

Chapter

11

KEY WORDS

composition
improvisation
riff
taqasim

Learning Objectives

After successfully completing this unit, the student will understand that:

1. While composition and improvisation are often treated as opposites, they are both processes involving the creation of music. Many musics involve at least some element of both composition and improvisation in their conception or performance.
2. Composers and improvisers are typically involved with characteristic forms, molds, and styles in a musical system.
3. Although creative musicians work in the present, they are grounded in the past; formally or informally they are part of a musical system.
4. While music in the Western classical tradition is recognized, for the most part by composer, other musics are often anonymous.
5. Composing can be an individual or collaborative process.

Television Program

Form: Composers and Improvisers

Audio Selections

59. *Great Southern Spirits* by Stephen Leek:
"Kondalilla" (3rd movement).
60. "Amelia" by Bob McQuillen.
61. "San Juan Pueblo Cloud Dance Song"
by Peter Garcia, Sr.
58. "Rag Kamod"
62. 'Ud Taqasim in Maqam Nahawand.

Composers and Improvisers

“Notation, the writing out of compositions, is primarily an ingenious expedient for catching an inspiration, with the purpose of exploiting it later. But notation is to improvisation as the portrait to the living model. It is up to the interpreter to resolve the rigidity of the signs into the emotion.”

PABLO CASALS

In this chapter, we examine how composers and performers create music. We look at the methods, training, and resources that composers and improvisers from different cultures use to create pieces and performances. We also discuss the role of the composer and improviser in culture. Creative musicians are typically involved with characteristic forms, molds, and styles that serve as the raw materials from which

they fashion their own unique compositions or improvisations. With each new creative act, composers and improvisers situate themselves in relation to the tradition of which they are a part.

In common usage, the two nouns in this chapter's title are treated as opposites. Music is either "composed," from the Latin *componere*, to put together, or "improvised," from the Latin *improvisus*, unforeseen. Composers carefully plot out their pieces, either on paper or in their minds, while improvisers produce their music extemporaneously, not knowing exactly what will happen until the very instant of their performance. But sometimes an improvisation can be seen as an "instant composition," a composition as a "frozen improvisation." For most creative musicians, composition and improvisation are related processes which might even flow seamlessly into each other. To understand the ways that such musicians really work with their materials, the conceptual duality must be replaced by something more like a continuum.



If we try to find the farthest poles of this continuum, we might end up with some forms of electronically-mediated music on the "composed" side: pieces which exist on tape as finished performances which will always be identical; the acoustics and sound equipment of any given playback situation provide "unforeseen" elements, but they cannot be viewed as human improvisation. On the "improvised" side, it is hard to imagine a human performance in which absolutely nothing has been even vaguely "put together" beforehand—unless one counts what a pre-toddler might do to a table with a spoon; the child may be responding to inborn tendencies toward rhythm, but since these are unconscious they cannot be regarded as willful composition.

Even music which is fully written out in a complex notational system—a Chopin piano prelude, for example—involves "unforeseen" elements in performance: the feelings of the pianist at the time of performance, the particular instrument involved, the general temperament of the audience, and the specific occasion can inspire a sensitive musician to a slightly different interpretation each time. Though the pianist will never change the notes or other indications—phrasing, dynamics, and so on—which Chopin specified, these subtle differences in performance belong, in spirit, to the realm of improvisation.

By the same token, music which is completely improvised, such as free jazz, involves a number of elements which are "put together" beforehand: the musicians are all drawing on their extensive experience with improvising, alone and in groups, and they have learned how to make open forms work in musically satisfying ways. Again, this kind of practical background may not constitute what most people would call a "composition," but it informs the musical activities in similar ways to those of a pre-composed improvisational format.

Moving closer to the center of the continuum, one may find many examples of musics which combine elements of the two. Performances of both Hindustani classical music and jazz usually involve much more improvisation than composition, but the improvisations are structured in pre-determined ways. Jazz musicians improvise on the basis of the harmonic cycle of the composition. Hindustani musicians work within the pre-established norms of raga and tala, as well as in overall improvisational formats such as alap, jor, and jhala. Central Javanese gamelans perform compositions, but several of the instruments are characteristically played in semi-improvisational ways within a set of learned parameters. West African drum ensembles also perform set compositions, but these pieces involve some latitude for many of the players to improvise, and a great deal of room for improvisation by the lead drummer who can even change the overall shape of the performance by signaling sectional changes.

Folk musicians perform composed pieces too, but in some cultures they are most highly-respected when they are able to nuance and embellish them in different ways each time. The Irish *sean-nós* singer Joe Heaney often said "I never sing a song the same way twice," but just as frequently he declared "I always sing songs exactly the way my father did." This apparent contradiction is resolved when one realizes that his father also never sang them the same way twice!

Compositions often begin as improvisations, as a musician experiments with musical ideas in order to weigh possibilities and make final decisions. Some Western composers have produced pieces called "impromptus," specifically indicating their origin in improvisation, and bebop composers often drew from their improvisations on older harmonic cycles in composing new pieces. The outstanding French Newfoundland fiddler and composer Emile Benoit described such a process to Colin Quigley:

So I used to play for dances an' all that. We had no radio, no television, or nothing like that. So, I used to get tired. You gets tired [of] the same thing all the time, eh? You'll find, *fatiguer*, the same song. Same reel or same air. You gets tired. You want to hear something

new. So I start makin' up things, eh, air, changing air, and all that. So [the dancers say], "Chee, where you heard that?" . . . Well from that, well you plays that for a while, then gets tired of it. Then try something again. That's the way it goes, oui? Yes, but after a while, you does that for years and years, eh? Well, you're getting pretty smart at it, oui? The same like go to school, oui? Getting your grade twelve. Same thing.¹

Conversely, performers in improvisational traditions like jazz, Arabic, and Hindustani classical music often employ compositional concepts as they endeavor to construct a coherent musical "story" on the spot, with a feeling of a beginning, middle, and end which work together in a satisfying way.

Both composition and improvisation can be collaborative efforts. Some "free" jazz groups, like the Art Ensemble of Chicago, have developed performing styles in which collective improvisation is not necessarily based on prearranged formal considerations: group dynamics and audience energy may lead them into completely unexpected musical adventures shaped only by spontaneous interplay at the moment of performance.

In Maoist China, the state-ordered practice of composition by committee resulted in music whose significance was more ideological than artistic. But some musical groups, like the rock band Rusted Root, value a kind of communal composition in which a member brings ideas to a rehearsal and the whole group contributes to the final shaping of the piece: the outcome, they feel, is a shared musical utterance whose power is enhanced by its embodiment of the group's cooperative energy.

In some cultures creative musical processes can involve a non-human element, and the concept of music may extend to the sounds of birds, whales, wind, and waterfalls. As we will see, some Native American groups maintain that songs can come from supernatural sources. In some cultures, songs can come directly from nature or from dreams. The Western concept of "talent" fits interestingly with such beliefs that musical creativity is rooted in more than conscious intelligence. The concept is not found in all cultures: for example, when James Koetting asked the master Ghanaian musician William Alban Ayipaga Connelly whether he believed in talent, Connelly replied negatively, categorizing the concept as *jùjù*: magic, or—to him, at least—superstition.²

Whatever its provenance, musical creativity involves a response to various kinds of flexible or rigid considerations—rules, norms, tendencies—which are embedded in culture. The following investigation of some of these influences provides a foundation for more detailed case studies.

THE MUSICAL SYSTEM

Although composers and improvisers work in the present, they are grounded in the past: formally or informally, they are part of a musical system. This foundation includes practical knowledge of the instruments or voices they are composing for or improvising with, their own capabilities and those of any other musicians involved, and sometimes notational systems as well. Some musics require an understanding of a theoretical system, such as Western harmony or the Arabic maqam system. All musical creativity involves certain implicit and explicit considerations which are fundamental to the tradition on which the composer or improviser chooses to build. In one way or another, the creative musician is usually involved with characteristic forms, materials, and styles.

Form

Composition. As we have seen, form is a crucial element in the compositional process. A composer may begin with a fragmentary musical idea, but before long, questions of overall form must be addressed: Should this idea be developed as a theme? Should it lead to something else? Should it return? Sometimes form itself is the first factor a composer determines.

For example, an eighteenth-century Western composer might decide or be commissioned to write in sonata form. This composer's training and experience would suggest coming up with a lively first subject and a contrasting second subject, both of which have some potential for development. Improvising at an instrument, the composer would soon arrive at two compatible subjects, and could get right to work.

