

North Indian Traditional Music's Influence on the Works of Two Experimental Musicians

Haruo Inoue

Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies

Kyoto University

1. Introduction

This paper discusses the musical interaction between two cultures through the works of two prominent American experimental musicians, La Monte Young and Terry Reilly, and their relationship with their Indian teacher, Pran Nath, who introduced the Classical North Indian vocal music, Khyal, to North Americans.

North Indian classical music is called Hindustani music, and it is quite popular worldwide. Hindustani music is different from Western music, because it does not have any fixed notations. Hindustani music has only two fundamental theories. One is *rāga*, the theory of melody, and the other is *tāla*, the theory of rhythm. Hindustani musicians use these theories to improvise and create their own musical styles. Therefore, each performance is completely different from previous or other musicians' performances; in other words, a performance is never repeated. This is quite amazing, because "classic" usually refers to past works that are repeated again and again. In this sense, Hindustani music is very traditional, yet it is renovated by each individual artist. Since Hindustani music's structure is quite flexible, it is conducive to fusion with other musical genres such as pop, rock, and jazz. In the 60s and 70s, many Western bands tried to use images of Indian music. The most successful example would be The Beatles who extensively used Indian instruments from the late 60s in their songs.

So many writers or researchers studied the relationship between the legendary rock band, The Beatles, and the famous Indian musician Ravi Shankar (1920-2001). However, only few of them has discussed the relationship between Young, Reilly, and Indian Pran Nath. The Beatles commercially used India by adopting images of exotic musical instruments like the *sitār* or *tablā* in their music. It can be said that they were commercially the first to introduce Indian music to the West, paving the way for Indian musicians to play outside of India. However, theirs was only a "superficial" way of adapting Indian music. Although Young and Reilly did not want to be in the commercial music scene and not many people know that their works are influenced by Indian music, their adaptation of Indian

music is more “essential” than what the Beatles did.

2. La Monte Young (1935-)

2-1. Early Life

Young was born to a Mormon family in Bern, Idaho. He grew up listening to the cowboy songs and lullabies sung by the villagers. He was surrounded by great natural soundscapes. When he was a young child, he was fascinated by the wind whistling through the logs of the cabin, the buzz of crickets outside, and the hum of the electrical transformer. American country songs and the continuous sounds and noises surrounding him became the source of his musical ideas that can be observed in his later works.

In his youth, he made a commitment to jazz and blues. He moved to Los Angeles and attended the high school where he met many jazz players. He jammed with prominent musicians like Billie Higgins (1936-2001), Ornette Coleman (1930-2015), and Eric Dolphy (1928-1964). While he was enrolled in the composition class at the University of California, Los Angeles, he had a chance to listen to Asian music including the Hindustani classical music played by the legendary *sarōd* player Ali Akbar Khan (1922-2009). He was spellbound by the background drone sound played by the *tambūra*; the string instrument, usually tuned with the key note and the 5th note, created a drone sound during the entire performance. He also met his lifetime friend Terry Reily there, who also attended the university to study composition.

He started composing early experimental pieces. One of his most celebrated works is *Trio for Strings* (1958) in which he used sustained tones played by violin, viola and cello. It is one of the earliest examples of drone music, though you can't clearly tell the influence of Indian music on it. It was not until when he moved to New York and opened the studio called Dream House with his wife and light-artist Maria Zazeela (1940-) that we start to sense the great influence of Indian music in his work.

2-2. Young's Musical Activities in New York

Young formed a band called The Theatre of Eternal Music and performed extensively in the New York underground scene. The avant-garde violinist Tony Conrad (1940-2016) and the former members of the legendary rock band Velvet Underground, Angus Maclise (1938-79) and John Cale (1942-), and Young's wife Zazeela were the band members. They released the record called *Inside the Dream Syndicate Volume I: Day of Niagara* (1965). The piece was similar to Young's early works in terms of its prolonged note and harshness. However, Zazeela and Young's vocals gave a ritualistic atmosphere to their music. Although Young had not encountered Pran Nath at the time, his music was

already exhibiting some elements of Indian music, namely the overtones and a sense of eternity.

The overtone is the essential part of Indian music. The common term *Jawārī* refers to the overtone buzzing sound of Indian string instruments. *Jawārī* is produced with carved bones, ivory or wooden bridges that support the strings on the sound board. These kind of buzzing sounds have been eliminated in Western music, because sound clearness and linearity are thought to be “proper sound” in Western classical music. In contrast, many non-Western musical cultures, such as African, Japanese, and Indian, have a different sense of the value of sound, which emphasizes overtones or noise.

