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STRUNG TOGETHER: REALIZING MUSIC-CULTURAL HYBRIDITY WITHIN A LIMITED TIME FRAME

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by **Richard Perks**

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Introduction

Intercultural musical collaboration presents many practical, aesthetic and ethical challenges. Not only are there significant differences to navigate between musical practices, systems and performance traditions, but social factors, such as each participant's perception of their function within the ensemble, play an integral role. When aspects from different musical cultures are combined effectively, it is often claimed that a 'hybrid' style or system has been formed. But what exactly does this mean? As Frank Camilleri and Maria Kapsali ask in relation to performance practice: 'Are some entities more hybrid than others? Are there old hybrids and new hybrids? Do all hybrids operate in the same way?'.[1] 'Hybridity', especially if used as a descriptive term for a type of music, is conceptually ambiguous, and it is not surprising that its meaning has been disputed across many spheres of research.[2] From my own experiences of playing in and directing intercultural music ensembles, particularly those built upon improvisatory musical practices, it seems that hybridity is not something that is determinable as a distinctive practical or conceptual goal, rather, it emerges in different forms, depending on a range of contributing factors, as determined by the project's parameters and/or participants at any one time. The project, Strung Together, therefore, is presented here as a case study designed to explore the different forms of music-cultural hybridity that might transpire through intercultural-improvisatory collaboration. The term 'hybridity strain' is introduced as a means to conceptualize and distinguish between said forms and is used to underpin a novel model for analysis and comparison.

In September 2017, I was commissioned by *Diaspora Arts Connection*[3] to lead a week-long collaborative performance project entitled Strung Together in San Francisco, California. In a combined effort, we sourced four additional professional musicians from the San Francisco Bay Area to form a quintet, each with a significant level of expertise in a specific music tradition: Sirvan Manhoobi (oud) and Faraz Minooei (santur) were both originally from Iran and formally trained in Persian classical music; Raman Osman (saz) and Faisal Zedan (percussion), were both originally from Syria, with extensive experience of performing different Arabic musics. I acted as 'musical director'/performer (fretless electric guitar) and was ultimately responsible for the project's curation and delivery. We gathered together daily through the week and during this time collectively developed, arranged, and rehearsed a complete performance programme of new music; a live performance took place on the evening of the final day.[4] The basis of the musical content was improvisation – in its broadest sense[5] – combined with various 'pre-composed' musical stimuli, *Fragment(s)*, each of which incorporated influences from the performers' respective music traditions and served as initial platforms for the development of the final pieces. The performance was broadcast live via social media and reached an international audience.

Drawing from models of cultural integration, compositional practice and collaborative creativity, this case study enabled the development of a practical methodology through which the improvisatory approaches of non-congruent music-

cultures might be combined to create a programme of original, eclectic works, within a limited time frame. By considering the subtle boundaries that lie between coexistence, assimilation and synthesis within intercultural collaborations, Strung Together explored how different initial musical stimuli might alter the balance, whilst maintaining contextually relative improvisatory freedom(s) and optimizing productivity. Here the blending of three distinct improvisation-based musics – Persian classical,[6] Arabic traditional,[7] and Western contemporary[8] – was investigated through a process involving continual dialogue, collective composition, coalesced methods of improvisation, rearrangement and refinement, rehearsals, and live performance. My point of departure is that of a professional guitarist (of some 20 years) with an extensive understanding of different approaches to improvisation, and a performer–composer with considerable experience of engaging in collaborations with musicians from the Middle East. Such preparation constitutes adequate 'procedural knowledge', and verifies a reliable insight into the strategies and workings necessary to steer a collaborative performance project of this nature; as a reflective practitioner, the format of practice-led study and critical reflection seems most appropriate.[9] A detailed account of the underlying process and discoveries from this project follows, with a focus on improvisatory interactions, points of music-cultural impact, and the advocacy of continual ethical consideration throughout.

1. Intercultural Collaboration, Music-Culture and Hybridity

The combining of different musical cultures is a complex issue. Unavoidably, both the process and its discussion bear a multitude of potential pitfalls, the avoidance of which requires much careful deliberation. As a performer-composer a number of texts have guided my approach, ranging across a broad field of enquiry, enabling profound questions to be asked about a project of this kind. These perspectives encompass the social sciences, which helped me to consider Strung Together in greater depth – not as an anthropologist, of course, but as a reflective practitioner. This section establishes definitions for key terms used throughout.

Ric Knowles suggests that, '[it is] important to focus on the contested, unsettling, and often unequal spaces *between* cultures, spaces that can function in performance as sites of negotiation. Unlike 'cross-cultural', 'intercultural' evokes the possibility of interaction across a multiplicity of cultural positionings, avoiding binary codings.'[10] Similarly, in relation to musical collaborations between cultures, Toby Wren says,

> Intercultural music can be seen as a situation in which musicians must react to the familiar and the unfamiliar, and in which their musical actions must similarly proceed from acquired cultural knowledge and assumed or speculative knowledge about the intercultural context.[11]

Following this lead, and despite the frequently interchangeable usage of terms such as 'crosscultural', 'extracultural', 'multicultural', 'transcultural' and so forth, I have adopted 'intercultural' throughout as my preferred term when referring to the general nature of this collaboration.

I have employed 'music-culture' to encompass all musical qualities, idiomatic conventions, performance practices, material objects and ontological meanings[12] ascribed to a music tradition, from the emic perspective of the performer, intentionally circumventing any extra-musical, tangential, or socio-identity attributes (e.g. representation within political

movements, trends in fashions, reflections of social-class, notions of 'scene' and so forth). In other words, 'music-culture' here refers to the performative culture within a music, not to the (wider-ranging) impacts of a music upon a culture.

Given that this project aimed to fuse the improvisatory approaches, compositional systems and aesthetic characteristics of three different music-cultures, 'hybridity' is used here in its most fundamental sense to describe their amalgamation through a creative process comprising collaborative composition, coalesced improvisation, dialogue, rehearsal and performance. Homi K. Bhabha introduced the notion of a cultural 'third space',[13] where the hybrid form replaces previous concepts and establishes new structural and political potentials. It seems to me, that in forging a creative 'third space', an intercultural-improvisatory ensemble will inevitably negotiate various 'states' of interaction at different junctures throughout the collaborative process, and in turn yield different *forms* of music-cultural hybridity. Whilst some aspects of the musics may well combine to establish the foundations of a new musical language or system, most will likely not, and instead will recurrently collide, interweave and interchange across different pieces and/or alternate realizations. I propose, therefore, that in fusing music-cultures, the search for a 'third space' unveils not one but *multiple* hybrid derivatives, which I shall call ***hybridity strains.***

2. Hybridity Strains: An Analytical Model

This section draws from various historical, cultural and political contexts to establish a system of categorization for the various hybridity strains explored throughout this project. The descriptions in section 2.1 have been adapted from counterpart notions presented in other disciplines to properly define each hybridity strain, and more pertinently, to provide a qualitative basis to differentiate between them. Six main hybridity strains have been identified, forming a taxonomic continuum:

Exclusion (non-hybrid) ↔ **Partial Exclusion** ↔ **Homogenization** ↔ **Coexistence** ↔ **Assimilation** ↔ **Synthesis**

Together they form an analytical model (section 2.2, Figure 1) and critical framework, which will be used later to examine the underlying aesthetic of each work developed in Strung Together (see section 4: Project Analysis).

2.1 Hybridity Strains Defined

In simple terms, synthesis can be defined as 'the putting together of parts or elements so as to make up a complex whole'.[14] David Nock defines 'cultural synthesis' as 'a policy of cultural adaptation that encourages the synthesis of two cultures, that retains elements of both, and that encourages the *voluntary* borrowing and adaptation by the weaker cultural system'.[15] He goes on to say, 'even more important to the concept of cultural synthesis is the notion that cultural components from different societies will be combined in ways that make sense to the borrowing society'.[16] In relation to this project, the notion of a 'weaker' music-culture is redundant as it has been assumed from the onset that each of the traditions are, in and of themselves, equally established. That said, the actions of 'voluntary borrowing' and 'adaption' by each, in addition to the view that such fusions must ultimately 'make sense' to all parties involved, are necessary prerequisites to attain the appropriate level of interconnectivity needed to generate a 'convincing' sense of unified musical identity. In a discussion about the processes of musical and cultural synthesis that underlay the

development of Chinese Christian hymnody, Vernon Charter and Jean DeBernardi conclude that 'creative work emerged out of a two-sided flow of cultural meanings and cultural forms, in which both missionaries and Chinese Christians actively directed the development of this musical genre',[17] suggesting that musical and cultural synthesis in this case was the result of a reciprocal process, involving multi-directional exchange. Following these ideas, therefore, '**synthesis**' will be used here to define the hybridity strain whereby the three music-cultures combine through *mutual exchange*, by borrowing and *adapting* various musical properties and performative conventions from each other, such that the underlying aesthetic evolves to yield a highly distinctive, collective, musical voice.

Milton Gordon delineates 'behavioural assimilation' as 'the absorption of the cultural behaviour patterns of the "host" society', however – unlike in the case of cultural exclusion – whilst one culture remains ultimately dominant, there is 'some modification of the cultural patterns of the immigrant-receiving country, as well'.[18] In terms of musical collaboration, this might equate to a partial trade of creative methodologies, and in turn aesthetic properties, whereby a particular music-cultural system becomes 'supplemented' by another. Therefore, by adapting Gordon's interpretation, '**assimilation**' here will define the hybridity strain in which all three music-cultures discernibly combine, and some multi-directional 'enrichment' does occur, but the underlying structure of the piece, format of delivery or level of exposition results in one (or two) music-culture(s) appearing dominant.

Edouard Glissant advocates the individual's 'right to opacity' (in addition to their right to difference), affirming that 'opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics'.[19] He claims, 'the opaque is not the obscure, though it is possible for it to be so and be accepted as such. It is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence.'[20] In an intercultural musical collaboration, therefore, this might suggest that it is possible for distinctive aspects of each music-culture to remain fully 'intact' (by each performer preserving their respective musical differences and/or 'opacity'), yet *together* 'weave' a cohesive musical 'fabric'. Furthermore, we can safely assume that – by the very nature of such collaborative projects – the participants are committed to producing a unified result; we are not resisting the performers' reluctant acceptance of multiple musics existing simultaneously (i.e. the music of the 'Other' being 'tolerated'), but rather fostering a respectful, cooperative community in which 'chaotic turbulence and insular serenity are able to coexist, and more, actually need each other'.[21] Drawing from these ideas therefore, I have used '**coexistence**' to define the hybridity strain in which the three music-cultures capably function side-by-side, whilst simultaneously remaining distinctly identifiable, each resembling and/or preserving their 'native' forms respectively.

In socio-cultural terms, homogenization often refers to states where cultures combine through methods of conformity and standardization.[22] Rather than cultivate a gestalt social environment, such conditions tend to prompt a practical *dilution* of the constituent identities. In relation to musical collaborations, analogous works might be considered those that are functional, yet uninspiring – conveying a contextually irrelevant, bland, and/or unconvincing collective musical voice. Musicologist Tran Van Khe determines that the hybridization of music may induce 'enrichment when borrowed elements are compatible with the original tradition and impoverishment in the contrary case'.[23] Performance

pieces which convey such diluted and/or impoverished forms therefore will be classified under the hybridity strain '**homogenization**'.

Finally, it goes without saying that both '**partial exclusion**' (where two music cultures have combined, but the third is not present) and '**exclusion**' (where all musicians adhere to the performative conventions of just one music-culture) were actively avoided when carrying out this project. These could well occur accidentally, of course, as a consequence of 'mismanaging' the underlying working methodology. Therefore, when combining the various approaches to composition and improvisatory traditions, it was essential to maintain an awareness of this possibility throughout.

