

## **Role, Status and Hierarchy in the Performance of North Indian Classical Music**

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*In this article we describe and interpret the interactions that take place between participants in performances of North Indian classical music. Since this music is shaped largely in the moment of performance, its success depends on felicitous interactions between participants, so understanding these interactions is key to understanding the musical tradition. Aspects of these interactions we consider here include the roles assumed by participants and their complementarity; the various hierarchies that exist amongst participants and are related to those roles; the expression of authority and deference; and the causes and results of conflict in performance. Although some of these issues have been noted in previous academic literature, they have not previously been subjected to a sustained and wide-ranging enquiry that draws extensively on first-person accounts of performing musicians. The theoretical orientation of our interpretation owes most to the classic sociological work of Erving*

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*Goffman, with reference to the particular ways in which authority, social hierarchy and deference are understood in South Asia.*

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## **Introduction**

North Indian (Hindustani) classical music is a soloistic tradition, in which performance is understood to be controlled by a virtuosic singer or instrumentalist (in the most common Indian usage, the ‘main artist’) who manages one or more supporting musicians (occasionally referred to as ‘co-artists’). The soloist makes decisions about the materials to be presented, as well as the structural unfolding of the performance, sets the tempo and instructs the other musicians more or less explicitly as to the kind of support he or she requires.<sup>2</sup> The relationship between soloist and accompanists is crucial for a successful performance, but often under-prepared and at the mercy of numerous intervening circumstances: a poor match can lead to disastrous results, while a good combination helps to bring the best out of gifted and highly-trained artists. The complexity of performance interactions is increased by the fact that the distinctions between musicians and other participants are often blurred—a paradox, given the highly virtuosic nature of the music. On one hand, players of the accompanying lute *tānpūrā* are barely recognised as musicians at all—unless, as students of the main artist, they also sing occasionally; on the other hand, an expert listener in the audience can contribute tangibly to the success of proceedings.

Conflict and contestation between soloist and accompanist, although usually covert, is a recognised phenomenon in the North Indian tradition, and one on which anecdotes abound.

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<sup>2</sup> As Napier puts it, the soloist controls the syntagmatics and the teleology of a performance (2007: 274).

Although rarely considered in any depth in academic writing, the topic is often mentioned as a notable feature of the music. Kippen's study of the *tablā*, for instance, includes a section on 'politics'—the English term commonly used in India to describe musicians' manoeuvres to enhance their own status and degrade that of their rivals (1988: 54–62). In more recent sources, Qureshi interviews *sārangī* master Sultan Khan on the topic of competition (2007: 169–73), Napier discusses contestation of authority between singers and their melodic accompanists in some detail (2007), and Dard Neuman analyses a fragment from a performance by Kesarbai Kerkar in which he sees tension between the singer and her *sārangī* accompanist (2004: 295–300). What emerges from these accounts, and from our own research, is the palpable sense of risk that is often experienced by musicians: risk that a performance may fail or, more importantly, that one's own reputation may be damaged by what transpires. The sense that what happens in performance may have serious consequences for one's livelihood should not be forgotten: here, musical performance is anything but consequence-free.

In this article we investigate performance interactions in greater ethnographic detail than has previously been attempted, particularly in as much as they potentially and actually give rise to conflict. Our interpretation is that conflict is largely the outcome of contradictions between overlapping socio-musical hierarchies played out in socially and economically consequential fora; that this conflict is mediated through gestural, verbal and musical means, and that therefore are important to a full understanding of musical performance. Although issues such as rules of proper demeanour and the management of conflict between musicians on stage have been raised in previous academic literature, they have not previously been subjected to a sustained and wide-ranging enquiry which draws extensively on the first-person accounts of performing musicians. These accounts attest to the prominence of concerns such as relative status and seniority, and the potential for friction and antagonism

within ensembles, in the everyday lives of performing musicians. These issues are not peripheral to North Indian classical music culture, but shape the activities of musicians and contribute to musical decisions. Issues of hierarchy, teamwork and conflict are not simply a matter of personal anxiety and negotiation. In discussing them, musicians outline sometimes contrasting ethical and ideological positions, and the discussion in these pages makes it clear that any understanding of social and musical change in India needs to take into account the complex relationship between changes in the social and economic status of musicians, shifting ideologies and the dynamics of musical interactions.

In interpreting these phenomena we employ a number of terms whose academic definitions are worth setting out at this point. In particular, we deploy some of the language of Erving Goffman's sociology and more recent work on which it has had an influence. 'Demeanour' and 'deference' are understood here in the senses clarified by Goffman: demeanour as 'behaviour typically conveyed through deportment, dress, and bearing, which serves to express that he is a person of certain desirable or undesirable qualities' (1956: 489) is distinguished analytically from deference, 'a symbolic means by which appreciation is regularly conveyed *to* a recipient *of* this recipient, or of something of which this recipient is taken as a symbol, extension, or agent' (1956: 477). Deference, in Goffman's account, is not necessarily shown only by subordinates to those in a superordinate position, but may be expressed symmetrically or from superordinate to subordinate actor. The two phenomena, of course, are intimately related and in practice it is difficult to talk about one without the other. Deference may be displayed by subordinate actors to communicate that they are willing to give way to the other's will, such as when 'yielding to higher status actors is believed to promote mutually desirable outcomes' (Colwell 2007: 443). It is also vitally important in helping to maintain the 'face' of participants in an interaction (Goffman [1967] 2005):

exaggerated shows of deference are likely to occur alongside actions that would otherwise threaten another's face.<sup>3</sup>

Two other aspects of this theoretical tradition will also be employed here. First, the concept of 'role', which is central to Goffman's dramaturgical perspective: in our account, participants in a musical event take on specific roles such as 'soloist' or 'accompanist', each of which invites others to fulfil complementary roles.<sup>4</sup> One way of understanding conflict between actors is as the result of clashes between these expectations: if actor A, through his demeanour, attempts to recruit actor B to a role the latter does not wish to fulfil (e.g. of subordinate accompanist), conflict ensues. Related to these concepts are those of social hierarchy (since each place, or status, in a hierarchy is enacted as a role in face to face interactions). It is also, of course, related to concepts of authority and power: although Goffman has been accused of failing to develop a theory of power worthy of his descriptions of interaction (see e.g. Hallett 2007), the idea that power and authority are attached to those in superordinate positions in a hierarchy—and that face to face interactions can be the locus of contestations of that authority—are clearly implicit in this approach. Finally, we deploy Goffman's concept of the 'performance team', defined by him as the 'set of individuals who cooperate in staging a single routine' (Goffman 1990: 85). Specifically, we explore the idea that the 'performance team' comprises not only the musicians on stage, but a wider group of active participants, including audience members and patrons or organisers, invested in the success of the event.

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<sup>3</sup> The term 'politeness' is used by sociolinguists in a similar sense (Morand 1996).

<sup>4</sup> In his 1959 book Goffman introduces the concept of role with reference to three principal roles, those of team member, audience member and outsider (144). Here we extend the concept to the differentiated functions within the team of performers, while simultaneously playing down the performer-audience distinction.

Performances of North Indian classical music take place in a wide variety of settings, from an informal *baiṭhak* or *mehfil*—a small-scale event, often in a patron’s home, in which most listeners sit on the floor, either at the same level or just below that of the stage—to large concert halls or arenas in which listeners are seated on chairs at some distance from the performers. Significantly, the small-scale intimate space is generally constructed as the ideal context for this music. This may be partly to do with an assumed link to courtly musical performance in the past, but is also because an intimate setting is understood to allow for rich verbal and non-verbal interactions between participants. In the *baiṭhak*, and sometimes even in the concert hall, performers will be very conscious of the presence of other musicians, critics or connoisseurs, patrons or concert organisers, who will generally sit in the front.

