

Chapter 18

Gesture and Imagery in Music Performance: Perspectives from North Indian Classical Music

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The experience of music is a multi-faceted one, and entails complex visual and gestural engagement at different levels of sound production and reception. In the following pages I will discuss how a comprehensive understanding of this visual aspect necessarily involves consideration of bodily involvement in performance and how both are ultimately integral to the aural dimension of music.

Performers use their bodies to make music, whether through their voice or by playing instruments; they move—more or less ostensibly—to communicate with fellow musicians and audiences, and—more or less deliberately—to accompany the flow of the music, or to support meanings associated with it. Other participants and listeners also, depending on the context of performance, move their bodies to the music, for example to dance, clap, express appreciation, or communicate with each other and with musicians. All these behaviors are regulated by genre-specific cultural codes and are embedded in the role that each individual takes on in the music event. Most of all, these movements and gestures, together with the visual experience that accompanies them, are integral to

processes of music-making and reception: participating in a performance as well as “just” listening to music implies sharing these movements—by seeing them, by making them, or by associating sounds and memories with them.

At the same time, musical sound is embodied through patterns of movement, and even listening (including remote listening to recordings, for example) involves experiencing this movement. Such embodiment of sound can be manifested through movement in performance, as well as in conversation, as people support the discussion of their experience of music through gesture and through imagery and metaphors; these images can be rich with extra-musical details, and can reveal information on the meanings and emotions that people associate with music. Rather than being *a posteriori* attachments, these visual elements are closely connected to musical sound: in fact, while retaining their cultural specificity, they are rooted in the same process that makes music a physical experience. Music experience is therefore a visual and bodily, as much as an auditory one: music is “seen,” and is perceived as movement, as well as listened to.

In this chapter I challenge notions of a disembodied nature of music shared among certain cultures (including Western art music), where the invisibility of the sound object often leads to the assumption of the ineffability of an abstract musical experience. On the contrary I will claim that music is experienced at a bodily level and—most importantly—that this experience can be

expressed through images and gesture, which are integral and not incidental to processes of embodiment of music. Furthermore, the interconnectedness of these visual and gestural aspects is such that one cannot be fully understood without taking the other into account.

Comment [AF1]: I would rather keep this. In studies of this kind it is normal practice to talk about “processes of embodiment”.

The cross-modal nature of musical experience and also the role of gesture in music performance are at the center of current scientific debate, and literature on this topic has increased in recent years, with contributions reflecting the interdisciplinary interest to which the subject lends itself. A lot of this work is grounded in research into embodied cognition, challenging the Cartesian dichotomy of body and mind, and in studies on the relationship of speech and gesture in verbal communication. Of particular relevance to the present discussion is David McNeill’s acknowledgement that gesture and speech are co-expressive and non-redundant, and, most of all, that they both emerge from a common imagistic ground. Extending this to the analysis of performance, it can be argued (and experimental data from various studies have indicated) that gesture, image, and sound stem from the same process of musical expression. Investigating these aspects necessarily involves not only analyzing each one of them, but more importantly emphasizing their interrelationships; considering, for example, how connotations arising from a given music can convey kinetic qualities, how gesture can integrate aural information, or how certain visualizations accompany the production of musical sound.

Comment [AF2]: I would prefer not to add this – these are still very early days in this kind of research and in any case we cannot talk about experimental data with certainty

The analysis of performance in both its musical and visual aspects needs to be supported by ethnographic research aimed at carrying out enquiries into how people describe their experience of music, the extra-musical associations, images, and emotions they attach to it, and in particular how they express them both verbally and through gesture. In the next section I will focus on Hindustani (North Indian) art—or “classical”—music, and in particular on ethnographic work on the vocal genre of *khyal* (nowadays the most commonly heard classical genre across the North of India), and on enquiries carried out between 2005 and 2010 with a number of *khyal* singers.¹ While I suggest that this tradition is far from being a unique case, the rich and often openly articulated body of extra-musical—including visual—associations attached to it makes North Indian classical music an ideal object of consideration for this discussion.

