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# Listening to North Indian Classical Music: How Embodied Ways of Listening Perform Imagined Histories and Social Class

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**Abstract.** With this article, I theorize the sociality of embodied ways of listening to North Indian classical music. I focus on *rasikas* (connoisseurs): these expert listeners are conspicuous at live performances, where they gesture and comment to express their enjoyment of the music. Based on ethnography and interviews with musicians and music lovers in Delhi, Mumbai, and Pune, I argue that *rasikas*' embodied, audible listening practices enact shared imagined histories and perform expertise and social status. Moreover, these listening behaviors also sustain values of the so-called old middle class in India in the face of economic and social change.

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## Listening at Live Performances

At live performances of North Indian classical music, certain audience members engage in listening practices that initially seemed to me to be remarkably active and noisy. Expert music connoisseurs, or *rasikas*, are especially conspicuous: usually sitting as close as possible to the musicians and following the performance intently, they react visibly and audibly to the music they hear. As they listen, they demonstrate their musical engagement through a repertoire of conventional gestures and comments, using these to interact both with the musicians and with fellow audience members. For example, when *rasikas* hear something they consider praiseworthy, they might indicate this by waving one arm in the direction of the performers, moving their heads, glancing at the people around them, or uttering stereotypical expressions of appreciation, comments such as "Shābāsh!" (Well done!), "Vāh!" or "Vāh vāh!" (Wow!), "Kyā bāt hai!" (What a thing!), or simply "Ah!" One listener I know traces out melodic shapes with one hand when he is particularly enjoying a performance, indicating to fellow audience members precisely what he has admired in the music. By and large, such contributions are highly valued by musicians, who take them as evidence

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of both a knowledgeable audience and a successful performance.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, these contributions have the power to shape the music: many musicians carefully observe and take into account listeners' responses when deciding what to sing or play next.

In this article, I ask what is at stake in listening in this audible, extrovert way. Although ethnomusicologists have long commented on the distinctive behavior of North Indian classical audiences, hardly any sustained scholarly attention has been paid to who these listeners are, how they listen, why they listen, and why they listen in this way. My research uses ethnography to address these questions and foregrounds listeners' own perspectives on live listening. Through this work, I situate the act of listening within wider social, historical, and discursive worlds of North Indian classical music.

A few scholars have discussed the unusual activity of North Indian classical audiences during live performances. In his landmark ethnography *The Life of Music in North India*, Daniel Neuman ([1980] 1990:76–77) described the crucial role that listeners play in live performances. Brian Silver (1984) has shown how embodied modes of listening to North Indian classical music are rich in connotations: they evoke courtly etiquette and are therefore reminiscent of the intimate, prestigious, aristocratic performance contexts for North Indian classical music of the past. In a series of important publications on roles, gestures, and interactions in North Indian classical music, Laura Leante and Martin Clayton have demonstrated the complex social dynamics of the performances in which these listening behaviors are embedded (Clayton 2007; Clayton and Leante 2015; Leante 2016). In much of this work, they showcase cutting-edge videography, which they use in order to examine musicians' and listeners' gestures and interactions in detail. Dard Neuman has written about North Indian classical listeners from a different perspective, highlighting ways in which new technologies and changing musical ideologies have shaped listeners' understandings of North Indian classical music over the course of the twentieth century. For example, he argues that the emergence of the gramophone and the radio changed how listeners made sense of live performances (Neuman 2009). Elsewhere, he notes the influence of early Indian musicologists on how connoisseurs make sense of *rāg*, contrasting listeners' "classificatory" ways of hearing *rāg* with musicians' "embodied" knowledge (Neuman 2012).<sup>2</sup>

However, the voices of listeners themselves are largely absent from these studies.<sup>3</sup> Instead, work on North Indian classical listening has until now focused on what musicians make of their audiences or on the observable details of listeners' behavior. By contrast, my work foregrounds listeners' own perspectives on live listening: my work is based on two fieldwork trips to Mumbai, Delhi, and Pune in 2014 and 2015, including formal interviews with twenty listeners (ranging in age from people in their twenties to people in their eighties), numerous informal

discussions, and a series of listening and discussion sessions in which I played recordings to small groups and we later discussed our responses to them together.<sup>4</sup> During these trips, I spoke with any people who considered themselves *rasikas* or music lovers, music organizers, music critics, and musicians, categories that often overlap. I also draw on participant observation, critically reflecting on my own experiences as an enthusiastic listener and student of North Indian classical music for eleven years. In this article, I quote from interviews with twelve individuals, all of whom have been anonymized. Interviewing listeners about their listening experiences raised issues of ethics, class, and history. By taking these into account, I theorize the sociality of listening to North Indian classical music.

My work contributes to a diverse and growing body of literature that seeks to interrogate musical listening. Like a number of these studies, this article considers the significance of embodied stances for listening (e.g., Becker 2010; Beckles Willson, forthcoming; Gross 2012; Johnson 1994; Plourde 2008; Qureshi 1986; Racy 2003), including what it means to move (or not) to music and how that ties in with broader ideologies. There are clear parallels between North Indian classical music and, for example, the highly interactional performance environments of *qawwali* (Qureshi 1986) or *tarab* (Racy 2003). On the other hand, the contrast with Western classical music is striking: unlike the still, silent audiences of the Western classical concert hall and opera house (Johnson 1994), North Indian classical listeners signal their seriousness and attentiveness primarily through physical activity and audible expressions of appreciation.

With this article, I extend to listeners insights from literature on embodiment in performance studies and ethnomusicology. Diana Taylor (2003) has argued that embodied performance is a key means through which cultural memory and knowledge are enacted and sustained. Various ethnomusicologists have made similar arguments, demonstrating the social nature of the embodied musical knowledge that is transmitted through teaching. For example, Tomie Hahn has shown how the transmission of Japanese dance is not solely a matter of learning the technicalities of the dance; rather, it also “instills profound cultural beliefs in the body” (2007:4). Likewise, Amanda Weidman has discussed social aspects of the embodied, “body-sensorial” knowledge that is transmitted from teacher to disciple in South Indian classical music; training in this tradition, she argues, “inculcates and hones gendered and classed sensibilities” (2012:214). Matthew Rahaim has highlighted how learning to perform contemporary North Indian classical music also entails learning embodied ethical dispositions such as patience and humility. He theorizes musicking bodies (the bodies of musicians as they perform) as “always already embedded in social relations” (2012:109) and shows how a body trained in the discipline of North Indian classical music “carries both aesthetic and ethical value” (126). Like other kinds of embodied practice, including that of musicians and dancers, listeners’ embodied engagement

with North Indian classical music is thoroughly embedded in the social world. As I will show, embodied ways of listening have the power to enact and reproduce cultural memory, sensibilities, and ethical dispositions.