2.2 Intersection and Topology

The model in *Figure 1* illustrates the intersections of the three music-cultures and the potential hybridity strains cultivated by works presented in Strung Together. Concise definitions of each are provided below.

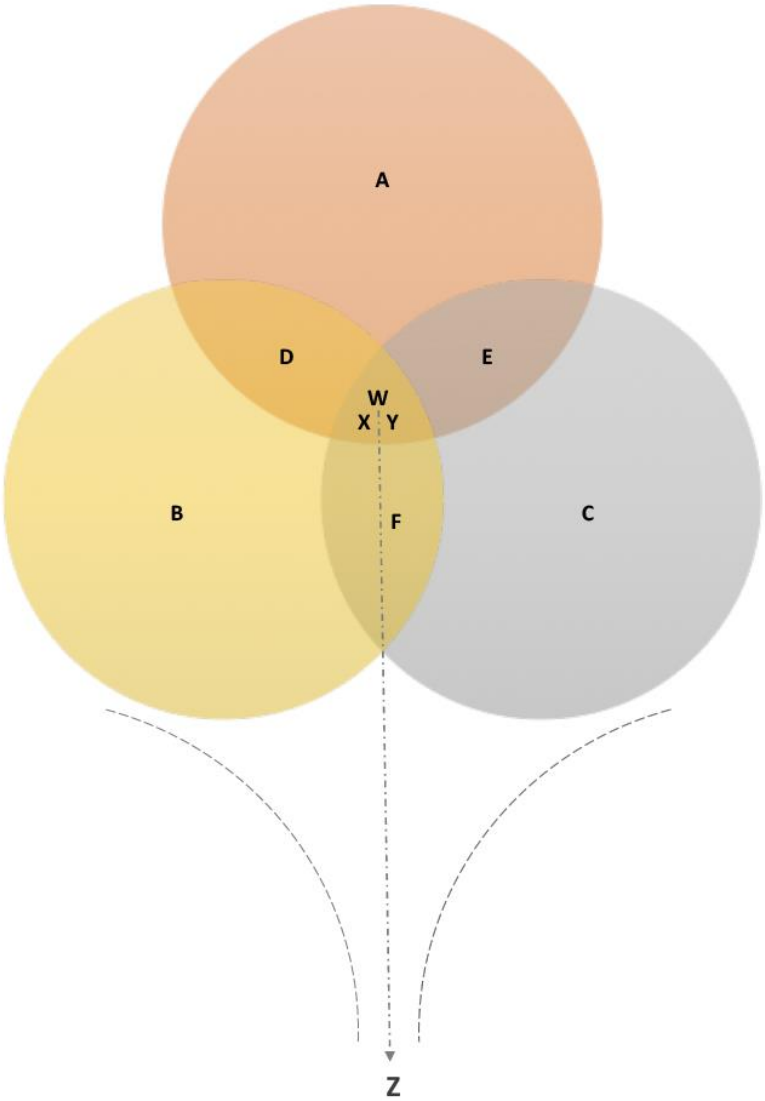


Figure 1 *Intersections of Music-cultures and Potential 'Hybridity strains' Cultivated by Works Presented in Strung Together.*

- **A, B, C** ⇒ ‘Exclusion’: Reflecting one music-culture only, leaving no room for the others; non-hybrid.
- **D, E, F** ⇒ ‘Partial Exclusion’: Two music-cultures have combined successfully (in some perceptible form), but the third is not present.
- **W** ⇒ ‘Homogenization’: All three music-cultures are present, though each in a notably diluted form: a bland unification.
- **X** ⇒ ‘Coexistence’: All three music-cultures are discernible; whilst capably functioning side-by-side, each music-culture resembles/maintains its native form for the most part; individual music-cultural traits remain distinctly identifiable.
- **Y** ⇒ ‘Assimilation’: All three music-cultures have sufficiently combined; some multi-directional enrichment has occurred, however, one (or two) music-culture(s) appears dominant; individual music-cultural traits remain identifiable.
- **Z** ⇒ ‘Synthesis’: All three music-cultures have effectively combined through mutual exchange; the borrowing and adaptation of various musical properties and/or performative conventions has resulted in the emergence of a highly distinctive, collective, musical voice; individual music-cultural traits are only partially identifiable, if at all.

3. Methodology

Strung Together sought to advance suitable working methods to explore the impact points between coexistence, assimilation, and synthesis within intercultural musical collaborations. The focus was not on producing works that explicitly ‘achieve’ *one* hybridity strain as a fixed state of interaction, but to examine the movement amid the boundaries. It was surmised from the onset that, during the collaborative process (which would comprise rehearsals, co-composition, rearrangements, dialogue and so forth), each ‘piece’ was likely to traverse multiple hybridity strains during its development. Furthermore, once the arrangement of a piece was ‘finalized’ by the ensemble, it might still negotiate several hybridity strains within its duration/performance. This is a perfectly plausible notion – particularly when considering the music’s highly improvised nature – and highlights again that it is the scrutiny of the process *behind* such collaborations that takes priority here, rather than a desire to consistently generate specific musical results. That said, there *was* a conscious attempt to avoid exclusion, partial exclusion and homogenization, where possible; this was continually monitored by ensuring that *some* form of relative contextualization of each music-culture was maintained throughout. This section provides a detailed description of the working processes implemented throughout this project.

3.1 Composing for Improvising Musicians

The use of partially notated scores has been championed by many composer-improvisers, including Barry Guy, Anthony Braxton, John Zorn and Larry Ochs to name but a few. Ochs says of his work in this area

> all my composed music has been concerned with the integration of composition and improvisation using non-traditional forms and/or alternative devices, inventing or reforming structures and systems that combine specific expectations (goals) with intuitive process.[24]

British composer-bandleader Peter Wiegold – a particularly prominent exponent of part-composed, part-improvised music in the UK – coined the term 'backbone' to describe a type of skeletal musical score he advocates in collaborative settings, most notably when working with ensembles comprising improvising musicians. The backbone score provides an experiential focus, whereby the improvisatory contributions of others are placed upon, and/or orbit, the prescribed musical information. This method of composition enables improvisatory ensembles to develop material quickly and can prove extremely productive in collaborative settings, particularly where rehearsal time is limited. Timothy Steiner delineates the 'backbone' score as follows:

> like an animal backbone, a musical backbone serves to form an indispensable central axis and focus to which all other parts of the music (or skeleton, organs and flesh), must relate. And like the animal backbone, it is complete in itself, but still requires the rest of the body in order to bring it to life. And although vertebrates differ hugely … the basic principle is always the same: each is held together, characterised and focussed by its backbone.[25]

This interpretation suggests that the content of the pre-prescribed material – regardless of how detailed or general it may be – is fundamental in relation to the end-product, and ultimately determines the music's identity. In comparison, Jacqueline Walduck adopts a more pluralistic approach in her work, affirming that

> Far from being a *cantus firmus*, the backbone has a different generative character. It gives the piece a central essence from which the ensemble members improvise and develop their parts, building in any direction, but always led by an overall shape and dynamic.[26]

For Walduck, it seems, the backbone provides a schematic framework around which improvisers may integrate their playing style, habits, traditions, and sounds such that 'the process invites the energy and personality of the players into (the realization of) the composition'.[27] Whilst here the contributing musicians may arguably exert a more discernible influence on the piece's identity,[28] there still exists a tangible degree of control (and, consequentially, an embedded sense of ownership) on the part of the 'composer' – no matter how slight – over the collaborative/improvisatory process and the subsequent musical results.

About improvisation, Bruno Nettl says that the improviser 'always has something given to work from —certain things that are at the base of the performance, that he uses as the ground on which he builds. We may call this his model.'[29] Furthermore, he contends that such models can – and do – take notably different forms between cultures. Some may incorporate the use of notation, others may rely on the memorization of a series of pre-determined (perhaps orally transferred) melodies, open extemporizations on modal figures, or the intricate negotiation of complex harmonic structures. In Nettl's words, 'There are, then, very diverse kinds of models used in the world of improvisation.'[30] It can be understood, therefore, that if one were to employ a pre-composed 'backbone' as the underlying model in an intercultural context, the additional concern immediately arises that the work could (inadvertently) become skewed towards Western paradigms from the very beginning. Because Strung Together intended to inaugurate an appropriately

cooperative creative space, where culturally relative 'points of departure'[31] might combine or function simultaneously, further considerations were necessary to assist the circumvention of any implicit power-bias or '*cross*-cultural' hierarchies. A more liberal method of music-making was needed.

3.2 'Starting Points' and 'Collective Backbones'

Once the commission from *Diaspora Arts Connection* had been confirmed, I produced a series of initial musical stimuli. Each filled no more than a single side of A4 paper and the amount – and type – of musical material provided varied. Each stimulus was considered not as a definitive backbone, but as a musical '**starting point**': a suggestion of what the music may – or may *not* – look like; completely subject to change, development, evolution or negation throughout the collaborative process. Thus, rather than supplying the musicians with the 'core component' of a semi-improvised 'piece' – conveying a potentially fixed compositional voice and/or carrying its own piece-specific identity (whereby alternate realizations of the same stimulus by different musicians would likely be recognizable) – the intention here was to spur productivity (given the short time frame) whilst simultaneously encouraging coalesced improvisation and co-composition. The starting points were devised to provide the ensemble with enough initial focus to overcome inertia – to get working on *something* – whilst leaving ample room for creative autonomy, such that each music-culture – and their respective approaches to music-making – might be 'sufficiently accommodated' at a foundational level.[32] This is not to say however, that the backbone approach was entirely rejected; rather, that the starting points might prompt the development of collaboratively determined – and therefore communally representative – '**collective backbones**' throughout the rehearsal process. These collective backbones would then serve as new improvisatory 'models', expressly reflecting the eclectic music-making traditions of *this* ensemble. Accordingly – instead of being 'finalized' by way of score-based representation – collective backbones here were likely to assume varied forms, with each comprising a different combination of aurally transferred ideas, memorized melodies and structures, partial notations, indeterminate sketches and/or shorthand performance notes (including memory prompts, entry cues/directions and so forth; see section 4).

Following in the vein of ensembles such as Shakti,[33] Strung Together aspired to produce ethically considerate hybridizations by creatively *empowering* each musician, and hence their respective music-culture, at a structural level.[34] To help achieve this goal, each starting point contained at least *some* musical content, or 'building blocks',[35] contextually relevant to each of the three music-cultures (as well as each instrument type). They did however differ in the degree of melodic, harmonic, rhythmic and structural information provided. All eight staring points (entitled '*Fragment(s)#1 – #8*') were sent to the musicians via email several months before we met in California, allowing them to gain a basic impression of the project, providing an opportunity to raise any questions in advance, and enabling me as musical-director to assess the extent to which such material 'made sense' to the performers. I anticipated that some of the musicians might not read standard music notation,[36] so I ensured that any modes, metres, or structural guides were clearly labelled in text also, to help with precursory communications. It is important to acknowledge at this point that the inclusion of any pre-defined musical *structure* within such stimuli has the potential to impact upon collective development, and may (even if unconsciously) dictate the global shape of an improvised 'piece'.[37] Given this project aimed to explore the nuances between different hybridity strains, it was important to ensure the level of

structural organization specified by the starting points (if any) was suitably varied; furthermore, this might help 'nudge' the creative process in different directions (see section 4).

