A report on the MUSIKKULTUREN Dialog Projekts 2023

Amira Sultana Ensemble

Funded by the NRW KULTURsekretariat

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Executive summary

This report covers the 2023 Dialog Project: Amira Sultana Ensemble, funded by the NRW KULTURsekretariat. This project explored the connections between Indian Raga, the Maqam system in the Middle East, and the contemporary European avant-garde scene. In April 2023, six musicians worked together in an intensive rehearsal period to develop a repertoire showcasing these cultures. The project culminated in three performances, a video documentation, a live concert recording, and this evaluation.

This project illuminates a number of insights about intercultural dialogue and the state's role in fostering diverse cultural offerings. Intercultural dialogue is more than two people coming into contact; when done right, it shapes an individual's relationship to the state, other cultures, and themself. Intercultural dialogue can cause conflict, but finding solutions drives forward intercultural change. These processes require time and space for exploration. Yet, publicly-funded projects do not often give enough space or resources to allow these encounters to unfold on equal-footing. This project primarily took place over the course of a week culminating in a concert premiere. Under such time and financial pressures, groups may revert to pre-established roles and behaviours based along gendered, colonial, or hierarchical lines. If the state wants to invest in the sustainable development of world music and intercultural dialogue, it must provide ample, paid rehearsal time, compensate fairly for planning and organising, and build up new audiences for world music.

Project members

Maren Lueg is a multi-instrumentalist based in Hagen and leader of this project. She plays saxophone, flute, ney, and mizmar. After completing a bachelor's degree in jazz and saxophone, she began learning music genres from the Middle East through studies in Cairo, Istanbul, and London. She has led countless ensembles and projects in the UK and NRW, including the EastWest-Pacem Orchestra, 'Der Zauber des alten Damaskus', and 'Homage to Oum Kalthoum'. Since 2020 she has studied Indian classical music and singing with the Hindustani singer Indrani Mukherjee, flautist Shashank Subramanyam, and the saxophonist Jesse Bannister.

Ludger Schmidt is a member of the free improvisation scene. Ludger and Maren together developed the concept and application for this project. He works across genres and media, bringing avant-garde music in concert with art, literature, and dance. Ludger is primarily a cellist who studied at the Musikschule in Detmold, as well with Frieder Lenz, and Frieder Obstfeld. His ensemble The Sephardics won first prize in the 2017 Creole - Globale Musik aus NRW competition. In 2020 he won the WDR-Jazzpreis with The Dorf.

Güler Bulgurcu is a singer and daf player based in Bochum. She performs with the musical groups Yakamos, Aramic Ensemble, and in the duo Güler and Firat. She has also performed with a number of projects in Germany, including "Musikalische Geschichten vom Bosporus: Erinnerungen an Istanbul mit Gesang" and "Musikalische Repräsentationen der Einsamkeit: Vorstellung der Forschung mit Musik". She is a politics and society programme planner at Bahnhof Langendreer in Bochum. She hails from Istanbul and has lived in Germany since 2008.

Prashanthi Sankaran is singer and pianist performing primarily in Indian classical music. From 1998 to 2007 she studied classical both Caranatic and Hindustani singing. In 2018 she completed her studies in electronic music production in Cologne. In her work, Prashanthi brings together elements of Indian and Western classical music, as well as contemporary music. She is active in the SPIC MACAY (Society for the promotion of Indian Classical Music and Culture Amongst Youth) which organises Indian cultural events in Europe. She grew up in south India and has lived in Cologne since 2012.

Ramesh Shotham is a world-renowned percussionist based in Cologne. He is at home in many styles, performing regularly with rock, jazz, Indian classical, and diverse world music ensembles. Shotham toured extensively with his many bands over the years, including Human Bondage, Jazz Yatra Septet, Bhavani, Khanda, and Madras Special. In 2014 he led his own NRW KULTURsekretariat dialogue project called "Global Tala". Shotham was born in Madras, South India, and has lived and worked in Europe since the 1980s.

Shashank Subramanyam is a virtuosic master of the Indian bamboo flute Bansuri. He trained in Carnatic music and began performing at the age of 6. He tours extensively around the world performing not only Indian classical music, but also blending Western classical, contemporary art music, and diverse world music genres. The Indian government awarded him the Sangeet Natak Akademi's senior award in 2017 and the government of France bestowed him with the Order of Arts and Letters in 2022. In 2009 he was nominated for a Grammy for his album with guitarist John McLaughlin.

Author background & positionality

Important for any ethnographic account is a reflection on the author's positionality. This refers to how the researcher relates to her interlocutors and how her own identity shaped the course of the data-collection process and the writing (Ruby 2016). I include this information about myself to help readers better understand the report that follows. This is not only important for authors with minority or marginalised backgrounds – all researchers need to reflect on how their view of the world influences the knowledge they produce.

I gathered data for this report through interviews and attending many of the rehearsals and concerts. I conducted interviews and informal discussions with ensemble members during the intensive rehearsal week and again after the project conclusion. I was not present for the online meetings which took place leading up to the group rehearsals.

I am a young, female anthropologist and ethnomusicologist who has lived in Germany on and off for the past seven years. English is my first language, German my second. I used both to communicate with project members. My identity overlapped considerably with the singers in the

project, which perhaps enabled us to talk more freely about the topics of gender, labour management, and group dynamics.

I am currently an interim assistant professor at the University of Cologne and a PhD student at the University of Oxford. In a society where accreditations are important, these titles grant me more legitimacy than perhaps would be granted to other capable researchers. Importantly, I am a musician myself who is well-acquainted with the Maqam system and have a basic knowledge of Indian traditions. This skillset allowed me to follow the developments in rehearsals and come to my own conclusions about the musical exchange.

Project overview

The Amira Sultana Ensemble was first conceived by Maren Lueg and Ludger Schmidt in 2022. The project explores the connections between the Indian Raga, the Maqam system in the Middle East, and the contemporary European avant-garde scene. In the first part of the project, Maren, Ludger, Güler, and Prashanthi met regularly online to exchange knowledge about this music and develop a repertoire. In April 2023, the six musicians came together in an intensive five-day rehearsal period in Hagen to develop a concert programme showcasing these musics. Shashank travelled from India with his family to join for the week. The project culminated in three performances in the Waldorfschule Hagen, the Anneliese Brost Musikforum Ruhr in Bochum, and the Katakomben Theater in Essen. Additional outputs include a video documentary, a live concert recording, and this evaluation.

