of vocal timbre, has been absorbed from her familial environment. As the seamless exchange of musical material ascends through the range, becoming increasingly complex and extended, Rama copies her mother with extraordinary precision and fluidity ([Audio 1](#)).⁹

In more normal circumstances, lessons with the guru at this early developmental stage focus upon rendition of the compositional kernel, *kalpita sangita*. Playing a significant part in distinguishing one musician's rendition from another, the intricate ornaments (*gamakas*) that intertwine with a predominantly devotional *sahitya* (lyrics), so prominent a feature of Karnatic music, are given special attention. The *shishya* tries to imitate the guru, listening particularly to the specificity of *gamaka* articulation. This process of imitation for memorization, involving little if any analysis or depth of musical understanding, facilitates absorption of some fundamental musical aspects and a simultaneous growth of perceptual and technical skill. Requiring a mode of listening that corresponds to Green's 'purposive' model, the *shishya's* main aim is to reproduce the musical material sung by the guru in real time (Green, 2001, pp. 61-64).

⁸ See footage collected as part of a three-year AHRC-funded research project entitled "Beyond text: growing into music" (Bagirova, Baker, Banal, et al., 2009-12) exploring musical enculturation in oral traditions: the processes by which children in diverse cultures become musicians, beginning with passive exposure in infancy and culminating in adolescent participation in public performance.

⁹ Audio 1: vocal exchange between a guru mother and her daughter.

Taken from a group lesson, the precursor to individual tuition with a guru, this video extract ([Video 1](#))¹⁰ highlights the level of significant detail expected of a *shishya*'s reproduction. The guru focuses particularly on execution of the seventh note (*nishada*), providing both visual representations of the necessary musical embellishments with his hands and extensive verbal explanations (a teaching tool rarely employed in one-to-one situations). The guru helps to clarify the distinction between two different *nishadas* specific to a particular raga context. In some refrains the same *nishada* is used, whereas in others both varieties are employed:

We had to be really watchful [in a lesson]. And in that process it's not only the sound that gets into your system, it is the way it is produced, the way it is given, the way it is said (Jaya, guru).

This imitative process then continues with greater specificity once an advanced *shishya* commits to one-to-one training with a single guru; this is a significant moment for any aspiring musician. In preparation for further development, a *shishya* must be "put on a particular path" (Priya, *shishya*). "All paths are equally beautiful but it is important for a *shishya* to choose just one" (Rajani, *shishya*). Participants describe the experience of this 'surrender' to a particular stylistic school in terms of the comprehensive establishment of a musical foundation. A guru provides "the right direction and building blocks for a *shishya* to take and internalise" (Rajani, *shishya*). To establish a "good grounding" (Jaya, guru), the guru "hands over a system, helping to pin a *shishya* to tradition" (Madhu, guru). While *shishyas* might be 'shaped' by the guru at this stage (Harshad, *shishya*), they are being put "on a groove so that they can become independent" (Yatin, guru). Imitation in this context, facilitating the perpetuation of important elements of the repertoire and its interpretations, not only helps the *shishya* accumulate musical strengths but is thought to be fundamental to the development of an individual 'voice' that occurs later in the training (see Green, 2001, pp. 74-76).

Absorption: 'tuning in' to the *bani*

A boy in the streets, he gets to repeat a song without even knowing what he is doing, perfectly sometimes. That means innately that your body is tuned to sound. But after that your mind becomes curious. Then you start becoming initiated into the art. Then you start absorbing the different things, then you start comparing. The memory here plays a part reminding you what you listen[ed] to the other day (Jaya, guru).

This next phase, 'tuning in' to the *bani*, though interconnected with the previous one, involves a greater internalisation of the composition in all its complexity. Moving away from a "faulty listening" to "intelligent listening" (Natraj, guru), a *shishya* gradually embeds fundamental aspects of the tradition from the perspective of a particular stylistic school (*bani*). According to one guru, during this developmental stage, a *shishya*'s understanding of the *bani* can develop to such a level of sophistication that "after a point of time, the *shishya* listens in a fashion that you want them to listen" (Nandi, guru). On a metaphysical level, this concentrated listening is considered essential for engagement with *nada*.¹¹

In this context, the process of rote learning becomes more 'mindful', less 'blind', as the

¹⁰ Video 1: during a group lesson, a guru demonstrates two executions of the seventh note and where they occur at different points within a particular *raga* context.