I also draw on classic sociological work by Pierre Bourdieu ([1972] 1977, [1979] 1984) in order to theorize links between embodied ways of listening to North Indian classical music and social class. In *Distinction* ([1979] 1984), he analyzes the tastes and attitudes of a broad selection of people in France in the 1960s. He demonstrates relationships between people's tastes in culture (including music) and their social class. Specifically, he shows how people's engagement with art is implicated in struggles between classes and class fractions: as he describes it, the different classes and class fractions are in a constant state of competition as individuals strive to improve their fortunes and as classes as a whole struggle to gain a higher position in the social hierarchy or hold on to (and transmit to their children) their existing privileges. In this context, he argues, "art and cultural consumption . . . fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences" (Bourdieu [1979] 1984:7). A key element of Bourdieu's work is the concept of the "habitus," "the internalized form of class condition and of the conditionings it entails" (101). This classed disposition shapes people's ways of understanding and classifying the world and informs their habits of cultural consumption. Crucially, habitus has an embodied component, which Bourdieu calls the "bodily hexis" ([1972] 1977:87, 93–94). I will suggest here that *rasikas'* embodied listening practices, as well as their ways of talking about listening, illustrate Bourdieu's arguments, although in a very different context from the one he studied. I will argue that ways of behaving during concerts are part of an individual's bodily hexis (and are therefore classed) and will show how listeners' understandings of good and bad listening reproduce class distinctions.

Overall, my aim here is to show how embodied ways of attending to music are intertwined with issues of history, status, class, and prestige. I do this in three main ways. First, I consider links between listening and the past: I show how listening offers a way for individuals to situate themselves within imagined histories of North Indian classical music. Second, I discuss the ethics of listening, exploring the fact that for many music lovers being a good listener is tied to being a good human being. In doing so, I highlight how discourses on good and bad listening are connected to ideas about social class. Specifically, I show how these discourses are a way for members of the "old" middle class to distinguish themselves from a "new" middle class that emerged as a consequence of India's economic liberalization in the 1990s. Finally, I consider listening as a form of embodied performance. It is a means by which listeners use their bodies to show how they are listening and to share their musical judgments with others; but it is also a way for individuals to enact shared cultural memory and to perform high-status social identities.

## **Imagined Histories of Listening**

Contemporary audiences for North Indian classical music are the result of a dramatic shift in musical patronage that occurred in the early decades of the twentieth century (Bakhle 2005). Before this time, North Indian classical music had been patronized by the feudal aristocracy in intimate gatherings of expert music connoisseurs. This aristocracy, however, fell into decline under colonial rule. In the first few decades of the twentieth century, North Indian classical music began instead to be patronized by middle-class audiences in a variety of contexts, including both small, intimate environments and public concert halls. Both Daniel Neuman ([1980] 1990) and James Kippen (1988) echo the prevailing sentiment among musicians and listeners by framing this as a move from older homogeneous expert audiences to newer heterogeneous audiences, including some experts, as well as large numbers of musical laymen. They both further suggest that this affected the musical performance, since musicians had to cater to audiences with increasingly low-brow tastes (Kippen 1998:90–104; Neuman [1980] 1990:67–80, 217–18).

My work shows the continued repercussions of this change in audiences. Although I did the fieldwork for this project in 2014–15, with pre-Independence performance contexts only just within living memory and over thirty-five years after Neuman carried out his research (and twenty-five years after Kippen), the historical move from aristocratic to middle-class audiences continues to shape contemporary listening experiences. Thus, as Neuman and Kippen also found, almost all of the contemporary listeners I spoke with make sense of their listening experiences through an imagined historical narrative, according to which Indian classical music enjoyed a golden age at some point in the past and has since fallen into decline. They lament that the majority of performances now no longer occur in small, interactive contexts but rather in large, impersonal auditoriums, where most listeners do not know very much about music. They complain that concerts now finish early in the evening, fondly recalling a time when listeners were more patient, and when musical performances used to feel timeless and might go on well into the night: when, as the music writer Ravi put it, “audiences sat as long as musicians were willing to sing” (interview with the author, April 23, 2014, Mumbai). And, so the story goes, a decline in the quality of audiences has resulted in a decline in the quality of the music. All of the great musicians of the previous generation have now died. Meanwhile, musicians nowadays, they say, are primarily concerned with making money and getting applause; they no longer care about being sincere to their art or pleasing the few remaining expert listeners. And so, one music organizer told me, music is no longer “soul satisfying”; it has become mere “entertainment” (interview with the author, April 27, 2014, Mumbai). Many music lovers told me that they

experience a strong sense of dissatisfaction with most of the concerts they currently attend.

Specific aspects of the music are implicated in this narrative of decline. Almost all of the music lovers I spoke with said that they were upset by the increase in “gimmicks,” such as duels between the soloist and accompanist or singers’ practice of showing breath control by singing a very long high note. They also criticized musicians’ overemphasis on technical virtuosity, or on what listeners call “rhythm,” as opposed to *rāg* or melody. Among other things, this could be displayed by using too many *tāns* (high-speed runs); using *tāns* too early in the performance; using too many *tihāīs* (conventional rhythmic formulae); placing too much emphasis on the *tablā* player; curtailing the slow *ālāp* section at the start of a performance; or going straight to the upper register, rather than gradually moving through each new note systematically. Connoisseurs interpret these features as the consequence of musicians’ “playing to the gallery” and pandering to the tastes of increasingly ignorant and impatient audiences.

On the other hand, *rasikas* tend to listen out for and enjoy those features that they interpret as traditional or that they associate with the past. Primarily, *rasikas* value and respond to those improvisational devices that foreground or manipulate elements of *rāg*. This reflects the fact that *rāg* has been a principal locus of prestige in North Indian classical music for centuries (Schofield 2010). For example, the music writer and organizer Neeraj told me that when he listens to North Indian classical music, he listens for moments when a musician confounds his expectations but nevertheless manages to do so while following the rules of *rāg*. Neeraj, like many other *rasikas*, is suspicious of radical musical innovation. Rather, he celebrates what John Napier calls “subtle novelty,” in which performers demonstrate their individuality through “subtle variation of the givens” (2006:12). In this case, the “given” is the *rāg*: to please Neeraj, a performer must ingeniously find ways of doing something unexpected with a *rāg* while nevertheless adhering to the rules of *rāg* grammar.

Likewise, although most listeners insisted that their musical likes and dislikes were simply matters of personal preference, it is no coincidence that almost all of the music lovers I met told me that their favorite part of the music is the *vilambit* or the *ālāp*. Technically speaking, this is simply the slow portion at the start of a performance, but it is also heavy with social and historical connotations. This is the section that listeners believe requires the most patience to listen to; it is prestigious and has an ancient reputation; and it foregrounds the leisurely expansion of *rāg*, rather than rhythmic tricks. It is the very opposite of the gimmicky, virtuosic musical characteristics that listeners lament in contemporary performances. Thus, when connoisseurs listen to North Indian classical music, their listening is thoroughly infused with ideas about history: they hear certain features as old-fashioned and therefore valuable, while others signify a



more recent musical sensibility, superficiality, and attempts to please the crowd. Imagined histories are a key basis for connoisseurs' musical judgments.

