Do the performing arts play a role in sexual selection? How does music influence mating practices in different cultures? Can the performing arts create social settings where sexual relationships germinate and grow – even where sex is a disruptive force, an arena for competition and conflict? And if so, where does this power of the performing arts come from?

The performing arts everywhere play an important role in expressing erotic feelings. Playing an instrument is often used to attract the other sex, and the singing of amorous songs between young men and women is widespread in Asia. According to one colonial travelogue, skill and verbal ability in poetry were a passport to female favour among the highland Malays of Sumatra: ‘A kind of flirtation goes on independently of the open and public display of skill, and it is often accompanied with the interchange of flowers and other mute symbols which all have a mystical meaning’ (Malayan Miscellanies 1821). The highland Malays ascribed evocative powers to lovers’ verses: in the past, when young men went travelling, they might give their beloved a piece of bamboo with an inscription, which the girl was to read aloud daily to ensure the success of her lover’s venture and his faithful return to her.

This supposed magnetism of music is not unique. Similar seductive scenes abound in early travellers, ranging from the courtiers of the celestial city Kin-Sai, famed from Marco Polo’s descriptions, to later stories of Kyoto-Gion’s geishas who lured their customers with their three-stringed shamisen. Drawing upon notions of the seductive Asian woman, oriental dancers such as Matahari and Little Egypt brought this art of seduction to the West. Many descriptions of such arts, as critics like Edward Said, Rana Khacharbi and Ashis Nandy have shown, are based on misunderstandings, sometimes intentional and generally say more about the western audience’s longing for a sensual other expressed through a depiction of the East as a place of lust and sexual pleasures. As a result, the Orient has long been perceived through the seductive performances of its women, something that the journalist Sheridan Passo (2005) describes as the ‘Asian Mystique’. Given all this, it is surprising how little is actually known about these arts and the often intricate ways they lured and seduced their audiences.

**Passions performed: is there an erotic component to the arts?**

Seduction stands for different things in different places, but little attention has to date been paid to local conceptualisations. Western dictionaries define seduction as an act of winning someone’s love or sexual favour, though seduction has also been interpreted more negatively as enticing someone to stray from the straight and narrow path. From the sirens of Greek mythology, Indian celestial nymphs (aparatas) who seduced both gods and men, to the attractiveness of today’s pop idols, special evocative powers are often attributed to the lovers’ song. Indeed, many believe there is something inherent in music that affects people.

What makes the human voice seductive and what defines a sexy voice? Is a sexy voice a biological given or a play upon cultural expectations? Wim van der Meer (this issue, p.6) sug-
The art of seduction traditionally plays upon all the senses simultaneously and its study might not only gain from biological or musicological perspectives, but from recent work on the anthropology of the senses. Veit Erlman’s (2004:9) Haunting Cultures observes that ours is essentially a visual age. Popular music is a good illustration of this, as image is often favoured over sound. This can be seen in singing competitions like American Idol and its spinoffs. At the same time, the performing arts perpetuate sensual cultures and ‘languages’ that convey things that in ordinary circumstances would be censored or create unease.

*Risque songs, fertility and the social function of seduction*

Youth throughout upland Southeast Asia and among the many minorities of southern China have traditionally exchanged repartee songs in which male and female singing alternate. Primarily associated with agricultural rites, these songs were often sung while collecting in the forest or working the fields. Such courtship songs were part of village feasts or temple festivals in Buddhist Southeast Asia: youths of neighbouring villages were invited for a communal meal, dancing, and question-and-answer games during which candidate-lovers were questioned. In the course of the night, screened from view, such songs easily became a battle of the sexes, and in some cases turned into sexual play.

Risque songs with an overt double entendre, erotic puns and sexually implicit behaviour normally constrained by society can, in one carnivalesque moment, become the norm. In his contribution Frank Kuenenhooven (p.7) describes such performances in northwest China: ‘flirting’ is directed towards the gods, and there is a begging for life, for rain, for protection of the crop, and for fertility of the women. The kam klawn of northwest Thailand, the pha pha songs of the Hmong and the hua’er songs described by Kuenenhooven all seem to point to the importance of singing seductive songs in the selection of marriage partners. In Southeast Asia such ritualised courtship songs were part of a wider set of entertainments, including cockfighting, couple dances, and riddling games meant to express wit and sexuality.

