



CIAN Research Briefing

# Improvisation as a methodology for intercultural dialogue

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Improvisation is often described in terms of linguistic exchange: musicians are 'talking to each other', creating 'dialogues', and musicians have 'something to say' through music. Although linguistic links have contributed some understanding of the complexity of both language and music (Patel, 2008; Bowie, 2007), it also seems clear that music and language communicate different things. What then does it mean for music to be a methodology for interaction? And, how can we evaluate a musical conversation?

## Background

In 2006 I began a project to explore ways of communicating across musical cultures. I drew on my recent studies in Carnatic music, and developed and tested various ways of creating musical contexts for intercultural dialogue through improvisation. These experiments led to performances and recordings



in Brisbane, Australia, and in Chennai and Bangalore, India. Carnatic and jazz musics are my particular area of interest, but there are problems in negotiating hybrid musical spaces, particularly in such fundamentally different systems, and particularly when dialogue through improvisation is the goal.



These cultural differences make intercultural music a special circumstance in which many of the dialogical qualities of improvisation are foregrounded. In dealing with the complexity of interactions between musical systems, spoken languages, and performance practices, the

differing aesthetic and theoretical foundations and assumptions of a musical culture are highlighted. In many cases this awareness challenges musicians to

examine the ways in which they are used to interacting, and to adapt their practices to facilitate intercultural music making.

### Case study analysis

An analysis of the musical outcomes of intercultural music can give us new insight into music making, improvisation and hybridity. The concert series, *Cows at the Beach* (Wren, 2011), and a concert collaboration with Guru Karaikudi Mani and Ghatam V. Suresh in Brisbane (May 2013) are used as case studies to illuminate the ways in which musicians negotiate and extend their base of practice in intercultural settings. For a listener familiar with one tradition it is possible to examine the intercultural work for the limitations it forces on musicians, but new insights emerge when the listener has experience of both cultural genres, or when commentary is sought from musicians in different traditions. From this standpoint it is possible to differentiate when musicians are tempering their interactions, extending their practice towards the other culture, or creating altogether new modes of performance. The ways in which advanced level musicians react to each other, challenge each other, and find ways to move the music forward in the face of unfamiliar models of development and exchange, creates a changing landscape in which improvisation in its many forms, are active methodologies in cultural exchange.

Further stages of the project include applying the critical framework developed around the case studies (Wren, 2014), to historical projects in the Carnatic-jazz field, including projects by Dave Brubeck and Palghat Raghu (1964); Pallani Subramania Pillai and Joe Morello (1958), and Rudresh Mahanthappa (2008).

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