BODIES AS FADERS: AN INFRACTION OF CENTRALISED MIXING AUTHORITY

YAZIKA SHARMA

Abstract (IT): Questo articolo indaga la possibilità di rimuovere il mixer – l'unità centrale di controllo e di gestione di un'esecuzione dal vivo – e di trasferire la sua funzione nei corpi degli stessi esecutori. Il mixaggio implica una serie di operazioni attraverso le quali vengono modellati livello, bilanciamento, dinamica, posizionamento spaziale e attenzione. Questo articolo isola un aspetto fondamentale di tale sistema – l'organizzazione del livello e del bilanciamento sonoro relativi – e si interroga su cosa accada quando la sua sede tecnologica centralizzata viene rimossa. Propone un'esposizione in cui un piccolo ensemble acustico si esibisce senza apparecchiature di mixaggio elettroniche, affidandosi invece al proprio udito e riassegnando il bilanciamento sonoro al movimento fisico: gli esecutori diventano, di fatto, i fader. L'indagine è documentata attraverso questionari strutturati per esecutori e ascoltatori, l'osservazione riflessiva di un professionista e registrazioni acustiche e ambientali passive, documentando insieme ciò che emerge una volta rimossa l'autorità centralizzata. Una seconda linea di indagine segue l'ascoltatore: come la posizione e la distanza del pubblico influenzano la percezione di ciò che viene 'mixato' una volta che il mixer, e i cavi che un tempo ne trasportavano il segnale, sono assenti. In tal modo, l'articolo si interroga su cosa emerga in merito all'autorialità e alla coerenza musicale quando la loro consueta collocazione centralizzata e tecnologica viene rimossa e ridistribuita tra esecutori e relazioni di ascolto.
Parole chiave: Mixaggio, Incorporazione, Infrazione di paradigma, Performance dal vivo, Autorialità distribuita.

Abstract (EN): This paper investigates the possibility of removing the mixing console — the central authorial and controlling unit of a live performance — and relocating its function into the bodies of performers themselves. Mixing involves a range of operations through which level, balance, dynamics, spatial placement, and attention are shaped. This paper isolates one foundational aspect of that system — the organisation of relative sonic level and balance — and asks what happens when its centralised technological site is removed. It proposes an exposition in which a small acoustic ensemble performs with no electronic mixing apparatus, relying instead on their own hearing and reassigning sonic balancing to physical movement: performers becoming, in effect, the faders. The inquiry is documented through structured questionnaires for performers and listeners, a practitioner's reflexive observation, and passive acoustic and environmental logging, together documenting what emerges once that centralised authority is removed. A secondary line of inquiry follows the listener: how audience position and distance shape what is perceived as 'mixed' once the console, and the wires that once carried its signal, are absent. In doing so, the paper asks what is revealed about musical authorship and coherence when their usual centralised, technological site is removed and redistributed among performing bodies and listening relationships.
Keywords: Mixing, Embodiment, Paradigm infraction, Live performance, Distributed authorship.

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Introduction

Mixing functions as a central decision-making authority across nearly every domain of music production — live performance, fixed media and acousmatic composition, film and long-form audiovisual content. This paper is concerned only with mixing in live performance. Realising the practical implications of removing electronic mixing authority, along with the wires, cables, amplifiers, and monitors that support it, opens a specific kind of exposition: a small acoustic ensemble, curated to retain the need for sonic balance while removing its usual technological apparatus and operating personnel entirely.

A mixing system does more than simply increase or decrease sound. It establishes relationships between sources: what comes forward, what recedes, what occupies space, what becomes perceptually dominant, and what remains in the background. These relationships are ordinarily negotiated through a centralised technological system. This exposition keeps the need for such relationships intact, but reassigns their negotiation: not from one technology to another, but from the console to the performers themselves.

While playing, musicians become the faders and volume controls of their own set, shifting position — forward, backward, in place — to alter their relative level at the listener's position, while leaning, turning, and changing posture extend this physical vocabulary into other aspects of projection and presence. Alongside this spatial vocabulary, dynamic playing itself becomes a further available tool: harmonium, flute,

and vocal shape their volume through breath and air pressure, while violin and tabla shape it through varying degrees of physical pressure and touch. Even where such dynamic shifts are partially absorbed or diffused before reaching the furthest listeners, they remain a meaningful contribution to the ensemble's overall balance. Listening becomes the primary feedback available — the same act that occurs even in a conventionally mixed performance, but now carrying a fuller physical, emotional, and psychological weight, since the performer's own body becomes the instrument of adjustment as well as of sound.

