

Iranian Culture



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Introduction to Persian Traditional Music

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The music of Iran has changed considerably in the past 25 years, which incidentally is the period of the Islamic Revolution and the establishment of theocracy in Iran.

It is an open question whether Iranian music has changed as a direct result of the Revolution, or whether the music would have evolved similarly in any case. Before 1979, one could easily have separated Persian music into two distinct categories: art music and pop music. The strong censorship practiced before the Revolution required the music to be void of any political messages, and most of the time pop music was the form presented on The National Radio and Television of Iran. Broadcasts of traditional music performances usually ran no longer than 15 minutes. This restriction was established by the producers and had the effect of cramping the music and its form.

One can compare traditional Persian music to the classical music of the West, which one should listen to from the beginning to the end with full attention. This form of Iranian music is based on improvisation and has a very inward quality. The sentiments of Persian music are personal and introspective. Some argue that this quality is the result of the many invasions of Persia, two of which were by Alexander in 330 BC and by the Arabs in the 7th century. Compared to the West, the traditional instruments of Iran are small and soft-sounding. Some believe that this evolution resulted from the ban of music in Islam, especially by the Shi'ite branch which became the main religion of Iran after the Arab invasion.

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The Influence of Islam

We have very few documents on the music of Iran before Islam; however, it is clear that Persian music and culture has influenced and been influenced by those of Greece, the Arab world, and India as well as other neighboring countries. After Islam was established in Iran, the status of the musicians often depended on the views of the religious leader or king of that era. While the

the views of the religious leader or king of that era. While the music and culture of the old Persian empire deeply influenced and enriched the life of the Arab countries, musicians themselves were faced with condescension from Islamic society and often persecution from the government. Musical practices did not have any continuity during long periods of time and one of the most socially comfortable and accepted forms of music was singing the verses of the Quran (Koran) without any instrumental accompaniment. Many believe that this is one of the reasons why the vocal repertoire became the core element of traditional Persian music.

The Marriage of Melody with Poetry

Currently this body of melodies is preserved based upon the secular poetry of great Persian poets such as Omar Khayam (10th Century), Hafez (13th century), and Mowlana (also known as Rumi, 1207-1273). Poetry is one of the most loved and developed art forms of Iran. It is not only a high art, but also is used as an everyday tool for communication among people. Our lives, as well as our music, are deeply affected by it. In the case of music this effect is not only emotional but structural-- often the poem will influence the rhythm and form of the music. The content of the poetry is often about unrequited love and sometimes one wonders if the singer is talking about a human being, a society, God, or the music itself.

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Radif - the foundation of skilled improvisation

As mentioned above, improvisation is one of the most important tenets of Persian traditional music; however, this should not be confused with the free improvisation practiced mostly in jazz in the West. Improvisation in Persian music involves many rules and the musician needs to learn and internalize the complete body of the ancient melodies. This complete repertory together with its hierarchical classifications and functional definitions of its melodies is called the Radif. Unlike Indian traditional music, where a performance is usually in a single mode, in Persian traditional music one can use many different modes. Radif, which literally means 'sequence', lays out the relationship and ways to modulate among its modes (microtonal tetrachords). Mirza Abdollah (b. 1843) was the first person to organize the various melodies of the Radif in its modern form.

Up to about a hundred years ago, the Radif was preserved solely through oral tradition, passed directly from master to student.

Much of the development of the music was either at the court of the kings or by the solitary work of few musicians. Generally speaking, the common people would never get a chance to attend a concert.

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Popularization and return to roots

Concerts in Iran have gradually become more common and accessible to the general public. This evolution has had a direct effect on the form of Persian music. Gholam-Hossein Darvish (1876-1927), also known as Darvish-Khan, was one of the first musicians to develop a definite form for concert performances. Influenced by his training in France, Alinaghi Vaziri (b. 1886) was the first person to transcribe the complete Radif of Mirza Abdollah.

