

Santur-Playing Iranian-Americans in Northern California

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Contents and Pages

Abstract.....	2
I. Introduction.....	3
II. Backgrounds.....	4
III. Research Questions.....	6
IV. Methods.....	7
IV.I. Interview.....	8
IV.II. Listening Test.....	9
V. Introducing Participants.....	12
VI. Findings.....	14
VI.I. Social and Historical Facets.....	14
VI.I.I. A Sample Piece.....	18
VI.II. What Interviews Suggest.....	19
VI.III. What Listening Tests Suggest.....	23
VI.IV. Findings Based on the Collective Data.....	28
VI.IV.I. Community Aspects.....	28
VI.IV.II. Performance Approaches.....	33
VI.IV.III. Organological Aspects.....	34
VII. Conclusion.....	35
Appendix: Video Samples of Santur Practice in Northern California.....	36
Glossary.....	37
References.....	38
Biographical Statement.....	40

Abstract:

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Roozbeh Nafisi

This paper, emphasizing on diaspora discourse in ethnomusicology, focuses on the music and distinctive social identity of Iranian-Americans in Northern California who play santur. Research questions are: 1) What are aesthetic conceptions of Iranian santurs and their sounds, held by santur-playing Iranian-Americans in Northern California? 2) What are social applications of Iranian santurs in Northern California? Participatory research in the field (using interviews and comments on music samples) served as the basis for this work. Literary research and reflections on my experiences as a santur-playing Iranian-American in Northern California were also incorporated.

Santur-Playing Iranian-Americans in Northern California

I. INTRODUCTION

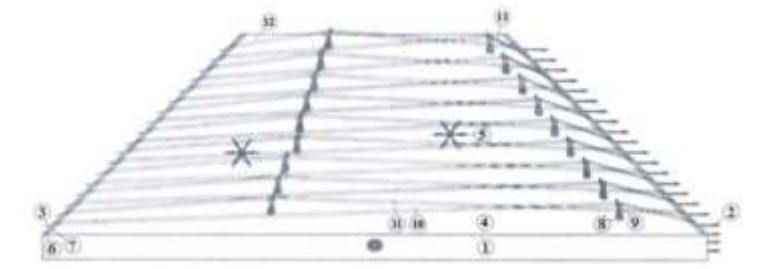
This writing provides a view over *santur*-playing Iranian-Americans in Northern California. The research questions are:

- 1) What are the aesthetic conceptions of Iranian santurs and their sounds, held by santur-playing Iranian-Americans in Northern California?
- 2) What are the social applications of Iranian santurs in Northern California?

Regarding methods, participatory research in the field served as the basis for this work. Research partners took part in intensive interviews, also shared their opinions on various music samples (listening tests). Literary research was applied as well, clarifying the necessary historical and social backgrounds. Wherever relevant, reflections on my experiences as a santur-playing Iranian-American who lived, played, and taught in Northern California (1999 -2008) were also incorporated. My particular interest in santur, the instrument I play since childhood, led me to conduct this research, on the side of my dissertation on santur.

II. BACKGROUNDS: SANTUR, IRAN, NORTHERN CALIFORNIA, IRANIAN-AMERICANS

Santur, a representative instrument of Iranian music, is a wooden trapezoidal chordophone played by wooden mallets.



A “General Schema of the Santur” (Payvar 2015: 55)

Iran, the homeland of santur, is a country in the Middle East. The domain of Iranian cultures lies beyond Iran's current geopolitical boundaries. This is because, over the course of its millennia of history, Iran has placed different cultures and different parts of the world under its rule, where these cultures have been able to spread and merge¹.

To explain the meaning of santur-playing Iranian-Americans in Northern California, I would first like to break down this term into its exponents. I suppose it is relatively clear what is meant by a santur player: a person who plays santur. I am not concentrating here

¹ “Still today, one should speak of not one but three Iranian states: apart from the Islamic Republic of Iran, Tajikistan and Afghanistan are both officially Persian-speaking and culturally Iranian. Uzbekistan has a large albeit mostly unrecognized Persian-speaking population [...]. The Kurds, who are spread out over half a dozen countries [...] are also part of the larger Iranian group, as are the Baluch of Iran and Pakistan, the Pushtuns of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the Ossetes and the Tats of Caucasus. Further afield, Iranian ideas and practices shaped those of cultures from Balkans to India and China until quite recent times” (Fotz 2016: xii).

only on professional santur players. I am also looking at the students and amateur players of this instrument.

What is meant here by Iranian-Americans is a group of people who are of Iranian heritage and live in the United States of America. They are considered both American and Iranian at the same time. However, they have their very own cultural characteristics as well, which are different from those of other Americans and the people living in Iran. Many of them celebrate national and cultural festivals of both the USA and Iran. For example, many Iranian-born Americans celebrate *Norooz* (the Iranian New Year celebration at the vernal equinox, according to the old Persian calendar) as well as Thanksgiving, a national holiday of the USA, in personalized ways. They have specific dialects and accents in speaking Farsi and English, contributing to an identity sometimes described as “Iranian in America and American in Iran” (Whitlock 2008: 13).