Unamplified acoustic ensemble performance is of course not new — it is a foundational practice across cultures, most enduringly in folk traditions. But those practices arise from an absence of means, not a deliberate withdrawal of them. This exposition inverts that condition: the absence of mixing technology is not a limitation but a method, curated specifically to ask what happens to listening, coherence, and authorship once centralised technological control is deliberately withheld. This withdrawal of centralised technological authority constitutes the paper's central infraction of the musical paradigm — understood, following Kuhn[1] and Coenen's[2] account of a Stockhausen paradigm, as a rupture in the implicit values governing who produces music, through what means, and under whose control. What follows is not a report of results, since the exposition remains unrealised at the time of writing, but a design and theorisation of the inquiry itself.

[1] Thomas S. KUHN, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1962.
[2] Alcedo COENEN, *Stockhausen's Paradigm: A Survey of His Theories*, in «Perspectives of New Music», vol. 32, no. 2, 1994, pp. 200-225.

1. Volume, Balance, and the Governing Function

The true purpose of removing the console and its operating engineer from consideration here is not to reproduce every technical operation of a mixing system through the body. It is to isolate and relocate one of its most fundamental functions: the continuous organisation of relative sonic level and balance.

A mixing engineer's task extends well beyond adjusting parameters: it is an act of continuous interpretive judgement — deciding, moment to moment, what the audience hears as foreground and what recedes, and in doing so, shaping what the piece sonically is at each point in its unfolding. Christopher Small's concept of musicking is useful here: music, Small argues, is not so much a noun as a verb — «to music is to take part in any capacity in a musical performance»[3], with its meaning arising through the relationships established between participants by the performance. Mixing, understood this way, is not simply a technical layer applied after the fact, but a relational act taking place within the performance itself.

The organisation of relative level and balance is foundational to mixing practice. Moylan[4] and Zagorski-Thomas[5] treat balance as a structuring layer within the mix; Senior[6] identifies level balancing as one of its core pillars; and live-sound pedagogy specifically frames relative level as a fundamental concern of gain staging[7]. What

[3] Christopher SMALL, *Musicking — The Meanings of Performing and Listening. A Lecture*, in «Music Education Research», vol. 1, no. 1, 1999, pp. 9-22.

[4] William MOYLAN, *Understanding and Crafting the Mix: The Art of Recording*, Focal Press, Burlington, 2014.

[5] Simon ZAGORSKI-THOMAS, *The Musicology of Record Production*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014.

[6] Mike SENIOR, *Mixing Secrets for the Small Studio*, Routledge, New York, 2018.

[7] Bill GIBSON, *The Ultimate Live Sound Operator's Handbook*, 2nd ed., Hal Leonard, Milwaukee, 2011.

remains less examined is not the importance of balance within mixing, but what occurs when its site of execution is removed entirely from the technological signal chain and relocated into the bodies of performers themselves.

The distinction that follows is important. Compression, equalisation, reverb, saturation, and panning do not perform the same operation, nor can they be reduced to volume alone. They act through different relationships between level, frequency, dynamics, time, spatial distribution, and timbre, though each of these operations can, at some level, be understood as a form of managed energy or level. The exposition therefore does not attempt to reproduce these functions physically. Instead, it isolates the more basic question of who or what is responsible for maintaining sonic relationships once the centralised technological mediator is removed.

The body becomes that site.

2. Theoretical Lineage: Cage, Grossi, and Hutchins

Live performance has changed considerably over the past fifty years, driven largely by the development of increasingly sophisticated equipment and electronic technique. This paper does not question or discourage that development. It asks a narrower question: what happens in its deliberate absence?

This runs in useful parallel to Cage's removal of the controlling agent from composition through chance procedure[8]. Where Cage removed the composer's intention to let chance enter, this paper removes the mixing console and its operator, substituting the ears of the performers themselves — not to introduce chance, but to ask whether coherence can still be achieved without a centralised point of control.

