Lessons from Extreme metal musicians: a perspective from Singapore

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Proceedings of the Sixth International Symposium on the Sociology of Music Education, 5 to 9 July 2009

St Patrick's College, Dublin

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Lessons from Extreme metal musicians: a perspective from Singapore

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Abstract
Despite the processes of learning by popular musicians at a very personal level, there is very little common knowledge or recognition of how popular musicians in general learn or of the attitudes and values they share in relation to music learning. A serious examination of popular music learning practices could provide insights for teaching and learning of popular music as well as to provide lessons in music. Having begun initial studies of a local Extreme Metal group, Rudra, I study two of their songs, ‘Malediction’ (released in 1995) and ‘Ageless Consciousness I Am’ (released in 2005). While ‘Malediction’ revealed the presence of written exiguous notation Rudra members relied on for their recording, the final recording of ‘Ageless Consciousness I Am’ revealed two earlier sound recordings. Rudra’s exiguous notational system was later supplanted by their reliance from 2000 onwards on recorded sound files as notational systems but accrued significant benefits for the band in the early stages of their learning. By making observations about their songs and lessons learnt when studying an approach to music learning in the practice of Extreme metal music, I revisit epistemological foundations of in/formal learning through music.
Introduction

In her chapter on curriculum discourse, Janet Barrett noted the calls for change in curricular practice along at least four areas:

1. Challenge longstanding views of musicianship and musical understanding including:
   a. More comprehensive views of musical behaviours
   b. A wider array of musical styles
   c. An integrated sense of music as an embodied experience, and
   d. Greater depths of musical understanding
2. Situate the music curriculum as a dynamic social practice;
3. Relate developments in the music curriculum to broad arenas of educational policy that enable or inhibit change; and,
4. Foster views of teachers as primary agents of change in curriculum work. (Barrett 2007, pp. 147-161).

Out of Barrett’s rich discourse, I want in this paper to focus on music of popular culture, specifically the musical dimensions which are as follows:

1. Challenging, at an epistemological level, an understanding of music and by consequence its creators, makers and participants. This is implicit in the call for more inclusive views of musical behaviours which are contingent on musical practices which reveal human behaviour in situated contexts (Blacking 1973; 1995).
2. Reinforcing these musical practices as living practices rather than artefacts of and about musics that have privileged specified persons, places and systems more than others based on unilaterally imposed criteria. Conversely, certain musical practices have not been considered because they are unable to satisfy these said criteria.
3. Concomitantly, as living practices, these musical practices are performed as performative cultures (Dimitriadis 2006).
4. These performative cultures, as embodied and lived experiences, make the musical experience as much a socio-cultural, socio-historical and socio-political experience if not engagement.
5. These musical practices are performed not only in the musical instrumental sense but also re/created by people through a variety of media in the authoring and authorising of their lives (Dimitriadis & Weis, 2007, p.333).

My extrapolations from Barrett’s discussions are considered with reflections and assertions on the *performative* in popular music and culture because of the need to contextualise both aspects and situate them in the educational landscape. The presence of popular music in the school-based curriculum is not new and has been dealt with many, most recently by Green’s (2002; 2004; 2008) observations of the ways popular musicians learn *informally*. An examination of the nature of changes in the last forty years popular musicians’ informal learning practices, attitudes and values could help towards:

- an understanding of popular musicians’ experiences in formal music education and the dynamics of these changes; and,

- Exploring some of the possibilities which informal popular music learning practices might offer to formal music education.

Green (2002, p.7) argues that a *serious examination* of popular music learning practices could provide insights for teaching and learning of popular music as well as provide lessons in music.

To begin with, informality seems at odds with convention and *author/ity of formal training* translated as prior preparation, systematic training & regulation, and assessment and validation. All these combine to question in popular music the *credibility* in teaching and learning conventions of informal learning processes. Understanding how popular musicians learn should question modes of learning and assessment as well the terms of reference for learning that is said to take place. On the other hand, popular musicians leave little evidence or trace of informal learning to be able to raise to common knowledge, recognition of how
popular musicians in general learn. This contributes to problems in understanding learning processes by popular musicians on their own terms.

For instance, Green (2004, pp.228-236) articulates the ways in which musicians learn through popular musics, which are tabulated below:

- Enculturation
- Listening and copying
- Playing with peers
- Acquiring technique
- Informal acquisition of knowledge of technicalities
- Understanding practising
- Coming to terms with “feel”
- Encountering friendship and cooperation
- Articulation of enjoyment
- Expressions, implicit or otherwise, of self esteem
- Appreciation and respect for “other music”

What seems noticeably absent in this tabulation is the aspect of learning through writing and reading notation. Based on her interviews with musicians in selected genres of popular culture, Green (2002, pp.38-40; pp.206-207) offers an explanation for the place of notation in popular music:

1. Instructional status of notation which “…is liable to be thrown away as soon as the instruction is internalized by the musician”. She explains this exigency “…when a musical director or bandleader may hand out their own pre-written charts, or may “scribble” something down and pass it to the musician during the session itself”. It is for this reason notation is further qualified as “… unpublished notation…used in a variety of circumstances”.
2. Mnemonic function “… whereby musicians may prepare themselves for a session after having worked with a demo or other recording, or may write down ideas and instructions for themselves during a session”.
3. Supplement rather than a major learning resource. This she argues is because “… notation [which] includes conventional staff notation, guitar tablature, drum notation and chord symbols … often referred to as “charts” … is always heavily mixed in with aural practices”. If notation by popular musicians possesses currency, it seems to happen “… after the early stages [when] published scores are used only by some function bands and session musicians, some of whom may have sight-reading abilities”.
4. Ambiguous if not ephemeral status as it “… does not have the function of preserving or passing on the music for, as already seen, these practices occur primarily through aural means which pay attention to musical aspects that are not readily notatable. Partly because of this, published
scores, particularly songbooks on sale in music shops, are usually very inaccurate...musicians who play the songs do not use the scores that are available in shops, so there is no need for the scores to be accurate. This in turn, of course, provides another good reason for avoiding them’ (Green 2002, p. 38).

Green’s account is instructive in a number of ways. First, consigning instructional status to notation implies a prescriptive, pragmatic and precarious function to notation in popular music learning. While Green is correct to point out the presence of exiguous written instructions, these practical yet written instructions merit a much closer scrutiny than being rendered disposable currency. Do we know what these written instructions comprise? Despite their apparent lack of correspondence with the solidified convention of conventional notation, should we not ask why and how are they written? Do such practical yet written instructions convey select readership? Would such notation be the same for other forms of popular music?

Secondly, Green’s distinction of notation as un/published suggests a medium and mode of presentation for commercial consumption. Paradoxically, while Green informs us these published versions are remarkable for their inaccuracy, they are available as commercial products. But the issue of publication does not pursue the question of authorship or authority of such notation. Was such notation intended by its authors for dissemination beyond its intended purpose or possess any value or currency beyond its function? Moreover, might the ‘inaccuracy’ of notation suggest a convention already familiar in European art music practices of the Baroque period, jazz and certain world music practices of notation as a point of homage and departure on the part of performers or consumers of this convention? Moreover, the equating of published scores with sight-reading abilities seems to transpose expectations of trained musicianship in reading conventional written symbols and signifiers onto situated written conventions.

Thirdly, notation is considered a supplementary rather than a major resource in its contribution towards music-making; rendering notation’s subservience to aural and oral
processes evident in popular music. Yet it is accorded mnemonic function. Memory aids are not only visual but are also embodied through the aural and oral acuity so often prized by musicians in music-making activities such as rehearsal, copying and exploring. Might notation not be regarded with *more* than supplementary status in relation to facilitating muscular, oral and aural memory?

Fourthly, gleaned through her interviewees, Green is probably correct in her observations about the nature, role and function of notation in the learning, copying and assimilating of pre-existing popular music repertoire. But Green’s focus on informal learning processes in popular music seems to concentrate more on *re-creative* than *creative* endeavour. How might notation be understood, applied and practised among musicians creating their own compositions in a genre of their choice?

In this paper, I study two original compositions by Rudra, an Extreme (Death) metal band from Singapore; ‘Malediction’ (ca.1993/4) and ‘Ageless Consciousness I Am’ (2005). This group began their creative endeavour with ‘written details’ I call exiguous notation. I focus my attention on one of their early songs ‘Malediction’ (ca.1993/4) observing the sonic processes (pitches, riffs, power chords, vertical sonorities, etc.) and structures emergent from the recorded example. I also observe the correspondence between Rudra’s attempt/s towards recording this song through their use of exiguous notational system (Rudra e-communication 2008). This exiguous notational system was later supplanted by Rudra’s reliance from 2000 onwards on recorded sound files as *notational systems*. ‘Ageless Consciousness I Am’ is preceded by two such prior tracks or rehearsals. I observe these two ‘instances’ of this work and compare them with the final version. Finally, through these two songs, I assess in/significance of notation for *Rudra* from the formative years to the recent present (Rudra, personal communication with K. Kathirasan, July 2008).
Documentary evidence of Rudra’s repertoire may be found in five CD releases (Rudra, 1998; Aryan Crusade, 2001: Kurukshetra, 2003; Brahmavidya Primordial I, 2005; Brahmavidya Transcendental I, 2009), a three-song release (The Past 1995) and original material written as early as 1993 and 1994. Their praxis has also been supplemented by multiple interviews with local and (more) international magazines and e-zines. The Rudra website www.rudraonline.org indicates no less than ten international performances albeit considerably fewer local events (highly profiled or otherwise).

Methodology

My initial searches, by word of mouth network, were eventually supplanted by an electronic network when I met K. Kathirasan of Rudra on the internet. Any attempts to schedule interviews with the group proved difficult partly because of conflicting times, and also fuelled by a sense of wariness. When their confidence was won and with bassist/vocalist K. Kathirasan acting as group spokesperson (with consensus from other members), I was able to obtain information through personal contact and e-mail exchanges, some of which could be corroborated by e-documentation available on Rudra’s website alongside information from other media. Moreover, the use of e-contact and correspondence enabled me to receive more articulate and considered views about their practice. In 2008, I was granted access to their collection of privately held materials. Sustained e-contact and personal interviews with K. Kathirasan, as custodian of these materials, resulted in richer discussions about their use of notational systems in relation to their practice in the formative years as well as a number of sound files of ‘earlier takes’ of songs recorded after 2000.

