

**‘When we connect there is only music’
A phenomenological account of musical connectivity in
sitar and tabla performance**

Alejandro Cooper
Independent Scholar

ABSTRACT: This paper explores the complex relationship between improvised musical interaction and social experience in North Indian sitar and tabla duo performance. As a phenomenological analysis, the main goal of this research is to provide a rigorous and detailed *description* of the experiential patterns that commonly underlie joint music-making in this genre. This is approached by focusing especially on how positive — particularly peak — musical and social experiences feel.

Qualitative data gathered through two case studies involving close collaboration with expert informants is presented and analysed in search for recurrent themes pertaining to these performers’ social experiences, particularly those experiences deemed most cohesive and enjoyable. The analysis is framed according to Høffding’s (2018) phenomenological categorization of musical absorption, and to McGuinness and Overy’s (2011) distinction between co-subjective and intersubjective states of shared subjectivity. Specifically, I consider the role of reflection and communication in promoting feelings of connectivity among performers, particularly during altered states of intense absorption.

The outcome of this analysis consists of a phenomenological model of musical connectivity which provides a broad topography of the various kinds of social experiences underlying this genre. This model can also be used — with certain adjustments — to describe the topography of social experiences in any other kind of musical ensemble, thereby allowing for comparative analyses of musical connectivity across genres.

KEYWORDS: Indian music, joint action, intersubjectivity, co-subjectivity, improvisation, absorption

INTRODUCTION

Musical participation can generate a vast range of possible experiences across different genres and scenarios, and its appeal and value may likewise vary accordingly. This proposition — implicit in ethnomusicological research for the past century or so through its commitment to anthropological methods and fieldwork — has more recently emerged as a focal point in contemporary music scholarship, for example in the work of Seddon (2005), Clayton, Dueck and Leante (2013), Schiavio and Høffding (2015), and Høffding (2018). The purpose of this paper is to contribute to this seam of work, developing our incipient understanding of the relationship between musical interaction and social experience in ensemble performance from the perspective of an improvisational and non-Western musical genre, namely North Indian (Hindustani) sitar and tabla duo performance.

Although musical interaction in Hindustani music has been studied extensively from both pragmatic (e.g. Clayton 2000, 2007; Cooper, 2018; Moran 2013; Sorrel & Narayan 1980) and sociological (e.g. Clayton & Leante 2015; Napier 2007; Neuman 1980; Widdess and Sanyal 2004) perspectives, this work is the first to provide a fine-grained phenomenological account of joint musical behaviour in this genre. The term phenomenology refers to a Western philosophical tradition concerned with understanding and describing the invariant structures and *a priori* conditions of first-person mental/emodied life (see Gallagher & Zahavi, 2012). The phenomenological approach is characterized by withholding, or ‘bracketing’ (i.e. *epoché*), all theoretical and metaphysical preconceptions of reality and instead focusing on how things present themselves in actual experience.

As a phenomenological analysis, the main goal of this research is to provide a rigorous and detailed *description* of the experiential patterns that commonly underlie joint music-making in this genre. Specifically, I am concerned with what is actually happening when music — in this case Hindustani music — appears to generate positive (i.e. enjoyable, meaningful, memorable) feelings of ‘togetherness’ among participants, a phenomenon I refer to by the term ‘musical connectivity’ for reasons explained below.

I approach this topic by looking closely at two specific case studies as exemplars of musical performance for one type of instrumental pairing within this genre. Both case studies involved close collaboration with expert performers, who were interviewed regarding their experiences following live duo performances. From this data, I extract recurrent themes regarding how these performers describe what performing and ‘connecting’ with one’s co-performer in this genre feels like. I then analyse these reports by interpreting and framing them according to Høffding’s (2018) topology of musical absorption, followed by a consideration of the level of reflective awareness and communication underpinning these performers’ interactions and concomitant social experiences. Based on this analysis, I offer a phenomenological model of joint performance that is flexible enough to apply, with modifications, to different contexts of joint music-making, thereby providing a tool for thinking about musical interaction from a nuanced phenomenological perspective.

The rationale for my choice of the term musical connectivity involves its simplicity and inclusiveness, which offer an advantage in the scenarios of fieldwork and qualitative research that this project entailed. The musicological literature provides an abundance of

terms by which to describe musical sociality, such as empathy (King & Waddington, 2017; Seddon, 2005), intersubjectivity (Keller, 2008; McGuinness & Overy, 2011), emotional contagion (Overy & Molner-Szakacs, 2009), communication (Hargreaves, MacDonald, & Miell, 2005), attunement (McCaleb, 2014), rapport (Moran, 2013), and flow (Hart & Di Blasi, 2015; Turino, 2008). Each of these terms have very specific and rather complex meanings. While high specificity of meaning has the advantage of allowing one to refer to precise facets of human experience, it may also pose a disadvantage by potentially excluding other aspects of experience which do not fall within its narrow sphere. In contrast, the word connection, which is often used colloquially by musicians and musicologists, can be easily grasped and intuitively related to a broad range of musical experiences.

The term connectivity also has the advantage of a semantic neutrality that allows me to engage in a current debate regarding the importance of shared reflection in ensemble performance while withholding any prior theoretical judgement or terminological conditioning. Traditionally, music psychologists have been prone to explaining musical interaction in ensemble performance by recourse to *reflective* processes such as shared intentionality, joint attention, empathy, and communication (e.g. Keller, 2008; McCaleb, 2014; Seddon, 2005). However, this stance has recently been challenged by several scholars (e.g. McGuinness and Overy, 2011; Schiavio & Høffding, 2015; Schober & Spiro, 2013) who argue that these processes are of somewhat secondary importance, and that musical interaction and shared experience is of a predominantly *pre-reflective* nature — a stance which coincides with phenomenological notions of a minimal, embodied self as the substrate of and condition for reflective human consciousness (Zahavi, 2014). For instance, McGuinness and Overy claim that ‘what music is capable of providing, rather than [reflective] communication, is [pre-reflective] communion’ (2011, p. 245) and that ‘agentive understanding is not essential to the nature of music’ (p. 258). Similarly, Schiavio and Høffding maintain that ‘attention to co-performers or an explicit sense of awareness of others’ mental states is not necessary for performing together’ (2015, p. 12).

