LEARNING KHAYAL: NOTES ON BEING-WITH

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In classical Indian music the question of consciousness and the nature of becoming *in and with* vocal performance is an enduring one, springing from ancient philosophical thought (Clarke and Kini 2011, 136). I trained in classical Indian vocal music genres, among them, khayal, for several years as a child, a teenager, and on and off into my early twenties. A long stint in humanities departments in the Western academy followed (with very little opportunity for vocal practice); and here I am now, navigating this institution's persistent severance of knowledge from bodily experience. Early in 2020, in the midst of a different writing project, I was searching Deleuze, Marx, and others, struggling to find the words to express "relation" and "becoming" in art. I had long buried the embodied knowing that singing khayal itself might be a subtle teacher in this pursuit; that is, until the pandemic hit. Confined to my Brooklyn apartment, I yearned for an expansive daily practice and and decided to return to khayal lessons, this time online. I was fortunate enough to find the wonderful Pune-based guru Priyadarshini Kulkarni to take me on as a student. And so, every Friday morning I sang khayal on Zoom, with the iTablaPro App providing a steady drone, my consciousness "colored" intricately by this form of raga music.[1] In khayal, I also began to experience with new ears, philosophy and music resonating and mutually transforming one another. Here, "audible sound [became] a means of knowledge because of its ability to reveal the inaudible" (Rowell 1992, 38, as quoted in Clarke and Kini 2011, 146).

What follows is,

> an autoethnographic fragment,[2]
>
> a vocalist's journal,
>
> (a record of) an instance of pedagogical transmission,
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> a contemplative riff on singing khayal, reading philosophy, and writing "becoming" and "relation."

The khayal genre of North Indian classical vocal music assumed its contemporary form in the 1700s. Its name derives from an Arabic-Persian word meaning "imagination" (Wade 1973, 446). Drawing from both Indic and Persian forms, the khayal is modal and monophonic. The "musical materials" that make up khayal include: raga, or a framework of melodic rules; tala, or meter; and chiz, the composition (Wade 1997, 11). What differentiates khayal from the related dhrupad form is the infinite possibility for improvisation that it allows for within the boundaries of any given raga; and so its name, "imagination." While dhrupad, considered the most classical of vocal genres of North Indian music, has been discursively coded as "masculine," khayal is fluid and mobile, and can take on both masculine and feminine aspects, depending on context (Alaghband-Zadeh 2015, 350).

A khayal repertoire consists of short songs in Hindi or Urdu on the themes of romantic or divine love, separation, the change of seasons, or the liminal states of dawn and dusk (Bagchee 1998). The singer is usually accompanied by the drone of a tanpura, a harmonium, tabla, and a sarangi. The pleasure of both singing and listening to khayal lies in following this form's exploration of the limits of possibility of the raga. A skilled singer improvises alongside, teases, or adopts an errant posture with respect to the raga's melodic rules.

Notes from my improvisation journal:

> When you learn khayal from a guru, you neither understand nor forget, you travel.

> This form of singing was never traditionally written and while it has been notated over the past century, it is impossible to contain the expansiveness of khayal in writing.

> Because of the weight on improvisation, no two renditions of the "same" khayal song will be identical.

> When I sing khayal, it is not only a retrieval of the past, a memory of my lessons, but more; it is imagination, and the present.

> Can a khayal be tethered to its origin? No. It tampers with authority.

According to scholar Bonnie Wade, while lore has long held that the form was created by the poet Amir Khusrau (1253–1325) in the Delhi Sultanate, some musicologists offer evidence that khayal truly flourished in the following century with the last Sultans of Jaunpur; still others trace its provenance and evolution to Khilji and Tughlaq kings who patronized musical innovation in the Indo-Persian tradition (Wade 1997, 1). While the 13th and 14th centuries did see an accelerated mixing of Indic, Perso-Arabic, and Turkic-Irani musical systems, most recent scholarship suggests that khayal developed two centuries later, within Delhi's Sufi sama ("listening") gatherings, steeped as this milieu was in histories of sonic intermingling, including the influences of devotional Hindu Bhakti songs as well as folk and courtly genres (Brown [Schofield] 2010, 187–8).

This morning, my guru teaches me a bandish in Raga Bhupali. A single-phrase lyric in which a despairing poet asks a traveler to bring her news of her beloved:

> Ja ja ja re pathikwa...

This hundreds year-old composition is sung differently each time a khayaliya imagines it into existence, while still bearing the traces of an embodied pedagogical lineage—my teacher, and hers before, and others before that. As I sing this khayal, I understand again a refrain from another dynamic text, "what is it you were doing in the ancient gardens, 300 years ago"? (Khoury 1989, 45).

To warm up my voice, I use long swaras (notes), with each swara residing in a specific position of the scale. And yet, what happens in between and within the swara, the manner in which each is connected to another and elaborated, is more significant (Bor 2002, vii). Singing khayal is a lesson in being-with.

A swara is defined in relation with other notes in the raga. But an Other note is never to be found merely separate from or outside of a particular swara. "Inflections," "slides," "ornaments," "oscillations," "shakes," are just some of the names given to these relations between and within swaras (Bor 2002, viii). "For it is always over there, in between, within, that the Other becomes a nameable reality" (Trinh 1996, 7).

> As I sing, new ways of finding a swara-in-relation spiritedly unsettle, rather than simply negate, traces of previous vocal leaps.
>
> An especially virtuosic khayaliya sings at the edge of a raga, pushing the raga to the point where the singer and the listener are aware of its limits.
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> I sing khayal and I am aware of the instance of its production and consumption. My performance is a politics of the now. (But the now does not equal merely the present).
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> The singer has a relationship of infinity with khayal.
>
> The listener has a relationship of infinity with khayal.
>
> Khayal presents mobile and embodied concepts for being-with, being-nearby, becoming-multiple, becoming-fanciful.
>
> Ja ja ja re pathikwa—go, traveler, bring some news from abroad.

Notes

[1] A raga is a tonal framework for composition. Joep Bor (2002) notes the features particular to each raga include fixed scales, order and hierarchy of notes, techniques of intonation and ornamentation, duration, strength, and approach. Most significant is the mood of the raga. As such, Bor concludes, "the association of a particular raga with a specific emotional state, a season or time of day, though intangible, is as relevant as its melodic structure." Clarke and Kini (2011) describe a raga as a "particular coloration of consciousness" and consequently, a raga is "achieved when that state of consciousness is attained" (140).

[2] For more autoethnographic writing on intersubjectivity in the context of classical Indian music vocal performance see Mani 2017. For more on classical Indian music communities online and affective communities amongst the South Asian diaspora, see Hornabrook 2017.

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Biography

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