[8] John CAGE, *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, 1961.

As this inquiry remains, at the time of writing, unrealised on stage, it draws support from Giuditta Parolini's account of Pietro Grossi, whose computer-music experiments were, in her words, more appreciated by computer scientists and technologists than by musicians themselves[9]. Grossi's practice suggests that a genuine infraction of the musical paradigm has historically not always secured validation from within music's own institutions first — a pattern this exposition's still-unrealised status sits within, rather than apart from.

The strongest structural parallel, however, is Hutchins' study of ship navigation, in which no single sailor holds the complete picture required to fix the ship's position, yet the group, working through partial, distributed representations, produces an accurate result[10]. The same structure appears in team sport: a goal in football is scored by one player, but is properly the outcome of eleven. This paper draws the same structure onto the ensemble under discussion: no single performer holds the mix, yet the group may still produce coherence.

Though this paper runs in parallel with Cage, Grossi, and Hutchins at several points, a gap remains: none of these lineages has been applied to a case in which a technological control function — mixing, and the electronic apparatus that performs it — is redistributed into the bodies of performers, in a manner that resists full choreography and remains, in large part, spontaneous.

[9] Giuditta PAROLINI, *Music without Musicians … but with Scientists, Technicians and Computer Companies*, in «Organised Sound», vol. 22, no. 2, 2017, pp. 286-296, in particular p. 293.

[10] Edwin HUTCHINS, *Cognition in the Wild*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1995.

3. The Proposal: Bodies as Faders

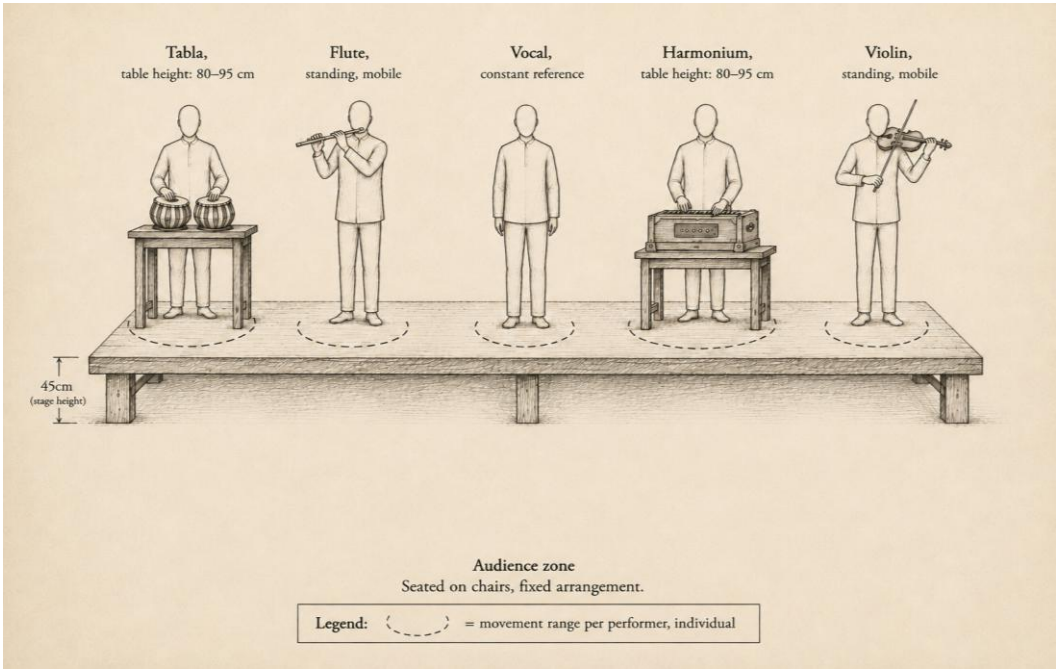
The primary infraction here lies in the mechanism of the exposition itself. Every practical decision below extends beyond logistics, toward argument.