The historical story *rasikas* tell is full of contradictions. Small concerts still exist and are often organized by the very people who lament their disappearance. My experiences over the last couple of years are a testament to the fact that it is still perfectly possible to hear wonderful music in small venues where one is surrounded by expert listeners. Old recordings provide plenty of evidence that virtuosity has long been a part of North Indian classical music; there is certainly nothing new in talented musicians showing off to their audiences. And the golden age to which listeners refer is remarkably mobile. As Neuman and Kippen have shown, people were making similar complaints about the decline of North Indian classical music in the 1970s and 1980s. Just like the people I interviewed, their informants lamented the disappearance of small concert venues, the ignorance of the majority of audience members, and musicians' use of gimmicks (Kippen 1998:94, 97; Neuman [1980] 1990:217–18). This period, though, now serves as the golden age for many of today's listeners, although they now more often attribute negative developments to the recent corporatization of the music scene than to the earlier move from aristocratic to middle-class audiences.

Why do listeners continue to tell these stories about decline? Despite its contradictions, narrating this history fulfils important social purposes. It serves as a means of social distinction between listeners: both the acts of telling this history and experiencing dissatisfaction while listening situate a person as one of the few remaining expert listeners, a position that implies a high status in the music world. (In the next section, I show how this position in turn is shaped by old-middle-class values and reproduces class distinctions.) Meanwhile, those seemingly old-fashioned performances that may still be encountered now seem extremely rare and special, a valued remnant of something that is disappearing. I have attended some such concerts. My fellow listeners, the hosts, and even the performers described these events as something surviving from a past golden age of music making and the kind of environment in which it is possible to hear the very best music. The advantages of such concerts are partly matters of size and informality: musicians and listeners agree that small concerts with a high proportion of connoisseurs and frequent interaction between performers and audience provide the ideal conditions for musicians to perform at their best. On top of that, golden age narratives serve to infuse these specific performances with nostalgia and prestige.

Thus, there is a complex temporality to ways of listening to North Indian classical music. In the right listening contexts (especially in small, private venues), connoisseurs in 2014–15 listened to North Indian classical music with a sense of nostalgia. Through their engagement with music, older listeners were

taken back to their youth and to their fondest listening memories. Meanwhile, many connoisseurs were simultaneously transported even farther back in time to aristocratic or even courtly contexts for North Indian classical music. This more distant cultural memory was shared by musicians: as Daniel Neuman has described, musicians too “evoke” a “remembered past,” where music was patronized by the nobility—“not the immediate past but a world that to the modern sensibility seems like something from the Arabian nights” ([1980] 1990:21). For the majority of music lovers, this remembered past is not remembered at all but encountered through descriptions by musicians and fellow music lovers and in books and films; nevertheless, it is made real when they hear music in performance, and it palpably shapes their listening experiences. Contemporary listening, then, involves a backward temporal orientation toward remembered and imagined pasts. In the next section, I explore the implications of this orientation in terms of social class by examining listeners’ discourses on good and bad listening.

### **Rasikas: Good Listeners, Good Listening, and the Old Middle Class**

Listening experiences are thoroughly tied to questions of what makes a good listener and what it means to listen well. These topics came up often in my interviews and were usually organized around the idea of the *rasika*: the music lover, connoisseur, or ideal listener for North Indian classical music. This word has a long history. For centuries, the concept of the ideal receiver for a work of art has been theorized as part of the South Asian theory of *rasa* (aesthetic experience) (e.g., Ali 2004; K. Higgins 2007; Schofield 2015). Nowadays the word frequently appears in concert invitations and music reviews, where it can be used as a synonym for “music lover” or even simply “audience member.” However, my conversations with listeners revealed complex understandings of what it means to be a *rasika*, including significant differences of opinion between individuals. Here, I explore the different, intersecting discourses through which listeners and musicians understand good and bad listening.

Echoing past understandings of what it means to be a *rasika*, many of the listeners I interviewed believe that this is in part a matter of ethics or of being a good person. As Daud Ali writes of Mughal *rasikas*, so it is for many contemporary listeners too: “The *rasika* [is] at once a moral and aesthetic category” (2004:193). More than that, the figure of the good listener reproduces wider social distinctions along the lines of social class. *Rasikas* and their ways of consuming North Indian classical music illustrate the arguments Bourdieu makes in *Distinction*, namely, that ways of consuming culture are linked with social class and reproduce class distinctions. As I argue, the ethical formation of the good

listener in North Indian classical music is classed, so that the act of situating oneself as a good listener is also a way of performing “middleclassness” (Donner and De Neve 2011:7).

Specifically, ways of listening to North Indian classical music reproduce distinctions between what Rachel Dwyer (2000) has labeled the “old” and “new” middle classes in India. As Dwyer describes, the old middle class rose to prominence in the first few decades after Independence and was a bureaucratic elite, occupying positions of power in the postcolonial government. It was characterized by a set of shared values: as Amita Baviskar and Raka Ray put it, for the old middle class, being middle class “meant being open-minded and egalitarian; following the rule of law and not being swayed by private motive or particularistic agenda; being fiscally prudent and living within one’s means; and, embracing science and rationality in the public sphere” (2011:5–6). Since Independence, members of this group have made up the majority of audiences for North Indian classical music. Following the cultural and social changes that accompanied India’s economic liberalization in the 1990s, the existing middle class was challenged, partially displaced, and thrown into relief by the so-called new middle class (see, e.g., Fernandes 2006), symbolized by their conspicuous consumption of newly available commodities.<sup>5</sup>

The old middle class in India resembles what Bourdieu ([1979] 1984) calls the “dominated fraction” of the “dominant” class: that segment of the bourgeoisie that is the richest in cultural capital but that has less economic capital than the “dominant fraction” of the “dominant” class, which, in contrast, is wealthier economically but poorer culturally and educationally. As in France at the time of Bourdieu’s research, so in India in the early twenty-first century, class formations are shifting: like Bourdieu’s old bourgeoisie, the old middle class in India is in decline and sees itself and its values as under threat.

The vast majority of the music lovers I interviewed for this project belonged to the old middle class. Most had, or had retired from, fairly well-paid professional occupations; almost all had been educated in English to at least the undergraduate level; by and large, they dressed conservatively, rather than expensively; and when I socialized with music lovers outside of organized music events, they tended to prefer to do so over home-cooked meals than in fancy restaurants. In keeping with Dwyer’s description (2000: 91), many were or had been involved with cultural organizations, especially those geared toward disseminating North Indian classical music.<sup>6</sup> In Bourdieu’s ([1979] 1984) terms, they possessed high cultural capital (in the form of educational qualifications and cultural expertise) but less economic capital than other elite groups.

