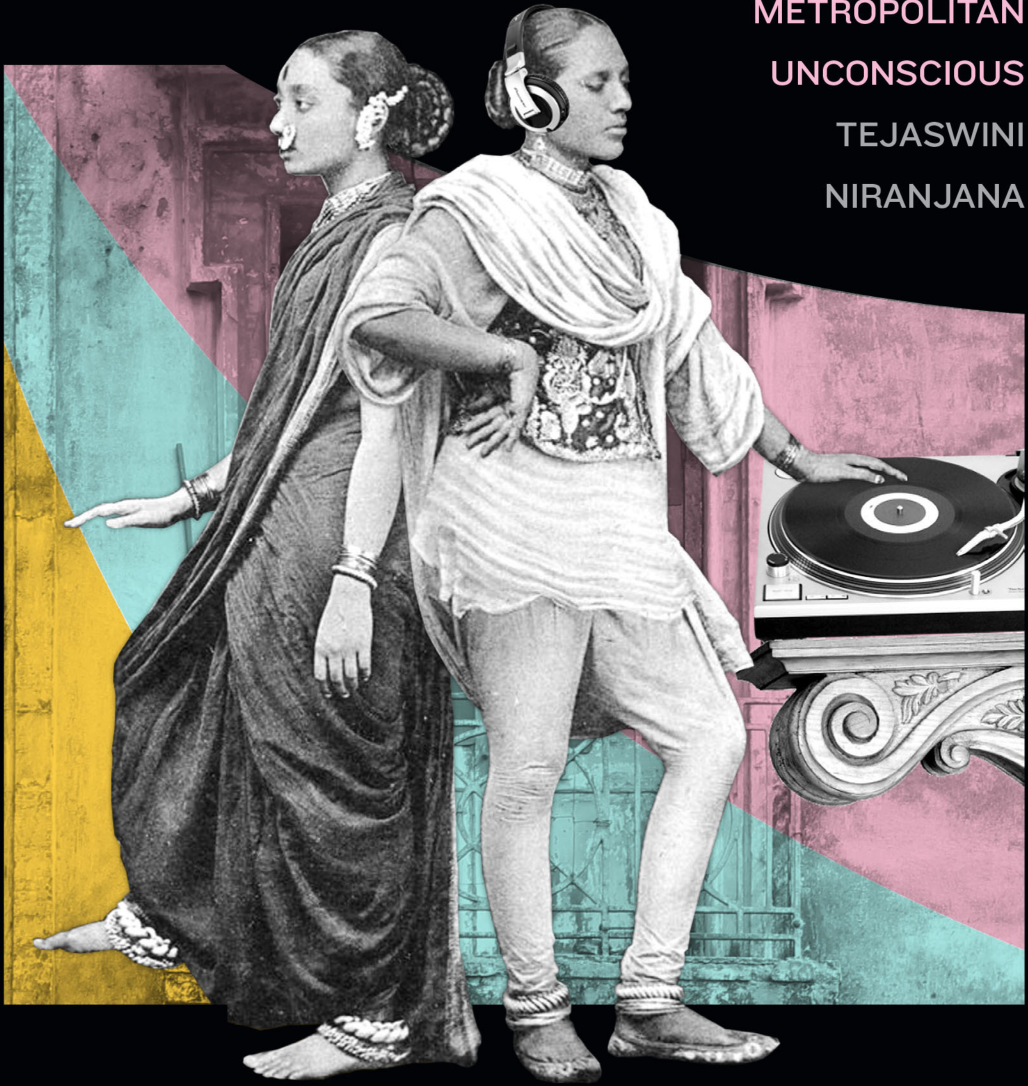
MUSICOPHILIA IN MUMBAI

PERFORMING SUBJECTS & THE METROPOLITAN UNCONSCIOUS

TEJASWINI NIRANJANA



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TEJASWINI NIRANJANA

Duke University Press *Durham and London* 2020

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on acid-free paper ∞. Designed by Courtney Leigh Baker
and typeset in SangBleu and Knockout by Copperline Books

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Niranjana, Tejaswini, [date] author.
Title: Musicophilia in Mumbai : performing subjects and the
metropolitan unconscious / Tejaswini Niranjana.
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2020. | Includes
bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2019032734 (print)
LCCN 2019032735 (ebook) |
ISBN 9781478006862 (hardcover)
ISBN 9781478008187 (paperback)
ISBN 9781478009191 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Hindustani music—Social aspects—India—Mumbai. |
Hindustani music—India—Mumbai—History and criticism.
Classification: LCC ML3917. I4 N57 2019 (print) | LCC ML3917. I4 (ebook) |
DCC 780.954/792—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019032734
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019032735

Cover art: Publicity poster for the exhibition *Making Music
Making Space*, Mumbai (2015). Courtesy: Jugal Mody.