3.1 Instrumentation

The ensemble comprises flute, violin, harmonium, tabla, and vocal. In traditional Hindustani classical music practice, every performer is typically seated. This exposition departs from that convention: flute, violin, and vocal are performed standing, so that these three performers can move through the fader-vocabulary described below. Harmonium and tabla remain seated in tradition, but are here raised to table height (approximately 80-95cm) — not to enable locomotion, since neither instrument can be relocated in space even from an elevated position, but so that their performers stand at the same height as the rest of the ensemble, and so their contribution to the fader-vocabulary is expressed through dynamic touch and breath pressure rather than movement. This trade-off is accepted here to preserve a uniform vertical plane across all sound sources, ensuring that listener-position effects discussed in Section 4 can be attributed primarily to lateral and depth movement rather than confounded by inconsistent source height.

These instruments were selected for the physical freedom each affords its performer within the fader-vocabulary described below, rather than for timbral compatibility alone. As is standard in Hindustani classical music practice, the vocalist sets the scale and the instrumentalists tune to follow, providing the ensemble's pitch reference. The ensemble performs within a shared *raag* and *taal*, fixed as the exposition's structural frame — a constraint operating at the level of scale and rhythmic cycle rather than through fixed, notated material, allowing genuine improvisation while holding the

underlying structural conditions stable. Across the exposition, the ensemble's structural musical framework, initial performer positions, platform configuration, audience arrangement, and absence of amplification are fixed in advance; variation is expected primarily through performers' embodied responses during the performance itself. *Tanpura*, though customarily present in Hindustani classical music performance as a continuous drone, is deliberately excluded here: its electronic form would reintroduce an electronic signal into an exposition built specifically around its absence, while its traditional acoustic form requires seated, stationary playing incompatible with the fader-vocabulary at the centre of this design. Its absence is treated here as a further, honest constraint of the infraction, not an oversight. Figure 1 illustrates this arrangement, showing each performer's position, instrument, and individual range of movement along the platform.



[**Fig. 1** – The five-performer ensemble arranged in an arc on the raised platform, with instrument, height, and mobility annotations. Source: author]

The vocalist is labelled as a constant reference to reflect their musical role, not a restriction on movement: within Hindustani classical music performance, the vocalist leads while instrumentalists respond to and support the vocal line. The vocalist may move within a limited range according to performance needs, while remaining the ensemble's primary musical reference point throughout.

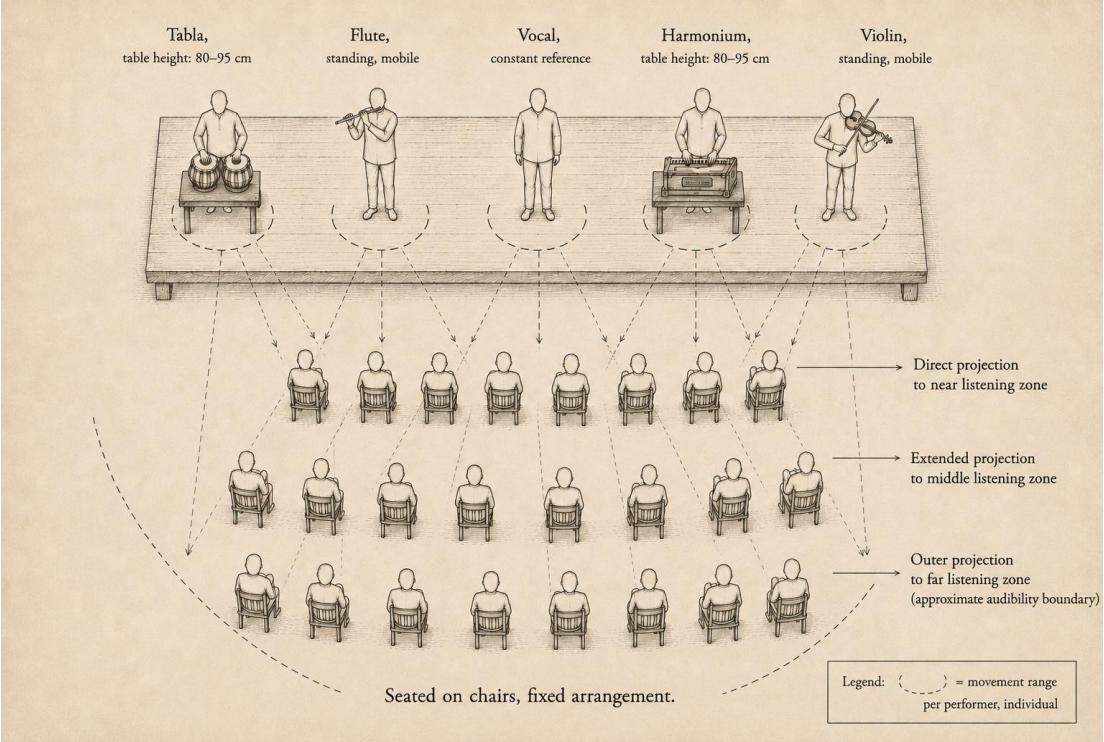
3.2 The Physical Vocabulary of the Fader