¹ The fieldwork in India was sponsored by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (grants MRG-AN6186 and AH/G012911/1), and the British Academy (grant SG38692). All interviews were carried out by the author together with Martin Clayton, unless otherwise stated. I would like to acknowledge the musicians who took part in the research, and in particular: Arun Bhaduri, Ashwini Bhide Deshpande, Chiranjib Chakraborti, Sudokshina Chatterjee, Babanrao Haldankar, Manjiri Asanare Kelkar, Vijay Koparkar, and Veena Sahasrabuddhe. Finally, I would like to thank Martin Clayton for his comments on a first draft of this chapter, and Tarun Nayak for providing help with the translation of Arun Bhaduri’s interview from Bengali.

The Ethnography of Imagery and Gesture in Khyal

Khyal concerts take place in public halls and large auditoriums, as well as in private homes where artists and a few listeners sit together on the floor in close proximity. The latter, smaller venues reflect a more traditional way to listen to and appreciate this music, and even today members of the public sometimes spontaneously split into two groups, with men and women occupying different areas of the room. The performance space can be unadorned, or decorated with flowers or a colored backdrop. The music is led by a singer (rarely a duo) who sits at the center of the stage. On his right and left side sit respectively a drum player on *tabla*, who provides the rhythmic accompaniment, and a harmonium (or *sarangi*) player, who shadows the melody performed by the singer. One or more musicians (often students of the singer) sit at the back, playing the drone on *tanpuras* and sometimes providing vocal support.

During the concert hand gestures, glances, and head nods are employed by the participants to fulfill a number of different functions. Musicians on stage exchange visual as well as aural musical cues to structure the unfolding of the music performance (by marking new sections or solos, for example), guide fellow performers, reward virtuosic passages, or to acknowledge the presence and seek the approval of the more knowledgeable listeners and senior artists who customarily sit in the front rows of the audience. Especially in smaller venues,

these latter musicians are observed by other members of the public, who look at them searching for signs of support for or disapproval of the performance. Moreover, audience members can tap along with the rhythmic cycle, and punctuate the event with nods, exclamations, and hand movements to show appreciation of the music. In any case, attending a concert involves ascertaining participants' roles and status, and visually following a complex web of relationships. The singer is at the center of these dynamics and the achievement of a successful performance relies on his capacity to manage them in an effective manner, as well as to focus on the delivery of his music. The accompanists' and audience's eyes are constantly on him as his movements, therefore, both communicate with other participants and support and accompany the production of musical sound.

In contrast to other Indian performing arts (such as, for example, classical dance forms, or the more romantic vocal genre *thumri*), *khyal* singers are not expected to perform iconic or symbolic gestures fulfilling a **depictive** function to underline the text of a song, or meanings associated with the music. Their movements are assumed to be more abstract, supporting the flow of the music in the improvised sections as well as in the performance of compositions with lyrics. I will now turn to these supporting movements, and I will discuss how gestures are integral to the singer's imagination in the production of musical sound, and how movement relates to the images and meanings that are associated with it.

Comment [Unknown A3]: This word doesn't really exist. Could we use 'representational', or 'illustrative'?

Comment [AF4]: It does actually exist: I have double checked on the OED. In any case, it is commonly used in gesture studies and it is widely employed to refer to this category of gestures. I would rather keep it in order to be consistent with gesture studies academic literature.

Comment [Unknown A5]: 'the singer's imaginary in' doesn't make sense, and I can't quite work out what you mean to suggest an alternative. Could you rephrase?

Like other Hindustani classical genres, *khyal* is considered part of a complex tradition which can elicit profound emotions, often likened to and described in terms of religious feelings and deep, fulfilling aesthetic experiences. It is based on a system of modes (the *ragas*), which are defined in terms of musical features such as scale profiles, principal pitches, distinctive phrases, and melodic movements, and also in terms of extra-musical traits, including prescribed time of day and season of performance, moods, characters, or even contingent effects that some modes are believed to cause. At times, raga names can contribute to conjuring up certain associations and images, as in the case of toponyms like Multani (referring to the region of Multan), or direct references to seasons, like Basant (Spring), or characters, such as Durga, named after the Hindu goddess.

