Sonic performativity: analysing gender in North Indian classical vocal music

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor and Francis in Ethnomusicology Forum (volume 24, issue 3) on 23/10/2015, available online: https://doi.org/10.1080/17411912.2015.1082925

Abstract
Many aspects of contemporary North Indian classical vocal music are gendered: genres, improvisational techniques and even certain ornaments evoke gendered connotations for musicians and listeners. However, analytical work on this music has failed to take gender into account; as a result, the relationship between gender and musical sound remains unexamined. In this article, I explore how issues of gender might come to bear on the close analysis of North Indian classical vocal music. First, I give an overview of the gendered musical landscape of the tradition. I then draw upon work by Judith Butler in order to theorise this in terms of what I call ‘sonic performativity’: I argue that North Indian classical musicians perform gender sonically and that this influences the subtlest nuances of musical style. Finally, I demonstrate ways in which considerations of gender inform the stylistic decisions of one singer, detailing how she negotiates gendered musical norms.

Keywords
gender, music analysis, North Indian classical music, performativity
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Ideas about gender are thoroughly embedded in the discursive world of contemporary North Indian classical vocal music. When I interviewed musicians and music-lovers in Delhi, Mumbai, Pune and Calcutta, between 2009 and 2011, the subject of gender frequently arose. Some spoke of a gendered division of labour, affecting the instruments and styles musicians perform. Certain female singers told me about the problems of singing genres associated with the now-disreputable courtesan tradition. There is also an explicit discourse on gender and musical style, touching on issues of genre, the differences between pedagogical lineages and even ornamentation. However, despite this close relationship between gendered discourse and musical features, music-analytical work on North Indian classical music has largely ignored matters of gender. With this article I begin to address this lack, by exploring what a gendered analysis of North Indian classical music might entail. I argue that the fine details of the sounds of North Indian classical music, accessible through transcription and analysis, are crucial to the gendering of the tradition. In bringing this to light, I advocate a fully contextualised kind of music analysis; I analyse musical sound alongside ethnographic research amongst musicians and listeners. I show how this approach makes it possible to analyse the social aspects of musical sound, making sense of musical characteristics by considering their role in broad social processes.

Various scholars have examined gender and Indian classical music from historical or sociological perspectives (e.g. Maciszewski 2006; Morcom 2009, 2013; Perron 2002, 2007; Post 1987; Qureshi 2001, 2006; Rao 1990, 1996; Schofield 2006, 2007, 2012; Soneji 2012; Walker 2004, 2014a, 2014b; and Weidman 2003, 2006). This work has most often dealt with female performers, especially those who fall under the umbrella ‘courtesans’; that is, with groups of female hereditary performers who used both to sing and to dance for male audiences and who would sometimes also engage in sexual relations with their patrons. A particular focus of this research has been a period of dramatic transformation in the classical performing arts, spanning the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Characterised variously as a time of ‘reform’ or ‘revival’, this entailed a change in musical patronage from aristocratic to largely middle-class audiences; a change in performance contexts from intimate, high-status gatherings to a mixture of contexts, including public concert halls; the coupling of Indian music with emergent Hindu nationalism; and attempts to standardise, systematise and notate musical practice (see, for example, Bakhle 2005; Kippen 2006; Manuel 1989; Moro 2004; Schofield 2010a; Walker 2014a, 2014b; and Weidman 2003).

This period of change had unequal consequences for male and female musicians. While male musicians participated in reform projects and continued to be patronised as performers and teachers, the new audiences of North Indian classical music tended to view female hereditary performers (courtesans) as disreputable and treat them with suspicion. This was in part a consequence of the high-profile ‘Anti-Nautch’ campaign, a middle-class social reform movement which aimed to abolish female singing and dancing, claiming that female performers were engaged in prostitution. Increasingly, hereditary female performers were stigmatised and disenfranchised. In the world of North Indian classical music, they were largely replaced by middle-class, non-hereditary, ‘respectable’ female performers, many of whom had apprenticed themselves to male hereditary musicians. An abundant body of scholarship has emerged around this set of developments, as well as around related developments in South Indian classical music and in dance (see above for examples);

1 Contextualised approaches to analysis have a diverse genealogy (e.g. McClary 1991; in this journal, Stock 1992; Leante 2009; Nooshin 1998; Widdess 2006; Webster-Kogen 2014; and many others).
this has examined both what was happening for female performers at the time and its implications for subsequent female performers of North Indian classical music, including both those who hail from a courtesan background and those who do not. As this work makes clear, the gendered dynamics of the events of the early twentieth century have exerted a continued influence over music-making ever since: Anna Morcom (2013), for example, has shown how the discourse of the Anti-Nautch campaign inflects current debates about performance in South Asia.

However, just as analytical work on North Indian classical music has so far neglected gender, so scholarship on gender has only rarely engaged with the details of musical style and structure. Studies by Vidya Rao and Amelia Maciszewski are important exceptions to this general rule. In “‘Thumri’ as Feminine Voice” (1990), Rao presents a provocative reading of the semi-classical genre thumrī, interpreting key musical features as feminist resistance. Amelia Maciszewski’s PhD thesis (1998, published in part as Maciszewski 2001a and 2001b) is a large-scale study of gender and North Indian classical music. Most pertinent here is Chapter Three, in which Maciszewski highlights two types of connections between gendered discourses and aspects of the ‘music itself’: first, she discusses how certain musical genres are gendered, with the result that male and female musicians face different expectations about how proficient they will be at performing them; and, second, she shows how gendered language appears in descriptions of nine musical qualities, each identified by a Hindi term. However, Maciszewski’s interest is not in music analysis and she does not pursue her discussion with any in-depth consideration of how particular musical features or qualities play out in actual performances. Despite noting the ‘interpenetration of music and language’ (10) in relation to gender and North Indian classical music, her research, though exceedingly rich, is mainly confined to the linguistic side of the equation.

This article explores how to take North Indian classical music’s complex layers of gendered signification into account when doing close musical analyses of recorded performances. With it, I will do three things. First, I give an overview of the musical landscape of contemporary North Indian classical vocal music, highlighting the central role of gendered discourse in shaping musical practice. This is an important first step for analytical work on gender: by setting out the gendered stylistic framework within which musicians operate, I lay the groundwork for gendered approaches to the kinds of close readings that are the staple of music analysis. Second, I examine North Indian classical vocal music in the light of gender theory, in particular the ideas of the influential theorist Judith Butler. Borrowing Butler’s most famous concept and applying it to musical sound, I suggest that North Indian classical performances involve what I call ‘sonic performativity’. I consider how this accounts for the musical construction of the (gendered) body, as well as the social policing of gender in music. Third, I bring together fieldwork and musical analysis in order to scrutinise gendered musical negotiations in detail. I highlight how discourses of gender and music intersect with other discourses, producing a network of sometimes contradictory social pressures on musicians. In doing so, I draw attention to one of the many musical and discursive intersections that, I argue, are a fundamental backdrop to North Indian classical performances. I identify how one musician, in part through her musical decisions, responds to and negotiates with these strategically.

Overall, this article tells a story about the sociality of musical sound. I use music analysis in order to highlight various ways in which gender, including aspects of gendered history, leaves sonic traces on contemporary North Indian classical music. I further consider what this suggests about the ways in which musical performance can participate in the social construction of gender. With this article, I propose that gender in North Indian classical music offers a powerful example of the intertwining of musical and social processes.
A gendered musical landscape: the semiotics of style

Figure 1 shows the main genres of North Indian classical vocal music arranged on a spectrum according to how classical they are. At the far left is *dhrupad*, the most serious and classical genre. Next comes *khyāl*, another classical genre and the most popular vocal genre of North Indian classical music. On the other side are a number of so-called ‘semi-’ or ‘light classical’ genres, of which *ṭhumrī* is the most classical. This spectrum also involves a change in emphasis from what Peter Manuel calls ‘music-dominated’ to ‘text-dominated’ styles (1989: 33). (He places a slightly different set of genres on a similar spectrum, including *ṭhumrī* and *khyāl*, as well as other genres not discussed here.) The more classical a genre, the greater is the importance of abstract musical processes, especially *rāg*, while at the lighter end of the spectrum a strict approach to *rāg* is not necessary; meanwhile the intelligibility and expression of the lyrics is important at the lighter end of the spectrum, but becomes increasingly irrelevant towards the classical end.