Improvisation. Concerns about form are equally important to improvisers. Knowing the harmonic cycle which underlies a given piece, jazz musicians structure their improvisations to fit with it in varying ways: form allows them to know where they are, and where they are going. Similarly, Hindustani tabla players build their improvisations within the framework of the tala cycle. Such improvisers may consciously work with larger forms too, determining how many tala or chord cycles they will improvise on and fashioning longer improvisations accordingly. Some tabla players are so adept at mental mathematics that they can plan a cross-rhythmic improvisation that will span several tala cycles and end at precisely the right moment, and jazz musicians can "go out," momentarily seeming to defy the chord pattern but then re-synchronizing with it in a musically compelling way. In such cases, form plays an important role in the generation of improvisational ideas.

Compositional Elements

- Form
- Materials
- Style

Improvisational Elements

- Form
- Materials
- Style

Materials

Materials may be less concrete than forms, but no less important in influencing musical creativity. As we have seen, ragas specify certain melodic possibilities, prohibiting others. An improvising Hindustani or Arabic musician works with both the potential of the raga or maqam—explicit but flexible materials which exist only in the mind—and the dictates of overall musical form.

Improvisation. Jazz musicians work with implicit materials in similar ways, improvising within musical norms which identify and differentiate the melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic character of jazz from other musics. Improvisational materials can be more specific as well. For example, *gender* players in Central Javanese gamelans know predetermined sets of melodic patterns which are appropriate for particular musical moments, but they may spontaneously make selections from these sets, weaving them into their previous and prior selections.

Jeff Titon proposed the concept of “preforms” to describe how blues musicians improvise: “A preform carries the connotation of something roughly sized or shaped, but not finished. Stored in its rough state, it is given whatever final shaping is necessary as it is fit into the accompaniment. Among musicians, the repository for these preforms often is called a “bag”; and what it contains is preforms for the patchwork quilt of variation.”³ Titon compares this process to many daily activities, showing how the manipulation of flexible materials is a common human experience. The idea of preforms fits well with the concepts of raga and maqam—the latter are simply more explicit versions of the same kinds of activities.

Composition. Composers also work with materials which may be implicit or explicit. Explicit materials like raga and maqam are essential considerations for composers in their traditions. While most of the world’s musical systems do not have a theoretical language for their conceptualization, they still involve implicit materials which are somewhat comparable to explicit ones. A folk musician composing a dance tune, for example, knows the form the tune must take in order to be appropriate for the particular dance, but also knows implicitly how to make the tune idiomatic, so that it is compatible with the whole repertory. Under traditional circumstances, a Scottish fiddler will not compose a melody that sounds Polynesian; and to those deeply involved with the music, Scottish tunes even sound identifiably different from those of neighboring traditions in England and Ireland.

Style

A creative musician's style may be thought of as both a personal and a local phenomenon. Long before Western classical music was thought of as one unified system, various national and local styles were acknowledged: French music, Italian music, Viennese music, music of the Cathedral of Notre Dame, and so on. Early blues were also thought of as local: East Texas style, Mississippi Delta style, New Orleans style, etc.

People in any sizable area differentiate between local styles in various ways. Composers and improvisers are always aware of their stylistic roots, whether they see them as belonging to a particular geographic region or to a particular lineage of musicians. Beethoven considered himself a stylistic descendant of Handel and Haydn, as well as a participant in the local musical style of Vienna. Miles Davis knew that his stylistic influences involved older bebop players, along with the musicians he knew and worked with in contemporary jazz genres.

In some cases a creative musician also develops a personal style—perhaps more than one over time. Such developments can be controversial: an especially idiosyncratic personal style may not be accepted immediately, or at all. Still, creative musicians often place a high value on finding their own “voice,” and many listeners respond positively to a composer or improviser's unique musical personality. But this is not a universal value: some musics place a higher premium on creativity which does not celebrate the individual but honors the group, by producing new sounds that fit perfectly with old ones. In such cases a musician is not encouraged to develop a personal style, but to carry the unadulterated tradition from past to future, replenishing it with congenial new material.

THE INNER WORLD

In addition to their foundation in pre-established musical systems, composers and improvisers respond to their own inner worlds. Such a response might largely involve a wish to uphold and supplement a beautiful tradition, as in the cases just mentioned. But it also might include a wish to connect deeply with one's own feelings, to express one's emotions, responses to nature, and so on. It might even involve a wish to assert oneself, to make others stop and listen, perhaps bringing them into a new kind of awareness. The impulse to create often springs from some combination of such desires, which in turn influence aspects of the creative musician's work.

Emotion

Emotions of sorrow, love, and indignation have been the wellsprings of countless songs. In various parts of the world, funereal mourning is an improvised tradition. The bereaved have heard others perform it, but do not compose what they will chant or sing over the deceased—the words and melody just come when the mourner's emotional state summons them. For the Kaluli in Papua, New Guinea, “song that moves men to tears” and “weeping that moves women to song” are among the highest cultural values, as Steven Feld has noted.⁴

Perhaps the most influential song in all of gospel music, “Precious Lord, Take My Hand,” was composed by Thomas A. Dorsey as he grieved over the death of his wife. One of the deepest of Irish love songs, “Eile-anóir a Rúin,” is said to have sprung spontaneously from the lips of the eighteenth-century poet Carrol Dálaigh when he first saw the beautiful young woman who was to become his wife. And one of the signal songs of the 1960s antiwar movement, “The Big Muddy,” was written by Pete Seeger in response to his rage over the squandering of life in Vietnam. A Netsilik Eskimo vividly described to explorer Knud Rasmussen how songs rise from the emotions:

Songs are thoughts, sung out with the breath when people are moved by great forces and ordinary speech no longer suffices. Man is moved just like the ice floe sailing here and there out in the current. His thoughts are driven by a flowing force when he feels joy, when he feels fear, when he feels sorrow. Thoughts can wash over him like a flood, making his breath come in gasps and his heart throb. Something, like an abatement in the weather, will keep him thawed up. And then it will happen that the words we need will come of themselves. When the words we want to use shoot up of themselves—we get a new song.⁵

Emotions can be expressed through music in more abstract ways too. To some extent, Beethoven's “Eroica” symphony grew out of the inner turmoil created by his increasing deafness, musically portraying feelings of heroism and triumph, morbidity, and a final embracing of the multifaceted beauty of life. A portrayal of changing emotions in a composition or improvisation can seem to tell an abstract story, communicating the complexities of the musician's inner world. Trumpeter Bobby Rogovin described how he listens to improvisers to Paul Berliner:

I thought of the soloist's lines like the way we talk sentences, and I heard all the emotion in them. . . . He's saying this now; he's saying

that next. He's sad there. He's getting a little cocky here. He gets a little happy there. He builds up here. He relaxes there. Things phrased in a certain way have a certain meaning. . . . Miles is really good at this. It's not so much the notes he plays as the way he plays the notes.⁶

Another trumpeter, Adolphus "Doc" Cheatham, told Berliner that "if a guy plays a beautiful solo and he's playing from the heart or he's talking with his horn, we say, 'He's telling a story.' If he's playing bad, we say, 'He plays like he's got rocks in his blood.'"⁷

Impressions

Sometimes creative musicians are prompted by inward associations with elements of the outside world. Many composers have drawn inspiration from nature, sometimes alluding to this association explicitly, as with Claude Debussy's evocation of the sea, *La Mer*. A striking Native American example of a more specific impression from the natural world comes from a member of the Washo Peyotists, as reported by Alan Merriam:

When I was a child in Carson Valley I used to go out in the fields at night during a thunder storm to listen. Lightning and thunder had a special fascination for me, and I still dream about it. I remember how the sounds of thunder seemed to strike against Job's Peak and then glance off and go rolling northward like the sounds which had followed and swallowed up "the old lady and the old man" [mythological creatures in the Washo creation tale]. While the thunder was rolling away I could hear him singing a song; his voice was that sound thunder makes when it echoes among the mountains. I can remember that song, and I can sing it. I have sung it ever since I was a child. It is my song.⁸

The music of the Kaluli draws extensively from bird songs, which have a special emotional and cosmological significance for them.⁹ The Hindustani raga system includes many relationships of ragas with elements of the natural world—specific seasons, birds, flowers, and so on—which may guide the improviser to bring out the raga's inner essence.