Out of their collection of materials, I was able to select two songs, ‘Malediction’ (ca.1993/4) which was released in 1995 because of the presence of written notation leading up
to the recording. Of the sound file recordings, ‘Ageless Consciousness I Am’ (released in 2005) was available in two prior versions which enabled me to observe the pathways of the song to the final recording; in fact the only recording thus far from Rudra to exist in two earlier forms. Rather than attempt to transcribe the materials, I have presented some of the ideas in a form that they have chosen – upper case pitch names in order to present them in their authentic written reality together with the recorded sound.

‘Malediction’

One of Rudra’s early songs ‘Malediction’ (ca.1993/4) appeared in a cassette tape release, ‘The Birth’, in 1994 and later in a 1995 four-track release called ‘The Past’. K. Kathirasan provides some background information on some of the pathways leading to the recording of the song:

This song was written with disgust for people in general…just dislike people telling us how we should live and religions telling us to live a certain kind of life. And these people did more evil to us by preaching than living their own lives or letting us live our lives. Every other day when we left our jamming place, the police would stop us and check our id [identification cards]…screening with a stern face while we would laugh at them just to irritate them because we have always been clean. There had never been any form of test [random urine testing for suspected narcotic substance abuse]…Just that we would be stopped every time a police car passed by us in the neighbourhood. And the public would watch us as though we were criminals because we wore black all the time…those were the days…. (e-communication with K. Kathirasan of Rudra, 2009).
‘Malediction’ survives in notated form in these three representations,

![Exiguous notation by K. Kathirasan and M. Balasubramaniam for ‘Malediction’ – courtesy of Rudra]

According to Kathirasan, ‘… the first two were written by Bala our guitarist. The 2nd [tablature] notation was written by me’. (e-communication with K. Kathirasan of Rudra, 2009). The riffs exist in two versions; letter names and guitar tablature written on A4-sized paper with a title-logo ‘Ngee Ann Polytechnic’ and another in an A5-sized exercise book. The A4 version seems to be an earlier draft; depictions of letter names seem to correspond to the recorded version less than the letter name version in the exercise book. Additionally, there are numbers attached to the riffs to indicate the number of times the riffs have to be played. From a textual perspective, ‘Malediction’ has only one verse which is repeated and is interjected by a number of sections separated by riffs. If anything, the song is probably more marked by guitar riffs than the lyrics itself. A brief overview of the structure of the recording of ‘Malediction’ is presented together with the written riff and tablature notation.

The piece begins with a guitar introduction (1” – 37”, tempo = 132-138 bpm) comprising arpeggiated figures anchored by an E-pedal and E-centric focus. According to Kathirasan, guitarist Balasubramanian was at that time ‘… exploring modal scales like Dorian & Phrygian. We decided to incorporate a similar scale into the song through that intro[duction]. Bala read a lot of guitar magazines and also briefly learned electric guitar playing at Yamaha Music School’ (e-mail communication with K. Kathirasan of Rudra 2009).
Riff 1

Figure 2, Riff 1, 38” – 50” tempo circa =144 bpm || E---B-F-E :|| 4x letter-name shorthand and bass tablature

Riff 2

0’ 51” – 1’17”

Figure 3, Riff 2 51” – 1’17” || E-B-Bb-A – E-G#-G-F# :|| 8x – pitch shorthand and bass tablature

Growl - 57” followed by growled vocals 1’ 04” comprising the following lyrics

Screams, that comforts the Damned
Evil reigns in sinister
Harrow the sick in the mind
Curse thou to rot beneath the Lord
Inflict the pain
To the senses
Resuscitating the agony
Till the touch of death
Soul bleeds in hell

Riff 3

1’ 18” – 1’ 30”

Figure 4, Riff 3 1’ 18” – 1’ 30” Hell (1’ 24”) || E-A-C-B – E-G-A#GAG :|| 4x

Riff 2

1’ 31” – 1’ 43”

Figure 5, Riff 2 1’ 31” – 1’ 43” || E-B-Bb-A – [E]-G#-G-F# :|| 4x – pitch shorthand and bass tablature

Growled Vocals 1’ 31” comprising a repeat of the earlier mentioned lyrics.

Riff 4

Figure 6, Riff 4 1’ 44” – 1’ 56”||: E --- e – B --- b ;|| 2x – pitch shorthand and bass tablature

Riff 5

Figure 7, Riff 5 - 1’ 57” – 2’ 55” (compound time/triplet rhythm contrasts with previous riffs) ||: F-G-E-F-F-G-E-F :|| 12x
Riff 5 + solo guitar  2’ 16” – 2’ 25”
Riff 5  2’ 26” – 2’ 35”
Riff 5 + solo guitar  2’ 36” – 2’ 45”
Riff 5  2’ 46” – 2’ 55”
Closing section  2’ 56” – 3’ 2” – F-pedal before closing on E  || F_________ E ||

The overall structure of Malediction conveys emergent structure built out of these riffs:

![Figure 8](image)

However, incongruity between written intention and sounded outcome may be found in the following ways:

1. No mention of tempo indications or changes – introduction tempo =132-138 bpm followed by song with tempo =144 bpm.
2. No mention of register
3. No mention of key-signature
4. No mention of dynamics
5. No mention of rhythm patterns either for the rhythm guitar or percussion section
6. No mention of timbre, or of amplification/distortion
7. No mention of vocal delivery as sung, screamed or growled.
8. Although the bass patterns are neatly written, the written pitches and bass tablature versions do not corroborate with each other in terms of accurately reflecting what is recorded. If there is some correspondence between some of the notation and the recorded song, the pitches seem to reflect, with reasonable accuracy, the sounded result.