![Figure 1, North Indian classical vocal genres.](image)

Crucially, this spectrum also has gendered significance. *Dhrupad* carries strongly masculine associations; semi-classical genres, meanwhile, evoke femininity. *Khyāl*, sitting between these two gendered poles, can take on both masculine and feminine connotations, depending on context. The gendering of many elements of North Indian classical vocal style ultimately derives from their position on this spectrum, so that, for instance, musical features associated with *dhrupad* evoke masculinity even when they are used in other genres (such as *khyāl*). This spectrum, in turn, is partly a product of the reform period discussed above; it was at this time that the music of various groups of male and female hereditary musicians was grouped together under the heading ‘North Indian classical music’. *Ṭhumrī*, in particular, had previously been associated primarily with courtesans, but now began to be sung by male *khyāl* singers; its lingering feminine connotations are traces of this gendered history (Manuel 1989; Perron 2002, 2007).
In the following sections, I synthesise the results of fieldwork I conducted in India between 2009 and 2011, archival research (including books by music-lovers and newspaper reviews) and scattered fragments of previous academic literature in order to lay out a bird’s-eye view of the gendering of North Indian classical vocal style. I discuss each of its three main genres (*dhrupad, thumrī* and *khvāl*) in turn, briefly introducing each genre and then moving from a general consideration of how it is gendered to the specific musical characteristics that give rise to this gendering. As a first step towards a more comprehensive survey, I limit my discussion here to a small number of key musical features with strongly gendered associations.

This research has revealed remarkable consistency in the ways diverse individuals talk about gender and musical style, resulting in a fairly unified overall discursive framework. As Adam Krims (2000: 46-92) has highlighted in the context of popular music, and others elsewhere (e.g. Sparling 2008: 412-414), this overview exposes the fundamentally relational nature of style: genres are defined as much through comparisons with each other as by their own characteristic features. Although I am primarily interested in the contemporary state of affairs, descriptions of gender and musical style have remained surprisingly constant over at least the last fifty years; this is reflected in the dates of some of the literature cited below. In many cases, what I discuss here dates from even further back in time: some aspects of the musical gendering I identify (such as the overall gendering of the spectrum of vocal genres) date from the reform period, while others (such as the gendering of *dhrupad* as masculine) predate even this. I would suggest that it is partly through musical sound itself that ideas about gender are sustained over time; later on in this article, I will theorise the mechanism by which this occurs.

**Dhrupad**

*Dhrupad* is the oldest and most prestigious genre of North Indian classical vocal music. Musicians and listeners commonly describe it as abstract, esoteric and strict. They often link this with aspects of the music: for example, many note *dhrupad’s* emphasis on technical musical processes, such as the systematic exposition of *rāg* and mathematical forms of rhythmic improvisation. The lyrics, on the other hand, play a minimal role and are often unintelligible. *Dhrupad*’s abstract, music-theoretical flavour and its apparently ancient roots contribute to its reputation as a serious, classical genre.

The general impression that *dhrupad* is masculine is partly a result of the gendered profile of its performers: most are men. Moreover, many musicians and listeners consider *dhrupad*’s musical style to be masculine, or especially suited to men’s voices. Amongst her informants, Maciszewski observed a feeling that men are better at singing *dhrupad* than women (1998: 204). Likewise, Manorama Sharma writes that the ‘manner of singing’ in *dhrupad* is ‘virile and manly’ (2006: 35). When women sing *dhrupad*, this often provokes discussion about the suitability of women’s voices to the style. For example, a music critic for the *Times of India* praises Gita Deb for managing to sing the genre despite

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2 Most of these sources are in English. Partly this is a consequence of doing research in India as an English speaker. Although I have learnt Hindi, I am far from fluent; however, the majority of people whom I have interviewed (both musicians and listeners) were completely fluent in English. In this instance, it seemed natural that we should conduct our discussions in English, occasionally shifting into Hindi, as is customary on the subcontinent. Moreover in India many of the most high-profile musicological publications and the major newspapers, which I also consult here, are in English. This raises the question of whether aspects of the gendered discourse on music would be different in other Indian languages (most importantly, Hindi and Urdu, but others too, including Bengali and Marathi). This is an important question, which deserves future exploration. However, I would suggest that it is unlikely that the overall gendered framework I present here would differ significantly in different languages. In my own encounters with musicians and listeners, I have not observed any shifts in the gendering of North Indian classical music when they have used Hindi or Urdu terms instead of English ones. Furthermore, I am encouraged by Maciszewski’s exploration of the gendering of Hindi musical vocabulary (1998: 252-262, discussed above), which corroborates descriptions in English.
being a woman: ‘It is laudable that though constraints of female voice do not suit dhrupad [sic] style of singing, she certainly did a commendable job’ (January 1st 1989). Dhrupad’s link with masculinity is further enhanced by its lyrics: as Meer (1980: 56-7) and Sanyal and Widdess (2004: 13) have pointed out, these imply a male ‘speaker’ and therefore are unlike the typical lyrics of khyāl and thumrī, which imply a first-person, female protagonist.

Dhrupad’s apparent masculinity is also tied to specific musical features of the genre. For many, this is associated with the use of ornamentation, characterised in terms of the absence of the typical ornaments of other genres. Reviewing a dhrupad concert by Wasifuddin Dagar, the critic Sarwat Ali writes,

He remained true to the basics of the form in maintaining a masculine quality by avoiding ornamental flourishes, graces and shakes. He also desisted from indulging in fanciful improvisation (http://dagarvani.org/mediawiki/index.php?title=NI_review, accessed February 2014).

Ali hears Dagar’s avoidance of particular ornamentation (that is, the ornaments one would expect to hear in other genres) as the means by which he ‘[maintains] a masculine quality’. This takes on an ethical flavour and is associated with broader ideas of restraint when, immediately afterwards, Ali commends Dagar for not ‘indulging in fanciful improvisation’.

Sanyal and Widdess note that although dhrupad is often characterised as lacking in ornamentation, certain ornaments are nevertheless strongly associated with the genre (2004: 56). One such ornament is gamak. Often described as a ‘shake’, gamak is an oscillation in pitch (Magriel 2013: 328-333; Sanyal and Widdess 2004: 165-166). It takes various forms, involving oscillations of anything from under a semitone to over a perfect fifth, and occurs in khyāl as well as dhrupad. (I detail different types of gamak below.)

Gamak, especially very wide gamak, evokes dhrupad and masculinity. Maciszewski reports that a number of singers told her that ‘heavy gamak does not “suit” a female voice’ (1998: 206). Gamak is even coded as masculine in instrumental music. Reviewing a veena concert, Mitra Phukan writes, ‘The “feminine” aspect of the Shringar Ras was beautifully balanced with the “masculine” characteristics of powerful stroke play, and vigorous gamaks’ (The Assam Tribune, 28th August 2009). Gamak also carries other associations. Sanyal and Widdess note that a musician’s proficiency in performing gamak demonstrates technical accomplishment in ‘the most serious and difficult styles of North Indian vocal music’ (dhrupad and khyāl). Additionally, they suggest, gamak references the high-status male court musicians who used to perform these styles, with the result that the gendered associations of gamak overlap intricately with ideas about musicians’ ability, status and prestige (2004: 169).³

A further, gendered aspect of dhrupad involves what musicians and listeners understand as an emphasis on rhythm and metre over melody and pitch. Maciszewski notes a strong association between masculinity, dhrupad and the ‘elaboration of tāla [metre] and laya [rhythm, tempo]’ (212). Likewise, Meer highlights the role of rhythm in his discussion of gendered distinctions between dhrupad and khyāl (1980: 56). In dhrupad performances, this emphasis is primarily manifested in the

³ Although my focus here is on the gendered nature of contemporary North Indian classical music, it is worth noting that the discursive link between dhrupad, masculinity and a particular approach to ornamentation (including ideas of restraint) predates the reform period; Sanyal and Widdess observe this, for example, in Augustus Willard’s 1834 treatise on Indian classical music and in a common anecdote that musicians tell about the musician Bahrām Khān (2004: 56-59).
characteristic improvisational technique laykārī, in which singers engage playfully with the underlying metre (and with the pakhāwaj player) through syncopation and other rhythmic devices (Sanyal and Widdess 2004: 239-43, 258-75).