For Seema, and for Ashish

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Acknowledgments

My greatest debt is to Neela Bhagwat, extraordinary feminist musician and scholar, who has guided me through the Hindustani music universe since 2003. With her, I got my first glimpse of *sina-basina* training. Amarendra (Nandu) Dhaneshwar, whom I will dare to call my *guru-bandhu*, has been more than generous in sharing his musical knowledge and his keen awareness of the social changes to do with cultural practice in Mumbai. Neela and Nandu welcomed me into their home, kitchen, neighborhood, and concert circuit—for all of this, I am truly grateful. I hope they will not be too unhappy with what I have made of this book.

In Bangalore, the musical doors Meghana Kulkarni opened for me eventually led me to Omkar Havaldar. His patience and generosity with my constant questioning and my unmusical concerns have been exemplary, as is his knowledge of Hindustani music. Rutuja Lad, who began by helping me translate Marathi writings on music, has become—through my current India-China project—a spirited collaborator and a touchstone for musical exuberance. Bindhumalini Narayanaswamy, who came into my musical life barely two years ago, is already a strongly engaged interlocutor, compelling me to confront complicated questions. My gratitude to these young vocalists for allowing me to accompany them at least part of the way on their twenty-first-century journeys.

Surabhi Sharma, longtime friend and collaborator, is director of *Returning to the First Beat* (2017), the docufilm that was interwoven with the research process of this book. Without her intrepid explorations of Girgaum and her fine sense of how to hold a shot, my understanding of musicophilia in Mumbai would have been the poorer. Kaiwan Mehta's Bhuleshwar walks were an early introduction to the wider native-town neighborhood. He and Sundararajan Rajan helped me understand the significance of motif and detailing in Mumbai's urban architecture. Farzan Dalal was an enthusiastic participant in the *Making Music Making Space* exhibition project, and his design skills showed what could be done with very little money but plenty of imagination. Sohnee Harshey, co-conspirator in adventures linguistic, has finessed my Hindi and Marathi usage into respectability. Tanveer Hasan bravely wielded the videocamera when there was no film crew at hand, and alerted me to the nuances of Urdu and Persian terms. Shaina Anand, Ashok Sukumaran, and Zinnia Ambapardiwala of CAMP helped the interview footage find a spacious home on pad.ma, and provided neighborly succor during my years in Chuim Village.

Grateful thanks are due to all those not mentioned elsewhere in these acknowledgments who agreed to be interviewed for the research: Aneesh Pradhan, Anjali Arondekar, Anmol Vellani, Arvind Parikh, Ashwini Bhide-Deshpande, the late Aslam Khan, the late Babanrao Haldankar, Balasaheb Tikekar, the late Chandrakant Ramjibhai Mewada, Shubhada and Shrikant Dadarkar, Dayalsingh Thakur, the late Dhondutai Kulkarni, Farida Sabnavis, the late Girish Karnad, Girish Sanzgiri, Kalyani Puranik, Kishor Merchant, Murli Manohar "Shukla," Namita Devidayal, Nayan Ghosh, Nilima Kilachand, Ramdas Bhatkal, Sangeeta Gogate, Satchit Dabholkar, the late Sharad Sathe, the late Sumathi Tikekar, and Sumitra Samant. Nitin Shirodkar's lively stories about Girgaum defined how we began to think about the spaces of music in Mumbai. Deepak Raja's kindness in supplying music, food, and stimulating conversation was unparalleled. A special thank you is due to Lalith Rao and Jayavanth Rao for indulging my requests for music, photographs, and contacts. The hours spent with them talking about Bombay/Mumbai have been truly memorable.

I am indebted to Prasad Shetty, whose insistence that we apply to the MMRDA's Heritage Conservation wing set Surabhi and myself on the path to discovering Girgaum's musicophilia. Surinder Jaswal at TISS was an enduring source of support; much of the exhibition work was enabled through her visionary ideas about what kind of challenges social sciences in India should take up. Arundhati Ghosh and Sumana Chandrashekhar at the India Foundation for the Arts saw the potential of the collaborative exploration of music in urban space. Rajeev Thakker of Studio X was a generous exhibition host. Satchit Dabholkar let us enter Laxmi Baug and fill it with Hindustani music once again.

My colleagues and students at the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society, Bangalore, offered critical comments on early versions of the ideas explored in this book. Over the years, my questions about music have been sharpened through conversations with Amlan Das Gupta, Ashwin Kumar AP, David Scott, Ding Naifei, Nisha Susan, Poorva Rajaram, Ritty Lukose, Samita Sen, and Urmila Bhirdikar. Anjeline De Dios and Steve Ferzacca of the "music group" in Singapore helped me think through questions of pedagogy in Hindustani music. M. Madhava Prasad offered comments on the manuscript at a crucial stage, inspiring me in finding the right peg on which to hang the afterword. I am grateful, as always, to Mary John and Satish Deshpande for their solidarity with my projects, and to Ila Ananya, my millennial reference point, for being on hand to organize the *ghar baithaks* and offer comments on my *riyaaz*.