¹¹ *Nada* is the manifestation of cosmic sound heard from within after prolonged yogic practice.

shishya is increasingly conscious of structures, aspects of musical grammar and the importance of those ineffable subtleties (mentioned above). In a second video extract ([Video 2](#))¹² drawn from a two-hour lesson, it is possible to see how musical knowledge embedded over several years of intense training facilitates this more sophisticated listening. With minimal verbal explanations, the guru is able to address meticulous *gamaka* detail. In addition, it would seem that the process of imitation at this level provides a mechanism for the improvement of technical skill. The *shishya* appears to develop an appropriate technical facility for execution of a particularly challenging melismatic phrase through the very process of attempting to copy it. After each of the *shishya's* attempts, the guru simply repeats the phrase in real time, providing gestural and verbal encouragement but no physiological explanations. Observed by two less advanced *shishyas* and the guru's young daughter, this exchange between the guru and *shishya* seems focused and intense yet playful at points.

Guided listening

Considered a powerful teaching tool, it is at this later stage in the training that *shishyas* are encouraged to start listening to other performers, usually in parallel with their guru training. In a sense, a *shishya's* listening is guided by the guru. As *shishyas* develop greater awareness of particular musical aspects in the lesson, so their listening 'tunes in' to those same aspects during a live performance or listening to a recording. One process feeds the other. Reflecting on his experience as a *shishya*, Nandi (guru) recalls how a feeling for the musical nuances of his own guru's *bani* developed during a lesson would significantly influence his perception of what was 'good and bad' in his broader listening. As his stylistic position within the Karnatic tradition was continually affirmed in this way, so he developed greater sensitivities to those subtle elusive dimensions that are "almost impossible" to teach (Nandi, guru):

Now what happens when you have a fixed good guru and you listen, is the process of listening and the process of teaching go hand in glove. In a sense, unnecessary influences are constantly negated because you have a good guru to guide you through the [listening] process. But at the same time, a lot of concepts, a lot of ideas about how the music is built, how the music is presented, how you internalise the music are also imbibed when you listen. So it's a very nice way by which you can, you can do both ... because there is no other way you can learn but by listening... I mean beyond a point, the classroom does not take you anywhere. It's only listening that takes you (Nandi, guru).

Though encouraged by most of the gurus, this broader listening is treated with some caution. The extent to which a guru monitors it depends upon the perceived level of a *shishya's* attunement to the *bani*. Clearly challenging in a digital age that facilitates extraordinary access to all kinds of music, some gurus attempt to restrict their *shishya's* oral consumption considerably. Others offer repertoire suggestions to enrich a *shishya's* listening palette or use discussion about what has been heard 'outside' as an opportunity to reinforce certain musical values:

You can listen to other masters, imbibe good qualities if you find anything ... but maintain your guru's *bani*... the teacher is going to instruct you, "you listen to this music, you listen

¹² Video 2: exchange between a guru and an advanced *shishya* addressing subtle rhythmic and ornamental details.

to that music, borrow this idea, borrow that idea, don't copy this, don't copy that", like that, so he'll give instructions (Tarak, guru).

Introspection: developing "my way of listening"

Tarak (guru): My father was the first guru, then my eldest brother, he was my second guru. After that I had good contacts with the great stalwarts of yesteryears and would learn many songs from them. I improved and enriched my repertoire that way. By hearing the music of those masters, drawing on important aspects of other good music, I evolved my own style of singing.

SG: And how do you do that?

Tarak: I listened to music, developed *my way of listening*.

Now finely attuned to the subtleties of a particular stylistic school (*bani*) with a more sophisticated technical facility, a *shishya* can begin the lifelong journey towards finding an individual 'voice'. Initially supported by the guru, this critical developmental stage involves an essentially autonomous iterative process of music listening and exploration. A particular listening capability is gradually refined through a series of singing experiments. Scrutinising performances, comparing different versions of a single composition (*kalpita sangita*) or pinpointing specific improvisatory variations (*manodharma sangita*), *shishyas* build a 'friendship with the *raga*' in numerous musical contexts. In order to gradually hone their own musical persona, they begin to ascertain which of their favourite musical nuances, drawn from performances of other musicians, have expressive power when articulated through the medium of their own vocal instrument. Remaining within the boundary of the *bani*, "pulling on the strings of their guru's singing" (Shyam, *shishya*), *shishyas* gradually discover what best suits their vocal capabilities and sensibilities. As one *shishya* explains:

Of course, after a level you have to be a very discerning sponge. You need to know what to absorb and what not to absorb. Because there are certain elements of everybody's music that is only good for them. You can't reproduce it. It would be mere imitation if you did that (Naresh, *shishya*).