\textit{Thumrī}

Towards the other end of the spectrum in Figure 1 lies \textit{thumrī}, the most prominent semi-classical genre of North Indian classical music. While musicians and listeners speak of \textit{dhrupad} as a strict musical genre, \textit{thumrī} is characterised in terms of flexibility. As is the case with \textit{dhrupad}, this is primarily a result of handling of \textit{rāg}. Unlike in \textit{dhrupad}, where they are forbidden, departures from the \textit{rāg} are a key feature of \textit{thumrī}. The lyrics, meanwhile, are of the utmost importance: singers often stress that the primary purpose of \textit{thumrī}’s music is to convey the emotion and meaning of the lyrics.

\textit{Thumrī} and other semi-classical genres evoke feminine connotations. As is the case with \textit{dhrupad}, this is partially the result of the gender of their performers, both past and present. Historically, as we have seen, semi-classical genres and especially \textit{thumrī} are associated with courtesans. Although the courtesan tradition has now largely disappeared, the link between courtesans and \textit{thumrī} remains strong in the imaginations of performers and listeners. Nowadays, both men and women perform \textit{thumrī}; however, most (but not all) of \textit{thumrī}’s foremost exponents are women, including performers who hail from a courtesan background and those who do not. While both male and female classical musicians often sing \textit{thumrī} alongside khayāl, singers who specialise in semi-classical genres are far more likely to be women than men. Lalita du Perron has shown how \textit{thumrī}’s lyrics contribute to the sense of femininity surrounding the genre, highlighting their ‘female voice’: they almost always imply a first-person, female protagonist (2002: 173). In addition, the genre’s femininity is linked with ideas about its character as sensuous, erotic and romantic.

Musically, many draw a link between \textit{thumrī}’s femininity and its ornamentation. The musicologist Ashok Ranade, for example, writes:

\begin{quote}
… musical embellishments such as the following predominantly figure in \textit{[thumrī]}: Kaku, murki, khatka, jhatka, meend, dard and pukar. These embellishments clearly indicate decorative, tender and delicate elements in musical expression. It is no wonder that the genre was often and rather mockingly described as \textit{janani} (feminine) (2006: 137).
\end{quote}

That Ranade compiles such a long list of ornamentation in his description of \textit{thumrī} is indicative of a more widespread view that \textit{thumrī} is, as Deepak Raja puts it, an ‘ornamentation-dominant’ genre (2009: 260), characterised not only by particular types of ornament but also by the fact that it uses more ornaments than other genres. This is in sharp contrast with \textit{dhrupad}, which (as discussed above) tends to be spoken of in terms of ornamental restraint.

Despite a lack of consensus amongst musicians around the precise definitions of ornaments and the genres in which they occur (Magriel 2013: 305-6), most agree that the ornament which most characterises \textit{thumrī} is \textit{murkī} and that this that takes the form either of what in Western classical terminology would be called a ‘mordent’ (Manuel 1989: 123) or some other fast combination of notes which encircle a central pitch. It involves pitch contours such as 121, 212, 2132, 21321 and 23212, for example as realised in Figure 2. (The numbers here refer not to scale degrees, but to transposable melodic shapes: ‘1’ indicates the lowest note of the contour, ‘2’ the second lowest, and so on.)

\footnote{Chloë Alaghband-Zadeh discusses the gendering of \textit{thumrī} in more depth elsewhere (2013).}
Murkī is associated with both thumrī and femininity. It is therefore diametrically opposed to gamak, which connotes dhrupad and masculinity. When I interviewed the classical singer Subhra Guha in 2010, she mentioned murkī as one of a number of characteristics of thumrī that could account for its common perception as a feminine genre, alongside ‘the production of voice and the lyrics’, the fact that ‘there is no use of gamak’ and ‘the feminine touch’. She described murkī as ‘more or less feminine’ and ‘a little delicate and soft’.

During this discussion, Guha demonstrated how the use of murkī differentiates thumrī from other genres. First, as shown in Figure 3, she sang two short phrases, which she told me were typical of the way in which murkī is used in thumrī. Then, she sang two phrases with a similar melodic outline to those in Figure 3, but using far fewer ornaments. She described these as how she would sing dhrupad (Figure 4). Finally, she sang another version of this melodic outline, again singing with murkī so as to demonstrate thumrī style once again (Figure 5). (See Appendix for an explanation of the notation system used here.)

In the first phrase shown in Figure 3, Guha’s demonstration of murkī is characterised by a complex, twisting ornamental strategy. Instead of moving directly up the scale, as she does in her dhrupad
demonstration (Figure 4), she traces a zig-zag pattern, then circling Š with the figure ŘŠŇŠ, before finally settling on N. The second phrase in Figure 3 is a condensed version of this, including an extended version of the circling figure around Š. Her final murkī demonstration, shown in Figure 5, includes another circling figure around Š.

Guha makes liberal use of murkī when she performs thumrī. Figure 6, an extract from Guha’s ‘Jāvo piyā tuma jāvo’, is typical.5 I have marked on the transcription some of the many murkīs Guha uses; others occur throughout the performance. This feminine ornament is integral to Guha’s thumrī style.

Note the changes in volume and timbre which often separate murkī from the surrounding music here. This is particularly clearly audible in the first two instances of murkī: in both cases, Guha sings the ornament very softly, while her singing immediately before and afterwards is much louder and uses a declamatory, open tone. This is consistent with Guha’s statement to me that murkī is ‘delicate and soft’. (It is also typical of the rich, subtle manipulation of timbre and volume that is central to Guha’s thumrī style; for another example of this, see her sudden drop in volume and change in voice production at M:1.) Other singers, too, stress the delicacy of murkī. On the website of the ITC-SRA (a music college), the singer Ajoy Chakrabarty demonstrates a number of ornaments, including murkī (http://www.itcsra.org/alankar/murki/murki_index.html, accessed February 2014). In his demonstration and in the accompanying description, he explains that murkī is distinguished only in part by the notes it uses, but also by its ‘force of delivery’, where murkī is ‘less forceful’ than other ornaments involving the same notes. This view of murkī is not universal; nevertheless, it indicates that for some singers at least, the ornament is defined not only in terms of pitch, but also in terms of timbre and volume. Later, I will explore further significance of the fact that ornamentation that evokes femininity is also associated with ideas of delicacy and softness.

5 This track can be downloaded from various websites, including imusti (http://imusti.com/#!/music/album/1773/Raga-Devgiri-Bilawal,-Mishra-Khamaj,-Pilu---Subhra-Guha, accessed February 2014).
Khvāl

Like dhrupad, khvāl is a fully classical (that is, not a ‘semi-classical’) genre, involving a strict approach to rāg. Musicians express a variety of views on the importance of the lyrics in khvāl, but by and large they are not considered as much of a priority as the lyrics of a thumrī performance. Both gamak and murkī can appear in khvāl.

Khvāl, sitting between the two gendered poles of dhrupad and thumrī, has a less explicitly gendered position than either. Perron notes that ‘in a gendered discussion restricted to [dhrupad and khvāl], dhrupad tends to be conceptualized as masculine whereas khvāl may be cloaked in a feminine garb’. However, ‘When discussed in relation to thumrī’s perceived femininity, ... khvāl can once again assume a masculine and serious role’ (2002: 173-4). Perron draws attention to khvāl’s chameleon-like nature; it is a genre whose gendered identity changes in different contexts.
As Perron’s argument would indicate, in contemporary descriptions khvāl frequently serves as the masculine foil to a feminine thumrī. The singer Rekha Surya formulates such a gendered distinction: ‘Thumri is liberal and feminine in temperament while Khayal is abstract and austere in nature, using a bandish primarily as a peg to hang notes on’ (http://www.lokvani.com/lokvani/article.php?article_id=5172, accessed February 2014). Likewise, one review describes thumrī as ‘like the female face of khayal’ (The Statesman, 17th March 2011). In an advertisement for a concert given in 2008, khvāl and dhrupad are grouped together so that both take on connotations of masculinity when placed alongside thumrī: ‘Thumri ... is the feminine style compared with the masculine khyal and dhrupad’ (http://www.redhotcurry.com/entertainment/theatre/dying_song.htm, accessed February 2014).