My research has revealed striking similarities between the values of the old middle class and descriptions of the ideal listener for North Indian classical music. In what follows, I will scrutinize the link between social class and

discourses of good and bad listening, focusing on three key areas: sincerity, attention, and expertise. As Bourdieu observed, “Social identity is defined and asserted through difference” ([1979] 1984:172). Thus, I argue that ways of listening (and ways of talking about listening) are a means for largely old-middle-class listeners to distinguish themselves from the superrich or *nouveau riche* (above), the “masses” (below), and the new-middle-class lifestyle of consumption. Some of these distinctions apply as much to class formations before the 1990s as now: certain elements of these discourses have remained constant at least since Independence. Other distinctions between good and bad listeners are specific to the current historical moment: as I show, they have been shaped by the emergence of the new middle class and by contemporary anxieties about consumer culture. I would suggest that the correspondence between the figure of the “good listener” and the ideological construction of the old middle class can explain how North Indian classical music has remained a middle-class art form for decades.<sup>7</sup>

### Sincerity and Open-Mindedness

Many listeners’ characterizations of good and bad listening revolved around ideas of sincerity and open-mindedness. According to the common wisdom, good listeners should not be overly critical; rather, they should be fair and unbiased, not rush to judgment, and be geared toward expressing approval rather than finding fault. And although listeners commonly emphasized that everybody has a right to his or her own tastes, many complained about listeners who show favoritism for certain artists or lineages over others. As one prominent music organizer put it, “A good connoisseur, you know, a good *rasika* should be able to enjoy across genres and across *gharānās*” (interview with the author, April 28, 2014, Mumbai). Similarly, for many music lovers, a good listener is someone who doesn’t have an agenda when going to a concert but who is just there “for the music.” The worst culprits are people who go to concerts in order to “see and be seen,” whereas the good listeners, as Urvashi (a singer) put it, “are not just there for social reasons but for musical reasons” (interview with the author, April 29, 2014, Mumbai).

This moral weighting of different listening attitudes resonates with the old-middle-class values of open-mindedness, egalitarianism, and the idea that one should “not [be] swayed by private motive,” quoted above. Moreover, discourses on ways of listening often explicitly combine such moral judgments with social distinctions. Urvashi criticized the wealthiest listeners, talking about “people who can afford those one-thousand-rupee tickets and go and sit in front because they have absolutely no inkling of music, but they are there because it’s [a prestigious venue in Mumbai], and they have to show their saris and clothes and their status.” Note how she aligned class-based judgment against the superrich with

a lack of expertise and also a suspect agenda for going to concerts. Note also her emphasis on consumerism, on how these bad listeners express their status through their expensive clothing. In this case, her criticisms are gendered: by singling out a gendered item of clothing (the sari), she directs her disapproval especially at other women.

This statement is part of a long-standing discourse on bad listeners of North Indian classical music. Vamanrao Deshpande, for example, wrote in the 1970s of the problems of the “newly rich” who “patronized music only with the idea that attendance at music concerts added to their social status” ([1973] 1987:118–19). This sentiment, however, also forms part of a much more recent discourse, identified by Christine Brosius (2010), in which old-middle-class individuals disparage the new middle class for its “vulgar” displays of wealth. In such statements, which are characteristic of the old-middle-class response to the post-1990s new middle class, simplicity serves as a means of distinction: according to the old middle class, new-middle-class individuals “lack the competence to be modest” (Brosius 2010:305). Brosius highlights such discourse as a means of social positioning through which members of the old middle class attempt to safeguard their privileges and exclude aspiring groups. Likewise, assessments of kinds of listening work similarly as a means for largely old-middle-class individuals to assert moral superiority over the new rich. In this case, they do so through a discourse that predates the distinction between old and new middle classes; here, an old-middle-class discourse on the bad listening of other social classes has survived, even when the particular class formations it applies to have altered over time.

### **Attention**

Many discussions of good listening also touched on the particular ways in which people attend to performances. A common gripe was with people who get distracted or, worst of all, look at their mobile phones during performances, whereas a good listener, according to Anisha (an enthusiastic listener), was someone “who gets mesmerized, or who gets entangled or pulled into the performance” (interview with the author, April 26, 2014, Mumbai). Sunny, another connoisseur, talked fondly about “very good” audiences he remembered in Calcutta in the 1970s: “I was in these audiences that were mesmerized. They were hypnotized almost.” He linked this with other attributes he found praiseworthy, saying that these audiences were also “knowledgeable” and “very emotional” (interview with the author, April 19, 2014, Mumbai).

Like comments about listeners’ bias or having an agenda, discussions of attention also combine moral with social judgments. For Anisha, talking about attention was one of the ways she contrasted her listening with that of what she

called the “mass.” She said that the “mass has a different kind of idea of Hindustani classical”: put off by the length of concerts, “they think, ‘Ah, they go on and on and on. . . .’” She continued, “People do not have the patience to sit through and listen, and everybody wants something which is fast and instant, and no one has the time to watch it delineate or expand.” This gradual expansion, however, is “the essence” of North Indian classical music, “where you are actually exploring it and you as a listener are exploring [the *rāg*] with the performer. See how it builds, slowly, step by step, step by step. It’s like you are climbing a mountain and then you are seeing the view from the top” (interview, April 26, 2014). For her, then, attending closely to the slow expansion of a *rāg* marks someone out as distinct from the “mass.”

This view, too, is congruent with old-middle-class values. Anisha’s characterization of the “mass” as impatient and unable to concentrate is indicative of middle-class ideas about the immature, excitable masses as discussed, for example, by William Mazzarella (2011). On the other hand, the idea that listening involves reaping the rewards of hard work over time, like climbing a mountain in order to appreciate a good view, is in tune with what Leela Fernandes calls the old-middle-class, “Gandhian moral norms of austerity” (2016:234). (This idea also finds parallels in the “asceticism” that Bourdieu identifies in the cultural consumption of the dominated fractions of the dominant class [(1979) 1984:176].) Aditya Nigam has argued that deferred gratification is a crucial element of post-Independence, middle-class, nationalist values: he writes that an economic strategy of “discouraging current consumption, forcing savings for purposes of national capital formation . . . required the production of a citizen who felt a sense of responsibility towards the task of nation-building and was therefore prepared to forego or defer her current desires” (2004:77). By highlighting how listening to North Indian classical music is at odds with how “everybody wants something which is fast and instant,” Anisha’s discussion resonates with this old-middle-class moral insistence on deferred gratification. Thus, the act of paying close attention to North Indian classical music over the course of a lengthy performance is as much a social practice as a musical one: in this context, qualities of attention have the power to reproduce class distinctions.

Here, an idea of the value of reaping the rewards of hard work conditions how Anisha hears and engages with one characteristic musical feature of North Indian classical music: the gradual melodic development of *ālāp*. As Anna Bull has discussed in relation to Western classical music, this is an example of how classed values can be “intertwined with the aesthetic of the music” (2015:182), a process she describes in depth elsewhere (2016). It is also an example of how, as Byron Dueck (2013) identifies, music can recruit its listeners to particular social roles: he shows how aspects of musical sound can invite listeners to take on particular social identities. In a typical *ālāp*, the soloist takes time to unfold

the rāg slowly, gradually introducing new notes and exploring an ever wider register. According to Anisha's account, this can only be appreciated through a kind of listening that is patient and attentive: this is music in which listening pleasures are deferred, only made possible through sustained engagement over time. For her, then, qualities of the music of ālāp invite her to adopt a patient, attentive listening disposition; they also, by extension, recruit her to the social role of rasika or good listener, which in turn is a classed identity.

Anisha explicitly situated this particular argument about attention within a wider critique of modern life. She told me that she believes the difficulty of staying focused on one thing is a problem of her generation, who are "a little trigger happy" (interview, April 26, 2014); she linked this, in turn, with new technology, people's increasingly intensive work lives, and consumer culture. Although complaints about impatient, inattentive listeners have a long history, Anisha framed her complaints specifically in terms of the current historical moment and even her own generation. For her, like many other listeners, ideas about good and bad listening are aligned with the imagined history of North Indian classical music (discussed in the last section), so that what is good (e.g., patience) is also what is projected back in time as a characteristic of audiences as they used to be; meanwhile, what is bad (e.g., impatience) is seen as a symptom of the contemporary world.