Audiences in Mumbai, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Singapore, New Delhi, New York, Berlin, Kolkata, Ahmedabad, and Hong Kong have engaged with my work and asked far-reaching questions. I am grateful to the Wissenschafts Kolleg zu Berlin; the Institut Etudes de Avancees, Nantes; Chua Beng Huat and the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore; and Stephen Chan and the Department of Cultural Studies, Lingnan University, for finding me much-needed time and resources (including the wonderful librarians at all these institutions). The manuscript has benefited hugely from Kristine Reynaldo's keen eye for infelicities. Toto Eunsoo Lee's visit to Mumbai ensured that her spatial aesthetic was translated into the architecture of the website that accompanies this book: https://mumbaimusicophilia.wordpress.com. My thanks to the three anonymous reviewers whose suggestions were a joy to work with. I'm privileged to have as editor the amazing Ken Wissoker, and am grateful for that lunch invitation in New York that eventually resulted in our working together again.

This book is dedicated to two people who are central to my involvement in music, and to my formation as a social subject and an intellectual: Seemanthini Niranjana (1964–2008), gone too soon, who shared my childhood traumas and insisted on our reconnecting to music; I will always picture her riding a scooter after her surgery, singing aloud as she bade me "do." To be able to sing (at last), she used to say, is so marvelous. Ashish Rajadhyaksha has been my companion for over two decades, and he is as deeply invested in my musical training as he is in what sense I'm making of it. I count on him to keep offering me what we jokingly call "loving advice." Without his constant encouragement, I would have hesitated to take all those risks that are so important and so necessary.

I am grateful to the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, and Lingnan University, Hong Kong, for their encouragement and support of the research on which this book is based. The Cultural Studies Cluster of the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, provided a three-month fellowship in 2016, during which I did substantial library work. The manuscript was completed with support from the Research Grants Council of the University Grants Committee of Hong Kong, under the Hong Kong Humanities and Social Sciences Prestigious Fellowship Scheme [Project Code: LU 33000017 (131606)].

Earlier versions of chapters 1 and 2 have appeared in a different form in *Cultural Studies*: “Musicophilia and the Lingua Musica in Mumbai” (32, no. 2, 261–85), and “Deewana (the Mad One); the Lover of Music” (published online, August 19, 2018). A very early version of chapter 1 was published online as a working paper by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai (January 2015).

Introduction

ON NOT BEING ABLE TO LEARN MUSIC

I always characterize my engagement with music as having gone from singing Christmas carols in my English-medium primary school to learning Hindustani music in my forties. But when I think back on my tenuous connection to the Indian classical performing arts, I dredge up memories from a childhood filled with books, looking for moments when music came briefly into that space where R. L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island* jostled with Enid Blyton's *Famous Five* series and Alexandre Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo*.

Was I nine or ten years old when I was taken to the house of a woman called Radha, student of the great Ravi Shankar, who lived on Ninth Main Road in Jayanagar Third Block? I have a faint recollection that her husband was a pharmacist—perhaps they were new to the southern city of Bangalore of the late 1960s. I remember her fair, sulky, rather unhappy face—perhaps they had come down in the world? Was it perhaps because of her marriage that her social situation had changed for the worse and she had to give music lessons? A sitar was purchased by my parents, and I was taken—was it twice a week?—to the teacher's house for lessons. This lasted for three years. I don't remember the music meaning much to me or giving me much pleasure. When my school organized a radio program, I played "Jingle Bells" on my sitar, and the teacher was appalled when I told her what I had composed. Perhaps the lessons stopped because of my lack of interest—on the other hand, perhaps also because of a family crisis when my father had a paralytic stroke, an event that made us rearrange our daily lives to a considerable extent and practice small economies. For quite a few years, however, the deep indentation caused by pressing down on the sitar strings remained on my left index finger. Decades later, if I unconsciously touch the pad of that finger, I can still feel the ghostly presence of the hardened skin.

My parents are long gone, and I have no idea why they wanted me to learn the sitar. For my modernist father, it could have been Ravi Shankar's rise to international stardom in the 1960s that prompted an interest in the Indian instrument made world famous by Shankar and others in the age of the Beatles and Woodstock. I still have two LPs purchased by my father at the time: one by Ravi Shankar and the Beatles' *Abbey Road*. The family went to listen to Ravi Shankar and his accompanist Alla Rakha at the Ravindra Kalakshetra auditorium in Bangalore once, and I enjoyed the glamour and the lively music, but it seemed so distant from my own feeble strumming that it was no great loss when I stopped, and soon the sitar disappeared from the house.