Maqam, Raga, and the European avant-garde in comparison

Each of the three traditions engaged in this project base themselves on modes. However, these modular scales are constructed and performed differently in each culture. This section gives some background information of each system and the commonalities which were explored in the Amira Sultana project.

Maqam is a modal system common across the Middle East and North Africa found in musical cultures from Morocco to Iran. A maqam is built out of two or more building blocks, called *jins*

(plural *ajnas*). These three- to five-note segments are made up of fixed intervals that can be transposed to different starting notes. The first jin establishes the maqam family and often determines the character of the improvisation. Subsequent jins are added at the *ghammaz* (the modulation point), usually the highest pitch of the first jin. This interlocking system of jins generates a theoretically endless number of *maqamat* (pl. maqam); however, a core repertoire of circa 15 maqamat are primarily used in contemporary performance.

Ragas operate on a similar basis. This modal system can be found in many musical traditions of South Asia, including *Hindustani, Carnatic,* and *Qawwali* music. Similar to the maqam, each raga has its own character with affective and symbolic connotations. Ragas can be grouped into families with a so-called parent scale (*melakarta*). Here, the tonal centre and the perfect fifth above are fixed to match the drone. These underlying pitches are usually played by a tanpura[1], although now it is often electronically produced. The other five notes vary according to the norms of performance. As with the many maqamat, hundreds of ragas exist but a couple dozen are commonly used.

While Indian classical music does not use microtones as maqamat do, per se, the practice of sliding between and bending pitches in the raga facilitates some sonic similarity. Maren and Shashank explored this possibility in their improvisations. When Maren played ajnas with microtones, Shashank mirrored them on his flute by bending the pitches to match her.

In contrast with these two styles, European avant-garde music is defined more by what it rejects, rather than what it is. Emerging after the Second World War, this movement rebelled against popular music's commodification and consumer-orientation. Techniques of this genre include the use of electronics, recorded sounds, graphic scores, extended techniques, and aleatory and serialist composition.[2] This movement values radical artistic expression, improvisation, and a rejection of traditional form and composition, as well as the institutions that represent it. This experimental

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[1] Also transliterated as tambura.

[2] Serialism is a method in which elements of composition are determined by a repeating series of numbers. Most commonly serialised are pitch classes, creating a random order of tones in a melody which is repeated. Composers also serialised rhythm, and in 'total serialism', dynamics, tempo, attack, timbre, and instrumentation. Aleatory music leaves much of the composition or performance up to chance. It is associated most commonly with John Cage and Iannis Xenakis.

approach gained a foothold in West Germany, especially in NRW, through exchange with the USA and UK (Beal, 2006).

All three of these musical cultures – Maqam, Raga, and European avant-garde – have their own rules and grammar guiding mode-based improvisation. These guidelines are rarely codified in written form; the knowledge is transmitted through study with a master to absorb not only the sequencing of notes, but also the techniques of improvisation, melodic fragments and turns of phrase, ornamentation, and artistic inflection. These systems encompass more than just scalar competencies. An education in Maqam or Raga includes learning diverse rhythmic patterns and cycles, ensemble performance, and the cultural associations with particular combinations of sounds. In both of these classical traditions, audiences interact readily with performers, more openly expressing moments of pleasure vocally and gesturally (*Tarab* in Arabic meaning "ecstasy"). In the primarily monophonic systems of Raga and Maqam, the mastery lies in melodic expertise and not in polyphonic composition and harmonic progression, as it is in Western art music.

On this basis, Amira Sultana Ensemble explored the depths of these similarities focusing primarily on Raga and Maqam. One key point for comparison were two modes that exist in both systems: Bhairavi/Kurd and Bhairav/Hijaz. Their transcriptions in Western staff notation can be found in figures 1 and 2.

Another point for dialogue in these two musical cultures was a common usage of rhythmic cycles. Western art music relies mostly on symmetrical time signatures (eg. 4/4, 6/8), in which each beat has equal subdivisions. In contrast, Maqam and Raga make use of unequal beat division. In Turkey, one of the most common time signatures is 7/8 with subdivisions of 2+2+3 or 3+2+2 (figure 3). In South Asia, rhythmic cycles are called *talas* and denote the pulse and the subdivisions (eg. 4+2+2 in an 8-beat tala). Amira Sultana probed this overlap in the song "Qumrike" where the group explored alternative ways of emphasising the beats. They settled on a division of 3+2+2+3 for the 10/8 time signature (figure 4).

The pieces in this project drew mostly on the Maqam and Raga repertoire. However, the improvisations, instrumentation, and forms juxtaposed these melodies with European avant-garde practices. How the ensemble balanced these three cultures is discussed in detail later in the report.

Figure 1: Raga Bhairav and Maqam Hijaz in Western staff notation

Figure 2: Raga Bhairavi and Maqam Kurd in Western staff notation
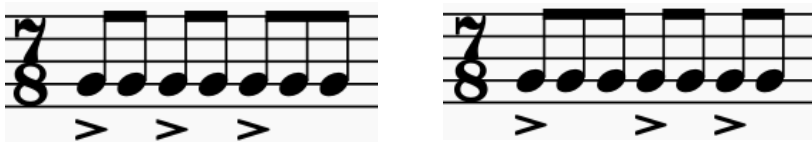

Figure 3: 7/8 time signature subdivided into (2+2+3) and (3+2+2)

Figure 4: 10/8 time signature subdivided into (3+2+2+3)

Interculturalism, dialogue, and intercultural dialogue

Intercultural dialogue is a prevailing concept in current policies promoting social cohesion. In his 2022 report, Mark Porter has given an overview of this topic in public policy. I will build on his thoughts on intercultural dialogue by picking apart different meanings of "interculturalism" and "dialogue". These will provide different lenses through which to evaluate this project.