This nostalgic backward orientation itself has implications in terms of social class. Bourdieu suggests that classes or class fractions in decline are more "inclined to social resentment and conservatism" and are "turned towards the past" ([1979] 1984:454–55). And as Brosius (2010) has shown in relation to contemporary India, nostalgia for the past, coupled with antimaterialism, can serve as a form of class distinction through which the old middle class criticizes and distinguishes itself from the new rich. The discursive construction of bad listeners as inattentive and the projection of ideas about good listening back in time are therefore part of a wider pattern in which old-middle-class individuals cement class boundaries (and claim moral superiority) by distancing themselves from contemporary consumer culture.

### **Expertise**

When I asked musicians and music lovers what it means to be a rasika, the topic that came up the most was expertise. This was also the subject that was the most contested: people articulated various, sometimes contradictory, views on the topic. Most often, they construed expertise as something valuable, an attribute of the ideal listener and a key element of what makes someone a rasika. Many interviewees expressed the sentiment that, as Sunny put it, "the best audiences are knowledgeable audiences" (interview, April 19, 2014). Degrees and



types of musical expertise were the primary ways in which music lovers and musicians distinguished between listeners.

It is not surprising that many of the people I spoke with stressed the value of expert listening. Almost all of the music lovers I interviewed were great experts on North Indian classical music, possessing extensive knowledge about *rāg*, *tāl*, and the stylistic differences between pedagogical lineages. As Dard Neuman (2012) has observed, knowledge of *rāg* (and being able to identify which *rāg* one is hearing) is an important source of value for music connoisseurs. Many of the musical features that musicians and *rasikas* value the most (e.g., those features that play with listeners' expectations of *rāg*) rely for their effect on an expert audience.<sup>8</sup>

In the next section, I show how nonexperts are barred from participation in the high-status, embodied listening behaviors that characterize the most prestigious kinds of North Indian classical listening. As with other communities of fans, connoisseurs, or *aficionados*, including the Mughal predecessors of today's expert listeners (e.g., Brown 2006; Malcomson 2014; Schofield 2015), restricting access along lines of expertise makes possible the pleasure of being part of a select, exclusive social scene. Thus, musical knowledge serves the ends of cementing social distinctions; as discussed above, expertise is part of what the most enthusiastic music lovers feel distinguishes them from the gallery, from the kinds of listeners who are captivated by virtuosity, who go in for cheap tricks and gimmicks, and who are partially responsible for the decline of North Indian classical music.

Musical knowledge is a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu [1979] 1984). Having musical knowledge is often the result of a particular middle-class kind of education. Most of the music lovers I encountered believe that one's musical education should start at birth and told me how they had grown to love North Indian classical music by listening to it at home as children either on the gramophone or on the radio. Both of these were key features of middle-class family life in the mid-twentieth century (Farrell 1993; Neuman [1980] 1990). Many had also acquired expertise through the middle-class practice of taking instrument lessons as a child. This emphasis on the importance of early acquisition reflects Bourdieu's observation that the most elite forms of cultural competence are better acquired early in the home than later through educational institutions ([1979] (1984):66, 74–75). Moreover, expertise is thoroughly aligned with middle-class values: many listeners emphasized the time and effort it takes to acquire musical expertise. In doing so, they described being a *rasika* as a lifelong process of continually developing one's understanding, a process that demands significant commitment and is necessarily fueled by passion and enthusiasm. In these descriptions, expertise is construed as both valuable and reliant on hard work over time. Like the question of paying attention to music, this too evokes the old-middle-class value of deferred gratification.



Despite this dominant discourse on the value of expertise, not everyone I spoke with agreed that a good listener or a *rasika* should necessarily be an expert. When I interviewed Raj, a music organizer and collector (and himself a great expert), he started off by telling me that he had just spoken to a mutual friend, whom I had previously interviewed, and that he wanted me to know that he disagreed with our friend's view that good listeners should be experts. He articulated a different position: "I can be a totally nonknowledgeable person about this item and yet love the item that is going on" (interview with the author, April 30, 2014, Mumbai). Here, Raj uses the idea of loving the music in order to negotiate with the dominant position that the ideal listener must be an expert. He was not alone in doing this. Similarly, other people I spoke with said it was less important to be "knowledgeable" than to be "open," "receptive," or "appreciative." In each of these cases, listeners negotiated with the conventional value placed on expertise by drawing attention to other desired attributes, often highlighting people's capacity to be affected emotionally by what they are hearing. Some displayed considerable ambivalence about this topic, contradicting themselves or apparently changing their opinion midway through our discussions.

The fact that some people were ambivalent about the value of expertise reflects one seemingly paradoxical aspect of the way in which North Indian classical music is organized: although it is an exclusive, niche interest, most of the prominent organizers I spoke with framed their activities in terms of outreach. Understanding the tradition to be in crisis, with dwindling audiences and the looming threat of extinction, they feel a sense of duty and missionary zeal to promote this music to wider audiences.<sup>9</sup> People I met put on a variety of outreach activities, including listening sessions, lecture demonstrations, and even educational retreats. Talking about such activities as "doing something for music," they see themselves as engaged in a noble project of great intrinsic value; this project provides a sense of joint purpose that unites music lovers, organizers, and musicians.

For people engaged in such activities, it is crucial to emphasize the accessibility of North Indian classical music to newcomers. It stands to reason that they would not then want to say that the only valid engagement with North Indian classical music was an expert one, since that would exclude the very people they were trying to introduce. Thus, Rahul, a singer and critic who is heavily involved in outreach activities, stressed that "our classical music . . . can be quite listener friendly. It's not so esoteric, not so distant as people otherwise fear" (interview with the author, April 23, 2014, Mumbai). Similarly, those musicians who most frequently perform abroad tended to reject the idea that listening requires expertise. In these cases, this discursive move is in line with the makeup of their audiences.

Just as discourse on expertise reveals middle-class values of education and hard work, so discussions of nonexpertise, too, are framed within other sets of middle-class values. If, as Baviskar and Ray have it, key old-middle-class values are egalitarianism and fairness, then it is important not to seem exclusive or elitist. As they note, the middle classes in India may represent themselves as “the everyman,” but they are in fact not “in the middle” at all but rather are an elite drawn from the upper income groups of Indian society (2011:2, 7–8). The ambivalence listeners feel about expertise is a result of the contradictions inherent in situations where an elite social group reproduces itself through discourses of egalitarianism. In this case, it is possible to take either of these two opposing stances on expertise and nevertheless do it in a way that allows the speaker to articulate an old-middle-class value.

Thus, contemporary class formations map onto the discourses through which participants in my study distinguished good listeners from bad. Just as the old-middle-class critique of the new middle class casts them as obsessed with shallow materialism, conspicuous consumption, and making money, so the stereotypically bad listener only goes to concerts to show off his or her fashionable clothing and is inattentive, impatient, stingy, superficial, and into fads and gimmicks. For today’s music connoisseurs, the figure of the “bad listener” embodies wider collective anxieties about the onset of consumer culture in India. Meanwhile, the good listener is knowledgeable, patient, sincere, unbiased, and someone with no agenda other than hearing good music, which echoes the discursive construction of the old middle class as educated, serious, frugal, egalitarian, acting out of duty, and not interested in being seen to be consuming unnecessarily. Listening well can therefore be a way for members of the old middle class to reproduce distinctions between themselves and others.