Two or three years later, in the early 1970s, on my mother's insistence my little sister and I acquired a Carnatic vocal music teacher, who used to come to our house twice a week. I remember him as a bald, elderly man, a few teeth gone, dressed in a much-washed white dhoti and kurta, who must have gone around the city giving a number of lessons every day. We learned a few *padams* from him, and sang them with more vigor than enthusiasm. Every time he saw us, he would say sadly in Kannada, "Katcheri maadsi bidtheeni" (I'll get you ready to do a concert soon). The lessons lasted barely a year. Giving the excuse of my upcoming high school final examinations, I persuaded my mother to stop the lessons. In hindsight, I think we girls did not take to the intense Hindu devotionalism of Carnatic music, having grown up in a largely agnostic home.

By the 1960s and '70s, it was quite common for middle-class parents in southern India to have their daughters taught classical music and dance as part of the cultural competencies that would better their chances at making a suitable marriage.[1] My own parents, who had come from poor families and were thus first-generation middle class, were writers and also socialists. They maintained an ambivalent relationship to the classical arts, which they would have seen as not of the people. Additionally, they saw their daughters' futures not as tied to a "good marriage" alliance but to

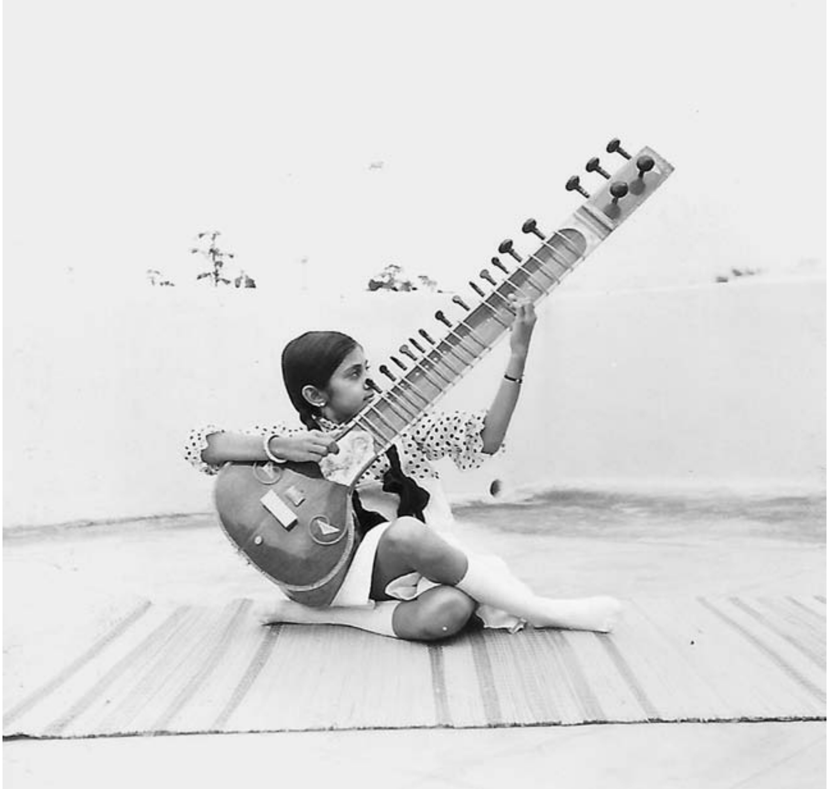

Figure I.1. The author at age ten. Photo: T. S. Sathyanarayana Rao.

things they might choose to do by themselves. And given that there was no one on either side of our parentage who had any connection to music and dance, there was no context in which we grew up listening to music or watching Indian classical dance performances. Late in life, I remember being quite bemused when I started going to Hindustani music classes, and the teacher asked me to practice at home with a harmonium ("Surely there must be an old one lying around in your house?" she had said). It wasn't that kind of home, I said wryly to myself, wondering at the post-midcentury assumptions about class, caste, and cultural capital embedded in that question, which was actually a statement.[2]

Two things changed my connection to music forever. This happened in the 2000s. I had been doing research on the Caribbean and had become increasingly interested in the musical culture of Trinidad. Responding to the beat of calypso, soca, and chutney, I fashioned a book on women, music, and migration between India and Trinidad.[3] While the manuscript was taking final shape, I took an Indian rock-pop singer, Remo Fernandes, to Jamaica and Trinidad, with a film crew documenting his journey and his collaborations. Ensconced in the music studios of southern Trinidad, listening to the singers who had dominated my academic research as they recorded with Remo lyrics that I had helped to write, I began to feel a different kind of immersion in the waves of sound during the production process than that experienced when I listened to already-recorded music or even a stage performance.

