

## **SUSPICIOUS SOUNDS<sup>1</sup>:** **Iranian Traditional Music in Lives of Iranians under the Ruling Islamic Regime**

### **Abstract**

This study explores the role of Iranian traditional music in lives of Iranians as influenced by the ruling Islamic regime as well as Islam. Questions: 1) What ties Iranian traditional music with lives of Iranians? 2) What is the role of Iranian traditional music in lives of Iranians since 1979? Participatory field research, literary research and reflections on own experiences are incorporated as methods. My interest in Iranian traditional music, which I have practiced since childhood in Iran, led me to conduct this research alongside my dissertation on santur.

### **Keywords**

Iranian traditional music; Radif; Maqam; Ghina; Mutrib

### **Foreword**

This work researches Iranian traditional music in lives of Iranians under the rule of the Islamic regime from 1979 to present. First, I will present the background, before the research questions and methods are provided. Then, the Islamic approach to music will be explained before discussing relevant events since the 1979 revolution. In the context of this writing, when addressing Iran, it is very important to note whether the people of the country are meant. Even though the country is officially called a republic (the *Islamic Republic<sup>2</sup> of Iran*), the regime is not to be confused with a democratic representation of the Iranian people. “The recurrence of widespread popular demonstrations [...] is a symptom of Iranian society’s radical estrangement from the ideology and the regime founded by Ayatollah Khomeini” (Boroumand 2020: 178). One conflict point between the regime and many people of Iran is Iranian traditional music.

### **Backgrounds**

Iran is a country in the Middle East, bordered by the Persian Gulf to the south and the Caspian Sea to the north, with Kurdish Iranians to the west and Baluch and Khorasani

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<sup>1</sup> “Music is haram, and there is no prohibition on suspicious sounds” (Khomeini 2013: 410).

<sup>2</sup> This title seems self-contradictory, according to Quran's opinion on democracy, mentioned in verse 6:116: “Wert thou to follow the common run of those on earth, they will lead thee away from the way of Allah” (Ali 2001: 377).

Iranians to the east. The Arab conquest of 632 was the beginning of the incorporation of Iran into Muslim territory. It took about two centuries for an Iranian kingdom to reappear in history. Iranian kingdom existed until the 1979 revolution, when an Islamic theocracy replaced monarchy.

What is referred to as *Iranian traditional music* here is the Iranian art music based on the *Radif* (“a repertory of roughly 270 short, mostly nonmetric pieces that musicians in Persian classical music memorize and that then serves as the basis for improvisation and composition” (Nettl 2009: 185)) and the treasure of Farsi literature and Iranian languages (Azadehfar 2011: 70). Originally, this music was centered in the courts of the Iranian kingdom, especially the royal court in Tehran, with intellectuals and the bourgeoisie being its target audience, although it gradually reached the commoner strata of Iranian society as well. This music is not part of Iranian folk music (which is often based on *maqams*).

My motivation for conducting this research is my decades of experience as an Iranian musician (santur player, educator, and composer) under the rule of the Islamic regime in Iran.

## **Research Questions**

- 1) What ties Iranian traditional music with lives of Iranians?
- 2) What is the role of Iranian traditional music in lives of Iranians since the 1979 revolution?

## **Methods**

As for the methods, participatory field research in the form of participant observation and expert interview formed the basis for this study. Most of these experts are based in Iran, while some live in the US and Germany. Whenever necessary, I also incorporated my personal experiences as an Iranian musician who was active in Iran as a santur player from 1988 to 2000 and as a santur player and composer in the Iranian diaspora since then, while always maintaining contact and connection with the Iranian traditional music scenes in Iran. In addition, I conducted literature research.

## **Islam and Music**

Islam's approach to music can be traced through the text of Quran and its interpretation by scholars of the religion, also Sirah and Sunnah (traditions that refer to the life of the Prophet, his confidants and successors, as holy figures of Islam) and Hadith (narratives about holy figures). Key referents rendering judgements on Islamic matters (including those on music) based on mentioned sources are the clerics<sup>3</sup>. In the entire text of the Quran, the word music is not mentioned. The Quran's judgment on music is assumed based on expert interpretations mainly referred to this verse:

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<sup>3</sup> In Shia Islam they have certain titles, one of the highest of which is Ayatollah.

“ومن الناس من يشتري لهو الحديث ليضل عن سبيل الله بغير علم ويتخذها هزواً أولئك لهم عذاب مهين” (The Quran 31:6). That translates<sup>4</sup> to: “But there are, among men, those who purchase idle tales [*lahw al-hadith*], without knowledge (or meaning), to mislead (men) from the Path of Allah and throw ridicule (on the Path): for such there will be a humiliating chastisement” (Ali 2001: 1211).

### Three Terms and One Notion

In this section, I draw attention to three Islamic terms associated with music: *lahw al-hadith*, *ghina*, and music of *mutrib*. I investigate any common musical attribute among them that might lead to an assessment of music as inappropriate from the perspective of Islam.