Nevertheless, most of the people I interviewed denied that listening had anything at all to do with social class and insisted on the universality of Indian classical music. As Sumit, a connoisseur, put it, “I’ve always felt music unifies; it never divides” (interview with the author, February 2, 2015, Mumbai). The invisibility of class in this context strengthens the effectiveness of ways of listening to reproduce class distinctions. Music becomes a site where old-middle-class values can be policed and safeguarded; others, meanwhile, are not excluded because of their class but because of their failings as listeners, which in turn are interpreted as moral failings.

Like imagined histories, discussions of good and bad listening also implicate aspects of musical sound: being a good listener is partly a matter of having good musical tastes. For Bourdieu, people’s taste in art is a product of their habitus, which in turn is the result of their position in the class system ([1979] 1984:170–75). However, since elite groups understand good taste as a “gift of nature” (1) rather than simply a result of class position, tastes serve to naturalize and legitimize social differences.

For example, when Arun (a connoisseur and record collector) listens, he orients himself toward the *ālāp* but is not afraid to admit that he stops listening altogether when the performance speeds up: “I am an *ālāp* guy. . . . If the *ālāp* is good, I’m happy, . . . but for the art to sustain itself, for the artist, for everything, [the rest] is needed. OK, then you maybe, you mentally switch off . . . and you are part of the audience, but you are switched off” (interview with the author, April 28, 2014, Mumbai).

In the last section, I discussed how *rasikas* commonly articulate a preference for listening to *ālāp* over faster sections of a performance, and I explained this in terms of the imagined histories that shape contemporary listening. Statements such as Arun’s, however, also have implications in terms of class. Like most *rasikas*, Arun understands his musical preferences as simply matters of personal taste (“I am an *ālāp* guy”). Nevertheless, through this particular expression of musical taste, Arun links himself with prestigious elements of the music and the part of the music that *rasikas* believe requires the most patience and expertise to understand. Meanwhile, he distances himself from faster, more showy, less prestigious parts of a performance. Understanding this in Bourdieusian terms, it is an example of how cultural capital gives individuals a “‘sense’ for sound cultural investment,” which “leads [them] always to love what is lovable, and only that, and always sincerely” (Bourdieu [1979] 1984:5, 6). Arun’s love of *ālāp* affirms both his identity as a good listener and his class position.<sup>10</sup> As Arun’s statement suggests, there are complex linkages between (1) ways of listening (even ways of switching one’s listening on and off); (2) discourses on history, on social class, on what makes a good listener; and (3) aspects of musical sound. In the next section, I add one more element into the mix, exploring how all of this is performed in the body.

## **Performing Listening**

Expert listeners’ typically noisy, extrovert listening practices are integral to performances of North Indian classical music. As musicologist Deepak Raja explained to me, “Our music . . . is the product of the interaction between a musician and his audience. Why so? Because at the root of it is the *rāg*. And *rāg* is only . . . a partially composed entity. So the musician doesn’t know what he is going to sing; the audience doesn’t know what it’s going to hear; and until they come together, that music doesn’t exist. . . . It’s a joint product of that context” (personal communication, April 23, 2014, Mumbai). This “joint product” relies on a kind of listening that is embodied, extrovert, and audible: listeners use their bodies and voices in order to show how exactly they are listening, including how their patterns of attention develop over time and what they are listening out for and appreciate. In stark contrast to the still and silent pose that characterizes conventional ways of listening to Western classical music, this way of attending

to and making sense of music is performed and visible to others, made legible on listeners' bodies. By observing the most active and conspicuous listeners, it is possible not only to say whether or not they are enjoying the performance or how attentive they are but also to say something about which particular musical features bring them pleasure. It is this fact that allows musicians to respond musically to listeners during a performance; most of the musicians I interviewed about this confirmed that they shape their performances in response to the immediate, embodied feedback they get from their listeners. There is also intense musicality in the subtle ways expert listeners react bodily to nuances in the music; their embodied behavior relies on having substantial musical knowledge and engaging closely with the music while they listen. In North Indian classical music, neither performance nor musicality is restricted to the stage; both also occur in the audience.

What else gets performed through these embodied performances of listening? Being active in response to music can be a way of tying oneself to the past. As Brian Silver (1984) found, so many people whom I interviewed associate interaction during performances with a past aristocratic or courtly golden age; extrovert listening behaviors are a means through which this cultural memory is preserved and reproduced. Many *rasikas* contrast the appreciation they show to musicians through conventional gestures and comments with the more modern practice of showing appreciation through applause, which they dislike. A particular source of annoyance is the new practice of applauding during the performance itself, especially at those features that *rasikas* consider gimmicks. They see such applause as a sign that listeners are increasingly undiscerning. On the other hand, interacting with musicians through gestures and comments is part of what makes it possible for listeners to orient themselves backward in time toward idealized performances of times gone by. Thus, conventional ways of engaging with music are an embodied performance of the imagined histories I discussed in the first section of this article; these embodied listening practices are an important way in which such histories are made real and reproduced over time.

Furthermore, adopting conventional embodied and audible responses to music is a means through which listeners take up the high-status, prestigious identity of the *rasika*, or good listener, as discussed in the last section. This is a social performance, a way of displaying a particular social identity to others, and a way of crafting one's internal sense of self. Responding to the "right" things in performance is a way of demonstrating expertise; the quality and intensity of listeners' bodily engagement with the music show their attentiveness; and adopting an embodied demeanor that is geared toward expressing approval indicates sincerity and lack of bias. As I have shown, these attributes of the stereotypical good listener have positive ethical connotations (e.g., indicating patience or lack of bias).

Performing the social role of the *rasika* is a way of asserting or aspiring to a high status within the music scene. More broadly, knowing how to behave at performances of North Indian classical music is also a form of embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986); as I discussed in the last section, the figure of the good listener is shaped by old-middle-class values. Listeners' behavior, then, is part of what Bourdieu calls the "bodily hexis" ([1972] 1977:87, 93–94). Through certain bodily ways of attending to music, listeners perform their own individual expertise, attentiveness, and sincerity, thereby raising their personal social status among their fellow listeners; collectively, however, these behaviors also sustain an elite class formation.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, embodied listening practices serve as a way of externalizing and performing musical tastes. I noticed a striking example of this when I attended a concert with Raj on January 25, 2015, in Mumbai. He was extremely active with gestures of praise during the opening *vilambit* (slow) portion of the *khyāl* we were listening to, but as soon as the music sped up and the singer started singing virtuosic *tāns*, he rolled his eyes and folded his arms across his chest, where they remained for the rest of the performance. At the first available opportunity, he turned to me and commented, "Unfortunately, I cannot enjoy this performance, because I remember how music ought to be." This embodied act, the pattern of attention it revealed, the explanation through which it was framed, and the musical tastes it demonstrated were meaningful at multiple levels. Grounded in the ideas of a past golden age, Raj's expressions served to reproduce imagined histories of decline. They also had the power to say something about the speaker: as someone interested in the slow, technical parts of a performance, he demonstrates that he is also patient, knowledgeable, and serious. These qualities, by extension, also situated him socially as one of the few remaining good listeners with appropriate musical tastes and expertise and not as one of the ignorant "gallery." Finally, these qualities were indicative of Raj's old-middle-class habitus, embodying old-middle-class ideals and values.