Moreover, song texts (often romantic and/or devotional) represent other sources of visual information attached to the music. There is no consensus among singers on the level of importance that the lyrics and their content should be given in *khyal*, and different artists claim to be aware to different extents of the text's content when performing; however, these texts can still contribute to shaping the artist's imagination.

Each raga, therefore, is accompanied by a rich corpus of images and associations which combine to define its musical identity. The importance that this visual aspect has long had in North Indian classical music culture is

Comment [Unknown A6]: Once again, what do you mean by 'the artist's imaginary'? You are using 'imaginary' as a noun, but it is almost invariably used as an adjective, so this usage will confuse almost all readers.

Comment [AF7]: I would rather keep "contribute", as I think it is more precise than "combine" here.

Comment [Unknown A8]: 'Imagist ic' isn't really a word. Would 'visual' do the job?

Comment [AF9]: Imagistic as a word exists in English. However, I agree that visual here could work too.

corroborated by the *ragamala* paintings, collections which flourished in India's princely states and depicted ragas as human or divine personifications, and which are discussed in more depth in Jonathan Katz's chapter in this volume. Although nowadays musicians rarely make reference to these paintings when talking about music, they remain among the visual sources accessible to the imagination of performers and listeners alike.

Extensive enquiries among musicians have shown how each individual artist seems to create his or her own picture of a raga, by drawing on both personal experiences and shared imagery; recurrent examples of the latter are represented by images stemming from the time of performance, with evening ragas often associated with birds returning home, night ragas with dark or starry skies, and morning ragas with the sunrise. The analysis of this pool of visual resources shows how musicians often portray ragas by making recourse to common tropes, mythological references, local geographies and cultural practices. A typical instance is the musician figuring himself in a contemplative mood by a river or by the ocean, or—in the case of more serious or devotional ragas—in the act of praying in front of a god. Other examples refer to specific ragas, like the description by Bengali singer Arun Bhaduri of the seriousness and the virility of Shree raga through the image of the god Shiva: for him Shree is “king-like ... [It's

a] very strong mood, [he's holding] a trident.”² This mythological picture is very different from the one provided by Sudokshina Chatterjee when talking about her experience of another raga, Bihag. Although still tinged with devotional references, her depiction conveys a much more joyful mood, pointing at the myth of the young Krishna and his lover Radha in his birthplace Vrindavan, the stories about his playful teasing of cowgirls, and the Spring festival of Holi, which people celebrate by throwing paint and colored powders at each other: “When I perform Bihag ... I try to imagine that I'm in Vrindavan and I can see that Lord Krishna and Radha [are] there ... throwing colors at each other ... and all beautiful girls also ... running here and there.”³

The extent to which extra-musical associations are explicitly taught by a guru varies: the knowledge transmitted by the teacher generally includes—apart from the musical features—information about the time of performance, the mood, and a number of compositions set in a given raga. Some teachers make recourse to imagery to explain more effectively the feeling a raga is supposed to convey, its melodic movement, or a technique of sound production.

² Arun Bhaduri, 15th February 2007, interview first published in Laura Leante, “The Lotus and the King: Imagery, Gesture and Meaning in a Hindustani Rāg,” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 18, no. 2 (2009): 185-206.

³ Sudokshina Chatterjee, 8th June 2006.

Most importantly, musicians often use gesture to accompany and clarify these images or the performance of a specific melodic passage. An example is provided by Manjiri Asanare-Kelkar, who—during an interview—stated how hand movement had become essential to the explanation of musical content in her communication with her late guru Madhusudan S. Kanetkar, once his old age and fragile physical condition had started to affect his vocal strength: “Sometimes he just gives the action [and] I understand what he means.”⁴ Gestures depicting abstract designs were sufficient for Manjiri to understand, for instance, the melodic contour or emphasis of a musical phrase. To illustrate her point she performed a quick, contained circular movement of the hand and explained that she associated it with a short, smooth phrase, within a small interval range, emphasizing the first and, mostly, last pitches (Figure 18.1). Gesture, image and sound are all non-redundant parts of a single process: seeing the hand movement provides specific and unique information about how the musicians conceive their music and its performance.