Shared ideas about proper demeanour ensure that certain proprieties are observed as a matter of routine (Neuman [1980] 1990, Silver 1984). So, for example, if recognised musicians or other respected guests are present in the audience a performer will greet them—if they are clearly senior to the main artist on stage, he or she will request their permission before beginning to perform. Accompanists will show approval (*dād*) for the work of the soloist, and the soloist will reciprocate with a display of appreciation for their efforts, while expert listeners too will show their appreciation—gesturally and/or verbally—at appropriate points (knowing what those points are, of course, is one marker of the expert listener; (Clayton 2005)). The respect and appreciation in this show of mutual deference is often entirely genuine and heartfelt. However, it cannot conceal from experienced listeners that all is not always as smooth as these gestures make it appear. Musicians frequently feel uncomfortable with each other for one reason or another and, although it is rare for any to show their discomfort unambiguously or to fight openly, the fact that anecdotes of such occasions circulate for decades after they have taken place is a testament to their rarity—they will readily admit to such feelings after the event.

In the north Indian context, matters concerning deference and demeanour will often be understood with reference to the Urdu term *adab* (translated as good manners, politeness, civility). This concept has some currency even outside of Muslim communities: as Metcalf describes, ‘*adab* is shaped... by a superregional, cosmopolitan culture’ (1984: 15). In Hindi/Urdu *nāḱ* (‘nose’) has a similar usage to the English ‘face’: thus, ‘to cut off one’s nose’ means to be dishonoured. We suggest here that although the rules for when, how and to whom deference should be shown are undoubtedly specific to this context, in many respects these concepts work in the same way as ‘deference’ or ‘politeness’ in Western social science literature. Thus appropriate demeanour includes the use of deference (*adab*) to repair situations in which the face (*nāḱ*) of a musician may be compromised.

Given that the relationship between main artist and accompanist is a critical one, it is perhaps remarkable that performing groups are not fixed, but are often assembled *ad hoc*. For sure, experienced soloists have their preferred accompanists, and in some cases they will be able to insist on their presence, but few musicians are sufficiently in demand to be able to set such conditions, and promoters are unlikely to want to spend high fees and travel costs on accompanists if they have people who they consider competent to do the job locally. Organisers of music festivals, which typically run for two to four days, will often hire a pair of accompanists to play with several singers and another *tablā* player for the instrumentalists. It is therefore not unusual for musicians to meet each other for the first time in the green room—or even on stage, moments before a concert is to begin. This is a cause of stress for the main artist, who will be looking for reassurance that the accompanists can provide the support they require, and puts a burden on accompanists to quickly assess the main artist’s style and try to work out what kind of accompaniment (*saṅgat*) is needed—in the harmonium player’s case, they may only discover on stage both the *rāg* to be sung and the pitch the

singer will use.<sup>5</sup> These tests of musicianship and performance know-how are often undertaken, as noted above, in the presence of highly knowledgeable listeners, who will judge how well musicians rise to the challenges.

Although the focus of this article is not on changes to the social organisation of Indian music, some aspects of the present situation cannot be understood without reference to the historical context. At least two relevant socio-musical changes have taken place in the last hundred years or so, which have been well documented and discussed in the scholarly literature. One significant change in the early twentieth century was the move by several musicians from *sāraṅgī*-playing families to establish themselves as solo singers, to which end they needed to give up their low-status accompanying instrument (Bor 1986–7; Dard Neuman 2004). Another factor is the entry of large numbers of Hindus into the music profession: from the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the efforts of music educators and reformers, particularly S. M. Tagore in Bengal and the Maharashtrians V. N. Bhatkhande and Vishnu Digambar Paluskar, paved the way for this change (Bakhle 2005; Daniel Neuman 1977).

In West Bengal and Maharashtra—the principal sites of our research—the classical music scene is now dominated by Hindus, and few appear to be conscious of the distinctions

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<sup>5</sup> It is perhaps surprising that rehearsal is not considered an essential preparation for performance. In part this is because performances are extemporised: rather than attempting to practice everything that might happen in performance—which is futile by definition—the main artist's focus is on assuring himself that his accompanists have the skill and attitude required (or that he is forewarned of any deficiencies). Practice varies considerably, but the most common approach is for musicians to sit together for a brief preparatory session in the green room before a concert. The main artist tells the accompanists what he is planning to present and quickly runs through the *bandiśhes* (compositions) so that the accompanists have advance warning of any unusual features that will have to be accommodated. Instrumentalists sometimes run through elaborate ending *tihāīs* for their *tablā* players' benefit. Accompanists also know, however, that repertoire often changes between the green room and the stage!



of status between different Muslim musician families. The earlier social distinction between soloist and accompanist lineages has not been replicated, so any sense of superiority in the former is not generally underpinned by an obvious social distinction. Where this history may continue to shape the tradition, however, is in the continuing sense amongst many soloists that accompanists are—in a musical sense—there to serve them; so amongst many accompanists, therefore, struggles over status and authority need to continue to be fought. In other words, some of the social dynamics that developed in a feudal context between higher- and lower-status court servants, or between established urban specialists and rural migrants, continue to shape the musical tradition now, even though these social distinctions between musician classes are fading fast.<sup>6</sup>

This article looks in more detail at how contemporary soloists and accompanists view relationships in performance—what is at stake, musically and socially, and what can go wrong (and right). It is based on interviews and informal discussions with more than sixty musicians as well as concert organisers over a decade of research, and observations and analyses of performances documented over the same period. Questions we discuss here include: how are roles and therefore hierarchies and relative status, determined? How are these roles asserted, negotiated or challenged in performance—what kinds of claims to authority can be deployed in doing so? How do these processes help to shape the course of musical performances? These questions are answered with reference to a number of examples from our ethnographic research that has been carried out among both established and upcoming musicians (singers, solo instrumentalists and accompanists) belonging to a number of different stylistic schools (*gharānās*).

We consider next the relationship between the roles available to participants, the spatial layout of typical performances, and normal modes of interaction that may be

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<sup>6</sup> For more on this topic see Qureshi 2000, 2002.

observed. This outline will help to frame our discussion of hierarchy, negotiation and other aspects of socio-musical interaction.

### **Musical Roles, Spatial Arrangement and Interaction Norms in Performance**

The most common ensemble formats in this tradition comprise (a) a solo singer with *tablā*, and harmonium players and one or more *tānpūrā* players, and (b) a solo instrumentalist with *tablā*, player (who may also use one or more *tānpūrās*, although this function is often carried out exclusively by an electronic substitute).<sup>7</sup> In this context, musical roles are generally described as comprising the main artist, an accompanying drummer (*tablā* or *pakhāvaj*), a melodic accompanist (harmonium or *sāraṅgī*), one or more student/support artists (for a singer, a student who sings occasionally and plays *tānpūrā*; for an instrumentalist, a student who sits on stage and plays occasionally), and other *tānpūrā* players. To these roles of performing musicians we need to add those of the expert listener, concert organiser and sound engineer in order to fully understand how performance is managed.

Although the key relationship is that between a main artist and accompanist, there is a lot of scope for different relationships to influence a performance, and for different dyads and larger groups to interact. Possible interactions are, however, constrained by the spatial arrangement: since musicians are all seated, only the off-stage participants have any freedom to change position once the programme has begun, and in practice most remain seated in one position for long stretches. In this section we will demonstrate how musical roles map onto

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<sup>7</sup> Common variants include a ‘*jugalbandī*’, or duet of main artists, the use of the bowed lute *sāraṅgī* instead of the harmonium, drum solo performance with melodic accompaniment, or the use of the barrel drum *pakhāvaj* instead of the *tablā*. We will not be discussing all possible ensemble formats here.

the positions occupied by participants in the performance space, and their hierarchies correspond to the different degrees of interaction they are afforded with the audience.

[INSERT Figure 1 about here]

Caption: **Figure 1** Stage layout of a vocal performance: singer Veena Sahasrabuddhe is accompanied by Vishwanath and Seema Shirodkar on *tablā* and harmonium respectively; at the back sit Surashree Ulhas Joshi (left) and Aparna Ajit Shela (right). *Source*: Still image from video recording by the authors (Pune, 15 December 2006).