3.3 Rehearsals and Final Performance

Rehearsals began with a brief introduction of the musicians and a basic description of the objective we needed to achieve: to produce an hour-long set of original, co-created music, within a week (spanning six rehearsal sessions), and perform it as a concert on the final evening. Initial, non-specific, music-making exercises followed, including introducing each other to our respective instruments, freely improvising – 'jamming' – with different scales, absorbing distinctive rhythms and/or 'feels', and exploring melodic conventions, as well as cautiously working with the starting points. Amanda Bayley proposes that, 'for each situation, locating creativity means identifying those individuals with whom creative responsibility lies and thus the characteristics of the participants, the context of their collaboration and the environment within which they communicate'.[38] These preliminary activities allowed us to imagine both individual and collective timbral possibilities, as well as develop a rudimentary sense of the creative and performative roles we might each adopt at different stages throughout the project.[39] The use of *fretless* electric guitar enabled me to access the microtonal (non-tempered) tuning systems – and thus engage in the melodic structures and/or articulations – relevant to the two Middle Eastern music-cultures, if and when desired.[40] As the week went on, drawing on our mounting familiarity and increasingly 'co-informed' perspectives, the focus of the rehearsals shifted more towards developing the starting point material.



Figure 2 *Still from Day 2 of Rehearsals (Photo: Diaspora Arts Connection)*

Propositions and alternative approaches were continually trialled and tested throughout, and we successfully achieved a creative workspace where no suggestion was deemed 'unfit' for further investigation – a testament, perhaps, to the expressly open-minded nature of the musicians involved. Gradually, each member of the group felt rightfully empowered to contribute creative ideas, confident that any suggestion would be taken seriously – and sufficiently explored – by the ensemble. In the latter-half of the week, as the starting points morphed into collective backbones and the structures of pieces were beginning to take shape, we consolidated our 'set' at the end of each session. Basic audio recordings were made of these 'summaries' and were distributed via email amongst the performers after each rehearsal, along with any performance 'notes', suggestions, or crucial 'points to remember' that had emerged during the session. We also engaged in telephone calls and email conversations in between rehearsals to exchange thoughts on how the project was progressing. These combined measures enabled us to independently digest, re-evaluate and generate new creative ideas

prior to the next rehearsal (this proved useful in a practical sense, given the time frame was so tight, and further reinforced the notion of individual empowerment within the band); throughout the week, whether physically together or not, we became collectively immersed in the material. The final rehearsal was a complete run-through of the pieces, and any last-minute refinements were made, one of which involved a *major* structural revision (see the synopses and critiques in section 4). An 'extended sound-check' was carried out in the afternoon prior to the performance, where some material – particularly beginnings and endings – were practised. The final performance, Strung Together – A Night of World Music, took place on the evening of Saturday 17 September 2017, to a sold-out theatre. The show was also broadcast live via Facebook, reaching a global audience, and videoed (for subsequent online archiving). Of the eight *Fragment(s)* originally provided, only six were used to develop the material for the final performance. I realized relatively early on that *Fragment(s) #3* and *Fragment(s) #5* would likely not be conducive to the cultivation of any meaningful music-cultural hybridity because their presentation format (i.e. graphic-scores) was so decisively rooted in contemporary Western tradition. These stimuli may have been fruitful had we had more time, but considering the group's ostensible preference for melodic and rhythmic starting points – possibly a reflection of Middle Eastern musical norms – I felt they should be omitted unless we gained surplus time.[41]

3.4 Collecting Feedback and Corroboration

In addition to the ongoing dialogue throughout the project (see above), post-project feedback from individual band members was collected through various conversations (some verbal, with notes being taken, others via email exchanges/online chat). These initial reflections occurred within a week or so of the final performance; but during my preparation for writing this article (sometime later) I conducted several online 'stimulated recall'[42] sessions with the performers (and exchanged further emails), to gather deeper insights. The video of the final performance allowed us to collectively reflect on each piece in turn, as well as establish our 'overall' thoughts (see section 4.8). Via the Facebook livestream, viewer comments and feedback ('likes' and so forth) were received from all over the world (including US, UK, UAE, Iran and Syria) and were recorded (by taking screenshots). A short online review (by revered Persian music critic Abolhassan Mokhtabad) was posted and shared on Facebook (along with a video excerpt from the performance); this was also documented and archived for corroboration. Various audio and video recordings of rehearsals (taken initially to assist project development at the time) were also revisited during post-project analyses (and proved especially useful in terms of examining process).

3.5 Role and Approach to Leadership

As I had been commissioned specifically to conduct this project, my 'role' had been labelled on publicity materials as 'musical-director'; *I* was therefore ultimately responsible for the programme's successful delivery. That said, I was conscious throughout to not inadvertently become the 'auteur'; I continuously stressed to the ensemble that this was not 'my band', and that the idea was to create music that was collectively *ours*. I 'led' the rehearsals more in terms of logistical and pragmatic aspects (times; who would arrive when; establishing what we could work on in someone's absence and so forth), rather than dictating what *musical* actions were to be taken or what content could be included. This quasi-passive approach to leadership raised some interesting issues regarding the group dynamic initially (for example, on the first day one musician appeared more reluctant to orate opinions or provide creative input – I discovered later that he had presumed that, as he was being paid, I must be 'the boss', and he should therefore act as a 'worker'),[43] but as

our individual relationships developed, so too did our genuine sense of ensemble, and each member became actively and crucially engaged in the rehearsal sessions. I feel my role in *practice* therefore more closely embodied that of an intermediary; a kind of 'musical-facilitator', rather than a conventional musical-director. This notion is supported by comments made by various ensemble members during post-project reflections. Faraz said, 'the initial ideas, rough written materials, enabled you [Rich] to manage the rehearsals, but also make the musicians feel a part of the project, and allowed them to bring out their strong parts and opinions'.[44] Similarly, Sirvan commented, 'at the very first session of the rehearsal a good friendship between us was made … Rich knew Middle Eastern music very well, had brought interesting ideas for the concert, and he made us feel free to use *our* ideas in the work'. [45]

3.6 Limitations

To conclude this section, it is important to reiterate that whilst the objective was to act with as much ethical consideration as possible – and measures *were* taken throughout to achieve this – there is no escaping the fact that this project is, by its very nature, inherently Western; and, as such may carry implicit connotations regarding cross-cultural power-relations. Here, a 'token' Western composer/music-maker has been commissioned to 'lead' an intercultural collaboration, for which each musician is paid a fee. The goal is to produce a 'product' (the final performance), which will be 'consumed' by an audience. That said, one could also argue that the application of a democratic or 'open-minded' approach to leadership to counter this is, in and of itself, equally Western, assumed ideologically to be a necessary condition, and again reflecting a form of cultural bias. Therefore, to be clear, when I talk of intercultural collaboration, music-cultural fusion, and the various hybridity strains explored in relation to this project, I do so referring solely to the interactions, creative processes, musical goals and results which could feasibly be observed and/or achieved, given these embedded limitations.

4. Project Analysis

This section provides a brief synopsis of each performance piece, discussing any noteworthy observations made during the rehearsal process and examining the musical outcomes in relation to hybridity strain. Drawing from Wren's 'Discursive Interculturality' as a means to critique intercultural work, I have considered qualitative and semiotic factors in relation to performance (e.g. interplay, collective timbre, musical gesture, and so forth), and engaged in dialogic evaluation (see section 3.4) to conduct a hermeneutic analysis of both 'the process through which cultural interactions are facilitated' and the 'musical object in terms of the record of musical interactions'.[46]

4.1 Fragment(s) #1

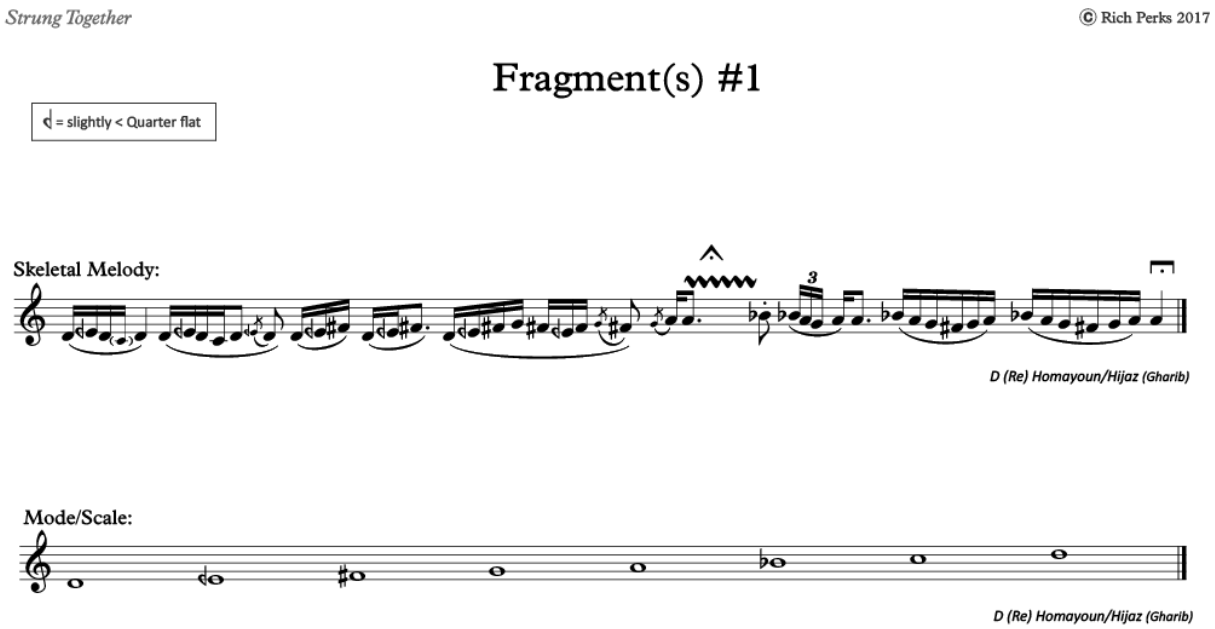


Figure 3 *Fragment(s) #1, Starting Point*

VIDEO EXAMPLE 1 – Fragment(s) #1, Final Performance

Fragment(s) #1 comprises only a short skeletal melody and a mode[47] (see Figure 3). There is no pre-determined structure, nor is there any suggestion of duration, metre, or weighting of importance toward either component; the melody here is nothing more than a 'model' and the rhythmic denominations are approximations only. In Persian classical tradition it is common for improvisations to revolve 'around unspecified central nuclear melodies' where the 'manifestation of the skeletal melodic outlines into a piece of music varies greatly from one performance to another, depending on the degree of freedom assumed in extemporization … It is rhythmically, also generally, free and flexible'.[48] This approach is echoed in Arabic traditional musics, where improvisation focuses on the 'intricacy of the melodic line and the decorations, the calls and responses, and the pushing and pulling against rhythmic infrastructure'.[49] This starting point therefore provided ample interpretive and creative 'space' for performers from each music-culture to develop and expand upon the material, and thus collectively explore various states of music-cultural hybridity, from the onset.

Initially the piece needed transposing, using G as the tonic, as Faraz was unable perform this mode in D without re-tuning the entire santur.[50] We began by exchanging ideas and improvising around the skeletal melody. At some point,

it was suggested the melody could be performed on fretless guitar using an EBow to emulate the timbre and phrasing style of a ney.[51] Faisal incorporated a traditional darabuka rhythm in 4/4 and the 'feel' of the piece started to develop. Over the week, a structural outline, comprising melodic content, the musicians' entries, and a series of pre-determined 'interaction' points – i.e. our collective backbone – became more defined. This was continually revised right up until the final rehearsal, during which we decided to add a solo santur extemporization to the beginning of the piece; this would introduce the mode in a 'more traditional' Persian style, before merging into the duet-based exposition of the 'skeletal melody' (led by the fretless electric guitar).

When reflecting on the recording as a group, we each felt that (in terms of music-cultural interaction) this piece conveyed a clear sense of collective cohesion, not least demonstrated by the fluid exchanges of improvised phrases throughout.[52] This piece, in general, leans towards Middle Eastern approaches to music making, which remain foundationally dominant for the most part. The inclusion of the distorted, 'rock-sounding', fretless electric guitar solo signifies a degree of Western influence without appearing 'alien';[53] though juxtaposed in a timbral sense, this solo incorporates suitable microtonal gestures and inflections throughout (replicating those found in Middle Eastern musics), reinforcing the notion that multi-directional 'enrichment' has occurred through our collective praxis. This suggests an overall leaning towards music-cultural assimilation. That said, the fact that each music-culture preserves its timbral independence throughout implies a sense of coexistence also. Furthermore, I would contend that there are several ephemeral moments within this performance which intimate music-cultural synthesis, in terms of the ensemble assuming a distinctive collective timbre,[54] as well as conveying suitably 'adapted' *content*[55] (see section 2.2, Figure 1; and section 4.7, Figure 10).