*Lahw al-hadith*, idle tales, is a reference apparently to music. The aforementioned verse was apparently revealed to Muhammad regarding Nadhr bin al-Harith who incorporated Iranian music and storytelling. “In the time of the holy Prophet there was a pagan Nadhr ibn al-Harith who preferred Persian romances to the Message of Allah, and turned away ignorant men from the preaching of Allah’s Word” (Ali 2001: 1211). Nadhr (killed A.D. 624) was a distinguished Arab man, as for instance when Muhammad began to obtain followers in Mecca, Meccans sent him as one of two trusted envoys to Jews of Yathrib (later Medina) to investigate whether Muhammad was a true prophet (Hirschfeld 1897: 100). He, a maternal cousin of Muhammad’s, was a physician and a prominent narrator and singer of Persian tales, who was familiar with the myth of Rostam and Esfandayr, for instance (Omidsalar 1984: 204). “He adopted the practice of trailing after the Prophet; whenever he saw the Prophet preaching to the people, he would start his own preaching session by saying “Muhammad tells you stories about the Jews,” referring to the Prophet’s narrations” (Omidsalar 1984: 211). “Al-Nadhr bin al-Harith from the tribe of Abd al-Dar said: This Quran is nothing but lies that Muhammd himself has forged [...]. Al-Nadhr alleged that Muhammad [...] was helped by Addas, a slave of al-Huwaytib bin Abd al-Izza, Yasar, a servant of Amir bin al-Hadrami as well as Jabr, also a servant of Amir bin al-Hadrami; he used to be a Jew but then embraced Islam<sup>5</sup>” (bin Sulayman 1989: 226). The word ‘mislead’ in the context mentioned by the Quran denotes that music could divert the listener’s attention from the Quran and distract the recruitment of potential Muslims. Music “competes and sometimes draws attention from Allah and Islam” (Otterbeck 2004: 15). This is apparently why Allah does not want such musicians to be active, or else they would suffer a humiliating punishment. After the Badr Battle, Nadhr was beheaded by another of the Prophet’s cousins Ali (later the fourth of the Rashidun Caliphs and the first Imam of Shia), after an execution order by Muhammed (Thomas 2002: 92).

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<sup>4</sup> After comparing various translations, I chose using Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s prominent English translations, appearing closer to the Arabic original.

<sup>5</sup> The English translation is provided by S. Z. Chowdhury (Chowdhury 2009: 4), in the absence of a published English translation of bin Sulayman’s book.



Figure 1: An Ottoman Painting  
 “Ali Beheading Nadhr bin al-Harith in the Presence of the Prophet Muhammad”  
 (Abdullah 1594)

Another term is غناء (reads *ghina* or *ghena*), which refers to the music forbidden by Islam. Historically, it has also been a reference to music in general: “In a somewhat more consistent contradiction, there was an active outcry against music (*ghinā'*) from multiple Shi'a clerics of the Safavid Empire. Indeed, these writings demonstrate a high degree of moral disapproval for music” (Lucas 2019: 84). Apparently, this term is concerned with rhythmic structures of vocal pieces, while also having applications beyond that. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei writes in his treatise that: “Ghina (in Arabic الغناء), is attributed to the voice of a human being produced in an undulating pattern<sup>6</sup> in order to create the effect of rapture which is appropriate for gatherings of merrymaking and sin. This is haram (forbidden) to engage in this kind of singing; in addition to listen to it” (Khamenei 2009). Another recent interpretation of ghina by Khamenei covers a broader spectrum: it can also apply to non-merrymaker music pieces (Khamenei 2020: 214). Ghina could also apply to instrumental (non-vocal) pieces. Khomeini commented on Ghena in a 1964 writing as follows: “Ghena is not only beautiful applying of voice. It is as well extending the voice and applying refrains in it in a cheerful way, in accordance with sessions of playing and cheerfulness. And in this respect there is no difference if that is applied to any righteous word such as the Quran or prayer or holly memoriums etc. either as poetry or prose. Indeed if it is applied to a vehicle of worshipping God, its punishment would be stronger” (Khomeini 2010: 203).

In his treatise, Khomeini assumes the music of *mutrib* (or *motreb*, among other

<sup>6</sup> In music theory terms, this statement seems suggestive of vocal music with consistent meter, such as a lied or folk song, which could also accommodate recurring body movements, such as dancing: clearly something that might stimulate collective rejoicing.

romanizations) haram: “Music of mutrib is haram” (Khomeini 2013: 411)<sup>7</sup>. Mutrib (مطرب) is an agent noun in Arabic language from the act of tarab (طرب). Tarab means “be agitated in emotion; be delighted; be in festive mood, celebrate a feast; sing or make music; wander (from the road)” (Steingass 2005: 630). It can simply refer to a minstrel: “Motreb, a word of Arabic origin meaning ‘one who gladdens or makes happy,’ refers to public entertainers who variously and in combination acted, played musical instruments, sang, and danced. Historically such a category of performers dates back at least to the fourteenth century [...]. These entertainers were linguistically and conceptually set apart from the serious musicians of the court” (Shay 2000: 85). “*Motrebs* also played a significant role in offering entertainment in the first half of the twentieth century, often appearing by contract at private celebrations” (Siamdoust 2017: 299).