Such song festivals were often fruitful arenas for contact – traditional dating agencies as it were – supervised by elderly persons experienced in such affairs, and with performers ultimately proposing marriage to one another. In the mountains of northwest China, love affairs during these festivals might even result in extramarital children, a welcome gift to women whose marriages had not been consummated. Fertility was the message of such festivals and an explicit theme in the songs. Ritual courtship through the performing arts therefore contributed in important ways to the general welfare of society. The temporarily release and the free reign of normally suppressed ideas, however, are not restricted to the agrarian societies described here. Especially in Asia’s island past, when the open expression of sexuality was quite constrained, the arts seem to have been a welcome solution to the expression of otherwise disallowed passions. Here one can speak of a professional class of performers specialized in the art of seduction, truly turning ritual courtship into a performance.

**Professional seduction: courtesans and performing prostitutes**

In many Asian societies courtesans were important promoters of the higher arts, teaching noble young men to appreciate poetry and music and initiating them in etiquette and cultural aesthetics. Their salons and teahouses were places where men were entertained and could discuss topics that other women in society were hardly aware of.

It is important to point out that sexuality was often sublimated and erotic play and flirting did not necessarily lead to real sexual play. Those who misunderstood this often humped together all sorts of courtesans, depicting them uniformly as performing prostitutes. Not all performers were paid for sex, and if they did engage in sex, it was often by choice, their music and dance aiding their selection of a partner. In India, as Jalalda Bojharat describes (p.8), professional seductresses ranged from vulgar harlots and cheap dancer-prostitutes to the formerly highly-respected mujarwali. The last were professional performers, trained in music, dance and etiquette, who cleverly made and still make use of their audience’s expectations, performing seduction as seen through male eyes. Middle Eastern, Indian, and Chinese treatises on love recognize dance as one of the arts necessary to a woman that should cultivate to please her lover (Hanna 1988: 56). Men, however, wrote most of these treatises. In the case of mujarwali, choreographers and dance teachers were also mainly men, who dictated the way women should behave and move to depict seductiveness. This ‘male gaze’, as Bojharat writes, later reappears in many Bollywood movies devoted to courtesans: ‘Nevertheless, if in the movies the male gaze determines much of the action, in real life the courtesan knows how to play this male gaze to get what she wants.’

**Male versus female gaze and the third sex as seducers**

It is, however, not only female entertainers who seduce, as Alkico Takeyama shows in her contribution (p.9) on today’s male host clubs in Tokyo. To perform as seductive men, hosts stye all aspects of their appearance and bodily movements to live up to the fantasies of their female clients. According to one female informant: ‘I also perform as if they boldly apparel my host so as to heighten the romantic mood and feeling of intimacy. In that way, he treats me even more specially. Performed seduction or performance as seduction – the boundaries tend to blur, but what they have in common is that once sensual fantasies take over, people are easily persuaded into other things, in this case ordering another bottle of expensive liquor, which will gradually be brought to the table by the male host.

In many Asian societies the third sex was thought to have qualities that enabled them to seduce in ways that ordinary males or females could never manage. In Indonesian theatre, transvestites often personify fantasies of the other sex, using sexual parody and erotic gestures that ordinary people would not get away with. Another example of performing transvestites is the Indian community of self-confessed eunuchs known as hijra. Most hijras specialize in song and dance and act in sexually provocative ways, dancing in public, using coarse and abusive speech and gestures, and lifting their skirts to expose mutilated genitals when their authenticity is challenged.

is a sexy voice a biological given or a play upon cultural expectations?

Biological assets aside, much of the idea of what is seductive is determined by culture. Our response to sexual stimuli depends on our environment and our culture. During the last ice age, to get away with. Another example of performing transvestites is the Indian community of self-confessed eunuchs known as hijra. Most hijras specialize in song and dance and act in sexually provocative ways, dancing in public, using coarse and abusive speech and gestures, and lifting their skirts to expose mutilated genitals when their authenticity is challenged.

web-cam courtesans and new mobile media are fertile ground for today’s arts of seduction

gests that whereas visual factors in the mate-selection process are well-known, often studied and exploited in the arts, the seductive aural stimulus of the human voice should receive equal attention. Van der Meer describes how Indian singers such as Kishori Amonkar and Lata Mageshkar might be seen as evolutionary ‘mutants’ mastering their voice in skilful and subtle ways that deeply affect the listener.

Biological assets aside, much of the idea of what is seductive seems to be culturally determined. Judith Lynne Hanna clearly summarises this idea in her 1988 book Dance, Sex and Gender: ‘Nonhuman animals’ drive to reproduce stimulates the dramatic and colourful ritualised movement displays that are referred to as “mating dances”. Similarly, the impulse for dance among humans may be reproductive, but it is mediated by culture. ‘Our response to sexual stimuli depends on our environment and our culture. During the last ice age, to get away with. Another example of performing transvestites is the Indian community of self-confessed eunuchs known as hijra. Most hijras specialize in song and dance and act in sexually provocative ways, dancing in public, using coarse and abusive speech and gestures, and lifting their skirts to expose mutilated genitals when their authenticity is challenged.