There was very little helpful information that correlated the written processes with the recorded material. Nevertheless, the written processes could hardly have qualified as instructional material since there was far more detail left out than in. Kathirasan’s recollection of the introduction was notably ambiguous with the guitarist given latitude to provide an introduction based on Dorian and Phrygian scales. Secondly, the only written components concentrated on choice of pitches, their sequence, the patterns around each sequence and the repetitions. Yet, this was sufficient information to record the song.

‘Ageless Consciousness I Am’

The next example, ‘Ageless Consciousness I Am’ (from Brahmavidya Primordial I – 2005), arrives after Rudra’s purchase of a mixer which allowed then to be more reliant on sound files and recorded takes. By this time, Rudra’s unique Extreme Metal identity, Vedic Metal, involved the fusing of Sanskrit with English together with their influence by the Advaita Vedanta. Kathirasan explained the genesis of ‘Ageless Consciousness I Am’ as

… primarily commentarial and also slightly narrative. The Sanskrit text source is the Aitreya Upanishad, in particular the verse 3.1.3…the lyrics [‘Ageless Consciousness I Am’] depict how someone gains dispassion and thereafter discovers himself by meeting and learning from a Guru. The chant comes at the point of their meeting. This song had points of convergence with my own experiences. In that sense my personal feelings could be found there (e-mail communication with K. Kathirasan of Rudra 2009).
From a musical point of view

there could have been versions prior to these two versions. After listening to version one, I realized that it lacked substance and hence I re-wrote the song to version two. The lyrics were there just as an idea but yet to be crystallised. For example this chant was there, but later edited to suit the song when the riffs were finalized. (email communication with Kathirasan of Rudra 2009).

My observations of all three versions of this song have been tabulated as follows:

- ‘Ageless Consciousness I Am’ (Take 1) – tempo circa 168 bpm (quarter notes)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Riff 1</th>
<th>F⁵b-E⁵b-D⁵b-B⁵b</th>
<th>5” – 26”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Riff 2</td>
<td>D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b-E⁵b-D⁵b-B⁵b</td>
<td>27” – 48”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>/Riff 2 variant – D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b-E⁵b-G⁵b-E⁵b</td>
<td>49” – 59”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riff 3</td>
<td>B⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b-E⁵b</td>
<td>1” – 1’19”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free play</td>
<td>1’20” – 2’3”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riff 4</td>
<td>E⁵b/d⁵b (harmonics)</td>
<td>2’4” – 2’24”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riff 2</td>
<td>D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b-E⁵b-D⁵b-B⁵b</td>
<td>22” – 2’25”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>/Riff 2 variant – D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b-E⁵b-G⁵b-E⁵b</td>
<td>2’39” – 3’55”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riff 3</td>
<td>B⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b-E⁵b</td>
<td>3” – 3’13”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coda – Explorations</td>
<td>3’56” – 4’29”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variant of Riff 2 – D⁵b-E⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b-D⁵b-B⁵b</td>
<td>/B⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b-E⁵b</td>
<td>4’3” – 4’29”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- ‘Ageless Consciousness I Am’ (Take 2) tempo circa 176 bpm (quarter notes)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Riff 1</th>
<th>B⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b-E⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b</th>
<th>7” – 10” (variant of Riff 3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Riff 1*</td>
<td>B⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b-E⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b</td>
<td>11” – 17” (Riff 3 from Take 1 rehearsal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both riffs take on an antecedent/consequent phrase shape…</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riff 1</td>
<td>B⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b-E⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b</td>
<td>17” – 21” (variant of Riff 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riff 1*</td>
<td>B⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b-E⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b</td>
<td>22” – 27” (Riff 3 from Take 1 rehearsal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riff 2</td>
<td>E⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b-E⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b</td>
<td>and variant – D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b-E⁵b-G⁵b-E⁵b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riff 1</td>
<td>B⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b-E⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b</td>
<td>1’10” – 1’15” (variant of Riff 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riff 1*</td>
<td>B⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b-E⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b</td>
<td>1’16” – 1’20” (Riff 3 from Take 1 rehearsal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riff 1</td>
<td>B⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b-E⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b</td>
<td>1’21” – 1’25” (variant of Riff 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riff 1*</td>
<td>B⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b-E⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b</td>
<td>1’26” – 1’29” (Riff 3 from Take 1 rehearsal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free play based on riff two – D⁵b-E⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b followed by variants D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b-E⁵b and G⁵b-F⁵b-E⁵b</td>
<td>F⁵b</td>
<td>1’30” – 1’54” – 2’14”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riff 1</td>
<td>B⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b</td>
<td>2’15” – 2’20” (variant of Riff 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riff 1*</td>
<td>B⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b</td>
<td>2’21” – 2’26” (Riff 3 from Take 1 rehearsal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riff 1</td>
<td>B⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b-E⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b</td>
<td>2’27” – 2’32” (variant of Riff 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riff 1*</td>
<td>B⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b</td>
<td>2’33” – 2’37” (Riff 3 from Take 1 rehearsal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riff 1 embellished variant – B⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b-D⁵b-E⁵b-F⁵b</td>
<td>2’38” – 2’47” (variant of Riff 3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• ‘Ageless Consciousness I Am’ (CD track) – tempo circa 152 bpm (quarter notes)