The phenomenological significance of this debate lies in that a reflective awareness of the other’s separate intentions, emotions, and subjective states has a profound effect on the underlying nature of performers’ social experience within an ensemble. As McGuinness and Overy (2011) explain, musical interactions involving shared reflective awareness tend to highlight the agentive distinction between self and other, thus supporting experiences which are *intersubjective* in nature. In contrast, musical interactions that do not involve such awareness are more likely to dissolve said distinction, resulting in what these authors, following Tia De Nora’s (2000) terminology, refer to as *co-subjective* states. According to this framework, intersubjectivity arises during musical interactions in which performer B recognizes performer A’s intention, and performer A recognizes that performer B recognizes his or her intention. Intersubjective states are — unlike co-subjective states — truly *communicative*, as they involve two or more beings consciously sharing information regarding their separate intentions, thoughts, and/or feelings. Conversely, co-subjective states involve either pre-reflective or individually reflective perceptual, bodily, and affective responses to environmental cues (including the actions of other people), without reflective awareness of the other’s separate intentions and mental states. As such, they may arouse shared experiences which, while lacking in communication, may nevertheless be strongly *communal*.

One main way in which I explore the question of how it feels to the sitar and tabla performers when they connect is by considering whether the reports presented herewith point towards positive social experiences which are predominantly intersubjective or co-subjective in nature, and in what ways are they so experienced. In contrast to Schiavio and Høffding (2015), what is at stake here is not whether musical interaction is *possible* without shared attention and communication, but whether it is *desirable* — both in terms of the perceived quality of the performance and the performers' personal enjoyment — in the particular case of sitar and tabla duo performance represented by the participants in this study. By framing the question of reflection in ensemble performance in terms of connectivity, I provide a different perspective on this issue.

The analysis offered in this paper is exploratory in nature; by no means does it address every single aspect of what it feels like to connect in this genre, nor does it pretend to represent every sitarist and tabla performers' own judgements regarding what constitutes a positive social experience. The more modest aim is to identify common underlying patterns of experience in these particular cases so as to offer a platform from which we can start to discuss these issues in a systematic and rigorous manner. In addition, I should also clarify that I will not address the various social, economic, and political factors that impinge on performers' social relationships as these have already been addressed elsewhere (Clayton & Leante, 2015; Napier, 2007; Neuman, 1980). While recognizing the broader social environment within which these interactions are embedded, my focus is on uncovering the various levels of reflection involved in musical interaction and the ways in which this affects performers' states of shared subjectivity.

Methods of data collection

To attempt a phenomenological investigation of musical connectivity in sitar and tabla performance is to pose an important methodological problem: phenomenology consists of the study of first-person experience, yet my own experience of this phenomenon is presumably quite different to that of expert Hindustani musicians. Though I have studied and played fretted instruments since childhood, I began learning sitar only eight years ago. While I have successfully pursued a working career as a sitar player and teacher in the ensuing years, I am nevertheless aware that my skill and expertise is far from that of a truly accomplished sitarist. Since, as we shall see below, musical connectivity seems strongly affected by and reliant upon musical expertise — expertise which I only possess to a certain, comparatively limited, degree — I find myself needing to depart from a strict phenomenological methodology and incorporating second-person accounts from more experienced musicians. Fortunately, there are numerous precedents of researchers adopting similar second-person interview approaches when carrying out phenomenological investigations on a certain kind of experience which is not directly accessible to them, as described in detail by Høffding (2018, Chapter Two).

This study draws from two main sources. The first is a case study carried out in Varanasi (India) in the winter of 2014 as part of my doctoral research (Cooper, 2018). The study involved close collaboration with professional musicians Dr Shyam Rastogi (sitar) and Dr Sandeep Rao (tabla), two cousins who grew up in the same house and have been practicing and playing music together on a regular basis since childhood. While North Indian musicians may often have a main duo partner, one aspect of being a professional musician involves

performing with less familiar, sometimes even completely unknown, partners. The case study was designed to capitalize on this situation by comparing Shyam and Sandeep's musical interactions and experiences when performing together and when performing with other, less familiar musicians.

The study was comprised of nine live sitar and tabla duo performances with the following ensemble configuration:

- Shyam and Sandeep playing together x3
- Shyam playing with other tabla players x3
- Sandeep accompanying other sitar players x3

Every performance took place at the International Music Centre Ashram for a live audience. Throughout the study, I made no requests as to what performers should play in order not to interfere with their natural musical behaviour and possible connection. I also allowed Shyam and Sandeep to select the other performers taking part in this study, for the same reasons. In addition to Shyam and Sandeep, five other local musicians (3 sitarists and 2 tabla players, all of whom were male except for one female sitar player) took part in this research. They all formally consented to participate and were paid for doing so. Nevertheless, I decided to preserve these musicians' anonymity due to the sensitive nature of this research, which impinged on matters of musical capability and status, and which I felt could potentially have an impact on the performers' sensibility, relationships, and reputation. Since Shyam and Sandeep openly expressed their enthusiasm for participating in this project and being publicly recognized for it, I decided to keep their names but exclude all others for ethical considerations (for more details see Cooper, 2018, p. 172).

Musicians were interviewed together immediately after each performance as to their varied personal and social experiences, and on what they considered to be the main factors affecting them. Interviews often began with a broad outline of my research interests, followed by some opening questions regarding their overall state of mind while performing. I would then ask them to rate how connected they felt during the performance and to identify the reasons for feeling this way. Whenever interviewees described their experience in general terms, I would ask them to think of and describe a specific instance in which they felt this way. Lastly, I would ask them to identify particular passages during which they felt either strongly connected or disconnected and, once more, identify the reasons for it.

The second source of qualitative data is based on a single live performance by my sitar guru Debashish Sanyal, from Varanasi, accompanied by Glaswegian tabla player Sodhi Deerhe. The concert took place in Glasgow during Debashish's visit to Scotland in April 2016¹. This concert was both special and relevant to the topic of musical connectivity on two accounts. Firstly, this was Debashish and Sodhi's first-ever joint performance, having only met for a brief rehearsal a few days earlier. Secondly, not only did both performers consider this to be a highly successful and enjoyable experience, but in addition, Debashish described experiencing a deeply transformative state, as we shall see below. Thus, this concert offered a unique opportunity to consider the topic of musical connectivity as

¹ A video recording of this performance can be found online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gDk2p9NeQ9o>

pertaining to musicians with absolutely no prior musical or social relationship, as well as to explore how peak musical experiences in this genre feel to the performers.

My overall approach towards interviewing Debashish and Sodhi was similar to the one adopted during the case study, with some important differences. For one, I interviewed both performers separately a few days after the concert took place. In addition, I used video recall in order to help them remember what had happened and get them to describe their thoughts, actions, and experiences during specific instances throughout the performance. Consequently, these interviews were significantly longer than those of the case study.

All interviews were transcribed in their entirety and analysed in search of recurrent themes pertaining to performers' experiences of connectivity and the various factors impinging on this experience.