Northern California starts in the far north of the state and extends to the end of the San Jose region in the south. The major cities in this region are San Francisco, Sacramento, San Jose, Oakland, Stockton, Modesto, Fresno, Chico and Eureka. The federal government of the USA estimates that of the less than two million Iranian-Americans living in the USA, about 40% live in California. However, there seem to be no exact statistics available on the number of Iranian-Americans of Northern California among the 15.3 million Northern Californians. The main communities of Iranian-Americans in Northern California are located in the San Francisco Bay Area, Sacramento and San Jose. They are growing steadily as more and more Iranians from Iran join them despite all

immigration and political obstacles. "Even today many bright young Iranians are leaving for the USA" (Raji 2010: 193).

As it seems to be a common tendency in the Iranian diaspora around the world², the majority of members of Iranian-American communities in Northern California are economically prosperous. "The Iranian-American population is well-educated, with six times the national average of doctoral degrees, and well-off, with 40 percent higher per capita income than the national average" (Larsen 2014: 26). In such administrative centers as the city of Sacramento, many Iranian-American technocrats serve as government employees. Many Iranian-Americans also work as academics in university towns such as Davis. In San Francisco, there are many Iranian-American technicians who work in the IT industry. This financial prosperity has supported music, including santur music, to serve as a cultural component.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1) What are the aesthetic conceptions of Iranian santurs and their sounds, held by santur-playing Iranian-Americans in Northern California?

Identifying Iranian santurs and their communities in Northern California would become possible through understanding the social, cultural and historical coordination of the Iranian-American communities in Northern California. It would be helpful to know where these people come from and what their original motivations were for leaving Iran

² Another interesting instance is the somewhat similar case in Austria: "[...] there are more than 40 thousand Iranians in a country where they are the most elite group in the foreign immigrant nations, has made Austria as an attractive country for Iranian cultural activity" (Movahed and Zadeh 2017: 35).

and settling in Northern California. It would be important to understand how the history and social life of these people is reflected in their music.

2) What are the social applications of Iranian santurs in Northern California?

Like a seed planted in another earth and climate, Iranian music in Northern California keeps developing in new directions in different ways than it has already experienced in its Iranian homeland. The Iranian santur music had to interact with the conditions, demands and expectations of the new society, so that after overcoming the challenges, it could eventually feel at home in Northern California.

IV. METHODS

Participatory research in the field, including interviews and listening tests, served as the basis for this work³. As I was unable to travel due to the demands of the pandemic, I contacted various prospective research partners and asked them if they could contribute through online interviews and listening tests. The contributors who kindly agreed to take part in the listening tests and interviews are Mr. Faraz Minooei (a professional sanur player and teacher), Mr. Saeid Bashash (an engineering-academic who is also an advanced sanur player in his free time) and an Iranian-American person from Rancho Cordova (near Sacramento) who wants his name not to be mentioned. The latter person is therefore quoted here as ‘Anonymous’. Considering the great time difference between Vienna (where I live) and California, one can imagine that the commitment to give

³ Also I used literary research and my own experience as a santur practitioner.

interviews and taking part in listening tests would require so much dedication, which I sincerely appreciate.

The total duration of the conducted interviews and listening tests is over ten hours. Each interview and listening test took shape as following: I contacted the collaborating persons and explained the general idea behind the project. I asked if we could continue with an interview and a listening test. The sessions were realized as video meetings via Skype. I called the contributor and we talked. In our conversations we used Farsi language. All conversations were recorded with kind permission of the contributors. I put various parts of the conversations into written words and translated them into English.

Since interviews and listening tests were conducted not with a very large number of persons due to the scope of this project, the amount of data this work deals with may appear not sufficient to ensure reliable results. Meanwhile, my personal experience as a teacher and player of santur among Iranian-Americans in Northern California agrees with the results of this project. I believe that this work helps to uncover the social and acoustical profiles of the santur.

IV.I. Interview

I presented the research questions in each interview, as well as the following detailed five questions to clarify the implications of the research questions:

1- Please provide a brief self-introduction, including how you got involved with santur.

- 2- In your region, which occasions might commonly include santur performances?
- 3- Please introduce your region's santur communities (emphasizing on performance, pedagogy and making of the santur).
- 4- In your region, what are the ensemble settings in which the santur participates?
- 5- Please describe your region's typical santur repertoires.

IV.II. Listening Test

I provided each participant with five audio samples, each one about one minute to a few minutes in length. I arranged these samples using largely not very well-known recordings, so that the commentary of the contributor would relate to what is heard on the recording, without an influence by knowing the person performing on the recording. After each recording was presented, following questions were asked:

- 1- Please comment on the type and sound qualities of the santur.
- 2- What is the possible performance occasion?
- 3- What are the tuning details?
- 4- What are the particular performance qualities?
- 5- Please add any additional remark you might find important regarding this sample.