Performers are asked to become, literally, the faders of their own mix: moving forward and backward to alter relative level through distance and shifting laterally to alter their spatial relationship to the listener. Additional embodied controls — dynamic playing, posture, and gesture — may further affect projection and perceived presence. This vocabulary is rehearsed in part, but much of it necessarily remains improvised and spontaneous, given the nature of live performance; the degree of choreography is not, in itself, the paper's central question. The important shift is that these movements are not merely expressive gestures added to the performance — they are functional. A performer moves because the sound needs to change in relation to the ensemble and the listener. Performers wear minimal, non-distinctive clothing of similar tone, so that movement — rather than costume — remains the legible visual signal, and so the ensemble reads as one coordinated visual system rather than five distinct individuals. The absence of a monitor system or shared external tempo reference extends the paper's central inquiry rather than sitting outside it: rhythmic coordination, like sonic balance, must be negotiated entirely through the performers' own listening, with no centralised reference point to correct against. This is treated here as a further dimension of the same infraction, not a separate technical problem to be solved.

3.3 Indoor and Outdoor: Choosing the Acoustic Condition

Among all design decisions, the hardest was whether to stage the exposition indoors or outdoors. Indoor staging extends audible range but colours the performance with the room's own acoustic signature; outdoor staging removes that coloration but reduces audibility with distance, and sound diffusion becomes unavoidable. Outdoor staging was chosen to reduce the contribution of enclosed-room reverberation and coloration, while accepting greater variability in propagation and environmental noise. The performance zone requires roughly six by four metres to allow five performers their individual range of movement; combined with an audience zone extending to the outer limit of audibility in open air, the exposition requires an open area of approximately twenty-six metres in diameter, accommodating an audience of approximately twenty to thirty listeners. Exact venue, stage dimensions, and audience size may vary according to availability at the time of execution. The performance lasts approximately twenty minutes. Figure 2 illustrates how sound projects from the platform toward the three audience rows, which provide near, middle, and far listening positions; their approximate distances from the platform will be documented for the realised site.