Sometimes compositions or improvisations are inspired by other kinds of impressions. For example, Emile Benoit described a musical idea that came to him in an airplane:

I got the sound of the wings, eh? I was in the hind seat, in behind the wing, eh? And listening to that [makes a high-pitched nasal hum], you know, a sound [makes the sound again]. And I didn't sing it,

but I had that [sound in mind], you know? So I took the violin and I played it. It was easy, easy to play and I play it right low. After a little while I got it and then I open up [laughter]. Jeez cripes, they started getting up. They started getting up from their seats. . . they wanted to know what was going on [laughter]. So . . . I went up, [the steward] put me on the [intercom] for fifteen minutes. Played. They all went, sat down in their seat [laughter]. So I played the Flying Reel, so I told them there that I just compose it. . . Yeah, it was all right.¹⁰

Creative musicians may also be stimulated by other artists. Some Western composers have been inspired by literary works, such as Richard Strauss's orchestral "tone poem" based on Friedrich Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, and musical settings of poems are clearly responses to the poets' original utterance.

The realm of visual art has prompted some compositions, like Modest Musorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Other musics can provide potent associations too: jazz musicians may consciously evoke the older world of blues in their improvisations, and Western classical composers sometimes purposely echo their own local folk musics. Sometimes actual people are alluded to, as when a jazz musician quotes a phrase associated with Louis Armstrong or Charlie Parker, or when a rap arrangement includes samples from recordings by James Brown.

THE OUTSIDE WORLD

Most creative musicians want their work to be received by other people; therefore their work is influenced by considerations of context and communication. Pre-toddler spoon-banging may be considered a kind of expression, but it is not particularly edifying as communication. And while it may be acceptable in the family kitchen, it is normally not welcome in a musical event. In order to bring elements of their inner world forward, composers and improvisers need to be fluent in the musical "language" understood by their listeners, and they must take into consideration the particular time and place for their work.

Situation

The situation or context in which a performance takes place is an important factor for most composers and improvisers. A jazz musician improvising at a nightclub frequented by serious jazz aficionados feels more freedom to explore a wide range of ideas than one who is playing for a socializing crowd at a wedding reception: the former audience wants to

listen closely to creative musicians, while the latter simply wants to hear pleasant background music, perhaps something they can dance to. Film composers must supply what the director wants to accompany a given scene, tailoring their music to split-second requirements. A Hindustani musician may find it necessary to perform shorter improvisations for non-Indian audiences, who cannot follow the nuanced intricacies of slowly unfolding a raga. Such situations do not destroy creativity, but they certainly limit it, and some composers and improvisers cannot—or will not—adapt to such limitations.

By contrast, a church congregation may be in exactly the right frame of mind to be attentive to, and moved by, a complex sacred composition or an extended vocal improvisation. A concert-hall or jazz-club audience offers a secular analogy: they have come for a contemplative experience, and are eager to hear music which will stimulate their minds and hearts. In such situations, creative musicians know that they can work with musical subtleties in a variety of ways.

Creative musicians might be even more immediately connected with their audiences, supplying what is needed for particular kinds of direct involvement—such as dancing. As mentioned earlier, composers of social dances must know the proper form and rhythm required for particular dances; and in some traditions improvisers may work very closely with dancers. The master Ghanaian drummer Alhaji Ibrahim Abdulai described such a process to John Chernoff:

Steady changing music is the feeling of the drummer, that is, the particular one who is drumming, that's what he feels. As he is drumming, sometimes people are also dancing. He watches their feet and how they take their feet for the dance. He watches the movement of the body and the feet, and as the dancer takes his steps in the dance, he will drum according to it. That is why I told you earlier that I had wanted you to call the Takai drummers and dancers for you alone to study, because there is one particular man who is very good at dancing, and you will see how he will be taking his feet. There is also one particular drummer who really watches that man. When the dancer lifts his feet and moves his body, then that man will play the music according to the movement of the body. Then you will see how clearly it comes together and how it changes according to how he dances. If he starts moving his feet and his body, the drummer will drum according to his movements. Immediately he stops, you will see that the one drumming in tune with him will also stop. Then you will see how it is his dance movements which bring the changes of the drumming.¹¹

Tradition and Innovation

With each new creative act, composers and improvisers situate themselves in relation to their tradition. As mentioned earlier, some traditions are very conservative, and the creative musician is judged by strict standards. If a Hindustani musician attempts to add new elements to a raga, most listeners will hear the innovation as a violation: the musician is clumsy, or tasteless. But if that musician produces new ways of working *within* the raga's traditional structure, audiences may be delighted.

Some genres are more accommodating to innovation. Musicians like John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman pushed the boundaries of jazz in visionary ways, and are now considered to be very important figures in jazz history. Western classical music in the twentieth century has been the scene of constant innovation, with some composers creating whole new musical systems and even new definitions of music. The serial procedures of Arnold Schönberg, the chance operations of John Cage, and the mathematical applications of Milton Babbitt—to cite just a few examples—have been hailed as momentous innovations by some, while others find their music merely bewildering.

Inventing a new musical language involves a communicative risk: will anyone understand it? In an essay originally titled “The Composer as Specialist”—notoriously retitled by its publisher “Who Cares If You Listen?”—Babbitt staked out his territory:

I dare to suggest that the composer would do himself and his music an immediate and eventual service by total, resolute, and voluntary withdrawal from this public world to one of private performance and electronic media, with its very real possibility of complete elimination of the public and social aspects of musical composition. . . . Admittedly, if this music is not supported, the whistling repertory of the man in the street will be little affected, the concert-going activity of the conspicuous consumer of musical culture will be little disturbed. But music will cease to evolve, and, in that important sense, will cease to live.¹²

Indeed, at the present time music such as Babbitt's survives only with institutional support. It has not been accepted by the general public: its language truly is that of the “specialist,” who, throughout his essay, Babbitt contrasts with the “layman” who cannot be expected to comprehend advanced developments in musical composition.

Innovation is a courageous act, and composers and improvisers often must grapple with its consequences. Coltrane and Coleman were not widely accepted by jazz audiences at first, but they did not capitulate to

popular taste, and eventually many listeners and other musicians came to value their contributions. Still, major innovation is not the only form of creativity, and many musicians and listeners place the highest value on music which can be appreciated and enjoyed by a wide musical community. Emile Benoit described the pleasure of having one of his compositions accepted at a dance:

Another time I composed . . . [a piece], "Farewell," it's called. . . . I played it to a party and jeepers, fancy, everybody liked it, you know, eh? And Joe Farwell, him, he got on the floor and he danced, well, it's just as well to say all night. We start seven o'clock, we finish two o'clock in the morning. For every dance on the floor, and that's all I played, that's all I played all night, "Farewell." Yeah. . . . And after that . . . I went out with a horse and a couple of my family come with me too, and when we came home [it] was right calm, eh. And the moon shining so bright. Oh, beautiful. I used to hear people, eh? [sings melody of "Farewell Reel"]. Now, [it] was the tune called Farewell, eh? [whistles tune]. They know that because I played it all night [laughter]. So after that when they goes to the times, they go on "Give us Farewell."¹³

Whether they choose to reach out to many people, to a small number of cognoscenti, or even to keep their music entirely to themselves, creative musicians make decisions about connections between their inner and outer worlds and position themselves in some relationship to the past and present. For more detailed examples of composing and improvising within particular traditions, we now turn to a few case studies.

THE ROLE OF THE COMPOSER IN WESTERN CLASSICAL MUSIC

We have discussed Western classical music throughout this book, but how can we really define it? In some senses, this is a difficult question to answer. It is "Western" historically, in that it developed in Europe; but it is performed and replenished with new compositions from all over the world, and not only by people of European ancestry. One could even argue that it is not ultimately European in origin, since so many of its practices and instruments were brought to Europe long ago from parts of western Asia and northern Africa, areas which are sometimes loosely referred to in the West as "the Middle East" and "the Near East."

It is not easy to define "classical" either: it might actually make the most sense to define it by what it excludes—folk and popular musics—though occasionally that distinction becomes problematic, as when a clas-

sical soloist or group performs music composed by a folk or popular musician, or vice versa. One salient feature is the degree of its dependence on written notation; as a rule Western compositions—including those for “non-classical” ensembles, such as jazz or marching bands—must be written out before they can be performed. It is important to remember that “Classical” is also the name given to a specific period of music, following the Baroque period and preceding the Romantic period. The word *Classical* in this text is used generally to refer to “Serious” music.

