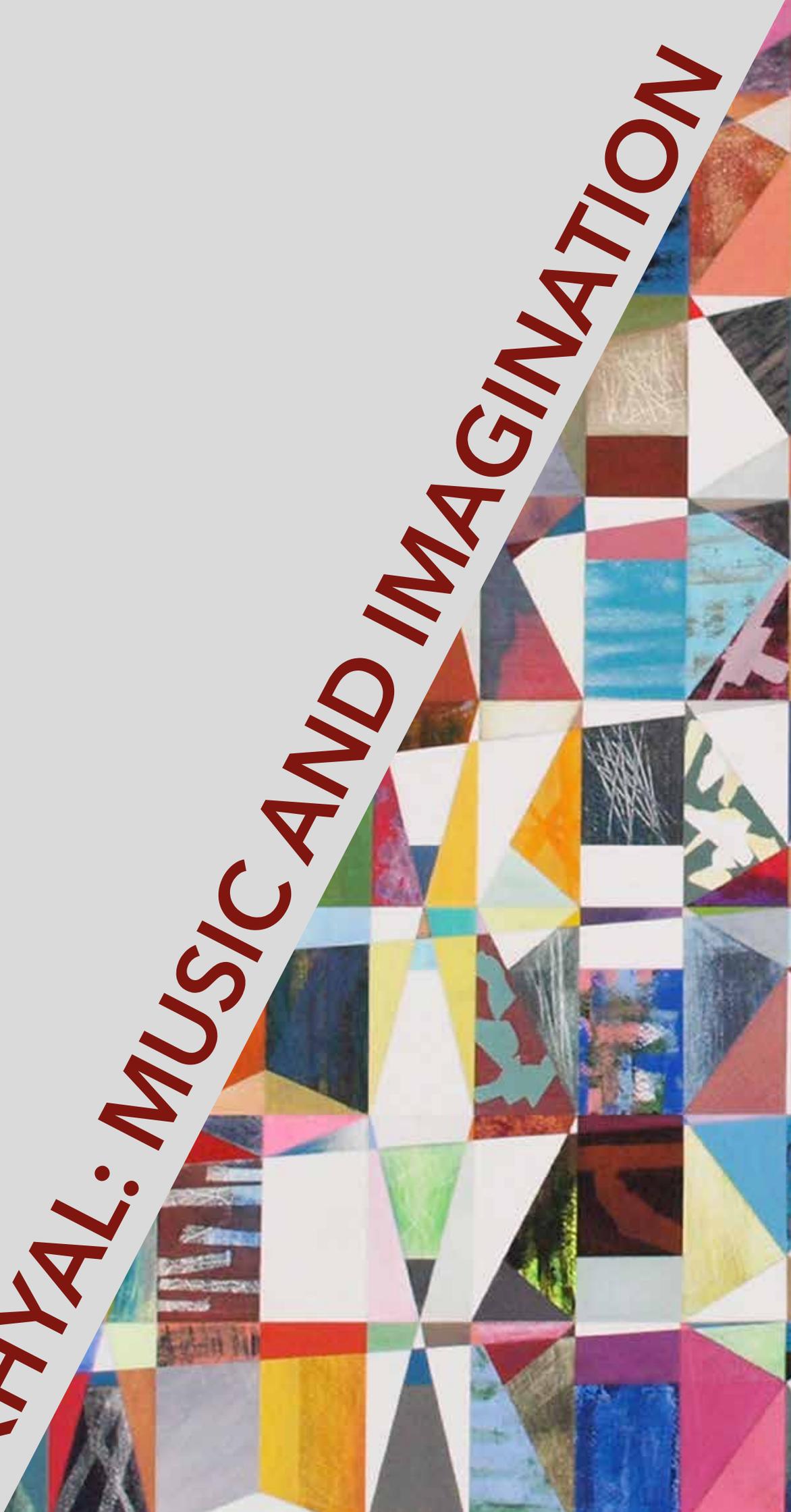


# ***KHYAL: MUSIC AND IMAGINATION***



# **Khyal: Music and Imagination**

*edited by Martin Clayton and Laura Leante*

Durham University  
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**[www.durham.ac.uk/music/khyal](http://www.durham.ac.uk/music/khyal)**

Cover artwork: Khyal – Combined Strengths, © Theresa Poulton, 2016, acrylic and  
pencil on paper (detail).

Facing: Veena Sahasrabuddhe's photograph by Neela Kapadia.





*In memory of Veena Sahasrabudde (1948-2016)*



## Khyal: Music and Imagination

Martin Clayton and Laura Leante

There is no shortage of visual representations of music to be found in South Asian cultures. Ancient statues and temple bas reliefs, medieval miniature paintings, and contemporary iconography of many kinds depict musicians – divine, celestial and human – and their instruments. The genre of miniature painting called the *ragamala*, the garland of *ragas*, even depicts the music's melodic modes, offering a unique visual response to the possibilities of sonic art.<sup>1</sup> The *Khyal: Music and Imagination* project, however, does not approach the confluence of music and visual art primarily from the perspective of art history, or from the study of religious or court iconography. Rather, it has developed from our emerging understanding of the visual imagination of musicians and listeners in the twenty-first century.

From our musicological perspective, we have sought to deepen our understanding of Hindustani, or North Indian, *raga* music – the tradition that in the twentieth century in particular introduced the world to the sounds of the sitar and the tabla, a great deal of finely crafted and deeply affecting music and some unfortunate clichés about Indian culture. Our focus has been primarily on the music *as performed*, indeed on the moment of performance. Who makes this music, who listens to it, and how do musicians and listeners alike make sense of it? What goes on in performance, and how is the gradual, extempore unfolding of a *raga* conceived? How do the members of an ensemble work together? How important are the words? (Clayton 2005; Clayton and Leante 2013, 2015)

A number of ideas have crystallised in the course of this work, thanks mainly to the openness and friendship of many fine musicians, and their willingness to explain their relationship to the music as profoundly as it can be expressed verbally. Behind the commonplaces – the simple association between a *raga* and a time of day, a season, or a particular deity that are routinely repeated – we found an enormous wealth of images, stories and metaphors that musicians develop individually and draw on to help guide their performances. They

described characters in many and varied situations, and depicted landscapes and buildings; they evoked vivid splashes of colour or fine linear designs that they drew with their hands in space (Leante 2009, 2014; Clayton and Leante 2013). More diverse still were the images reported to us by large numbers of mostly untrained listeners (Leante 2013). In the listeners' case these images were largely *ad hoc* responses to a musical extract – whereas those of musicians, although personal, may be stable over a long period of time – but they were no less fascinating for that.