I gather that the three terms refer to music performed to entertain, suggesting a festive association. Assuming that the Quranic concept of lahv al-hadith probably refers primarily to Iranian music, and that also the other two terms could have a connotation of Iranian music, it is important to explore what attribute in Iranian music might sound festive to the ears of the authorities of Islam. Ghina addresses the rhythmic aspect of vocal music in particular, which typically involves lyrics. Also lahv al-hadith is associated with [Persian] tales, probably in a lyrical form such as poetry. A major part of classical Persian poetry consists of prosodies suggesting rhythmic cycles of six<sup>8</sup>. Also if mutrib music, encouraging celebrations, might include dance music, this would also indicate rhythms of six, as Iranian music's festive form, called *reng*, also often follows divisions of six, generally referred to by Iranian musicians as 6/8. Considering this common rhythmic notion among the three terms, also that certain rhythmic behaviors lead to forbidden music according to experts of Islam, it could be deduced that Islam is critical of Iranian 6/8.

### Opinions of Key Figures of Islam

It is cited from Muhammad that:

«كان إبليس أول من تَعَنَّى»

“Devil was the first who made music”

(Amili 1983: 231).

He is also<sup>9</sup> quoted saying:

«أَنَّ اللَّهَ بَعَثَنِي رَحْمَةً لِلْعَالَمِينَ وَ لِأَمْحَقِّ الْمَعَازِفِ وَالْمَزَامِيرِ»

“Certainly Allah sent me as a blessing to the existence, and to destroy musical instruments”

(Majlesi 1983: 250).

<sup>7</sup> (Khomeini 2013: 411). “موسيقى مطرب حرام است”

<sup>8</sup> Poets of Farsi poetry traditionally interpret prosody using syllabic manifestations called *aruz*. After analyzing dozens of examples, I realized that almost all of them were interpretable as configurations of 6 rhythms.

<sup>9</sup> These two books are among most important hadith references in Shia Islam.

Amili mentions from Imam Baghir, a Muhammad's offspring and reference figure to Shia Muslims, that: "He [Imam Baghir] said that ghina is among what Allah has promised to punish with hellfire, and then recited this verse: 'Among the people is he who trades in distracting tales' [The Quran 31: 6<sup>10</sup>]" (Amili 1983: 226).

From another significant figure of Islam, Imam Sadiq, there is following quotation, cited by both Shia and Sunni major hadith references: "The house of music (and singing) is not safe from tragedy, prayers are not accepted and angels do not enter in it" (Kulayni 2013: 574 and Nu'man 1965: 208). "A number of our people have narrated [...] from Ishaq ibn Jarir [...]: "I once heard abu 'Abd Allah, 'Alayhi al-Salam, saying, 'There is Satan called al-Qafandar. If barbat (a musical instrument) is played in a house for forty days and men come to him then that Satan places every part of his body on every part of the body of the owner of the house, then blows a blow; and thereafter he will not mind even if people go in on to his women'" (Kulayni 2013: 574). "I once heard abu 'Abd Allah, 'Alayhi al-Salam, saying, 'Playing 'Ud (a certain musical instrument) grows hypocrisy just as water grows green plants" (Kulayni 2013: 575). "Music (and singing) is of such things for which Allah, most Majestic, most Glorious, has warned with punishment in the fire" (Kulayni 2013: 572).

### Since 1979

Islam seems to still be addressing public as it did in early Islamic centuries. "In common with other Islamists, Khomeini claimed that the Koran, Islam's holy book, and the Sunnah, its prophetic traditions, are sources for comprehensive legislation that is directly applicable to all human societies at all times. [...] Khomeini denied Iranian national identity, preferring to replace it with the Islamic concept of the *ummah*, the transnational community of believers" (Boroumand 2020: 170). As for the case of music, such sacred recommendations as the following are still used as guidelines: "Ali ibn Ibrahim has narrated [...]: "Once I was with abu 'Abd Allah [...] when a man said, 'I pray to Allah to keep my soul and the souls of my parents in service for your cause, I enter my WC (water-closet) and I have neighbors who have singing slave-girls who play musical instruments and perhaps I sit longer, listening to them'. He (the Imam) said, 'You must not do so'" (Kulayni 2013: 573).

Khomeini ruled that: "Music is haram, and there is no prohibition on suspicious sounds<sup>11</sup>" (Khomeini 2013: 410). This fatwa apparently assumes that music generally falls under the prohibited category unless one could not say with certainty (or would be suspicious) whether it exhibits the defined characteristics of prohibited music. An implication of ghina, as mentioned earlier, is tied to the measurable recurring rhythm of music, probably what

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<sup>10</sup> This Quranic verse was mentioned earlier.