While the explicit use of images associated with a raga’s identity in didactic contexts is not practiced by all teachers, gesture—as in the case of

⁴ Manjiri Asanare Kelkar, 11th December 2006, interview first published in Gina Fatone, Martin Clayton, Laura Leante, and Matt Rahaim, “Imagery, Melody and Gesture in Cross-cultural Perspective,” in *New Perspectives on Music and Gesture*, ed. Anthony Gritten, and Anthony and Elaine King (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 203-220.

Manjiri Asanare-Kelkar—plays a fundamental role in the transmission of North Indian musical knowledge and its use is widespread. Picking up music is about both watching and listening, as well as reproducing sound: in fact, learning *khyal* involves the repetition by the student of a passage performed by the guru—a process which is usually accompanied by the imitation on the part of the disciple of the guru’s gesture. Although this is not a topic often discussed explicitly by teachers during the lesson, and not all teachers openly encourage students to use hand movement to support their performance, it is easy to observe that the students’ vocal improvements correspond to the development of smoother and more confident gestures. Sudokshina Chatterjee’s experience confirms this co-expressiveness of gesture and sound in music production: “The hands give you psychological support ... when I started using my hand I was more expressive, the expression came more ... naturally.”⁵

Literature on the transmission of gesture in Hindustani classical music is extremely scarce;⁶ however, it is plausible to hypothesize that a guru’s movements would exert an influence on the development of his student’s own gestures, as Ashwini Bhide Deshpande seems to **suggestconfirm**: “I think we have seen our senior artists also doing these gestures and it comes out unknowingly. When my

Comment [Unknown A10]: Can this ref go in 'Further Reading'?

Comment [AF11]: I would rather keep SUGGEST as I think it is more cautious. This is a field of research which is still completely open and quite controversial...

⁵ Sudokshina Chatterjee, 8th June 2006.

mother was teaching me, probably she was doing these gestures; and it comes [...] I [picked] up those qualities also along with [the music].”⁶

There is no agreement among musicians on the aesthetics of gesture in performance and therefore on the impact that more or less emphatic hand movement can have on the audience and on the effective delivery of a raga. However, although there is ample margin for individual behavior (and in fact singers’ movement on stage varies a lot), most claim to prefer a more restrained, rather than flamboyant comportment. In any case, as the musicians quoted above indicate, gesture is considered a natural part of music performance, as “[the] total body is singing, not [just the] voice.”⁷

Singers describe their use of gesture as something which they do not deliberately control, something “unconscious,”⁸ spontaneous, and at the same time idiosyncratic.⁹ This aspect of gesture is summarized by the seemingly contradictory words of Vijay Koparkar: “The movement of the hands is a natural

Comment [T12]: In some cases ellipses have a space on either side, in some cases they join to text on one side, and in some cases they join on both. Could you make your usage consistent across the chapter?

Comment [AF13]: I think I have done it now

Comment [AF14]: If possible, I would prefer to keep the original text, since I do not like the repetition of the term “gesture”

⁶ Aswhini Bhide Deshpande—, 5th February 2010. ~~The interview Interview was~~ carried out by the author together with Martin Clayton and Simone Tarsitani.

⁷ Chiranjib Chakraborti, 6th June 2009.