4.2 Fragment(s) #2

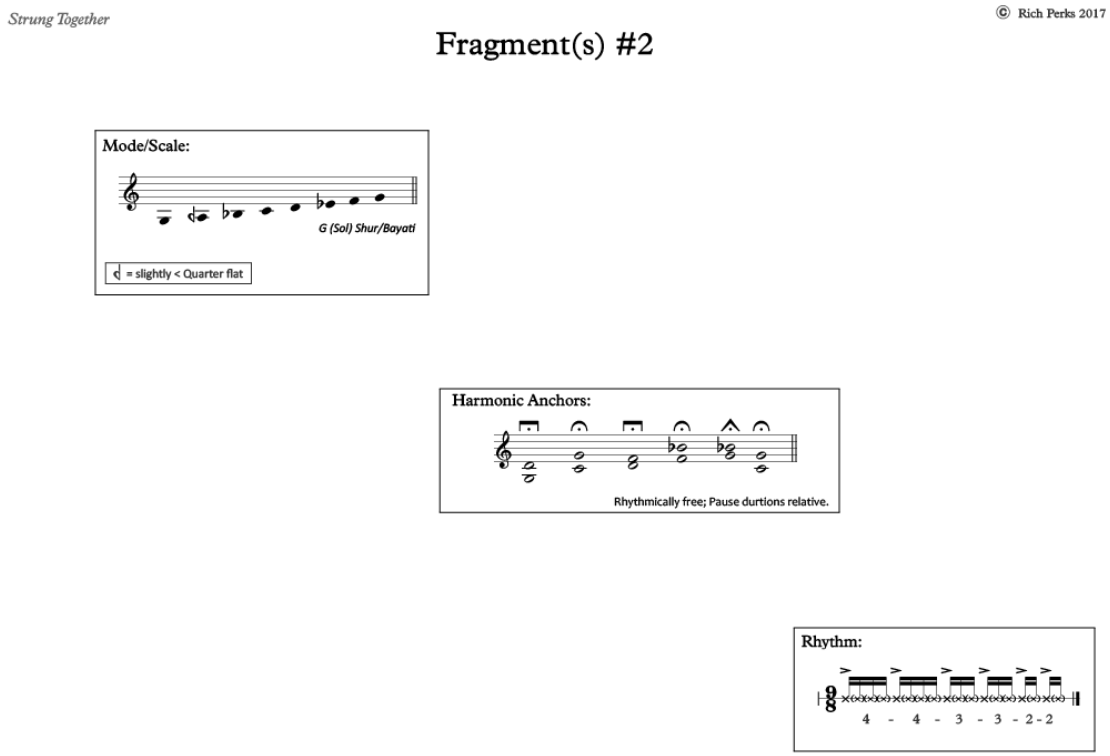


Figure 4 *Fragment(s) #2, Starting Point*

VIDEO EXAMPLE 2 – Fragment(s) #2 (Encore), Final Performance

Fragment(s) #2 consists of three small pieces of musical information: a mode, some 'Harmonic Anchors', and a rhythm (see Figure 4). The mode included here is common to both Middle Eastern music-cultures and the rhythmic cell outlines a basic pattern found in various forms of Syrian and Kurdish music. Ordinarily, Persian classical music 'does not employ' polyphony;[56] similarly, 'harmony is not given much attention in Arabic composition'.[57] The inclusion here of more 'vertically formed' harmonic structures – and the absence of tangible melodic information – was therefore intended to provoke different musical outcomes.

There were some wonderful collectively creative moments during the rehearsals on this material. At one point, early on, I started playing the rhythm on guitar, and Faisal (who didn't read musical notation) immediately identified it as 'the Turkish-Syrian rhythm'. He suggested he could interweave this pattern with the 'Kurdish version of this beat', which contained a slight variation in accent. The ensemble concurred, and in the final incarnation Faisal would alternate between both to create rhythmic tension and release at different stages. The 'theme' emerged completely spontaneously: Raman combined the rhythmic pattern and the mode beautifully during an improvisatory passage, which the ensemble instinctively echoed, one-by-one, until it became continually looped in unison. We then decided to develop an 'answer' to the phrase, and it soon evolved into a set 'call and response' section. This illustrates that the process of collective composition here comprised both verbal and non-verbal forms of 'dialogue'. As the piece became more organized, as well as forming part of the introduction, this 'call and response' passage was also employed throughout as a structural 'marker'. Each improviser would denote the end of their solo by playing the 'call' twice, to which the whole ensemble would reply with the 'response' twice, in unison. The entire call and response section was then repeated by the band (again in full unison) to signal the transition to the next soloist.[58] Ultimately, this call and response section provided the foundation of a 'collective backbone' – around which individual extemporizations occurred – generating a strong, piece-specific identity, whilst leaving ample space for improvisatory freedom (see Figure 5).
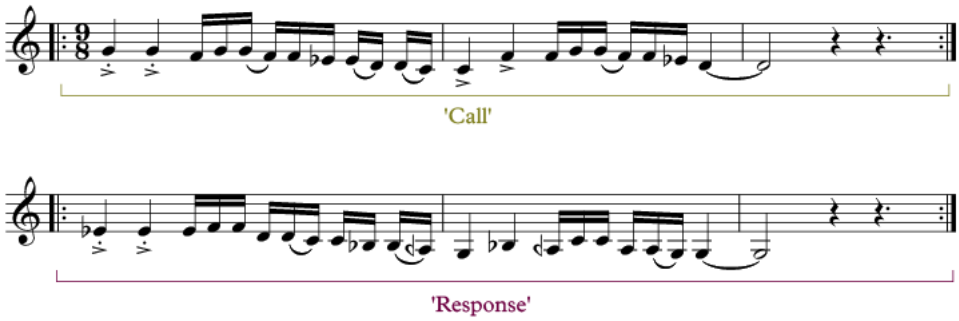


Figure 5 *'Call and Response Section' developed from Fragment(s) #2 Starting Point*

Derek Bailey holds that 'the essence of improvisation, its intuitive, telepathic foundation, is best explored in a group situation',[59] and in this respect, I feel this piece was the most successful. Elements of each music-culture were continually injected throughout the rehearsal process, and the piece became a rich fusion of our respective music-cultural

signifiers, articulations and traditions. Though somewhat 'minimal' in terms of musical content, the *Fragment(s) #2* starting point still provided enough focus to stimulate improvisatory explorations, generate 'definite' musical themes, and evolve into an eclectically informed collective backbone; accordingly, the final realization appears to have an overall aesthetic inclination towards music-cultural synthesis (see section 2.2, Figure 1; and section 4.7, Figure 10). All members of the ensemble retrospectively concurred that this piece felt the most organic in development, combining elements from each music-culture, reflecting all, whilst simultaneously sounding fresh.[60] Reflecting on the final performance, Raman remarked 'the second song feels like "us"; we really play that one together, from the heart'.[61] Similarly, Faisal commented 'I especially liked the 9/8 beat composition; we were able to use the beat with the Western approaches, to create a beautiful crossover between the music systems'.[62]

4.3 Fragment(s) #4

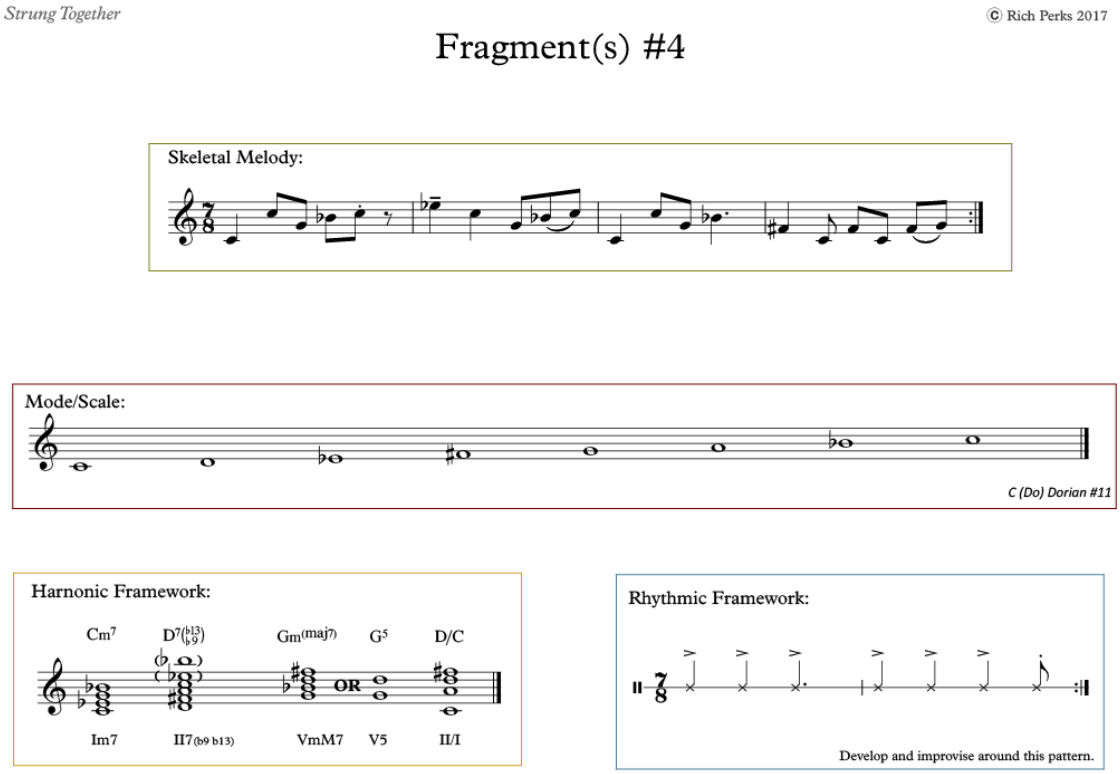


Figure 6 Fragment(s) #4 – Starting Point

VIDEO EXAMPLE 3 – Fragment(s) #4, Final Performance

Fragment(s) #4 contains more musical information than the previous two examples (see Figure 6). The underlying harmony is based on the mode of Dorian #11, and all notes adhere to equal temperament. This allows richer harmony to be taken advantage of, and by proxy, nudges the starting point further towards a Western aesthetic.[63] Depicting four components – a skeletal melody, a mode, chords, and a rhythmic framework – this starting point more closely resembles a conventional Western musical backbone (see section 3.1); that said, rather importantly, there is no suggestion that any of the constituent figures are 'fixed'. In rehearsals, the skeletal melody was initially employed as a kind of rhythmic and harmonic 'underpinning', often played on the fretless electric guitar through an octave-generator pedal; serving as a 'quasi-bass-line' with improvisations placed 'on top'. However, after exploring variations in the melodic content,

rhythmic emphasis points, addition of solos and so forth, it was decided that the skeletal melody would instead function in a similar vein to a typical jazz 'head' to 'bookend' the piece; it was also agreed it would be played in unison by all melodic instruments. The solo 'backings' were a regular alternation between chords Im7 and II7 (the latter often played as a first inversion to emphasize a dissonant tritone movement in the bass part); and the pulse assumed both 7/8 and 7/4 'feels' at different junctures. My performative role in this piece, for the most part, resembled that of a contemporary jazz rhythm-section member, and moreover, a 'substitute' bassist.