Results

I now present a summary of the results obtained through these interviews. My aim here is to present performers' various descriptions of connectivity in their own words, withholding phenomenological analysis for later. Reports are presented according to three broad categories: (i) skill and experience; (ii) musical and social interaction; and (iii) performative passivity. The first of these categories include personal reports regarding the technical and creative requirements that must be met for professional sitar and tabla performers to interact effectively and connect. The second category broadly includes all references to the *other* performer, especially those pertaining to what kinds of interactions are more likely to underpin and help generate positive social feelings.

The third category requires some explanation. The term 'performative passivity', which I borrow from Høffding (2018, Chapter Ten), refers to non-egoic activity — to the feeling that 'it is not fully "I" who is performing' (p.175). The concept is in turn derived from Husserl's notion of 'passive synthesis', which refers to the combination of bodily, emotional, and cognitive processes which do not depend on reflection, attention, and volition. Together, they constitute what Høffding describes as 'a diaphanous layer of subjectivity that underlies or precedes egoic activity' (p. 179). The content of this layer of subjectivity is felt as 'anonymous'; it arises from 'the periphery of my being' as Montavont aptly puts it (1999, p.70; in Høffding 2018, p. 191). As we shall see, reports show a broad consensus that depth of musical experience and connection depends upon achieving this altered sense of self and agency.

Skill and experience

Throughout these interviews, musical connectivity was consistently reported as depending on musicians' ability to skilfully cope with — and ideally excel at — the various musical tasks and challenges involved in performing this music in a live setting. Even though Shyam and Sandeep had already been playing at a professional level for many years, the first thing they did at the start of our first interview was urge me to explore how more senior and masterful musicians connect, since in their opinion musical connectivity 'fully depends upon capacity' (Shyam). Likewise, during both our interviews and our sitar lessons, Debashish was adamant about the importance of having enough skill and experience in order to truly connect with the other musician and audience. It is, as he put it, 'a lifetime achievement'.

During the case study, the relationship between musical connectivity and skill usually

emerged in negative terms, meaning that moments of disconnection were often attributed to some technical flaw, musical error, physical constraint, or lack of creativity. For example, Shyam occasionally reported feeling least connected during the closing *jhālā* section due to his hand getting tired by the high speed this portion of the performance requires. At other times, technical errors underlying disconnected passages were caused by misunderstandings between musicians — for instance, by misinterpreting their place in *tāl* or miscalculating a *tihāī* — resulting in lack of coordination. When such errors did occur, performers explained how crucial it was for them not to get mentally attached or depressed by that error, since ‘if you enter that depressed mood then everything is gone’ (Shyam).

In addition to being able to play expressively while avoiding mistakes, musical connectivity was also reported as contingent on musicians’ capacity to improvise in a spontaneous and novelty-driven manner, avoiding repetition. This was a particularly strong concern for Shyam and Sandeep since, understandably, having a researcher record and analyse nine consecutive performances put a stress on their capacity to play something different every time. As Shyam remarked, ‘I want to make something new always, I don’t want to repeat’, yet ‘when we try to do some new thing, then sometimes we miss’. Sandeep was even more explicit on this concern, stating that ‘whenever I play with Shyam I feel I should play something new for you, but it is very difficult’. Sodhi elaborated more extensively on this same issue.

You want to be on a level where you’re able to sit on stage and be open and clear-minded and then interpret the music and improvise the music as it comes along. But at the same time nobody wants to make a mistake, nobody wants to ruin a performance.

For Sodhi, as for Shyam and Sandeep, the importance of approaching performance in a spontaneous and open manner lies not only in the unexpected combinations of sounds such an approach might produce, but even more so because of how it makes them feel. When asked whether it was important for them to play creatively, avoiding predictable patterns of musical behaviour, Shyam and Sandeep responded in the following manner:

Shyam: Yes, because some *tihāīs* you learn and practice many times and then you play the same thing in the concert, this is not very enjoyable. Maybe audiences like it, but if you play many times the same thing...

Sandeep: It gets boring.

Shyam: So I try to play new, either it comes on *sam* or not.

Sandeep: And when these things come on *sam* you feel very happy.

Shyam: Sometimes you play a *tan* and just by guessing you make a *tihāī*. This is very nice.

As these reports imply, playing in a novel and spontaneous manner involves both skill and a certain level of risk, a risk which according to these performers is ultimately worth taking. Whereas Shyam describes this novelty-generating process as ‘guessing’, Debashish provides a more evocative and embodied account of his approach towards improvisation:

When you are playing for 40 years you don’t need to think anything about your playing. You don’t need to think about the structure, the structure is inside of your blood. But if you are going to perform within 10 years of experience it is not inside your blood, then it is more in your mind. Then you play more by your mind, thinking “after this I should play that, then I play this *tihāī*”. But after you play for 40 years there is no need to think what to play...This *tāl*, this *ṭhekā*, this rhythm, is not inside my mind, it is in my blood.

(Debashish)

Here, Debashish describes a state in which abstract musical concepts and processes have become completely internalized by his 'musicking body' (Rahaim, 2012) or 'body schema' (Gallagher, 2005), to the point where he can largely dispense with reflective planning and thinking. As we shall see in the following pages, both novelty and connectivity appear to be largely predicated on performers' capacity to play in this phenomenologically 'passive', non-thinking manner.

Musical interaction and emotional attunement

While the importance of skill and experience was mostly discussed in personal terms, performers also showed a keen awareness of and concern for their co-performer's musical abilities. This was considered a particularly pressing issue when performers had little or no prior experience playing together, such as the case of Sodhi and Debashish. This is how Sodhi described his experience of having to 'figure out' Debashish's style and musical capabilities in the course of playing together for the very first time:

See, you need to know how far you can go with someone. We tabla players have the *tāl* in our head all the time. But does the main guy? At the end of the day, the reality of the fact is, not everyone is good with *tāl*. But you *want* them to be good in *tāl*. Cause for me it's about having a conversation. So you test the waters...