Although I am deeply envious of those who can do Caribbean-style wining, that fluidity of bodily movements is not something my limbs can emulate. So the physical response to music, and the feeding back of movement into voice production, is beyond my reach. By then I was two years into learning Hindustani music, first in a rather disorganized music school and then in one-on-one training. I knew that my breath control was poor, my Hindi accent atrocious, my voice loud and raw. I returned from the Caribbean tour determined to improve my musical practice. I also began to listen to more Hindustani musicians than I had ever done before.

One of the by-products of my Caribbean years was that I became increasingly skeptical about the distinctions between popular, folk, and classical music to which cultural studies scholars are accustomed. The influence of European and Anglophone music scholarship in India, converging with early twentieth-century nationalist efforts to assemble national traditions, had reinscribed these distinctions onto the diverse kinds of music in the subcontinent. So after the 1950s, the description “classical music” was attached to the North Indian (Hindustani) and the South Indian (Carnatic) strains of music that became the staple of radio broadcasts in newly independent India.[4] The twentieth-century classicization of the Indian vocal and instrumental music coming out of imperial courtly culture involves its separation from the folk on the one hand and film music on the other. The efforts at separation also bear the impress of the debates musicians had with British enthusiasts such as Ernest Clements who looked for descriptors of classicism in India to match those that had emerged in Europe through the nineteenth century.[5]

Historicizing the emergence of notions of the classical had the advantage of encouraging someone like me, who had been involved for over a decade in contributing to the critique of how nationalist/national traditions were assembled, to engage more deeply with the practice itself, instead of merely thinking about classical music as an oppressive and discriminatory institution because of the mainstream nationalist framing of the classical as part of an exclusive elite culture.

Foregrounding the practice rather than the institution also allows one to acquire an embodied appreciation of musical meaning. So just as calypso and soca music pleasured and stimulated me, I now began to respond to Hindustani music in similar ways. But unlike calypso, which I could not figure out how to reproduce through my own voice, Hindustani voice production was closer to the Indian languages that I was familiar with from childhood as well as to film music and folk music. All of these kinds of music—so-called classical, film, and folk—are part of a sound spectrum that forms the ambient music of everyday life in India. This is a reflection in hindsight on routes taken and not taken, and deciding to learn Hindustani music rather than Carnatic in adult life may well have been prompted by the childhood memory of not being engaged with South Indian music. Likewise the choice to learn how to sing rather than to play an instrument could have been prompted by the indifferent training I was given on the sitar.

One of the problems with coming to music late in life is that teachers tend to treat me as a mere hobbyist, someone learning music just to pass the time. On the other hand, people who have been learning music since childhood are treated as those who have the *sanskaara* or traces of that cultivation, who understand the allusive references to what *taal* structure is and how rhythmic patterns work, who shake their heads appreciatively with the right gestures and give *daad* or praise at the correct moments. I felt like someone struggling to eat with knife and fork at a Western-style dinner, watching out of the corner of my eye to see what the person next to me was doing. To this day I'm overcome by this musical shyness while attending a concert performance, unable to reconcile my own deeply felt auditory response with the kind of gestures that the confident listener makes. As he marks time on his thigh, raises his right palm upward and shakes the fingers, moves his head from side to side, and exclaims, "Wah!" and "Kya baat hai!," I shrink further into my seat, all punctuations and murmurs frozen before they are formed.

I never faced any difficulty learning the melody of a composition or being able to sing it with the right pauses. But the idea of improvisation within a rigid rhythmic structure was hard to grasp. I spent an inordinate amount of time mastering the actual compositions, which I treated like songs, as well as the precomposed sound patterns of the *taans*. I felt compelled to write down taans in the hope of being able to memorize them. I was afraid to switch on the electronic tabla, let alone sing with a live accompanist. I acquired composition after composition from different teachers and developed a nodding acquaintance with the scales of a number of ragas. At the point at which one must jump off the precipice and skim along, held up only by the undulating music, I came to a standstill.

I refused to believe that this was simply a lack of dexterity or confidence. Seeing the problem in terms of a psychologized "real individual" would not help me understand the larger issues: issues to do with the shaping of modern postcolonial subjects through the tensions between the liberal idea of the enlightened subject that is part of both our political common sense and our legal system in India, and the excessive subject exemplified by musicophilia.[6] What I do in this book, then, is use my personal story of musical struggle as an entry point into framing the research, for thinking about how modern urban Indians were seized by musicophilia over the long twentieth century, how through this passion they gained a new sense of interiority as well as an idiom in which to express it, and how their love of music is an indicator of a subjectivity that emerges through its immersion in the social.