The final realization of *Fragment(s) #4* predominantly resembled music-cultural assimilation, this time with Western qualities emerging as 'dominant' (see section 2.2, Figure 1). It seems that this piece adopts the general aesthetic of modern jazz, whilst being 'enriched' with Middle Eastern timbres, articulations and embellishments. 'Common ground' is discernible by way of rhythmic interpretation, interaction and unison passages,[64] which together suggest a reasonable level of music-cultural exchange. There are however, several moments of improvisatory 'uncertainty', where interactions admittedly lean more towards music-cultural homogenization.[65] In addition, partly due to our seeking diversity in the programme, but also partly because several members of the ensemble expressed that they felt less comfortable improvising freely within this piece (for one member there were tuning and register limitations; the other, a lack of confidence in combining this particular mode within the 'slower' 7/4 metre), it was agreed that only I and Sirvan would adopt the role of 'soloist' in this piece. This suggests that the musical information conveyed by the starting point – and the way in which it was interpreted by each performer – directly informed the process, and in turn the resultant music, regardless of the underlying premise that anything could be changed or adapted at any time. In this instance, it seems an element of partial exclusion (see section 2.2, Figure 1) was unintentionally 'injected into' the working process from the onset (see section 4.7, Figure 10).

4.4 Fragment(s) #6

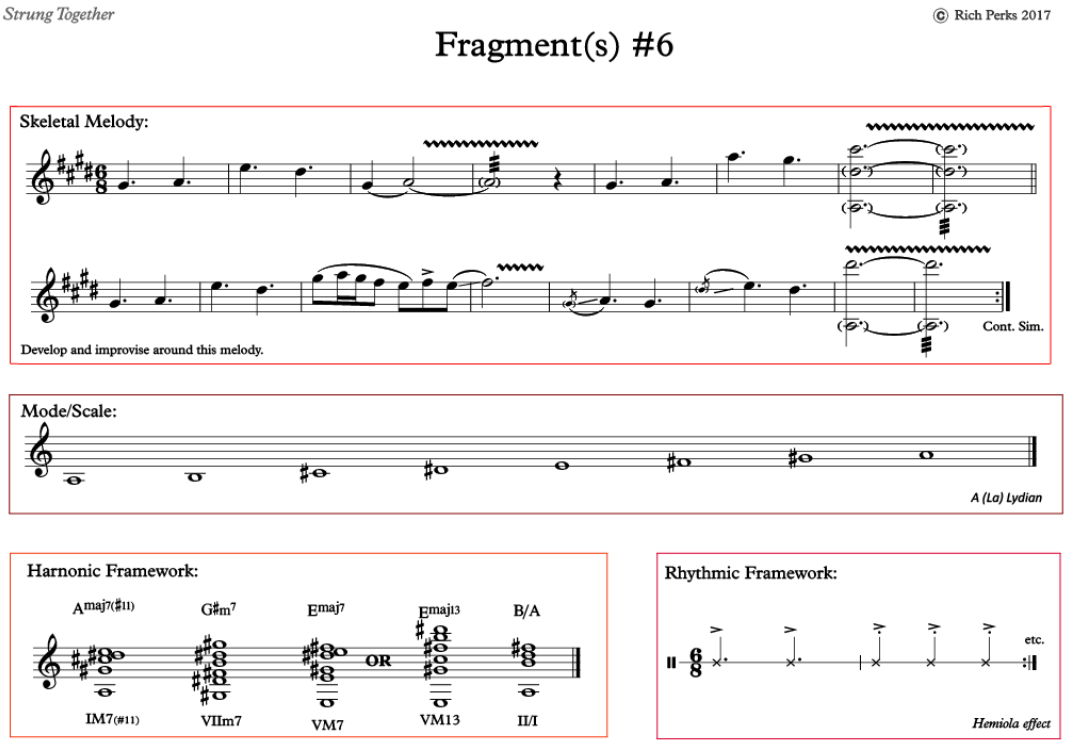


Figure 7 Fragment(s) #6 – Starting Point

VIDEO EXAMPLE 4 – Fragment(s) #6, Final Performance

Fragment(s) #6 includes a rhythmic framework common to Persian, Arabic and Kurdish music-cultures, combined with a mode and harmonic framework more prevalent in Western musics (see Figure 7). The skeletal melody was intentionally written such that it could be placed on top of the 'suggested' chords, irrespective of their ordering. *Fragment(s) #6* presented the most perceptibly pre-determined structure of any starting point used. Whilst this stimulus is arguably positioned more towards Western paradigms, its exploration was no less fruitful in terms of collaborative creativity, problem solving and bonding as an ensemble. As events transpired, this starting point functioned as much as a 'provider of challenges' as a musical stimulus; it demanded that we re-examine both our individual resources and collective potentials to develop and realize a convincing piece.

Evidently, the Lydian mode is not common to traditional Persian music(s); this was not something I was aware of when producing the original stimulus. Furthermore, it was impossible for Faraz to play this mode on santur accurately in tempered tuning (regardless of transposition). My initial response was for us to adapt the material accordingly, but Faraz intimated that he would in fact prefer to play percussion (his second instrument) on this piece, giving us more instrumentational variety overall. More pertinently, this instrumental change would enable us more polyrhythmic options when emphasizing the 6/8 (hemiola-style) pattern. This provides an example of how reworking a problem democratically and pragmatically through the collaborative process can, instead of fostering exclusion, result in an augmented state of music-cultural coexistence. A further factor was Sirvan's lack of familiarity with this mode: he repeatedly asked me "should E be the tonic?". Of course, this would mean the scale were E major (not A Lydian) – a sonority he was more familiar with. When I confirmed that A *was* the root, he would laugh, and manically – partially frustrated, though equally intrigued – experiment with different phrases and finger positions on the oud, to try to make them circumnavigate and/or resolve using A as the foundational pitch. It is important to note that Sirvan was clearly excited by this musically, regarding it as an 'accepted challenge', and made a concerted effort between rehearsals to develop his articulation using this mode – essentially mirroring the 'homework' I was engaged in myself, practising the subtle microtonal inflections required by other pieces on the fretless guitar. The process was compelling us to adopt aspects from each other's native musical aesthetics to realize our collective ideas; and thus, engage in *meaningful* intercultural exchange.

In aesthetic terms – in a similar vein to *Fragment(s) #4* – the final performance of this piece predominantly reflects music-cultural assimilation, within a Western-dominant 'host' music-culture (see section 2.2, Figure 1). The rhythmic interpretations, however, clearly draw from both Arabic and Persian traditions, thus implying a degree of coexistence; here the percussive rhythms stand independently, whilst simultaneously functioning together to achieve a common musical goal. This supports the hypothesis that multiple hybridity strains may be traversed – or may even occur concomitantly – during a single realization (See Figure 10 below). This piece is by far the most recognizable from starting point to final performance – likely due to the greater degree of melodic structure included on the page.

4.5 Fragment(s) #7

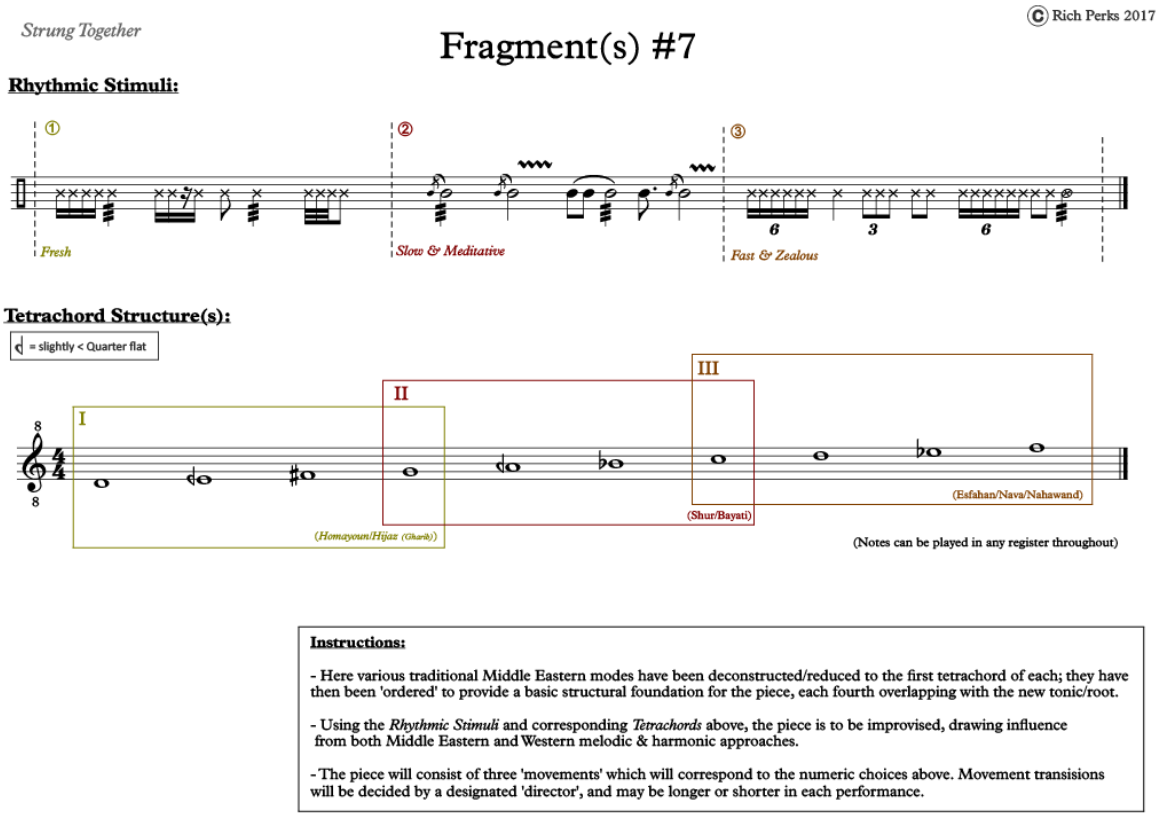


Figure 8 Fragment(s) #7 – Starting Point

VIDEO EXAMPLE 5 – Fragment(s) #7, Final Performance

Fragment(s) #7 suggests gradual transition between three simple tetrachords common to both Persian and Arabic traditions (see Figure 8). The three (vertically separated) sections might be considered 'movements', drawing from Western classical structures, and are each connected via a 'pivot-pitch' – a note shared by each adjacent tetrachord.[66] The inclusion of written 'instructions' draws from indeterminate composition techniques developed in the 1950s,[67] though were used as an 'optional guide' only; as with all aspects of the starting point approach they were open entirely to alteration and/or rejection, as decided by the ensemble.

This starting point provided the foundation for an insightful collaborative compositional process.[68] The piece took multiple forms during rehearsals, where various combinations of instruments – and performative roles – were explored. We each experimented with leading 'movement' transitions, and we developed distinct improvisatory 'signalling' mechanisms. It was agreed that a *different* performer would be responsible for navigating the ensemble through each section change, and that that musician would take responsibility for deciding *when* the transition would occur.[69] Various rhythmic 'grooves' were established for movements one and three, influenced partly by the rhythmic fragments provided by the stimulus; it was decided that movement two should be rhythmically 'free', with no obvious sense of pulse. A 'theme' reflecting the rhythmic pattern and tetrachord provided – created by Sirvan and me

(accidentally whilst improvising together during a lunch break!) – served as the only 'set' melodic content and was included in section three; it was subsequently 'harmonized' by the ensemble to build musical tension towards the end of the piece. All these constituent musical properties and real-time decision-making systems, together, formed our collective backbone.

Analysing the recording, I hear that the piece is composed of a series of moments that discernibly alternate between prominent states of assimilation (where improvisations are 'housed' within idiomatic convention) and synthesis (where the overarching sound, or 'feel' of the music appears aesthetically removed from any specific tradition), with the latter increasingly pronounced towards the end of the performance (see section 2.2, Figure 1; and section 4.7, Figure 10).[70] This was one of the most satisfying pieces to develop and it came together very quickly, within only several hours' rehearsal. This may be a result of our increased social and/or kinaesthetic awareness by day four, or it may indicate that the type of musical stimuli provided by the starting point was particularly conducive to collective creativity; most likely though, the result was due to a combination of these factors.