What struck us just as forcefully as this richness of image and metaphor was the reaction of many musicians and listeners at being asked about such things. Many musicians told us it was the first time anyone had asked them what they, personally, felt about the *ragas* they performed. Lay listeners felt liberated by the idea that their untrained responses to music were valued. The consistent story was of the importance of movement, line, and colour as well as image, place and narrative. The details of which figure is being imagined, or which colours splashed, are transmitted from musician to listener very imperfectly if at all, of course – musical sound is not an efficient way to communicate such things – but that is not the point. Everyone involved, from performer to listener, may be engaged in a deeply imaginative, creative, multimodal experience.

We are often invited to introduce people to this music for the first time, particularly university students or school children whom we encounter in workshop situations, and we felt that our research presented an opportunity. Could new listeners be engaged with this music more easily, if instead of beginning with the rudimentary Sa, Re, Ga, Ma we introduced them to musical representations of dancing characters, rivers and mountains, or abstract designs? How would schoolchildren who have never engaged with anything remotely similar, either musically or visually, respond to this? What if we engaged visual artists with musicians and asked the former to respond to the music – not as a set of

clichés or an exotic surface, but as the sonic manifestation of a rich and multidimensional imagination? What might the artistic result of such a process be?

Meeting Adinda van 't Klooster in 2014 and experiencing her work on another musical project, *Affect Formations* ([www.affectformations.net](http://www.affectformations.net)), kicked off conversations that made all of these things seem possible; discussing them with our partners at GemArts convinced us that we could make it work. We decided to focus our work on the most popular classical genre in India, *khyal*, which seemed appropriate not only because we knew and had recorded many fine performers, but also for the association of the name: *imagination*. As a pilot, Adinda created a new artwork in response to Veena Sahasraduddhe's sublime performance of Shree Rag, which helped us to secure funds from the Arts and Humanities Research Council. And so the project *Khyal: Music and Imagination* was born.

The outline of the project activities has been as follows. We identified three visual artists (adding Theresa Poulton and Mahjabin Imam Majumdar to Adinda van 't Klooster), and three *khyal* singers with whom we had worked previously (Sudokshina Chatterjee, Ranjani Ramachandran and Surashree Ulhas Joshi) (figures 1, 2 and 3). All six spent time together in Durham with us, recordings were shared and many discussions held (and, thanks also

to the Charles Wallace Trust, Durham University's MUSICON Concert Series, and St Chad's College, performers sang and recorded new pieces in concert). The three visual artists then worked on original artworks inspired not just by the musical sound but by what they had discussed with the singers, with the aim of displaying the work at the Laing Gallery in Newcastle in November 2016, then at Durham's Oriental Museum, and possibly other locations in the future. These commissioned artworks would be presented alongside recordings of the music that had helped to inspire them.

While the professional artists were working on their commissions, GemArts helped us to organise two school workshops that were delivered jointly by a musicologist and a visual artist in the North East of England. This was conceived from the outset as a crucial moment of our project: the development of new forms of creative interdisciplinary engagement had to include collaboration with teachers and young people. The decision to represent the children's work reflects the importance of this part of the project, and is a testament to its success.

The last major element of the project was the development of an interactive iPad app. In this app, developed with Komodo Digital, video recordings of complete *raga* performances by Sudokshina Chatterjee and a fourth singer to join the project,



**Figure 1: Sudokshina Chatterjee (centre) performing in Durham (2 March 2016) accompanied by Gurdain Rayatt on tabla (left) and Kaviraj Singh Dhadyalla on harmonium (right). Photograph by Simone Tarsitani.**

Atul Khandekar, are presented. We used the multitrack audio recordings we had originally made for research purposes, but which we wanted to make available to the wider public through an interactive tool. These recordings were used not only to produce a fine stereo mix (thanks to project research technician Simone Tarsitani, who recorded many of the pieces used in the project), but also to create the possibility for users to mix the sounds as they wished. Listeners unfamiliar to a new genre of music often find it challenging to separate the different sounds and understand their different contributions. In this case the voice, tabla, harmonium and tanpura sounds can be isolated and hence – we hope – more quickly and better understood. We also decided to add a set of explanatory texts to the app, and mark up a number of key points in each performance with explanations, so that users who wish to learn more about the technicalities of the music have an engaging way of doing so. This app was developed alongside the other elements of the project with a view to being included in the exhibition alongside the visual art.

In the following pages we have tried to offer a snapshot of some of the many perspectives that converged in our *Khyal* project. We hope these contributions will give the reader an idea of the many voices and approaches the project has brought together. Similarly, we have tried to represent the various ways team members have interacted, by presenting texts in different formats – essays and dialogues.

For more information about the project and North Indian music research at Durham University, visit

[www.durham.ac.uk/music/khyal](http://www.durham.ac.uk/music/khyal)



**Figure 2: Ranjani Ramachandran. Photograph by Arnab Ghosal.**

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Ebeling (1973), Powers (1980), Waldschmidt and Leonore (1967, 1975).

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**Figure 3: Surashree Ulhas Joshi performing in Durham (2 March 2016). Photograph by Simone Tarsitani.**

## Drawing *Shree* and animating *Bihag*

Adinda van 't Klooster

Visually expressing music has a long tradition as an artistic pursuit. In India from the late 1400s, *ragamala* (“garland of *ragas*”) paintings were made to portray many different *ragas*. Each painting also came with a brief description (or poem) of the mood of the *raga*.<sup>1</sup> This practice continued for four hundred years and went through different phases: the idea that *ragas* can be represented visually persists to this day.

There is no equivalent in the history of Western art of such a sustained practice of visualizing music. Whilst there are ample examples in Western art where music is used as a theme or inspiration in painting (Coleman 2015) it wasn't until twentieth century abstract art that painters like Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee took music as a central subject matter (Düchting 2012, Kandinsky 1977). Kandinsky wrote extensively on music in his book *On the Spiritual In Art*, where he states:

A painter, who finds no satisfaction in mere representation, however artistic, in his longing to express his inner life, cannot but envy the ease with which music, the most non-material of the arts today, achieves this end. He naturally seeks to apply the methods of music to his own art. And from this results that modern desire for rhythm in painting, for mathematical, abstract construction, for repeated notes of colour, for setting colour in motion (1977: 24).

This is not to say that there were no sustained ventures in bringing music and visuals together in live events. As examples from Castel's colour organs of the eighteenth century<sup>2</sup> to twentieth century electronic colour organs illustrate, the fascination with how music might translate into visuals has concerned inventors, musicians and artists alike over a long period.