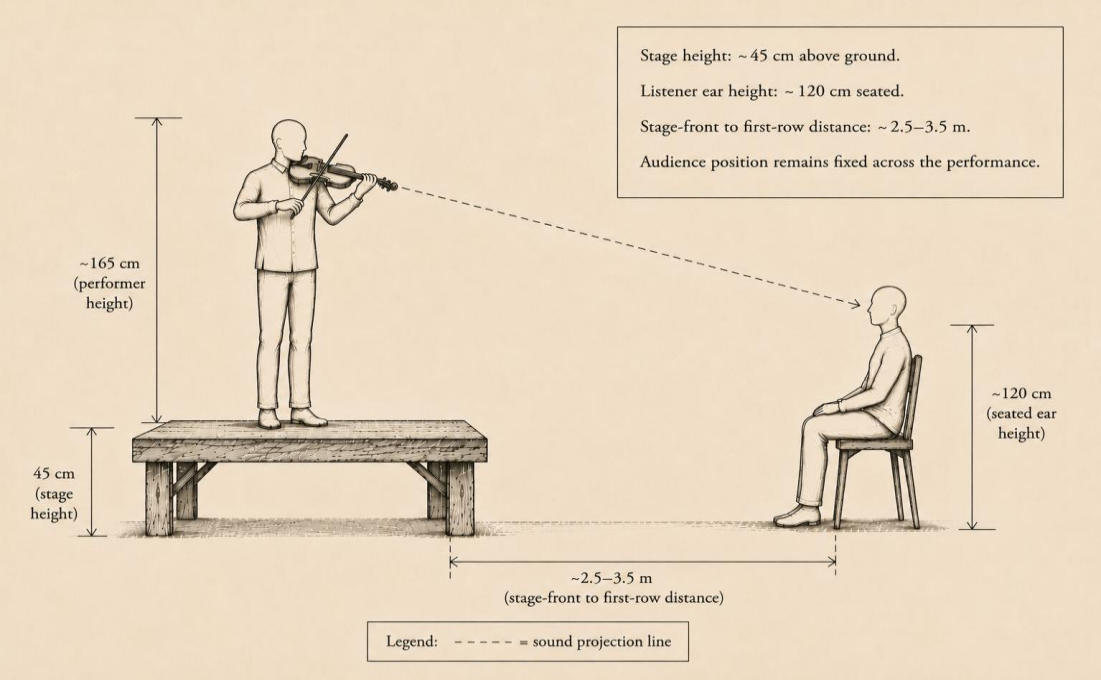
A low raised platform, approximately 45cm above ground level, supports the ensemble throughout: this is a physical rather than technological condition, introducing no centralised point of authorship or control, but is intended to reduce ground-level absorption of sound and preserve sightlines for the seated audience, particularly those further back.



[**Fig. 2** – Sound projection from performers to near, middle, and far listening zones, with fixed audience seating arrangement. Source: author]

Staging is planned for early morning or evening, both to avoid the acoustic and thermal instability of midday heat and to allow ambient environmental sound — birdsong, in particular — to enter the piece as an uncontrolled but legitimate participant in the soundscape, consistent with this practice's broader engagement with non-human, non-intentional sound. Wind conditions will be logged, and performance will be postponed if wind materially compromises sound intelligibility. The audience is seated throughout in chairs rather than on the ground, in a fixed arrangement — keeping listener ear height closer to the performers' projection line and away from ground-level absorption, while still providing a stable reference point against which the

performers' movement becomes perceptible. Figure 3 illustrates these height and distance proportions in profile, using a single representative performer and listener. Audience members are not restricted by musical background; a deliberate mix of trained musicians and non-musicians is sought, so that the exposition's perceptual effects can later be considered across differently trained modes of listening.



[**Fig. 3** – Elevation view illustrating stage, performer, and seated listener heights with the sound projection line, shown using one representative performer and listener. Source: author]

3.4 Documenting the Infraction

Because the exposition's central question — what happens to coherence and authorship once centralised mixing is removed — cannot be answered through observation alone, the exposition is documented through several complementary, triangulated methods, so that no single account carries the full evidentiary weight.

3.4.1 Questionnaires

Structured questionnaires are administered separately to performers and listeners immediately following the performance, to preserve the immediacy of the experience reported.

The performer questionnaire is built to probe the gap between understanding the exposition's design and what is actually experienced live, on stage, in the body — since performers, unlike the audience, know the mechanism intimately in advance, and generic questions would land flat for them. It includes:

- Before this performance, how did you imagine the physical fader-vocabulary would feel to execute? Did the lived experience match that expectation, or diverge from it?
- Was there a moment where you moved instinctively, before consciously deciding to, in response to another performer or the ensemble's overall sound?
- Compared to a conventionally mixed and monitored performance you have been playing, did you feel more or less certain, at any given moment, of how the ensemble actually sounded to the audience?
- With no mixing engineer to confirm your final sound, what — during soundcheck or performance — personally told you your own contribution was where you wanted it: what made you feel, 'this is set, I can leave it here'?
- Where, if anywhere, did you feel the ensemble's coherence break down, and what did you do, if anything, to try to recover it?

The listener questionnaire is administered to audience members after the performance. Listeners are given only a light introduction to the exposition's underlying premise beforehand — enough to understand what they are about to experience, without enough detail to shape or colour their perception before the performance begins.

- Did this performance feel different from other live performances you have attended? If so, how would you describe that difference?