4.6 Fragment(s) #8

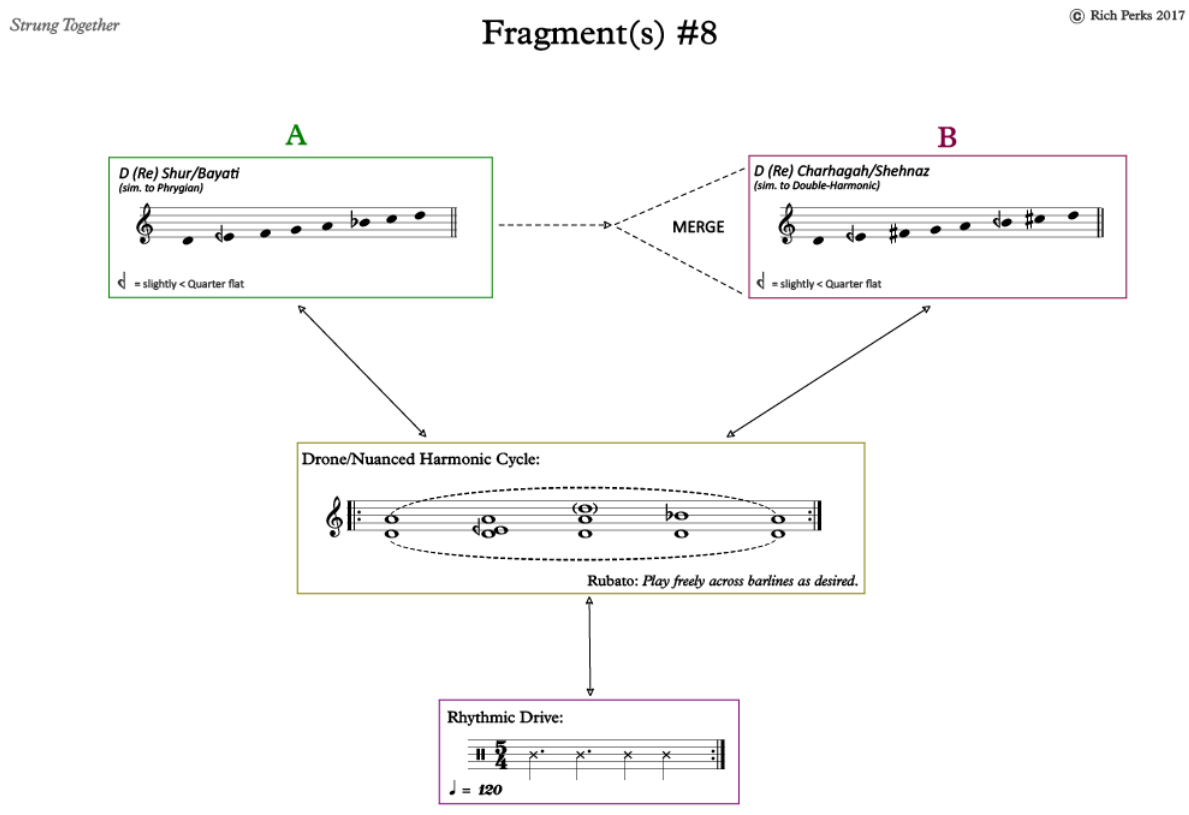


Figure 9 Fragment(s) #8 – Starting Point

VIDEO EXAMPLE 6 – Fragment(s) #8, Final Performance

Fragment(s)# 8 intimates a simple transition between two modes, a 'drone-cycle', and a 5/4 rhythmic pattern (see Figure 9). The structural implication is essentially to 'get from A to B … somehow', and that 'vertical' ideas may be traversed in any way. This starting point evolved considerably during rehearsals. Consequentially, the collective backbone

developed was, by the end, notably ‘removed’ from the original stimulus. This was one of the final pieces we tackled, by which time we had developed a confident working relationship and were playing much more cohesively and intuitively as an improvisatory ensemble. It was decided that a third mode would be placed in-between the two indicated on the page, to produce a smoother harmonic transition.[71] We had also began shaping the concert programme by this point, which indirectly informed the way we structured this piece. Placing *Fragment(s) #8* at the end of the show, it was agreed that this piece should allow each performer the opportunity to perform an ‘exposed’ extemporization; and that this would directly reflect *their* improvisatory tradition. We devised a ‘mirrored’ structure, such that each musician entered at a different point, and Raman’s vocal improvisations ‘bookended’, and thus accentuated, the transition between the first and final modes. We interacted by collectively responding to the ‘main’ soloist throughout, regardless of the performative role assumed at the time; so even if providing rhythmic support, a musician was free to inject an ‘answer’ or repeat the soloist’s melodies, at any time, adopting the same level of ‘prominence’.

This structure intentionally provided a platform for each musician to explicitly improvise in a way closest to their tradition. Therefore, if we consider the piece in terms of process, a sense of music-cultural coexistence was clearly encouraged; but when improvisatory interactions accompany these extemporizations – with discernible idiomatic leanings towards each music-culture respectively – the aesthetic result resembles a form of music-cultural assimilation (see section 2.2, Figure 1), with one tradition ‘leading’ that section. When improvising more ‘freely’ at various junctures – notably during solo ‘climaxes’ and/or transition points – the ensemble behaves more like a ‘self-organising system’,[72] yielding an original sound-world. In such instances the collective timbre is somehow emancipated from any of the three traditions – implying momentary states of music-cultural synthesis.[73] Faraz reinforced this view, commenting that ‘those moments near the end of each solo, when we were all just playing, sound like something totally different’.[74] I suggest therefore, that this starting point – moreover, the collective backbone it prompted – provided a model from which music-cultural coexistence, assimilation, and synthesis each emerged to a significant degree, whether simultaneously or at different junctures throughout the realization (see section 4.7, Figure 10)

4.7 Comparative Leanings Towards Hybridity strains

This post-project analysis, in conjunction with the ongoing reflective-practice conducted throughout, has enabled me to generate a comparative visual representation, depicting the leanings of each *Fragment(s)* towards each music-cultural hybridity strain (see Figure10).

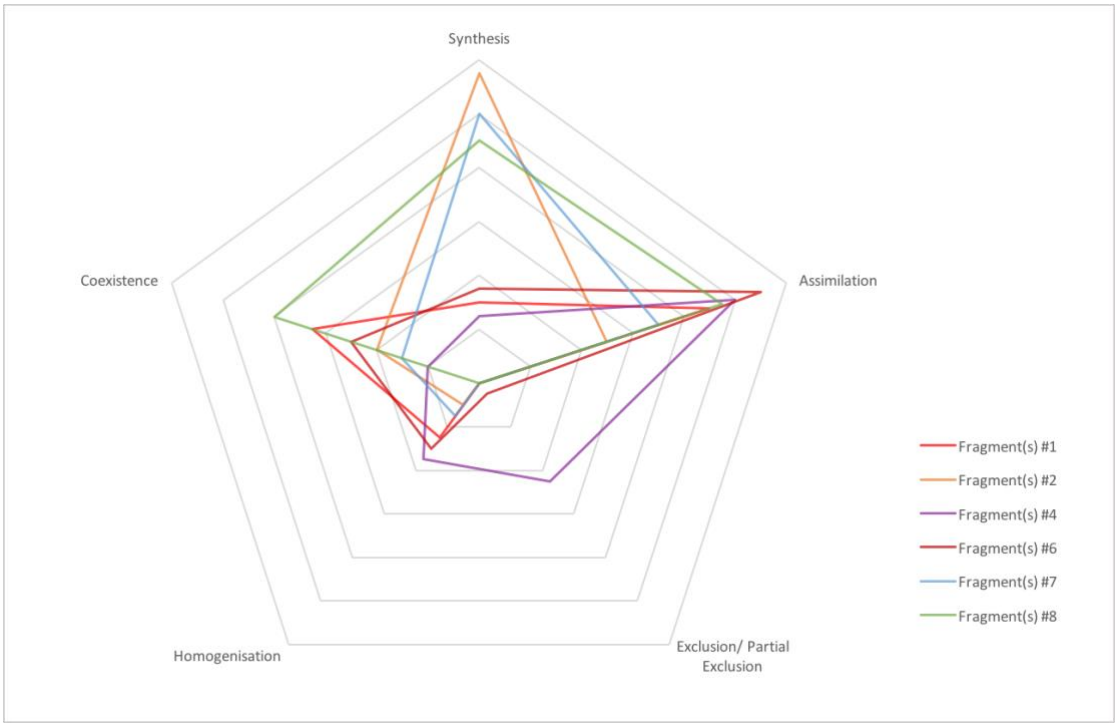


Figure 10 *Comparative Leanings of Each Fragment(s) Towards Music-Cultural Hybridity strains*[75]

Fragment(s) #1 was predominantly based around music making approaches prevalent throughout the Middle East, any 'Western-style' input generally converged towards, or integrated with, these systems (resulting in a form of music-cultural assimilation whereby the two Middle Eastern musics were structurally and aesthetically 'dominant'). *Fragment(s) #2* had the most obvious leaning towards music-cultural synthesis; the lack of 'detailed' musical material provided by the starting point (see section 4.2), coupled with the point in time we began developing this piece (several days in; with increased group confidence), resulted in a piece that contained more frequent (and longer sustained) sections that convey a 'highly distinctive, collective, musical voice' (see section 2.2). When more detailed (or defined) melodic information was provided by a starting point (*Fragment(s) # 4* and *Fragment(s) # 6*, for example), the collective contribution to melody diminished; consequentially these scores functioned more like conventional Western 'backbones', with the final realizations more obviously reflecting the pre-composed material/content (and therefore leaning further towards music-cultural assimilation and/or partial exclusion). However, when more space – ambiguity even – for thematic development existed (*Fragment(s) #2*, *Fragment(s) #7* and *Fragment(s) # 8*, for example), despite a basic harmonic grounding being suggested, the potential for collectively devised melodies increased exponentially and the final realizations conveyed a much greater sense of collective composition, which in turn informed the accompanying improvisations (thus leaning more towards music-cultural synthesis). This may reflect the fact that, traditionally, both Persian and Arabic musicians create improvisations based primarily on melodic content; each 'mode' represents a tonal palette in which specific melodies are 'housed' and/or may be embellished from, but ultimately, the melodies come first. Perhaps, therefore, it is the case that (in such collaborations) when presented with a set melody to begin with, it 'makes sense' to work with *that*; and if there is no melody, one must be established as a precursor for significant musical development to occur.