In a typical vocal performance (Fig. 1), the singer sits at the centre of the stage facing the listeners: he has the greatest freedom of interaction, being able to communicate with the accompanists and to make eye contact with the expert listeners, and to decide—depending on his own habit, mood or the point reached in the performance—either to openly engage with the public or to behave in a more introverted manner.<sup>8</sup> On his right and left sides, slightly forward on the stage and angled so as to be able to face both soloist and audience, sit the *tablā* and the harmonium player respectively. The *tablā* player will often sit at an angle allowing more interaction with the audience than the harmonium player is afforded, since the latter needs to pay close attention to the singer at all times and will rarely interact with anyone other than the soloist and the *tablā* player (Clayton 2007). The drummer's greater freedom to interact relates, according to our interviewees, to the different musical requirements of the two accompanying roles—he can spend a lot of time playing pre-learned patterns, while a melodic accompanist must always be ready to follow the singer. The degree

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<sup>8</sup> For ease of reading, in this article we will refer to all musicians using the masculine gender; in practice, while almost all accompanists and most instrumental soloists are male, female singers have a very prominent place in the music culture.

of interaction afforded the drummer also relates, though, to different understandings of authority on stage; *tablā* players can engage in some direct communication with audience members without being censured, while a harmonium player who does so may be judged to be disrespecting the main artist to whom he is supposed to be attending. In this way, the specifics of the musical role help to determine that a melodic accompanist is more likely to assume the demeanour of a subordinate than is a *tablā* player.

One or more musicians (often students of the singer) sit at the back of the stage playing the *tānpūrā* and/or providing vocal support; their attention and the direction of their gaze are most of the time on the singer: this is particularly important for the support vocalists who need to remain alert for hints as to when they should start and stop singing. However, the fact that they are not expected to interact directly with anyone else reflects the subordinate status they have in the performance.

[INSERT Figure 2 about here]

Caption: **Figure 2** Stage layout of an instrumental performance. Sitarist Kushal Das is accompanied by Abhijeet Banerjee on *tablā*. *Source*: Still image from video recording by the authors and Andy McGuinness (Kolkata, 9 February 2007).

In a typical instrumental performance (Fig. 2) the main artist does not sit at the centre of the stage, but towards stage left, with the *tablā* player at his right; such a layout seems to be a compromise between ensuring the centrality of the soloist (as in the vocal performance) and granting a more balanced distribution of space between him and the drummer. The instrumentalist's leading musical role is reflected by the fact that he is directly facing the listeners.

For the audience too, position identifies status, and proximity to the stage is often directly related to musical competence: important people, including patrons as well as senior musicians, music students, and connoisseurs occupy the front rows. The further back listeners sit in the room, the less knowledgeable they are assumed to be. There may be exceptions to this rule: for example, in *baiṭhak* performances, in which listeners sit on the floor, some chairs are usually arranged at the sides and/or back of the room for those who—for reasons of age or health—cannot sit comfortably in the front row. Alternatively, a relative or a student of one of the musicians on stage might stand at the end of the room in order to check that the amplification does justice to the artists on stage and the sound is loud enough to be heard from the back of the room.

Not surprisingly then, the spatial layout of participants reflects the need to facilitate certain kinds of interactions. It not only affords a symbolically important central position to the soloist: together with shared rules on appropriate interaction and demeanour, it establishes the soloist as dominant in the sense that only he may initiate interactions with any other participant whenever he likes. Other participants are restricted in whom they may address and/or when they may do so. In this context, deference is shown not only through specific words or actions, such as nodding or smiling in appreciation of another's skill. It is also shown in the timing of interactions: participants must know when it is appropriate to show appreciation, when one may initiate an interaction or conversely be expected to demonstrate openness to receiving a paramusical communication from the other. To put it another way, one may use the form of deferent behaviour, but doing so at the wrong time or in a way that appears more calculated to attract attention to oneself than to offer support to the other, will be interpreted as challenging the status of the other.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Dard Neuman gives a good example of this when he describes an interaction in which a *sāraṅgī* accompanist offers vocal appreciation to a famous singer, but does so in a way that is clearly distracting to the latter: in this

## Musical Roles and Remuneration

If the musical hierarchies defined by the relationship between a main artist and one or more accompanists are visibly manifested in stage layout and interaction rules, they are also reflected, less publicly, in the remuneration musicians receive. There are no firm rules and these can be sensitive topics to raise in conversation, but our informants suggest a split of roughly 70/15/15% would be common between singer, *tablā* and harmonium player in a vocal concert; a *tablā* player in an instrumental concert might expect something in the order of 25–30% of the overall performance fee. These proportions vary according to the relative seniority or popularity of the musicians, or the level of demand for their skills: a *tablā* player known to be particularly good at providing accompaniment for a particular genre or who has been requested by a famous main artist, for instance, has more bargaining power. Alternatively, young and relatively unknown soloists will often be prepared to play for free or for a nominal fee in order to gain exposure, in which case their accompanists would still expect to be paid. *Tānpūrā* players generally participate for free, either as a service to their teachers or for the privilege of sharing the stage with professional musicians.<sup>10</sup>

Although they will rarely be aware of the exact fees being received by main artists, accompanists are aware that they usually are paid less—sometimes much less—and this discrepancy can be a source of frustration, being seen as a lack of acknowledgement of the extensive musical knowledge and skill which they have to develop in order to accompany

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case the display of deference may have been understood as quite the opposite, a gesture to attract attention to oneself and undermine the other (2004: 295–300).

<sup>10</sup> While they can be (and are often) introduced by name during a concert, *tānpūrā* players are only rarely acknowledged on concert advertisements and posters and on recordings.

soloists trained in very different styles. This frustration is particularly acute for accompanists who are unable to secure regular engagements, which can be the case if there are few concerts in their area or an over-supply of accompanists. This frustration was a frequent topic in our discussions with musicians expected to serve as accompanists, particularly *tablā* players and especially in Bengal where there are currently fewer classical music concerts than in Maharashtra but a large number of excellent musicians.

While the patron or concert organiser always pays the soloist, accompanists might be hired by either the organiser or the soloist: in the latter case, the musical hierarchy overlaps with an employer/employee relationship. In either case, recommendations from main artists are essential for a steady flow of concerts. This dependency has an obvious significance for the musicians' relationship on-stage: failure to provide the required accompaniment, whether for lack of skill or some other reason, will hardly be conducive to future recommendations. On the contrary and as noted above, a main artist may insist that an organiser hire their favoured accompanists, granting both increased opportunities and bargaining power to the latter (cf. Napier 2004 on the role of the artist as patron).

### **Individuality and Teamwork in Musicians' Discourse**

The soloist-accompanist relationship is a topic that exercises many musicians a great deal. When invited to talk about this relationship in an interview context, soloists tend to take one of two approaches: either they stress the mutual dependency of all musicians and the need for good teamwork, or they focus on what is required from accompanists and how easy (or how difficult) it is to obtain such support. Singer Ram Deshpande articulates what we might take as an archetypal statement of the ideology of teamwork:

A classical music concert is not just by one artist. It is a teamwork. There are accompanists, *tānpūrā* players, students. Students sing the *mukhrā*, sing the *ṣaḍj*<sup>11</sup>. The accompanist on the *tablā* gives rhythm. The harmonium player follows the singer on the harmonium... So no artist should feel that he alone is creating the effect. It is the duty of each artist to work as a team. (Ram Deshpande, Nashik, 13 February 2010—translated from Hindi)<sup>12</sup>

For sarod player Prattyush Banerjee, in contrast, it is clear that his emphasis is not on teamwork but rather on his role as soloist; his perspective depicts a completely subordinate, even dispensable, accompanist:

This term ‘main artist’ sometimes bothers the accompanists. They do not like this: ‘What main artist? I am also a performer’. Fine, you are a performer, but then you are there because I am there. I could have this performance without you. I can actually do a performance without a *tablā* player, I can play that much *ālāp*;<sup>13</sup> I can play at least two long *ālāps* and do a one and a half hour concert. I don’t need a *tablā* player. But the *tablā* player mostly does not understand... He’s an integral part of the concert, but he’s not the main part of the concert. (Prattyush Banerjee, London, 27 September 2012)

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<sup>11</sup> The *mukhrā* is the opening phrase of a composition, employed as a refrain; the *ṣaḍj* (Sa) is the main note given by the *tānpūrā* as a reference.

<sup>12</sup> Where necessary, quotes have been edited for readability.

<sup>13</sup> *Ālāp* is the opening section of a *rāg* performance, usually without drum accompaniment.