| Riff 1 antecedent – D-E♭-D-E♭-D-C-D-E♭ – 1” – 6” (second variant of Riff 3) |
| Riff 1 complement – C-D-C-D-E♭-DD-D – 7” – 12” |
| Riff 1 – D-E♭-D-E♭-D-C-D-E♭ – 13” – 17” (second variant of Riff 3) |
| Riff 1 complement – C-D-C-D-E♭-DD-D – 18” – 23” |
| Riff 2 variant – C-D-E♭-D-F♯-E♭-D with vocals (23” – 1’ 44”) introduces a south Indian folk percussion instrument the urumi melam. |

| • 0’ 44” – 1’ 3” | Riff 2 variants with vocals – F♯-E♭-D- E♭ – C-D-E♭-D |
| • 1’ 04” – 1’ 23” | Riff 2 variant – C-D-E♭-D-F♯-E♭-D |
| • 1’ 24” – 1’ 44” | Riff 2 variants with vocals – F♯-E♭-D- E♭ – C-D-E♭-D |

| Riff 1 as basis – 1’ 45” – 2’ 06” still employing the urumi melam: |
| • Riff 1 – D-E♭-D-E♭-D-C-D-E♭ – 1’ 45” – 1’ 51” |
| • Riff 1 complement – C-D-C-D-E♭-DD-D – 1’ 52” – 1’ 55” |
| • Riff 1 – D-E♭-D-E♭-D-C-D-E♭ – 1’ 56” – 2’ 00” |
| • Riff 1 complement – C-D-C-D-E♭-DD-D – 2’ 01” – 2’ 06” |

| Riff 2 variant – C-D-E♭-D-F♯-E♭-D – 2’ 07” – 2’ 17” |

Riff 3 – comprising antecedent phrase [A—C-D—E♭—D-C—D—E♭] and consequent but anchor phrase, [A—C-D—E♭—D-C—DE♭-D] – is now accompanied by Extreme metal band instrumentation (2’ 18” through 2’ 39”) and Sanskrit lyrics.

| • Riff 3* – A—C-D—E♭—D-C—D—E♭ – 2’ 18” – 2’ 23” (variant of Riff 3) |
| Sadashiva Samarambham / Starting from Lord Shiva |
| • Riff 3 – A—C-D—E♭—D-C—DE♭-D – 2’ 23” – 2’ 27” (Riff 3 from Take 1 rehearsal) |
| Shankaracharya Madhyamam / And in the middle Shankaracharya |
| • Riff 3* – A—C-D—E♭—D-C—D—E♭ – 2’ 28” – 2’ 33” (variant of Riff 3) |
| Asmadacharya Paryantam / Homage to my own Teacher |
| • Riff 3 – A—C-D—E♭—D-C—DE♭-D – 2’ 34” – 2’ 39” (Riff 3 from Take 1 rehearsal) |
| Vande Guru Parampara / And to this day I bow this long line of Teachers |

Riff 2 Variants return with lyrics in English:

Riff 2 variants C-D-E♭-D-F♯-E♭-D with vocals (2’ 39” – 2’ 58”)

*Finally the Truth is seen
Unknownable once to me but now known to me
What an error it is to take myself to be what I am not

Riff 2 variants C-D-E♭-D-F♯-E♭-D with vocals (2’ 59” – 3’ 09”)

*No words can reveal me
Yet words alone set me free
The beatitude revealed through disciplic succession

Riff 3 (3’10” – 3’31”) as a central riff returns albeit without vocal interjections.
The central riff 3 returns in a manner similar to the section marked 2’ 18” – 2’ 39”

- Riff 3* – A—C—D—E♭—D—C—D—E♭ – 4’ 12” – 4’ 17” (variant of Riff 3)  
  *Sadashiva Samarambhham / Starting from Lord Shiva
- Riff 3 – A—C—D—E♭—D—C—D♭—D – 4’ 18” – 4’ 22” (Riff 3 from Take 1 rehearsal)  
  *Shankaracharya Madhyamam / And in the middle Shankaracharya
- Riff 3* – A—C—D—E♭—D—C—D—E♭ – 4’ 23” – 4’ 28” (variant of Riff 3)  
  *Asmadacharya Paryantam / Homage to my own Teacher
- Riff 3 – A—C—D—E♭—D—C—D♭—D – 4’ 29” – 4’ 34” (Riff 3 from Take 1 rehearsal)  
  *Vande Guru Paramparam / And to this day I bow this long line of Teachers

The closing riff for the song is the first riff:

- Riff 1 – D—E♭—D♭—E♭—D—C—D—E♭ – 4’ 33” – 4’ 39” (variant of Riff 3)  
- Riff 1* – C—D—C—D—E♭—D—D—D – 4’ 40” – 4’ 46” (Riff 3 from Take 1 rehearsal)  
- Riff 1 – D—E♭—D♭—E♭—D—C—D—E♭ – 4’ 47” – 4’ 53” (variant of Riff 3)  
- Riff 1* – C—D—C—D—E♭—D—D—D – 4’ 53” – 5’ 2” (Riff 3 from Take 1 rehearsal)

‘Ageless Consciousness I Am’ seems funded on the textual content with the riffs but the musical material as it appear in the CD is very tightly knit round Riff 3 D—E♭—D♭—E♭—D—C—D—E♭ / A—C—D—E♭—D—C—D♭—D and the relationships with Riff 1 D—E♭—D♭—E♭—D—C—D—E♭ / C—D—C—D—E♭—D—D—D and Riff 2 which is the most fluid and varied riff C—D—E♭—D♭—F♭—E♭—D. It may even be possible to suggest Riff 2 being at the nexus of all the riffs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The central riff 3 returns in a manner similar to the section marked 2’ 18” – 2’ 39”</th>
<th>The closing riff for the song is the first riff:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Riff 3</strong> – A—C—D—E♭—D—C—DE♭—D – 3’ 16” – 3’ 20” (Riff 3 from Take 1 rehearsal)</td>
<td><strong>Riff 1</strong>* – C—D—C—D—E♭—D—D—D – 4’ 40” – 4’ 46” (Riff 3 from Take 1 rehearsal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Riff 3</strong> – A—C—D—E♭—D—C—D—E♭ – 3’ 26” – 3’ 31” (Riff 3 from Take 1 rehearsal)</td>
<td><strong>Riff 1</strong>* – C—D—C—D—E♭—D—D—D – 4’ 53” – 5’ 2” (Riff 3 from Take 1 rehearsal)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Solo guitar improvisation (3’ 32” – 3’ 50”)

| Rifft 1 & 2 variants return D—E♭—D—E♭—D—C—D—E♭ – 3’ 51” – 4’ 12” with lyrics in English |
|---|---|
| No illusion for me  | D—CE♭—D  |
| I am the ever free  | DE♭—F♯E♭—D—E♭  |
| No illusion for me  | D—CE♭—D  |
| I am the ever free  |  

Eugene Dairianathan  
Lessons from Extreme metal musicians
As with ‘Malediction’, however, there are gaps between the two takes and the final performance despite the absence of notation. Incongruity may be found in the following ways:

1. Changes in tempo – the first, second and final takes were played at speeds of approximately \( \approx 168, 176 \) and 152 respectively.

2. There is no suggestion of key signature although the first two ‘takes’ aurally suggest a closer affinity to \( E_b \)-centricity. The final performance is perceived to be in D-centricity.

3. No indication or intimation of dynamic contrast or nuance in the first two takes although in the final performance, there are clearly nuanced and dramatised through the use of pauses and passages free of regular percussion infusion.

4. Rhythmic and melodic patterns might have led to the assumption of the second take being the near accurate version in performance. The final performance, however surprising the twists and turns, is characterised by melodic and rhythmic profiles which are tightly knit and display not only profundity but also effective use of thematic material.

5. No preparation for nuances of timbre, or of amplification/distortion in the first two takes although in the final performance there is sufficient variety, contrast and even solo lead guitar infusions for an emergent and engaging song. The inclusion of south Indian traditional percussion instruments of a very bright and outdoor timbre (\textit{urumi melam}) does create sufficient tension and contrast with the extreme metal instrumental soundscape. The use of traditional percussion instruments at the beginning helps to add tension to the work by suspending the extreme metal instrumentation until two minutes and seven seconds into the song.

6. There is no vocal input in the first two takes and no mention, as well, of vocal delivery as sung, screamed or growled in the final performance.
7. Structurally, in the first take, the central riff seems somewhat unbalanced by the myriad variant riffs. The second take seems to centralise the riff by assigning it an antecedent-consequent phrase shape. In the final performance, the nexus riff (without vocals) is located somewhere in the middle of the song (ca. 3’ 10”) making for an arch-shape structure out of the riffs. In the meantime, the outer sections of the piece are thematic variations of this riff, with added notes or slightly altered melodic profiles. In locating these riffs, the final performance seems structurally quite symmetrical. It might be possible even to suggest that this final performance was scripted if we had not the evidence of the earlier takes. As again, the eventual CD track seems to have been effectively arrived at despite gaps in continuity of information or effectiveness of symbols from the first and second rehearsals.

Lessons from Extreme Metal Musicians

I want to reiterate the questions raised earlier, beginning with consigning an instructional status to notation which implies a prescriptive, pragmatic and precarious function to notation in popular music learning. K. Kathirasan, Rudra’s bassist, vocalist and songwriter, explained how notation was situated in their creative pathways:

To us notation is a way of preserving the music. After a couple of songs we may forget the intricacies of certain riffs. So it is good to note it down especially in Extreme metal where the riffs can have very minor yet significant variations. …And having it written would allow me to pick up the riffs quickly. (e-mail communication with K. Kathirasan of Rudra 2009).