<sup>11</sup> This English translation is mine, as this was only available in Farsi: "موسیقی حرام است و صداهای مشکوک مانع ندارد" (Khomeini 2013: 410). In the book, this is mentioned under question number 12066.

Khamenei, the current head of the regime, has referred to as rise and fall: “Ghinā’ involves the rise and fall of the voice in a way that is lahwī<sup>12</sup> and deviates people from the way of Allah. It is a sinful act, which is ḥarām for both the singer and the listener. As for music, it is to play musical instruments. If it is done in a way that is lahwī and deviates people from the way of Allah, it is ḥarām for both the musician and the listener. Otherwise, it is permissible in itself and there is no objection to it” (Khamenei 2023). Consequently, according to Khomeini's fatwa, music that follows a free rhythm would fall into the category of suspicious sounds. Iranian traditional music mainly deals with free rhythmic structures rather than following constant time signatures: “[...] the avaz is the basic style and the main body of Persian music. The measured sections [...] may be considered rather to offset the major part, in the flexible rubato rhythm” (Tsuge 1970: 205). By its nature, Iranian traditional music would mostly fall under suspicious sounds.

“From the very beginning of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 up to the present time, music has been the subject of fierce political and religious debate in Iran. Its legal and social status has constantly been changing and continues to do so, and it is still the object of various restrictions and threats” (Youssefzadeh 2000: 35). When the regime was established, “through a complex course of events, it transformed Iran from a constitutional monarchy to a theocratic republic based on Shar’iā law” (Rastovac 2009: 276). The regime's ideology is that of the Twelver Shia branch of Islam. Central to it is that after Muhammad, his twelve descendants are his rightful successors, the last of whom is still alive, disappeared in a well at a young age in 874 A.D. and will one day reappear as savior, with Jesus (Shenk 2009: 120) being one of his 313 companions (Tahir-ul-Qadri 2003: 25). They will ensure through bloody battles that Islam dominates the whole world and rules until the Day of Judgment. “This matter (the appearance of the Mahdi) will not be realized unless two-thirds of the people perish” (Tusi 2008: 591). According to this belief, a *faqih*<sup>13</sup> must be in charge of the nation of Islam until resurgence of the savior (Rosset 2011: 6).

After revolution, most of the millennia-old musical traditions of Iran<sup>14</sup> were banned. Only a few music genres, including military and religious music, were allowed, perhaps in an effort to keep the Iranian people halfway surviving, especially during the war (Naderi 2023). “A certain amount of musical activity, mainly in the service of the state’s ideological promotion, is being encouraged. All other activity is suppressed” (Farhat 2004: 6). “Music can be seen as

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<sup>12</sup> This refers to the first Quranic citation used here.

<sup>13</sup> “A *faqih* is an adept in Islamic law. Khomeini declared that God has designated the highest-ranking *faqih* to act as the successor to Muhammad [...] in all matters [...]. The absolute supremacy of the Islamic jurisprudent is the basis for the office of supreme leader [...] that by definition demotes citizens to the status of minors [...]. Khomeini was its first incumbent” (Boroumand 2020: 170).

<sup>14</sup> “An illustration found on pottery at the ancient Chogha Mish excavation site on the Susiana Plain, in western Iran, shows what is believed to be the oldest image of a concert, dating back to about five and a half thousand years ago” (Siamdoust 2017: 292).

a part of a Western, and sometimes specifically North American, cultural imperialism” (Otterbeck 2004: 15). Such views contributed to younger Iranian generations becoming more curious about culture and music of the West: “The santur would no longer satisfy me. It is diatonic. I desperately needed a chromatic instrument” (Noipour 2021). Some other genres of music, like the music played in Iranian cafes and bars (with roots in Iranian music but focusing on ceremonies and dancing), were considered evidences of ghina and therefore banned. “In seeking to establish control through promoting Islamic values, the theocracy [...] began life by legislating against a wide range of musical activities, from public concerts to music classes” (Nooshin 2005: 238). The regime has consistently sought to Islamize the arts, as even reflected in the title of the responsible ministry<sup>15</sup>, where the word arts has been replaced for Islamic guidance (Aramesh(Masoud) 2021). Meanwhile, music seems to have continued to play a prominent role in lives of Iranians<sup>16</sup>, even those inclined to the regime to various degrees (Aramesh(Masoud) 2021 and Fallah 2021), to the extent that performance, pedagogy and instrument making have remained common practices.