- Details of the Music Samples Used for the Listening Tests:

For the listening tests, I sent five MP3 music segments by e-mail to participants during my Skype conversations with them. In order to ensure that the participants made their

comments strictly on the basis of what they would hear on the recorded samples and not be influenced by written information, I marked the five e-mail attachments as "Sample 1", "Sample 2", etc., without giving specific information about each recording.

My intention in selecting these specific fragments as listening examples for the listening test was to offer each contributor a variety of different styles of santur playing, even though all of the examples are from recent decades. In this way, the participants' comments could open up a wider perspective on the research questions.

Sample 1 is a segment of 2 minutes and 26 seconds selected from Mansour Saremi's solo santur performance in the mode titled as "*Bayat-e Esfahan II*" (Saremi 2002) from a CD recording. The CD does not contain any information about the type of santur used in this performance. Based on the sound recording, I guess it is a conventional 9-bridge G santur.

Sample 2 is a segment of 2 minutes and 51 seconds length, selected from a CD, featuring the recording of a private music event in which only a few people participated (Payvar 2005). The participants are among the most renowned masters of their time. On this recording there is also a short talk by an unknown person about performing musicians (This talk is not included in the segment I arranged as the audio sample). I can imagine that this meeting took place around the 1950s in Tehran. On the sample there is santur (played by Faramarz Payvar), then singing (sung by Mahmoud Karimi) which is complemented by setar (played by Daryoush Safvat). There is no accompanying percussion, except apparently someone holding the rhythm on a table. The music is in the

mode of *Shour*, including a brief modulation to *Bayat-e Tork*. The santur used in this recording is most likely a traditional 9-bridge G-santur, made by Mehdi Nazemi, a maker from Yazd, as he is one of the people mentioned by the speaker.

Sample 3 is 1 minute and 8 seconds of Pashang Kamkar's Santur playing (Kamkar 2017). It is played in the mode of *Homayoun*. This musical section was selected from a recording made in the santur making workshop of Davoud Gholami-Shirazi, a maker from Shiraz. Kamkar is testing a 9-bridge G santur, which appears to have been produced by Gholami-Shirazi. The date mentioned by Gholami-Shirazi is 2019.

Sample 4 was selected from a recording made by Iranian national television in Tehran (Varzandeh 2014). The date of performance is not included in the recording. Due to the apparent age of the santur player Reza Varzandeh on the video, I suspect that the recording was made around 1970s. A known habits of this celebrated player was to use only his self-made instrument and mallets. Such a santur is easy to recognize here. Its dimensions are obviously larger than conventional santurs. The mallets used have no rings. In this recording Varzandeh plays in the mode of *Mahoor*, accompanied by an ensemble of Iranian instruments. The duration of this audio sample is 2 minutes and 20 seconds.

Sample 5 is a 2-minute audio recording of a contemporary santur solo. I played it in 2019 at home in Vienna on a 9-bridge G-santur made of walnut wood by Daryoush Salari, a contemporary santur maker in Tehran. I wanted to expose the participants also to unusual

playing techniques and get their input. Therefore, in this recording, I used such extended playing techniques as bowing the santur strings using a violin bow, and applying mallets without felt on a contemporary santur. This recording uses a combination of various modes, including *Abu-Ata* and *Dashti*. This music is not made available before.

V. Introducing Participants:

The participants, all of whom are Iranian Americans from Northern California who play the santur, come from different backgrounds, as following.

Faraz Minooei is a professional santur player and santur teacher in his late thirties and resides in San Jose area. He places great value on tradition. At the age of nine he began to study santur in Karaj (near Tehran), Iran. Since he was fourteen he studied under santur instructor Behnam Mehrabi. About twenty years ago he immigrated to Northern California. One year before moving to California, he lived in Turkey, where he had the opportunity to review his knowledge of *Radif*⁴ every day in his alone time. After moving to California, he completed his academic education in music, while also receiving further traditional training from masters of Iranian music in California, including Mahmoud Zoufonoun and Mohammadreza Lotfi. He also maintains close contact with various colleagues and masters of Iranian music in Iran. He is an active santur educator in the San Jose area. He is also in the process of "giving a course on the basics of Iranian music to

⁴ “This music is based on the Persian Radif, an elaborate music system unique to Iran. [...] a series of modal scales and tunes that must be memorized – and is recognized by many as a quintessential Iranian heritage that is beyond ideological or political reproach” (Siamdoust 2017: 157).

Google employees" (Minooei 2020). He could be considered as a member of the group of younger masters, as I will explain later.

Anonymous is a nickname for one of the participants, who for personal reasons wished for his real name not to be mentioned. He is an amateur santur player who finds the most important aspect of music to be its social side. Anonymous is in his sixties, living in Rancho Cordova (near Sacramento). He was born in Tehran and immigrated from Iran to California about forty years ago, mainly for political reasons. Before moving to Northern California, he had no experience in playing any instrument. In his early fifties, he began studying santur with Roozbeh Nafisi in Sacramento, California. He dedicated some of his time since then to play the Radif of Iranian music, learn folk songs from Iran, and improvise with various musicians from other minorities in Northern California. His wish is that one day he can "learn the whole Radif" (Anonymous 2020). In this research, he is placed in the pupils category.