As Porter summarised, early legislation and theories on social cohesion revolved around the contact theory (Allport 1954). This theory argues that bringing diverse groups of people together leads to strong social bonding through contact in public spaces. Since then scholars argue that social cohesion requires more than mere contact (Amin 2002). With this in mind, political entities in the Global North advocate now for increased dialogue. This formulation goes beyond just spatial proximity and instead encourages meaningful exchange. As the Council of Europe wrote in its seminal 2008 paper on the topic:

> Intercultural dialogue is a process that comprises an open and respectful exchange or interaction between individuals, groups and organisations with different cultural backgrounds or worldviews. Among its aims are: to develop a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives and practices; to increase participation and the freedom and ability to make choices; to foster equality; and to enhance creative processes. (Council of Europe 2008, p. 10)

This definition sets out the prerequisites for dialogue: exchange on equal footing across perceived differences. Goals for such initiatives focus on personal and societal transformation. Dialogue should increase equality, encourage democratic participation, and importantly for this project, spark creativity.

While these terms appear frequently in European society today, in **what other ways can one conceive of intercultural dialogue?** And does this shape how we view this particular project? First let's pick apart the term "intercultural". **Intercultural exchange** can happen in a number of constellations: between two cultural groups, a group and its governing institutions, or even within a single person. Zapata Barrero (2015) expands on these three understandings of interculturalism. (1) Political theory tends to focus on *vertical interculturalism*, or relations between marginalised groups and the state. This project exemplifies this kind of interculturalism, with a

publicly-funded institution supporting diverse musical practices in NRW. (2) *Horizontal interculturalism* promotes social cohesion between cultural groups. This comes to the fore once again in this project: members of different ethnicities, nationalities, educational backgrounds, and genders come together to better

Dialogue should increase equality, encourage democratic participation, and importantly for this project, spark creativity.

understand each other. (3) Zapata Barrero highlights the creative potential of *intrapersonal interculturalism* in the third strand, which focuses on transformation within a single individual. The creative friction of intercultural exchange can generate new ideas and ways of being, transforming how a person relates to the world. In an artistic project such as this one, encounters with different musicians can spark creative innovation and revelations about one's own culture. Prashanthi said that looking for similarities between Indian Classical and the Kurdish singing styles prompted insights about her own singing practice:

> Although Indian classical music is very improvisation based, we know set structure of things, how to do things. And now I have to rethink some of the phrases I do or some of the songs that I choose. Do I want to use that part of the song? Or does something else fit in better?...I became more self aware of my own music system through this actually, because I wasn't aware that it was so universal or could even jam with another culture.

It was only in this dialogue with the other musicians, that these insights about her own musical practice emerged.

In this project all three of Zapata-Barrero's strands play a role: Representatives of different cultural backgrounds entered a dialogue together and this exchange impacted their own musical practice and relationship to larger institutions.

But there are other ways to conceive of dialogue that might help our understanding of this project. An everyday use of the term comes from books, theatre, film, and television. Here **dialogue is a scripted conversation between characters.** It is made to seem spontaneous, but in reality it hides hours of creative work in the production. The words are carefully crafted to convey a message. This work culminates in a performance where readers and spectators witness the dialogue playing

out. This insight is relevant to our dialogue project as well. Even if the project focused on dialogue between musicians, they worked with an imagined audience for their music in mind. **The listeners shaped the course of the musical creation.** Reflecting after one rehearsal Prashanthi said, 'There have been some interesting questions: Do we want to do a bridge? Do we even need a bridge? Are [the pieces] so similar that audiences don't realise we are playing a different song?' Later she remarked, 'Sometimes we struggle to even bring that emotion out. Because we know some things work with audiences, but which may not necessarily match the feeling [of the piece]...So often we need to think differently about how to present these pieces.' The limitations of the audience's knowledge perhaps limited the depths that the artists could have explored. But on the other hand, if intercultural dialogue will shape broader societal relations, then projects such as these need to cater their offerings to the audiences at hand.

Turning from cultural to social theory, the meaning of "social dialogue" in labour relations refers to negotiations between workers, employers, and governments. Here the emphasis is on resolving disputes in order to move forward for a productive future. This conception highlights the **tensions, differing interests, and outright conflict inherent in dialogue**. These rifts often precede the dialoguing process, and can even emerge during it. In the overwhelmingly positive discussions on intercultural dialogue in policy circles, one needs to remember the ever-present potential for conflict. Christiansen et al. (2017) call this the 'messiness' of the 'organised cultural encounter'. Entering into dialogue always poses a risk; the results cannot be predicted in advance. It has the possibility to transform social relations, but it could also result in reestablishing existing roles and hierarchies. Nonetheless, change requires creative friction – a potential for conflict.

In this project one disagreement led to a shift in social relations. Towards the end of the rehearsal week, one member expressed that their culture and instrument was not equally represented in the music alongside the other two. These tensions came to a head on the night of the first performance when they asserted themselves in one of the songs. The other musicians claimed that it compromised the dialogue and neglected the essence of the piece. As one band member said, 'it is supposed to be a happy song –what was played did not fit at all with what the

Entering into dialogue always poses a risk; the results cannot be predicted in advance.

piece is about'. Another commented, 'there has to be some basic aesthetics that need to be kept'. This led to a heated conflict between some members. As discussions continued, and the value of this piece was debated, the individual relented. In subsequent nights, they did not repeat their performance, but stayed in the background.

This arc mirrored all the elements of intercultural dialogue outlined above: inevitably in social dialogue, conflict arose which threatened the integrity of the ensemble. Through a process of negotiation, in which the needs of the musicians, the musical work, and the audience were considered, a solution was reached. In the end the musicians picked a course that would best evoke the song's intended emotions in audience members. This process of intercultural dialogue not only led to improved group relations (*horizontal interculturalism*), but also to a more creative artistic output (*intrapersonal interculturalism*).

Combining these different conceptions of interculturalism and dialogue, we get a process that happens across different levels of society, and sometimes within a single individual. Conflict will inevitably rise. Resolving these tensions can lead to new and improved social relations. Dialogues are often performed, and are thus shaped by audience expectations. These additional insights build on and expand our understanding of intercultural dialogue and what it means for a project such as this one.

'Knowledge and openness': What is needed for dialogue?