Contemporary instances in which khvāl takes on feminine associations are less common. Nevertheless, ideas about the masculinity of dhrupad and relative femininity of khvāl are a component of some accounts of the genre’s origins. Susheela Misra suggests that khvāl arose because dhrupad was ‘a thoroughly masculine type of music,’ therefore ‘women-artistes must have been yearning for a style more suitable for their feminine temperament and voices’ (1990: 39). The tabla-player David Courtney makes a similar point, describing the difference between dhrupad and khvāl as one of greater or lesser ‘delicacy’ (http://chandrakantha.com/articles/indian_music/khayal.html, accessed 2012). Meer, too, has proposed that the music of dhrupad and khvāl respectively suggest that khvāl ‘emerged to be sung by women’, as dhrupad’s ‘female counterpart’ (1980: 56-69).

In addition to descriptions of khvāl as masculine compared to thumrī and rarer instances in which its apparent femininity is attributed to its origins, I have observed another gendered trope in contemporary discourse on khvāl: many accounts stress that it contains both masculine and feminine elements. Meena Banerjee describes khvāl as the middle-ground between the masculine dhrupad and feminine thumrī, involving aspects of both: ‘Dhrupad and thumri, according to some ustads, are essential idioms for total grooming of a khayal exponent because dhrupad unravels the mystery of a raga through its powerful, direct, masculine approach replete with rhythmic variants, while thumri, with feminine touches, adds different hues of emotion to the raga’s persona’ (The Statesman, 15th April 2011). This forms part of a wider discourse on the all-encompassing nature of khvāl: certain musicians and music-lovers claim the superiority of khvāl by suggesting that it combines the best elements of other genres.

The gendered associations of different genres are also the basis for other gendered distinctions, including between khvāl styles. There is, for example, a widespread belief that the Agra gharānā (a pedagogical lineage) has a masculine style, primarily a result of the gharānā’s close relationship with

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6 However, this idea does crop up in various historical sources, as Sanyal and Widdess discuss (2004: 56-57). It is possible to speculate that khvāl used to connote love and femininity, but that these associations have subsequently weakened, so that the genre can now also reference masculinity or (as I will discuss below) a combination of masculinity with femininity. This would seem to make historical sense. Since dhrupad has historically been a more prestigious genre than khvāl (sung by high-status kalāvants), it has long been in the interests of khvāl singers to promote khvāl as a serious, even masculine genre. In the early days of the public, concert-hall based tradition of North Indian classical music, in the early decades of the twentieth century, the need to minimise any connection between khvāl and femininity would have been particularly acute, since this was a time in which female musicians had started to be seen as disreputable. Furthermore, the addition of thumrī to the repertoire of male khvāl singers in the same period allowed thumrī to take over what Deepak Raja has called (in a different context) the ‘aesthetic space’ (2009: 297) that khvāl used to occupy: the romantic, feminine counterpart to a strict, masculine dhrupad (and now also khvāl). Further historical research would be required to confirm the details of this apparent shift in the gendered associations of khvāl.

7 For a thorough examination of khvāl’s origins, see Schofield (2010b).
**dhrupad.** In her comprehensive survey of khyāl styles, Bonnie Wade suggests that the closeness of the Agra style to dhrupad can account for most of its defining characteristics (1984: 131). In particular, she writes, it explains the priority Agra-gharānā singers give to rhythmic aspects of performance, for example rhythmic play, which (as noted above) have strongly masculine associations. Wade also attributes other characteristics to the gharānā’s connections with dhrupad, including: heavy use of the text of the composition (102, 129-131); inclusion of a long ālāp; and singing with a ‘robust or powerful voice’ (102). Likewise, the music connoisseur Deepak Raja attributes the sense that the Agra gharānā is masculine to, amongst other things, its ‘full-throated and aggressive vocalization’, which he suggests is ‘inspired by’ dhrupad, and to Agra-gharānā singers’ use of ‘forms of melodic execution’ from dhrupad, including gamak, and their avoidance of ‘delicate ornamentations’, including murkī (2009: 29). In the case of the Agra-gharānā khyāl style, then, the appropriation of stylistic features from dhrupad has the power to evoke masculinity even in the context of an entirely different genre.

The gendering of North Indian classical vocal style invites music-analytical attention: there is great scope for detailed study of the gendered significance of individual performances, styles or lineages. I demonstrate one such approach in the final section of this article. Before doing this, I first consider the social mechanism by which North Indian classical vocal style comes to be gendered. I suggest understanding this gendering through Judith Butler’s concept of performativity: as an example of ‘sonic performativity’, which extends to the subtestes nuances of musical style.

**Sonic performativity and the musical construction of gender**

Central to Butler’s theory of gender performativity is a critical reversal. She challenges the common wisdom according to which people’s outward manifestation of gender is understood as the expression of an internal gendered identity. Instead, she argues, ‘acts, gestures and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause’ (1999 [1990]: 173). In other words, ‘no gender is “expressed” by actions, gestures, or speech, but ... the performance of gender produces retroactively the illusion that there is an inner gender core’ (1997: 144).

Since both gender and music can be construed as types of performance, Butler’s argument holds potential to illuminate the relationship between the two. Suzanne Cusick has made this case persuasively, suggesting that musical performance is a means by which ‘we project … a gendered and sexed self that is intelligible to those around us’ (1999: 27). Following Cusick, I propose that North Indian classical vocal performances are powerful instances of the ‘actions, gestures, or speech’ through which gender is enacted. As Susan McClary famously argued, ‘individuals learn how to be gendered beings through their interactions with cultural discourses such as music’ (1991: 7-8); the concept of performativity suggests the mechanism by which this occurs. Seen from this perspective, repeated, gendered musical performances do not simply reflect or express the internal (gendered) identity of their performers; rather, as Butler puts it, ‘the illusion that there is an inner gender core’ (cited above) is in part produced by those very performances.

Performativity, in this case, is sonic. It operates through the medium of sound, so that even subtle musical details can seem to express gender. My claim is that musicians’ performances of gender involve not only what can be seen, such as their stage behaviour and dress, but also what can be heard. Although often ignored by gender theorists, these audible signs of gender are just as powerful
as visible ones. They involve various aspects of musical sound, including the kinds of stylistic characteristics that are accessible through transcription and analysis, such as types of ornamentation. Moreover, in talking of ‘sonic’ rather than ‘musical’ performativity, I also wish to draw attention to the performative role played by less easily analysed sonic features, such as timbre and voice production. As seen in the case of murkā (above), in North Indian classical music these two types of features are thoroughly interrelated.

The sonic performativity of North Indian classical vocal music relies on the complex, self-perpetuating networks of significance in which musical features are embedded. Take, for example, the associations surrounding dhrupad: this is a genre thought of not only as masculine but also as strict, disciplined, austere, mathematical and esoteric. Thumrī, on the other hand, connotes femininity alongside emotional expressiveness, freedom from the strict rules of rāg, sensuality and romance.

Each of these networks of meanings implicates the genres’ characteristic musical features, including, for example, the ornaments gamak and murkā, the sonic corollaries of masculinity and femininity respectively. Furthermore, these ornaments are embedded in networks of associations of their own, which intersect with the associations surrounding their respective genres, so that gamak is heard not only as masculine but also as vigorous and strong, while murkā is heard not only as feminine but also, as Guha puts it, as ‘delicate and soft’. The interlacing of these different associations functions recursively to sustain a sense that men are vigorous, disciplined and mathematical, while women are delicate, sensuous and emotional.