Experimental filmmakers such as Norman McLaren, Oskar Fischinger and Len Lye scratched

directly onto filmstrip to create abstract animations, sometimes to pre-existing music and sometimes to create both image and sound simultaneously. Joint generation is seen in McLaren's famous short films *Dots* and *Loops* (1940). Examples of animations made to pre-existing music are Fischinger's *An Optical Poem* (1938), which is based on Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody No.2*, and McLaren's *Pas de Deux* (1968).

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has brought forth various digital ways of translating music or sound into imagery,<sup>3</sup> though most of these systems are based on the Western chromatic scale.

The practice of creating graphical scores (for example in works of Obukhov, Cardew, Bussotti, and Molitor) has existed alongside previously mentioned approaches and was undertaken by both composers and artists, but stands slightly aside. There the visuals instigate the music rather than the other way round.

For the *Khyal: Music and Imagination* project, the idea was to get three contemporary artists to visualize a selection of Indian *ragas*. As a named researcher on this project I worked with two *ragas*.

### Shree Raga

For the pilot project I worked on an extract of the *Shree Raga* performed by *khyal* artist Veena Sahasrabuddhe in 2003. Along with the video and audio recordings, I was given a copy of an interview in which the singer discusses the *raga*,<sup>4</sup> and two essays by Laura Leante, one focussing on a comparative discussion of how Indian audiences visualize a vocal performance of *Shree Raga* versus a sitar rendition of *Raga Jhinjhoti* (Leante 2013), and one discussing the embodiment of movement and imagery associated to *Shree Raga* by Indian musicians (Leante 2009). Prior to making the artwork I read the articles so I already had plenty of information to help contextualize the otherwise unfamiliar music.

The total duration of the performance used is



Figure 4: *Shree*, ink on paper, © Adinda van 't Klooster, 2015. Photograph by Simone Tarsitani.

forty-six minutes. It includes a long unmetred introduction (called *alap*) followed by a sequence of three compositions with tabla accompaniment, each faster than the last. As I looped the full recording whilst drawing in my studio, all these sections found their way into the artwork (figure 4). *Shree* is an evening *raga* meant to be performed at sunset. The slow part seems to loop with minimal changes and is both evocative and meditative. The *raga* seems infused with a great longing that never becomes sad, as though it is known that this yearning will eventually be fulfilled, like the craving for a glass of water on a hot day. Both musicians and audience reported associations with the sunset for this *raga* (Leante 2009, 2013) and I concur that this association is palpable in the music even for someone with no previous exposure to *khyal*. In this vein, the colours used in the painting aim to further accentuate the mood and atmosphere of the song.

According to Veena Sahasrabudhe this *raga* is

associated with “a strong character, someone who has tried things and knows who he is”.<sup>5</sup> Other Indian musicians report the association with a royal figure of authority (Leante 2009), whilst audience members more frequently report religious associations (Leante 2013). Whilst I could relate to the meditative nature of the music, I didn’t feel it related to royalty. However, I was struck by Veena Sahasrabudhe’s wording of the strength of character of the *raga* and this could have influenced the choosing of a strong central shape in the composition of the drawing. The Indian tradition refers to this *raga* as male but I must confess I find Veena Sahasrabudhe’s rendition much more female than male. This may however be because I associate “someone of strong character” predominantly with the female.

The primary repeating melodic phrase of the *raga* (an ascending slide) is visualised by the central abstract shape; thus the idea of reaching out in longing is visualised in an abstract way, similar to

how in the video footage of the interview Veena's hand reaches up when this melodic phrase is repeated. The melismatic way of singing in the faster parts is further visualised in the painting's waves, the curviness of the central shape and the zigzag treatment of the black lines.

### Raga Bihag

The second artwork was made in response to the concluding part of another evening *raga*: Bihag. This time I was given a ten-minute excerpt, sung by Sudokshina Chatterjee in 2006, of which three minutes were used. I first listened to the recording at home without knowing anything about the *raga*; it felt very upbeat and more contemporary than the Shree Raga previously used. I started dancing to it with my baby daughter and by the end of it she shrieked with laughter. Not long after I met Sudokshina in person and she told me Bihag is an evening *raga* sung by a female lover who is waiting for her beloved who is not coming, causing her sleepless nights. Although Sudokshina was taught that the overriding emotion attached to the *raga* is one of pathos, she said in the recording used here she focussed on the happy side of the story: that of loving and longing. Although the desire and impatience with the waiting is palpable in the music, it doesn't develop into pathos.

When I asked Sudokshina in 2016 to give the *raga* a colour she likened it to the colour of port wine.<sup>6</sup> Sudokshina has known the *raga* for twenty-five years, and her relationship to it has changed a lot in this period. In an interview from 2006 she said:

When I perform Bihag.... I try to imagine that I'm in Vrindavan and I can see Lord Krishna and Radha [are] there...throwing colours at each other. (Sudokshina Chatterjee, cit. in Leante 2014: 148)

I wasn't aware of this quote until I had reached the final stages of production of the animation I had set out to create in response to the *raga*, but nevertheless there is an intentional light-heartedness in the visuals. This is in response to Sudokshina's rhythmic play, and the way she improvises on the notes of the Indian scale

(Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha, Ni), which are sung in rapid succession in shifting orders creating nonsense in terms of language whilst allowing for vivacious improvisation. I decided to emphasize this playfulness of Sudokshina's rendition of the *raga*. With *Bihag*, the creative methodology was different from the approach used with *Shree* as this time I didn't suffuse myself with information on the *raga* before I started sketching and developing ideas. The only further information that filtered into the creative process, apart from the meeting with Sudokshina and the other musicians as part of the project, was a video excerpt of Sudokshina performing the *raga* in India. This recording shows her in front of a flowery drape that gave me the idea to use video myself for the artwork, as this could be projected behind the singer when performing this *raga* in the future. For this reason there is no intention of a perfect synchronisation between the visuals and the audio recording, as each performance of the *raga* will be slightly different and the visuals need to work each time.

The animation doesn't focus on the love story behind the *raga* although the petals are a little tongue-like, alluding more subtly to the carnal side of love. For the rest, I wanted my own imagination to respond to the music (figure 5). As *ragas* are often compared to a character, I chose to incorporate character animation into the video. Although this *raga* is traditionally supposed to be of a female character, the character in the *Bihag* animation has no overt gender and is rather a cross between a human, a flower and an insect. To deviate from traditional cartoon-like animation, the eyes that are normally central in character animation have been omitted, and instead of inhabiting a landscape this creature is surrounded by digitised ink drawings made in response to the music. Some of these drawings are animated and overlaid on the 3D computer animation. This creates mesmerizing patterns of movement that mirror the playfulness of rhythm changes in the music (figure 6).

Projecting further into the future, it would be interesting to develop software that could generate visuals to different *ragas* on the fly. With extensive reiterative design, each output could be directly related to the musical structure of each *raga*. Autonomous

performance of such a system would involve cutting edge research into the emotional expression of Indian classical music, and a how this could translate into meaningful and expressive imagery.