In the processes of writing in relation to creating ‘Malediction’:

There were prior writings that were trashed after I started to write them in the book. Initially I wrote down the different riffs in a song. And then I noted the specific riff in terms of the bass line. This would allow me to know what I played or what the riff was. Basically all this happened because I feared that I may forget
the riffs. I only wrote my bass lines once the song had been finalized. (e-mail communication with K. Kathirasan of Rudra 2009).

Kathirasan’s musings on notation, and Rudra’s by extension, represent not only a mnemonic but also an archival function. Rudra’s use of notation suggests de-scriptive, sometimes in-scriptive or but far less prescriptive function. Writing the riffs down became tantamount to archiving their compositional tactics, strategies and repertoire; albeit in riffs. This raises questions about the function of a riff since it is also a stark reminder of in/visibility. Moreover, whether a riff constitutes a composition or compositional sketch is a question of perspective. On the one hand, should a riff therefore, as a simplistic fragment, re/present the entire song? On the other hand, Peter Winkler’s accurate as possible transcription of the rhythm of Aretha Franklin’s vocal line in ‘I Never Loved a Man’ is a reminder that accuracy of textual representation may not only obscure the simplicity of musical ideas leading to that performance, but may also be realised in a written form that might not be understood by a practitioner responsible for the performance of that musical idea (Winkler, 1997).

Secondly, notation for Rudra seemed to constitute points of homage and departure. Notation acted to trigger extra/musical responses like emotions, muscular responses, differentiate subtle nuances in the riffs, self-esteem, reassurance, objective perspective from the riff. In Kathirasan’s words, ‘… these were artifacts to remember the good ol’ days of the band. The band meant a lot to me so I had this all safely kept as memories may disappear over time’ (e-mail communication with K. Kathirasan of Rudra 2009). Since the riff acted as stimulus, it conveyed, through notation, a communicative function more than exemplifying that which was or has been composed. Notation for Rudra therefore seemed far more symbiotic and symbolic than supplementary in its contribution towards music-making.

Thirdly, since notation serves to communicate through the use of visual information, albeit a riff, notation seems to act, in Rudra’s case, more as an act of visualisation. Each riff or
combination of riffs seems to in/form a topography of creative activity with a song being the result of a preconceived structure or one emergent through the concatenation of riffs.

Fourthly, notation was intended for personal consumption; creative activity from within. Performing conventions would consequently bear out these introspective triggers. Questions of its suitability for publication are a matter of perspective. Are these published texts intractable prescriptions or are they descriptions of communicative processes by individual/s made available for consumption? It is very likely that fake books, popularised among popular music and jazz practices, are acknowledgment of un/stable texts rather than exemplifying textual in/accuracy. This suggests practices involving textual in/stability known to its practitioners and subscribers largely because of the freedom to respond intuitively, orally and aurally to such texts, and their most likely deference to a more stable text such as the sound recording.

Finally, notation as an instance of text/uality seems to highlight, for Rudra at least, a greater predilection for the lyrics to the music rather than the other way around. Kathirasan muses on detail of his compositional strategies with Rudra:

In the early days I would write the lyrics first and then edit them to fit the music. That’s why I still have lyrics for which no music has been written. ‘Malediction’ lyrics were independent and then music later…then joining them together…the sequence was lyrics – music – edited lyrics – song completed. The lyrics [‘Ageless Consciousness I Am’] were there just as an idea but yet to be crystallised …later edited to suit the song when the riffs were finalized. This hymn is chanted with the same background riff [Riffs 3 & complement in the final cut]. In this case, I came up with idea of using the hymn first and then wrote the riffs (e-mail communication with K. Kathirasan of Rudra 2009).

If the lyrics for ‘Ageless Consciousness I Am’ were commentaries on texts available in the Advaita Vedanta, Rudra’s practice, Vedic metal, is in actuality Vedic philosophy through Extreme (Death) metal soundscapes; briefly lyrical text through musical text.

‘Malediction’ and ‘Ageless Consciousness I Am’ make for instructive comparisons. While in the former, much of the song was fuelled by riffs, the latter is quite clearly mapping
of lyrical text onto musical space. Kathirasan’s nuanced perspective of writing and later deferring to recorded riffs and sounds is instructive of his and Rudra’s creative endeavour. Writing formed an important part of their compositional strategies. Even if the musical notation had been supplanted by oral scripting, it is difficult to ignore the impact of written notational practice on aural and oral performance practice. This is further corroborated on the translation of written to aural and oral topography as Kathirasan points out in the recording of ‘Malediction’:

I had already tried out the sounds and recorded onto tapes. It [the notation] didn’t do much to me in recording because I was very familiar with the song at that time. We didn’t record rhythm patterns because we had recorded the song on tape. So we didn’t feel the need to write that down or even learn how to record it. (e-mail communication with K. Kathirasan of Rudra 2009).

Admittedly ‘Ageless Consciousness I Am’ represents a move away from notation but Kathirasan’s qualification of notation is instructive:

By the time of ‘Aryan Crusade’ [ca.2001], I had already invested in a mixer with a tape recorder where I could record all the songs/riffs. So I stopped writing the stuff down. Moreover, I knew it was going to be recorded hence the need to write it down took a back seat. Now that the songs were all recorded and released in CDs, there was no more the urge to write things down (e-mail communication with K. Kathirasan of Rudra 2009, author’s emphasis)

Notation was not relegated to the status of supplementary or throwaway material; only its deferred spatial representation for which a sound recording sufficed.