Saeid Bashash is a mechanical engineering academic in his late thirties who has a teaching position at San Jose State University. He is a part-time but advanced santur player with modern tendencies. Saeid Bashash plays santur since his youth, starting in his native Azerbaijan, Iran, in the city of Maragheh. After finishing secondary school in Azerbaijan, he moved to Tehran to study for a technical Bachelor's degree. There he also continued his activities as a part-time santur player. He emigrated to the USA in his early twenties for an eventual doctoral study. After spending a few years on the East Coast of the USA, he moved to San Jose. Besides santur he also plays tar. Occasionally he gives performances in Northern California. His santur teacher in Northern California is Faraz

Minooei. On the one hand Bashash is an advanced santur player. On the other hand, he “does not really see himself as a professional santur player” (Bashash 2020) and is motivated to take further santur lessons.

VI. FINDINGS

I start this part with a review of some key social and historical developments within the final decades of the 20th century, including some aftermaths of the 1979 revolution in Iran. I believe a realistic understanding of the communities and applications of santur among Iranian-Americans in Northern California would not be possible without an in-depth understanding of these events. Then I share my findings based on interviews and listening tests, while also referring to my experience in Northern California and Iran as necessary.

VI.I. Social and Historical Facets:

The Iranian-American minority in Northern California is by no means a very homogeneous population in cultural, political, ideological and economic terms. The Iranian immigrants to Northern California around 1979 and thereafter included royalists whose regime had been overthrown, as well as opponents of that regime and of the settled Islamic Republic. The social classes from which those groups came from are relatively clear. For example, the followers of Marxism came mainly from the working class as well as the intellectual bourgeoisie, some with an interest in the then neighboring country of the Soviet Union. It would not be surprising to notice that the types of music practiced

or consumed by each of those groups could be very different from the music practiced or consumed by another group. “In fact, the Iranian diaspora in the USA has been a vital intelligentsia in producing powerful ideas about exilic identity that have contributed to debates about multiculturalism, diaspora, hybridity, and transnationalism” (Whitlock 2008: 17).

Around 1979 and immediately afterwards, music was an object of politicization under the heavy shadow of the political developments of the time. A few months after the revolution, music was condemned and banned by the Islamic regime⁵. Some of the music would bear the label of being promoter of imperialism, and some would be accused of serving as the opium of the masses, while masses were expected to guard the revolution. Some other music directions would be described by the Islamic state as trivial entertainment to rot the spirits of masses, and therefore their practice would be punished with penalties of the laws of the Islamic Republic. “In today’s Persia, public musical life is non-existent, save for the so-called ‘revolutionary’ music which is in service of the ideology of the state. All traditional musicians who were sustained through employment in radio and television, and as teachers at various schools, are out of work and are suffering intolerable deprivation” (Farhat 2004: 121).

In this hodgepodge, instruments such as the santur specialized in the art music of Iran, which formerly were court instruments, were condemned as instruments of the royalists which with their opium-like effects on listeners and practitioners would prevent the

⁵ “Music is a narcotic of minds” (Khomeini 2010: 200).

masses from remaining active revolutionaries. Such condemnations by the Islamic regime provoked reactions among the Iranian people, especially among the younger generation. “Increasingly, even young Iranians who care little about politics are rebelling against a society whose architect, Ayatollah Khomeini, once proclaimed 'There is no fun in Islam'” (Basmenji 2013: 19). One of those reactions was learning music ‘illegally’, against the state’s suppressing rules. I was a member of this large group of the Iranian youth just before the 1990s⁶.

Some sense of unity has probably always existed among musicians of Iranian music. The heat of the revolution and its politics caused a more visible and radical ramification among those musicians. A group, some of which were supporters of the revolution for the hope of realizing democracy, focused on bringing Iranian art music to the people by organizing performances in larger ensemble settings, using politically and socially critical texts, much of which were by contemporary lyricists. Meanwhile, other groups of musicians who did not want to get involved in politics became more isolated than probably ever before in Iran's modern history. These groups included some of the most conservative traditional musicians, who related to the Radif of Iranian music in orthodox manners. Between these two extremes, there were other musicians, who depending on their inclination, felt closer to one of the two extremes, typically without being completely against the other group.

⁶ For years after that, I would still need to keep my music practice a secret. “One could not play concert then. It was around 1992 or 1993. They even shut down his shop a couple of times. They would come from the imam of the city and would ask him to stop his activities. Then he decided that he would only teach at his home” (Bashash 2020).

As the Iranian revolution proceeded to the establishment of the Islamic Republic, some of the opposition members who had escaped the new regime and its penalties (including a heavy wave of executions), ended up in Northern California. Later, musicians who up to then were not very politically active joined the active opposition, since most performing artists were banned from performing (which lasted until 1988⁷). The performance of Iranian music is still a kind of grey area of legality. For example, it is almost never the case that Iranian national television broadcasts images of musical instruments. The Iranian musicians who landed in Northern California gathered around a common suffering: the experience of being forced to leave Iran because they wanted to keep their music alive.