As for accompanists, as we will see below, many unsurprisingly stress the importance of their own role and their contribution to a soloist's performance<sup>14</sup>. There are also, however, reasons why an accompanist might willingly set aside his own sense of individual expression and defer to a soloist. For Vishwanath Shirodkar, an experienced and highly regarded *tablā* player specialising in vocal accompaniment, a merging of identities with the singer represents an ideal. He explained this clearly, referring to himself as well as Seema—his wife and an accomplished harmonium player—before a concert by *khyāl* singer Veena Sahasrabuddhe:

Today when I am accompanying Veenatai,<sup>15</sup> I am not Vishwanath Shirodkar, she is not Seema Shirodkar. We both are Veena Sahasrabuddhe. If that thing happens, it is total blending. I forget who I am and I am totally engrossed in that music. (Vishwanath Shirodkar, Pune, 20 February 2010)

More pragmatically, harmonium player Arawind Thatte spoke of his earlier, youthful acceptance of a subordinate role as being justified by the opportunity it gave him to learn:

Most of the time we are subdued because our role is limited and we have to support the main artist ... In the beginning you want to learn so many things ... We accompany so many vocalists; we are learning from them so many things. That is the profit part of that. Sometimes we think: 'OK, he is behaving like that ... in spite of that, we are with him, because we want to learn'. (Arawind Thatte, Pune, 25 November 2013)

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<sup>14</sup> Napier illustrates ways in which particular accompaniment practices can effect a sense of individuation of the accompanist's voice (2007).

<sup>15</sup> 'tai' is a respectful suffix to a woman's given name, commonly used in Maharashtra.

Vishwanath Shirodkar's explanation hints at the important idea of *surrender* (a term he did not explicitly use but which came up in conversations with other musicians<sup>16</sup>), placing a positive value on the bracketing off of individual identity in favour of the success of the overall performance. This interpretation should be taken seriously, even if it should be pointed out that Shirodkar's own playing is so clearly imbued with his own character that it could hardly be confused with anyone else's. Whether through this line of reasoning or for Thatte's more pragmatic reason, there are ways in which accompanists can justify to themselves adopting the subordinate role that many soloists feel they should occupy. Such reasons can even include a sense of ~~one's own~~ musical inferiority: ~~this is the case of~~ several harmonium players, ~~who~~ – however virtuosic they are as musicians in their own right – described themselves as singers who had abandoned their intended careers due to some problem or other. This acceptance is a delicate one, however: Arawind Thatte abandoned accompaniment when he could no longer stomach the subordination (Pune, 25 November 2013), while it would be a brave singer who treated Vishwanath Shirodkar disrespectfully on stage. Both Thatte and Shirodkar, in fact, can speak with the confidence earned with their established status and seniority, two important aspects to which we will soon turn.

Other senior accompanists take an even more forthright view that they are not, and should not be treated as, subordinate. *Tablā* player Akram Khan, for instance, while insisting that this sort of behaviour amongst soloists is nowadays rare, asserted that if and when he encounters it he is willing to 'teach them a lesson' (Delhi, 11 November 2013). In Kolkata, the well-known *tablā* player Tanmay Bose treated us to an extraordinary diatribe on the failings of soloists, expressing sentiments that many other accompanists concurred with, although few expressed so forcefully:

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<sup>16</sup> Violinist Milind Raikar, for example, explained that 'when you play the role of accompanist, you can't use your own brain. You have to just surrender to the main artist' (Milind Raikar, Mumbai, 31 January 2010).

As accompanist you work with every different house, like housemaids in India: they work in five different house, apartments; so they get to know five different families. So [as] an accompanist, the most successful you are the more houses you are with. The more you are into their family the more you learn and most of the time, not every time, [you start] hating them as much. ... The main point of focus [for soloists] is then ‘you make sure that you [don’t] overshadow me on stage’, ‘you make sure your playing is very limited’, ‘you make sure your sound balancing is less than me’. ... And so there is a lot of frustration for *tablā* players in general. And everybody goes through it. (Tanmay Bose, Kolkata, 5 February 2007)

In short, musicians’ discourse encompasses a range of ideas. They speak of co-operation and conciliation—stressing teamwork, and either the valuing of accompanists’ voices or reasons to accept subordination amicably. They also recognise conflict as an inescapable part of the tradition—which makes clear that for many musicians, the concert stage is frequently experienced as a place of considerable discomfort. This suggests an unresolved conflict about how best this music should be understood: as presentation by a solo performer who is required to show immense skill and concentration in developing a unique personal interpretation and requires others in a purely supporting role; or as a collaborative and interactional performance by multiple highly-skilled performers, whose results may not be predictable by any one individual.

### **Socio-Musical Relationships Between Musicians**

So far we have discussed the system of *musical* roles in performance: from this discussion, other aspects of relationships between musicians have begun to emerge. For instance, main artists and *tānpūrā* players often have a teacher-student relationship, and supporting the teacher on stage is both a service to the teacher and a learning opportunity for the student. In this case we can expect absolute deference from student towards teacher.<sup>17</sup> Main artists, at the same time, often employ their accompanists directly, and even if a concert organiser contracts the latter they are nonetheless conscious of the need to please a main artist in order to secure future recommendations and a steady income. This state of affairs also often ensures deferential demeanour on the part of an accompanist, although as we shall see this is by no means always the case.

There are a number of other social factors that could have a bearing on the way musicians relate to each other in performance. Kinship is one such: it is often present in the relationship between a musician parent and their student son or daughter, as noted above. Kinship bonds, like teacher-student relations, tend to be consonant with the hierarchy of musical roles (e.g. a son is much more likely to be the accompanist than the main artist), thus if anything they merely amplify the latter. Gender is another factor: it is worth considering whether a *tablā* player (who will almost invariably be male, as will a melodic accompanist) will behave differently with a female singer than he does with a male singer, for instance. Gender is indeed a vast topic in Indian music performance and some accompanists affirmed to us that they regard men and women soloists as requiring different accompaniment styles: there is no evidence, however, that this notion contradicts the basic hierarchy of musical roles. Established female artists, in our experience, tend to be shown the same level of deference as their male peers: indeed, to show disrespect to a Veena Sahasrabuddhe or

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<sup>17</sup> Napier gives an example of a senior singer disciplining a student on stage following a musical transgression of authority (2007: 293).

Ashwini Bhide Deshpande on account of their gender is almost unthinkable. The same does not necessarily apply to young, up-and-coming female artists, who may encounter male accompanists less inclined to defer to them than they might be to a young male artist. We have observed instances in which this appeared to contribute to tension on stage, however, such interpretations have so far been impossible to prove.

We might also ask whether musicians relate to each other differently if they belong to different communities (e.g. religious, caste, class or regional). On these topics, almost all of the musicians we spoke to were adamant that they make no difference whatsoever to performance dynamics and that good musicians are respected as such wherever they come from. This denial could of course mask considerable difficulties based on these very factors and confirm nothing more than that these issues are not easy or convenient to talk about in public. However, in events that we have observed, any interaction that could be interpreted as a clash based on community background could more convincingly be explained by another factor. A couple of exceptions to this reticence are worth noting here, although it is difficult to speculate on their significance. Harmonium soloist and scholar Arawind Thatte claimed to have witnessed instances in which musicians appeared to be shown less respect on account of their community of origin, although—even in the context of an interview in which he was very outspoken in his condemnation of aspects of senior musicians' behaviour—he placed this kind of occurrence largely in the past (Arawind Thatte, Pune, 25 November 2013). Senior *tablā* player Tanmay Bose's complaint regarding the insufficient respect shown to accompanists included an apparent reference to social class:

Musicians ... come to the city, they make a name, they start thinking that they are important. What they lack still is the attitude. So, people like us, we are city-born people and with a decent family background. For me to take this as a profession is also a contradicting thing, because [of] the way I have grown up.