### Khomeini on Music

In Khomeini’s judgment, music is worthless and should be avoided. “A transaction is void in several situations. First, buying and selling the substance of unclean such as urine and stool and intoxicants [...]. Fourth, dealings which involve those things whose usual benefits are unlawful such as instruments of gambling and music” (Khomeini 2018: 269-270). Based on this, music must be kept out of the media as much as possible. He was aware of the power of radio and television. “Domestic Television was clearly stated to be the main channel through which the respondents access their political news” (Seyed-Emami 2008: 61). He was determined to limit them to serving his regime’s agenda. “In Iran, television is controlled by the supreme leader and, according to the Islamic Republic’s Constitution, must be used as a tool to ‘serve the diffusion of Islamic culture’” (Khiabani 2008: 29). In his speech on July 19, 1979 for employees of radio and television, Khomeini expressed: “If you are interested in Islam and the country, [...] reform this organization. [...] Don’t be ‘West-struck’ to necessarily broadcast music in pauses between this news and that news. [...] Make a different arrangement [...]. Make the news longer. Come up with something to interrupt the music. Don’t assume that music is something for an advanced country. Music is ruining our children’s mentality. It corrupts brains of our children. If a young person always has music in the ears, that young person can no longer work or think seriously”<sup>17</sup> (Khomeini 2010: 157).

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<sup>15</sup> The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance

<sup>16</sup> “My serious engagement [with Iranian music] began in 1986, as I spontaneously stroked the strings of my uncle's santur to celebrate the turn of the Iranian year” (Aramesh(Masoud) 2021).

<sup>17</sup> The English is mine, as I found only the original Farsi:

“اگر شما علاقه دارید به اسلام، علاقه دارید به کشور، علاقه دارید به ملت خودتان، [...] این دستگاه را اصلاحش کنید؛ [...] غرب زده نباشید، که حتماً باید بین این خبر و این خبر، موسیقی باشد، [...] یک طرح دیگری درست کنید [...] اخبار را زیادترش کنید، یک کارهایی بکنید که موسیقی را ترکش کنید. شما خیال نکنید که موسیقی



## Khamenei on Music

Khamenei's rule, following Khomeini's death in 1989, has not changed much in the status of music. State television almost never shows instruments. Khamenei mentioned: "Promotion of music is not congenial to the grand goals of the holy Islamic system"<sup>18</sup> (Khamenei 2009). His administrations have sought to enforce his views on music. A recent quote from a cleric member of parliament reads: "Availability or unavailability of sunglasses and musical instruments makes no difference in people's lives. [...] If some are after musical instruments or their personal desires, there are other countries. They can leave Iran"<sup>19</sup> (Mousavi 2021).

## **Social Aspects of Iranian Music under the Islamic Regime**

### Music as a Protest Tool

The regime considers practicing music as protest, even if musicians would not intention to use their craft as protest. If a performance attracts a crowd, the regime might interpret it as a threat. For example, the Lian Ensemble was ordered to provide clarifications after audience members, including women who had removed their compulsory headscarves, began singing and dancing during a performance on June 14, 2023 at the Vahdat Hall in Tehran (Lian Ensemble 2023).

Censorship of music began immediately after the regime assumed power. On February 1, 1979, minutes after Khomeini landed in Tehran, he stopped to give his first speech after arriving. As the crowd started applauding after a segment of his address (close to minute twenty-two into the speech in uncensored versions), the circle around him pointed the people to stop clapping and instead shout Allahuakbar (Khomeini 2020). The ban on female singing followed soon after<sup>20</sup>. "I didn't know women could not sing on stage in Iran. I sang [during performing Hungarian cimbalom in Tehran in 2022]. It was a big revolution. The wife of Hossein Malek [(1924-1999)] was a singer, and said afterwards that what I [(Viktória Herencsár)] did was very good for the Iranian women. After this case she gave me his last made santur" (Herencsár 2021). Gradually, almost all types of music were banned. To date,

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یک چیزی است برای یک مملکت مترقی. موسیقی خراب می کند دماغ بچه های ما را؛ مغز بچه های ما را فاسد می کند. دائماً تو گوش یک جوان موسیقی باشد، این دیگر به کار نمی رسد؛ این دیگر نمی تواند فکر جدی بکند."

<sup>18</sup> The English translation is mine, from the Farsi original under question 1145 in the chapter on music: "ترویج موسیقی با اهداف عالییه نظام مقدس اسلامی سازگار نیست".

<sup>19</sup> The English translation is mine, of this original Farsi: "عینک افتابی و یا آلات موسیقی باشد یا نباشد [...] اگر افرادی که به دنبال آلات موسیقی یا امیال شخصی خودشان هستند، هیچ تفاوتی در زندگی مردم ایجاد نمی کند. [...] کشور های دیگر هستند می توانند از ایران بروند".

<sup>20</sup> That is still the case.

the regime has not succeeded in stopping activities of Iranian traditional music. More and more people have shown interest in engaging in it partly because, next to usual reasons, they mean to express their opposition. Even clapping has gradually become a sign of protest against the regime. During months of unrest in 2023, nearly all accounts of protests show people clapping hands and chanting. Also instruments of Iranian music found their ways among protesters, even in demonstrations outside Iran<sup>21</sup>.