Besides what has been said so far, there are some less significant motivators bringing the santur-playing Iranian-Americans of Northern California together, such as the ethnic-religious identity. “In addition to the class/political differences, there is a great diversity of ethnic-religious belonging compared to the demographic composition inside Iran; the Jewish, Armenian, Zoroastrian, Baha’i populations are relatively large” (Tsubakihara 2013: 337). Also it seems common that the influences through the musics of other minorities in Northern California have caused particular developments in the artistic productions of the Iranian-American musicians. I will write further on this matter.

⁷ That year I started learning santur as a child. Ayatollah Khomeini issued a decree then, lifting strict bans on chess and music. However, the ban on music was never completely lifted until now.

V.I.I. A Sample Piece:

Notation and lyrics for 'Tulips', a protest hymn used by leftists and political prisoners during and after the 1979 revolution, is provided here as a sample. Santur doubles the voice line. Creators of the music and the text are unknown, probably on purpose.

Tulips (Laalehaa)

A socialist hymn, composer and lyricist unknown
Notation: Roozbeh Nafisi

$\text{♩} = 70-80$

da mad laa le haa az de le ku ho dasht be yaa de a zi ze sha hi dsa ne ma

mf

8 az aan akh ta raa ni ke af ruukh tand be daan saan be daa maa ne sob he se pid, be

16 paa ko nim par cha me khash mo kin raa pey af ka nim zen de gaa ni ye no vin kho ru she

23 maa bar ka nad ba naa ye bi daad be sar re sad in na bar de aa kha rin

Lyrics in Farsi:

دمد لاله ها در دل کوه و دشت / به یاد عزیز شهیدان ما
همان اخترانی که افروختند / بدان سان به دامان صبح سپید
به پا کنیم پرچم خشم و کین را / پی افکنیم زندگانی نوین
خروش ما بر کند بنای بیداد / به سر رسد این نبرد آخرین

Translation (by Roozbeh Nafisi):

Tulips bloom in fields and on mountains / keeping dear memories of our martyrs alive.
The memories of shining stars / until the break of morning.
We raise flags of justice / We form our today's living.
Our movement topples the foundation of inequality / So comes this final battle to its end.

VI.II. What Interviews Suggest:

In this section I will first restate each interview question. Then I will present the findings based on a comparison of the data provided by participants.

1- Please provide a brief self-introduction, including how you got involved with santur.

All participants seem to share the following points regarding this question:

- Starting to learn santur based on strong personal motivations (as opposed to, for example, the will of parents): "I saw someone playing santur at a wedding at the age of nine or ten. I became interested and asked my parents to get me a santur" (Bashash 2020).

- Experiencing "playing around" (Anonymous 2020) with santur in earliest stages of learning, seemingly like a child's play, to discover the instrument, relying heavily on listening

- Studying the Radif of Iranian music: "I have played Radif to a certain extent, although not completely. [...] I am more interested in Radif's metric pieces" (Bashash 2020).

- Being strongly influenced by the teacher: "We would see him as a god and would not dare to ask many questions. I now regret that I did not ask him many questions" (Bashash 2020). This illustrates the nature of such influences, through traditional master-pupil relationships. However, this would not always prove encouraging for the student: "I

thought that if I played santur and turned into someone like those people [the teachers who didn't seem very passionate], I wouldn't want to play santur. So I stopped for a while" (Minooei 2020).

- Being strongly influenced by the family: "My father thought that I should concentrate more on my school, but my mother supported me a lot when I started learning santur" (Bashash 2020). Sometimes Iranian music does not seem to have been the family's preferred music style. Nevertheless, the families of this study's participants often supported the learner in studying santur. "My family does not really listen to Iranian art music. But they do not mind it either. I think they are just not so well informed about it" (Anonymous 2020).

- The apparent ineffectiveness of the Islamic State's ban on music in stopping music activities: "Concerts were not allowed [by the state]. The first concert I ever saw, I was around 18 [around 1998]. In the neighboring Bonab, the town's policy changed, and a concert permit was issued. The ensemble was not professional. However, they played well and I had a great time" (Bashash 2020).

2- In your region, which occasions might commonly include santur performances?

Although santur could be presented on various occasions in Northern California, it seems that almost like in Iran, the main events are private gatherings (as opposed to larger

public events). The most popular presentations seem to be house concerts. "They often play at their private gatherings, although sometimes they are also interested in presenting [public] concerts. But it is often in houses" (Minooei 2020). "The occasion for playing depends on the time period. For example, I do not believe that many people today would play santur at weddings anymore" (Bashash 2020). Sometimes santur players in Northern California also participate in public events such as cultural events organized by universities. "Sometimes the university organizes events during which I might play" (Anonymous 2020).

3- Please introduce your region's santur communities.

The santur communities in Northern California are mainly understood as circles of friends who share an interest in santur music "There are many communities in [Northern] California. With friends, we would go and play together. Here we have a group of amateur players. Every two or three weeks we play together, working mainly on songs" (Bashash 2020). What many of these musician friends often have in common is that they "concentrate on an activity other than playing santur as their official profession" (Minooei 2020). The profession of Saeid Bashash (a university professor) confirms this point. "We meet every few weeks with different learning people and present our work" (Anonymous 2020).