And then coming into the profession I started facing this. Especially from my friends: you know, from my generation people. Even they, we are the best of friends, [but] when we are on the stage, they are completely different persons. And their attitude changes, their look changes. ... Many *tablā* players, they don't have a choice. So they will have to keep doing this. (Tanmay Bose, Kolkata, 5 February 2007)

Tanmay Bose's complaint is both against his peers—musicians who come from a similar background to him but take on airs when on stage, assuming the superordinate role of main artist; and against those he sees as coming from a lower social class and with less education, who still feel that the 'main artist' role confers privileges on them. This is a clear illustration of the kind of tensions in the system that are still playing out following the social changes noted above. As Daniel Neuman suggested back in 1977, "[t]he discontinuity between off-stage and on-stage hierarchies results in tensions within the context of musical performances. Non-hereditary soloists attempt to maintain the traditional hierarchy and seek accompanists whom they can 'keep in control'" (241). A generation later, the tensions Neuman observed are still keenly felt.

It is difficult, in short, to disentangle or unambiguously demonstrate the impact of aspects such as gender or class. Another factor—seniority—is somewhat easier to interpret. Not only do musicians discuss it openly and extensively; it often appears to be one of the most likely explanations (sometimes the sole reason) for frictions that we have observed. Seniority also clearly creates its own hierarchy, which is as important as that of musical role. Contradictions between the hierarchies of musical role and of seniority are, in short, often the simplest explanation for conflict between musicians. The importance accorded to seniority is a constant in Indian social life and music is no exception. Not surprisingly, then, musicians are acutely aware of the hierarchies of seniority. Not only are musicians aware of the senior

members of their own family or *gharānā*; on a broader scale, it is not unusual to hear musicians discuss such subjects as ‘Who is the most senior *tablā* player in the city?’. In a performance situation, both musicians and expert listeners will be conscious of the relative seniority of the performers, and it is more than theoretically possible for a musician occupying the subordinate role of accompanist to be clearly senior to the main artist they accompany.

Napier accounts for the importance of discourses of seniority partly in terms of the social changes which result in authority no longer being ‘underpinned by social hierarchy’ (2004: 46). As he describes, while the main criterion for seniority is age, other factors come into play, such as level of knowledge, performing ability and even gender. As Napier also claims, ‘It is apparent that the term is sufficiently flexible to be a useful, and unprovable, rhetorical tool, since one criterion may be played off against another.’ (2004: 47). One way of looking at seniority, then, is as a criterion for the ascription of authority which is sufficiently grounded in everyday experience to be discursively powerful yet sufficiently flexible to be manipulated for many different purposes. This is certainly borne out in our research. Seniority is not merely a rhetorical tool, however, since it can also be discussed rather more neutrally. For instance, when young musicians informally discuss ‘Who is the most senior musician in the city?’ they articulate a sense that an objective hierarchy of seniority exists ‘out there’ in the world. While this may be an illusion, since such discussions inevitably involve explicit or implicit claims as to the high status of one’s teacher or associates, which can be contested, it is necessary to believe in a ‘real’ hierarchy in order to justify one’s attempts to achieve a higher status within it.

Without referring to any other musician by name—a taboo observed by almost all our interviewees—musicians are willing to discuss not only the notion of seniority but also the ways in which this factor can impact on musical performance. Firstly, a senior *tablā* player in

Kolkata, Sanjay Mukherjee, gave a very clear statement as to the importance of this factor. In a couple of sentences he gave a sense of the calculations of relative seniority that go on within the singer-*tablā*-harmonium trio, and how this is translated both into respect and, more forcefully, domination and obedience (which might be taken as more forthright terms relating to demanding and obtaining deference).

If you are a senior *tablā* player, [the harmonium player and the singer are] ready to obey you... If [there is] a senior harmonium player, then the *tablā* player should not dominate him. Also he gets the respect from the main artist.  
(Sanjay Mukherjee, Kolkata, 28 October 2009)

Another index of the importance of seniority in musical performance is the clear preference shown by young soloists for accompanists of their own generation. The relationship between a young soloist and a senior accompanist is a delicate one: the latter will generally stress the importance of their role in providing support and encouragement to the young artist, casting himself rhetorically as uncle or elder brother. For the young singer, however, the situation is fraught with risk: most feel safer with an accompanist who can be instructed, and if necessary corrected, than with one who must be treated with deference. An upcoming singer, Ranjani Ramachandran, expressed this clearly:

Generally, if it's in my hands I select only people from my generation: we are so comfortable with each other; the whole group will be sort of one age group, or one stage. (Ranjani Ramachandran, Pune, 19 February 2010)

Sanjeev Abhyankar, a more established vocalist, remains aware of this issue, but points to the potential difficulty of interpreting the actions of a senior



accompanist: the latter may be distracting, he suggests, but may nonetheless be acting with the best of intentions:

When you are in the upcoming phase and accompanied by senior musicians, you have to accept that they are senior musicians. Sometimes they may be giving hints, but the intention may be very good also. If you believe that the intention is not to show that they are senior musicians, but just to help you as senior musicians ... that's a good thing. So in a way what we perceive as a problem is not a problem when we change our direction of thought. Most of the times. (Sanjeev Abhyankar, Pune, 20 November 2013)

Many established soloists prefer to work with more junior accompanists: 'I always prefer young musicians because they will follow what I am doing ... they call me *dādā* which means big brother' (Sanjeev Abhyankar, Pune, 20 Nov 2013). Others, on the contrary, may feel uncomfortable with a younger accompanist who might try to grab too much of the audience's attention for himself. This is clearly put by Prattyush Banerjee, who discusses his easier relationship with *tablā* players who are senior to him:

With me he does not have to prove himself, because he is anyway senior and he's good, everybody knows about him. So, the best thing he could do and he should do is make my life easier, instead of making me nervous ... For a junior, upcoming *tablā* player, I think he has a point to prove and that's where the clash begins between his sensibility and his musicality and his eagerness to prove himself. (Prattyush Banerjee, London, 27 September 2012)

There are clearly different solutions to the same problem, as musicians look at soloist-accompanist on-stage relationships from their own perspectives and experiences: whatever their specific preferences, however, they tend to discuss these relationships in terms of seniority and deference.

### **The Negotiation of Status in Performance**

In discussing how seniority confers authority, Shankar Ghosh—who most would regard as the most senior *tablā* player in Bengal—explained to us that it also entails a duty to manage a performance:

I have to care for the soloist—the main vocalist—and also the harmonium player. If the harmonium player is playing too much, subverting the soloist, then I have to play something to give him [a] reminder that ‘You are playing not so good, so be careful’. There are some ways. *Tablā* players also have some weapons in their pocket! [laughs] ...

*Q: How do you do that?*

You do it by playing specific things. Maybe the modulation of sound:

[demonstrates a *tablā* phrase that begins very loudly, and then becomes softer].

When I play [that] then he [might think]: ‘Oh my goodness, he is scolding.

Why he is scolding? Let me take care of that’. (Shankar Ghosh, Kolkata, 29

October 2009)

Therefore, according to Shankar Ghosh, musicians have ‘weapons’ at their disposal if they feel the need to assert their authority in performance and thus negotiate an appropriate place in the hierarchy. Specific phrases in his *tablā* accompaniment are invested with

meanings: ‘Be careful!’, and behind that ‘I am a senior musician here, and I am helping the soloist to manage the performance by passing messages to the other accompanist’.

Whatever means a musician chooses to demonstrate his status or challenge the dominant position of another, in all but the most extreme cases everyone will follow another cardinal rule, which is to conceal genuine conflict from the public, since ‘if the audience notices something is wrong, then the whole concert is ruined’ (Ajinkya Joshi, Pune, 25 February, 2010).<sup>18</sup> Thus, as several musicians demonstrated to us, they employ a repertoire of gestures which are open to multiple interpretations: for instance, to the audience it appears that an accompanist is being applauded, but the accompanist himself realises that he is being corrected (while his face is being saved). Most musicians will agree that it should never be too obvious that an accompanist is being instructed or corrected, even if there is no negative aspect to the instruction. Some instructions, however, such as that to adjust the tempo, are so common that they are commonly given without concealment.