The sense of eternity is also an essential part of Indian music. Hindustani musicians tend to think of *rāga* as a matrix to which all of us can contribute our creations. In this sense, *rāga* will be updated, renovated, and evolved without limitations. This means Indian music will never be “completed” by individuals. Young started to create music longer than three or four hours, and thought that his works are always continuing and never completed. His masterpiece, *The Well-Tuned Piano*, is composed with this concept in mind. For this unfinished work that started in 1964, Young improvised more than ten hours a day and started each time from where he had stopped. In this way, the work was continuously expanding and evolving. Musicologist Jeremy Grimshaw argues that *The Well-Tuned Piano* is divided into six major parts, and each section can be listened to as a kind of *rāga* (Grimshaw 2011, 163).

2-3. The *Rasa* Theory

Young was influenced by the philosophy of Indian music as he learnt Hindustani vocal music in depth. Indian music systematizes the *rasa* theory that relates *rāgas* and human emotions. In this theory, there are nine fundamental *rasas*, corresponding to nine human emotions (Table 1). Each *rāga* is related to a certain time of the day, and if played at the right time, its effect is maximized. The *rasa* theory originates from ancient Indian performance arts and literature, and many Indian artists still believe in it. Grimshaw argues that Young’s cosmological thinking, which connects human bodies to sound, does not directly come from ancient Indian thought but from his Mormonism (Grimshaw, 2011, 142-172). The analysis of the Mormon and Hindu philosophy on music is quite an interesting topic, but is beyond this paper’s scope. The next chapter is about Young’s lifetime ally Terry Reily and Hindustani music’s

[Table 1: Rasas and the corresponding emotions]

rasa	emotion
shringāra	love
hāsya	humour
raudra	anger
kārṇa	sorrow
bībhatsya	disgust
bayānaka	terror
vīra	heroism
adbhuta	wonder
shānta	peace

influence on Reily's work.

3. Terry Reily (1935-)

3-1. Early Life

Reily was born in the small town of Colfax, California in 1935. He was keen on music from an early stage of his life and started to learn the violin when he was six years old. He started to play piano by listening to and imitating the tunes broadcasted on the radio when he was eight. Like Young, Reily was fascinated by jazz, and used to play in bars to make a living. He was an orthodox Western musician who studied Western classical music theory. However, he met Young when he was enrolled in the composition course at the University of California, Berkeley, and his thought about music totally changed. Young was Reily's mentor in music, and they used to play together in Young's band.

3-2. Musical Activities in San Francisco

After he graduated from university, he worked as a staff artist for the San Francisco Tape Music Center and started to experiment with tape loops. At the time, Paulin Oliveros (1932-2016) who later founded The Deep Listening Band and Phil Lesh (1940-) who was the original member of the psychedelic rock band Grateful Dead were active in the scene. The atmosphere was quite open and innovative which enabled Reily to try many innovative things using the tape reels and the cheap tape recorders. He released one of his most celebrated pieces, *In C* (1964). He composed this piece with fifty-three short phrases, and the number of beats varied from half a beat to thirty-two for each phrase. If the phrases are repeated with different instruments at the same time, many layers of rhythm can be heard. Each phrase is quite simple but become very complex and loud when heard together. This piece is considered the first minimal music composition in the West. However, it is very common for Indian musicians to play with different rhythmic cycles.

The Indian music term *layakari* is a generic term for polyrhythmic renditions commonly performed by vocalists and instrumentalists, and *chand* is a type of *layakari* where the melody player and the rhythm player play different rhythmic cycles. For example, if the percussionist plays seven-beat rhythm cycles while the melody player like the sitarist plays five rhythm cycles, then a tension and relief emerges during the performance. Figure 2 shows the logic of *layakari*. When the melody

[Figure1: *layakari* between melody and rhythm parts]

melody	1		3	4	5	1		3	4	5	1		3	4	5	1		3	4	5	1		3	4	5	1			
rhythm	1		3	4	5	6	7	1		3	4	5	6	7	1		3	4	5	6	7	1		3	4	5	6	7	1

player plays five-beat rhythm cycles and the rhythm player keeps seven-beat rhythm cycles, the tension will only be relieved after 35 beats when the two rhythm cycles meet again on the first beat. This is how *layakari* works, and you can hear these kinds of tensions and reliefs in *In C* and other works of Reily.