It therefore becomes possible to add further characteristics to each end of the spectrum of genres of North Indian classical vocal music depicted in Figure 1. For example, in his discussion of different genres, Vamanrao Desphande describes a change in emphasis from dhrupad, through khyāl and thumrī, to film music. He characterises this in terms of different degrees of ‘restraint’, where dhrupad involves the highest levels of ‘restraint’ and ‘purity’, while semi-classical and light genres are distinguished by their ‘sensuality’ or ‘sentimentality’ (1987 [1973]: 23-26).

Elsewhere in the same publication (41-77), in his analysis of khyāl gharānās, Deshpande articulates another, related conceptual spectrum from music which emphasises svar (pitch, melody) to that which emphasises laya (rhythm, tempo). As in his description of different genres, he links each end of this spectrum with extra-musical values, such as ‘discipline’ and ‘sweetness’, writing that Agra-gharānā singers ‘exaggerated the importance of discipline and order and ignored values connected with the swara – its sweetness, smoothness and delicate artistry of tonal nuances’ (42). Later, he formulates this as a difference between the ‘intellectual’ and the ‘emotional’ (76). As Maciszewksi points out, Deshpande’s theoretical spectrum between svar- and laya-oriented music also applies to North Indian classical music as a whole. She notes its gendered implications: it aligns rhythm with masculinity; melody with femininity (1998: 222).

Yet more associations, some gendered, cluster around either end of this spectrum. Some are apparent, for example, in Maciszewski’s discussion of the musical qualities mardāngī (252-253) and cancaltā (259-261): mardāngī is often identified in dhrupad and indexes ‘manliness’ and ‘heroism’, as well as the musical characteristics of rhythmic improvisation and dynamic intensity, while, on the other hand, cancaltā is associated with semi-classical forms, a florid or embellished melodic line, femininity and ‘flirtatiousness’ or ‘playfulness’. Other scholars hear a gendered significance in the flexibility with

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8 As Perron (2002) has shown, thumrī singers have played down sensuous connotations, instead emphasising devotional interpretations; nevertheless, most listeners continue to associate thumrī with love and with courtesans.
which *rāg* is treated in *ṭhumrī*. Rao (1990) interprets this as feminist resistance, equating *rāg* with patriarchal norms. Perron, meanwhile, disputing Rao, links this flexibility with patriarchal discourses on femininity, writing that it is commonly perceived as ‘evidence of the genre’s femaleness: it lacks discipline and order, and so it always in danger of being “out of control”, a quintessentially feminine attribute in patriarchal ideology’ (2002: 175).

Various scholars have observed the relationship between gender and the hierarchy of genres in North Indian classical music. Rao (1990: WS-31), Maciszewski (1998: 208), Qureshi (2001: 98-99) and Perron (2002: 174) have all drawn attention to the fact that *ṭhumrī* and other genres associated with female performers are marginalised under the heading ‘semi-classical’, while men’s genres are taken as the most prestigious, core repertoire. In part, this is a product of musical history: at the time when courtesans’ genres began to be sung by male *khvāl* singers, the genres were tainted by association with a group of performers who were increasingly seen as disreputable. It is not surprising that their music did not achieve full classical status. As Perron notes, this is also indicative of the ‘othering’ of femininity in patriarchy more generally. Contemporary commentators articulate this hierarchy in various ways. Shrikrishna Haldankar, for example, describes a hierarchy according to which *dhrupad* is ‘at the top’ of North Indian classical music; he writes that this reflects a difference not only in how ‘highbrow’ each of the genres is, but also in the ‘dignity and weightiness’ of each genre’s musical style (2001: 11). Amongst other things, he equates this with use of the ornaments *mīnd* (glissando) and *gamak*, as opposed to *murkī* (and other semi-classical ornaments). Some of these layers of additional associations are shown on Figure 7.9

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9 This framework raises questions about the universality of gendered stereotypes. It finds parallels, for example, in ideas about differences between the respective styles of male and female *gender* players in Central Javanese *wayang*. There, Sarah Weiss has highlighted how musicians characterise the female style in terms of emotion and ornamentation; the male in terms of abstract, modal rules (2008: 24). There is no space for further discussion of this here, but future cross-cultural comparison could shed light on the gendering of music in a variety of contexts.
This network of related oppositions demonstrates what Daniel Chandler calls ‘semiotic alignment’. Discussing ‘binary oppositions’ that ‘come to seem natural to members of a culture’ (2007: 93), he writes that the power of binary oppositions is enhanced when they are aligned with other such oppositions, so that ‘additional “vertical” relationships … acquire apparent links of their own’ (2007: 100). Thus in Figure 7, characteristics on each end of the spectrum cluster together vertically, implying relationships between, for example, femininity, marginality and emotional expression, on the one hand, and masculinity, prestige and discipline, on the other. Aspects of sound are fully a part of these clusters of ideas and are thoroughly embedded in the discursive world of North Indian classical music. In this case, binary oppositions that arise from gendered social norms are aligned with musical stylistic conventions. Each of these elements reinforces the others with which it is aligned, strengthening the sense that they somehow reflect the natural order, rather than a cultural fabrication.

Performativity offers a powerful explanation for how these semiotic alignments come into being and are sustained: how they come to seem, as Butler puts it ‘natural, original, inevitable’ (1999 [1990]: xxix). It highlights the power of repetition: the repeated reconfirmation, both in musical performance and discourse, of links between, on the one hand, particular musical practices and qualities and, on the other, sets of gendered and other associations, naturalises these links. For example in the case of dhrupad: repeatedly attending performances, probably by a man, of a style thought of as masculine, in which, by convention, the music has a ‘strict’ flavour, can suggest or confirm the sense of a natural link between masculinity and strictness. Or rather, in a more Butlerian framing, it is through repeated gender performances, including musical ones, that the categories ‘man’ and ‘masculine’ become intelligible at all, understood through linkages with other attributes. The link that emerges between masculinity and strictness is grounded in the sonic characteristics of dhrupad and in the fact that

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**Figure 7, connotations of North Indian classical vocal genres.**
strictness can be identified with particular musical techniques (e.g. not diverging from the rāg, rhythmic improvisation and avoiding certain ornaments). This has the power to affect the ways performers and listeners experience gender and contributes to the discursive frameworks within which they craft their own gendered identities.\(^\text{10}\)

North Indian classical music’s capacity to perform gender relies on the fact that most musicians and listeners understand successful performances to be authentic expressions of the performer’s inner life. This is revealed in musicians’ common insistence that if they do not feel the emotions of the music they are performing, then neither will their audiences, or in their frequent claims that it is impossible to sing thumrī properly without having experienced what it is like to fall in love. By and large, North Indian classical performers are not interpreted as acting out emotions, but rather as expressing them from within. Such performances, then, are a case of what Butler calls the ‘persistent impersonation that passes as the real’ (1999 [1990]: xxviii). This sense of naturalness is enhanced by music’s potent, affective nature. Listening to or performing music implicates individuals in an intimate, seemingly direct emotional experience, disguising the layers of discursive framing and learned cultural convention on which such experiences rely.

Music is also powerfully embodied. This is in part a consequence of how bodies are used in practising and performing music. In her article ‘The Ethnographer as Apprentice’, on embodiment and South Indian classical music, Amanda Weidman discusses the embodied behaviours that an individual learns incidentally, while learning music. She argues that these practices work to produce particular (gendered, classed, embodied) subjects, so that it might be possible to ‘link the learned bodily moves and sensibilities of an art from with the kinds of subjects they produce’ (2012: 215). Although she does not theorise this in terms of performativity, there are clear parallels with Butler’s model.