It is not unusual to hear soloists recollecting instances from their early experiences on stage in which they had to learn how to manage their relationship with a senior *tablā* player. Singer Ranjani Ramachandran, for example, remembered one occasion in which she naively instructed a senior accompanist too openly:

[It] happened in one [concert] and some senior *tablā* player was very mad at me. I was not getting the *lay* [tempo] I wanted. I gave one *lay*, and he actually didn’t give the right *lay*; then I changed it. I don’t remember whether I said [to] slow down, or make it faster. So he got very mad! [H]e just stopped and then looked at me: I didn’t know how to react! I didn’t do anything—he then started. He was just trying to say: ‘You cannot do this to

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<sup>18</sup> As Goffman put it, ‘the audience must not acquire destructive information about the situation that is being defined for them’ (1990 [1959]: 141).

me, you cannot tell me what *lay* I should play.’ Then he started up.

(Ranjani Ramachandran, Pune, 19 February 2010)

Of course the main artist can—if he feels his status allows it—respond more assertively to such behaviours. Many stories circulate, for example, about instrumental soloists who, irritated by the proud attitude on stage of their *tablā* players, start performing a composition in such an obscure rhythmic cycle that the young accompanist has to interrupt the concert in order to humbly ask the soloist to explain it to him (a clear public admission of subordination; see Kippen 1988: 59–62 for similar stories). Another means through which an accompanist might try to assert himself can involve the choice of what he plays or when he plays it. One way of doing this is a simple subversion of musical etiquette: the *tablā* player does not wait for the main artist’s nod or eye contact that indicates that he should take the lead. When Akram Khan ‘teaches [the soloist] a lesson’, this lesson takes the form of embarking on a solo at a time of his choosing (Delhi, 11 November 2013).

Although short harmonium solos are becoming more common feature of *khyāl* concerts in recent years, the instrument hardly lends itself to simply launching into an unsanctioned solo, so other approaches are employed. Napier has discussed, for example, the possibility for an accompanist to ‘demonstrate a different understanding of the “same” *rāga*’ (2007: 275) if he thinks the soloist’s is incorrect. Senior harmonium player Arawind Thatte confirmed to us that a subtle message can be sent by the harmonium player declining to follow something the singer has just sung:

Sometimes I will just follow blindly what the artist is doing, and sometimes I won’t follow: I will just leave the phrase, then I will do something else, I will give just supporting notes; I won’t follow completely ... if I think it is wrong  
(Arawind Thatte, Pune, 25 November 2013)

Thatte also mentioned strategies that soloists can employ to assert their status. As he explained, a harmonium player might interpret a soloist offering him space to play as a hostile gesture, if what has just been sung is technically very challenging or impossible to reproduce on the instrument.<sup>19</sup>

Sometimes what happens is [that] the artist gives you freedom to play in between, where your instrument has some limitations compared to that. You can't follow that. Sometimes purposely they do that for lowering the dignity of that artist, of for lowering the impression of that artist. Sometimes we respond. In the beginning accompanists don't respond. In the beginning of the career, we can say. But, as we become senior, as we also become somebody, then we start responding also in those situations (Pune, 25 November 2013).

Another way in which accompanists can challenge the authority of the soloist is by straying from normal rules of deference. One such concerns the tuning of the *tablā*. When the *tablā* goes out of tune, the player is expected to be able to notice this swiftly and choose a good moment in which to adjust the tuning without interrupting the performance. A senior soloist might need to alert a more junior accompanist that his instrument has slipped out of tune. In case of severe problems, a soloist might interrupt a performance to give time for the *tablā* to be retuned. A subversion of this etiquette that we have observed was of an experienced *tablā* player repeatedly interrupting a performance by a junior singer to retune,

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<sup>19</sup> cf. *sāraṅgī* player Sultan Khan's comment in Qureshi (2007: 173): "Of course, he may try to trip you up by singing something that you cannot play."

without requesting permission. This can clearly be interpreted as an assertion that as the senior artist he does not need to defer to the singer. In practice, this had the effect of disrupting the young singer's performance dramatically: whether this was the intention or not is a matter of conjecture, but the performance was badly affected. Another, even more blatant instance we witnessed involved a *tablā* player answering his mobile phone while a young instrumentalist was performing an *ālāp*—the opening section of a performance during which the percussionist is expected to sit next to the soloist and support his performance by quietly displaying attentiveness and appreciation of the music. However, these last two examples are extreme, and such open friction is rare. Normally, negotiations of status are channelled within and regulated by the normal practices which surround a music performance, and covered by displays of deference, making them less visible to the non-expert eye.

One of the most common ways in which this conflict is played out is in the manipulation of sound levels. Public address systems in India are historically notoriously bad—a poor complement indeed to both the skills of the musicians and the delicate sounds of the instruments—due to a combination of inadequate equipment and under-trained sound engineers. Although this situation shows signs of changing, it means that generations of musicians have grown up with poor sound systems and that conversations between technically-literate musicians and professional sound engineers about how to achieve the best possible sound in a particular environment remain the exception rather than the rule. At the same time, musicians often see the relative loudness of their instruments as an index of their importance. Thus, a singer who feels that *tablā* accompaniment should be basic and unobtrusive will very likely also want it to be quiet; the obvious response of a *tablā* player who feels his art is under-valued will be to make his instrument louder. Given that the soloist's voice is normally the most important, and is deferred to, unless the *tablā* player is able to use his seniority to counteract this, a couple of strategies are commonly employed.

The simplest is to play quietly in a sound check and then increase in volume in the concert itself: even if the soloist then instructs the sound engineer to lower the volume, the point will have been made. A more elaborate strategy that is easier to carry out in one's own home city, is to arrange for one's students or other supporters such as family members to badger the sound engineer, asking him to turn a musician's level up.<sup>20</sup>

Negotiations over sound levels also take place in very felicitous performances. Most importantly, they happen as part of the wider set of comportment rules of the performance. An unusual, but instructive example of this that we documented featured the renowned *sitār* player Nayan Ghosh accompanied on *tablā* by his young son and student Ishan. The concert, a traditional *baiṭhak* in which the audience sits on the floor in close proximity to the stage, took place at Sangit Mahabharati, the music school directed by Nayan Ghosh in Mumbai.<sup>21</sup> Among the listeners in the front rows there were several boys and young men, clearly students of Nayan and therefore *gurubhāīs* ('guru-brothers') of Ishan. The observation of the unfolding of the event over the first few minutes following the arrival on stage of the musicians and during the very beginning of the performance reveals how the young men were trying to advise Ishan during the final tuning of his *tablā* and repeatedly asked the sound engineer to bring up his sound level; however, they stopped making any such request or suggestion whenever Nayan Ghosh intervened to express his view or give his approval of the sound. In other words, their behaviour was carefully balanced between the expression of

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<sup>20</sup> We had the opportunity to discuss this openly and experience it repeatedly during a fieldtrip to Maharashtra in 2010, when we were accompanied by Simone Tarsitani, who made audio recordings of eleven performances.

<sup>21</sup> The concert took place on 6 February 2010. Musicians on stage included Nayan Ghosh on *sitār*, Ishan Ghosh on *tablā*, and Patrika Janali on *tānpurā*. The audiovisual recordings on which the present analysis is based were made by the authors and Simone Tarsitani.

support for Ishan (and, by extension their allegiance to Nayan Ghosh as his father and teacher) and deference and respect for their own *guru* and senior artist.

### **Musicians in the Audience**

As noted above, interactions with knowledgeable or otherwise members of the audience are also a common part of Indian musical culture, and the front rows should ideally be occupied by musicians and expert listeners capable of following the *tāl* and grasping what the musicians are trying to do musically.<sup>22</sup> When such listeners show their appreciation verbally and gesturally (as described in Clayton 2007) they are also, in a sense, performers: they understand themselves, and are understood by others to have a key role in the creation of an ideal performing environment for the musicians and—by extension—in the success of the event.<sup>23</sup> In this sense they can be regarded as a part of the ‘performance team’.

However, the interaction that particularly concerns us here is that between musicians on stage and others of similar or greater seniority in the audience. Although many point to a decline in the practice of musicians attending each other’s concerts in recent years, this is still

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<sup>22</sup> We are very grateful to Chloe Zadeh for sharing her ideas on the interaction between audiences and performers, and in particular on the contribution of connoisseurship to the shaping of performance in Hindustani classical music.