### Popularity

After revolution, Iranian traditional music survived in homes of Iranians while serious competitors were censored. This could partly be due to the highly improvisational nature of this music. New pop songs, for example, rely on active songwriters. Without these creators, there would be no new song to take the life of this music to a new level. Iranian traditional music, however, is based on improvisation. It is also inextricably linked to structures of the language, for example in terms of rhythm. “Language, land, and a shared memory seem to suffice for most discussions on cultural identity” (Foltz 2016: xii). Some mechanisms have protected Iranian traditional music and contributed to its popularity in times of financial and socio-political difficulties, especially after revolution. I see them in two main categories: interchangeability of genres and confidentiality.

Confidentiality of musical activities after 1979 reached such proportions as to utilize people's homes as performance venues, teaching studios and luthier workshops. In the lack of official stages, most common venues for presentations of Iranian music became people's homes, where wedding celebrations with live music could also be held<sup>22</sup>. After the revolution, amateur performances became more popular than before, with the public consisting mainly of family and friends of artists, many of whom probably attended pop concerts before the revolution<sup>23</sup>. For years, Iranian music lessons also took place almost exclusively in private homes<sup>24</sup>. Many instrument makers also started making instruments at home, some originally for family members (Memarzadeh 2020). All these activities contributed to the widespread possession of Iranian instruments. It is still very common for Iranian households to own Iranian instruments, even though there may not be a professional or amateur player living

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<sup>21</sup> I witnessed a santur player performing protest songs during a rally in front of the United Nations headquarters in Vienna on November 17, 2023.

<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile parties are traditionally not considered very appropriate occasions for performing Iranian traditional music (Safdari 2020), perhaps due to Iranian traditional music not being considered light music.

<sup>23</sup> I remember such private amateur events in Tehran in mid-1980s. Usually someone from the crowd (i.e. a cousin or a sister) would contribute to the dance. I recall one case where the player sat at the wrong side of the santur and played.

<sup>24</sup> My santur lessons took place at my family's home. Neighbor kids also took lessons at homes.

there. One strategy to support pervasive presence of instruments has been keeping prices of Iranian instruments affordable, sometimes even at the expense of instrument makers' sacrifice: "Sometimes I give away [my built] instruments for free" (Fallah 2021). Moreover, supplying instruments has grown away from commercial shops<sup>25</sup>. It is common that instruments are bought directly from makers. Better-known makers in particular often have no stores. They offer instruments to order, being very selective about clients, including teachers seeking instruments for students<sup>26</sup>.

Partly due to availability, Iranian music has engaged in other genres. Iranian instruments have served also as instruments of musics such as pop, folk and Western classical<sup>27</sup>. There has also been a reverse phenomenon. Some experts of folk music and other genres engaged in Iranian traditional music since their original genres were less active due to socio-political strains. For example, some masters of folk music made instruments of Iranian traditional music to earn living<sup>28</sup>. In the absence of musical genres suitable for dancing, such as Iranian pop music, more dance pieces were used in Iranian traditional music after revolution, for example through the use of the aforementioned form reng. While discussing interchangeability of genres, it is important to consider the level of professionalism of musicians. Amateur musicians, as the majority of musicians in Iran, tend having an easier time with pop and folk pieces than with Iranian traditional music<sup>29</sup> due to limited improvisation skills. It seems that composition plays a somewhat stronger role than improvisation in the performances after revolution (Kamkar 2021). "I come from a notation generation in which composition was more significant than improvisation. Role models were composers" (Noipour 2021).

### Influences of Technology

With growing number of amateur musicians since 1979, use of tuners originally designed for Western tunings also has increased. Especially for intervals smaller than a half step, this would cause a variation from traditional tunings. Experienced musicians traditionally apply their personal preferences in tuning them, allowing for flexibility of a few cents. "My teacher tuned my santur to his ear. After ten years, my microtones were calibrated in accordance with that" (Bashash 2020). Use of tuners by amateurs would inevitably lead to some level of tuning uniformity, so that frequencies not exactly matching tuners' specifications could disadvantageously go out of fashion. Another effect of tuners is their increasing of tuning

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<sup>25</sup> I bought my first setar in 1998 from a vendor in Tehran, who walked around with instruments on his back.

<sup>26</sup> See the section on my personal experience.

<sup>27</sup> Consequently, some traditional tunings, especially those containing microtonal intervals, have receded under the heavy shadow of Western well temperament.

<sup>28</sup> See the section on my personal experience.

<sup>29</sup> This has also led to certain instrument models coming into fashion. For instance, larger santurs (such as 11-bridge models) have become fashionable in recent years (Fallah 2021).

accuracy on two levels: frequency precision for each pitch, and unison precision for doubled strings (on instruments with more than one string responsible for a pitch). These have led instruments to sound different: “Some santurs today sound almost digital. Tunings are applied so precisely that it is sometime difficult to recognize the santur character in the sound” (Noipour 2021). Using this type of sound is sometimes referred to, sarcastically, as ‘electronic performance’ (Fallah 2021).