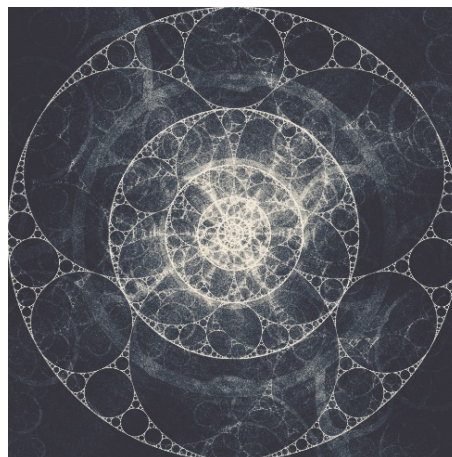
3-3. The Influence of Indian Music

We have confirmed that we can find the influence of Indian music on Reily, even in his early works. Yet, this influence is most apparently felt in his master piece, *A Rainbow in Curved Air* (1969). This album influenced many artists such as Pete Townshend (1945-) of the successful English rock band, The Who, and the English progressive rock band, Soft Machine. In this album, Reily plays repetitive phrases with the electric organ to create a mysterious atmosphere. Then, suddenly, the electric harpsichord cuts in and sparkling improvisation begins. This album has a very introverted character, yet the elements of excitement are there. He uses a seven-beat rhythmic cycle in this tune. In Indian music, the seven-beat rhythmic cycle, *rūpak*, is very common, and it provides a kind of unsteady feeling which matches Reily's mysterious melodic parts. Both Reily and Young's works are very spiritual and ritualistic, but the former is

meditative and calm while the latter is heavy and harsh. I think this comes from Reily's particular usage of the rhythms. In fact, he was very keen on Indian theory of rhythm and learned the Indian percussion instrument, *tablā*. Indian rhythm theory *tāla* has a cyclical nature, where one cycle leads to others and when the performance is completed, each small cycle will be organically connected with each other, making one large cycle similar to a mandala (Figure 2). This fractal structure forms the character of *tāla*, which can be recognized in Reily's works

during this period. The strong influence of Indian music can also be recognized in the next two albums *Persian Surgery Dervish* (1972) and *Shri Camel* (1980). After these albums, Reily started to work as a composer and wrote more fixed pieces for other bands like the Kronos Quartet.

[Figure2: the images of rhythm cycles]



The Art Work is created by Erik Söderberg
(<https://work.eriksoderberg.se>)

4. Pran Nath (1918-1996)

Compared to other well-known Indian musicians like Ravi Shankar or Alla Rakha (1919-2000), Nath is an unknown figure. Almost no Japanese listeners or players of Indian music know about him. He is not famous even in the Hindustani music scene in India. In the West, his esoteric figure turned

him into a cult hero in the underground scene, but few recognized him as an Indian classic musician. This is the matter of who introduces a figure from another culture into their own. Young and Reily have never tried to promote Nath like the Beatles did for Ravi Shankar, rather they just invited him to their place to learn Hindustani vocal music from him. Nath himself did not care for popularity either, so he rarely performed or recorded his music. But the real question is why such accomplished musicians like Young or Reily turned into serious disciples of a rarely unknown musician like Nath and what elements of his music attracted them. To answer these questions, we need to take a look back at Nath's early life.

4-1. Early Life

Nath was born to a decent family in Lahor, Pakistan, early in the twentieth century. Lahor was one of the most active cultural cities at that time, and many musicians used to visit the city and perform in intimate house concerts. Naturally, he grew up listening to the performances of those maestros and decided to be a musician himself when he was only six years old. At that time, music was not something that a boy from a rich family would not pursue as a career, so his parents strongly opposed him. When he turned thirteen, his parents told him that he had to leave their home if he wanted to be a musician. With a determined mind, he immediately left his house. He was strolling the streets of Lahor when he heard the voice of Abdul Wāhid Khān (1872-1949) of *Kirāna gharāna*, the vocal tradition that originated in a town in Northern India called Kirāna. He was absorbed by his voice and immediately decided to be Wāhid Khān's disciple. It is important to know what *Kirāna gharāna* is, if we are to understand the elements of Nath's music and its influence in the United States.

4-2. Kirana Gharāna

Gharāna is the style or tradition that descends from founders. There are around ten prominent vocal *gharānas* in North India. Among them, Kirana *gharāna* is famous for emphasizing the accuracy of each musical note. In this *gharāna*, musical notes are treated very carefully and delicately. Wāhid Khān and his cousin Abdul Karīm Khān (1893-1937) founded the *gharāna* themselves. They started to sing in an extremely slow tempo called *vilambit laya* to conjure a kind of pensive and meditative atmosphere. It was totally different from the flamboyant court style of singing at that time. The style was very introverted yet emotional in a way, and attracted many musicians. The prominent disciples are Begum Akhtar (1914-1974) who is one of the most celebrated *ghazal* (romantic song mostly written in Urdū language) singers; Hirābai Barodekar (1905-1989) who is the famous classical singer and the

daughter of Karīm Khān; Ram Nārāyan who is one of the most famous sārangi (bowed instrument) players (1927-); and Nath himself. After studying under the guidance of Wāhid Khān for nearly two decades, Nath moved to Delhi and became a staff artist of All India Radio. He also taught at the Delhi University until he decided to move to the United States in 1970.