4- In your region, what are the ensemble settings in which the santur participates?

In Northern California, santur is used either as solo or in ensembles of Iranian instruments or mixed ensembles of Iranian and non-Iranian instruments. "Santur is often used either as a solo instrument or in chamber ensembles" (Minooei 2020). Ensembles with non-Iranian instruments could include a liberal variety of instruments. "Last time we jammed with some friends who play harp, cello and guitar, and we improvised" (Anonymous 2020).

5- Please describe your region's typical santur repertoires.

In contrast to the case of santur playing in Iran, there seems to be a tendency in Northern California to include folk music in the santur repertoire: "Here we like to include folk music in our repertoire. That helps me remember the melodies better" (Anonymous 2020). There is also an interest in musics of other minorities and nations. "I am interested in all kinds of music: the music of Turkey, India, Japan, also Western music [...]" (Minooei 2020). The Radif and compositions of Iranian musicians remain integral parts of the repertoire of the santur-playing Iranian Americans in Northern California. "I like to play metric pieces by Payvar and Meshkatian" (Bashash 2020). Improvisations in different styles also seem popular: "Sometimes we sit and make sounds, depending on what we hear from each other" (Anonymous 2020).

VI.III. What Listening Tests Suggest:

I am organizing the findings here in order of the presented recording samples.

SAMPLE 1:

All participants were curious to learn the identity of the featured musician on this recording (however, no one made a correct guess). Two of the three people found that the instrument presented was probably a larger santur, whereas the instrument on this recording was apparently a conventional 9-bridge G santur. "This is a semi-professional santur, perhaps larger than a 9-bridge instrument. But it does not sound like a 12-bridge santur" (Minooei 2020). They all imagined this performance to be from several decades ago, apparently because of the special playing technique and the tuning details which the musician used. "He uses some techniques which make me think that this is a little older than Varzandeh[’s time]" (Minooei 2020). One participant used this opportunity to express his opinion on an optimal santur sound quality: "A good instrument [like this] sounds soft" (Bashash 2020). When I asked him to explain what he meant by soft, he said: "It means that [the instrument] sounds homogeneous and there is no ‘knocking’" (Bashash 2020).

One person said that this performance was a casual one. "[It is] perhaps in an open space, for example in a garden, playing for oneself or for a few people" (Minooei 2020).

Another person said: "It sounds as if it would probably be a private concert. As if some

people were sitting there. It does not sound like a studio recording” (Bashash 2020). The third participant thought that the sample “could be a studio recording” (Anonymous 2020).

All participants felt that this was not a good example of a very spontaneous improvisation. “He sounds as if he likes to calculate the music and set everything before the performance” (Bashash 2020). One person commented: “He does not sound to be on fire. He sounds as if he is a very logical player” (Anonymous 2020).

SAMPLE 2:

None of the participants felt that the instrument had any unusual features. They all thought that it was an older instrument. "It was perhaps made in the later Qajar period" (Minooei 2020). Obviously because of the ambient noise (such as occasional whispers on the recording) all participants felt that the possible performance occasion was a private gathering. "It was perhaps a party. Maybe someone was playing the rhythm on a table. It is picked up by the microphone" (Anonymous 2020). The tuning, especially around the microtones of the middle register, seemed inaccurate to two of the participants: "I think the quarter-step [of the 1st bridge in the middle register] was not accurately tuned" (Bashash 2020) and "I would loosen up that quarter-step a bit" (Minooei 2020). They all considered this to be a performance that would match the qualities of the styles of the early 20th century: "The nature of the sound suggests the style of Habib [Somaei]"

(Minooei 2020). This understanding was perhaps partly due to the sharper sound of the mallets: "The mallets had very thin felt on them" (Bashash 2020).

SAMPLE 3:

All participants agreed that the recoding was a contemporary performance on a contemporary santur. They also agreed that the instrument was well tuned. "I have no problems with the tuning" (Minooei 2020). One participant noted that the mallets probably did not have felt. They did not think that this music was so enthusiastically performed. "He sits somewhere alone playing and pretends to enjoy it" (Minooei 2020). One participant said that the reason was probably that the performance was not a live concert: "This is a studio recording" (Bashash 2020).

SAMPLE 4:

Probably due to the distinct style of playing in this sample, comments of all participants agree with each other. As soon as I would ask the contributors for their comments on this recording, they would start by naming the artist: "This is Varzandeh, [playing] on a 12-bridge santur. [...] I have a high opinion of almost every aspect of Varzandeh's playing. Also that he made his own santur at that time. I respect him, even if he would make a mistake in any part" (Minooei 2020). All participants knew the possible occasion of this

performance. "Isn't this one of his last ensemble broadcasts?" (Anonymous 2020). With regard to the tuning, almost no specific comments were made. Instead, some general thoughts were shared. "I think he has one of the best tunings because he heard a lot of music on the radio. His tuning might be very close to our older Iranian tunings [...]. As he had very good ears, by listening to Habib on the radio he absorbed many influences from him, probably subconsciously (Minooei 2020). The most specific comment I received about this recording refers to the playing technique: "The mallet movements were not only striking. There was also some rubbing etc. His tremolos were [therefore] 'foggy', as if the height of each mallet hit was relatively low" (Bashash 2020).