<sup>23</sup> Where no audience member is able to perform this role, it is important that the accompanists fill this gap. This is evident, for example, from the words of Sanjeev Abhyankar, who indirectly distinguished between ‘audience’ (the whole group attending) and the *rasikās* (the connoisseurs): ‘I would always say that a musician should not expect that the audience understands the technical part of the performance because that is not possible ... I expect only ... 10–15 people will understand ... I first locate those 10–15 people and if nobody is available, my harmonium player is always there, because he understands the intricacies’ (Sanjeev Abhyankar, Pune, 19 November 2013).



an important part of the culture.<sup>24</sup> For a young artist, the presence of seniors in the audience is an honour, an opportunity and a cause of anxiety. For less established musicians, reasons for apprehension can include a sense of responsibility towards their *guru* who they feel they represent, the desire to give a good impression in the hope of future engagements. Several of our interviewees suggested that the presence of senior artists in the audience guarantees a serious commitment from the soloist on stage, who will not ‘play to the gallery’ and will present a more rigorous and orthodox performance (Sarang Kulkarni, Pune, 29 November 2013).

More experienced musicians tend to articulate their feelings towards knowledgeable members of the audience as a stimulus rather than intimidation; however, they are always aware of who sits before them and will feel pressure to give their very best. One of the most popular and well-established singers at the present time, Ashwini Bhide Deshpande, perhaps surprisingly admitted to still feeling this pressure:

If there are very learned people in the audience, then I’m singing with that tension, or that pressure ... that what I am doing is being watched, basically.

(Ashwini Bhide Deshpande, Mumbai, 5 February 2010)

The points discussed above are effectively summarised in the words of singer Manjiri Asanare-Kelkar, who described how her feelings and attitude towards the more learned members of the audience have changed through the years:

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<sup>24</sup> Qureshi describes an earlier kind of event called a *daṅgal*, in which musicians would play principally for each other (2007: 169-172): this was also alluded to by some of our interviewees, Nayan Ghosh in particular.

It used to scare me when I was young. I was feeling that not a single mistake I should make and I was more scared about what they would think of my *guru*. I shouldn't let down my *guru*. But now, when I see any senior musician in front of me, then I think that it is a blessing for me. I am not scared now! (Manjiri Asanare-Kelkar, Nashik, 12 February 2010)

The deference that artists on stage show towards senior musicians sitting in the audience is manifested through the exchange of greetings (smiles and head bows accompanied by the hands joined together) when the performers walk on stage or—during the performance—if a notable listener joins the audience. A soloist may explicitly say to another musician in the audience, ‘With your permission...’: even a slight bow or nod before the performance begins will be understood as standing for this acknowledgement. Glances, smiles and gestures can also be exchanged to mark the accomplishment of a particularly subtle nuance or difficult passage in the performance.

The relationship between artists on stage and connoisseurs and senior musicians in the audience is complicated by the fact that the latter are themselves the object of scrutiny by other members of the public, who check for signs of approval (or otherwise) of the performance. As appreciation is expressed very explicitly through audible exclamations or through hand gestures (for example, by marking the rhythmic cycle, or raising a hand in the direction of the performers), it is not difficult for listeners to interpret the behaviour of those closer to the stage. Musicians in the audience are normally expected to show support and appreciation for the musicians on stage. On occasions this may be either withheld, or expressed in such a lukewarm manner as to suggest the opposite, and (we have been told) is understood as such by the performers. This is relatively rare, however, as it is usually easier to simply not attend a concert by another musician whom one does not wish to support or enjoy listening to.

Musicians in the audience are extremely aware of the attention they attract from other listeners, and some even prefer not to sit in the front rows in order not to attract too much attention.

I usually do not like to sit in the first row. I like to be in the eighth and tenth row, because there I can be a normal listener where I am saying ‘wah!’ or giving the acclaim where it’s an instinct, accepting that something good has happened. That expression has to come natural as a listener. (Sanjeev Abhyankar, Pune, 20 November 2013)

As Sanjeev Abhyankar’s words suggest, irrespective of how they embrace their role as ‘special listeners’, musicians acknowledge that their position becomes more delicate if something goes wrong on stage; this is when they feel particularly conscious of the possibility of being observed by other members of the public:

I try not to be affected by these things, but it’s not always easy. When the music is in its flow. I will not be aware of people looking at me. But if [the performance] is not happening the way it is supposed to happen, then everything will matter! (Ashwini Bhide Deshpande, Mumbai, 5 February 2010)

Ashwini Bhide’s statement echoes the words on another senior *khyāl* singer, Sanjukta Ghosh:

It’s like itching! [*Laughs*] But no, I have to sit with smiling face, I cannot say [anything] ... My face will not change. I have to be careful! (Sanjukta Ghosh, Kolkata, 29 October 2009)

The previous two quotations illustrate how musicians in the audience feel that to some extent the outcome of the performance depends on them and on their display of appreciation. Of course this applies in particular to artists who—like Ashwini Bhide and Sanjukta Ghosh—are more senior or established. Manjiri Asanare-Kelkar explicitly described how the listening musician's seniority brings with it a sense of responsibility for younger performers on stage:

Sometimes I don't like it that people are looking, because I want to enjoy, as a common listener. The artist on the stage, when he is a senior artist, then it doesn't matter; but when he or she is an artist that is junior to me, or he has just started his career, then naturally he looks at me as a support, so it is my duty to tell him that 'Yes, it's okay, you are doing well'. Because it is the responsibility of senior listeners. Even if I'm not feeling that it's okay, but still he is doing well, he is trying his level best—he has learnt and he is trying to express what he's learnt—it is my duty to give him support. (Manjiri Asanare-Kelkar, Nashik, 12 February 2010)

The awareness that established artists show of their role as supportive audience members invites a reflection on performance etiquette and in particular on the performers' acknowledgement of musicians—as well as other connoisseurs—in the audience. As Goffman pointed out, offering deference to someone is not just a way 'in which an actor celebrates and confirms his relation to a recipient' (1956: 477). A show of deference also implies commitment to proper demeanour and, in return, an *expectation* of a complementary proper demeanour (1956: 479–80). Thus the young performer, by acknowledging the presence and the status of the senior musician sitting in the audience, formally acknowledges his own inferior position in the hierarchy of musicians. At the same time he implicitly invites

the senior musician to fulfil the duty of a responsible supporter. This is not dissimilar from what can be often observed in the dynamics of relationships on stage. An accompanist who allows his sound level to be set by the soloist, waits to be invited to perform a short solo and shows his appreciation of the soloist's performance as an expert listener should, is performing the role of deferent accompanist and expects to be rewarded with the usual corollaries of this behaviour: to be publicly appreciated by the soloist and given opportunities to show the range of his skills.

## **Discussion**

We have discussed a number of aspects of interaction in North Indian classical music performance. We have outlined roles—both those specifically related to the performance (soloist, accompanist, listener etc.) and others related to musical status (e.g. teacher, student); the kinds of hierarchies that these imply and the ways in which they are expressed in spatial organisation, interaction rules, and remuneration. We have discussed the importance of a number of social factors, particularly seniority, as a form of hierarchy that may contradict that determined by musical roles, and as an alternative source of authority that can be deployed in socio-musical interactions. Finally, we have considered the way in which interactions with expert listeners, especially other musicians, are an integral part of the performance. The overall picture is quite complex, since inherent in the musical tradition are both clear hierarchies linked to rules of proper demeanour and deference, and a tension between different forms of authority and status that can lead to conflict between musicians. This latent conflict can be manifested in various ways, almost always in a form intended to be invisible to an audience, while musicians use deference behaviours to help save each others' face. Conflict can be attenuated by the influence of the ideology of teamwork or by a strategic

acceptance of subordination, but nonetheless can be a source of great bitterness and resentment. Even a discourse emphasising ‘teamwork’ does not necessarily lead to an egalitarian ensemble: it can be strategically used by soloists to justify their superordinate position, and by accompanists to obliquely demand a greater degree of authority.

There are two ways in which the *status quo* can be challenged:

1. The overall system is not challenged, but an individual fights for a more prominent place in the hierarchy. This can be achieved on-stage, through musical and paramusical means; or
2. Aspects of the system itself are challenged, such as the subordinate status of *tablā* players. The fact that this is talked about a lot suggests it cannot be achieved on-stage: this requires talk and action away from the stage itself.