Although today people tend to think of Western classical music as a unified category, this idea is comparatively recent and arises largely from the changing social situations in which the music has thrived. Generally, we can say that the system is rooted in the institutional religious and court practices of medieval Europe. It appears that for some time the musics of the church and the court were quite separate. Sacred music was sung by soloists or unison groups: a particularly well-known example today is the repertory referred to as Gregorian Chant or plainchant. Court music involved an array of functional, entertainment, and dance musics, related in various ways to local folk musics, but generally involving the conscious refinement and embellishment that suited an aristocratic atmosphere.

The Composer Before 1900

By the thirteenth century these traditions were already starting to mix in some places, with court composers using sacred chant melodies as the basis for composing secular music, and church composers borrowing compositional ideas from the world of court music. While some composers continued to specialize in music for one venue or the other, by the middle of the fifteenth century many composers were employed to write both sacred and secular music.

Subsequent decades saw the rise of opera and the consequent development of a third important venue, the theater. Apart from certain works by earlier composers—mainly choral, keyboard, or lute works—the music of what is now called the Baroque era is the earliest music that is still often heard in conventional Western classical performances. A number of pieces by some of this era’s composers, including Antonio Vivaldi, George Frideric Handel, and Johann Sebastian Bach, are quite well known today.

These composers, like others before them, were mostly supported by the patronage of church or court. Composition was regarded as a craft that was often handed down in families. Composing was a job in which individual artistic expression had to be tailored to fit the needs and requirements of both patron and performance situation. Whether the context was

a party at court requiring chamber music, a royal birthday celebration, or a regular church service, composers were required to provide new compositions for each event. They also functioned as performers and conductors, as well as teachers and organizers. As Cantor of St. Thomas's Church in Leipzig, Johann Sebastian Bach not only had to write a new cantata (a major work for soloists, chorus, and orchestra) almost every week, but he had to notate it in parts, rehearse the musicians, conduct it in performance, and organize the music for the other churches in town.

Although Baroque composers notated most of their music, it was common practice to leave room for the musicians to improvise in performance. Composers were not required to write out each ornament and note as musicians were expected to know where and how to correctly embellish the music. The most obvious form of improvisation occurred in the continuo part, which was written just as a figured bass line. Harpsichordists or organists played the notated line with their left hand, often supported on this same line by bass instruments such as the cello or bassoon, while improvising a part based on the appropriate chords with their right hand.

These improvisatory practices gradually died out after the Baroque period. Although Mozart was a fabulous improviser, his music is completely notated. The score became the complete blueprint for performance and performers were left little room for real improvisation. The cadenza was the one place that performers were given free rein. Typically occurring in concertos featuring a single instrument and orchestra, the soloist's cadenza was and is often a lengthy passage occurring near the end of a movement. This moment gives the soloist a chance to display virtuosity and brilliance while the other instruments are silent. As the cadenza climaxes and ends, the orchestra then comes back in to finish the piece.

During the Classical period (roughly 1750–1825) a growing public concert world started to play a much greater role in the music's social maintenance. While some composers—such as Franz Josef Haydn—still relied mainly on courtly patronage, others—including Mozart, Beethoven, and Franz Schubert—relied partly or entirely on public venues and private patronage for financial support. Accordingly, their music developed in ways which were congenial to public concert settings, with listening audiences who wanted to experience a more dramatic range of expression. Orchestras and opera companies grew larger, and the works written for them became longer and appealed to wider audiences. Works for smaller ensembles also grew longer, and similarly more diverse in their expressive range. Instruments were developed to produce fuller, richer tones, and wider dynamic and pitch capabilities.

Such trends continued as public patronage became even more important in the Romantic period (roughly 1815–1900), with the massive operas of Richard Wagner, Giuseppe Verdi, and Giacomo Puccini; the fervent symphonies of Robert Schumann, Johannes Brahms, and Gustav Mahler; and in the increasingly virtuosic chamber works of many composers. While most of these composers wrote sacred music as well, after the Baroque era it was increasingly unlikely that a composer would be regularly employed to provide a new church piece every Sunday. Sacred musical traditions generally became more conservative (with occasional exceptions, such as the monumental Requiem Masses of Verdi and Brahms), and religious institutions sponsored the creation of new musical works less often.

The role and function of the composer also changed during the nineteenth century as a separation developed between composer, performer, and conductor—they were no longer certain to be the same person. Both composition and conducting became more specialized activities. Beethoven was probably the first composer to make his living solely from composing. Regarded as a genius in his own lifetime, he is also viewed as the first truly independent artist who followed his own muse. Subsequent composers came to be regarded as visionaries and artists rather than craftsmen—each engaged in creating his or her own unique expression.

Twentieth-Century Trends

Around the beginning of the twentieth century composers such as Claude Debussy, Bela Bartók, Arnold Schoenberg, and Igor Stravinsky started to push classical music well beyond many of its prevailing formal and harmonic conventions. The cataclysmic social and political events surrounding the two World Wars were mirrored in all the arts by an increasing abandonment of standard practices, in a conviction that a new artistic order must accompany a new world order, along with a sense that older practices were unredeemably tainted by the wrongs of the past.

Much of twentieth-century classical music has involved such a rejection of previous norms of tonality, melody, and harmony in the search for new techniques and sounds. Some of these techniques have included the use of electronic instruments and computers, the use of ambient and chance sounds, the invention of new instruments, and the incorporation of non-Western musical elements. Twentieth-century composers have taken and continue to take, a variety of individual approaches to musical creation, making use of what has gone before while perpetually forging new paths. Some, including the Australian composer Stephen Leek, have experimented with the use of improvisation in their compositions.

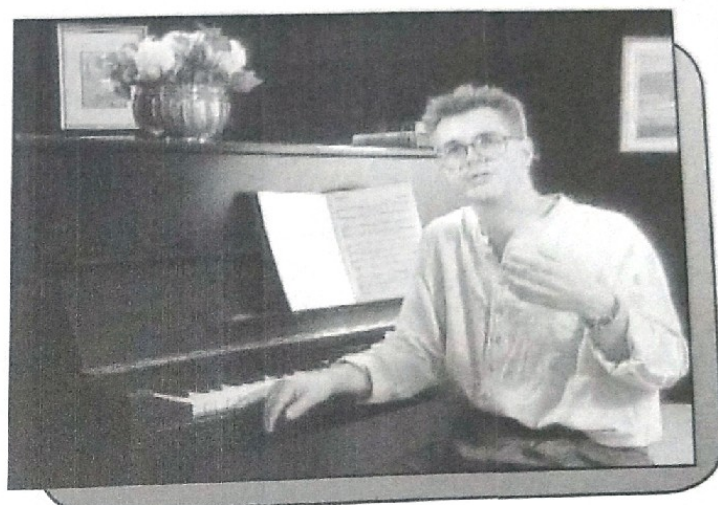
Courtesy of the George Grantham Bain Collection,
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▲ Igor Stravinsky

Stephen Leek. Leek is one of the best known composers in Australia today, as well as founder of Australian Voices, a choir devoted to performing vocal works by contemporary Australian composers. Although his scores are entirely notated, most of his compositions allow for some improvisation, either in structure, rhythm, texture, or form. By allowing this type of freedom, Leek believes that his music is given new life and expression in every performance. He also feels that his approach allows for dynamic collaboration between composer and performer:

I actually build into my scores elements so that the performances are never the same, so the performer has the opportunity to have input into decision making along the process of the performance of the piece. It could be for instance that they are given pitch materials and they're asked to extend the durations or choose the durations. It could be they are not given any pitch material at all, but given the rhythmic structure. . . . And that for me provides a really exciting medium where it's not just me as the immortal composer, but (I am) part of a process which comes alive during every performance.¹⁴



▲ Stephen Leek

"Kondalilla," the third movement of Leek's four-movement choral work, *Great Southern Spirits*, provides one example of his use of improvisation within a portion of a composition. In the opening he gives the sopranos specified pitches, but allows them to put them into any rhythmic framework:

The sopranos open the movement with information which is provided in a box which they can interpret and repeat ad lib, by deciphering the information that's there and making choices about where they place the material, how long the material occurs, how thick the texture becomes they have some input into the polyphony of the piece. . . . Sometimes it might be quite thin, sometimes there might be silence, sometimes there might be quite a dense sort of sound. . . . They decide how the tension is created and released.¹⁵

While Leek has been quite successful in getting recognition and support throughout Australia for his work, other composers have not been as lucky. In many cases, experimental music has proved disastrous for public patronage: feeling assaulted by unpleasant and seemingly incomprehensible new music, audiences largely have withdrawn their support. Most orchestras and opera companies have been forced to become very conser-



A performance
of "Kondalilla."

vative in their programming, offering relatively few performances of new music. If it were not for the support of academic institutions and private foundations, much of this innovative music could not survive today.