SAMPLE 5:

This sample was the least known of all five listening samples for the participants. The tuning used there, also some playing techniques, are not usual. These aspects contributed to that each participant would listen very attentively and make specific comments.

Two persons assumed that the instrument used in this recording sample was an ordinary 9-bridge G santur: "It sounds like a normal santur to me, except that it has a really good sound volume. But maybe the high volume is due to mallets or the playing manner" (Anonymous 2020). One participant found that it could be a larger santur: "It was not a 9-bridge [santur]. Maybe it was an instrument with 14 or 12 bridges" (Bashash 2020).

Two people thought it was a studio recording. Another person thought it was a preparation for an academic performance: "It is a preparation for an academic performance, like a presentation at a university" (Minooei 2020).

They all found the tuning of this santur acceptable, even if it did not sound ordinary at times: "The quarter steps were not too different from our usual ones - even if they sometimes sounded close to half-steps. [...] It was a different atmosphere. It followed the *Dastgah*⁸ order, while the atmosphere would not necessarily follow the tradition" (Bashash 2020).

All participants assumed that there were at least two musicians on this recording: one playing the santur and the other playing a wind instrument. "The thing the wind player does on the side... it points out something... like a question" (Minooei 2020). There was, however, one person playing, sometimes also bowing the santur strings using a violin bow, which evidently sounded similar to a wind instrument.

Here are a few more remarks which the participants made about the playing technique used in this music. "To me it sounds a little like the third sample you sent me. Even though this player uses the lower register differently" (Anonymous 2020). "I think it's a non-Fantastic instrument, but the player has probably played it much and has found out how to make it sound good. Either there is no felt on the tip of each mallet, or it exists but is very thin" (Minooei 2020). Another aspect of this recording which attracted the

⁸ "It signifies a set of pieces, traditionally grouped together, most of which have their own individual modes" (Farhat 2004: 19).

attention of all three participants was the way modulation was used in this music. “The transitions from modality to modality would not bring any big surprises. They came so naturally” (Bashash 2020). And: “You couldn't label this in a particular mode [of the Radif]. It was very free” (Anonymous 2020). Also the pauses in this music were considerable for one participant: “The pauses between the phrases... I liked this. Some seconds of absolute silence... I love listening to these longer pauses. A timely pause makes the listener think” (Bashash 2020).

VI.IV. Findings Based on the Collective Data:

Based on the collective data, I can provide the following summary under three categories of community aspects, performance approaches, and organological aspects.

VI.IV.I. Community Aspects

- Social Presentations:

In Northern California there are regular public performances of santur music, usually as solo performances or within ensemble settings. There are also private specialized gatherings of santur practitioners (usually students, teachers and performers) in which santur music is presented. Such private gatherings include “house concerts and educational presentations” (Minooei 2020), usually organized by or for the students of a santur instructor. At such gatherings most or all participants know each other personally. Most santur practitioners in Northern California attend such gatherings perhaps a few times a year. Besides mentioned specialized occasions, santur is also featured on celebrations. One participant said that he played santur for the occasion of his own

wedding (Bashash 2020).

- Community Groups:

Among Iranian-Americans of Northern California focusing on Iranian music, three main groups can be identified:

- Masters of older generations
- Masters of younger generations
- Pupils

Masters of older generations are those persons who received their traditional education in Iranian music in Iran, then served in Iran for many years before immigrating to Northern California. The professional experience of these musicians does not usually include academic music training, although there are exceptions. Some of the most important names in this group are the followings (this list includes also those masters whose primary instruments are further Iranian instruments, while their works have been influential on santur music as well):

- Manoochehr Sadeghi (1938 Tehran)
- Mohammadreza Shajarian (1940 Mashhad)
- Anoushiravan Rohani (1939 Rasht)
- Mahmoud Zoufonoun (1920 Shiraz – 2013 San Francisco Bay)
- Morteza Neidavoud (1900 Isfahan – 1990 San Francisco)

Masters of younger generations are those Iranian-American experts of Iranian music who

spent considerable parts of their lifetimes outside Iran, receiving their training from the older generation of masters. Some of these individuals also have received higher education in music in California. This generation of experts seems to be somewhat less strictly bound to the traditions defined by the Radif. They often feel free to incorporate their experience as Iranian-Americans into their work, while allowing for influences from other musical genres in Northern California. Followings are some of the better-known names in this group (specializing on santur or other Iranian instruments in close collaboration with santur music). All of them have lived in Northern California, while some later moved to other places.