- Did you feel the performance was balanced throughout, or were there specific parts that felt muddy, noisy, or unbalanced compared to others?
- Was there a specific moment in the performance when you noticed the balance shift — where one instrument or voice became more or less prominent than before? If so, when, and what changed?
- Were you aware of the performers' physical movement as connected to what you were hearing?
- What is your level of musical training or performance experience, if any?

Participants will be informed of the research purpose and documentation procedures and will provide consent for the use of their responses and any identifiable recordings; questionnaire responses will be anonymised in subsequent analysis.
Responses will be reviewed thematically, with recurring references to balance, coherence, bodily agency, movement-awareness, and listener position coded across performer and listener accounts.
Convergence and divergence in performer and listener responses are both treated as substantive findings here: agreement across accounts may indicate a shared, reconstituted sense of coherence; divergence may indicate that coherence itself becomes plural and contested once its centralised authority is removed.

3.4.2 Passive Acoustic and Environmental Logging

Sound-level meters will be placed at multiple fixed points across the audience zone — near, middle, and far, matching the seating arrangement described in Section 3.3 — logging decibel levels throughout the performance. Meters will be placed only in the audience zone, since the paper's concern is not what performers produce at the source but what a listener actually receives; this yields an objective, continuous record of

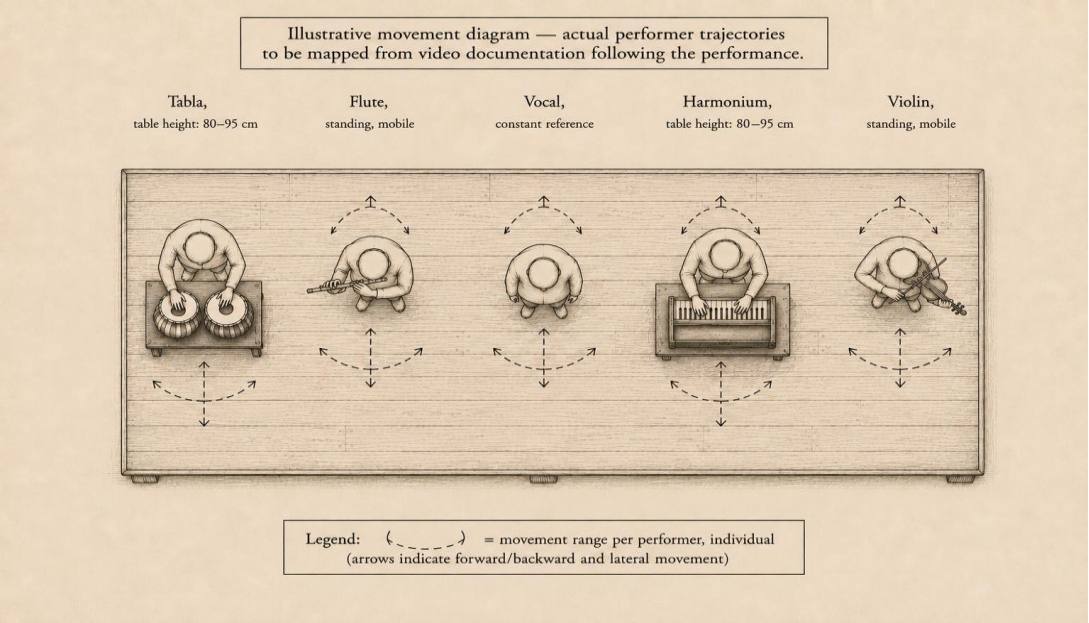
sound-pressure level over time and across listener positions, independent of anyone's self-report. Wind speed, temperature, and time of day on the day of performance will be logged alongside these readings, so that actual conditions can be compared against the thresholds stated in Section 3.3.

3.4.3 Reflexive Practitioner Observation

As the exposition's designer, the author's observations are necessarily situated rather than independent; they are therefore treated as a distinct reflexive account, documented alongside the performer and listener questionnaires.

3.4.4 Recording

Audio and video recording will be used strictly as retrospective documentation, not as live mediation: unlike the mixing console, they exert no influence on the sound as it occurs, and performers receive no feedback from them during the performance. Following the performance, an overhead diagram is produced from this documentation, illustrating performers' approximate movement across the performance zone; this diagram is intended to aid the reader's spatial understanding of the exposition, not as a precision movement-tracking instrument.
Figure 4 shows this overhead diagram in illustrative form; the actual trajectories recorded during the performance will replace this template following the exposition.