In my interviews with project actors I asked, 'What is needed for dialogue to transpire?' Many pointed to **open mindedness and curiosity**, but also a prerequisite to **know one's own culture.** Güler said, 'Dialogue means sensitivity and listening, a mutual exchange of experiences...Because dialogue means to learn things that one maybe did not know so well before.' Prashanthi answered along similar lines: 'Knowledge about one's own culture and a willingness to know another, to ask the right questions'. Maren agreed: 'Openness. The group needs to understand the subject and be open to dialogue'. In short, both sides need to bring something to the table and be willing to exchange.

Everyone felt that some form of dialogue was able to take place over the course of the project. Especially in the intensive five-day working period in Hagen, the project members practised an **attentive co-presence** that produced a hotbed for exchange. The musicians pointed to different moments when exchange happened for them. Güler found a connection in vocal practices across Eastern Mediterranean cultures and Indian classical music. Both use a repeated word in improvised solos to express longing, sadness, and despair. Ludger and Ramesh connected over stints of free improvisation using extended techniques on their instruments. Prashanthi applied her knowledge of music theory in Indian and Western classical systems to Maqam to test out which elements were the same and where they diverged. Maren saw Shashank imitating the microtonality in the maqam Bayati on his flute. But, as Ludger pointed out, 'one has to see to it that we get some sort of **balance between the musicians**'. And achieving this balance with such a diverse group proved to be an ongoing challenge.

The modern world poses many hindrances for true dialogue to emerge. **Even with skilled, open, and attentive musicians – such as in Amira Sultana – broader societal problems can nevertheless shape interpersonal interactions.** As expressed above, groups must first operate on a basis of open and free exchange, with all members on equal-footing. Yet Western societies today are not prefigured for such interactions. The music scene is increasingly governed by market forces, which push for faster, cheaper, marketable products. Within this capitalist system, colonial and patriarchal structures still govern ways of doing business. Projects that seek to dismantle these systems face an uphill battle, a challenge which this ensemble undertook. In this section I will outline the societal norms that work against dialogue and how Amira Sultana counteracted them to create an environment of open exchange.

The first hurdle to overcome was the **implicit hierarchy between musicians based on skills and experience.** To bring together a multi award-winning virtuoso together with two singers with little professional performing experience posed a challenge. Under such conditions, the group conceded, no meaningful two-way exchange could take place.

But they took steps to diminish this hierarchy. Maren, Ludger, Prashanthi, and Güler met often, both online and in person before the start of the ensemble work. In these meetings, they discussed

and played different songs, shared basic knowledge about the different cultures and theory systems, and practised techniques for improvisation. This extra time allowed the singers to engage with the material before rehearsals began. These meetings also benefited social

relations in the group. For example, Prashanthi met online with Shashank before he arrived in Germany. These encounters established a connection between the two and allowed a personal relationship to emerge.

Ramesh similarly worked to put everyone on an equal playing-field. He shaped the rhythmic emphasis to cue the singers to enter. He taught the group how to count a particularly complicated rhythm. When one person lost the structure or the chord changes, he followed them seamlessly and kept the piece going. His encouragement and easy-going manner established a supportive environment for everyone to easily work together across skill levels.

However, a more pernicious problem to tackle was **systemic gender roles and expectations**. First, in order to bring people on equal footing, all members needed to feel equally capable of contributing to the performance. This challenge is even greater in improvisation, where women and girls on average feel less able to assert themselves creatively (Green 1997, Wehr-Flowers 2006). Prashanthi: 'I have to prepare myself mentally a lot to just go on stage. I can see why women need more support. We need strong people in the industry who are willing to coach us through this'. Maren knows these challenges and deliberately built in this support throughout the project. She sought out specifically women singers to give them professional mentoring. This was surprisingly difficult. For example, Prashanthi told me how she got involved in the project:

> I knew a dancer who knew Maren was looking for an Indian classical musician and preferably a woman. And Maren called me and said "I can't find anyone who is a woman!" And that was interesting for me. I know so many people around me who sing. But yeah, all of them are male. I didn't realise that before.

Just as in addressing the hierarchy between skill levels, gender imbalances require extra effort to ensure equal participation. Maren strove to do this by arranging additional mentoring, music lessons, and meetings with the female members to provide them the necessary support. I also played

a role in this capacity: Maren thought the women in the group would be more comfortable opening up to a woman researcher.

Even with this heightened sensitivity to gender-based societal issues, they nonetheless presented themselves in the music-making and project organisation. During the intensive rehearsal week, ensemble members noticed these imbalances and took steps to address them. The main issues manifested via unequal division of unpaid labour: women prepared a majority of the meals and cleaned the rehearsal spaces at the end of the day. Before the beginning of the intensive week,no plans were made to provide the group with snacks, drinks, or meals. When the group realised these tasks had not been done, the three women musicians – and to an extent myself as well – procured food for the group with their own money, used their breaks to prepare meals, and cleaned it all up at the end of the day. Halfway through the week, this imbalance was brought to the group's attention. Following this intervention, the costs and time for meal preparation were more fairly shared.

Across all state-funded arts programmes, project organisation is another heavily-gendered, often unpaid task. Under the "Eigenanteil" system, where 10% of the budget must be contributed by members, organisational costs are mostly credited as "volunteering hours". This constitutes uncompensated labour that is nevertheless necessary for the success of the programme. In many projects women perform these tasks. However, in Amira Sultana these organisational costs were shared more fairly. The co-leaders divided up the majority of the responsibilities: Ludger coordinated the rehearsal spaces, additional funding from the Kulturbüro Hagen, and the concert premiere, while Maren prepared the music, liaised with the audio engineers, arranged the subsequent two concerts, and managed payments, contracts, accommodation, and travel for the artists. Prashanthi developed the advertising materials and coordinated travel.

When roles and tasks are not communally discussed, they risk falling into gender-based, not capacity-based, patterns. To be clear, sometimes in group settings, the best person for a job happens to fulfil certain stereotypes. But these roles need to be negotiated openly and tasks assigned fairly. Most importantly, **this work needs to be paid**. This was not possible in a project operating

under time and budgetary pressure. When this happens, group dynamics may revert to biassed heuristics.