Tokyo’s Kabukicho, the world’s largest red-light district

Photographs: Matt Abar
The art of seduction has become yet another trendy pastime for western housewives looking to seduce their husbands. The introduction of new grassroots media and inexpensive information technologies have led to mass seduction on an unimaginable scale, as illustrated by two recent media hypes. In Indonesia the influx of cheap Video CD (VCD) technology has done much to change the existing media landscape. One of the unforeseen effects has been a resurgence of pornographic imagery — ranging from student-made amateur movies to a VCD containing a sexually explicit recording of a live dance performance in a Balinese village called joged humbug (often translated as ‘porno dance’). The popular dangdut singer Inul, however, is a better example of what the modern day art of seduction can bring us. Inul Daratista, from Pasuruan, east Java, then 24 years old, taught gymnastics before becoming a pop singer. She had been popular for some time among lower social strata when the illegal distribution of an amateur VCD showing her erotic up and downward movements suddenly rocketed her to national-wide fame in 2000. Her dance-style was soon compared to that of a drill, giving her dance the nickname ‘bung buncit’ (passed down). The Elderly nostalgically remember the Malay repartee songs, of village feasts. Courtesans are now a popular topic for many local narratives of Asia’s post-colonial societies, or have otherwise been brought into conformity with a new moral climate fuelled by competition over the interpretation of religion.

In Thailand, male to female transgender is generally accepted by society. Kathoey or effeminate men are sometimes lectures in the Anthropology Department of Leiden University. Male to female transgender is thought to have qualities enabling them to seduce in ways ordinary males or females could never manage. 

My own description of narsiat – Islamic boy-band music in Southeast Asia (p.10) – seems to be the antithesis to many of the arts discussed thus far, as it is seemingly the art of seduction. Especially in religious contexts, seduction has more often than not been negatively valued and equated with sin and immorality. With their moral behaviour, clean-cut appearance and lyrics that stress there is no love other than God’s, narsiat bands seem to have little in common with their western counterparts. At the same time, the moral messages conveyed do seem to be yet another form of the persuasion that music is so well-known for. The success of this Islamic pop music has thus far led to only a few female pop groups: Islamic hardliners fear the perils of the female voice, in which the fear of seduction is a key argument. The transformation of the art of seduction, however, is due not only to changing norms or a new moral climate, but also to new ways of mediating it.

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The art of seduction has become yet another trendy pastime for western housewives looking to seduce their husbands. The introduction of new grassroots media and inexpensive information technologies have led to mass seduction on an unimaginable scale, as illustrated by two recent media hypes. In Indonesia the influx of cheap Video CD (VCD) technology has done much to change the existing media landscape. One of the unforeseen effects has been a resurgence of pornographic imagery — ranging from student-made amateur movies to a VCD containing a sexually explicit recording of a live dance performance in a Balinese village called joged humbug (often translated as ‘porno dance’). The popular dangdut singer Inul, however, is a better example of what the modern day art of seduction can bring us. Inul Daratista, from Pasuruan, east Java, then 24 years old, taught gymnastics before becoming a pop singer. She had been popular for some time among lower social strata when the illegal distribution of an amateur VCD showing her erotic up and downward movements suddenly rocketed her to national-wide fame in 2000. Her dance-style was soon compared to that of a drill, giving her the title of Ratu Ngeboe, Queen of Drill Dance. Ever since, Indonesians have been divided into pro or contra Inul camps. In a similar way, Furing Jirin, or Hijicansister, recently shot to fame when seductively-posed photographs were posted on the bulletin boards of two of China’s most prestigious university campuses. Hijicansister (or Lotus Flower as she prefers), in an interview with the South China Morning Post on the media ban of her weblog, laughed at the idea of being a threat to oficaldom – ‘I just wanted to dance, and sing and write heartfelt, meaningful prose.’ This example makes clear how otherwise familiar strategies for seduction have found new space on the internet.

Many of the essays collected in this issue’s theme build upon contributions to the ‘Music and the Art of Seduction’ conference, which brought an international group of musicologists, social scientists, scholars of literature and biologists to Amsterdam in May 2005. The conference was organized by the Bake Society for Ethnomusicology and the Department of Music Studies of the University of Amsterdam. For more information please see the website of the Bake Society, www.abake.nl. Frank Kouwenhoven and Wim van der Meer are presently editing a book on Music and the Art of Seduction in various cultures worldwide, which will contain some of the contributions to the Amsterdam Conference.