Notably, the reason for Sodhi's concern for Debashish's musical capabilities was his wish of having a 'conversation', a recurrent analogy to what positive musical interactions in this genre should be like. As Shyam put it, 'when I listen to the tabla and play something, and he listens to me, we are together. It is the same as when we are talking, and we have one object to talk about, and we have good feelings'. Such musical conversations were often described as involving a brief but powerful sense of shared recognition:

For me a peak performance is when I am playing with someone with the same understanding. For example, I am playing *vilambit tīntāl* and they play a low note and my *bayan* matches that frequency. They turn around and they acknowledge that, then you know you're on the same page. (Sodhi)

Occasionally, such musical conversations can be even more elaborate and explicit. For instance, while watching the video recording of his performance with Debashish, Sodhi identified an instance in which he purposefully memorized one of Debashish's melodic phrases in order to repeat it a few moments later, before it became 'deleted by the next phrase'. Here's another description of a similar conversational interaction happening just moments earlier:

Now, he does something here. He's settling down while I play the *thekā*. So that's me replying back, very subtly, to a conversation... Watch my *bayan*, the *bayan* is where all the expression happens. [Points at repeated notes on *bayan*]. Very subtle. And that's all I need, I don't need to do the whole melody. I just need to show him that 'I know what you're playing, and I know what might work with it'. (Sodhi)

As these statements imply, sitar and tabla performers are often keenly aware of one another's actions and underlying intentions. Concomitant to this, musicians also emphasised the importance of understanding and supporting each other's emotional states and achieving some kind of emotional attunement. For Debashish, this was one of the main

reasons why he was able to connect with Sodhi even though they had practically no prior experience playing together.

He [Sodhi] is playing and he is smiling so I feel his is also enjoying my playing. When you see someone else enjoying it makes you feel like wanting to play more.

Not only was Debashish aware of Sodhi's subjective state, but moreover, appreciated it as a form of encouragement and inspiration. Probably the best evidence for the importance of such traits — i.e. communication, responsiveness, and emotional attunement — is illustrated by one of Sandeep's performances during which he perceived them as largely lacking, therefore resulting in what was described as the most disconnected performance in the study:

She is very soft and not responding that much when I am playing something. You remember when I was playing with this boy, even though we don't play together a lot, he was responding, so it makes me more joyful... I felt very connected because he was *supporting me* also... Today I feel the problem was she was not responding.

For Sandeep, as for all the other musicians I interviewed, musical connectivity is often achieved through the pursuit of communicative and empathic forms of musical interaction, the lack of which may often result in feelings of disconnection. As a contrasting example, here is how Sandeep described one of his most memorable performances accompanying Shyam:

One time I remember, he [Shyam] was playing sitar and crying. It was in Assam, both of us went there for one performance at an *ashram*, and there were only a few people, maybe seven or eight people, mostly *sadhus* [holy men]. He was playing *rāg Cārukeśī* and started crying. The *ālāp* he played that day! I can still remember... It was really, very, very... The sound was like he was in temple serving something to God, expressing his love to God, something like that. And that day when it was my turn to play, I only play *ṭhekā*... I feel he is playing with more feeling and if I play something fast it will destroy his feeling. So I just do this [demonstrates undecorated *ṭhekā* on tabla]. Enough.

Here, Sandeep expresses a highly empathic awareness of and care for Shyam's subjective state. Significantly, what makes this experience so memorable for Sandeep is not his own playing or state of mind, but rather his perception of Shyam's state, as expressed through both his physical and musical behaviour. It is also noteworthy that Sandeep's perception of and attunement to Shyam's state caused him to simplify his accompaniment by playing nothing but the *ṭhekā*, thereby avoiding the more overt forms of musical communication which may permeate sitar and tabla performance (such as the kind of interactions described by Sodhi above).

If we compare these last two reports by Sandeep — i.e. his peak and disconnected musical experiences — it is interesting that both involve a reduction in ordinary levels of musical interaction. Yet, whereas in the first case this seems to have been caused by some underlying conflict between the musicians, in the second case it was purposefully chosen as an empathic reaction stemming from Sandeep's perception of Shyam's state. Thus, while most reports presented herewith demonstrate an appreciation for communicative forms of musical interaction, this last report implies that a simple and direct correlation between performers' musical connectivity and overt musical communication may be overly simplistic.

Performative passivity

During the case study's final interview, one of the tabla players accompanying Shyam gave the following succinct yet elusive definition of what musical connectivity feels like: 'When we connect there is only music'. Many reports of what ideal musical interactions and social experiences feel like coalesce around this notion of non-egoic activity, expressed in terms such as not thinking, not planning, not controlling, and — ultimately — not being. As we have already seen, Debashish claimed that 'when you are playing for 40 years you don't need to think anything about your playing'. Similarly, here is how Sodhi described his mental preparation just before a concert is about to begin:

My general approach is to make myself as empty as I possibly can. I try not to assume anything... Because if I am accompanying I need to understand the musician, the *rāg*, the composition and if I've already made an assumption from the beginning as to how this is going to be or what is going to happen then I am not going with the actual main artist, I'm actually just going with what I believe. And that principle applies for any genre of music, I am actually completely empty. I'll sit on stage, with my tabla, and say to myself: 'let's see what gets thrown at me', and then I take it from there.

In this case, Sodhi describes 'making himself empty' in order to become more receptive and attuned to what the main artist might 'throw at him'. For the sitarist, one of the main factors contributing to his or her sense of performative passivity, of allowing the music to take over agentive control, is the *rāg*. One of the most interesting and phenomenologically significant characteristics of *rāgs* is that they are often perceived as real entities with almost human characteristics (Clayton, 2005; Leante, 2009). Because of this, affect is often felt as emanating from the *rāg* itself rather than the performer. As Debashish describes,

It is not that I have to make my mood in a certain way; the feeling of the *rāg* is changing your mood, because the sound is giving to you, you are not giving to the sound... When you play *Malkauns*, the mood is deep but you are a normal person, but when you play this *rāg* you automatically become very serious.

Debashish's remark that 'the sound is giving to you, you are not giving to the sound' highlights the sense of non-egoic, performative passivity which appears to underpin heightened musical experience in this genre. The way in which *rāgs* act as the dominant factor shaping performers feelings and behaviours, coupled with the fact they are perceived as human-like autonomous entities, grants them a sense of agency which at times may even seem to supersede that of the actual musicians. As Shyam put it, 'sometimes on stage I go through what the *rāg* wants, I don't put my desire on the *rāg*'.

This sense of agentive displacement, and of losing oneself in the music, can occasionally reach truly transformative levels. As mentioned, I was fortunate to witness and then interview Debashish on what he identified as being one of his most profound musical experiences during his performance with Sodhi in Glasgow. I present his account in full, and then discuss some of its phenomenological implications.

Debashish: When I feel very good by my playing, the atmosphere and the feeling then I go so deep inside the music I forget where I am and *who* I am. It affects my body and my mind. This has only happened to me a few times, but it happened in this concert. I go so much inside the music I lose myself. Then I go, go so much inside [wipes eyes], I don't know where I am. Then after the concert it is very hard for me to find balance and takes me one or two hours to come back.