Especially after revolution, traditional instruments have been reworked through involvement of technology. For instance, when Iranian instruments began to appear in non-traditional settings, such as next to synthesizers that do not go out of tune and can get loud to mask traditional instruments, manufacturers experimented for example with stronger glues and heavier strings so instruments withstand higher string tensions and more stable tunings.



Figure 2: Santur and Synthesizer in East Azerbaijan Province of Iran  
(Shot from a video provided in 2022, for Persian New Year, by Shahram Gholami-Gargari)

Most apps and websites for streaming music, such as Youtube, are not easily accessible in Iran due to censorship. Users have thus found enough reasons to redefine available platforms, such as Instagram, for music. Requirements of this app dictate that videos are kept short. This has influenced artistic productions (Kamkar 2021). Short Instagram posts, a staggering number of which are fed into the app every day, have to be engaging to the audience. Common features include a focus on virtuosity and hyper-accurate tunings. Many pieces are compositions. Music on social media seems particularly popular with younger generations.

### Iranian Music Overseas

After revolution, performance opportunities in Iran were abruptly restricted. Still today, musicians have to apply for permission from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance before performing<sup>30</sup>. “Even after being formally invited to perform at the festival, ensembles

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<sup>30</sup> 2019 was my last santur performance in Iran as part of a chamber program with a female singer. The only venue where we were able to play and be sure to avoid troubles from the regime was the Austrian embassy in Tehran.

still had to tailor their image, repertoire and modes of representation” (DeBano 2009: 236). It is nothing unusual for female musicians in an ensemble to be asked not to perform shortly before a performance<sup>31</sup>. Next to music bans also some musicians have been banned, like singer Mohammadreza Shajarian (1940-2020). Some musicians have managed finding ways onto international stages<sup>32</sup>. Some young Iranian musicians have used study opportunities abroad combining their knowledge of Iranian music with musics outside Iran. This has led to emergence of new techniques and styles in performance and composition<sup>33</sup>.

## My Personal Experience

In 1988, during final months of the Iraq-Iran war, Khomeini’s regime lifted the ban on music probably due to the pressure it felt (i.e. radio and television were not easily manageable without music<sup>34</sup>). A limited presence of music was permitted<sup>35</sup>. A couple of universities could include Iranian traditional music in their curricula again, while concerts were still prohibited frequently (Bashash 2020). Nevertheless, traditional communities dedicated to preserving traditions of Iranian music remained active in secret (Aramesh(Masoud) 2021). That was when my mother heard of a santur teacher. This was no ordinary event. It was not common to give or take music lessons openly. On December 28 I took my first lesson. It was briefly after the ceasefire and there were still evening blackouts<sup>36</sup>. We did not think that the door ringer would not work. Around five p.m. someone knocked on the window: a bearded tall man in his late twenties who had to jump over the wall of the house. He, Mahmoud Safdari, was a student of English literature at Tehran University who could not finish his studies due to

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<sup>31</sup> On numerous occasions ensemble musicians have refused performing out of protest in support of their banned female colleagues. “This is mainly due to the pressure exerted on them by the public” (Naderi 2023).

<sup>32</sup> It is often difficult for Iranians to obtain visas, due to politics of the regime. “After 1991 it got difficult to organize him visas, until he (Hossein Malek) passed away” (Herencsár 2021). Some countries, including USA, do not have consulates in Iran due to conflicts like regime’s 1979-1981 hostage-taking of diplomats.

<sup>33</sup> See my article *melodic (de)composition* for more details.

<sup>34</sup> Khomeini reports on his dispute regarding this with the head of radio and television Ghotbzadeh (executed later for treason) (Khomeini 2010: 157).

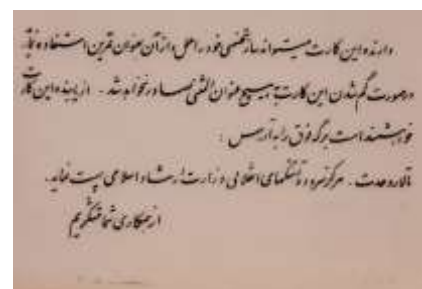
<sup>35</sup> That is while music never really got allowed so far (see Figure 4).

<sup>36</sup> I remember that especially in final months of the war there were power cuts in Tehran to block Saddam's bombers’ air views.

*Cultural Revolution*<sup>37</sup>. He joined the private santur studio of Faramarz Payvar (1933-2009). Our lessons continued for seven years, almost without interruption, on Tuesdays at five. I did not talk at school about my training, except with a few comrades also secretly practicing music. I later realized that this was a common story.