At this moment, the Western classical performance world is still dominated by works from the Classical and Romantic periods. Both musicians and audiences often favor these works, and a typical short list of “the great composers” would largely comprise those from these two periods, with less from the Baroque era and the twentieth century and still fewer from pre-Baroque times. Still, there are thriving performance scenes for “early music” and “contemporary music,” each with its own public and private patronage systems.

Although their role in society has changed over time, contemporary composers continue to write new music that keeps the Western classical tradition growing and dynamic as they recharge, rejuvenate, and reshape music materials into their own individual artistic creations. Some, such as Phillip Glass, Steve Reich, Lou Harrison, and Gordon Gottlieb, are greatly influenced by non-European traditions. According to composer Gerald Shapiro, the process depends on what has gone before—all the music and techniques of previous composers—as well as the composer’s own training and inspiration:

I think what I’m writing is one long piece and that I chop off a section of it and I give it out. And every piece has something of the material that came before. Every piece is an intersection. I live a life. I have children, I have parents, a wife. I’m happy. I’m sad. Something is going well. Something is going poorly. I work as a teacher of composition. I discuss how to shape different intervals and different chords into effective wholes. . . . Two separate lines are happening. . . . There’s a technical study that’s going on. I’m learning all the time about music, and studying new ways of using techniques. And I’m living a life and learning all the time what’s in my heart, you know, what’s in the world around me. And each piece represents a special intersection between those two things.¹⁶

COMPOSITION AND THE FOLK PROCESS: NEW ENGLAND CONTRA DANCE MUSIC

While music in the Western classical tradition has been created, for the most part, by known composers, Euro-American traditional or folk musics are often anonymous. Even though individual composers originally conceived these songs and instrumental pieces, their work entered a common body of repertory in generic forms, in which the composers’

names are forgotten over time. The music is often transmitted orally from musician to musician; each performer in the chain personalizes it as it becomes part of his or her repertory. There is no single definition of music that is considered "folk" or "traditional," but typically, traditional music genres have great meaning for a community and have been passed down from one generation to the next.

Although authorship in many folk genres is obscured and old repertoire is cherished, new compositions help to keep a tradition dynamic. In the contemporary contra dance world, for example, both old tunes and new tunes intermingle in performance. Composers work within established parameters of tune structure, but create new melodies. Because of recordings and publications, some composers now get credit for their tune creations, although many tunes still enter the common repertory anonymously. Since performers improvise on tunes during dances, compositions tend to get slightly altered as they are passed from musician to musician. We now look at this tradition in more detail.

Music Repertory

As discussed in Chapter 2, contra dances are thought to have originated in England before the sixteenth century and imported to America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The dances have always been closely associated with the music used for their accompaniment. The current music repertory is drawn primarily from a pool of Irish, Scottish, French Canadian, and Cape Breton fiddle tunes—reels, jigs, marches, and hornpipes. There are thousands of tunes in this repertory, many dating back to the eighteenth century.

Published tune collections have long been part of the Anglo-Celtic-American fiddle tune tradition and new ones continue to be published. These collections, at least up until the last twenty years, typically presented the tunes with no acknowledged composer. Instead, the tunes, were (and are) considered part of the "folk tradition," unowned by any single composer. Because oral transmission—passing the music on directly from musician to musician—plays such an important role in the maintenance of the tradition, tune authorship is less valued than in many other musical genres. While tune names sometimes indicate the name of the composer ("Coleman's Jig" for example), most do not. Tunes are felt to be "owned" by the musicians who play them.

Nevertheless, new compositions have been an integral part of the contra dance repertory, as they have been in other fiddle tune traditions. In Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, for example, composing is characteristic

among fiddlers. According to a study by Virginia Garrison, about one quarter of the musicians she interviewed had written a tune, while a few became known as prolific composers.¹⁷ Peter Cooke found a similar situation in the Shetland Islands where he reported that composing is also an important part of the fiddling tradition. While most musicians compose a few tunes, a minority consider themselves, and are considered by others, as composers.¹⁸

Bob McQuillen

Bob McQuillen is reputed to be the most prolific composer in the New England contra dance scene. Although he got his start playing dance music in the 1940s, he didn't begin composing until 1972. The tune "Scotty O'Neill" was written in memory of one of his students who died in a motorcycle accident. He gradually started composing more tunes after this first attempt, most of which were written for and dedicated to special people in his life, including friends, fellow musicians, callers, and children. He published his first book of tunes entitled *Bob's Notebooks* in 1975 and released his tenth in 1994. These books are self published and distributed by McQuillen himself and a number of folk music stores. He always sends a complimentary copy to each person for whom he's written a tune in that particular volume.

McQuillen said that he writes tunes because he loves both the process of writing and of meeting people for whom he wants to write a tune:

I'm going to 1500 next. I'm going to keep on. I can see no way that I'm going to stop writing the tunes. The tunes are too much fun. It's a fun trip to do, it's a neat thing. I love doing it. And as long as there are people I enjoy meeting and have relation with in the music scene, why I'm going to find people I'm going to want to write a tune for.¹⁹

McQuillen stated that he has no desire to put an individual stamp on his tunes. Instead he says that he is writing to fit into the "New England tradition" that is a composite repertory of anonymous fiddle tunes from different origins:

It can sound a lot of different ways because we use here in New England lots of different ethnic origins in our music. We've got the Scottish thing, well the Cape Breton style I'll put it that way. . . . Then we have the Irish thing and then we have the French thing from Canada. And then we have, I don't know whether to call it just naturally New England. . . . So those things are all old New

England tunes and so I can make a tune so that it sounds French, or I can make it in the Irish tradition with the endings and inflections. . . . I can do all this different stuff that would fit into the tradition. And so that's what I emulate.

I'm just doing my thing the best that I can and as far as my stamp, I don't have a stamp. There are others who say to me, "That sounds like a McQuillen tune . . . but I don't know what that means. . . . All I know is that I do my thing and this is how it comes out and if they call that a McQuillen style, well that's what it is. . . . I just plain write them."²⁰

While McQuillen says that relatively few of his 1000 tunes have been performed extensively, some have become part of the collective contra dance repertory, including "Amelia," "The Dancing Bear," "The Boys of Antrim," "Mary Elders Jig," and "Spring Song."

In explaining how these tunes became part of the folk tradition, he cites the circulation of his books as the primary reason:

I just put out a book and somebody played it and they liked the sound of it and it went on. . . . I started putting these damn books out and they just went round and round and round. And I keep putting them out, so pretty soon people are starting to look at it. And especially if they got their tune in there.²¹

McQuillen draws much of his inspiration for composing from the people around him. His tunes—taken as a unique body of repertoire—create a whole community of people who have been recipients of their own Bob McQuillen tune. Other composers in the contra dance scene have different approaches to their work, but this pattern of personalizing tunes after people and places is a common theme in the composing process.

Nevertheless, McQuillen suggests that he is less interested in having his tunes be labeled "McQuillen" tunes, but prefers that they get played enough to be considered part of the "folk tradition." His attitude reflects a value system that honors the group over the individual by producing new sounds which fit perfectly with old ones.



A performance of "Amelia."

COMPOSITION IN NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES

The indigenous peoples of America have developed many musical genres which are conservative, but not closed: while new compositions are valued, and sometimes even required, they follow the conventions of the tradition. Of course, many Native Americans are involved with genres

that mix indigenous elements with ideas from popular and other musics. But since this kind of mixing is a global phenomenon, here we will concentrate on the older Native American traditions and the concepts and practices through which their practitioners continually replenish their repertoires: the process of recombining traditional materials, sometimes as a collaborative effort, and the influence of the supernatural.

Numerous indigenous cultures exist throughout North and South America, each with its own traditions; the present examples are drawn from the Great Plains and southwestern desert regions of the United States.