~~e-Tarsitani.~~

⁹ Babanrao Haldankar, 31st January 2010. Interview carried out by the author together with Martin Clayton and Simone Tarsitani.

thing, [it] is a habit.”¹⁰ Therefore, if on the one hand it is a key element for the acquisition of musical knowledge and it is learned through the observation of the guru, on the other hand bodily involvement is acknowledged by *khyal* singers as intrinsic in music production, since “gesture goes with the *swaras* [notes].”¹¹

In performance, gesture often seems to stem from embodied metaphors of direction as, for example, conceptualizations of high and low musical pitch in melodic development can correspond to analogous trajectories in hand movement: some singers explain that in their mind they visualize, if not the single notes, at least these trajectories between phrases or pivotal pitches of the raga. Similarly, a number of pantomimic gestures can often be seen: for example, notes can be “held” or “sustained”—both with the hands and the voice, as the imaginary as well as the physical space around the performer is occupied by his arms. Some musicians—not coincidentally—liken performing a raga to making a design, drawing patterns, or painting on a canvas. Ashwini Bhide Deshpande, in particular, explained how she associates her singing with visualizing and organizing colors and architectures: the former are related to the identity and mood of raga; the latter refer to the structure of the overall performance. She also specified that the way she manages them is not random, but can depend, for

¹⁰ Vijay Koparkar, 18th February 2010. Interview carried out by the author together with Martin Clayton, Tarun Nayak, and Simone Tarsitani.

¹¹ Veena Sahasrabuddhe, 5th May 2005.

Comment [AF15]: I have removed this footnote as the title is already included in the further reading section.

example, on the planned length given to a raga, as longer ragas (which usually last approximately forty-five to sixty minutes) are performed as the first item, and shorter ones as the second item in the standard format of a *khyal* concert:

I sometimes do see colors, I sometimes do see pictures, some architectures; but, you know, I don't think that's very raga-specific ... Colors, maybe yes; architectures, no ... I think [the architecture] comes from the structure, the building of the raga. I'll give you an example: rag Ahir Bhairav ... has the potential of being expanded for over one hour ... in that case, I might build a bigger structure with that rag ... But now this same rag, if I am treating [it] now as a second rag of my performance ... I will not treat it the same way, I will not structure it the same way as I would if I am treating it like a first rag. In that case, I might just splash some colors, and not think about the structure at all, of the rag. It's that way.¹²

Ashwini Bhide's mention of color associations is not unique: other musicians too link ragas to shades and colors, which often stem from either the mood or the prescribed time of performance of a raga. However, as I pointed out earlier, the visual body that musicians draw on to shape their own idea of a raga is

¹² Ashwini Bhide Deshpande, 5th February 2010. Interview carried out by the author together with Martin Clayton and Simone Tarsitani.

wider, and can include images (either shared or constructed by each individual), which can be quite detailed in their pictorial qualities. How do images connected with a given raga and with the singer's own experience of it relate to body movement?

An example of how intertwined gesture and imagery can be in both the production of music and the verbal discussion of the experience of its performance is provided by Arun Bhaduri's explanation of Kedar, a night raga, in which the fourth degree of the scale can be both natural and sharp, and which is characterized by oblique melodic phrases. During an interview, Arun Bhaduri described Kedar's characteristic melodic movement (*chalan*) with rolling, circular, and undulating movements of his hands (Figure 2A and 2B). Then, when talking about the mood and the pictures that the raga arouses in him, he specified that Kedar reminds him of sea waves and of the feeling of standing by the seashore. While saying this, he repeated the same circular gestures he had made before (Figure 2C): the common image of the musician standing by the sea is accompanied by the more precise, raga-specific detail of the movement of the water waves. Most of all, he immediately demonstrated the movement of the waves signing Kedar's *chalan*, and again, accompanying the music with circular and undulating gestures (Figure 2D and 2E).

Kedar's *chalan* is therefore embodied as a pattern of movement, which can be expressed by a circular, undulating, contained hand gesture, and by the

Comment [AF16]: I reversed to the original text and pictures, as explained in the email)

image of sea waves; or, *vice versa*, it can be seen as the sonic rendition of an extra-musical, visual experience, i.e. the view of the waves. Most importantly, Arun Bhaduri adapts the shared common image of the musician standing by the seashore by adding and focusing on the detail of the waves' movement: these images are reflected in and at the same time stem from the process of embodiment of the music. His experience of raga Kedar is therefore a complex one, in which musical sound is inseparable from imagistic-visual and gestural aspects.

Comment [Unknown A17]: pictorial?

