Exploring the Value of Bimusicality: A Journey into South Indian (Carnatic) Vocal Percussion

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Note: Because a portion of my paper was performance based, the reader is referred to a compilation of the same material, although slightly expanded, as presented and recorded several months prior at another venue: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ul-98k7-1P0&feature=youtu.be. Time stamps to the relevant material in the video recording will be included in square brackets throughout this paper.

[Performance: 21:45-22:04.] This is *konnakol*, a vocal percussion art form from the South Indian classical tradition. I took my first steps into this artistic tradition as part of fulfilling the requirements for my last class towards an M.A. in World Arts from the Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics in Dallas. This class, a Directed Practicum, required me to study some kind of artistic tradition that was new to me, and the motivation for such a course stems from Mantle Hood's suggestion, in 1960, that the ethnomusicologist should aspire to *bimusicality*, or extending one's musical skills so as to be able to function competently within another artistic tradition. But *why* do we do it? Learning another artistic tradition is *hard*; it requires an extraordinary amount of patience, discipline, and persistence. Scholars[1] have noted many different kinds of challenges—physical, mental, and emotional—beleaguering the path of anyone pursuing this kind of excellence. So did I gain anything from the investment of all this time and energy into another practice? Is there any lasting value to working through these kinds of obstacles? I'd like to try and answer these questions based on my experiences with South Indian vocal percussion. So first, please join me on a brief recap of my journey into this musical tradition. Then, after we've shared a bit of the journey together, we'll come back and explore why learning another artistic tradition might be worth all this trouble.

Indian music is considered by most scholars to be the oldest music system on earth. This system consists of two major streams, or styles, stemming from the same foundation. In the north you'll find Hindustani, which, beginning several centuries ago, has absorbed more of the Muslim influences. In the south you'll find the Carnatic stream, found in the five major southern states of Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and the recently formed Telangana. There's a great deal of overlap between these two streams of Indian music, so these are just rough divisions, and they share a lot of the same concepts, but the terminology and emphases in performance in each are somewhat different. For the rest of this presentation I will be focusing on Carnatic (South Indian) music, which is what I studied with my mentor.

My mentor was Rohan Krishnamurthy, the son of immigrants from India to the United States in the second half of the twentieth century. Rohan has stayed closely connected to his Indian heritage through disciplined lessons and practice in South Indian percussion, which has allowed

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[1] Aubert 2007 lists "impassable psychological barriers," pp. 76-7; see also Hood 1960.

him to build his career around performing and teaching in this tradition. In fact, he has played for dignitaries in India and is respected by professional musicians there as well as here in the USA. He's best known for his performances on the *mridangam*, one of the most ancient and popular drums of India, but he also teaches this vocal percussion art form known as *konnakol*.

In total, I had ten hours worth of lessons with Rohan. We had our first lesson in person, sitting on the floor, cross-legged, in the traditional manner of an Indian percussionist; however, we held the rest of our lessons over Skype. In-between lessons, I practiced at least one hour a day—by now I've practiced about eighty hours in the tradition. I also read books, watched video clips, and listened to recordings to learn more about the world of Carnatic music.

Let's move into some of the technical aspects of Carnatic percussion. The rhythmic underpinning of a piece of music is called the *tala*, a metrical cycle that repeats at a constant tempo throughout the duration of the piece. Accompanying hand gestures create a physical and visual way of marking time within the *tala*. Two of the most common gestures are the clap (in which the palms strike each other) and the wave (in which the top of one hand strikes the palm of the other).

One common *tala* is *misra chapu*, a cycle of 7 beats. On the PowerPoint [see slide shown at 17:45 of the video] you can see the gestures. The "W" stands for a wave, and the "C" stands for a clap. Let's try it: [18:11-18:19]. Now, our English numbers "one, two, three, four, five, six, seven" are not very consistent in their formation—for example, "seven" has two syllables, and "three" has a consonant cluster at the beginning. We encounter similar problems with the numbers as expressed in the languages of India. To remedy this issue, Indian musicians devised a set of consistent syllables that require minimal mouth movement to articulate. One set that goes with *misra chapu* is ta-ki-Ta-ta-ka-di-mi. This is *konnakol*, using syllables to express rhythms. These syllables were originally used for pedagogy—helping students learn rhythms, translating them into dance steps, or translating them into strokes on percussion instruments, where certain syllables dictate specific positioning of the fingers/hands on instruments such as the *mridangam*. Although originally designed for pedagogy, *konnakol* has since become an art form in its own right and can be heard as part of percussion ensembles.

Historically, students in the Carnatic tradition have learned orally and aurally. Various attempts have been made, over the past few centuries, to create a helpful notation system, but none of them has been standardized. In that spirit, Rohan has developed his own notation system, and I'll be using his system when I show you excerpts. Note that all the excerpts in this presentation are taken from Rohan's own composition, *Misra Musings*, which he wrote for his students (Krishnamurthy 2006). This notation cycle features one *tala* cycle per row, with each cell representing one beat of the *tala*. Each symbol gets the same time duration: syllables represent sounds, while hyphens represent silence. Underlining indicates that the symbols should be performed twice as fast [11:47-12:04]. I had the benefit of learning from notation, which meant I could cover more ground. It also meant that I didn't have to spend time figuring out how to notate the music before I could analyze it for deeper understanding—so a significant part of my studies included learning how Carnatic percussion solos are put together.