[**Fig. 4** – Illustrative overhead diagram of performer movement range across the platform; actual trajectories to be mapped from video documentation following the performance. Source: author]

4. The Listener's Position

This paper's central inquiry extends naturally to the audience: listener position is treated here as structurally symmetrical to performer embodiment, not a separate concern but the same question seen from the other side. Where performers manipulate relative sonic level through bodily position, listeners receive and interpret those relationships through their own positional situation — both are embodied, spatial acts once the mixing console's centralised signal path is removed.

This symmetry is not merely conceptual. Bacila and Lee's study of listener position and head orientation in an enclosed space found that position reliably and measurably

shifts a listener's perception of a performance — not only its loudness, but its apparent width, its sense of envelopment, its perceived distance[11].

Their study, however, holds the sound source fixed and moves only the listener. This exposition varies both: the performers move through space as they play, while listeners each occupy a different fixed position relative to them, with no amplification to normalise the resulting differences in what each listener hears.

As a result, a listener's experience of 'the mix' will vary meaningfully depending on where they sit, in a way a conventionally amplified performance would partially normalise. This variation is not treated here as a flaw to be minimised, but as part of the exposition's own inquiry. A recent systematic review of visual and spatial factors in classical concert listening notes that performer visibility and seat geometry substantially shape audience engagement and perceived expressiveness — yet of the studies it reviews, only one was conducted in an actual performance space; the rest relied on laboratory, home, or virtual-reality reproduction[12]. This exposition is, in that sense, closely aligned with the kind of field-based inquiry the review calls for, extended further. While embodiment, spatial perception, listener experience, and technology's role in musical performance have each received scholarly attention, the specific reconfiguration examined here — relocating live sonic balancing from a centralised mixing position to performers' physical positioning within a Hindustani

[11] Bogdan Ioan BACILA and Hyunkook LEE, *Listener-Position and Orientation Dependency of Auditory Perception in an Enclosed Space: Elicitation of Salient Attributes*, in «Applied Sciences», vol. 11, no. 4, 2021, article 1570.

[12] Carlo-Ferdinando DE NARDIS, Mariangela DE VITA, Alessio GABRIELE, *Effects of Visual and Spatial Factors on Classical Music Listening: A Systematic Review*, in «Architecture», vol. 6, no. 2, 2026, article 66.

classical music ensemble — remains, to the best of this paper's knowledge, unaddressed.

If meaning, as Small argues, arises from the relationships enacted between everyone present in a performance, then listener position is not a logistical afterthought[13]. It is part of what is being composed.

5. Discussion: What Remains Open

This paper theorises and designs the exposition described above; it does not report its outcomes, since the exposition has not yet been staged at the time of writing. This is a deliberate methodological position: theoretical reflection on an unrealised inquiry is treated here as a legitimate contribution in its own right, distinct from documentation of completed work.

What the exposition will show remains genuinely unknown. Whether coherence is in fact perceptible to performers and listeners once centralised authority is removed; whether the chosen outdoor site preserves sufficient audibility for meaningful listener response; whether performers move more, or less, than rehearsal anticipated once the performance is live — none of these can be answered in advance. This uncertainty is structural, not incidental, and shares its epistemic footing with the traditions this paper draws on: Cage's chance procedures and Hutchins' account of coordination achieved through partial, distributed representation are both, by definition, outcomes that cannot be fully known before the fact.

The exposition is planned to be staged by the end of 2026 and thoroughly documented at every stage — through performer and listener questionnaires, passive acoustic and

[13] Christopher SMALL, *Musicking* cit.

environmental logging, reflexive practitioner observation, and audio/video documentation, as described above. This documentation is intended to form the basis of a further exposition, one addressing what the inquiry described here actually revealed.

The present paper does not claim to resolve what happens when centralised sonic authority disappears. It proposes a situation in which that disappearance can be experienced, observed, and questioned.

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Author's note (per editorial correspondence): AI tools were used to assist with editorial drafting of this text and to generate illustrative diagrams describing the exposition's physical design.