4-3. Life in the United States

Nath was invited to New York by Young and Zazeela in 1970. Young was fascinated by Nath's recording that his friend gave him in New York and decided to bring Nath to the United States. When Nath travelled abroad for the first time, he was surprised that many Americans were fascinated by Hindustani music and sincerely wanted to learn about it. After a short while, he decided to live in the United States and stayed there for the rest of his life. The way Young and Zazeela treated him was so sincere and respectful. At that time, Young had been patronized by rich businessman in New York and founded the studio called Dream House where he and his wife performed concerts and made installations. Young made a room for Nath there and called it the Kirāna Center for Indian Classical Music. Since then, this institution has been open to anyone who wants to study Kirana *gharāna* in the United States. Nath released two recordings in his lifetime, and two other recordings were released posthumously. Listening to his music, it is easy to sense the influence of Kirana *gharāna*. It is slow and meditative. However, the drone sound is much louder than that of the recordings of his teacher, Wāhid Khān. In fact, Nath was interested in making a new drone instrument in his own style. He wanted stronger overtones from the tambura while he sang. It can be presumed that Young's fascination for drone sounds led Nath to invent his own *tambūra*. We are not sure whether Nath had ever heard of Young's experimental music. However, it is natural to think that Nath was aware of Young's music and could have been influenced by it. This is a good example of cultural interaction. Cultural influence is mutual by nature. In other words, Young or Reily were influenced by Nath's music and Indian music, and Nath himself was musically influenced by them. Unfortunately, Nath didn't live long, and his Kirāna Center has gradually become inactive. Compared to the Ali Akbar College of Music in California which was founded by the legendary *sarōd* player Ali Albar Khān in the 60s, Nath's Kirāna Center is so vague and underground that people tend to think of it as a dubious place. But if Nath is rather perceived as the cultural ambassador who introduced some essential elements of Hindustani music to the West, we would realize its value in broader terms, as establishing the cultural interaction between East and West.

5. Conclusion

I have tried to reveal the musical interaction between India and the West in this article. So far, only few recognize the connection between Hindustani music and the American underground experimental music. It has been a while since the relationship between India and the West has begun. It dates back to the colonial era when British officers traveled the Indian continent and encountered the “exotic” Indian music. William Jones (1746-1794) or August Willard (18c) wrote about Indian music in their article, but never tried learning or adapting Indian music. In the late nineteenth century, many Indian musicologists, like V. N. Bhatkandē (1860-1936) or S. M. Tagor (1840-1914), opened Hindustani music up to everybody, and a lot of people from the non-music family started to learn about it. They opened the school and invented the notions by reference to the systems of Western music. After Indian Independence, many Westerners tried to learn Indian music. In the late 60s, Ravi Shankar was introduced to the West by The Beatles. People thought that Ravi Shankar played very traditional and authentic Indian music. In fact, his music was rhythm-oriented, and technically fast and complicated so that it attracted Western people who didn’t know much about Indian music. In contrast, Nath’s vocal music was extremely slow and meditative, which could be boring for the Westerner who wants something fast and exciting. However, Young or Reily noticed that the elements of Nath’s music were not far from what they were trying to do. They could naturally adapt Indian elements to their own music. For Young, it was extreme overtones and intonation, and for Reily, it was the rhythms. The *other* culture will continue to be something from the outside if consumed at the surface level, but it can be *our* culture if we take it seriously and try to grasp the fundamental elements like the two American experimental musicians did.

REFERENCES

- Bakhle, Janaki. (2005). *Two Men and Music - Nationalism in the Making of an Indian Classical Tradition*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Farrell, Gerry. (1997). *Indian Music and the West*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Grimshaw, Jeremy. (2011). *Draw a Straight Line and Follow It – The Music and Mysticism of La Monte Young*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Inoue, Haruo. (2018). *The Encounter between American Experimental music and Indian Music*, JASMIM Journal vol. 2,(in Japanese).
http://jasmim.net/jp/wpcontent/uploads/Jasmim_Journal_vol2.pdf.
- Lavezzoli, Peter. (2007). *The Dawn of Indian Music in the West*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group Inc.

Potter, Keith. (2000). *Four Musical Minimalists*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Welch, Alison. (1997). "The Influence of Hindustani Music on Selected Works of Philip Glass, Terry Riley and La Monte Young". Doctoral Dissertation, The University of Texas.

INTERNET RESOURCES

http://musicmavericks.publicradio.org/features/interview_young.html

<http://www.innerviews.org/inner/riley.html>