<sup>3</sup> A number of software-based examples are described in van 't Klooster (2012: 173-176).

<sup>4</sup> Unpublished interview with Martin Clayton (Mumbai, 12 April 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Sudokshina Chatterjee, personal communication (Durham, 3 March 2016).

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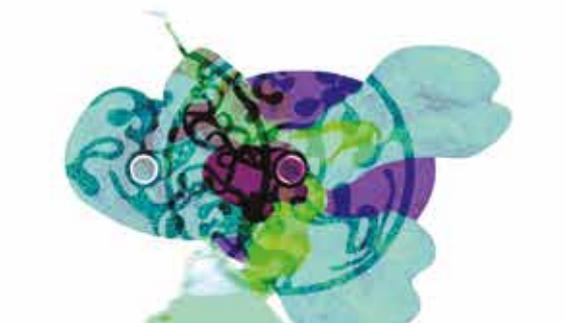
<sup>1</sup> See for example Ebeling (1973), and Dulwich Picture Gallery (2012).

<sup>2</sup> Castel's colour organs were keyboards that raised pieces of coloured paper in front of candles when a particular key was hit (Peel 2006).

**(Facing) Figure 6: Video Stills, *Bihag*, animation, © Adinda van 't Klooster, 2016.**



**Figure 5: Video Still, *Bihag*, animation, © Adinda van 't Klooster, 2016.**



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## A conversation with visual artist Theresa Poulton

*Musicologist Laura Leante interviewed visual artist Theresa Poulton about her involvement in the project, for which Theresa created two complementary works, Khyal - Past, Present and Future and Khyal - Combined Strengths (figure 7), inspired by a rendition of Raga Rageshree by khyal singer Surashree Ulhas Joshi and by her relationship with the performer.<sup>1</sup>*

**Laura Leante:** What was your impression of the music when you first listened to it, before you met Surashree?

**Theresa Poulton:** For me, looking back over the project, that was the most important part of it. I knew what *khyal* was, but when I listened to the audio file, there was music, there were sounds, and there was voice I was not familiar with at all. So I thought “I’ve got to keep playing it: at different times of the day, when I am in different moods: to

see how I feel, and whether I get anything different from it”. Based on the audio file alone, I was struggling a little bit. I’d never worked in that way before.

**LL:** At that point, were you developing any image or idea?

**TP:** Possibly colour more than anything, which is the way I work. I’m an abstract artist, so it’s not figurative. I was focusing on the music, a genre of music I certainly wasn’t familiar with, even though I’d been in India. I had nothing to compare it to, either, but maybe that was good: it was just a total blank canvas for me.

**LL:** I would like to ask you more about your creative process: when you talk about colour, do you mean that at this early stage you were able to pinpoint particular colours, or was it something much less defined?



**Figure 7:** *Khyal - Past, Present and Future* (left) and *Khyal - Combined Strengths* (right), © Theresa Poulton, 2016, acrylic and pencil on paper.

**TP:** It was less defined. It was a riot of colour, lots of colours. But then when I started listening to the music over and over again, I started moving to it. And you know, there was melancholy, gentleness. There were pitches that were higher and lower: at times there were soft, gentle, muted tones; then, as the pitch and the rhythm changed, my movement changed too; gesturally I became more animated and the colours I imagined became stronger, more opaque. When the music sounded gentle and soft and there were longer notes, then the colour was very delicate and more translucent. That's the way the colours were changing with the sound, because not knowing the language, I didn't know what the lyrics meant. It was colour and movement, and strength of colour, depths of colour.

**LL:** How much of these initial images, colours and textures is retained in the final work?

**TP:** Part of the work is exactly the same as how I initially imagined it, but the colours I saw at the beginning have been exaggerated or enhanced by the other experiences of meeting Surashree and learning about this music, and seeing Surashree performing live in a concert.

**LL:** You met Surashree after listening to the music: what were your thoughts listening to Surashree's perspective on this music?

**TP:** Well, it was very black and white. Which is interesting, because that does link into the work as well. Surashree didn't elaborate on the emotive side of *khyal* performance or that particular performance I was working on. She told me the title of the composition and what it was about.

What I found interesting was how the music is built of rhythmic cycles and that Rageshree is an evening *raga*. So, immediately, the colour started to evolve. Because although I had a colour palette imagined in *my* head, having experienced India in the evening, I started relating to Surashree's explanation of the *raga* and to my travel to India. And that links directly to the colour, and it's the development within the work. Then meeting Surashree, the discovery through you of what *khyal* is: all of those things were coming together within the work.

As for my own experience of India, I don't see that as a negative, I saw it as a positive.

**LL:** We have talked about the development of the artwork and its colours. What about its shape, the triangle?

**TP:** The triangle is symbolic, but in this work this is not meant as a religious reference.

There are two triangles, as well: what I found is that it was constantly a combination between Surashree and myself. Surashree was the *khyal* performer, I was the visual artist: we were coming together. The two triangles are not separate: it's two pieces that form one work - it's like *yin* and *yang*, and it's her and it's me.

The triangle is symbolic of femininity and that is obviously Surashree and myself. In the triangle that points up, the base represents stability and strength, and I could see that Surashree is a very strong young lady: that stability relates to Surashree as a person, as a musician, as a performer. And I guess the relationship between the two triangles represents the relationship between her and me in the project.

The three sides of the triangle also represent past, present and future. Surashree told me how she became a *khyal* performer, and the relationship with her and the history of *khyal*: that's obviously the past that informs her music. The present was the moment I met her, and I was now part of her present within the project. And then obviously when we met we didn't know what the future would hold; but the work was going to be part of the future.

When I met Surashree the work was being thought about: it was important meeting her, it certainly shaped the artwork.

**LL:** Can you tell me more about the shapes, the details within the triangles?

**TP:** It's "khyal": it's not important if the viewer sees it or not, but the catalyst for the work for me, was the word "khyal". This relates to my imagination and how I work as a hard-edged geometric artist. So the word k-h-y-a-l forms a series of geometric shapes: what I see immediately is the lines on white paper or a white background, and how they join together.

**LL:** So the smaller shapes come from letters...

**TP:** I ended up, for my final work, with the

triangles: within the triangular boundaries there is the word “khyal” repeated over and over again: because I couldn’t get that out of my mind. That was embedded in my mind at the time. But it mirrors and it flips. It’s five equal forms.

What artists choose to show is usually what they think is the best piece, but there are other experiences that lead to that. The studies I’m sharing with you are works in their own right, and are telling you about my journey (figures 8, 9 and 10).