How does one break out of these patterns? As the musicians themselves said, dialogue necessitates an open exchange and a willingness to explore. **This requires time and effort to investigate different options, try out new paths, and allow for failure.** First, as outlined above by the project members, dialogue requires an openness to trying new things. But even with a forward-thinking group, they still need time to implement changes and confront their unconscious biases. Time for reflection is a crucial component of the intrapersonal strand of interculturalism – personal transformation through new encounters. One needs time to practise new habits in order to create long-lasting structural change. Even if a group has the willpower to challenge societal norms, they still require time to implement them.

Even if a group has the willpower to challenge societal norms, they still require time to implement them.

This is not the case in this dialogue project format. These rehearsals took place under a ticking stopwatch. The concert dates were set months in advance. Flights were already booked and project members needed to return to their day jobs. Just as with the challenges regarding gender roles, this time pressure and concert-oriented rehearsing forced uncreative shortcuts being taken. And these patterns didn't only impact the interpersonal relationships, but also the music itself. There was no time to coach beginners in improvisation, develop radical exchanges across different instrument/vocal groups, or fully immerse oneself in other musical systems.

In their application, Amira Sultana proposed to explore the intersections in improvisation between Raga, Maqamat, and new music in the European Classical tradition. Putting all three of these cultures on equal footing and exploring them constituted a radical new approach. Most transcultural projects explore bilaterally between a majority and minority culture. Instead, relativising the Western classical tradition as just one of three cultures takes away some of its historically accumulated hegemony. In this formulation, the group proposed to explore the three systems as independently valuable musical cultures.

Figure 5: Advertisement for Amira Sultana Ensemble Concert in Essen

However, in order to put together a programme in short order, group members reverted to the systems the majority of them knew, usually Western classical notation, vocabulary, and harmonisation. In practice, this meant using lettered names (Bb, C, Db, etc.), Italian words (ritardando, crescendo), and assigning chord progressions to non-harmonised songs using the circle of fifths. With time, the means of music transmission in other cultural contexts could have been explored, for example learning the building blocks of ajnas in the Maqam system to then create a solo. Instead, the maqam was translated into staff notation and letter names so that everyone could join as quickly as possible.

And in the end this led to **the Maqam and Raga systems being presented as something exotic and in need of explanation, but not the Western classical one**. Despite their best efforts to present all cultures as equals, in the end the concerts nevertheless perpetuated a performance of "otherness" (Said 1978). The Middle Eastern and Indian sounds were posed as interesting, exotic, and special while the Western improvisations were normalised. One sees this already in the advertisements for the concerts (figure 5), which promise 'Maqamat and Raga' in dialogue. In the concerts as well, the elements from the Western contemporary free improvisation scene were not discussed onstage, even though it purported to be one of the three cultures explored in the application. The musicians introduced the songs with information about the non-Western techniques, but did not unpack those used by Ludger and Ramesh in their free improvisation solos. Western art music was not treated equally alongside the other two cultures. It was a given; it

did not need an introduction. Dialogue requires time and space for experimentation. But the societal and practical constraints beyond the dialogue itself worked against that. **When processes need to happen fast, cheaply, and as smoothly as possible, then old habits dominate. And that goes against the notion of dialoguing. For true exchange on eye level to happen, hierarchies need to be dismantled. This takes time, energy, and openness.**

With the pressure to perform, this ensemble resorted to heuristics: the people who were comfortable, improvised. Everyone learned the music using their own systems of learning. The professional musicians filled the extra programme time with pieces they already knew. These practices transpire every day in the music industry. But some heuristics reaffirmed systemic power imbalances. The women prepared meals and cleaned up. The Indian and Middle Eastern cultures were exoticised and Western culture normalised. The professionals improvised and the female amateurs performed their prepared songs.

So in the end, what is needed for dialogue to transpire? As Prashanthi summarised, to dialogue one needs the knowledge and willingness to ask the right questions. But beyond that, one needs the time to ask these questions, challenge pre-existing ways of thinking and build up a new means of exchange on equal footing. In short, one needs a break from the modern world.

With all that being said, it is important to stress that despite the constraints, dialogue did transpire. When I asked members in the interviews, they were overwhelmingly positive about the dialogue that emerged in the project. Maren saw dialogue transpire in her improvisations with Shashank. Prashanthi relayed everything she learned about Maqams and how this shaped her own singing. Ludger pointed to his jams with Ramesh as a highlight of the project. With more time, resources, and organisational capacity, the next dialogue project may be able to facilitate even deeper exchange.

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The power of recognition: The state's role in promoting dialogue

The previous section looked at the interpersonal requirements for a fruitful dialogue. But institutional support is also important. NRW is a forerunner in this field with state-sponsored programmes to promote intercultural dialogue. Without public-sector funding, projects like this would not survive in the competitive market.

As Mark Porter (2022) wrote in his report on last year's dialogue project, the state has an imperative to this work. Borders and state boundaries hampered preexisting intercultural dialogue in society. Therefore, such programmes redress a problem that the state itself created. It is not an innovation, it is a restitution.

But within the state's broader goal of promoting intercultural dialogue, **is the target outcome to support art for art's sake or to cultivate market viability for such genres?** This form of project-based intercultural music-making is not profitable on the free market. Such projects rely on public funding to happen. But the question remains as to what the state wants to accomplish with these initiatives. Should these funds ensure minority cultures perform on the stage or be invested in longer-term audience-building for the world music genre?

If the state wishes to improve recognition of cultural minorities, then it must also work to change public opinions.

To answer this question, theories of **multicultural recognition** may help. These concern how states and societies treat minorities. While most of the literature on recognition comes from Canada and the UK, Germany has come to see itself as an "*Einwanderungsland*" as well. The politics of interculturalism here champion diversity as a societal strength, not a weakness. This position hinges on the recognition of minority groups by the state, as well as by society. As many theorists have written (Fanon 1952 [2008], Honneth 1996, Taylor 1994) recognition concerns the harmony between how individuals perceive themselves and how society perceives them. This happens when an individual's self-defined identity is

acknowledged and validated externally. The state does this when it recognises that all residents and cultures equally belong to a pluralistic society (Taylor 1994).