The questions that bothered me were: How does one study or practice music? How does one treat one's teacher? How does the teacher expect to be treated? Should one never question what the teacher is doing in the act of teaching or performing? Why did all the touching of feet and references to godliness and devotion bother me so much? Strangely, I was at once both inside and outside this connotative universe—inside, because of having grown up liminally aware of it as a horizon of understanding and daily life for most people I knew; and outside, because of having grown up with political vocabularies of socialism, communism, and feminism, with their trenchant belief in human equality and their critique of hierarchy. In my home it was unheard-of for us children to touch anyone's feet, let alone those of our parents. What does it mean, then, for a modern Indian woman to learn Hindustani music today? I propose two kinds of moves in order to address this question: looking back, to understand the historical context in which this music came into urban spaces; and looking sideways, at the experience of others—teachers, students, music lovers—over the long twentieth century. I look at the spectacular experience of Bombay/Mumbai from the mid-nineteenth century to the present to explore why and how modern Indians became obsessed with Hindustani music.

Looking back and looking sideways, then, I began to resolve my anxieties about cultures of learning. Finally, I did touch the feet of two people, since they would not have understood any other token of respect. Both were female, both preeminent singers, both born in the very early twentieth century: Gangubai Hangal was ninety-three when I met her, and Dhondutai Kulkarni was eighty-seven. Neither was my teacher, but I continue to learn from their exemplary and single-minded careers. I treat one of my earliest teachers, Neela Bhagwat, now seventy-five, quite differently. She is a self-professed leftist and feminist, and complains that she is so democratic that she cannot force her students to learn in the way she wants them to. Our relationship is a companionable one, our engagements infrequent. This lack of sustained contact tells on the learning process, as I'm all too aware, and the focus has been more on accumulating, or learning many compositions, rather than on deepening my understanding of the music.

Now I obtain my *taleem* or training from Omkar Havaldar, who is in his early thirties but has been learning music since he was four years old, most of his teachers having been in their late sixties or seventies. He is my teacher, but struggles to find a respectful term with which to address his oldest student, while I use the privilege of age to call him by his first name. These days most of our lessons are online, and imbued with what I call Skyptimacy—a new intimacy between teacher and student that is premised on geographical distance rather than closeness. Technology, instead of alienating me from the learning process, has actually strengthened aspects of it. I hear my teacher's soft voice more clearly because he uses a microphone. He holds up his iPhone, with the display of iTabla's percussive beats, and encourages me to follow the rhythmic cycle visually on the screen, while simultaneously listening to the sound of the tabla at his end. I improvise more and more and with greater ease these days, and I have begun to understand how to draw on a repertoire of musical phrases to create a sustained taan. Through my daily *riyaaz* or practice, I have begun to understand that knowing, and not remembering, is what propels the maker of music.

And so, finally, I am able to sing.

Musicophilia

In this book, I bring together the notions of sociality and subjectivity to throw light on the performance of modernity in the non-Western metropolis. My focus is on the port city of Bombay/Mumbai, where the centrality of Hindustani or North Indian classical music from the late nineteenth century onward helped form a distinctive kind of aural community. The aspirations of this community impacted the way in which urban spaces were organized, as the love for music created a culture of collective listening that brought together people of diverse social and linguistic backgrounds. The book suggests that this condition of collective listening enabled the formation of a new musical subject, the musicophiliac. The avid listener, the collector, the event organizer, the student, and the teacher—all came into Hindustani music as nontraditional musical subjects. I argue further that their attraction to a music that became publicly available by the late nineteenth century and their membership in a community of musicophiliacs are the factors that fed into the production of the musical interiority foregrounded in Hindustani music practice as it moved into the twentieth century.

The elephant in the room in debates about non-Western contexts is usually the issue of modernity. In a lucid summary of the key propositions of the debates, Lawrence Grossberg uses the term "euro-modernity" to refer to what is presented as normative, especially but not only in modernization theory from the 1950s on.[7] Then there have been the critiques: It's one thing, he says, to argue—as Timothy Mitchell does—that modernity is not created by the West but in interaction between the West and the non-West. It's another thing to say modernity was also invented elsewhere (other or alternate modernities), and yet another to say there are alternatives to modernity. Grossberg is of the view that to recognize either of these would require the near-impossible project of the decolonization of knowledge.[8] The problem with either, I propose, is the idea that there is indeed a norm (euro-modernity) against which, outside of Europe, we could aspire to have alternatives to modernity or alternate modernities. Cultural theorist Madhava Prasad, in a trenchant review of *Consuming Modernity*, drew attention to how, in spite of the different modernities signaled by the Public Modernity and Public Culture project, there always seemed to be beyond these a Modernity with a capital M.[9] This problem besets even that most nuanced of contemporary thinkers, Partha Chatterjee, to whom we are otherwise indebted for a host of insightful formulations about non-Western political formations. In a well-known essay titled "Our Modernity," Chatterjee describes the subjection of the colonized in India:

> Modernity for us is like a supermarket of foreign goods, displayed on the shelves; pay up and take away what you like. No one there believes that we could be producers of modernity. The bitter truth about our present is our subjection, our inability to be subjects in