In labeling embodied listening a type of performance, I do not wish to suggest that it is inauthentic or put on. My own experiences as a listener strongly suggest otherwise. Over the years in which I have engaged with North Indian classical music, I have noticed these practices imprinting themselves onto my own body, too. As my knowledge of this tradition has deepened, without trying, I have found myself gradually acquiring a new gestural repertoire with which to experience it. When I listen now, I find my own body performing conventional gestures spontaneously. This movement reflects the descriptions of this behavior as described by the expert listeners I interviewed: as involuntary, direct responses to the music. As Neeraj put it, "I cannot control myself: it comes on the spot" (interview with the author, April 24, 2014, Mumbai). Gradually acquiring this gestural repertoire has allowed me to experience firsthand the pleasures that

accompany a successful embodied performance of expertise. I recall with great pride the moment when a singer approached me after a listening session organized by a mutual friend. She told me, to my delight, that she could tell that I knew about music because of the way I had been reacting. In this case, my embodied responses to music were socially performative (they raised my status among a group of expert listeners), but they were certainly not faked. Part of the power of the disposition inculcated through this listening behavior is the very naturalness with which it is experienced.<sup>12</sup> Viewing this listening behavior in a Bourdieusian light, its naturalness serves in turn to disguise the social conventions on which it relies and the social structures it reproduces.

Performing listening on the body also makes possible pleasures of shared listening. For many of the music lovers I interviewed, this was the most important source of joy they identified in attending concerts. The following conversation took place between music lovers in the same family:

Sangeeta: And at times you experience the same thing. At times two people would have experienced the same thing, and you look at that person and you know that that person has . . .

Vidyun: . . . has the same experience as you.

Sangeeta: It's a very different feeling. OK, there is someone else who is sharing my feelings as well.

Radha: Somebody else is also enjoying what I have enjoyed!

Sangeeta: That happiness is very different.

Vidyun: It's unique! (interview with the author, April 27, 2014, Mumbai)

Many other music lovers articulated similar ideas. Anisha called this a moment of "connection," while Neeraj pointed out the sense of "camaraderie" he has developed with people whose "responses [to music] are similar" to his own. He said, "This is what . . . brings people closer" (interview, April 24, 2014). Here, the ability of listening to be communicated through the body and the experience of shared listening make possible a similar kind of pleasure to that identified by Will Straw in his study of record collectors in the UK and America, in which he describes how "each man finds, in the similarity of his points of reference to those of his peers, confirmation of a shared universe of critical judgment" (1997:5). As Arun put it, "If you have like-minded friends . . . and they emote at the same points which you do," then it's "confirmation of what you like." He describes the feeling as "Shit! I'm doing the right thing!" (interview, April 28, 2014).

However, despite all the benefits of these conventional listening practices, listening in this way carries social risks. In my interviews, a few listeners commented on people who attempt this extrovert, audible listening but who, for various reasons, get it wrong. For example, Raj criticized the "inconsistency" of a friend when Raj goes to hear one of his (the friend's) relatives performing: "He

goes [and] sits in the very front, and the vāh comes out left, right, and center. Vāh vāh vāh! You know. He's doing it because it's his [relative] performing. The same person will do it not even one-tenth of that portion when somebody else is performing" (interview, April 30, 2014). Here, a particular listener is singled out for criticism after his listening behavior reveals an unfair bias for one musician (a family member) over others. Meanwhile, Urvashi told me about "irritating" listeners who "just do vāh vāh at any point of the music, where it's not needed. . . . They want themselves to be noticed, that 'Yes, I understand. See, I understand more than you.' . . . If it's in the right place, musically, then it's genuine. So that's where we know which audience is discerning and which is not: by the vāhs. So if they are saying vāh vāh at a wrong place, we know: uh uh, this one needs more listening" (interview, April 29 2014). Expressing a common sentiment among musicians and listeners, Urvashi interprets incorrect participation in active listening behaviors both as a sign of listeners' ignorance and as a sign of bad character: they are not being genuine but simply trying to assert their superiority over other listeners. She uses musical criteria ("in the right place, musically") in order to form this assessment.

In both of these cases, individuals face criticism, including moral criticism, for the way they perform their listening, because they have inadvertently performed aspects of the stereotypical bad listener. Such statements indicate the social risks associated with extrovert listening behaviors. While engaging in active listening practices can mark out an individual as a good listener, it also risks marking someone as a bad one. This is especially true for nonexperts: as Urvashi's comments suggest, they are particularly prone to facing negative judgments (including judgments of their character) when they try to take part in high-status listening activities—and get it wrong.

As a result of such social policing, not all people are able to take equal part in extrovert, audible listening practices. Nonexperts experience social censure if they draw too much attention to themselves during performances. I have noticed that men tend to be more active than women, although I have not analyzed this with any empirical study.<sup>13</sup> And extrovert listeners are usually distributed unevenly across the performance space. As Silver (1984) has noted, the most active audience members tend to cluster closest to the musicians. This is the place where the highest-status listeners sit, including the patron, the soloist's entourage, and any other musicians. It is with these listeners that musicians will interact the most. Active, extrovert listening therefore forms part of a complex system in which there are links between people's social status (determined in part by their expertise), how extrovert they are, and where they sit.

For some, listening well and being known to listen well can serve as tools for social mobility; both musicians and listeners told me about times when musicians spotted a "good listener" at the back of the audience and called that



person to the front to get the benefit of his or her reactions. As well as serving as a form of social performance, embodied listening practices can thereby also be implicated in social negotiations that are played out in terms of movement within the performance space.

On the one hand, extrovert, audible listening is a valued part of musical performance: it is associated with a lost golden age and can situate individual listeners as experts, *rasikas*, or good listeners with good musical taste and a high social status. On the other hand, engaging in these practices also risks giving the impression of being biased, a show-off, an attention seeker, a wannabe, or undiscerning. Embodied ways of listening perform imagined histories, social identities, and sets of musical tastes; and they make possible moments of shared joy. However, access to these extrovert listening practices is unevenly distributed across the performance space and along lines of status and expertise. Listening therefore entails navigating a social minefield. This is a matter not only of listeners' embodied behavior but also of the specific musical tastes and patterns of attention that such behavior reveals.

### **Conclusion: Listening and Contemporary India**

In this article, I have explored what it might mean to put listening, rather than performing, at the center of a study of contemporary North Indian classical music. Focusing on listeners' accounts of their experiences, I have explored the complex sociality of ways of listening to music. In doing so, I have highlighted linkages between ways of engaging with music, aspects of musical sound, discourse, and embodied behaviors. I have demonstrated how imagined histories of North Indian classical music shape contemporary expert listening, as well as how these historical narratives are sustained through listeners' embodied engagement with musical sound. I have argued that listening practices perform social status, specifically, that particular embodied behaviors perform the overlapping identities of the *rasika*, the good listener, and the musical expert. Moreover, since this identity of the good listener is a classed identity, ways of listening are a site for the embodied reproduction of social class.