Let's explore some of the major principles involved. First, a composer and/or improvising performer wants to introduce changes gradually. You can see a change here [13:26] from duple into triple time, but Rohan doesn't make the change suddenly, in just in one line. Instead, he gives just a hint of it in one line, then another hint in the next, and finally, in the third, he moves completely into triple subdivisions. This transition sounds like this: [13:42-13:52].

A second important compositional principle is that you want to build energy, so you move from simple to more complex constructions throughout each *line* as well as throughout each formal section in a composition. These formal sections also build in energy relative to one another, so the most rhythmically complex sections occur near the end of the piece. In this example [14:07] I've highlighted the squares where something extra, like a new syllable, or a thicker, heavier-sounding syllable, has been inserted to make a line slightly more complicated than the preceding line. This is called *additive embellishment*, in which you start with a basic line and make each subsequent line slightly more complex by adding something [14:25-14:38].

Third, Carnatic percussionists want to avoid undue repetition, such as repeating the same line more than once. Here's an example in which the same line occurs three times [14:56-15:07]. Musicians may use a number of techniques to create variety in this kind of situation, such as using additive embellishment, as we just saw, in which they add in pieces gradually. They might also strategically omit syllables in order to create interest. They could substitute some different syllables, such as using a different set of three ("di ta ka") to replace the given set of three ("ki Ta ka")—Rohan likens this process to building with Lego blocks and simply substituting a different colored block somewhere in the structure. Yet another technique is to change the placement of the vocal accents in each line, which is the technique I've chosen for my example. The bold font denotes syllables to be accented vocally. You'll see that, in the spirit of adding changes gradually, I made one set of changes in the second line, then retained those changes and added another small change in the final line, moving us step by step towards more complexity. With these small modifications, these three lines now sound like this: [16:02-16:13].

The final principle we'll discuss here is the convention of using cadences to delineate the conclusion of one formal section and launch both performer and listener into a new section of the composition. The cadence consists of a motif that is shorter than one *tala* in length and is repeated three times. This convention is called the *theermanam*. You can see that I've highlighted this thrice-repeated pattern in yellow on the slide [16:49-16:59].

We're going to put all of this together with a longer excerpt from this piece we've been examining, *Misra Musings*, in order to demonstrate in context the elements I've presented. As you listen, note especially the increased rhythmic interest near the ends of *tala* cycles as well as the overall build in energy created by the movement from simpler rhythms to more complex throughout the excerpt. Since a Carnatic audience would keep the *tala*, please feel free to join me. I'll get you started and then take off performing. Of course, please also feel free to drop out at any time if it gets too complicated or if you'd prefer just to listen [*Misra Musings* excerpt performance 18:11-22:04].

Now, I didn't get to this point overnight. Remember the obstacles I referenced at the beginning? Consider, for example, the physical challenge of figuring out where to take a breath when there aren't any breaks in the syllable stream. Or the emotional challenge of questioning my musicianship when I was struggling in a musical tradition that I haven't heard and practiced my whole life. Or the aesthetic challenge of sticking with this tradition long enough to get to the point that it finally began to produce associations with "music" for me.

Given these and similar kinds of obstacles, let's return to our original question: Why might it be worth pursuing bimusicality? It seems that when Hood first coined the term, his motivation was purely functional; he simply wanted to be sure that one's "observations and analysis as a musicologist do not prove to be embarrassing." That motivation isn't sufficient for me—why not simply find a local expert to check our work? Why not simply encourage a local expert to do the

performing? No, there needs to be a better reason for us to invest ourselves in another artistic tradition.

Various authors have explored this question, many highlighting a deeper sense of personal satisfaction achieved from pursuing excellence in another tradition.[2] Likewise, I found myself launched into this realm of unforeseen rewards when, only a few weeks into my lessons, Rohan said to me: "This is amazing. You're doing great! I've got to connect you with some of my students in Dallas!" A week later, he sent me the email address of a Dallas student's mom so I could consult with her about sources of authentic Indian clothes. That email has been the beginning of a friendship that has gained me access to the south Indian community in Dallas in a way I could never have anticipated. I've been invited to various artistic events, including the upcoming graduation recital of a Carnatic percussion student. As a result of the artistic connection, I've been invited to several social events. Beyond the social and artistic realms, I've also been invited into the community on a professional level. In January I was invited to speak at a conference for Ek Sitara, an organization whose goal is to feature, in their words, "accomplished and upcoming performing artists studying art forms foreign to their inherited ethnic/cultural background." Since the event was also attended by many students from the tradition, I was even given the privilege of becoming part, to some small extent, of the transmission of this artistic tradition.

And so I discovered some of the deepest values of bimusicality: The opportunity to show respect for others by taking their artistic tradition seriously; the ability to connect emotionally, touching hearts directly through a beloved art form; and the richness of negotiating relationship, of being changed by interaction with others and by in turn enriching their interactions with the world around them. These are the kinds of reasons to persevere, to face the obstacles. These are the kinds of reasons to give our lives, our best energy, to the pursuit of another artistic tradition.

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[2] See, for example, Beaudry (1997), Rice (1997), and Shelemay (1997).

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