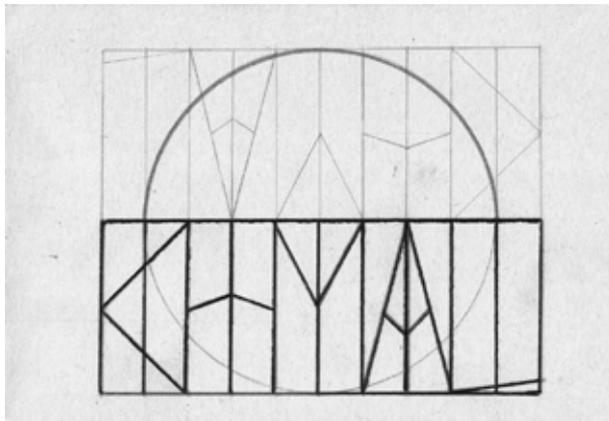


Figure 8: Study, © Theresa Poulton, 2016.

“Khyal, khyal, khyal”: I can’t emphasise enough the importance that word has for me within this project. But each section then had to represent something else, and how do I do that? Through colour and my imagination.

When Surashree talked about the *raga* being an evening *raga*, I pictured a journey that I was on in India, a seventeen-hour journey on a train. It was evening, I was looking through the window. The window had a filter, a film that distorted the colour beyond and I was watching how things changed and how the colour changed. But the colours were filtered. So within my work, the strong, opaque, flat colour relates to strength. It’s Surashree, but it’s me as well. Where the colours are more translucent it’s almost like looking through that window.

**LL:** You said that the creative process you experienced within this project is ongoing. In what way has this affected you as an artist?

**TP:** I would hate to think that that’s it. It’s *not*, because I could show you a whole series of works that I’ve done since. I’ve revisited works in my studio and changed them.

**LL:** So are you talking about works that you did earlier?

**TP:** Yes, works that have nothing to do with the *Khyal* project. However, the *khyal* is now within the other works. It’s been introduced – should we say – into former works. It changes, my work always does.

You know, there is something that we discuss in art, and it’s “concept or outcome: which is the most important”? And really this was quite strong within this work. There *has* to be a concept and I’ve now found what the outcome for the exhibitions is. But for me the thought process, the involvement with *khyal* hasn’t stopped. This is the exciting part as well for me.

**LL:** This was the first time that you worked with music, if I remember well.

**TP:** The first time I’ve ever worked with music. And I’ve got to be honest I did panic. Plus there was a timescale and when you’re making an artwork you don’t know how long it’s going to take. So there’s quite a lot of work.

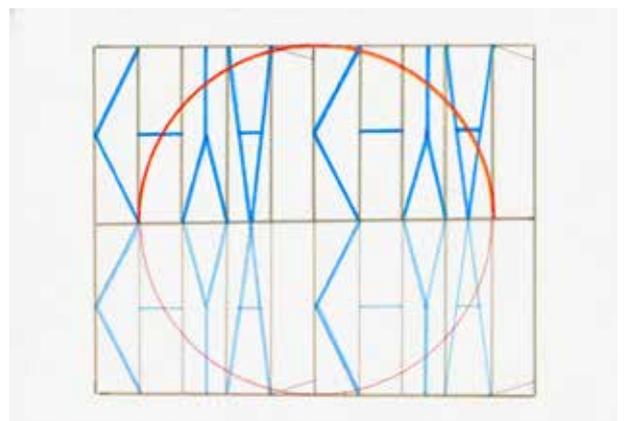
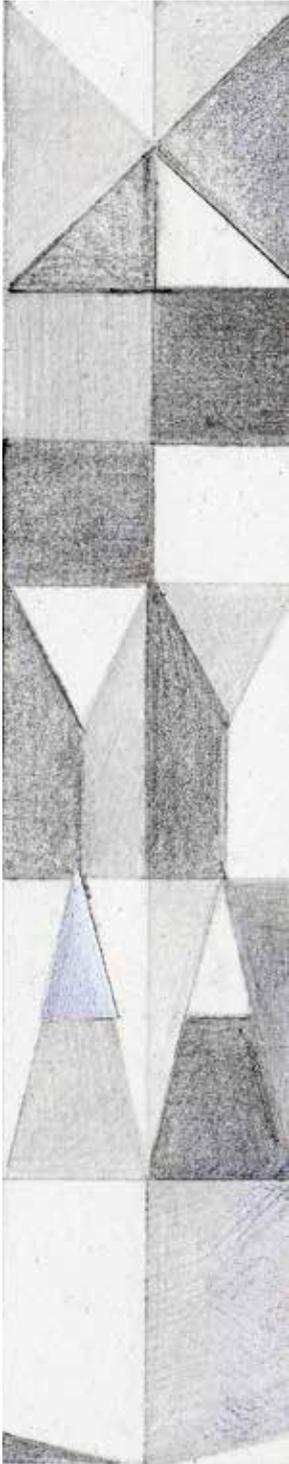


Figure 9: Study, © Theresa Poulton, 2016.



I will tell you briefly about one of the works I chose not to show you. That was meant to be the final work for this commission, but I realised that it was becoming too much about me and not about the project. It's the two triangles combined, which does relate to Indian spirituality, but it is also the Star of David, which is Jewish. And I am of Jewish origin. So I thought: that's Surashree and that's me, combined together. But I thought "it's not going in". It's a beautiful painting. It just became more about me. It was autobiographical. And I thought "no, it's too much about me, and it's got to remain Surashree and me together and the project". So that was interesting, because I always maintained with my work: "it doesn't say much about me". And I thought: "wow, this project did!"

Durham, 25 July 2016

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<sup>1</sup> We are grateful to Sam Horlor for transcribing the full interview.

Figure 10: Study, © Theresa Poulton, 2016.

## Visual interpretation of a recorded performance: Raga Marwa

Mahjabin Imam Majumdar and Ranjani Ramachandran

As part of the Khyal: Music and Imagination project, visual artist Mahjabin Imam Majumdar created a new painting, Marwa, in response to a recording of Raga Marwa by singer Ranjani Ramachandran. The two artists here give their individual perspectives on the project: below, they report on an event linked to the project held at Visva Bharati University in Santiniketan, India.



**Ranjani Ramachandran**

In my capacity as a Hindustani vocal music practitioner, this has been a unique experience of looking at a visual representation of my music. When I was asked to join the team, I readily agreed and also suggested the name of the visual artist Mahjabin Imam Majumdar, who has so wonderfully

interpreted the music in her own language and idiom. It helped that both of us had ample occasions to interact with each other since we reside in the same place: Santiniketan, West Bengal, India, a place that has been nurtured by the celebrated Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore.