The two approaches are clearly interrelated: a *tablā* player fighting for better respect and remuneration for *tablā* players helps himself by helping his peer group. Moreover, one might expect the balance of such actions to change as the wider social context changes. As in many parts of the world, professional music-making in India is for most a stressful occupation, in which a reputation that will bring regular well-paid work can take many years to build up. In this context family and, to a lesser extent, teaching lineages can act as an important support structure: the *guru* or parent can introduce a young musician to the market, help him to obtain work and protect him. In return, the up and coming artist owes a great debt of allegiance to his musical family. Having a famous *guru* does not, however, save one from all professional frustrations: even in the best case, a musician must work hard to establish a strong individual reputation and maximise his prestige. Deference is a mark of that prestige, and thus musicians can be very sensitive to perceive slights.

The two most important and socially-acceptable ways in which a musician can rhetorically insist on deference are, as we have seen, (a) to insist that his musical role is superordinate, e.g. as a ‘main artist’, and (b) to insist that as a senior he should be given due respect, just as an elder brother or uncle would be. When one musician’s recourse to seniority contradicts a co-performer’s claim to respect as a soloist these rhetorical strategies clash—which is another way of saying that two perceived hierarchies are in conflict. One way of understanding the relationship between musical role and seniority, then, is to see them as different forms of hierarchy which can either align with or contradict each other: in the latter case, conflict is likely to ensue. Another way to gloss this is to see musical role and seniority as the two most important sources of *authority* that can be deployed by musicians engaged in interpersonal interactions, with conflict resulting from competing claims to authority and the ideology of teamwork acting as a dampener on this potential conflict. In deploying these strategies an individual is likely to insist on both his own authority and that of his school or family, and/or stress the importance of his own musical specialism since these different elements are likely to reinforce each other. Furthermore, claims to musical and social grounds of authority are mutually reinforcing: seniority carries with it a respect for one’s musical experience while musical expertise influences perceptions of one’s seniority. Another way of interpreting the prominence of the rhetoric of ‘seniority’ is that this is a topic that is easier to discuss publicly than relations based on class, religious community or gender, and leaves other potential sources of friction unspoken. This is not easy to prove, however, and seniority is genuinely an issue which concerns musicians, both a source of anxiety and as a strategy to be consciously exploited.

Arguably, in many cases a hint of tension between artists can have positive results for a performance: it keeps everyone on their toes, so to speak, attentive to what the others are doing, full of concentration and keen to show the best of what they can do while doing

nothing to compromise the success of the overall performance. A sense that the musicians are giving their best and may be in competition can give an enjoyable frisson of excitement to the occasion, without necessarily threatening to undermine the event. In the worst cases the opposite is true: musicians seem uninterested in each other or the overall effect of the performance, and appear willing to risk the success of the performance in order to make an individual statement and enhance their personal prestige. Interactions with the audience are important here too: a symptom of a poor performance can be a musician obviously more interested in showing off to one or two favoured members of the audience than in attending to his co-performers, while a particularly successful performance is in contrast marked by an apparently seamless flow of felicitous interactions both between musicians, between listeners, and between players and audience.

The notion of teamwork as articulated above by singer Ram Deshpande reads as a counterweight to the otherwise suffocating importance of knowing one's place and at best trying to improve one's ranking within the various hierarchies: it does not, however, indicate that such hierarchies are shortly to be brought down. The hierarchies are constantly changing though and in some cases being more actively challenged than they have been for a long time. The system is dynamic: if one element changes—e.g. accompanists no longer belong to inferior social classes or attitudes to women musicians change—the rest of the system adjusts. If attitudes to seniority in Indian culture changed more broadly, this too would surely have important consequences. It is difficult, however, to imagine Indian classical music as a completely egalitarian system.

In Hindustani classical music performance, we argue, the 'performance team' as intended by Goffman (1990 [1959]: 85) is not limited to the people responsible for producing musical sound on stage but extends to the audience, especially the knowledgeable listeners and musicians sitting in the front rows. In this way, the boundaries between stage and



public—and between the roles of performer and performed-to as he originally conceived them—become blurred. The interaction between performers on stage and musicians in the audience is a means to define and reinforce musical as well as social hierarchies: a musician's importance is manifested partly in his authority to interact directly with the audience (and similarly, a listener's importance is manifested in the ability to command a performer's attention). The conception of the Hindustani classical tradition as an example of the 'presentational' type of performance, as defined by Turino, 'in which there is a pronounced artist-audience separation' and in which music (often virtuosic) 'is prepared by musicians for others to listen to' (2008: 51–2) accords with the dominant conception within the culture but nonetheless ignores a crucial element of practice. Although North Indian classical music conforms to some extent to the characteristics of presentational performance, the degree of participation of the audience goes beyond the clapping of the metric cycle (Turino 2008: 52) and interaction with musicians on stage (whether by senior artists or other members of the public fulfilling their role as supporters) can significantly affect music performance (see Leante, in press).

Despite the greater emphasis given to *tablā* accompaniment and rhythmic interplay, particularly in instrumental music following the twentieth-century innovations of instrumental soloists such as Ravi Shankar and *tablā* players such as Alla Rakha and Zakir Hussain, Hindustani music remains based on a soloistic model that seems to evoke the clear hierarchies codified in the feudal courts of an earlier era. We have seen the emergence of a rhetoric of musical meritocracy—as we have frequently been told, one's background doesn't matter in music—and of teamwork. But teams are rarely flat in hierarchy: they tend to have leaders and followers, stars and support players. What seems to be happening is that a strict hierarchy underpinned by social differences is evolving into a more dynamic hierarchy, which is understood as meritocratic. This hierarchy is challenged, and may be intermittently

destabilised. In the most prominent area of conflict, the soloist-drummer dyad in instrumental genres, some performances may tend towards an evenly-balanced duet, but this has not emerged as a dominant model and it faces stiff resistance from many soloists.

Deference is a way to assert one's position. It is also—and most importantly—a way to engage another party to take up a specific role. It entails the engagement of another in a reciprocal agreement and in a specific code of behaviour. Musicians exchanging signs of appreciation on stage remind each other of such agreements and/or negotiate their terms. The senior artist presenting himself as the experienced guide is ostensibly showing public support and offering friendly guidance to the younger performer, while also implicitly reinforcing his status and reminding the latter that he has to perform in manner which does not impinge on hierarchies of seniority. The upcoming musician showing deference to established artists or connoisseurs publicly engages them as 'protectors' in order to minimise potential threats to his performance.

All of these negotiations are necessary to reassure musicians of a commitment to a successful outcome of musical performance but also establish the roles—and hence the rules—by means of which that outcome can be reached. This is important in all contexts, but becomes vital when musicians meet and play together for the first time—*adab* is the context within which deference is manifested, authority and respect tested, and roles and hierarchies asserted and challenged. As has been noted in very different contexts, deference is an integral part of this process because it allows participants to express in codified ways the terms on which they are willing to interact, allowing also for conflict to be played out ceremoniously and for actors to repair any loss of face which might potentially be suffered as a consequence. In some instances, however, an actor may feel compelled to push the boundaries of proper demeanour and challenge expectations of deference. In so doing not only may another's 'face' be threatened, but the success of the performance as a whole may be put in jeopardy.

As Dard Neuman argues, the ‘subordinate virtuoso’ may use such a strategy in order to increase his visibility and hence socio-musical mobility, and in the process a delicate line is trod between ‘the aura of a performance and its disruption’ (2004: 299).

Social issues such as when and how to show deference, when to demonstrate one’s own skills and when to stand back and appreciate those of others, involve musical decisions. In this way, social relationships and interactions help to shape the development of a performance. This does not mean that one can easily listen to an audio recording of a concert and interpret it in terms of the ebb and flow of interpersonal interactions: the trace of the sound rarely contains enough information for the social interactions that led to it to be read unambiguously (although as Napier 2007 demonstrates, this can be achieved to some extent). What we can be clear about, given the abundance of detailed testimony from musicians, is that negotiations over status and hierarchy are an integral part of this musical tradition that are experienced at some stage by all performing musicians; and that these negotiations are carried out either through musical means, or in ways that have musical ramifications.

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