Written notation, however, does not account for a crucial element in performance; its timbre. That assumes, however, that written notational practice can be comprehensive, definitive and not communicative of possibilities. The lessons from ‘Malediction’ – of a lack of complete correspondence between written out versions and their recorded example – may also be seen in ‘Ageless Consciousness I Am’. The initial riff from the first take is absent in the final recording. ‘Malediction’ is notable for its preconceived riffs which were realised and shaped in performance. ‘Ageless Consiousness I Am’ is notable for its rather diffuse soundscape punctuated by a central riff for a hymn chant which is then honed towards a
performance where it becomes a central (almost literally and temporally) aural and oral sculpture. Kathirasan explains the rather surprising entry of Indian traditional instrument/ation:

> The percussion instruments we use were the *tavil, dholak* and *urumi melam*. I had an idea for the percussion [urumi melam] even while writing the two earlier versions. But we never got down to writing it and we were still in search of musicians. (e-mail communication with K. Kathirasan of Rudra 2009).

While ‘Ageless Consciousness I Am’ is an apposite example of aural and oral traces of Rudra’s compositional processes leading to the final version, I want to suggest Rudra’s early cartographical praxis – the act of written notation as well as ability to visualise content and form - was instrumental towards their later oral scripting tactics and strategies.

Despite Rudra’s shift towards aural and oral practice as a more efficacious *notational system*, Kathirasan seems wistful in the midst of these changes:

> Over the years, when I kept writing more and more songs I realized the value of writing the notes down or else one day I may forget them. Till today, I regret not having written the notes for most of the songs. I wish I had the motivation to write because it helps in objectifying the riffs visually rather than aurally. Personally I like the idea of having songs written on a paper so that it does not get forgotten even I were to not ‘hear’ what I have played in a song. So it gives a sense of reassurance to me that I have got it cast in stone….although music is sonic by nature, structures cannot be recorded aurally but visually through forms written (e-mail communication with K. Kathirasan of Rudra 2009).

**Implications for Music Education**

If the lessons from Rudra bear evidence of compositional tactics and strategies, might we not consider the notation, written as well as aural and oral scripts, records or sketches, which *bear witness to the compositional process* (Lillestam, 1996, p.210-211)? If songs are about music and lyrics and regarded as *agglomeration[s] of music and lyrics* (Kahn-Harris, 2003, p. 84), might notation consider two textual versions, a sonic one and a written one? Considering the lessons from Rudra, might one think of songs as lyrical content expressed *through* music; in this case Extreme (Death) metal? If the lessons from Rudra are that of notation as
communication, and that notation is communicative towards performance, might we consider notation as *communication-in-performance*, more so than *composition-in-performance* (Oesterreicher, 1997, p. 207)? If notation is a revelation of communication and each musician’s pathway towards communicating themselves is symbolised by their different marks, should notation be regarded as visualizing – whether conceptualizing or mapping – technology (Lochhead 2006)?

**Conclusion**

Rudra’s sketches and lyrics, which were developed in their immediacy with more/less cancellations, sheds light on their self-taught and learned creative behaviours and processes. They learned to compose-by-doing; beginning with the use and meaning of written versions of creative endeavour with more and less cancellations; they learned to use exiguous notation and use of technology; they learned and developed creative endeavour through writing and music-making; in so doing, they developed self-assuredness and confidence in aurally and orally *writing a script*. Through their lyrics and modes of self-expression, they have communicated an understanding of the skills of composing through writing and music-making as culturally situated practices; namely Vedic metal. If Rudra members express regret in their difficulties in documenting their compositional outcomes given their self-taught pathways and lack of formal training, could learners in popular music be engaged not only through their own means of communication but also through conventional notation? Should teachers be cognisant of creative attempts through written and aural & oral drafts not only as valid compositional sketches but also tactics and strategies towards self-expression? Are teachers prepared to accept exiguous notation as *texts of immediacy* of self-expression? Are teachers prepared to see conventional notation as one of many communicative possibilities
among others, including exiguous means and not as a basis for comparison with texts of immediacy? Are teachers prepared to come to terms with exiguous notation as drafts in compositional thinking in both written and sounded content and form? Are teachers prepared to accept that written and sounded notational systems as provisional creative attempts, riffs notwithstanding, as documentation of compositional processes?

An awareness of in/stability of written and sounded compositional texts in popular music learning as textual and communicative immediacy helps to highlight a multiplicity of communication possibilities through immediacy. It is this textual instability that fuels the arguments of and about textual content, form, meaning and interpretation in the practice of popular music. If nothing else, lessons imbibed from Rudra articulate the tensions between in/formality (issues of form) and inform/ality (issues of content) in learning popular music; issues which merit serious examination.

Acknowledgement

I acknowledge my appreciation of K. Kathirasan and Rudra members for permitting their compositional sketches in this article. Much of the research material was obtained with funds from a research grant awarded by the National Arts Council of Singapore in 2002.

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