Musical embodiment, however, is not solely a matter of physical gestures and body language; it is also contingent on material aspects of musical sound, especially the voice. Numerous scholars, including Weidman herself, have stressed the capacity of voices to suggest qualities of the bodies which produce them (e.g. Barthes 1977; Jarman-Ivens 2011; Weidman 2003, 2012). As part of her application of performativity to music, Cusick explores how voices participate in the production of gendered bodies. She writes that although ‘we assume our voices to be among the inevitable consequences of biological sex’, in fact ‘all voices, but especially singing voices, perform the borders of the body’ (1999: 29). This relies on a performatory conception of the body: the principle that ‘the gendered body … has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality’ (Butler 1999 [1990]: 173). Just as theories of gender have highlighted how gendered bodies are enacted in performance and through discourse, so I suggest that performances of North Indian classical music contribute to the production not only of gender, but also of gendered bodies.

In North Indian classical music, the performing bodies of musicians are loaded with complex layers of significance (Clayton 2007; Leante 2009; Rahaim 2012). In the twentieth century, as we have seen, female performing bodies have been especially contentious. In the early decades of the twentieth century, formerly high-status courtesans came to be seen as disreputable. This produced what Margaret Walker describes as the ‘peeling apart of music and dance’. While many courtesans had both sung and danced, the vast majority of today’s professional performers specialise in only one or the other. As Walker notes, this is a result both of the stigmatisation of dance, increasingly associated

\(^{10}\) Although there is no space here to discuss the relationship between the models of gender that circulate around (and through) North Indian classical music and constructions of gender in South Asia more broadly, the performative model I am advocating suggests that musical performance is a powerful contributor to wider gender norms.
with prostitution, and also the nationalist appropriation of music; together, she writes, these factors produced a situation in which music became ‘disembodied’, while dance ‘was made solely responsible for the immorality associated with the performing arts’ (2004: 172-173; also Rao 1996: 284, 305). This disembodiment of music entailed a shift in gendered performativity. Through dancing, courtesans had invited the desiring male gaze, performing their bodies as not only gendered but also sexually available. By suppressing dance, female singers minimised audiences’ attention to their bodies, instead performing a different kind of embodied femininity: that associated with respectable, middle-class performers. In her rich analysis of the similar situation in South Indian classical music, Weidman describes this as the ‘performance of nonperformance’ (2003: 214).

Sonic aspects of performance, too, contribute to the gendered construction of performers’ bodies in North Indian classical music. There is, for example, a widespread discourse linking masculinity with the abdomen or stomach (as opposed to the throat) as a locus of voice production. Thus Wade both notes the common gendering of the singer Gangubai Hangal’s voice as ‘masculine’ and cites a description of her singing ‘so uninhibitedly that it almost hurt in the stomach’ (1984: 199). A similar idea emerges from Anuradha Raman’s obituary of Hangal, in which the embodiment of her voice provokes a bodily reaction in the listener: ‘That voice, so deep it seemed to rise from her abdomen and almost manly in tenor and authority, was enough to raise goose pimples’ (Outlook, 3rd August 2009).

Maciszewski notes that Hangal herself claimed that her low-pitched voice was a result of suffering from tonsillitis, after which she could no longer sing with the higher, feminine tone she had previously, and after which she ceased singing semi-classical genres in favour of an exclusive focus on _khyāl_. However, Maciszewski also identifies this downward shift in Hangal’s voice and her decision to sing only _khyāl_ with a successful strategy to distance herself from her courtesan background (1998: 351-2). Three forms of vocal embodiment are in play here: first, the problematically bodily, sensuous nature of courtesans’ performances, indexed sonically by ‘feminine’ voices singing semi-classical genres; second, the bodily vulnerability of voices, which can be irrevocably damaged by illness; and, third, the specifically masculine bodily disposition evoked by voices with a low pitch, conceived of in terms of voices produced in the stomach. I would suggest reading the change in Hangal’s voice as a substitution of the first kind of embodiment with the third (by means of the second), allowing Hangal to perform the prestigious, respectable body of a classical singer, as opposed to the dangerously female, disreputable body of a courtesan. Cusick has stressed the relationships between voices and the boundaries of the body (1999); in the case of Hangal, a change in pitch has the power of replacing a sexually available body with one that is not.

_Gamak_ too, that masculine ornament, often tends to be discussed with reference to the body. When Guha described _gamak_ to me, she both noted its masculinity and that it comes from the stomach. Likewise Tapasi Ghosh describes _gamak_ as masculine and gives it a similar bodily significance, writing that it entails ‘a type of deep voice production right from the navel’ (2008: 31, 154). Meanwhile, a contributor to an online forum provoked a lengthy debate by asking why female singers do not perform _gamaks_ as much as men and whether it is true that practising _gamak_ is bad for women’s voices (https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/rec.music.indian.classical/hfs4saWmDXE, accessed November 2013). As well as negotiating a link between one ornament and particular, gendered bodies, this discussion is also an instance of a wider discourse, common in discussions of North Indian classical music, which concerns the possibility of doing damage to one’s body by singing in the wrong way. In all of these instances, the use of one ornament suggests not only masculinity, but also a specifically masculine use of the body in singing.
The idea of performativity captures the interrelated nature of discourse, practice, embodiment and experience. I have suggested ways in which performing and listening to North Indian classical music, understood and experienced in its particular discursive environment, contributes to the social construction of gender and even of gendered bodies. This gendering is dependent on a variety of sonic features, including timbre and register but also, counterintuitively, seemingly arbitrary features such as types of ornamentation.\footnote{The relationship between Butler’s theories and biological differences between men and women is hotly contested (e.g. Butler’s comments at \url{http://www.theory.org.uk/but-int1.htm}, accessed February 2014). I do not wish to exclude partially biological or statistical accounts of some of the linkages I discuss here. Men’s speaking voices are often lower than women’s. I am grateful to Sarah Weiss for pointing out that men’s vocal cords are less suited to producing fast ornaments like murkī. Nevertheless, following Cusick (1999), I would argue that it is only through layers of largely invisible social construction that such facets become intelligible as characteristics of sexed bodies. Both men and women have to train for many years to produce the fastest nuances of North Indian classical music, whether in the form of the gendered ornament murkī or more gender-neutral virtuosic runs (tāns): these techniques do not come naturally to anyone, regardless of their gender.}

Music’s performative nature leads to various types of gender policing in discourse on North Indian classical music. As Butler argues, ‘what is … performed can only be understood by reference to what is barred from performance, what cannot or will not be performed’ (1997: 144). Thus one male khyāl singer with whom I spoke told me that ‘most women cannot do justice to … male-oriented rāgas because their [voices are] always on the trill, on the niceties of the rāgas’ and are ‘not broad enough’. He feels that while ‘the lighter rāgas are more suited to women’, ‘heavier rāgas’ such as rāg Dārbārī and those which require what he called ‘aggressive singing’ are not. When women attempt to perform these, he said, the results are ‘not that impressive’ (personal communication, 2010).

A form of gender policing is also in play when the critic Chandramohan Rao rebukes the singer Arati Ankalikar-Tikekar for departing from her previous Jaipur-gharānā style by including elements more typical of the Agra gharānā, a style whose key characteristics, as we have seen, include a sense of masculinity. Rao feels that the Agra-gharānā aspect of Ankalikar-Tikekar’s style ‘does not match her feminine voice’ and that she ‘sounds a bit rough and rugged as a result’ (Times of India, July 22\textsuperscript{nd} 1989). This is coupled with a criticism of her blurring of stylistic distinctions; in a typical display of suspicion towards singers who have trained in more than one gharānā, the reviewer describes her style as ‘a little from here, a little from here’, writing, ‘she is neither in Jaipur nor in Agra’.

Just as female singers attract criticism for singing in a masculine way, so the opposite is also true. The music connoisseur Kumar Prasad Mukherji, for example, writes disparagingly of those khyāl singers whose use of ornamentation displays the influence of semi-classical forms. His criticism is formulated in strongly gendered terms:

Khayal [style], of course, has been changing, as it must over the years, but my elders were lucky to have missed the invasion of Punjabi harkats [a semi-classical ornament] and murkees from the bazaars of Lahore and Peshawar, reserved earlier for their brand of thumris and ghazals by petty tawayefs [courtesans] (Mukherji 2006: 68).

Here, Mukherji explicitly links ‘harkats and murkees’ not only with semi-classical forms but also with female performers: specifically with disreputable, ‘petty’ courtesans who dwell in ‘bazaars’.