Raga Marwa is a powerful *raga* which simultaneously evokes feelings of restlessness, strength, pathos, melancholy and anxiety. It is an evening *raga*, more specifically a *sandhiprakash raga* (one that is sung at sunset). Every *raga* comprises melodic permutations and combinations of a certain set of notes: the two most dominant notes in Marwa – namely *komal rishabh* (Re) and *dhaiwat*

(Dha) – have an engaging relationship and are used frequently in varying patterns during the course of expanding the *raga*.<sup>1</sup>

The rendition of Raga Marwa which was selected as the source and inspiration for the original art work is an excerpt from a concert I held in Pune, India, in 2010. In this recording I perform two *bandishes* (compositions): a *bara khyal* (a slow composition) set to the 14-beat rhythmic cycle *jboomra tala*, which is further explored through *alap*, *bol-alap* and *tans*,<sup>2</sup> followed by a *chota khyal* set to *madhya laya* (medium tempo) *ektala* (12 beats) (table 1).

In Mahjabin's striking painting (figure 11), I could see the interpretation of some of the emotions of Raga Marwa. The colour palette also suggests the evening time! I am also fascinated by the dominant presence of the tree and the intricate work within, which to me represents the complex melodic structure of Raga Marwa and, with respect to my performance, the expansion and exploration of the *raga*.

In conclusion, I would like to state that visual interpretation of a particular piece of music cannot be limited to the literal explanation of the content through a painting or a sculpture. It is not about simply illustrating something in another medium. Even a single painting is not an exact translation of the music, but a sum total of the experiences of the visual artist.

Through this experience, I am also encouraged to explore the reverse interpretation as well. Just as *raga* music can evoke myriad emotions, a single painting can be interpreted in different ways through music.

**Bara khyal in vilambit jhoomra tala (14 beats)**

Sthayi:<sup>3</sup> *Beeta gaayee more raina tumhare kaarana more saajana*

Antara: *Sanchee preeta karata bakhaana hamako jalaaye paaye chaina*

My beloved, the entire night has passed (waiting for you).  
You professed your true love for me, but you seem to enjoy making me jealous.

**Chota khyal in madhya laya ektala (12 beats)**

Sthayi: *Laagi lagana guru payee, sakala, jagata, bisarayee, pragatee divya drishti jyota, agama nigama samajha payee*

Antara: *Guru dayaala prabhu kripaala, prema roopa magana bhayee, maarag para paga dhara kara, joga jugata guru batayee*

(Addressed to the Guru)

I have understood the underlying philosophy of *agama nigama*,<sup>4</sup> only by serving you at your feet,  
so much so that it makes me forget everything else in this world.

I am grateful to you for showing me the right path to the realization of self.

Table 1: Raga Marwa, *bara khyal* and *chota khyal*: text and translation.



Figure 11: *Marwa*, © Mahjabin Imam Majumdar, 2016, acrylic on canvas.



**Mahjabin Imam Majumdar**

When I was first asked to visually interpret a Hindustani classical *raga* based on the archival recording of Raga Marwa rendered by Ranjani Ramachandran, my first thought was that this would be a challenging as well as an intriguing experience for me.

Through the collaborative nature of the *Khyal: Music and Imagination* project, I had the opportunity to work and interact with Ranjani on her views and experience as a musician, as well as my own ideas and experiences as a visual artist, and therefore to initiate a dialogue between Hindustani classical *raga* music and contemporary painting.

Before this project, I had already enjoyed Ranjani's music in various live performances and also some recorded ones, and every time I was enthralled by her wondrous rendition of a piece of music, the energy that resonates through her voice, the delicate touching upon different notes, and above all how the whole body of a particular *raga* slowly takes shape just as a tree grows, spreading its roots, growing its trunk and gradually moving upwards to spread its branches.

As a visual artist, while creating a dialogue between Raga Marwa and my painting (figure 11), I have taken the liberty to imagine the music itself as my muse. I took inspiration from various aspects of the music, including the time of day Raga Marwa is performed, which is just before the sunset or the hour of twilight, the time when the world around us is largely visible in silhouette. While the tune evokes multiple emotions, in the painting I have used the lyrics of the *bandish*, in which the heroine is accusing her beloved for making her wait for a long time, complaining about his indifference to her, expressing displeasure, and her own pain and agony due to the absence of the loved one.

The body as a container of emotions, and the presence of the body, suggest that bodily positions in space are signifiers of relationships in the physical as well as the spiritual sphere. The face is like a mirror that reflects an inner state, or the revelation of the workings of the mind that split the undivided self into diverse appearances: agonized,

vulnerable, unhappy, shuttling between sensuous and tragic.

To me any form of art, whether it is painting or music, is like a philosophy which should evolve, be reinterpreted, reassessed or re-evaluated with time, otherwise it remains stagnant or dead, just as my own art practice deals with a world where the present is juxtaposed with the past. I was born in Bangladesh but have been living and working in Santiniketan, India, for a long time; the desire to create an alternative space where one can belong, can rest, is perhaps born out of my memories and associations with the two places. The co-existence of my immediate surroundings – what I see, feel, the everyday – with the memory and the bitter-sweet sense of loss and the dilemma of homeland is caught between the overlapping spaces of estrangement and togetherness. I could identify the mood and the emotion of Marwa with some of these aspects that were already present in my art; therefore, in one way I do not see this work as something totally separate from my own previous practice. However, at the same time creating an artwork based on a classical *raga* was altogether a new experience for me.

So how did I visualize the painting? Did I see it in the inner wall of my eye lids when I closed my eyes? Was I able to detach myself to avoid making it look personal? My work of art is largely based on intuition: I carry within myself a universe which consists of my own perception of the world around me. In this artistic universe there are some things I consider very fundamental to the creation of an artwork: emotions, inspirations, agonies, and small psychological details. I wanted to create an image of the inner landscape of the mind, parts of which I can visualize and describe with a fair amount of lucidity, but some of which I cannot, indistinctly connected scenes of a narrative.

With the help of rhythmic patterns of linear scribbles I tried to execute visual forms which eventually inspired me to create a sense of loss and dilemma: caught between the overlapping spaces of estrangement and togetherness, with the duality of conformity and contradiction, at the same time keeping it open-ended and ambiguous. Viewers have full liberty to find a strong affinity with the emotion of the visual art as well as the music, so as to interpret in their own way to add different dimensions into the whole creative process. Only through this, I believe, can a dialogue be created.

## A dialogue between Ranjani Ramachandran and Mahjabin Imam Majumdar Visva Bharati, Santiniketan, India: A report

An interactive presentation to share the experiences of our collaboration was held at the Nandan Museum Gallery in Santiniketan, India on 28 June 2016. Both of us talked about our respective involvement in the *Khyal: Music and Imagination* project, and explained the nuances and details of our respective work (music and painting) with reference to this project. The audience also had an experience of listening to the music and viewing the painting simultaneously.