Add anything to your music but only after deep consideration. Be thoughtful about it. Your voice is different and your temperament is different... So think how much it [a musical aspect that you have heard and appreciate] is going to suit you and how much it'll go with your original style [*bani*] (Jaya, guru).

According to one *guru*, listening can be so finely tuned during this process that, in the end, the ear only hears musical ideas that are personally and vocally apposite. Whether in reference to the compositional or improvisatory dimensions, it is interesting that the possessive adjective is always used in this context, as if a musician takes individual charge of the *raga* at a particular point in its orally transmitted history.

DEVELOPING AN INDIVIDUAL 'VOICE': LISTENING AND SINGING IN PLAYFUL EXCHANGE

When you perform, you create your own energy through music. So it's very much part of your soul and your make-up, your physical and your mental make-up (Yash, *shishya*).

Developing an individual 'voice' in Karnatic music seems to involve a complex interplay between modes of listening and vocal experimentation. *Shishyas* gradually discover what musical material best suits them and what nuances, when expressed with their own instrument, have a unique communicative power. This iterative process helps the

accumulation of a personalized bank of musical ideas, of “remembered repertoires” (Neuman, 1990, p. 22), from which a singer can draw in the moment of performance. Slawek contends that in Hindustani music, though there is freedom as the performance unfolds, a performer is actually producing “fixed musical units” of melodic and rhythmic material that have been memorized, practised and rehearsed hundreds if not thousands of times (Slawek, 1998, p. 336). Any performance actually involves “something remembered and reproduced intact on the spot, or something created extemporaneously by recombining stored musical information in a new way that is appropriate to the musical situation of the moment” (*ibid.*, p. 336).

Whilst many of these “fixed musical units” or ideas are certainly absorbed through listening to music in a number of different settings where the *shishya* is not singing,¹³ it is through practising the improvisatory dimensions that *shishyas* acquire the necessary visceral and personal knowledge of them. In both formal and informal learning environments, certain circumstances would seem to facilitate this practical exploration of “remembered” music. Though the gurus are not always present in these environments, they are an essential link to *shishya* networks where the playful exchange of creative musical material is possible.

Lesson with the guru

One feature of a lesson that is particularly significant in this context concerns the practising of *svara kalpana*,¹⁴ one of the five improvisatory forms in Karnatic music (*manodharma*). Producing material that might be replicated in a performance, the guru and *shishya* exchange *svara kalpana* material in a call-and-response exercise. Set within a particular *raga* in relation to a specific composition, *shishyas* will either copy improvised material sung by the guru or create their own response in relation to it. The exchange is seamless and fluid. Rather than stopping to make corrections, or slowing down any of the material, the guru sings phrases in real time. According to the *shishya*'s response, these gradually increase in complexity or gravitate around a particular area that is causing the *shishya* difficulty. If the *shishya* really struggles to respond, the guru might even take over momentarily, performing an extended solo to demonstrate melodic motifs particularly appropriate to the context.

During a lesson between Natraj (guru) and Yash (*shishya*), the former version of *svara kalpana* exchange occurs, with the *shishya* attempting to copy the guru exactly ([Audio 2](#)).¹⁵ Particularly if the *shishya* is unfamiliar with the composition to which the *manodharma* relates, this helps to highlight not only the nuances of the *raga* but some particularly apposite ‘signature’ phrases. Rather than stopping the flow when Yash falters, the *guru* simply repeats another phrase, singing along with the *shishya* for some of his subsequent responses. As the *shishya* gradually gains in confidence during the session, so the guru plays

¹³ Though not covered in this article, *shishyas* have numerous opportunities to absorb musical ideas from live music-making contexts without actually singing themselves. For example, they might observe the lesson of a more advanced *shishya*, help their guru prepare a lecture presentation or accompany their guru in performance on the *tambura* (long-necked, four-stringed fretless lute providing the drone).

¹⁴ “*Svara kalpana* is the improvisation of melodic/rhythmic passages using *svaras* (sol-fa syllables), taking place within the *tala* (metrical cycle) of a composition” (Viswanathan & Cormack, 1998, p. 219). See Cormack (1992).

¹⁵ Audio 2: *Svara kalpana* call-and-response exchange between a guru and a *shishya*. The *shishya* is attempting to copy the guru exactly.

less of this supporting role, leaving the *shishya* to respond more independently. In an example taken from a different learning environment ([Audio 3](#)),¹⁶ the guru (Nandi) demands more independence from his *shishyas*. Alternating calls to two of them, he expects newly invented responses immediately. Because the phrases are short, the *shishyas* have little time to think or calculate. If what they sing is too similar to the guru's material, he exclaims "don't repeat what I am singing". In an atmosphere that seems playful yet focused, the guru insists that his *shishyas* create afresh. Breaking the intensity of this multiple exchange, the guru then sings an expansive, dynamic solo that provides an inspiring platform from which Vinata, the most advanced *shishya*, can extemporize with longer melismas before a small 'audience'.