In his theories about recognition, Axel Honneth (1996) emphasises the importance of solidarity as one area for recognition. To achieve solidarity, resources and opportunities must be fairly distributed. For example, the Musikkulturen programme seeks to give world music practitioners access to performing opportunities. The KULTURsekretariat does so not only through the dialog project, but also through its catalogue, subsidising musicians and venues for world music in NRW. This programme not only shows that such music is valued by the state, but also that it deserves public funding.

But some say that solidarity is not sufficient. Nancy Fraser argues **economic redistribution in addition to cultural recognition is necessary to achieve equality**. While this funding programme works to close the financing gap between non-Western music and other genres, classical music and jazz still receive the lionshare of cultural money in Germany (Ellinghaus, 2017). In comparison to the subsidies given to concert houses, educational institutions, and ensembles, this project's budget constitutes a negligible amount in public spending.

However, recognition does not just concern the state; it also deals with how a community recognises cultural minorities. When a social group mistreats or discriminates against a minority population, these daily mistreatments amount to significant harm on par with legal misrecognition (Fanon 1952). In the world music scene, many assert that the cultural sector does not appreciate their artistry and skills in the same way that they do classical musicians. This becomes a question of recognition for these individuals. These claims may be addressed by building up audiences for world music and improving public opinion.

So how does one **increase public recognition for a minority cultural product?** One begins by bringing attention to the artistic quality of the performance and advertising the events to new audiences. Yet the incentive structures of the funding programme do not encourage audience outreach. When musicians receive a flat rate for a performance, no fiscal demands pressure them to recruit listeners. And in this project, no additional support was given to finance advertisements or compensate for the time invested in such work. Once again here, the time pressure leading up to

the premiere meant that tasks not necessary to the performance fell by the wayside. Maren and the project members advertised using materials made during the week, but it was limited to the time and funds available. And consequently, the modest number of people who attended the concerts were overwhelmingly connected somehow to the project members.

This indicates a missed opportunity for the KULTURsekretariat. If the project aims to sponsor dialogue not just in the music-making, but also amongst the public, then more work must be done to ensure a bigger reach beyond the "usual suspects" for world music. Performing for those already sympathetic to world music and minority cultures in Germany does not pose a great potential for change. Public money must be allocated for advertising campaigns and outreach work. If the state wishes to improve recognition of cultural minorities, then it must also work to change public opinions.

Recommendations

1. **Use advertisements and public outreach to draw broader audiences**. In order to increase awareness for the plurality of cultures within Germany, projects like these must reach beyond typical audiences. This not only leads to increased multicultural recognition in society but also improves the economic prospects for world music. Building audiences for diverse musical genres in Germany is a sustainable investment in the scene, as well as the country's multicultural future.

2. **Use advertisements and public outreach to bring in more diverse applicants.** The Dialogue Project is a great opportunity for musicians. However, few people know about it, and even fewer come from minority or marginalised backgrounds. The KULTURsekretariat should promote the programme in more diverse circles, including using multipliers to circulate the call for applications in multilingual contexts.

3. **Incentivise a process-focused, not a product-focused, approach.** The need to put together a concert repertoire can overshadow the creative process of dialogue. This may limit the open exchange of knowledge and radical ideas. Nevertheless, the concerts are necessary to also promote dialogue with audiences. Therefore, the KULTURsekretariat should foreground the experimental and process-oriented nature of the project. This will reduce the pressure for a polished programme by opening night.

4. **Ensure that organisational work is fairly paid and equally divided.** Under the 'Eigenteil' system, project organisation, catering, and advertisements are often sacrificed as volunteer work. These jobs are also more likely to be done by women. Projects should therefore include these hours in the budget, pay them fairly, and divide the tasks openly and equally.

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Appendix 1: Amira Sultana setlist

1: Jago Mohan (traditional Indian) + Qumrike (traditional Kurdish)

2: Bedouine Fire (composition from Maren Lueg, GEMA number 1913646)

3: Dhatuvardhani (composed by Charlie Mariano)

4: Yemen (traditional Turkish) + Venkatachala Nilayam (traditional Indian)

5: Chennai Pace (composed by Shashank Subramanyam)

6: Narin (traditional Turkish)

7: Shark Jalaman (composed by Maren Lueg, GEMA number 1913646)

8: Tatva Meruga (traditional Indian)

Appendix 2: Excerpts from select interviews

Over the course of the week and thereafter, I conducted interviews with project members. Their answers from individual interviews are presented here in their original language, collated by question.

RC: What has your creative process looked like this week and in the past few months?

GB: Dieses Jahr haben wir uns schon im Januar kennengelernt. Und dann haben wir schon so mehrere Wochenenden auch geprobt. Es gab auch Austausch über WhatsApp oder E-Mail, wo wir so ein kleines Stück gespielt haben und rumgeschickt haben. Das heißt, das war schon ein Prozess vorher, weil jetzt ohne den ganzen informellen Austausch, das hätte noch nicht passiert. Also ich fühle mich auch sicherer, weil ich die Lieder gesungen habe und dann das Arrangement steht auch so, also 80, 90 %. Natürlich kann man die Feinheiten noch machen. Also ich finde, die Gruppe wächst auch so langsam zusammen. Also man lernt sich besser kennen und auch die Bedürfnisse, Wünsche von jedem. Es gibt auch Diskussionen. Das ist für mich persönlich eher mit Prashanthi häufiger, weil wir in der gleichen Wohnung bleiben. Wir üben abends noch, bisschen sitzen und nicht so viel üben. Aber wir schauen, welches Lied passt zu welchem Lied? Wie können wir improvisieren? So, und das finde ich schön.

PS: So I think firstly the group is quite new to each other. Four of us have been working together longer in the project. Also it's several cultures, so there is a lot of thinking that's going on while we practise. So day one was getting to know each other more than getting to know the pieces. Yesterday we started going into more structures, on how we want to present the pieces. And I think there have been interesting questions. Do we want to do a bridge? Do we need a bridge? Are these pieces so similar that audiences don't realise that they are different? Also there are so many types of beats, rhythms that we use. Even if the Maqams match, the beats still change. That, I personally did not expect. So I think we're getting more into structure, which also I think helps the improvisation framework. So initially we were just improvising. It was more like, 'Okay, I have to understand the talents and the team right now.' I think day three, we had to start putting together whose strength works where. So we are right now in a framework. I think it's a good framework we have. For me

personally, I work on, 'what would bring out my best in the framework that we have.' So I think it's going to get more interesting for me.