Recombining

What makes a new song acceptable within a conservative tradition? One might approach this question by asking its opposite: what would make a new song unacceptable? One answer is ineptitude, the composer simply proving unequal to the aesthetic task of generating a pleasing product. A further answer involves the materials of composition: a new piece will not be accepted if it is not made up of the appropriate elements, properly used. Established repertoires consist of pieces which employ predominantly traditional components in traditional ways, and a new addition to such a repertory must do the same.

This kind of compositional process has been called *recombining*.²² Like an author using the common words and structures of a language to produce a new literary work, the composer employs the tradition's characteristic materials, recombining them in a new way which still adheres to its organizational models. In genres like Hindustani, Western classical, and Arabic musics these materials and models are explicitly codified and taught; in many other traditions they are implicit, acquired only through immersion in the repertory. In the words of an Eskimo song recorded by Laura Boulton:

All songs have been exhausted.
He picks up some of all
And adds his own
And makes a new song.²³

For example, when Judith Vander asked "Do you ever make up hand-game songs?" the Shoshone singer Helene Furlong replied "Yeah, try to put two and two together, or page number 1 with page 21."²⁴ Responding to a similar question, the Shoshone singer Lenore Shoyo said, "Yeah, I had to work at it. So I sat home all day thinking of a song. And I keep get-

ting mixed up. I had a hard time, but I finally got it together."²⁵ Putting "page number 1 with page 21," "getting mixed up," and "finally [getting] it together" articulate the process of recombining: reordering traditional elements and mixing them until they come together in a satisfying way.

Composing in this manner can also be a collaborative undertaking. Furlong's brother Wayland described this kind of process to Vander:

WAYLAND: "It's some songs put together on the end and some songs that was this year's and altogether mixed."

JUDY: "You said that C. helped too?"

WAYLAND: "Yes, he added little bits here and there. So it was really the two of us."

JUDY: "Do you usually do that when you make up a song?"

WAYLAND: "Most generally. That was the first time that C. and I ever made up a song together. Most of the time it's with Helene."²⁶

The kachina dance songs of the Hopi are cooperatively composed for each annual performance occasion, following traditional musical and textual regulations. In some cases a number of men from the kachina cult sit together and collectively work out a new song. In other cases a male member of the cult provides a preliminary composition which he then presents to the group. They have no obligation to accept it. If they accept it they are free to alter it. The composer may even request this, if he is unsatisfied with part of it.

Similarly, the music for the Cloud Dance of San Juan Pueblo is freshly composed each year, following its own set of traditional rules. The example given here was composed by Peter Garcia, Sr. and then submitted to a group of song composers for any changes they might deem necessary.

**"San Juan Pueblo Cloud Dance Song" by Peter Garcia, Sr.,
part 2.**

Translation by the composer.

Verse 1:

Sun blueish Lake, its surrounding areas, from there the sacred Koshares began to come out—on top of the lake, they began to jump about. (repeat)

Chorus 1:

Over there from the Laguna Lake, the summer Kachina Boys began to come out.
Over there from the Laguna Lake the summer Kachina Girls started to come,
with their corn-producing process and with their wheat-growing process, here at
this place they arrived. [repeat Verse 1 and Chorus 1]



A performance of "San
Juan Pueblo Cloud
Dance Song,"
part 2.

Verse 2:

It is from here, San Juan Village, the Keres way, the Parrots ways, humming bird boys in their own way are enjoying their ways of life. It is from here, San Juan Village, the Keres way, the Parrots ways, humming bird girls in their own way are sounding their sacred horns.

Chorus 2:

Over there from the Laguna Lake, the summer Kachina Boys began to come out. Over there from the Laguna Lake the summer Kachina Girls started to come, with their rain-making process and with their water-producing process, here at this place they arrived. [repeat Verse 2 and Chorus 2]

San Juan and Hopi are both Pueblo cultures, and they share several features. Like the Hopi kachina dances, the San Juan Cloud Dance is concerned with rain and crop fertility; Garcia's lyrics refer to kachina boys and girls and to koshares, the sacred clowns, invoking their power. Pueblo cosmology recognizes an inherent duality in creation, and Pueblo song texts often have parallel constructions referring to the male and female sides of this duality, as in this example. Also typical of Pueblo songs, the verses and choruses are framed by sections sung with vocables. Garcia has worked within the accepted traditional models, recombining their elements to produce a new song that fits in well with the existing repertory.

The Supernatural

Some Plains cultures have traditionally placed great importance on the "vision quest," a solitary search for spiritual power which often has involved travel and fasting over several days. In a state of physical weakness and heightened consciousness, the seeker would experience visions which might not be exclusively visual: they could include voices, and songs. Usually some kind of agent would be involved—a spirit being who brings the song and presents it to the receiver. A Flathead described such an experience to Alan Merriam:

There was a guy who was looking for power once, and he heard a guy coming from a long way off, singing a song. He finally met the guy, and the guy was singing a stick game song. He told the young feller, "When you get to be a certain age, you can use that song for the stick game." The young man remembered the song until the time he came to use it.²⁷

Songs from supernatural sources contain personal power. The "young feller" now had a song which belonged to no one else, and he could use it for his own spiritual and physical strengthening.

Another of Merriam's Flathead examples did not involve a formal vision quest, but involved an intensified emotional state:

When someone is discouraged or he doesn't know what to do, he may be sitting around his tipi and a spirit comes to tell him what to do. Sometimes he can hear the singing from way far off, and hear it approaching. Before daylight he hears the spirit coming, always from the East. The tipi always faces east, with its ears up. [The ears refer to the open smoke flaps of the tipi.] The spirit comes from afar and hits the ears; then it comes down the ears and stands in front of the person. It tells him what to do, and it sings the song. As it comes toward the tipi it has been singing the song many times as it comes.²⁸

In this case the man's tipi was a participant in the process: his home—an extension of himself—received the spirit first, through its “ears.”

Visions and songs may arrive without invitation. Another Flathead man told Merriam of being briefly left alone in the wilderness with his young sister when he was “eight or nine” years old. His sister suddenly saw a grizzly bear approaching them, and alerted her brother. A vision ensued:

I went out of my head. I was way up on top of a mountain. People were dancing, singing, playing stick game, cards. I looked around and it was me singing. Then I went out again. I was on another mountain and the same people were there doing the same thing. The grizzly bear took me back each time, and this happened on four mountains. The people all had otter skins around their heads. All the animals were singing and dancing in there. It was always me singing.²⁹

As in many visions, the agent here was a powerful animal, who transported the boy to four similar locations (perhaps symbolic of the four directions, north, south, east, and west). Animals can provide an effective link to the supernatural, providing a bridge between human consciousness and the unknown world beyond.

Merriam arrived at some interesting ideas about the Flathead examples he encountered, which are worth bringing up here. Rejecting the notion of “unconscious composition,” he pointed out that in his examples

one aspect of the process seems to be repeated again and again. This is the fact that the song, which the petitioner will later learn, is first heard from far away; the being who is singing it comes closer and closer, singing constantly, until it finally actually appears. Without desiring to stretch a point too far, it seems quite likely that

this formalized supernatural-song pattern refers symbolically to the process of composition. That is, the song is dimly heard (dimly formulated) at first, and then becomes clearer and clearer as the supernatural being approaches (as the petitioner gains a stronger sense of the structure of the song he is, in fact, composing) . . . [In other examples] it is significant to note that although the pattern of slow approach is not suggested, there is substituted a type of situation in which the individual is subjected to a number of repetitions of the songs he will learn . . . while the people would hotly deny the interpretation presented here, it seems likely that hallucination and composition are closely connected in the manner suggested.³⁰

While outsiders may judge such a rational approach to be more "realistic" than an insider's viewpoint, the Native American conception is worthy of nuanced understanding. Important clues can be found in descriptions of personal experiences like that of Angelina Wagner, who told Vander about a Sun Dance song in her repertoire:

My mother, she found that song. When the sun was coming out and she came into our kitchen and then she heard that song. She was sleeping the first time she heard that song, so she start in singing that song. And when she sang that song, well, she thought that it was a prayer song. Something mentioned to her that it would be a prayer song. That's the way they do, too, for the Ghost Dance songs. It's got meanings to them or something like that, to somebody who found that song. So she got up and was singing that song, and she went in there to the room where my dad was sleeping; and she sang that song for him and my dad just caught that song all at once [the sign of a true visionary song]. He just sang it once, and he knew that song and that's what they sing. And my dad sang that song 'cause it was my mother's song. The old man said, "Well, if it's given to you, maybe it's been a blessing for you."³¹

Notice the verbs Wagner used for song acquisition: "found," "heard," "caught," and "given." These are the words heard again and again among Native Americans describing such experiences. They point to the concept that the song already exists, in a realm beyond consciousness. In extraordinary moments, such a song can be "found" and "caught," "given," and "heard." The first pairing recalls the experiences of successful hunting; the second suggests a bestowal to a worthy recipient. To many Native Americans the two readings are not only compatible, but intertwined.