One might assume that the learning in these contexts is unidirectional, from the guru to the *shishya*. Nevertheless, all the gurus interviewed consider teaching to be a fundamental part of their own creative development. One guru explains that his path is to "teach and learn, learn and teach" (Tarak, guru). Another describes how a familiar phrase, mediated through the different voice and musical personality of a *shishya*, can inspire new musical ideas:

When you teach a phrase and they get it right, it gives you aural pleasure... The pleasure you get out of your own doing is double when you get a student to do it. And then I also experience that I get something better... Ah, when I give one phrase to somebody, I get a better phrase for myself. It is not quid pro quo, it is much more than that (Natraj, guru).

Shishya community

For all the *shishyas* in this study, the principal arena for learning would seem to be lessons with the guru, either alone or in small advanced groups. Nevertheless many of the participant *shishyas* engage in other informal activities that seem to have a significant impact on their learning. The *shishya* community within a particular *bani*, often with a guru at the centre, provides extensive opportunities for *shishyas* to continue exploration of creative material beyond the guru-*shishya* context. A number of *shishyas* interviewed arrange either impromptu or regular practice sessions with other *shishyas*. Vinata perceives that working with her more advanced brother, for example, helps to broaden her inventive palette for individual expression within *svara kalpana*:

Practising with him actually helps me a lot... We practise together and take turns like in class. We do that a lot. So we pick up ideas from each other rather than from singing on our own. We give each other tips. And since we're learning from the same person, it's not like the schools are [in conflict] (Vinata, *shishya*).

Some *shishyas*, practising in larger mixed-ability groups, relish the opportunity to explore musical material they wouldn't sing in front of the guru. In a supportive atmosphere, they can try things out, receive criticism given "in a healthy way" (Jaya, guru) and draw inspiration from their contemporaries:

More than learning individually, I think this group, our team effort has done [for] each one of us great things because we are able to practise together, we are able to learn from each other. I take a lot of good qualities from them (Shilpa, *shishya*).

¹⁶ Audio 3: *Svara kalpana* call-and-response exchange between a guru and two *shishyas*. The *shishyas* are attempting to create new musical material in response to the guru.

We're very comfortable with each other and if she [fellow *shishya*] makes a mistake, I can always correct her and she won't take it in a bad way. And if she corrects me also, I am senior to her, that's fine. I can still take it and say ok there's something there (Priya, *shishya*).

Where the differences in ability might seem to be so wide as to be detrimental to a functioning process of musical exchange, *shishyas* describe finding new musical resources within themselves (resources they didn't know they had) as they attempt to respond in the moment to the call of a more advanced partner. As Blacking discovered with young Venda singers (1965), the order of acquisition of skill in music transmission is not necessarily a movement from relatively simple concepts and motor behaviours to more complex ones. Particularly if there is a motivation to learn and the material is familiar, advanced skills can be attained at unexpected stages of a musician's development:

We used to just practise together, we used to learn together. I used to sing whatever little I knew. He was at a *much* senior level compared to me and just opened this world for me. I said ha [on an in breath], I want to be there. You know sometimes you see something and say, that is, that is what I'm learning but that's not how I sing it. I want to sing it like that (Rajani, *shishya*).

As with some informal peer-group learning in non-classical Western music contexts (e.g. Bennett, 1980, p. 5; Berliner, 1994, p. 64), an element of competition seems to benefit some *shishyas* during these *manodharma* 'jamming' sessions. Whilst continually assessing what and who sounds good, there is a sense that exciting new material might be created in the frisson of a contest. Following an interview with Naresh (*shishya*) at his home, extensive discussions ensue between him and a fellow *shishya* (Shyam) about the *gamaka* detail in a particular performance. This spoken dialogue then gradually transforms into a sung one as musical material heard on the recording is explored through a dynamic competitive *svara kalpana* exchange:

I pick up nuances from him ... and I enjoy it because I am picking up something which I don't know... We try to compete with each other but it is not, it is a healthy competition. We try to see who becomes better and at the same time we learn. There are some things that he would want to pick up from me and I would want to take it from him (Shyam, *shishya*).