LS: Ich denke, das ist im Laufe der Zeit ein bisschen offener geworden. Und ich denke, wir sind eigentlich auf einem ganz guten Weg. Ich glaube, ich würde gerne den Prozess noch ein bisschen mehr öffnen. Ich würde es ganz gut finden, wenn wir den Gesang noch viel mehr mit einbringen. Wenn die beiden Sängerinnen noch die Möglichkeit haben, auch so ihr Improvisationspotential einfach auch auszuschöpfen, auszunutzen.

RC: What is your role in the project?

GB: Meine Rolle als Sängerin sehe ich darin, die kurdische Musik in diesen Dialog einzubringen. Und da ist es für mich auch sehr wichtig, eine Brücke zu schlagen zwischen der indischen und der kurdischen Kultur. Und das sehen wir auch so. Mit den beiden Liedern haben wir darüber diskutiert: Ist das jetzt eine gute Brücke oder nicht? Aber dann haben wir gemerkt, wie kann man die beiden Elemente musikalisch verbinden? Also als Sängerin finde ich es schön, eine neue Herausforderung anzunehmen. Ja, ich habe kurdische Musik, also ich liebe kurdische Musik. Ich mache kurdische Musik. Aber jetzt mit einer indischen Sängerin und indischen Trommeln und Cello und Flöte. Ich habe schon viele Auftritte gehabt, aber noch nie in dieser Form. Deshalb ist es für mich sehr, sehr schön. Ich finde auch, dass kurdische Lieder auch so... ich nenne das so kurdische Lieder bekommen neue Klamotten, also neue Kleider. Sie ziehen sich neu an. Die Basis oder die Grundlage bleibt gleich, aber irgendwie wird es anders interpretiert und das finde ich sehr wichtig.

PS: I think in some pieces, I'm more the connector between the pieces. In some pieces I'm the main part. So I think we keep changing roles in every piece and some pieces we are not involved in, which is also an interesting aspect of Indian classical music. A lot of instrumental music is based on words and they have to often do the same song without using their voices. So it's also interesting for me to see how other cultures work on this...So this is basically like a jazz band for me. That's how I perceive this. It's very difficult to come out of the classical music world and work like this. Although Indian classical music is very improvisation based, we know set structure of things, how

to do things. And now I have to rethink some of the phrases I do or some of the songs that I choose. Do I want to use that part of the song? Or does something else fits in better? And now that we have fixed scales and rhythms, I would also try to choose phrases that suit my voice better.

RC: How would you answer that question if I asked what is your role socially in this project?

PS: I've been an expat here for ten years and there's very little understanding for classical music here. There is good understanding in small pockets of Europe. I think in general, classical music is very difficult to be accepted, and I think my role in this project is to bring classical music to a bigger audience, to an uninitiated audience in a way they would like to hear it. I think these kinds of bands try to open your ears to more flavours. So if I eat a pizza all my life and then I go and taste sushi, it's maybe not the best feeling at first. So for me, I want to bring the sushi. Yeah, it may not be the best first taste, but I want the people to start listening to more and more other music which maybe broadens their thinking. For me, that's what's important. As an expat, I felt this could have helped my life or the way I integrated into society here. And music is just a means to talk about it, like food is. So I just want to use this as another means for people to come closer together and lose their personal differences and talk more or enjoy an experience they can take with them.

LS: [ich achte darauf], dass wir eine Art Gleichgewicht bekommen. Das heißt für mich einfach ganz klar, die Stücke müssen noch eine stärkere Dramaturgie haben, die wir alle verfolgen müssen...Weil ich auch die Zeit hinter dem Block im Hintergrund habe und dann genau diese Dinge, die ich gerade genannt habe, noch stärker reinbringe. Also Dramaturgie der Stücke, dass die Sängerinnen ihr Potential einfach noch mehr einbringen können.

RC: How are you perceiving the gender aspect of this project?

PS: The male artists who are here are super supportive of what we want to do. I think we need all of it because, I think even two of us were discussing at some point, if we weren't pulled on to the project, we wouldn't [be here]. I've often seen that women are less willing to come out confidently and improvise, and I think that's hugely underplayed in the music scene as well. And I'm experiencing through this project why. I have to prepare myself mentally a lot to just go on stage, and I can see why women need more of the support. I think we need some strong people in the

industry who are willing to coach us through this... I underestimated this aspect until I'm in it right now.

RC: This also came up in how you joined the project, right?

PS: Yeah I knew a dancer who knew Maren. And she said Maren was looking for an Indian classical musician. And preferably a woman, actually. And so Maren called me and said 'I can't find anyone who is a woman! You were recommended to me.' And that was also interesting to me: I know so many people around me who sing. But yeah, all of them are male. I didn't realize.

ML: I didn't want to go back to the default mechanism of just inviting a man, there were many male musicians I have worked with who would have liked to be part of this project and are used to being on stage. So this was really, really difficult. Even of the women I know who are good singers and professional, it would have been very difficult for them to take that time off because they have children. They have commitments, and to take a whole week off to do this project, I don't know. I really don't know if that would have worked. I was really pleased that we found Güler and Prashanthi, they put a lot of time and commitment into the project.

RC: What is necessary for dialogue to transpire?

GB: Man braucht ein gutes Gehör, weil jeder Musiker, jede Musikerin kommt aus einem anderen Erfahrungsraum. Und wie bringt man so viele Erfahrungen zusammen? Das muss man zusammen gut zuhören, was sind die Bedürfnisse und darauf zu achten, ‚fühlst du dich jetzt wohl?' Dialog heißt auch Sensibilität und gegenseitiges Zuhören, gegenseitiges Austauschen von Erfahrungen. Also das ist sehr, sehr wichtig für mich. Manchmal habe ich keinen Part. Z.B., ich sitze da und zähle die Takte oder ich fühle in mir die Musik und das ist für mich auch sehr wichtig. Das ist auch Dialog. Also Dialog heißt nicht immer, dass man so präsent ist. Man kann sich auch zurückziehen und dann als Zuschauerin, also auf der Bühne, aber als Person (die vielleicht gerade nicht singt oder nicht spielt) mitmacht, mit lächeln oder mitfühlen und dann auch Feedback geben.

