

is in devising a means by which seemingly conflicting historical perspectives of the sarod and sarodiyās are situated clearly within the cultural and political dynamics which precipitated the development of the instrument, as opposed to the prevailing trend in which the history of the instrument is retrieved, appropriated and reinvented according to communalist and fundamentalist agendas.

To achieve this aim, such a methodology needs to consider and synthesise three levels of research activity. First, information on the complex social, ethnic, communal and regional dynamics which historically have surrounded this instrument and its players must be made accessible. By highlighting this information, it is intended to counter attempts by any one lineage to claim cultural ownership, and to voice the legitimate interpretation, of the entire sarod tradition. Second, consultation with contemporary sarodiyās, and other members of the various source communities, will ground the research within the concerns of the current musical environment and the issues of most relevance and concern. This work will include the collection of further empirical data, both written and orally trans-

mitted, in order to construct both a detailed ethnography and an analysis of musical style across the tradition. The outcome of this work will then be returned to numerous personal contacts active within the music culture for comments and criticism. Finally, I will weave together into a narrative the competing voices of sarodiyās and their followers and combine these with commentaries and arguments raised by scholars dealing with the wider cultural and social ramifications of fundamentalism in India, along with the concerns of patron groups, other musicians, artists and audience groups. In doing so I hope to argue that the entire tradition can perhaps be best thought of as the sum total of all these voices.

The sarod tradition is not the end result of the development of an ethnically homogenous environment, as portrayed in fundamentalist polemics. Rather, it is precisely the historical amalgam of diverse influences and personnel interacting musically, socially and politically that have enabled the sarod and sarodiyās to gain a pre-eminent place in Hindustani music. Without this interaction, it seems certain that there would not be a sarod tradition in India.

*Adrian McNeil*

## ■ **Research Report** ■

### *Playing Ad Lib: Improvisatory Music in Australia 1936–1970, a Melbourne Perspective*

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*Playing Ad Lib* will be published early next year as part of the Currency Press/National Library, Cultural History series. It is based on the 1993 Ph.D. thesis, 'Improvisatory Musical Practice in Australia, 1836–1970: a Melbourne Perspective' (La Trobe University, Melbourne). The following is a preview by the author.

The main objective of this book is to reveal the threads of improvisatory musical practice that are woven through the fabric of colonial and twentieth century Melbourne musical history. It also demonstrates how the importation of imitation African-American performance culture played a key role in preserving a tradition of improvisatory music in Australia. The whole one hundred and thirty year period examined here is viewed as historically self-contained, with the late 1960s representing the culmination of a long process of musical liberation or 'breaking out' from the

notion of musical performance as slavish musical reproduction.

As such, it presents an argument about freedom and structure in Australian performance culture that clearly has significance for broader cultural and social considerations. But, perhaps more important than emphasising this dichotomy, it also hints at how 'improvisatory musics' functioned as, to borrow a term from popular music studies, a complex 'field of negotiation' for what was to become socially and artistically permissible in Australian music.

A twofold approach is taken to teasing out and defining the various strands of improvisatory practice. Foremost is the identification of the most relevant genres of music-making and the presentation of available evidence regarding the types of improvisatory practice associated with them. This evidence is also

interpreted through theoretical ideas such as decontextualisation, 'imitation ecstatic performance' and improvisatory music as gesture, all of which are defined in relation to the Australian context.

Notwithstanding the personal bias that is inevitably brought to such a book, I have attempted to discuss the various forms of improvisatory musics without applying aesthetic judgment. This approach has made it possible to discuss their means of production, that is the various approaches taken to improvisatory practice, from the perspective of two broad, musically and socially contrasting streams of musical activity referred to as Approved and Anonymous. These categories approximate (very inadequately) what is generally understood by the terms 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' music, or 'art' and 'popular' music.

These two streams of musical activity are interconnected by the fact that improvisatory techniques of the Approved stream, such as embellishment and variation technique, had practical application in the Anonymous genres. In other words, the European conservatorium tradition that underpinned the Approved genres provided a pool of technical knowledge, literature and written out musical models that could be drawn on by improvising musicians working in Anonymous genres (such as silent cinema, vaudeville or dance bands). By the 1920s, the Anonymous genres included Australian jazz.

Pre-jazz Anonymous genres include improvisatory musics that were played in a manner which relates to the later jazz performance tradition in Australia. Some were performed in relatively informal contexts of the type most conducive to playful musical interaction, flamboyance and embellishment. They also often included unorthodox or non-legitimate performance practices, whereas the Approved genres were associated with orthodox, standardised, systematised and congruous musical practice. The general level of onstage indeterminacy tolerated in less formal types of public entertainment often translated into a requirement for music accompaniment with jazz performance-like 'elasticity'. Open-ended musical forms that allowed for the spontaneous interpolation or removal of segments were often used. Furthermore, in contexts in which the same pieces were constantly repeated, musical detail could be added layer by layer through a combination of intuitive group interaction and leader direction, a process suggestive of the 'head arrangement' of jazz.

The requirements and contingencies of Anonymous

genre performance situations often had to be dealt with by personal inventiveness. This inventiveness could require the creation of a sound or the development of a technique that may have already been invented by countless others in similar situations. In other words, the Anonymous genres fostered a type of problem-solving experimentalism. The requirements, the contingencies and the relatively informal and indeterminate nature of these activities also provided conditions for the preservation of an aural tradition. Anonymous genre musicians were often expected to be able to 'fake'.

In the pre-jazz era, the Anonymous genres provided musicians with considerable latitude to transgress legitimate practice in a creative way. Through ragtime and jazz however, such musical iconoclasm became a normal and widely distributed element of popular music. It thus created a broader base for the acceptance of a spontaneous, or seemingly spontaneous, exploration of extended musical possibilities. The history of African-American influenced improvisatory music-making in Australia is considered to fall into two successive periods: an early period in which improvisatory practice characteristically took the form of embellishing popular music and a later period (c.1935–) in which it embraced far more complex and creative forms of improvisatory music-making.

The final chapters interpret improvisatory practice from the perspective of progressive or avant-garde musical tendencies. This focus on a 'cutting edge' of style synthesis or development reveals the process by which Australian musical history had, by the late 1960s, folded back on itself, with improvisatory musical practice again becoming a legitimate element of some of the most creative forms of new art music. Also described is the orgiastic but, as history proved, unsustainable proliferation and expansion of musical and social freedoms that reached Melbourne by the late 1960s.

*Playing Ad Lib* is the expression of my own fascination with the 'unwritten music-making' of Australia's musical past: the folk musics, popular musics and art musics that drew vitality and character from musical alteration, embellishment and creation which took place in performance. It glosses over the musically determined or 'fixed' in Australian music and, instead, focuses on the musically indeterminate: music as process, as cultural, social or political action, or as a vehicle for personal, small collective or grass-roots artistic expression or exploration.

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