Provoked by musical material heard live rather than on a recording, one of the gurus recalls rushing home from concerts with fellow *shishyas* and 'jamming' for hours, trying to remember especially affecting musical nuances or criticizing certain *raga* executions:

It was about second year of college when I started singing a lot, when I figured that this was something I loved doing... I had a couple of friends and we used to jam every day. We used to, I mean that was the best time, in fact I didn't practise like that ever [again]. I used to go to college for two hours and then just go to his house, have lunch and all afternoon we would sing. We would just sing all afternoon. We'd just take one raga and sing, nonsense or not, we would sing for three or four hours. We'd go to a concert and they would have sung a raga there that we would be pissed about. They sang it horribly. So we'd come back home and sing it for the next three hours (Nandi, guru).

Expanding his network of fellow *shishyas* further afield, Naresh (*shishya*) regularly 'jams' in the virtual realm. He meets members of an international community of Karnatic musicians via a live internet forum to exchange musical ideas.

Make mistakes

I give them some [*manodharma*] exercise... I say to them, sing random. Don't even worry that you have to finish here or you have to finish there, just keep blabbering something. So you get into the flow of it. Then you can think about the how, the where, the context... Get used to the flow first... They may not do it in the class but they will walk outside and automatically they will start singing, humming this tune. So that's it, the end result of the atmosphere you provide [as the guru] is going to contribute most to their learning... I tell them make mistakes. Go ahead... Whatever you want to do, sing, attempt, make an attempt (Jaya, guru).

As this quotation implies, and from much of the data from both interviews and observations, it would seem that *shishyas* are encouraged to find pleasure in the process of musical exploration, particularly at the latter stages of their training. Rather than being afraid of making mistakes, they seem to be positively encouraged to do so. The atmosphere in many of the observed lessons, an aspect rarely discussed in pedagogical music research, might be described as 'seriously playful'. Partly assisted by the continuous sounding of the drone (*sruti*), there is a sense of fluidity and movement in any exchange whether 'mistakes' are made or not. If a singer struggles to respond or makes a 'mistake', the music doesn't stop. The guru might sing another phrase, the *shishya* might laugh, but a flow of creativity in perpetual motion is nurtured as the overtones of a simulated *tambura*¹⁷ resonate from an electrical *sruti* box:

It's about developing the flow and it's about getting rid of the fear of making mistakes. It's very important... I feel very nice when I am making mistakes in class because that way, two things. One is I can listen to the guru sing that phrase a number of times [laughs]. It's very nice, it feels nice [relieved exhalation of breath]. It feels so soothing, comforting ... if he's in a good mood [laughs]. And secondly because, that way I've got that mistake off my chest. That mistake is bound to happen [laughs]. It's bound to happen either today or, I might as well phew, there you go, there you go, this is my mistake, this is my own beautiful creation [laughs] (Rajani, *shishya*).

CREATIVITY IN PERPETUAL MOTION

In conclusion, it seems that this process of creative development, manifest in so many different pedagogical settings, both formal and informal, continues throughout a singer's life. Drawing creative inspiration from listening, Karnatic singers continually develop and hone their own individual musical ideas. Singers gradually develop a unique way of listening that informs the kind of material they absorb into their creative music (from what they hear). This listening is filtered through a number of paradigms: the classical tradition; a particular *bani*; an expanding musical knowledge; an evolving vocal skill; a growing awareness of vocal strengths and weaknesses; and individual musical preferences.

As singers are exposed to an expanding range of musical material, gain knowledge and understanding of how it works, and develop an increasingly sophisticated vocal facility through exploration of the music in question, so they become more attuned to the unique qualities of their own voice. Combined with a particular musical sensibility that is brought to

¹⁷ The *tambura*, a long-necked lute, provides the basic tonic drone (*adhara sadja*). Four, five or six strings are played with the middle finger while the index finger plays the remaining *sadja* strings in the middle and lower octaves.

the fore in this process, these factors together construct a perpetually changing cyclical framework for developing musical creativity.

At a certain stage you understand your music... I mean, it took me years and years and years and years to even figure out what that was. I think it is like an individual maturing as a person, it falls in the same bracket as that... you reach a stage where you know who you are (Nandi, guru).

Perfection in music or in any other art is a journey not a destination. You can't be perfect at all. It is only a destination. It's a journey you must be going [on] all through your life. You may reach the destination or not... That's really very very important I say. You cannot be a perfect man. Nobody is perfect excepting the Almighty (Tarak, guru).

Music is a continuous process. We teach, we learn, we sing, we learn, we perform, we learn, and still that goes on... It keeps going. The learning, the learning curve is always there (Yatin, guru).

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