It also depends on the *rāg*. This *rāg* [*Malkauns*] affects you so much. Some *rāgs* are very deep and affect you like a drug. You know every *rāg* has different mood, so this *rāg* changes your attitude, changes your feelings. This makes it very difficult to explain when you're playing where you are, because after playing for one or two hours you don't remember. We're in a totally different world at that time. Once you're inside of that it looks like you're in a dream. We're totally in a trance, and until musicians don't go into this trance they cannot give good feeling through their music.

AC: In what way was the creative process of this performance different to normal performances? Is there any difference in terms of how you improvise?

Debashish: It is a very free way. Once you're in this free way then all the things we are playing are coming automatically. We don't decide and don't think about those things. Because once you're thinking what to play next then you can't go inside that feeling. That comes with experience, depending on how much knowledge and fluency you have in your music, how much honesty and depth you have with your music. Then it becomes a totally automatic thing. In this concert I played some techniques that then I think "how is it possible that I played this?" If you ask me to play it again maybe I can't do it because my energy at the time was different. Now I am in a different state of mind so I can't do it. At this time what is coming is coming automatically, and this I think is one way of God's gift.

Whereas earlier we encountered Sandeep's second-person impression of Shyam's state of intense absorption, we now encounter Debashish's first-person account of what such state actually feels like. Clearly, Debashish's report marks a radical departure from ordinary states of consciousness and selfhood. He describes his own music as a separate object or process within which he submerges himself, or merges with, and in so doing, dissolves his ordinary sense of self-awareness. The comparison to a dream state evokes a state of consciousness in which the self is immersed in a world of its own making, yet as a witness, unable to fully determine its content or direct its course. The music is felt as something which, while grounded in his own physical behaviour and skilful know-how, is at the same time emanating from somewhere else. It is felt to be happening 'automatically', largely unaffected by his directing mind. The music seems to be happening *to* him — it is a gift of which he is the recipient.

It is noteworthy that although Debashish begins by pointing out that he has only had this kind of experience 'a few times in his life', he then remarks that 'until musicians don't go into this trance they cannot give good feeling through their music'. To me, this implies that while the more intense, self-transforming manifestations of this experience are rare, milder aspects of it permeate competent musicians' standard experience. This might explain why, as unusual as this peak state appears to be, Debashish's report includes several themes which we have already encountered repeatedly. For instance, this state seems conditional on the extent to which musical behaviour is unplanned and spontaneous, precisely in order to allow the musicking body to take over agentive control free from the directing egoic mind. Part of this feeling of agentive ambiguity is redirected towards the *rāg*, which Debashish describes as having mind-altering effects similar to drugs. In addition, Debashish casts this experience onto spiritual notions of self-transcendence pervasive throughout Indian culture, essentially in the same way as Sandeep did when describing Shyam's state.

While some readers might question whether this report qualifies as an instance of musical connectivity, given that Debashish does not mention Sodhi at all in this report, he

does recognize that achieving this state depends on the co-constructed social environment, or ‘atmosphere’, within which the event takes place, which includes the audience and especially his co-performer. And although Debashish does not mention Sodhi here, he did express appreciation for Sodhi’s friendly character and playing during our interview, as noted earlier. Therefore, one may assume that Sodhi played an important role in allowing Debashish to achieve this state of absorption, which might not have happened if performing with someone else.

Phenomenological analysis, part 1: Varied states of musical absorption

As these reports show, musical connectivity in sitar and tabla performance may involve a wide range of social experiences, from highly communicative to intensely introspective. Both facets of musical experience are valued and sought after in their own ways. In addition, these performers broadly agree that musical behaviour and experience should ideally be underpinned by a sense of non-egoic activity — or performative passivity — which, when heightened, may result in profoundly transformative states. Given the significance attached to these peak musical experiences, a phenomenological model of musical connectivity in sitar and tabla performance must be able to describe and account for these altered states. At the same time, such a model should also be able to account for more ordinary states of shared subjectivity which, while comparatively mundane, are in fact more characteristic of what musical connectivity feels like most of the time.

With this goal in mind, I begin this analysis by interpreting and categorizing these various reports according to Høffding’s (2018) phenomenological topology of musical absorption, derived from his extensive collaborative study with the Danish String Quartet. Following this preliminary step, I then address the question postulated at the start of this paper regarding the relationship between these performers’ experiences of connectivity and their varied states of shared subjectivity.

Høffding identifies five distinct though fluid phenomenological categories of musical experience, namely: (i) standard absorption; (ii) frustrated playing; (iii) mind wandering not-being-there; (iv) absorbed not-being-there; and (v) ex-static absorption (see Chapter 4). Out of these five states, both ‘mind wandering not-being-there’ and ‘absorbed not-being-there’ involve instances in which performers are only minimally conscious of their musical actions, and therefore — one may presume — even less conscious of their co-performers’ actions. As I understand them, these states are almost completely devoid of any social content; performers experience neither connectivity nor lack of connectivity, neither rapport nor conflict. As such, they are largely irrelevant to a study on social experience, which is why I exclude them from this discussion.

Reducing Høffding’s topology of absorption to three states makes it easier to superimpose them onto a more linear categorization of musical connectivity, as I shall now explain. Most ordinary instances of musical connectivity correspond, I propose, to what Høffding terms standard absorption, during which interactions are generally occurring smoothly but nothing truly exceptional is taking place. This is a broad phenomenological category encompassing a wide range of subjective states, including — as I shall argue in the following section — varying degrees of reflection and social awareness.

Standard absorption can be expressed as the default mode of performing when the music, circumstances, or performances are not overly challenging, when the musicians

are not overly distracted or absentminded, or when they are not unusually and intensely concentrated on or absorbed in the task at hand. (p. 76)

One of the more specific facets that defines standard absorption is ease in musical execution, or more specifically, a match between performers' broad musical intentions and expectations on the one hand, and their output on the other. Achieving such state depends on the fine training of one's musicking body — which is why, while ordinary for a professional musician, may nevertheless be hard to achieve and maintain for a non-professional one. In addition, standard absorption also depends on performers being able to maintain a certain degree of musical cohesion, and not having other factors (e.g. poor sound system, an inattentive audience, etc) derail them from this state.

When these or other factors do impinge on the performance in a negative manner, musicians are less likely to enter a basic state of absorption and experience a sense of frustrated playing instead. As we have seen from these reports, there are a few recurrent causes for frustrating playing among sitar and tabla performers, such as: (i) an inability to cope with the technical and musical task at hand, either due to lack of practice, experience or some physical limitation (e.g. being unable to maintain a certain speed or avoid repetition); (ii) miscommunication between musicians (e.g. getting a *tihāī* wrong); and (iii) outright social conflict with one's musical partner. Frustrated playing is often accompanied by a sense of disconnection among musicians, which is why, as Shyam explains, it is so important to avoid 'entering this depressed mood'.