This work contributes to a growing body of literature that explores how musical consumption practices have been shaped by the economic changes that took place in India from the 1990s on and the new class formations that emerged as a result (Beaster-Jones 2014, 2015, 2016; N. Higgins 2014; Morcom 2013, 2015). Whereas other studies have focused on the varied musical lives of the new middle class, studying contemporary North Indian classical music allows for a focus on what has happened to the old middle class over the last couple of decades, specifically, how their discourses on musical consumption have shifted in response to the changing economic landscape. In many cases, their ways of



describing good and bad listening serve as broader social commentary: discussions of listening highlight their ambivalence toward contemporary life and their sense of alienation from consumer culture. Seen in this light, embodied performances of good listening are a powerful way of preserving something old in the face of unwelcome social change.

Meanwhile, to the growing interdisciplinary body of work on listening (spanning ethnomusicology, anthropology, musicology, sound studies, and philosophy), this study contributes an example of how embodied listening practices can participate simultaneously in social processes at multiple levels, including across what Georgina Born calls the “four planes of social mediation” that music “engenders” (2013:32). At the microsocial level, listening practices are implicated in the complex field of spatialized social negotiations that take place at live performances. These practices are socially strategic: they are a way for listeners to assert or negotiate a high status within a tight-knit community of connoisseurs. At the macrosocial level, meanwhile, they are part of the habitus of a particular elite class formation and a means through which this class fraction reproduces itself. Above all, this research highlights musical listening as a thoroughly social practice, as part of how individuals navigate the social world. Listening, then, is something we do not only because we love music but also because it has the power to make us who we are or to say something about who we want to be.

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## Notes

1. For an example of this, see this YouTube video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hRdwn234gQI>, accessed September 1, 2015) of a khyāl performance by the singer Salamat Ali Khan, broadcast on TV in 1974. Notice the gestures and movements of the audience as they listen; notice how you can read the quality of their concentration on their faces; and notice their audible and embodied expressions of appreciation, through which they show that they have enjoyed what the musician has just sung.

2. My conversations with listeners complicate details of Neuman’s account. Below, I will stress the embodied nature of how listeners engage with music, corroborating Leante (2013); ultimately, I would suggest, expert listeners and musicians alike engage with music in ways that are both embodied and mediated by discourse and frameworks of classification. Nevertheless, Neuman’s work remains an important reminder of how ways of listening are tied to broader musical ideologies.

3. Leante's work (2013) is an exception, but it does not concern ways of listening to live performances. She analyzes listeners' verbal reactions to recorded performance as a way of addressing questions of musical meaning (especially the embodied associations of particular *rāgs*).

4. This method of asking listeners about their own listening is inspired by Gross (2012).

5. As various scholars have discussed (e.g., Fernandes 2006; Brosius 2010; Donner and De Neve 2011), this new middle class is heterogeneous and can be difficult to pin down. Thus, both the group Dwyer labels "new middle class" and her "emerging petite bourgeoisie" would fall under the category "new middle class" in the work of other scholars. In some descriptions, the distinction between old and new middle classes is generational: the new middle class comprises the children of the old middle class. In others, the new middle class consists of upwardly mobile new entrants into the middle class. However, regardless of its sociological reality, ideas about a new consumerist middle class (and its failings) are an important part of public discourse in India. It is beyond the scope of this article to intervene into wider debates on class definitions. Rather, I focus on old-middle-class (often stereotyped) ideas about the new middle class and on how old-middle-class individuals marshal these ideas in order to distinguish themselves.

6. The class habitus of the music lovers I met was thrown into stark relief by that of the Indian salsa dancers with whom I also socialized, who had typically new-middle-class lifestyles. (When I was living in India, salsa dancing was my most important hobby.) Although, like music lovers, they tended to be affluent and highly educated, they were far more invested in the conventional trappings of consumer culture. They wore designer labels, went out clubbing in the evenings, and, resonant with their interest in salsa dancing, often met up over cocktails and international cuisine. (This also reflects an age difference: most of the salsa dancers I encountered were in their twenties and thirties.)

7. Kalpana Ram has remarked on the link between the classical arts in general and this post-Independence Indian middle class. She accounts for this by focusing on the slowed-down temporality of performances, which, she argues, make possible for audiences the experience of "leisurely savoring." This, in turn, "offers respite from the breathless, compressed temporality of dragging the nation out of underdevelopment" (Ram 2011:S169). For Ram, then, the link between the classical arts and the middle classes is grounded in contrast: since the middle classes are engaged in fast-paced political activism, the slow pace of performances makes the arts a valuable source of relief. Here, I account for this link in a different way by demonstrating the congruence between ways of listening and middle-class values.

8. There is no space here to analyze the ways in which such musical strategies play out in performance. For a detailed musical analysis of an *ālāp* from the perspective of listeners' expectations, see Widdess (2011).

9. There is a long history of projects, going back at least one hundred years, to save North Indian classical music by promoting it to wider audiences (Bakhle 2005).

10. I am grateful to Byron Dueck for pointing out that studying North Indian classical music lovers has the potential to intervene into sociological debates about cultural omnivorousness: the theory that having varied (i.e., omnivorous) tastes has emerged as a marker of elite status (e.g., Peterson 1992). When doing this research, I did not systematically ask *rasikas* about any music other than North Indian classical music; when issues of taste came up in our conversations, it was usually in the context of music lovers valuing certain features of North Indian classical music over others, rather than comparisons between different types of music. The social distinctions I discuss here would seem to be grounded primarily in questions of taste within North Indian classical music, rather than between musical traditions. However, a few *rasikas* highlighted the eclecticism of their musical tastes, situating their interest in North Indian classical music within a broader enthusiasm for music in general. One listener, for example, took pains to emphasize that he was just as passionate about Western classical music as he was about Indian. Further research on this issue could nuance scholarly understandings of taste and class in India, potentially also contributing to wider debates in sociology; this would seem an extremely valuable project.

11. My engagement with Bourdieu raises questions about agency. For Bourdieu, individual class habitus is the product of class conditioning and therefore largely beyond personal control: “Agents are possessed by their habitus more than they possess it” ([1972] 1977:18). Here I show how listeners’ embodied ways of listening are socially efficacious at various levels, each with different implications in terms of agency. At the macrosocial level (social class), individuals are subject to internalized class dispositions that orient them toward particular ways of engaging with music; at the microsocal level, however, individuals may exert considerable freedom in how they choose to participate in the social negotiations that occur within the music scene or indeed at a specific concert.

12. In a very similar kind of environment, Rachel Beckles Willson (forthcoming) describes this as “authoritative listening.”

13. The feminist scholar Vidya Rao confirmed my general impression (personal communication, 2015). This would support Schofield’s (2010) claim that the contemporary connoisseurship of North Indian classical music reproduces masculine sensibilities and masculine forms of sociality. As she explores in various publications, there is a long history to the gendering of North Indian classical connoisseurship (e.g., Schofield 2015; see also Brown 2006).

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