Musicians anticipate and attempt to avoid or respond to criticisms such as these in a variety of ways. In the final part of this paper, I will highlight the strategic musical and discursive negotiations through which one musician justifies and legitimates her deviations from gendered musical norms.
**Strategic negotiations**

Subhra Guha, like Ankalikar-Tikekar, is a female singer who has trained in the Agra gharānā. Perhaps Guha’s keen awareness of gender in music (revealed above) is a consequence of the unusual position in which she finds herself: although a woman, she belongs to a gharānā whose defining characteristic is masculinity. A variety of contradictory social pressures therefore act on Guha. There is considerable pressure for her to remain true to the stylistic heritage of her teachers and predecessors in the Agra gharānā: gharānā membership is the primary source of prestige for khyāl singers and, as we have seen, blurring between styles often attracts considerable disapproval from music critics and connoisseurs. Nevertheless, another set of pressures militate against non-normative gendered behaviour.

This places Guha in a discursive and musical minefield, which she navigates through a variety of strategies. For example, on her website she anticipates and immunises herself against gendered criticism of her khyāl style by owning up to its combination of masculine and feminine elements, and then painting this multi-faceted nature as an advantage:

> Though belonging to the Agra Gharana, which is synonymous with the prowess and masculinity of Aftab-e-Mousiqui Ustad Faiyaz Khan, what makes Guha's rendition style uniquely different is her mature juxtaposition of her feminine charm with masculine grandeur that's inherent in the Gharana ([http://www.subhraguha.net/profile.htm](http://www.subhraguha.net/profile.htm), accessed November 2013).

Guha thus evokes the sense of an all-encompassing khyāl style which is therefore superior to other styles (discussed above), while still both tying her style to that of her predecessors in the gharānā and also emphasising its femininity.

Another strategy she adopts is musical. She told me about this when I interviewed her in 2010. She said that the masculinity of her gharānā is a consequence of the typical way in which singers ‘produce the voice’. Demonstrating this, she sang a few very low phrases, using dhrupad vocables. She said that this masculine style is something ‘which I do not do, because I am a woman’. When I then asked precisely what it is that she does not do, she named the ornament gamak. Such a statement, referring to a particular, named musical feature, invites music analysis. In what follows, I will elucidate Guha’s use of gamak through a comparative musical analysis, comparing a performance by Guha of a khyāl in rāg Chāyānat (1992) with a performance of the same composition by Sharafat Hussain Khan (n.d.), a male singer also from the Agra gharānā.\(^\text{12}\)

My approach here, based on the transcription and analysis of recorded performances, has various limitations. Most of all, it ignores the visual and embodied aspects of performance that could have been studied using audio-visual analysis. Given the importance of gestures and comportment in the performance of gender, this would have been a valuable additional component in a study such as this. However, my focus here is on musical sound; in this case, even the audio alone is sufficient to be able to shed light on Guha’s musical style. Practical considerations also informed my decision to examine these two particular audio recordings: by analysing recordings which are easily accessible and in the public domain, my hope is that some readers will feel inclined to listen to the whole recordings themselves. In addition, by taking a limited, audio-only approach, part of my aim is to demonstrate...

\(^\text{12}\) Recordings of both of these performances are available online. See Discography for details.
the benefits of something which resembles ‘traditional’ musicological analysis for a discipline that is increasingly suspicious of transcription and analysis as a research tool.13

Like most North Indian classical ornaments, gamak takes various forms. In his comprehensive description of the musical devices of khyāl, Nicholas Magriel notes the variety of different types of gamak singers employ: these range from ‘loose-throated fluctuations of pitch’ which are ‘used to separate [repetitions of the same pitch]’ to ‘convulsive tonemes’, involving ‘rapid movements through large intervals’ (2013: 328-333). I will argue that both the amount and the type of gamak Guha uses differentiate her style from Khan’s, and contribute to Guha’s re-negotiation of the sonic performativity of the apparently masculine style she sings.

Figures 8, 10 and 12 are indicative of Guha’s approach to gamak at a few representative stages of her performance. Figures 9 and 11 come from equivalent points in Khan’s rendition. I have marked instances of gamak with boxed text on each transcription. In general, Guha makes far less use of gamak than Khan, although she does not omit the ornament altogether. Unlike Khan, she completely avoids those conspicuous instances of gamak that Magriel labels ‘convulsive tonemes’, which cover a very wide range and in which the underlying melody pitches are impossible to discern.

Figures 8 and 9 come from early on in each performance, where the performers are engaged primarily in the exposition of the rāg, the tempo is slow and the rhythmic density is still relatively low. While Guha does not employ gamak at this point in her performance, Khan does so frequently. Both in the passage transcribed here and in the surrounding passages, Khan frequently initiates phrases with a version of the melodic outline RGMP, heavily ornamented with gamak. The first and last instance of gamak marked on Figure 9 are examples of this. Also, both here and elsewhere in the performance, Khan makes ingenious use of rising scalar figures with repeated notes, where each repeated note is separated from the next with gamak. The second instance of gamak here is an example of this.

Although Guha also initiates many of her phrases with florid opening gambits (for example at B:4, C:2 and C:4, marked with circled numbers 1-3), these do not involve gamak. She does, however, make great use of another classical ornament: mīnd (glissando). I have marked each successive mīnd with the circled letters a to m in Figure 8. (In every case, mīnd is used to join a higher note to a note a third or fourth below it.) Note the craftsmanship with which Guha uses mīnd in this passage. On three occasions, for example, she uses mīnd to join S with P, always setting the lyrics ‘ṣu-’ (at letters b, e and h). Each time, this occurs at a different point in the metrical cycle, subtly altering the rhythmic feel on each repetition. Note also the parallelism Guha creates by using mīnd to link S with D at c and then, immediately afterwards, to link N with P (at d). By using the same technique to link these two successive sets of notes, she draws attention to the fact that the second is a transposed version of the first. (This same pattern occurs without mīnd in the first mātra [beat] of C:3.) Finally, note that the mīnd at j echoes the mīnd at i and that the music setting ‘jhage’ (including j) is a condensed version of that setting ‘jhage’ (including i). (These two mīnds in close proximity have a further sonic resonance with the mīnd at k.) In line with the heavy use of mīnd here, both instances of the mukhṛā (refrain) here are altered from their normal form so as to end with mīnd from P to G (g and m).

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13 Transcription and analysis is controversial in contemporary ethnomusicology and has been the subject of considerable debate in the discipline. The approach I propose here engages with this debate in two key ways: first, it represents a mode of analysis oriented towards answering social (rather than technical or music-theoretical) questions (as advocated by Solis [2012]); and, second, it brings analysis into conversation with ethnomgraphy, since the agenda for my analysis initially emerged from a conversation with the performer (following the compelling example set by Widdess [1994]). I revisit the question of analysis’ place in ethnomusicology in the Conclusion to this article.
Although mīnd, like gamak, has strongly classical associations (it is not customarily used in semi-classical forms), this ornament has the opposite aural effect from gamak: rather than separating notes, mīnd joins them together. Guha’s heavy use of mīnd in this performance is partly a consequence of the rāg she is singing: one of the key features of rāg Chāyānaṭi is a slide from P to R. By using mīnd to join together other pairs of notes, Guha thematises and elaborates on this feature, displaying a drive towards variation that is typical of North Indian classical improvisation. Nevertheless, the preponderance of mīnd in this performance is noteworthy, particularly if, as Wade has suggested, the Agra-gharānā style is characterised by a lack of mīnd (1984: 130). As can be seen in Figure 9, Khan’s use of mīnd in this performance is largely restricted to joining P with R, as the rāg demands. Examining other performances would reveal whether an unusually heavy use of mīnd is characteristic of Guha’s khvāl more generally; here, at least, Guha’s mīnd plays the role of a substitute for gamak, since it is an ornament which is equally classical but not strongly gendered.
Figure 8, Guha (1992), 03:45 to 05:36.
Figures 10 and 11 come towards the middle of each performance and demonstrate each singer’s approach to rhythmic improvisation (*bol bā́r*). As with the passages transcribed in Figures 8 and 9, there is a clear distinction in the amount of *gamak* the two singers employ here. Khan frequently uses *gamak* in the passage in Figure 11 and throughout the sections of his performance devoted to rhythmic play. Guha, meanwhile, hardly uses any *gamak* in such passages. Figure 10 is indicative: the only time *gamak* appears is one instance of very light *gamak* on repeated notes. Rather than use *gamak* in passages such as that in Figure 10, Guha articulates the separation between successive notes with semitone oscillations. See, for example, the way she uses *M̃* to separate the three successive instances of P setting ‘*jhanakā’* at the start of this extract. These are far too slow to count as *gamak*, but act as a kind of stretched-out *gamak*, separating repetitions of the same note. Guha uses semitone oscillations similarly throughout this extract.
The only time Guha does consistently use gamak is when she sings tāns (fast runs which characterise khyāl). Some degree of gamak is inevitable when singers perform tāns. As Magriel has noted (2013: 319), and as I have experienced in khyāl lessons, it is almost impossible to distinguish between each of the notes contained in between rapid scalar patterns without using some amount of gamak. However, in Guha’s performance this is always limited to the least extreme forms of gamak and never obscures the underlying melodic line. For example, Guha uses light gamak to articulate the tān-like run at the end of the passage transcribed in Figure 12. Here, the oscillation produced is small (often only spanning a semitone) and barely audible at full speed. Khan, on the other hand, typically uses
exceptionally wide gamak in his tāns, to great dramatic effect: frequently this is so extreme as to completely obscure the underlying pitches, something which never happens in Guha’s tāns. See, for example, Khan’s tāns from 12:27 to 12:54 or from 17:17 to 17:49.