4.8 Final Reflections

When I first envisaged this project, the primary goal was to explore the nuanced interactions that occur when combining different music-cultures and to consider the different hybridity strains that may emerge (see section 2.2, Figure 1). In this sense, Strung Together was successful; and as a case study it provides significant insights into such creative practice. Various degrees and forms of music-cultural hybridity occurred throughout, both in terms of process and aesthetic; we established a 'collective timbre' and ultimately *some* level of music-cultural interchange was discernible across every piece. This view was echoed by Sirvan who said 'the beauty of this experience for me was that in my musical culture (Iranian music) usually only one or two musicians improvise, but in this performance five musicians from different musical cultures improvised together and could reach to one and the same musical expression'.[76] Similarly, Faraz claimed, 'there is no particular piece I can mention as the best, I liked all the work as a whole; pieces had their own characters and were all interesting in one way or another'.[77] The 'distinctive' nature of this project was highlighted too in an online review, which positively described the concert as 'a *rather different* type of group improvisation'.[78]

The contributing musicians each expressed a sense of achievement in developing the programme in such a short time frame. Sirvan commented, 'I thought it was a very short time to get ready for one-and-a-half-hour performance; I didn't think we could create an acceptable performance this way … finally, we had a great performance.'[79] Faisal concurred when he exclaimed, '[only] a short period of time was given to us to create the music, and we did it!' [80] On the prospect of having had a longer gestation period, Faraz suggested, 'I am sure some pieces would evolve to another level of artistic expression if we had more time; also, different works would likely have emerged. … This would have been an astonishing experience if it were to be continued.'[81] The performers also appeared particularly proud of the overall 'result' and the final concert performance. Faraz said, 'this was one of the most interesting projects I've been involved in where musicians with different backgrounds gathered together to create art; I believe it worked well for many reasons'.[82] Sirvan claimed that, 'many of the audience told me that it was one of the best concerts that they had watched in the Bay Area'.[83] Faisal rather elegantly summarized his experience, when he said

> The project was certainly a special one. Meeting you and the guys and working together for the first time and the ease that I felt around everybody and around the effort to put the music together. I had a great time working out and practising the music, and I was impressed with the music we made combining metres found in Middle Eastern music with Western approaches. … I appreciate that we were all able to accomplish a great performance at the end, and the friendship and family feel that was created between all of us; I hope we do this again.[84]

It seems, therefore, that the contributing musicians felt both motivated by the processes and comfortable within the working environment inaugurated throughout this project. Furthermore, the collective sense of pride and accomplishment in relation to the finished product suggests that each player was truly invested in the music from start to finish.

Conclusion

By considering the various 'hybridity strains' that emerge during intercultural-improvisatory collaborations, this practice-led case study has enabled me to develop, test and reflect upon an innovative working methodology which may serve as a model for others working in similar territories moving forward. Fundamental to the process was the use of *starting points*, pre-composed stimuli containing varying degrees of musical information. As discussed, these served to overcome creative inertia and proved to be invaluable – particularly in pragmatic terms – given the constraints presented. The starting points acted as catalysts, both socially and musically, and often evolved into *collective backbones* throughout the rehearsal process. Not unlike conventional Western 'backbones',[85] each collective backbone provided an aesthetic and/or structural guide – a musical 'map' – upon which the final works were based; the significant difference was that they were developed and refined *communally* during rehearsals and they thus reflected the creative voice and performative approach/es of each musician involved. Comprising different combinations of musical notation, aural-transfer and memorization, the collective backbones served as *new* improvisatory 'models',[86] uniquely specific to *this* ensemble; accordingly, the final musical performance embodied and conveyed a convincing sense of co-ownership.

One may reasonably question the need to provide starting points as part of the process: why not simply get together and create collective backbones from scratch? In response, I maintain that in this situation – working with an ensemble comprising five strangers representing three distinctive music-cultures, with only one week to produce a weighty final product – the use of *some* form of preliminary musical stimuli helped to tackle numerous issues immeasurably. Firstly, having a prefatory musical focus enabled 'free play'[87] to occur straightaway, acting as a form of musical – and social – 'ice-breaker'; where each musician could tentatively 'dip their toe in the water' before becoming fully immersed. Furthermore, providing starting points that were carefully constructed to include elements familiar to each music-culture (as well as each instrument type) implied a sense of conscious music-cultural consideration from the onset, and helped to establish my role as more 'musical-facilitator', than – potentially dictatorial – 'musical director'; this instilled a level of *trust* amongst the ensemble[88] and empowered the contributing musicians. More pertinently, the starting points helped to set a precedent, ensuring the approaches to improvisation and music-making of each music-culture (and therefore each performer) were suitably integrated from the beginning, and would continue to be so throughout the development of the material into collective backbones and/or full realizations – this was crucial to the success of the project. Having conducted this investigation, I am further convinced that for 'truly' eclectic intercultural music to be created, each music-culture *must* be 'sufficiently accommodated' at a foundational level.[89] This ensures that *some* degree of contextual relevance exists for each member of the ensemble throughout the process; thus, providing an appropriate space for concomitant musical properties to emerge more naturally. If a similar project were to be conducted over a longer gestation period, [90] perhaps an alternative approach could be employed whereby all players are encouraged to bring their own 'pre-composed' ideas (to be used as either backbones, improvisatory models, starting points, and so forth), thus fortifying each music-culture's starting position in terms of multi-directional-exchange.

It seems that when creating a creative 'third space'[91] – particularly if the collaboration is so profoundly based around improvisation – hybridity is in a constant state of flux, able to take different forms, and navigate multiple hybridity

strains, depending on the kind of interaction engaged in by the ensemble at the time. In sum, hybridity strains are *fluid*. Realizations rarely reflect a commitment to any one hybridity strain in isolation; they are not mutually exclusive; and the final performances often display a balance – or combination – of several, whether traversed linearly at different junctures, or occurring interchangeably throughout. It is curious to note also, that hybridity strains exist in terms of both process and/or resultant musical aesthetic; furthermore, the two need not equate. For example, during the developmental stages, musical *approaches* might well 'coexist' in equal measures, however the final realization might *sound* more like music-cultural assimilation in terms of discernible musical qualities. Similarly, an organizational system (e.g. collective backbone) might appear to suggest an 'obvious' form of music-cultural assimilation, yet the performance situation may unexpectedly allow more room for synthesis than previously assumed, and so on. In this sense, a 'well-defined' state of music-cultural coexistence seems to be the rarest to encounter in a 'distilled' form (unless, of course, a piece is divided into sections whereby musicians perform from their tradition separately and can unequivocally preserve their respective musical differences and/or 'opacity').[92] What starts out as music-cultural coexistence (particularly in terms of process), more often than not transforms into a form of assimilation, where one music-culture becomes – however marginally – the dominant influence. This should not necessarily be presumed to be a bad thing; one may even argue that in such cases the transmutation from coexistence yields a more *coalesced* – less hierarchical – form of music-cultural assimilation. Lastly, it is important to stress that synthesis ought not be considered the 'superior' strain of music-cultural hybridity; each has its own creative value both in terms of process and resultant aesthetic. Of course, it is highly likely there exist further sub-categories of music-cultural hybridity than those presented here – the subject is infinitely complex – and future work with different creative environments, combinations of musical archetypes, ensemble structures and so forth, may advance this concept to reveal a spectrum of possibilities and further contribute to the wider discourse surrounding hybridity.

In conclusion, this project has illustrated that by inaugurating a democratic environment where manifold approaches to music-making are properly considered and respected at a structural level, music-cultural hybridity is achievable within a limited time frame. Furthermore, through the collective reflection on and openness to various 'hybridity strains', it is possible to cultivate a *fresh* kind of collaboration – one which is broad reaching in terms of intercultural communication, musical interaction and improvisatory interplay. This conscious and multifarious approach to embrace hybridity can enable the contributing musicians to adapt more dynamically the creative possibilities at hand and, in doing so, become more intrinsically 'Strung Together'.

Endnotes

[1] Frank Camilleri and Maria Kapsali, 'On Hybridity', *Performance Research*, 25/4 (2020), 1–6.

[2] See, for example, Marwan M. Kraidy, 'Hybridity in Cultural Globalization', *Communication Theory*, 12/3 (2002), 316–39.

[3] *Diaspora Arts Connection* (www.diasporaartsconnection.org) is a non-profit organization that produces events which foster deeper understanding of different diasporic cultures within San Francisco Bay area communities and helps artists from different cultures and parts of the world to collaborate and produce valuable artistic presentations. www.diasporaartsconnection.org

[4] Strung Together: A Night of World Music Improvisation was performed on Saturday 17 September 2017, at the Burial Clay Theatre (African American Art & Culture Complex), San Francisco.

[5] See Bruno Nettl, 'Thoughts on Improvisation: A Comparative Approach', *Musical Quarterly*, 60/1 (1974), 1–19.

[6] Persian classical music (sometimes referred to as the 'urban art-music' of Persia/Iran), is based upon a vast canonic collection of melodies known as the *radif*. The individual melodies, or *gusheh*, are characterized by specific modal and intervallic properties, and are organized into various systems called *dastgāh*. It is important to note that 'each gusheh functions only as a model for improvisation, not as a finished composition' (Ella Zonis, *Classical Persian Music* (Harvard University Press, 1973), 62). Furthermore, during a traditional performance, a performer will select multiple *gusheh-ha* – from a single dastgāh – to devise a 'framework', around which they construct a highly individualistic extemporization. For more information about Persian classical music, see Hormoz Farhat, *The Dastgāh Concept in Persian Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and Laudan Nooshin, *Iranian Classical Music: The Discourses and Practice of Creativity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).

[7] There are many forms of Arabic music; genres, styles and improvisatory praxes vary throughout the Arab World. Most, however, have in common that they are rooted in maqām (a centuries-old system of scales, melodic patterns, ornamentations and aesthetic conventions). Furthermore, Arabic musics invariably exhibit *some* degree of improvisation (whether via nuanced melodic embellishments, or prominent solo expositions – such as taqsîm). Therefore, throughout this investigation, 'Arabic traditional' music will refer to any musics from the region that are fundamentally based in maqām, that also contain discernible aspects of improvisation. For detailed information about Arabic maqām performance, see: Johnny Farraj and Sami Abu Shumays, *Inside Arabic Music: Arabic Maqām Performance and Theory in the 20th Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); and Mondher Ayari and Stephen McAdams, 'Aural Analysis of Arabic Improvised Instrumental Music (Taqsîm)', *Music Perception*, 21/2 (2003), 159–216.

[8] 'Western contemporary' here refers to the eclectic approach adopted by many modern-day Western improvisers – including me – that collectively draws from the improvisatory practices of multiple genres (e.g. jazz, rock, fusion and so forth) as well as from more 'abstract' systems such as 'free' improvisation and indeterminacy. Improviser-composer John Zorn is a prime example of a leading practitioner who chooses to work in this way. For a comprehensive overview of contemporary Western approaches to improvisation, see Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* (New York: Da Capo, 1993).

[9] Robin Nelson, *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 37–44.

[10] Ric Knowles, *Theatre and Interculturalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 4.

[11] Toby Wren, *Improvising Culture: Discursive Interculturality as a Critical Tool, Aesthetic, and Methodology for Intercultural Music* (PhD Thesis, Griffith University, Queensland, 2014), 23

[12] See Philip Bohlman, *World Music – A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 6–9; and, Philip Bohlman, 'Ontologies of Music', in *Rethinking Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 17–34.

[13] See Homi K. Bhabha, 'The Commitment to Theory', in *New Formations*, 5 (1988), 5–23; and Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

[14] 'synthesis, n.', Definition 6a, in OED Online, Oxford University Press (accessed 27 October 2021).

[15] David A. Nock, *Victorian Missionary and Cristian Indian Policy: Cultural Synthesis Vs Cultural Replacement* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1988), 1–2.

[16] Nock, *Victorian Missionary and Cristian Indian Policy*, p. 2.

[17] Vernon Charter and Jean DeBernardi, 'Towards a Chinese Christian Hymnody: Processes of Musical and Cultural Synthesis', *Asian Music*, 29/2 (1998), 101.

[18] Milton M. Gordon, 'Assimilation in America: Theory and Reality', *Daedalus*, 90/2: *Ethnic Groups in American Life* (1961), 279.

[19] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 190.

[20] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 191.

[21] Virgil Nemoianu, *Postmodernism and Cultural Identities: Conflicts and Coexistence* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 241.

[22] See Daniele Conversi, 'Cultural Homogenization, Ethnic Cleansing, and Genocide', in *The International Studies Encyclopedia*, ed. Robert A. Denemark, 12 vols (New York: Wiley Blackwell, 2010), 719–42. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.139

[23] Tran Van Khe, 'Ou en sont les traditions musicales?', *Bulletin du Groupe d'Acoustique Musicale* 84 (1976), 8.