The presentation received a good response from an audience including eminent visual artists Prof. Jogen Chowdhury and Prof. Sanat Kar, Prof. Dilip Mitra, Prof. Pankaj Panwar, Sanchayan Ghosh, many faculty members of Kala Bhavana (Institute of Fine Arts) and Sangit Bhavana

(Institute of Performing Arts) as well as visitors from other academic backgrounds. It was heartening to see a large number of students, especially from Sangit Bhavana and Kala Bhavana, as active participants in the interactive session. Some of the interesting questions and comments that came up during the presentation included the inter-relationship between Raga Marwa and the images created on the surface of the canvas and beyond, notions about the same painting depicting a different *raga*, and the imagery that the musician has in mind while singing. There was also a general debate in the audience about the reciprocity of an exercise like this, and if a painting can be used as the starting point of interpretation into a Hindustan classical *raga*.

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<sup>1</sup> *Re* and *Dha* are respectively the flat second and sixth notes of the scale. While these are the dominant notes, the other notes of this *raga* are also an integral part of the process of improvisation referred to as *vistar*.

<sup>2</sup> These terms refer to different vocal techniques used in *khyal*.

<sup>3</sup> The terms *sthai* and *antara* refer to the two sections of a *khyal* composition.

<sup>4</sup> Two different notions of spiritual practice.

## Working in partnership: The perspective of GemArts

Vikas Kumar (GemArts Director) and Alexandra Marsden (Project Manager)

GemArts is a National Portfolio Organisation funded by the Arts Council of England, and a nationally recognised leader in the diversity arts sector. We are committed to delivering an ambitious and culturally eclectic programme of work, and constantly strive to produce work of the highest artistic quality, including providing a platform for artists of international significance, from the UK and abroad, to present their work to audiences in our region and beyond.

GemArts is also committed to excellence in our participatory arts practice and we specialise in delivering high quality arts-based projects with schools and community groups across all age ranges, to provide creative, educational and enjoyable learning experiences, and to promote a greater understanding of people and their respective cultures.

At the core of our organisation's approach is the aim "to increase equality of opportunity for everyone to engage with culturally diverse arts". GemArts has a track record of successfully delivering, in partnership with public and voluntary sector organisations, high quality arts-based projects in estates and communities where there is minimal or no cultural provision, targeting socially excluded people from BME, asylum seeker, refugee and wider communities across the North East, and through experience, knowledge and robust evaluation we have developed an understanding of their specific needs, and realised ways in which these can be met through participatory arts-based projects.

The work we have delivered over the years, specifically targeting those who are least engaged, includes participant-focused arts projects which have addressed issues around Racism and Discrimination, Community Cohesion, Health & Wellbeing, and Preventing Anti-Social Behaviour, and we have worked with children at risk of offending, in Pupil Referral Units, NEETs, young carers, older people in day care centres, people

with mental health issues, and people with disabilities.

The *Khyal: Music and Imagination* project has enabled GemArts to build on our exemplar Indian classical music programme by offering a unique opportunity to schools that we work with (figure 12). The project gave young people, who otherwise would not have the opportunity, a chance to experience a diverse musical art form and develop new different drawing and art techniques, inspired



**Figure 12: Pupils of Kingsmeadow School, Gateshead, working with visual artist Theresa Poulton (22 June 2016). Photograph by Sandie Carter.**



**Figure 13: Abstract drawings made by pupils of Kelvin Grove Primary School, Gateshead, ink and acrylic on paper (15 June 2016). Authors: Areeba (top), Konrad (middle), Igor (bottom). Photographs by Simone Tarsitani.**

by *khyal* music. Young people were able to visualise the *ragas* in the music and use their new creative skills to develop exciting original artwork to be displayed in a professional art gallery space.

The two workshop artists explored the concept of visualising music through art with young people in very different ways. Musicologist Laura Leante complemented the sessions with an overview of *khyal* performance and instruments.

Artist Adinda van 't Klooster introduced children from Kelvin Grove Primary School in Gateshead to different drawing techniques, and to the work of other visual artists who have been inspired by music in the past. The children worked in both black and white and colour on large scale pieces of work that were then digitized and printed onto balloons (figure 13). The balloons were each inflated and released for an unknown person to find. Each child wrote a short letter for the finder explaining where the image on their balloon comes from and why they chose to visualise the *raga* in this way. The letter also contained a website address where the finder could go and find out more about the project and to let the children know where their balloon was found.

Artist Theresa Poulton's *Reception and Response* workshop with Kingmeadow Community School in Gateshead stimulated young people to think about feelings, colours and emotions that music invokes, guiding them through the creation of various works, moving from representational to abstract art. Students used instruments employed within *khyal* music as inspiration for their own self-expression through art. Using the size of the objects, the colours, shapes and forms, they developed individual drawings and collaborated on a larger scale abstract collage work (figures 12 and 14).

The key outcomes of the school workshops were that they enabled young people to develop an understanding of music and creativity drawn from the North Indian Classical vocal music tradition. Many aspects of the sessions developed independent enquiry, decision-making and creative thinking skills as well as mutual support and team working skills and improvement in communication and social skills.

Working alongside professional artists and having their artwork presented in a professional space gives the young people a sense of pride in their artwork and an opportunity to do something they have never done before.

One of GemArts' key long-term objectives is to influence national public policy to embed creative and cultural learning within formal and informal education settings by identifying and establishing collaborative programmes and partnerships with regional and national academic and learning institutions and foundations. GemArts has worked in partnership with Durham University for the last six years, widening the reach and impact of performance through our Indian Classical music programme, through workshops, pre- and post-concert talks, and seminars for the general public.

This AHRC-funded project has enabled

GemArts to strengthen our partnership and collaboration with Durham University by furthering knowledge exchange, and deepening research that has social impact as well as academic benefit, where beneficiaries have included emerging and established musicians and visual artists, students, researchers, cultural and arts organisations, and the wider public.

For more information about GemArts visit [www.gemarts.org](http://www.gemarts.org)



**Figure 14: Collage made by pupils of Kingsmeadow School, Gateshead, paper and adhesive on wall (22 June 2016). Photograph by Simone Tarsitani.**

## Khyal: The app

Martin Clayton, Laura Leante and Simone Tarsitani

The *Khyal* app allows users to explore two beautiful performances of North Indian classical music and learn about its form, style, and technique. The app features video recordings of two complete performances, by Sudokshina Chatterjee (Raga Miyan ki Malhar) and Atul Khandekar (Raga Shyam Kalyan) (figure 15). Initially planned as an integral part of the *Khyal: Music and Imagination* project exhibition, it is freely available for download from the App Store.