> our own right. And yet, it is because we want to be modern that our desire to be independent and creative is transposed onto our past. . . . Ours is the modernity of the once-colonized. The same historical process that has taught us the value of modernity has also made us the victims of modernity.[10]

In my account of musicophilia in Mumbai, I hope to persuade you that the modern subjects of that city have embarked on what Kwame Anthony Appiah in a different but related context called a "less anxious creativity."[11] I borrow Madhava Prasad's notion that while there is a concept called "modernity," it can only ever be realized in nationalized forms, since both "nation" and the "modernity" that requires political formations like "nation" and "nation-state" are of the same vintage. So there are truly different modernities, spatially divergent, albeit occupying the same time of the present. Once we stop invoking the Kantian enlightened subject, we can also stop conflating the concept of "modernity" with "the practical reality of modern social orders."[12] Referring to something as "our modernity," then, would mean we have in mind quite a different set of ideas about political formations, governance, relationships between institutions, and so on, than those obtaining in euro-modernity. Since there is no evidence that the reference is working in all these registers, calling something "our" may only mark a moment of elite postcolonial desire.[13]

But then we need another approach by which to understand the specific features of national modernity in India (which this book does not claim to address directly) or that of metropolitan modernity in Bombay/Mumbai (which is indeed the backdrop against which my arguments about musicophilia are mounted). The distinctiveness of Bombay's[14] modernity in certain domains has been the topic of significant scholarship in business and industrial history, associational history, and the history of education, of planning and architecture, and of entertainment—especially theater and film. None of these have dealt with the subject of this modernity, although we obtain glimpses of these in fiction and in memoirs.[15] By the early twentieth century, Bombay—as headquarters of the Bombay Presidency—displayed many of the features of other imperial cities of the time: a city planning and governing authority, a judiciary, a form of political representation through institutions like the municipal council, a local bourgeoisie, a major commercial and industrial sector, an entertainment industry, hospitals, professional schools, an elaborate education system ranging from primary to tertiary levels, and a multilanguage and vocal press. Peopling this large urban area were migrants from the immediate hinterland as well as from distant regions in the subcontinent.

Aspects of Mumbai's modernity could be seen in new structures of governance and new associational models, even those that brought people together on the basis of caste, place of origin, and language. There were platforms on which participants deliberated on issues of common good and spoke on behalf of constituencies they claimed to represent, or tried to exert pressure on the governors of the city by making civic concerns visible. But alongside these platforms, there were others, like those that brought musicophiliacs together, that did not necessarily function as a space of/for representation. In spite of the efforts of music critics to deploy classificatory systems and popularize standards of judgment, evidenced in sporadic debates in magazines, musicophiliacs were not bound to follow principles of rational discourse.[16] Instead, the space they occupied while listening to music was one of intense and vociferous expression of appreciation and devotion. Often it was a space in which people fell silent because they were so profoundly moved, and where head-shaking or swaying or weeping—marks of what we might call "bodies in affect"—were greatly in evidence. In order to be able to understand the musicophiliac as a subject embedded in colonial and postcolonial modernity, I propose that we grasp this subject as a social subject and not as an individual in the normative euro-modern sense.[17]

The Metropolitan Unconscious

This book provides an account of this social subject, the musicophiliac, by examining the kinds of spaces in and practices through which the love of music is manifested in Bombay/Mumbai. I claim that in this city obtains what I call a "metropolitan unconscious," a collectivized unconscious that includes the diverse pasts and experiences of the migrants who came to settle here under conditions of colonial modernity from the nineteenth century onward. The metropolitan unconscious draws on all these migrant histories but is not identical with any one of them. These would include, in the instance at hand, both the hereditary musicians who taught and performed here as well as the people who made up the musicophiliac audience. Internally fraught with divisions of caste, class, religion, gender, and language, the musicophiliacs—fixated on Hindustani music—could sidestep these distinctions to create a community of musical affect. It was not a matter of transcending the divisions but of negotiating them in ways that had to be performed and not laid out in contractual language. I suggest that while musicophilia represents some features of the excess of subject formation in the contingent historical conditions of urban Bombay, the metropolitan unconscious stands for the sedimented repertoire of ways of living and experiencing that people brought into Bombay and that underwent transformation in engaging with the conditions of the present, thus creating a unique mode of being for musical and other subjects. In the instance of Hindustani music in the city, we see what Anjali Arondekar calls the figure of repetition-rupture, as performers invoke the permanence of tradition in the very moment of its transformation.[18] How does this imbrication of past and present occur, and what can it tell us more generally about subject formation?