On the other side of the connectivity spectrum, not only are peak musical experiences characterized by high musical proficiency and social cohesion, but moreover, by what Høffding describes as 'a profoundly heightened experience of performative passivity' (p. 175) involving a transformed sense of self and agency. Although such states are likely achievable through many other musical genres, there appear to be certain distinguishing features as to how they are achieved and experienced in the context of Hindustani music, which may arguably intensify their effect.

One of these distinguishing features appears to be an increase in spontaneity and novelty. As Debashish explained, states of intense absorption depend on musicians' capacity for playing in what he described as a 'free way', potentially leading to truly novel and unrepeatably musical behaviour. Although a detailed account of the relationship between novelty and absorption lies beyond the scope of this study, I propose that said relationship is due to the manner in which novelty contributes towards the heightening of performative passivity by making the performer unable to predict what will happen next. As a result, the performer's temporal experience becomes akin to that of a listener or witness, as described by Debashish. In Husserlian terms, the protentional, future-oriented dimension of performers' experience becomes more unpredictable and surprising, causing it to be felt as lying beyond egoic control.

A second peculiarity regarding ex-static absorption in this genre relates to the important role that *rāg* plays in bringing such states forth. *Rāgs* are meant to rouse intense emotional states on both performers and listeners. This in itself may contribute towards a heightening of the passive dimension of subjective experience, as emotions lie, by and large, beyond egoic control (see Høffding, p. 204-208). Furthermore, *rāgs* play an additional, more unique, role in contributing towards heightened states of performative passivity in that, as mentioned, they are often experienced as quasi-autonomous agents, thereby contributing

to the performer's — particularly the soloist's — sense that the music is emerging beyond his or her directing, egoic mind.

One last peculiarity of how Hindustani performers experience ex-static absorption is the way in which these states resonate with, and are valued according to, spiritual notions of self-transcendence and non-duality that are pervasive throughout Indian culture. Both Sandeep and Debashish chose to describe peak musical experience in reference to God. As several ethnomusicologists have noted (e.g. Neuman, 1980; Clarke & Kini, 2011), this is typical of how both performers and listeners in this genre depict and appear to genuinely interpret their most memorable musical experiences. Based on the evidence presented herewith, I propose that one of the main phenomenological factors causing performers to associate these experiences with spiritual notions of self-transcendence is a heightened sense of performative passivity, underpinning their felt sense of union with God.

Phenomenological analysis, part 2: Shared subjectivity

With this framework in mind, let us now consider what role reflection might play in promoting connectivity. As noted in the introduction, several scholars have recently challenged the prevalent view in music psychology that musical interaction relies fundamentally on shared attention, empathy, and communication, arguing instead that these processes are secondary and of a somewhat lesser importance, and that shared musical experience is therefore fundamentally co-subjective in nature. In many ways, they are certainly right. For a start, many aspects regarding performers' individual musical actions are carried out pre-reflectively, as a result of a highly-trained musicking body or body schema. Performers do not need to think about the various motor behaviours underlying their musical intentions. For a skilled, experienced performer, even the formation of musical intentions is itself largely non-reflective, as Debashish explained.

Similarly, many aspects regarding performers' *joint* actions can also be accounted for without recourse to reflection and shared understanding. As Schiavio and Høffding (2015) explain, joint action in ensemble performance relies largely on embodied and ecologically embedded processes lying below the level of reflective awareness, allowing performers to coordinate their musical actions without having to communicate or consciously reflect on each other's intentions. The clearest example of this is metrical entrainment, which enables precise temporal coordination without the need for constantly reflecting on when certain actions will take place. In addition, performers can also carry out more complex interactions without reflecting on each other's intentions, but rather by relying on their extensive knowledge and embodied know-how on what to expect and how to respond. For example, a tabla player may accompany a sitarist by playing the appropriate *ṭhekā* without having to reflect on the sitarist's intentions. He may even vary the *ṭhekā* in ways that enhance the sitarist's solo without overtly attending and thinking about what the sitarist is doing, but rather in a pre-reflective manner resulting from extensive experience.

However, as we have seen, this is not how the performers in this study describe their ideal musical interactions and shared experiences. Instead, it is all about 'having a conversation', as Sodhi put it. Based on this evidence, and taking into account the unplanned and highly complex and cohesive interactions permeating this genre (see Clayton, 2000; Cooper, 2018), I maintain that an adequate description of what musical connectivity in this genre feels like must include intersubjectivity as a prominent

component. While agreeing with Schiavio and Høffding (2015) and McGuinness and Overy (2011) regarding the foundational primacy of pre-reflective behaviour and co-subjective social experience, as well as with their critique of music psychology's excessive emphasis on joint attention and shared understanding, I disagree with what I perceive as a dismissal of more explicit and reflective forms of musical communication and the important role that they too play in generating feelings of social togetherness.

Schiavio and Høffding's central argument is that 'attention to co-performers or an explicit sense of awareness of others' mental states is not necessary for performing together' (2015, p. 12). It is important to note that the operative word in their claim is *necessary*. These authors do not argue that joint music-making *cannot* or *does not* include such traits, but simply that it *can* happen without them. However, they then extend this claim by suggesting that when the need for attention and communication does arise, it is often because 'something is not right' (ibid). It is here that I disagree, at least without properly contextualizing this claim as pertaining to the musical experiences of string quartet players performing scored music (on which their research is based). In the case of sitar and tabla duo performance, I would argue that the need for communication is normally present as a *positive* factor of what constitutes a successful and enjoyable performance, and the feeling of 'something not being right' is usually associated to a *lack* of communication and intersubjective understanding, as illustrated by Sandeep's performance with the female sitarist. Although shared attention and explicit awareness of the other's mental states may in fact be technically unnecessary for playing music as a group, the evidence presented herewith demonstrates that in the case of sitar and tabla performance, such traits are both common and generally desirable.

How should we interpret this discrepancy between these authors' claims and my own? Rather than revealing a fundamental disagreement regarding the ultimate nature of musical experience in ensemble performance, I see it as pointing towards an interesting phenomenological contrast between the two specific genres on which our separate studies are based. According to our respective studies, explicit musical communication appears to be a more prominent aspect of the social experiences underpinning sitar and tabla performance compared to that of a string quartet. Although a detailed account of the reasons for the apparent difference in the social experiences underpinning these two genres lies beyond the scope of this study, I would like to suggest that this relates to the prominent role of improvisation in Hindustani music, as I consider the difference between improvising and playing a pre-composed piece to be phenomenologically more significant than what Schiavio and Høffding propose (p. 14).