Moving their fingers over four mixer sliders, or on the video window itself, users are able to hear the different sound elements in their preferred mix (voice, tabla, harmonium and tanpura). This is a unique chance to hear the singing voice alone, for instance, or to experience the difference made by the tabla, harmonium or tanpura when added in.

Key points in each performance are marked as selectable ‘clips’: selecting a clip takes the user to a particular point in the performance and opens up information about the techniques the musicians are using at that specific moment. Taken as a whole the app offers an overview of the musical form: it is designed as a flexible educational tool for those getting to know *khyal*, as well as for the enjoyment of Indian music lovers everywhere.

We have been making audiovisual recordings of *khyal* performances since 2003. These recordings have been made with the full cooperation of the musicians, and intended for research and educational use. The *Khyal* app extends the intended function of these recordings in a novel and unique format.

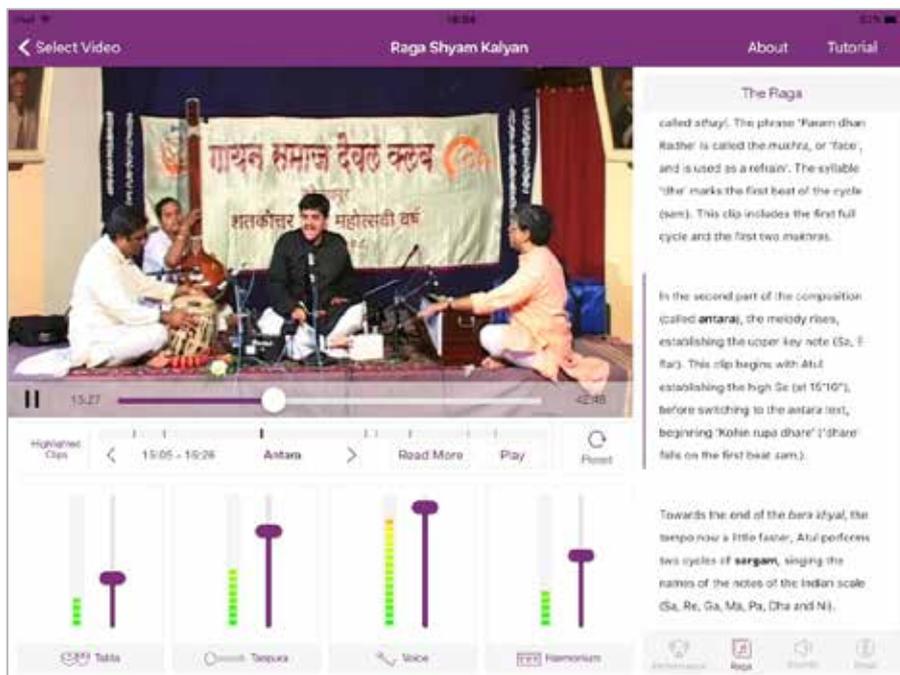


Figure 15: Screenshot of the *Khyal* app, featuring a performance by Atul Khandekar.

## Videos

### Raga Shyam Kalyan

Atul Khandekar (vocal) with Milind Pote (tabla) and Sanjay Gogte (harmonium).

#### *Alap*

*Bara khyal: "Param dhan Radhe" (vilambit ektal)*

*Chota khyal: "Sajani Shyama" (teental)*

*Tarana: "Tare dani dim" (teental)*

Filmed at the Gayan Samaj Deval Club, Kolhapur, Maharashtra, 2 March 2010.

### Raga Miyan ki Malhar

Sudokshina Chatterjee (vocal) with Gurdain Rayatt (tabla) and Kaviraj Singh (harmonium).

#### *Alap*

*Bara khyal: "Aaye umara ghumara" (vilambit ektal)*

*Chota khyal: "Bolere papiha" (teental)*

Filmed in the Chapel of St Chad's College, Durham, England, 2 March 2016.

## Credits

Created by Martin Clayton, Laura Leante and Simone Tarsitani of Durham University, in collaboration with Komodo Digital. Developed as part of the *Khyal: Music and Imagination* project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

Recording sessions were supported by the AHRC, St Chad's College, Durham, and GemArts, and edited at Durham University's Audiovisual Documentation and Analysis Laboratory.



**Recordings used in *Khyal: Music and Imagination*****Shree Raga**

Veena Sahasrabuddhe (vocal) with Vishwanath Shirodkar (tabla) and Seema Shirodkar (harmonium). Bageshree Vaze and Madhuchhanda Sanyal, tanpura.

Filmed at IIT Bombay, Powai, Mumbai, 9 April 2003.

Co-organised with Hari Sahasrabuddhe.

Recorded by Audio Video Software Service, Mumbai.

**Raga Bihag**

Sudokshina Chatterjee (vocal) with Subrata Manna (tabla) and Manikalpana Ghosh (harmonium).

Filmed at a house concert in Salt Lake, Calcutta, 6 December 2004.

Co-sponsored with Arohan Foundation.

Recorded by Martin Clayton and Laura Leante.

**Raga Marwa**

Ranjani Ramachandran (vocal) with Charudatta Phadke (tabla) and Suyog Kundalkar (harmonium).

Filmed at Gandharva Mahavidyalaya, Pune, Maharashtra, 25 February 2010.

Co-sponsored with Lalit Kala Kendra, University of Pune.

Recorded by Simone Tarsitani, Laura Leante and Martin Clayton.

**Raga Rageshree**

Surashree Ulhas Joshi (vocal) with Milind Pote (tabla) and Sanjay Gogte (harmonium). Deepali Halkarnikar and Radhika Kumbhojkar, tanpura.

Filmed at the Gayan Samaj Deval Club, Kolhapur, Maharashtra, 2 March 2010.

Recorded by Simone Tarsitani, Laura Leante and Martin Clayton.

**Raga Shyam Kalyan**

Atul Khandekar (vocal) with Milind Pote (tabla) and Sanjay Gogte (harmonium). Nitesh Joshi, tanpura.

Filmed at the Gayan Samaj Deval Club, Kolhapur, Maharashtra, 2 March 2010.

Recorded by Simone Tarsitani, Laura Leante and Martin Clayton.

**Raga Miyan ki Malhar**

Sudokshina Chatterjee (vocal) with Gurdain Rayatt (tabla) and Kaviraj Singh (harmonium).

Filmed in the Chapel of St Chad's College, Durham, England, 2 March 2016.

Co-sponsored with GemArts.

Recorded by Simone Tarsitani.

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Supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, British Academy, Durham University, St Chad's College, Durham, and Open University.

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