While Wagner's father was not an agent of this song's provenance, he played an important role in confirming its authenticity as a vision song. It was well-received, and became an integral part of the Sun Dance

ritual. Another of Vander's Shoshone examples—this time from a “dream” at a peyote meeting—combines the phenomenon of wife/husband confirmation with visualization and animal agency (or, in this case, insect agency):

We had a meeting one time a long time ago, and this fireplace was still there in front of the cabin. . . . There was a butterfly flying right on top of it, and it was humming this certain song. It was a real pretty song; my mother was asleep, and she started humming that same song that my dad was thinking about and he was seeing. You know, you can't visualize somebody seeing a song, but he did. He seen that song as well as it coming to his mind. This butterfly was fluttering around that song just like that song right over that fireplace. And he seen it. See, this is his dream, or he seen it, visualized it. All of a sudden he just woke up and started singing that song. And my mother was thinking about that same song.³²

Native American conceptions of song acquisition through connections to the supernatural world do not require rational explanations; their validity for the cultures in which they are valued suffices for our respect. But whether one embraces an indigenous or Western analytic viewpoint, songs of supernatural provenance are songs of power: they are not trivial. In this connection, we may observe that tales are also told of Western composers who were supernaturally stimulated, perhaps in visions, for one or more of their compositions. Composers like Bach and Mozart are sometimes referred to as “divinely inspired,” particularly for their sublime religious masterpieces. Such Western concepts also involve the idea that extrahuman energies can contribute to both musical generation and power.

IMPROVISATION IN NORTH INDIAN CLASSICAL INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC

In the Western classical traditions, the “labor” of music-making is usually divided between separate individuals who perform the distinct roles of composer, conductor, vocalist, and instrumentalist. The composer creates a musical score, the conductor makes important decisions about tempo and interpretation and directs the actual performance, and the singers and instrumentalists read the score, follow the conductor's signals, and create the sounds which the audience hears in a concert hall or on a recording or broadcast.

In North Indian classical music, one individual commonly performs all of these functions in a single performance. If the solo performer is an instrumentalist, he probably has learned to sing the same music that he

plays on the sitar, sarod, violin, sarangi, flute, or shehnai, because Indian instrumental music in large measure imitates the style of vocal music. In concert, the soloist spontaneously chooses the repertory to be performed, sets the tempo, and sings or plays a program in which she composes large portions of the performance on the spur of the moment. Accompanists follow the directions of the soloist, who combines at once the roles of composer, conductor, and performer.

The musician's improvisations are guided by the conventions of raga (melodic mode), tala (rhythmic cycle), and the forms of a variety of vocal and instrumental genres. We may regard the basic forms of Indian music as a sort of mold into which the musician pours the performance of a particular raga. Thus, the performer's improvisation is not absolutely free. He must always maintain the basic character of the raga, fit his playing into the rhythmic framework of the tala, and present more or less in order the different portions of a complete classical performance. The overall form, and to a large extent, the melodic content of his exposition, is dictated by tradition, but he is free to fill the mold according to his own spontaneous inspiration.

On a microscopic level, the soloist may improvise even when playing the pre-composed gat in a sitar or sarod recital. Ornamentation, in the form of added grace notes or slight variations in rhythm and melody, is a constant factor in the style of many players and singers. Such subtle variations are so common that most Indian musicians might not even think of them as improvisation. In the player's mind, a few correctly added grace notes do not "change" the composition at all, and improvisation occurs not in the playing of the gat, but in other portions of a performance: the introductory alap, jor, and jhala, and the layakari (rhythmic play) and tans (fast passages) which follow the opening statement of the gat.

Alap, Jor, and Jhala

The principle function of a player or singer's introductory alap is to establish the mood and outline the melodic features of the raga being performed. The first step is to present the key-note sa. The next step is to fill in the lower and middle octaves of the soloist's instrumental or vocal range, proceeding through a series of improvised melodic "limbs," each of which helps to reveal the important notes and melodic gestures of the raga being performed. After the leisurely alap is complete, the player proceeds to the jor and then the jhala, in which a pulse is first established and then accelerated, giving rhythm an increasingly prominent place in the performance.

Gat, Layakari, and Tans

Rhythm becomes still more important when a player renders a gat (instrumental composition), set in a rhythmic cycle such as the sixteen-beat teental. During the alap, jor, and jhala, the instrumentalist improvises within the limits imposed by the raga being performed. Once the gat has been introduced, all improvisations must also be tailored to fit within the tala structure, dovetailing perfectly with the first few notes of the gat, which serve as a point of departure and return for episodes of rhythmic play (layakari) and fast passages (tans). Layakari and tans can be short, taking only a few beats of a single tala cycle, or extended, continuing for several cycles.

IMPROVISATION IN ARABIC MUSIC

In Arabic art music, instrumental improvisations called *taqasim* may either be extended items in a recital, or short introductions to, or bridges between, composed pieces. In either case, the *taqasim* provides an opportunity for the soloist to display both his virtuosity and his knowledge of the *maqamat* (melodic modes) of Arabic music.

The form of the *taqasim*, melodic improvisation in free rhythm, appears to have a relationship to the *tajwid* form of Qur'anic chant, and to "a broad generic continuum in which the *taksim* is one vehicle for the expression of *tarab* (musical rapture or ecstasy)"³³ 'Taqasim therefore seems to have a close connection with both orthodox and less conventional forms of Islamic worship.

Each *taqasim* is structured in a way that both reveals the essential melodic characteristics of the *maqam* being rendered, and allows the improviser to explore relationships with other *maqamat*. Like a raga, each *maqam* has a particular set of notes which provide a basic vocabulary for improvisation and composition. A performer will begin his *taqasim* by focusing on a small group of notes, gradually expanding to include and highlight different aspects of the *maqam*. Movement through the octave, and especially into higher and lower octaves, often involves the use of accidentals—sharps, half-sharps, flats, or half-flats—which are part of the melodic "personality" of the mode.

After the initial *maqam* in a *taqasim* has been introduced, the performer may begin to modulate—moving from one *maqam* to another. Musicians commonly conceive of the *maqamat* in groups of related modes, and musical mastery requires a thorough knowledge, not only of the *maqam* with which a performance begins, but of the entire modal landscape which



Buddhadev Das Gupta presents a complete performance of Rag Kamod, including alap, jor, jhala, slow and fast gats, layakari, and tans. The form chart given in Chapter 10, page 313 is a useful "road-map" to the composed and improvised sections of this performance.

[Additional listening analysis is at the end of the chapter.]



Instrumentalist Simon Shaheen plays a *taqasim* on the 'ud, an unfretted, plucked instrument related to the European lute and guitar. He is accompanied by Michel Merhej on the tambourine or daff.

[Additional listening analysis is at the end of the chapter.]

might be traversed in the course of an improvisation. Skillful modulation demonstrates the artist's grace and ingenuity, and players who excel in this aspect of taqasim are greatly admired by knowledgeable listeners.

IMPROVISATION IN JAZZ

Jazz has undergone many transformations during the nearly one century since its birth in New Orleans. The product of the interplay of African, European, and American musical traditions in the urban south, jazz originated with African-American composers and performers and has since become a truly international genre.

Jazz performance is essentially the art of improvising within a certain set of stylistic limits. Within those parameters, the musician speaks a particular musical "language," with its own vocabulary and grammatical conventions. This language, a synthesis of African, European, North American, and Latin American musical elements, is constantly evolving, as new musicians contribute their own, individual dialects to the mix.

Among the features of West African music that informed the development of jazz, improvisation over a texture of repeating ostinatos was a key element. The "time-line" which is maintained by the bell in an Ashanti or Ewe drumming ensemble, has its analog in the "groove" established by a jazz drummer on his high-hat cymbal, and the repeating tonal and rhythmic patterns in the accompaniment part played by a Mande *kora* player has its parallel in the pulsations of the "walking bass" in a jazz ensemble.