In Guha’s performance, other typical Agra-gharānā features remain intact. For example, as one might expect from an Agra-gharānā performance, Guha makes liberal use of rhythmic play. I have already highlighted her ingenious rhythmic manipulation of the S-P contour in Figure 10, which is staggered against the underlying tāl. Similarly, note in Figure 10 the changing rhythmic placement of a P-R mīnd at the ends of successive phrases (labelled a to d) and also the pattern GRG-MGM- (marked with the circled numbers 1 to 3). (Modified versions of this occur before and afterwards, at 4 and 5.) The lyrics are also part of the complex rhythmic staggering of this passage. See, for example, the variety of different accentuations Guha gives to the word ‘saba’ (shown in boxes) at the beginning of this extract. It appears syncopated (the first and fifth times it occurs), with ‘sa’ as an upbeat to ‘ba’ (the second time), with both ‘sa’ and ‘ba’ on the beat (the third time) and with ‘saba’ as an upbeat to ‘lu’ (the fourth time). All of this occurs in the overall context of heightening rhythmic density, generating increasing excitement for listeners.

By singing in an Agra-gharānā style (for example with typical rhythmic play) but omitting more extreme types of gamak, Guha crafts a delicate musical compromise between the twin pressures to stay true to one’s gharānā heritage and also not to blur gender boundaries. In Gender Trouble, Butler highlights the potential for subversion inherent in her performative model of sex and gender, writing, for example, of a ‘kind of gender performance’ that might ‘enact and reveal the performativity of gender itself in a way that destabilizes that naturalized categories of identity and desire’ (1999 [1990]: 177). She views this as central to what feminism ought to be doing: she argues that ‘the critical task [for feminism] is … to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them’ (187-188). It is tempting to see Guha’s subtle negotiation of the gendered performativity of her khvāl style as one of Butler’s ‘local possibilities of intervention’. However, Guha’s performances are far from subversive in the way Butler describes. They make no overt challenge to gender norms; nor do they even significantly dispute the discourse on the importance of not straying from the musical style of one’s gharānā. Rather, they constitute a very slight deviation, as befits Guha’s position as a mainstream artist in a conservative musical tradition. This hints at the difficulty of escaping gender norms; although subversive practices do exist, subtle negotiations such as this are a much more common strategy for dealing with gendered restrictions.
Other singers face different sets of challenges and negotiate them in a variety of ways. Maciszewski (1998) details a number of such negotiations. She focuses on female musicians, including the female dhrupad singer Asgari Bai, the classical singer Girija Devi, as well as courtesans and former courtesans. Her work is primarily ethnographic and focuses on discursive negotiations; my aim here is to demonstrate how such work can be complemented by music analysis, revealing how gender is enacted in the sounds of North Indian classical music. In her PhD thesis (2013), Chloë Alaghband-Zadeh takes both music-analytical and ethnographic approaches in order to examine the interrelated discursive and musical negotiations that musicians carry out in relation to ṭhunrī. Many of these, like Guha’s, involve balancing the demands of gendered discourses with other discourses on music. Myriad other strategic discursive and musical negotiations of gender and North Indian classical music remain unexamined. These include the gendered strategies of male musicians, who have attracted far less scholarly attention than their female counterparts.

**Conclusion: gender and music analysis**

In this article, I have explored some of the ways in which the social production of gender interacts with music and discourses on music. After setting out a broad overview of the gendered landscape of North Indian classical vocal music, I suggested thinking of particular musical features as instances of sonic performativity and demonstrated how such features are implicated in musicians’ strategic negotiations with gendered norms. I focussed on only a small sampling of features of North Indian classical vocal performances, but it is worth noting that many others also carry gendered significance: these include certain improvisational strategies, vocal timbre and register, ways of using dynamics and approaches to musical structure. I restricted my study to contemporary North Indian classical music; I did not attempt a comprehensive historical genealogy of the gendered associations of North Indian classical music, although this would be a very valuable project. I left instrumental music completely unexamined. Nevertheless, I hope to have indicated possibilities for future, more detailed analyses of gender in North Indian classical music and to have demonstrated the richness of this area.

The picture of North Indian classical music that emerges from this research is of a highly complex musical and discursive field. In this field, gendered discourses intersect with those on genre and ornamentation; they also come into dialogue with yet other discourses on music, for example on the importance of staying true to one’s gharānā. These generate numerous, sometimes contradictory, sets of social pressures for musicians. And these different, interrelated discourses implicate musical sound in a variety of ways, touching on the specifics of musical features, structures and styles. Musicians (such as Guha) navigate this field strategically, not only through their statements about music, but also through their musical decisions. In doing so, they artfully negotiate with conventional understandings of the music they perform, in search of prestige and professional success. Aspects of musical sound, like discourse, can be oriented towards social aims; and sound, like other performative modes, is a medium through which musicians perform particular social identities. Seen in this light, nothing is ‘purely musical’ in North Indian classical music: its sounds are inescapably embedded in the social world.

This paper therefore suggests a position on the necessary relationship between close music analysis and ethnographically based studies of music and gender. On the one hand, I propose that ideas about gender are thoroughly implicated in North Indian classical style and should be central to its analysis; on the other hand, I suggest that only work which engages closely with the fine details of musical sound can fully account for gender in this context. For ethnomusicologists, I would argue, paying
close attention to musical nuances is a crucial step towards understanding the role music plays in wider social processes.

**Bibliography**


**Discography**


**Appendix: on notation**

I have transposed all examples so that the middle tonic is written as middle C. Accidentals apply only to the notes that they are beside. The metrical cycle (tāl) is shown using bar-lines and rehearsal letters. Each rehearsal letter indicates the position of the sam, the first beat of the metrical cycle. Each cycle consists of a number of vibhāgs, shown here as bars. Each vibhāg contains a number of mātras (beats), which I transcribe as crotchets in faster musical examples and as semibreves in slower examples. Dotted lines separate each mātra in these slower examples.

The scale degrees of Indian classical music are Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha and Ni, where Sa is the tonic, Re is the second scale degree etc. I refer to each scale degree by its initial letter, so that Sa becomes S etc. In their natural (śuddh) form, these are the scale degrees of the major scale. If they are flattened (kosal), then they are underlined: kosal Ni is written N. Only Ma can be sharpened (tivra Ma): this is written M. Notes in the uppermost octave have a dot above the letter (e.g. Š); notes in the bottom octave, a dot below (e.g. Ń).