Since the early 1900s, music education in Iran has gone through many phases. For a long time the fascination with the western culture caused the musicians to lose their contact with the roots of the tradition-- to the point that even some instruments were to be forgotten, such as the kamancheh in favor of the violin. However, the young generation of 1970s, perhaps due to the teaching of their masters, paid much closer attention to the roots of the traditional music as well as the folk music of the various regions of Iran. Their music sounded not only very traditional but in certain ways bold and full of energy. Among these contemporary musicians one can name Mohammad Reza Lotfi, Hossein Alizadeh, Parviz Meshkati, and Mohammad Reza Shajarian. Among the older masters, whose recordings are still available, one should also not forget Ahmad Ebadi, Hassan Kassai, Aliakbar Shahnazi, Gholam-Hossein Banan, Gholam-Hossein Bigchekhani, Jalil Shahnaz, and Asghar Bahari.

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After the 1979 Revolution

Some of the most beautiful contemporary works of Persian music were created during the late 70s and early 80s, which is right around the time of the Revolution of 1979. When the Islamic regime gained power in Iran, it started its own form of musical censorship. Even though Ayatollah Khomeini sent a Fatwa (religious call in Islam) that music should not be banned in Iran, still music has remained far from being a free entity. However, the greatest damage was done to the pop music whose production was immediately stopped; slowly, production of Iranian pop moved from Teheran to Los Angeles, where it thrives today. At first this change created a fertile ground for the already charged traditional music; the serious musicians in Iran filled with hope and energy started creating potent works and established educational organizations, such as the Chavosh Artistic and Cultural Foundation. The masses of Iran started paying more attention to traditional music and the number of the students of traditional instruments literally exploded.

However, the laws against music in general made it harder for the music to flourish with an intensity to match public interest. One of the most devastating rulings was the ban against women from producing musical works or performing as solo singers. Only recently have women gained the permission to give performances in concert halls in Iran, but can perform only for other women. To this day, the National Television of the Islamic regime does not show the image of an instrument and if they broadcast music, only the face of the instrumentalist is presented. In late 1996, following a Fatwa by Ayatollah Khamenei stating that music education corrupts the minds of young children, many music schools were closed and music instruction to children under the age of 16 was banned by public establishments (although private instruction continued). Every work to be produced still needs to be approved by the government even before it is recorded. The works are controlled for their lyrics as well as their musical content. While the restrictions on music in Iran have been relaxed recently, in the past 19 years, similar to the period of the Arab invasion, it has never enjoyed a comfortable existence.

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The emigration of many Iranians due to the Revolution gave Persian traditional musicians a reason to tour the world: partly to reach this audience, and partly to find a less restrictive atmosphere for expression. With the introduction of Persian music to the West, this music is gaining widespread appreciation.

Many of the Persian musicians are now touring the world as international figures in concert halls filled with passionate and knowledgeable listeners.

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Links and recommended recordings

If you would like to learn more about instruments of Persian traditional music you can visit

<http://www.kereshmeh.com/instruments.html>.

Among the musical compositions used in "Iran: Beyond The Veil" were excerpts from "Ney Nava" and "Song of Compassion" by Hossein Alizadeh, who is one of the most influential and progressive contemporary composers of Iran.

If you are interested in traditional Persian music and would like to hear more, here are a few suggestions:

The Abuata Concert by M.R. Shajarian and M.R. Lotfi on Kereshmeh Records, Los Angeles.

Alizadeh Live at the LA Festival improvisations on setar by Hossein Alizadeh on Kereshmeh Records, Los Angeles.

Bidad composed by Parviz Meshkatian, vocals by Mohammad Reza Shajarian on Al Sur, Paris.

Dawn by Parviz Meshkatian on Kereshmeh Records, Los Angeles.

Classical Vocal Art of Persia by Parisa on JVC, Los Angeles.

Hassan Kassai: Le Ney by Hassan Kassai on Playasound, Paris.

Music of Northern Khorassan by Sima Bina on Buda Records, Paris.

For an interesting collaboration between Persian and Indian musicians refer to **Ghazal** by Kayhan Kalhor, Shujaat Khan, and Swapan Chaudhuri on Shanachie, New Jersey.

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