[24] Larry Ochs, 'Devices and Strategies for Structured Improvisation', in *Arcana: Musicians on Music*, ed. John Zorn (New York: Granary Books, 2000), 325.

[25] Timothy James Steiner, 'Composition: Interaction & Collaboration' (PhD Thesis, City University of London, 1992), 113.

[26] Jacqueline S. Walduck, 'Role-taking in Free Improvisation and Collaborative Composition' (PhD Thesis, City University London, 1997), 17.

[27] Walduck, 'Role-taking in Free Improvisation, 111–12.

[28] See also Jacqueline S. Walduck, 'Collaborative Arts Practice and Identity: The Role of Leadership', in *The Reflective Conservatoire*, ed. George Odam and Nicholas Bannan (Farnham: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 301–31.

[29] Nettl, 'Thoughts on Improvisation', 11.

[30] Nettl, 'Thoughts on Improvisation', 12.

[31] See Bruno Nettl, *Encounters in Ethnomusicology: A Memoir* (Warren: Harmonie Park Press, 2002), 120.

[32] See Richard Perks, 'Combining Musical Identities Through Composition and Improvisation' (PhD Thesis, Brunel University, 2013), 6–15 and 57. In some respects, the use of a 'score' as the 'starting point' here echoes the approach (and inclusive ethos) advocated by Cornelius Cardew – particularly regarding his work with the *Scratch Orchestra* – whereby non-conventional musical scores were developed such that all members of the ensemble might play an equal part, irrespective of previous musical training, ability, or social background; see: Tony Harris, *The Legacy of Cornelius Cardew* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

[33] Shakti is a fusion ensemble which combined Indian and Jazz music(s), 1974–78, featuring John McLaughlin (guitar), L. Shankar (violin), Zakir Hussain (tabla), Ramnad Raghavan (Mridangam), and T. H. 'Vikku' Vinayakram (Ghatam). The project is well-respected across multiple musical landscapes (including Jazz, World, Pop; as well as amongst the respective North and South Indian sub-traditions), and is praised for its cooperative ethos. Gerry Farrell describes it as 'perhaps, the closest anyone has got to a true synthesis of Indian music and jazz' (Farell, G. 1988, p.202)

See Gerry Farrell, ‘Reflecting Surfaces: The Use of Elements from Indian Music in Popular Music and Jazz’, *Popular Music*, 7/2 (1988), 189–205.

[34] The fundamental difference between this project and ensembles such as Shakti, of course, is the vastly restricted gestation time.

[35] See Nettl, ‘Thoughts on Improvisation’, 13.

[36] Incidentally, only one of the musicians did not feel comfortable working with standard notation.

[37] See Perks, ‘Combining Musical Identities’, 41–4.

[38] Amanda Bayley, ‘Cross-Cultural Collaborations with the Kronos Quartet’, in *Distributed Creativity: Collaboration and Improvisation in Contemporary Music*, ed. Eric F. Clarke, and Mark Doffman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 97–8

[39] During the rehearsal sessions, it transpired that two of the contributing musicians were of Kurdish descent and shared a well-ingrained understanding of that musical tradition also. As this fact was unknown before we all met, it is understandable that Kurdish folk was not considered as a separate music-culture at the project’s planning stages (including the creation of the ‘starting point’ stimuli). That said, it should be acknowledged that this additional stratum of music-cultural commonality likely manifested itself in some form throughout the development of the final repertoire, and, at the very least, it assisted with social ‘bonding’ between ensemble members. A retrospective analysis of the aesthetic properties from Strung Together that more closely resemble Kurdish folk tradition (when compared to Persian or Arabic musics) might offer further insights, however such a study would be notable in size in and of itself, and thus lies outside the scope of this article.

[40] It is worth highlighting that my use of the fretless electric guitar throughout this project – that is, the fact that I could more readily engage with Middle Eastern tuning systems, articulations, performance techniques and so forth – arguably helped to generate further potential for the creation of music-cultural hybridity. See Richard Perks, ‘Fretless Architecture: Towards the Development of Original Techniques and Musical Notation Specific to the Fretless Electric Guitar’, *Music & Practice*, 4 (2019).

[41] *Fragment(s)# 3* and *Fragment(s)# 5* were removed from the set of musical stimuli after the first rehearsal. I made this decision for several reasons: first, it became immediately apparent that aural transfer was the preferred method of communicating musical ideas by most the performers, invariably in conjunction with a specific melodic, harmonic, or rhythmic starting point. Second, with consideration, I realized these two *Fragment(s)* were so heavily grounded in (Western) contemporary compositional architypes (i.e. graphic score interpretation, indeterminacy, ‘non-idiomatic’ free improvisation and so forth), that they in fact contradicted the fundamental condition: that each starting point must include ‘some’ tangible influence from each of the three music-cultures. This said, perhaps if more time were available, these more ‘abstract’ approaches may have been fruitful. This is something that could be explored in future projects of this kind.

[42] ‘Stimulated recall’ was first coined by Benjamin Bloom in 1953 to describe a method involving students listening back to audio recordings of lessons, where the ‘subject may relive an original situation with vividness and accuracy’. Benjamin Bloom, ‘Thought Process in Lectures and Discussions’, *The Journal of General Education*, 7/3 (1953), 161. Stefan Östersjö employs this method in collaborative musical contexts and suggests ‘its usefulness to music research

arises from its focus on listening and the creation of a shared understanding of a particular situation or observation'. Stefan Östersjö, *Listening to the Other* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2020), 94–5.

[43] Fortunately, this issue was remedied after the first day through a conversation between me and one of the other contributing musicians; interestingly, the player in question ended up being one of the most active contributors.

[44] Faraz Minooei, reflecting upon the project in a post-project email exchange with Richard Perks, September 2017.

[45] Sirvan Manhoobi, reflecting upon the project in a post-project online chat with Richard Perks and Faraz Minooei, September 2017.

[46] Wren, *Improvising Culture*, 90

[47] I have opted to use 'mode' throughout this section when referring to collections of pitches that resemble 'typical' Western scale-structure, unless the subdivision into tertrachords or pentachords is particularly relevant.

[48] Farhat, *The Dastgāh Concept in Persian Music*, 2.

[49] Cameron Powers, *Arabic Musical Scales* (Boulder: GL Design, 2005), 4.

[50] Santur players sometimes use multiple instruments in alternate tunings, however, in this instance (due to various logistic complications) Faraz only had one to work with.

[51] The EBow affords infinite sustain such that the legato techniques more commonly associated with wind instruments are made possible.

[52] See Video Example 1, Santur and fretless electric guitar opening 'duet' (2'04"–4'00"); and the 'call and response' section between oud and fretless electric guitar (9'48"–10'20").

[53] See Video Example 1, Fretless electric guitar solo (5'42"–6'50").

[54] See Video Example 1, Aesthetic (distinctive collective timbre) indication of music-cultural synthesis (10'21"–10'38").

[55] See video example 1: Content-based (borrowing and adaptation) indication of music-cultural synthesis (7'23"–7'39").

[56] Farhat, *The Dastgāh Concept in Persian Music*, 2.

[57] Powers, *Arabic Musical Scales*, 4.

[58] See Video Example 2, Ending of Saz solo/transition to Santur solo 'call and response' sections (3'48"–4'57").

[59] Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* (New York: Da Capo, 1993), 112.

[60] This piece was performed as part of the concert programme, and then again at the end as an encore (on the request of – and voted for by – the audience), which suggests that the audience also felt a specific connection to this piece. Both realizations were considered when analysing this work.

[61] Raman Osman, reflecting upon the final performance in post-project discussion with Richard Perks, September 2017.

[62] Faisal Zedan, reflecting upon the project during stimulated recall session with Richard Perks, July 2020.

[63] Dorian #11 is the fourth mode of the Harmonic minor scale. The 'system' conveyed by this starting point draws from compositional and improvisatory approaches used in contemporary (i.e. post 1960s) modal-jazz. See, for example, the work of jazz-fusion guitarist John Scofield for the application of similar static modal foundations.

[64] See Video Example 3, Introduction, unison section (0'28"–0'50"); Impromptu rhythmic interaction (2'50"–3'04"); Collective building of intensity/tension (4'15–4'40").

[65] See Video Example 3, Uncertainty; possible indication of music-cultural homogenization (3'06"–3'18").

[66] The use of 'pivot-pitches' as a transitional device between tetrachords (and/or pentachords) when improvising is common practice in both Arabic and Persian musics.

[67] See Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 110–38.

[68] It is worth noting that by the time we started to work on this piece, we had been playing together for four days, and were forging an increasingly comfortable group dynamic.

[69] This approach echoes that of open-structured jazz works, such as Davis's *Flamenco Sketches*, where 'the transition from one mode to another is signalled in quite different ways' by each improviser. See Ekkehard Jost, *Free Jazz* (New York: Da Capo, 1994), 23.

[70] See Video Example 5, Aesthetic (eclectic 'sound-world') indication of music-cultural synthesis (11'41"–13'09").

[71] A 'mid-section' based on the mode of D Homayoun/Hijaz Gharib/Phrygian Dominant was inserted (by replacing the F with an F-sharp); this allowed more gradual harmonic development.

[72] David Borgo, *Sync or Swarm: Improvising Music in a Complex Age* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 126.

[73] See Video Example 6, Example of a moment where ensemble is functioning as a 'self-organizing system'/indication of music-cultural synthesis (7'17"–7'55").

[74] Faraz Minooei, reflecting upon the final performance in post-project discussion with Richard Perks, September 2017.

[75] This figure is included for illustrative purposes to provide a holistic comparison between each *Fragment(s)*, highlighting the respective leanings towards each music-cultural hybridity strain as concluded from reflective analysis.

[76] Sirvan Manhoobi, reflecting upon the project via email exchanges with Richard Perks, September 2020.

[77] Faraz Minooei, reflecting upon the project during stimulated recall session with Richard Perks, August 2020.

[78] Taken from a review of final concert by revered Persian music critic Abolhassan Mokhtabad, published online via Facebook on 17 September 2017. This review was posted along with a video excerpt from the show and was viewed almost a thousand times in the first hour.

[79] Sirvan Manhoobi, reflecting upon the project via email exchanges with Richard Perks, September 2020.

[80] Faisal Zedan, reflecting upon the project during stimulated recall session with Richard Perks, July 2020.

[81] Faraz Minooei, reflecting upon the project during stimulated recall session with Richard Perks, August 2020.

[82] Faraz Minooei, reflecting upon the project during stimulated recall session with Richard Perks, August 2020.

[83] Sirvan Manhoobi, reflecting upon the project during stimulated recall session with Richard Perks, August 2020.

[84] Faisal Zedan, reflecting upon the project during stimulated recall session with Richard Perks, July 2020.

[85] See Steiner, 'Composition: Interaction & Collaboration', and Walduck, 'Role-taking in Free Improvisation'.

[86] See Nettl, 'Thoughts on Improvisation'.

[87] See Stephen Nachmanovitch, *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* (Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, 1990).

[88] Anthony Gritten identifies trust as a key element of successful ensemble practice, arguing that 'on the back of trust, ensemble interaction generates social capital'. See Anthony Gritten, 'Developing Trust in Others; Or, How to Empathise Like a Performer', in *Music and Empathy*, ed. Elaine King and Caroline Waddington (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 253. For further considerations of trust in intercultural collaborations, see also, Stefan Östersjö, and Nguyễn Thanh

Thủy, ‘Arrival Cities: Hanoi’, *Voices, Bodies, Practices: Performing Musical Subjectivities*, ed. Catherine Laws et al. (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2019), 235–294

[89] See Perks, ‘Combining Musical Identities’.

[90] For an example of an intercultural musical collaboration spanning a longer gestation period, see Stefan Östersjö’s excellent account of his work with The Six Tones in *Listening to the Other*, 85–116.

[91] See Bhabha, ‘The Commitment to Theory’ and Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.

[92] See Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*.