By relying on a written score, there is *comparatively* less need for ensemble musicians to understand each other's musical intentions, as these are primarily laid out in the score itself. In most cases, performers will have rehearsed the piece many times and can therefore allow their body schema to take complete control of their musical actions while they observe with little or no reflective interference. In improvisation however, major musical decisions must be made all the time. Indeed, herein lies part of the appeal of playing improvised music, as noted throughout the reports presented in this study. Consequently, playing improvised music as an ensemble places greater stress on performers understanding each other's evolving intentions, especially when the genre in question requires musicians to be finely coordinated at all times. Although, as Schiavio and Høffding

rightly argue, improvising musicians also achieve this by relying on pre-reflective perceptual, cognitive and behavioural processes, there is still a greater need — even an appeal — to guide certain aspects of the performance from a reflective stance, making intersubjectivity a more prominent aspect of what it feels like to connect.

Phenomenological Analysis, part 3: Absorption and communication

The question still remains as to whether sitar and tabla performers are also intersubjectively aware of each other's separate intentions and emotions during states of intense absorption, as described by Debashish. On the one hand, the way in which performers describe these states in terms of a loss of self in which 'they don't know where or *who* they are' and in which 'there is only music' would imply little or no reflective awareness of each other as separate intentional agents. Yet, on the other hand, judging by Debashish's musical behaviour during his self-reported ex-static performance, I find it hard to conceive that he was entirely unaware of Sodhi's separate intentions, as his interactions seem to me highly communicative (as can be seen in the video recording online). By this I refer not only to Debashish's musical (i.e. sound-producing) actions, such as adapting to Sodhi's solos, reacting to his *tihāīs*, etc, but also to his gestural and verbal interactions with Sodhi: looking, smiling and even congratulating him at various points throughout the performance. Moreover, as we have seen, Debashish explicitly acknowledged and expressed an appreciation for Sodhi's friendly character and supportive playing. If we accept that Debashish did in fact experience a state of ex-static absorption during this performance (which I believe he did), it seems to me he must have been at least to some extent reflectively aware of Sodhi's actions and intentions.

This poses a paradox, in that while states of ex-static absorption are supposedly underpinned by heightened performative passivity, which in turn implies a diminishment of egoic activity and — presumably — a concomitant undermining of the distinction between self and non-self, Debashish's behaviour throughout this performance suggests otherwise. Although a detailed analysis of the social experiences underlying these altered states of ex-static absorption exceeds the exploratory goals of this study, my current interpretation of this apparent paradox goes as follows. Such experiences do indeed involve a significant decrease in intersubjective awareness among performers compared to their more standard states of absorption and connectivity. However, I do not believe that said awareness becomes entirely absent, at least not in most cases. Rather, it appears that it is possible for sitar and tabla performers to experience heightened performative passivity while still remaining intersubjectively aware of each other as separate musical agents. As McGuinness argues,

Performance... is paradigmatically simultaneously *doing* in a pre-reflective stance and *observing* in reflective stance; without, however, either mode of consciousness interfering (at the conscious level) with the action of the other. (2013, 110)

What I propose is that during moments of ex-static absorption, performers allow their body schema to make most musical decisions, while they observe, and occasionally reflect on, their own and their co-performer's behaviours. Based on this reflective observation, they may occasionally guide their actions in a certain direction in response to their co-performer's actions, and then quickly allow their pre-reflective body schema to take back control (see Berkowitz, 2010). This may result in what I would describe as a form of 'non-

egoic communication’, in which performers maintain a certain degree of reflective awareness of each other’s separate intentions, but in which musical responses stemming from such awareness are largely felt as passive.

A phenomenological model of musical connectivity

During the preceding analysis, I argued that sitar and tabla performers may connect both co- and intersubjectively to varying degrees and in various ways according to musical, social, and personal context. Although the primacy of co-subjective experience postulated by the aforementioned scholars is accurate, the reports collected herewith present a picture in which intersubjectivity, emotional sharing, and communication play a significant — even crucial — role in generating a sense of connection. I also argued that the social experiences underlying sitar and tabla performance may be categorized according to three distinct yet fluid states — namely standard, frustrated, and ex-static connectivity — each of which has its own distinct phenomenological characteristics, and that intersubjectivity and communication tend to be more prominent when performers are in states of standard absorption compared to when they experience either frustrated playing or ex-static absorption.

Based on the preceding analysis, I now offer the following illustration as a way of mapping the varied social phenomenology underlying joint performance in this genre.

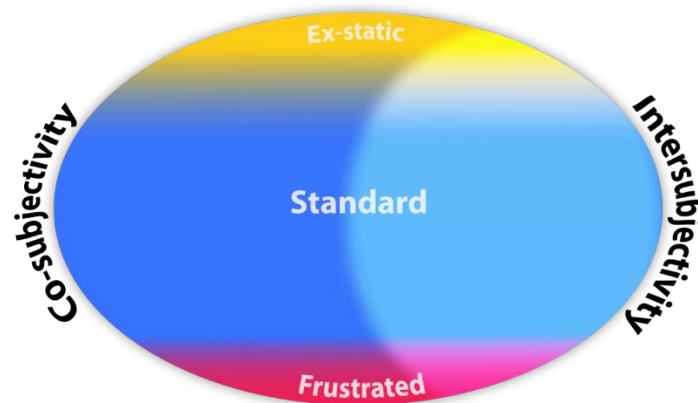


Figure 1. A phenomenological model of musical connectivity in sitar and tabla duo performance.

The model is based on the recognition that musical experience is a multi-faceted and multi-layered phenomenon. In order to grasp this complexity, the model is constructed by overlapping two distinct facets of musical experience: namely, performers’ varying levels of musical absorption and their varying levels of reflective awareness of each other’s separate mental states. By combining Høffding’s categorization of musical absorption with the more socially-oriented notions of co- and intersubjectivity, we can achieve a more nuanced phenomenological understanding of the various kinds of subjective states underlying joint musical performance in this and other genres.

The graphic’s circular shape is meant to show that standard experiences — occurring

towards the middle of the graph's vertical axis — are more common than both frustrated and ex-static states. Having the colours representing each of these states fade into one another represents how performers may move in and out of these various states throughout a performance. The relationship between the co-subjective and intersubjective areas depicts how co-subjective experience acts as the substratum on which intersubjective experience takes place. My illustration of intersubjectivity as occurring in the margins of co-subjectivity is meant to illustrate this dependence. Intersubjective experiences are represented by an increase in brightness because these states are characterized by greater degrees of conscious awareness. Lastly, the half-circular shape of the intersubjective area is meant to show that these states of shared subjectivity are generally more common during standard connectivity, compared to both frustrated and ex-static connectivity.