Over these repeating patterns, jazz vocalists and instrumental soloists improvise virtuoso passages which both reach back to African vocal and instrumental traditions and also express an exuberant individualism which seems entirely American. The later development of "free jazz" in the playing of musicians like Ornette Coleman in the 1960's, in which all the members of an ensemble were given license to improvise as "soloists" simultaneously, seems a particularly boisterous expression of an American ideal—that of a society free of the constraints of rigid convention and "old-world" social hierarchies.

Form

In the traditional forms which pre-date, and have persisted through and beyond the era of "free jazz," jazz musicians typically begin their performances by playing an item from the "standard" repertory, often the melody of a popular song, with an eight-bar "A" section played twice, an eight-bar "B" section called the "bridge," and a concluding "A" section

which often has a different and more “final” sounding conclusion than the original “A.” After playing this thirty-two measure melody once or twice, a jazz soloist or ensemble begins several rounds of improvisation.

These improvisations may fall anywhere on a continuum from recognizable variations on the original melody to highly abstract melodic statements which bear no resemblance to the tune which served as a point of departure. Wherever the improvisation falls on this continuum, however, it must fulfill two requirements:

1. it must conform to the harmonic sequence of the original melody
2. it must “fit” rhythmically into the usually thirty-two bar form of the song.

Language

The language of jazz includes several elements. All players share, first of all, a common harmonic vocabulary, consisting of the various chords which can be constructed in the key in which the song is written. Among these chords, there is a hierarchy, somewhat like the “pitch hierarchy” in a raga or maqam.

The “I” chord, built on the keynote of the song, usually serves as the first and (especially) the last chord in a song—it is the home base, to which all improvisations ultimately return. The “V” chord, built on the fifth scale degree of the key in which the song is written, is second in importance to the “I” chord; the final cadence or harmonic resolution in a song usually consists of motion from “five” to “one.” This cadence is usually preceded by the “II” chord, built on the second degree of the scale; “II-V-I” is the most commonly heard harmonic progression in traditional jazz, particularly at final cadences.

These chord symbols are often written above the notated melody in “lead sheets” which serve as a score for learning or performing jazz compositions. The chord symbols provide guidance both to the improvising soloist and to the accompanists, who improvise their accompaniment by deciding how to “voice” the chords (high or low, broad and lush or thin and sparse), and how to fit them rhythmically into the structure of a measure.

In addition to a common harmonic language, jazz musicians also share a vocabulary of melodic motifs or “riffs,” popular melodic fragments in-



▲ Jazz Improvisation

herited from previous generations of players. In some cases, a large repertoire of such motifs can be traced to a single influential musician, like the seminal bebop saxophonist, Charlie Parker. Other riffs, like the commonly heard walking bass line associated with boogie-woogie piano-playing, are part of the legacy of anonymous musicians in oral tradition.

Musicians adopt these riffs, break them up, and re-combine them in a never ending stream of improvisation, employing them just as people use clichés (“How do you like them apples?” “Is that so?” “Well I never!”) in everyday speech.

Finally, each jazz musician must create his or her own vocabulary of personal motifs, a repertoire of original riffs that become a distinctive trademark of his or her improvisational style. In each player’s improvising, we will hear her use of the common harmonic language, the employment of favorite motifs from players who have influenced the individual, and hopefully some original riffs which carry the artistic “signature” of a performer who has begun to create a personal dialect within the larger language of jazz.

SUMMARY

In looking at musical creation on a continuum, we have examined ideas of composition and improvisation in several traditions. Many musics involve at least some element of both composition and improvisation in their conception or performance. As we have seen, musical creativity is linked to various kinds of flexible or rigid considerations—rules, norms, tendencies—which are embedded in culture.

Some of these responses are rooted in learned techniques related specifically to musical tradition, while others are drawn from other aspects of culture and the environment. At one time, composers and improvisers worked in the present—while being grounded in the past. Now composers and creative improvisers are a part of a musical system that gives them new materials and tools with which to work (electronic instruments, and now computer programs). As you will see in the following chapter (Chapter Twelve) recently developed software programs, notably Ableton Live and others like it, provide contemporary Disc Jockeys (DJ’s) the wherewithal to join with other creative musical performers to *improvise*—even within the framework of existing prerecorded music.

ADDITIONAL LISTENING

AUDIO #58 IMPROVISATION IN RAG KAMOD: A BRIEF ANALYSIS

Buddhadev Das Gupta begins his alap in a brief gesture which ends on Sa (C) at 0:06. He reveals the "minister-note" Re (D) at 0:10 and then slides up to the "king-note" Pa (G) at 0:13. During the remainder of the first "limb," which concludes on Sa at 0:42, he sketches the crooked motion of Rag Kamod in a series of short, zig-zagging gestures.

In the portions of alap, jor, and jhala which follow, Buddhadev Das Gupta continues to show the basic melodic contours and pitch hierarchy of Rag Kamod as he moves first through the lower octave, then the middle and upper octaves, and then gives an increasing emphasis to pulse and rhythm.

In the sections of rhythmic play and fast tans that follow Buddhadev Das Gupta's exposition of the composed gat (beginning at 3:40), his improvisations conform not only to the melodic contours of Rag Kamod, but to the rhythmic structure of the sixteen-beat cycle known as teental. His first episode of rhythmic play, beginning at 4:15, takes one cycle of teental, concluding at 4:28. Other episodes of layakari follow. The tempo increases at 5:45, and he plays his first fast tan at 5:51. This short tan occupies only eight beats, one-half cycle of teental, concluding at 5:56. At 6:00 he plays a longer tan, which takes 28 beats or one and three-quarters cycles, ending the medium tempo gat at 6:20.

Improvised tabla solos are interspersed between the sarod layakari and tans. The medium tempo gat is followed by a fast gat, with more layakari, tans, and tabla solos.

AUDIO #62. SIMON SHAHEEN PLAYS A TAQASIM ON THE 'UD

Simon Shaheen begins his improvisation in maqam Nahawand, which sounds very much like the C harmonic minor scale, using the notes C, D, E-flat, F, G, A-flat, and B natural. At 0:35 in the recording, "A" is raised to its natural position, signaling a shift in focus to the octave note (c) rather than the lower tonic (C). At 0:52, Mr. Shaheen plays G-flat, a characteristic accidental note in maqam Nahawand.

At 1:04, we hear the first modulation, to maqam Bayyati on G. The tonic note moves from C to G, and the notes A half-flat, B-flat, and E half-flat are introduced. In this modulation and in the two which follow, continu-

ity is provided by the continued use of tones already introduced, while interest is stimulated by the introduction of new, unanticipated notes.

At 1:44, Mr. Shaheen makes a second modulation, to maqam Saba on G. The tonic remains at G, and c-flat and g-flat are introduced. At 2:07 he starts to return to maqam Nahawand, first by introducing a transitional moment with A natural and F sharp. Then the B natural is returned along with A-flat, and we are back in maqam Nahawand. Finally, at 2:52, the taqasim ends in the same maqam in which it began.

POINTS TO REMEMBER

1. The process of composition refers to the creation of a musical work that is designed before performance while improvisation refers to spontaneous composition that occurs in performance.
2. Composers and improvisers are typically involved with characteristic forms, molds, and styles from which they fashion their own unique creations.
3. Although creative musicians work in the present, they are grounded in the past: formally or informally they are part of a musical system.
4. Composing can be a collaborative process among the Shoshone and Hopi cultures. Song acquisition in some Native American cultures often comes about through spirits, visions, and dreams.
5. Hindustani classical music and jazz are essentially improvised art forms, but musicians work within the conventions and stylistic limits of their traditions. In Arabic art music, the improvised taqasim provides an opportunity for the soloist to display both his virtuosity and his knowledge of the *maqamat* of Arabic music.

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the difference between composition and improvisation? Discuss the continuum between the two processes, giving examples.
2. What resources do composers and improvisers draw on to fashion their own unique creations?

3. Describe the folk process.
4. How does composition relate to the supernatural world in some Native American cultures?
5. What is an Arabic taqasim?

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is the difference between composition and improvisation?
2. What are some of the improvised elements in the performance of a composition that is completely notated?
3. What are some of the composed elements in jazz performance?
4. What is the "folk process?"
5. Describe some examples where composers are influenced by nature and the supernatural.
6. Describe an Arabic taqasim.

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