Through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus we see how "habitual actions" may be understood as "embodiments of an external field of social forces which structure perception and experience."[19] The dispositions provided by the habitus, says Bourdieu, situate the subject in a web of structuring and structured experiences. The habitus "ensures the active presence of past experiences . . . deposited in each organism in the form of scheme of perception, thought and action."[20] For Bourdieu, the habitus offers a "conditioned and conditional freedom," the limits it sets on present action having been set by "historically and socially situated conditions." Where the idea of habitus helps me articulate the sociality of the subject is in its reference to "embodied history":

> The *habitus*—embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history—is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product. As such, it is what gives practices their relative autonomy with respect to external determinations of the immediate present. This autonomy is that of the past, enacted and acting, which, functioning as accumulated capital, produces history on the basis of history and so ensures the permanence in change that makes the individual agent a world within the world. The *habitus* is a spontaneity without consciousness or will, opposed as much to the mechanical necessity of things without history in mechanistic theories as it is to the reflexive freedom of subjects "without inertia" in rationalist theories.[21]

Here Bourdieu usefully challenges the idea of the Cartesian-Kantian freestanding subject. But in his insistence that the dispositions determine the discourse of the subject, who then “goes along like a train laying its own rails,” he tries to stuff the significatory excess that is the very condition of subject formation into a box, as it were.[22]

Bourdieu’s references to Durkheim’s discussion of the collective unconscious and his own mention of the unconscious perhaps point to his, and our, dissatisfaction with the congealed histories in the “quasi-natures of *habitus*.”[23] Mary Anne Rothenberg, in a perceptive comparative analysis of the concepts of habitus and the unconscious, argues, “The *habitus*, unlike the unconscious, is not itself transformed by the encounter with the present; neither are past and present transformed by their combination in practices. The *habitus* merely enables a variety of practices, each of which incorporates past and present in ways that do not alter their meanings.”[24] Rothenberg contends that only a theory of the unconscious, with its retroversive mechanism (the *Nachträglichkeit* or *après-coup*) would help us grasp the fact that “the appropriation of the present by the past works a transformation on both past and present.”[25] Without the retroversion, Bourdieu’s effort to show the workings of history actually ends up in dehistoricization.[26]

Performance of Modernity

I want to suggest that we modify the idea of habitus for the present project as follows: the coming together in the metropolitan space-time of colonial Bombay of multiple histories and their already determined limits on future action should be seen as creating not a sum of their parts but an altogether new entity, the metropolitan unconscious, the inhabiting of which affords new routes and new opportunities for the formation of social subjects. Under conditions of colonial modernity and the subsequent assembling of a national modern, subjects render their present livable by revisioning the past, but they do so—as in the case of Hindustani music—by drawing on a shared archive, not an individuated one, even as they engage in personal quests for listening opportunities, in building a vocabulary of devotion around their favorite musician, or in attempting to learn to sing or play an instrument themselves. If, as I propose, the performance of modernity was an imperative of this metropolitan unconscious, the passion for music opened up an important route to the realization of this performance.

Although the word “performance” in contemporary English indicates the act of presenting a play or any other form of entertainment, or at the most may refer to doing a particular job or undertaking an activity, in Indian languages the word for performance, which is *pradarshan*, refers to enactment and exhibition on the one hand, and to demonstration or showing on the other. Drawing heavily on the connotations of *pradarshan* then, in this book I use its translation, “performance,” to mean: render articulate, make visible, display, demonstrate. I hope to provide ample evidence of this kind of performance in the various chapters.

In the period I’m looking at, Hindustani music moved from being a courtly art to one firmly embedded in the urban marketplace. New structures of patronage for performers included musical theater companies, the emerging middle classes who set up music circles, gramophone companies, and state-owned radio. The new audiences for Hindustani music formed communities of listeners who often tried to learn music themselves, through the burgeoning music schools and through individual discipleship to great musicians. My research is based on archival and ethnographic work (participant observation of musical culture in Mumbai and in-depth interviews with performers). I also draw on a range of primary and secondary texts, which are referenced throughout the book: business history, accounts of the opium trade, community histories, autobiographies and biographies, architectural and town planning history, theater history, recording history, broadcasting, the history of education, of institutions, of railways, shipping, migration, and of publishing and print media. To a large extent, the effort has been not to produce new facts but to assemble an interpretive framework that may allow us to address anew the centrality of music as cultural practice in modern India and its role in creating the excessive subject of postcoloniality. By and large, the book focuses on vocal music, especially the *khayal* as well as semiclassical genres, and touches only occasionally on instrumental traditions. In this, I gesture toward the salience of the voice in the musical landscape of Mumbai in the long twentieth century about which I write.

I suggest that the musicophilia of Mumbai’s inhabitants over the long twentieth century gives us new material with which to think through questions of urbanity, subjectivity, and culture. Although the study is a deeply localized one, I believe similar patterns can be traced elsewhere in the subcontinent, and the relationship between cultural practice and the formation of the social subject can speak to many other contexts, especially in the non-West.

It is hoped that this book will impact a number of scholarly domains,