Comment [AF18]: I do not think that pictorial would work... what about "visual"?

Imagery and Gesture in Performance: Some Concluding Remarks

Arun Bhaduri's use of gesture in performance is, of course, more complex than the brief, clear hand movement displayed during our conversation. As discussed above, in fact, body movement during a concert fulfills a number of functions, including managing musical and social relationships with other participants, as well as structuring the development of the music, and supporting the production of sound. The boundaries between these different kinds of movements are often blurred and it can be difficult to distinguish neatly between them.

However, analysis of video footage of a performance of raga Kedar that Arun Bhaduri gave the evening before the interview shows that he made circular hand gestures when singing Kedar's *chalan*, in particular during the first section

of the raga, in which the mood and the character of Kedar are thoroughly explored and presented.¹³ Whether in that moment the singer was visualizing the ocean waves is impossible to determine: what is important is that the kinetic qualities of the melodic movement he associated with the images of the water waves are reflected in the process of the embodiment of musical sound and are expressed through gesture. Similarly, other participants, including listeners, will not have grasped Arun Bhaduri's specific image, but his hand movements will have contributed to convey the character of the melody: this, in turn, will be integral to the shaping of their own experience of raga Kedar, as the shared body of images and extra-musical associations attached to a raga is complemented by one's own pictures and details.

Movement in performance will also reflect a singer's own idiosyncratic gestural behavior, which is developed through training and through the observation of the teacher, as part of the process of acquisition of musical knowledge. At the same time, it will be affected by the corpus of visual sources associated with different ragas, as well as by images employed to describe the performance of large-scale structures (such as architectures or colors), or specific phrases (as in the case of movements implying metaphors of trajectories).

¹³ The concert took place in Raniganj, West Bengal, on 14th February ~~2010~~2007. The video recordings were made with Martin Clayton and Andrew McGuiness.

Comment [T19]: In this footnote you give the year of the performance and interview as 2010, but an earlier footnote says 2007.

Comment [AF20]: SORRY! Well spotted!

The auditory, the visual, and the gestural are therefore integral parts of the experience and the performance of music. Acknowledging the importance of these aspects and their interconnectedness, and investigating them simultaneously rather than considering them as separate elements, is essential to an understanding of how people make and make sense of music.

Further Reading

Clayton, Martin, and Laura Leante. "Embodiment in musical performance." In *Experience and Meaning in Music Performance*, edited by Martin Clayton, Byron Dueck, and Laura Leante. Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

~~Fatone, Gina, Martin Clayton, Laura Leante, and Matt Rahaim. "Imagery, melody and Gesture in Cross-cultural Perspective." In *New Perspectives on Music and Gesture*, edited by Anthony Gritten, and Anthony and Elaine King. 203-220. Farnham: Ashgate, 2011.~~

Godøy, Rolf Inge, and Marc Leman, eds. *Musical Gestures: Sound, Movement, and Meaning*. New York: Routledge, 2010.

Gritten, Anthony, and Elaine King, eds. *New Perspectives on Music and Gesture*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2011.

Comment [T21]: Can we remove this from the Further Reading, as it is now in a footnote, and the New Perspectives book is also listed here separately?

Comment [AF22]: This is a major publication and must be included in this list. I have removed the Fatone et al, as you rightly suggested.

Leante, Laura. "The Lotus and the King: Imagery, Gesture and Meaning in a Hindustani Rāg." *Ethnomusicology Forum* 18, no. 2 (2009): 185-206.

MacNeill, David. *Hand and Mind: What Gestures Reveal about Thought*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

_____. *Gesture and Thought*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Rahaim, Matt. *Musicking Bodies: Gesture and Voice in Hindustani Music*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2012.

Tagg, Philip. "Gestural Interconversion and Connotative Precision." *Film International* 13, no. 1 (2005): 20-31.

Captions

Figure 18.1: Manjiri Asanare-Kelkar using gesture to describe a melodic phrase.

11th December 2006.

Figures 18.2 and 18.3: Arun Bhaduri discussing raga Kedar.

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