PS: One needs knowledge about their own culture and more importantly, the willingness to get to know another. To ask the right questions to try to find a way between. So I think some of us come with a lot of experience and background, and we sometimes just know the things as they are. But

the ability to challenge that and start making music that sounds good together, or so that everyone can make music together…that's the thing that the band brings on top [of everything else]. What do you need for that? I think, yeah, you need a willingness to learn. Most importantly.

ML: Openness. The group needs to understand the subject and be open to dialogue.

RC: Can you point to a moment of dialogue that happened this week?

GB: Je mehr Leute ich in der Musikkultur kennen lerne, desto mehr gibt es etwas, das uns verbindet. Z.B., Prashanthi singt ein Lied mit "Aman", das bedeutet Sicherheit. Aman ist so ein trauriges Wort. Das ist so auf dem Balkan, im persischen Raum, in Kurdistan, in Indien. Und dann denkst du: "Okay, ich weiß nicht, worüber sie jetzt singt, aber ich weiß, wie sie sich jetzt fühlt." Und das finde ich sehr schön.

LS: Gestern zum Beispiel war eigentlich ein ganz guter Moment, wo Ramesh und ich quasi aus einem Stück ausgebrochen sind. Und zwar als ein Kontrast in einer total harten, freien Improvisation a la Free Jazz Wuppertal. Im Grunde genommen dann auch das zu machen, was zwischen uns beiden total gut harmoniert hat. Also dieser Kontrast war mir sehr wichtig.

ML: I really liked the dialogue between the Raga and Maqam in the music. I did like the challenge. There were many ways that people really pushed themselves to take on the challenge. For example, Shashank moved into other rhythms that we played together. He was flexible and engaging. He even tried to play some of the quarter tones. In the piece 'Bedouine Fire' he played Maqam Bayati and then he changed to Hijaz. When I said okay, 'This piece is a bit more relaxed and mellow and slow' he changed his flute to suit the song. One might not perceive the level of freedom Shashank and everyone else choose to put into it as much from outside as what it would be if you were an insider of the traditional music styles. If you view it from traditional Raga/Maqam styles, you could see that we took a huge amount of liberty from the traditional forms. But of course maybe it doesn't appear like that for an audience that doesn't know the style so well.

PS: I personally felt happy that my friends who came to the concerts were connected to my music but also got a flavour of different music. This was important…I think every audience would have taken something with them, thinking 'Oh, I didn't know this existed in world music' and this is

what I wanted to happen. I also became more self-aware of my own music system through this actually, because I wasn't aware that it was so universal even to be able to jam with another culture. Maren was a strong point who had learned all three systems and was able to easily juggle between the three. If we didn't have someone like this, I think the project would have been much more difficult. So she was kind of the anchor between the three systems. If we didn't have someone like this, I think the project would have been much more difficult. But that's more from the band perspective. From the audience, I think everybody took something with them. That there's other kinds of music and if it's played with the flavour of what they know already, it's received better. So if I just play a pure Indian Classical track for someone, they would be like, 'I don't know what you're playing.' It's difficult to understand or it's too fast or too sad or too slow. But if you play a bit of their own culture and mix it with another, I think it has a different effect.

But thinking about dialogue in the music, I had to think a lot about which raga will fit this and that. I think the initial days were the days where I was brainstorming, thinking, 'Will this fit? Will that fit?' That for me was still a dialogue. I would ask Güler to repeat a phrase and ask, 'Where are the other notes of this Maqam?' So it was also interesting for me, some of the songs were just going between the first and the fifth of the scale. So I think, 'Cool, that's giving me so much space to interpret.' I can choose whatever notes I want beyond that...I think I learned what composition looks like in other cultures...My improvisation phrases with Maren I really enjoyed. I had to think about how I want to create it, how do I want to give her a phrase, and how can she pick it up? Together with Güler, it was for me more thinking about the structure of what does the song mean and how can I fit that without taking the essence of the existing song away? Because these are popular songs. So you still have to respect the other culture at some point.

RC: How was the whole experience overall for you?

PS: This was a first for me, to be honest. There were a lot of cultures sitting in the room trying to come up with a 90 minute gig...In the end I liked the jamming sessions more than the concerts. The concerts were great, but I think it was the journey was more interesting for me as such. We got better with every concert. The first one, we didn't know what to expect of each other as a band. We just said, okay, we'll go live. And we started and it actually turned out more interesting than I

thought. Then the second one was kind of easy, let's say. I shouldn't say easy because it was also new acoustics and new hall for me. So hence the team had to find each other again. It was also just a change of place because we were practising in the same place for five days and then there was a new setup. And the third gig was just for us, I think. Yeah, I was able to improvise better because I started getting comfortable with the band more. So for me, the third was the most comfortable and more creative for me as how I could play with the band and then participate in the conversations...

RC: What advice would you give to next year's Dialog Project group?

GB: Ich würde den Leuten vorschlagen, dass sie sich vorher auch so treffen und austauschen und sich Gedanken machen, ‚Wie wollen wir welche Stücke machen?' Nicht so komplett alle Stücke, aber ich würde empfehlen auf dem Weg langsam so erst mal sich gegenseitig zu öffnen und sich gegenseitig irgendwie Stücke zu schicken. Weil Dialog heißt, dass man noch Sachen lernt, die man vorher vielleicht nicht so gut kannte.

PS: I think a more spread out timeline would have been better. So not five days in a row. I think each one would have taken something home, thought about it, came back with a different thought if we had spaced it over several weeks. You go back, you internalize the song, you come up with new ideas, you come back, you listen more. I think the internalizing process would have been would have made it richer...Also pay someone for the role of a project manager. Because I think it's not easy to manage the paperwork and the artists and play and practice and compose, that's for sure.

ML: If possible, do it in some sort of place where your food and accommodation and the rehearsal room is provided in one location. Unfortunately, it is not easy to find a place like that in our area we couldn't find a place that we could have afforded from the funding available.