Mr. Safdari brought me a santur bearing no maker's name, carefully wrapped in newspaper so that it would not attract attention. It sounded different than what I had heard on recording. Its lower register had something snarling about it, like the sound of the qopuz, of Ashiqs (my ears were familiar with Azeri music, as my father is from Azerbaijan region of Iran). Decades later I realized that it was made by the renowned Ashiq Imran Heydari, who focused on Ashiq music until revolution and later also made santurs. As a santur maker he apparently introduced himself as Mr. Heydari, not Ashiq Imran, under which name he performed (Safdari 2020). Around 1989 my father and I thought of getting a case for this santur. We went to the old music shops neighborhood of Tehran, in Baharestan district. There was a small store still in operation, run by a Jewish Iranian named Jamshid. When I visited again in 2017 the employees there, now a towel shop, told me that Jamshid's store was long out of business and that his family probably immigrated to Israel.

Khomeini died few months after I started lessons. Khamenei's rule did not change much in the state of music. One could see how unsuccessful the official illegitimacy of music continued to prove, even among those affiliated with the regime. Here are two examples. My grandfather was a physician in a clinic headed by Ayatollah Nasrallah Shah-Abadi<sup>38</sup>. As he and his son visited our home around 1993, I noticed the son, in his twenties, being curious upon seeing our tombak. He asked his father if he could learn tombak. The ayatollah replied that it was haram. Earlier, around 1990, as my mother wanted to buy that instrument for my brother and me, the three of us arrived at the address and realized that it was the headquarters of the IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps). We hesitated whether the address was right. After asking for Sadreddini's name, it turned out correct. He came to us in uniform, carrying the instrument in a khaki bag, and handed it to my mother with utmost secrecy.



Figures 3a and 3b: Two sides of an instrument carrying permit from 1980's, issued by Ministry of Islamic Guidance (Aramesh(Mohsen) 2021)

<sup>37</sup> An agenda of the regime was to shut down universities to Islamicise them. Many students and professors were expelled. My father, who refused to start his chemistry lectures in the name of Allah, was among them.

<sup>38</sup> He became a member of the Assembly of Experts of the Leadership.

My early inspirations to learn santur were my father's gramophone recording of Payvar's santur and mother's encouragements. As she asked me if I wanted to learn santur, I did not know what it was. As I heard that recording, the crystal-sounding santur swept me away. Later I realized that Payvar's playing inspired many: "First my father played Payvar's Parnian recording to me. It sounded like crystals to me" (Noipour 2021). Also: "I first heard Payvar's santur on Golha program of the radio" (Aabyaar 2021), and "I used to listen to Payvar and Marzieh on the radio" (Safdari 2020). I did not have the option of choosing among instruments. I learned that others experienced similarly: "If tar would be available, I might have become a tar player instead" (Aramesh(Mohsen) 2021). Later, my parents got me to Ardavan Kamkar's performance. Tickets were hard to get<sup>39</sup>. It was among first permitted concerts, and my first concert visit, not knowing he would be my teacher later<sup>40</sup>. Those years I saw santur only once on TV: a war propaganda featuring a *hymn group*<sup>41</sup> from Abadeh, honoring an anonymous martyr of the *holy defense*<sup>42</sup>.



Figure 4: A student in 1993 preparing at her school to accompany a hymn group's performance on the santur (Naderi 2023)

<sup>39</sup> I remember long lines of enthusiasts outside concert halls waiting for tickets. Allowed number of tickets per purchaser was usually not more than two. Once in mid-1990s I queued up on the eve of a concert of Iranian music. It was in Tehran's winter, few degrees below zero. Some made bonfires to get through the night. All night people took roles to know if anyone was missing, whereupon the name would be removed and someone from waiting list would join. There was also a tickets black market. Those who did not have much money or were against the black market needed much effort and luck to earn tickets.

<sup>40</sup> The aforementioned concert series also inspired others my age to pursue music seriously: "Kamkar's performance was a reasons why I developed a strong interest in santur and becoming a musician" (Noipour 2021).

<sup>41</sup> This was the only type of musical ensemble existing in schools. A hymn group (گروه سرود) in Frasi, pronounced *goruh-e sorud*) was basically a group of school kids who posed like soldiers and sang hymns of the regime, often in honor of the war (Naderi 2023). Occasionally the ensemble was accompanied by a synthesizer, or an Iranian instrument like santur (Aramesh(Msoud) 2021 and Aramesh(Mohesen) 2021). "Musically, the *sorud* defers from all other forms of Iranian music: it is played in 2/4 and 4/4 rhythms and intended to be sung by groups, and it is often taught in school" (Shay 2000: 87).

<sup>42</sup> Regime's reference to the Iraq-Iran war

As I took entrance exams of universities in experimental sciences and music, I was admitted to both. Ardavan Kamkar advised me not to study music at university, but rather privately, reminding me that he and his colleagues would refuse teaching at regime's universities. After few months I immigrated to California to study composition.



Figure 5: Musicians live on IRIB TV in April 2023. Instruments are covered (Saltanatpour 2023)

## Conclusion

Iranian traditional music continues functioning as a fundamental element of Iranian culture, showing its various dimensions in the course of socio-political changes, reflecting the lives of Iranians. It has continually managed to keep thriving and flourishing despite (and sometimes from) the bans and censorship imposed by the Islamic regime.

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