This model offers two main functions. Firstly, it provides a broad topography of the various kinds of social experiences underlying one given genre, in this case sitar and tabla performance. As I shall demonstrate below, the shapes and relationships that constitute the model can be changed according to musical context, thereby allowing for comparative analyses of musical connectivity in different scenarios. Secondly, the model allows us to situate specific experiences within the broader range of social experiences characterising a given genre. Considering specific examples taken from the reports discussed earlier, I would argue that: 1. Sandeep's experience playing with the female sitarist who did not respond to his playing gravitated towards the lower left side of the circle (i.e. frustrated, non-communicative, co-subjective experience); 2. Sodhi's 'musical conversation' with Debashish gravitated towards the centre right of the circle (i.e. standard intersubjectivity); 3. Shyam and Sandeep's peak experience in Assam gravitated towards the top left side of the circle (i.e. ex-static co-subjective experience); and 4. Debashish's peak experience with Sodhi gravitated towards the top-right side of the circle (i.e. ex-static intersubjective experience).

The model can also be used, with the appropriate adjustments, to describe the topography of experiences of musical connectivity for various other musical contexts, and to compare how these differ from each other. For example, for a sitar student like myself, the frustrated playing area should encompass a much larger area than for professional musicians, due to my comparative lack of skill and experience. It is also harder for me to attain and sustain a state of ex-static absorption similar to that of a more experienced sitarist. I would also represent intersubjectivity with a smaller area due once again to my relative lack of skill, which limits my capacity for overt forms of musical communication — particularly those requiring complex calculations or quick responses to the other performer's actions.

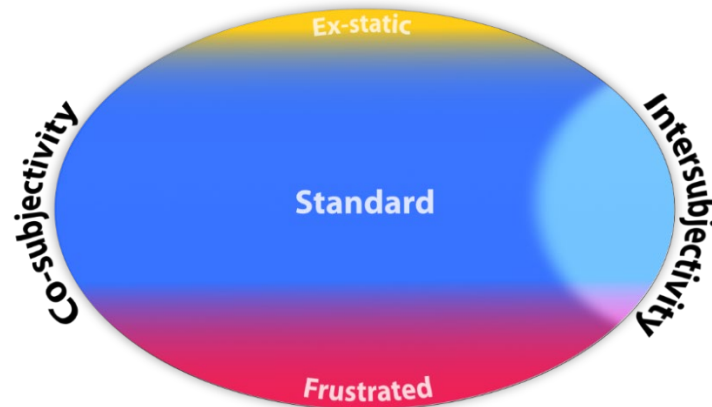


Figure 2. A phenomenological model adjusted to my own experience of musical connectivity.

We can also use this model to compare the social experiences underlying entirely different musical genres. Following Schiavio and Høffding's claim that communication among members of the DSQ emerges mainly 'when something is not right', we can adjust this model by shifting the intersubjective area towards the bottom of the graph, as part of experiences of disconnection and frustrated playing.

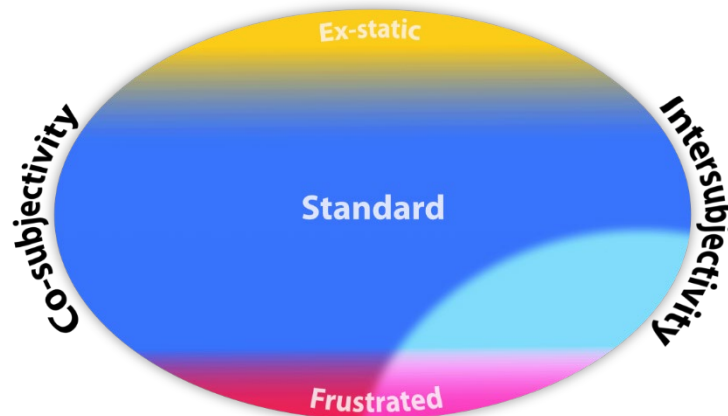


Figure 3. Phenomenological model adjusted to illustrate musical connectivity in string quartet performance, based on Schiavio and Høffding's (2015) account.

In short, this model is meant as a tool for thinking about musical interaction from a nuanced phenomenological perspective, as it flexible enough to apply, with modifications, to all kinds of different contexts of joint music-making.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this study, I have proposed that musical participation in this genre is strongly motivated by two specific kinds of experiences which, although distinct and to some extent contrastive, are not necessarily mutually exclusive. On the one hand, sitar and tabla performers strive towards maintaining spontaneous, empathic, and responsive forms of musical interaction and shared experience. Communication plays a central — and not merely supportive — role in promoting feelings of musical connectivity among sitar and tabla performers, both because of this music's improvisational nature and because of the specific way in which these improvised interactions are structured.

On the other hand, performers are also motivated by the possibility of achieving states of heightened performative passivity and ex-static absorption, during which the music is felt as emanating from a source other than their controlling egos. While this kind of musical experience is available in many other contexts of joint music-making, the way in which it tends to manifest in this genre involves several distinguishing features, all of which I argue help promote such ex-static states in various ways. One of these features is the pursuit of unplanned and at times truly novel musical behaviour. Another feature involves the perception of the *rāg* as the main agent of musical expression. And thirdly is the way in which these experiences resonate with and are interpreted as manifestations of spiritual notions of self-transcendence pervasive throughout Indian culture.

Although these two kinds of experiences — i.e. intersubjectivity and ex-static connectivity — would appear to be mutually exclusive, in that the first involves a heightening of awareness of self and other as distinct intentional agents whereas the second would appear to involve a diminishment of this quality of social experience, I propose that they actually feed into and, to some degree, support each other. For professional Hindustani performers, even standard levels of absorption and connectivity are likely to involve a sense of performative passivity, as many aspects of their behaviour are carried out in a pre-reflective, non-egoic manner. At the same time, sitar and tabla performers are likely to maintain some degree of intersubjective awareness of each other's separate agency and intentions, even while experiencing states of ex-static absorption, on account of the types of highly communicative musical and gestural/verbal interactions permeating this genre. I maintain it is this combination that allows for the kind of 'non-egoic communication' I have proposed takes place during instances of ex-static connectivity.

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DR ALEJANDRO COOPER is a student of sitar player Debashish Sanyal and Dhrupad singer Dr Ashish Jaisawal. He completed his doctoral thesis on the musical interactions and shared experiences of Hindustani sitar and tabla performers in 2018. He is co-director of 'theSitarProject', a community-based group that promotes Indian classical music across Scotland. He is also a sitar teacher and performer, and has recently received the prestigious Kala Ratna Award for his contribution to the Indian arts scene in the UK.