- Faraz Minooei (1980 Tehran)
- Koorosh Taghavi (1965 Gorgan)
- Babak Sabetian (1976 Sari)
- Hamed Nikpey (1977 Tehran)

Pupils of Iranian music in Northern California form a very diverse group in terms of age, profession, political preference, etc. Their approaches to the education of Iranian music seem to vary according to their life experiences in Iran and Northern California. For students who are first generation Iranian-Americans of their families, the traditional master-pupil relationship generally seems to be very important. They seem to be more enthusiastic about relatively more nostalgic repertoires, such as the songs they used to listen to in Iran. Later generations of Iranian-American musicians, who have more life experience in Northern California than in Iran (some of whom may never have visited Iran), appear more open than the first group to the exploration of Iranian music. “They

show a more Western attitude in learning music than the first generation individuals who are more committed to traditional learning etiquettes” (Anonymous 2020).

- Activity Characteristics of the Past and the Present:

As with many aspects of Iranian-American culture in Northern California, there are debates among musicians regarding commitments to the inherited traditions on one hand and the necessity of cultural adaptations on the other hand, as “the dichotomy of modernity and tradition” (Khiabani 2008: 21). Among those santur-playing Iranian-Americans in Northern California who have experienced considerable parts of their musical lives in Iran, or have immigrated relatively more recently from Iran, a more conservative attachment to the Radif of Iranian music seems to be a trend. “They try to hold on to what they perceive as their tradition. They may feel intimidated by the culture of their new home” (Anonymous 2020). This seems closely related to Iranians’ post-revolution experience. “The Iranians who came to California in the wake of the 1979 revolution had witnessed a radical, to say nothing of violent, transformation of Iranian cultural norms which they identified as an integral part of their identity. The experience of loss naturally fueled a desire in them to restore and maintain what was seen as threatened with extinction” (Rahimieh 2016: 2). Meanwhile, the younger generations in their Northern Californian homes seem to feel less afraid of losing a native culture and feel free to practice their musical heritage in a less conservative way.

- Occasions:

In Northern California around particular times of the year, specific santur performances

could take place, contributing to various occasions ranging from “celebrating the feast of the winter solstice” (Bashash 2020) to “occasional celebrating of weddings, for example in San Francisco” (Minooei 2020). On most such occasions it appears that the majority of participants are of Iranian-American origin.

- Other Cultures Borrow from the Santur:

The use of santur and other Iranian instruments in formerly irrelevant contexts is becoming more and more widespread in Northern California and furthermore in the West.

Followings are some prominent examples:

- The flexible 6/8 rhythms of Iranian music and poetry are retained as the pivotal points of the ongoing improvisations in pop music.
- Other cultural minorities such as the Turkish-Americans apply santur in performances of their music, handling the Iranian santur like a native instrument of their own.
- Baroque musicians of contemporary times apply Iranian instruments such as santur and setar, in their performances.
- Contemporary Western music composers write for santur, *tonbak* and other Iranian instruments, treating them like European instruments. There are various composers who could be mentioned here, like Georges Aperghis and Viola Falb.

- Formation of New Musical Languages:

As santur music slowly felt at home in Northern California, audible influences in the expressions of santur in Northern California became recognizable. To my experience in Northern California as a santur player, while collaborating with Iranian-Americans and

with musicians coming from other Northern Californian cultures, musical accents are recognizable within the Northern Californian Iranian santur expressions, for example while applying ornamentations and rests. It seems fair to say there is generally less musical ornamentation applied in the music of santur-playing Iranian-Americans in Northern California, compared to the santur music produced in Iran. “Maybe more straight-forward and less ornamented musical expressions help santur music communicate more easily with Jazz music” (Anonymous 2020).

VI.IV.II. Performance Approaches:

- Importance of Virtuosity:

It seems that santur-playing Iranian-Americans in Northern California, many of whom belong to younger generations, have higher expectations regarding virtuosity in performance, compared to the past generations of santur musicians in Iran. A collaborator mentioned in a listening test: “He sounds not to be a virtuoso in santur-playing, although he might be highly virtuous about the knowledge of Iranian music [in theory]” (Bashash 2020). “At present, there is a tendency to include more than one *chaharmezrab* in the performance of a Dastgah, as the virtuoso demands of such pieces serve to display the instrumentalist’s technical prowess” (Farhat 2004: 13).

- Feeling and Moment:

In their comments, all collaborators spoke of ‘feeling’ and ‘moment’ . “It was a good feeling. Together with the voice it was a good moment” (Bashash 2020). Considering the

contexts of the talks, these expressions suggest spiritual effects of performances on listeners, caused by the focused presence of the improviser's mind throughout making music.

VI.IV.III. Organological Aspects:

- Larger Santurs Becoming Popular:

It seems that the larger santurs which were more common decades ago in Iran, such as 11-bridge and 12-bridge santurs, are getting popular among professional Iranian-American santur players in Northern California. “It is a matter of time to get your hands used to playing them” (Minooei 2020). “9-bridge santurs are sometimes too limited” (Bashash 2020).

- Tuning:

Comments on common audio samples varied sometimes vastly in case of tuning. For instance, one of the participants did not find the tuning of lowest register of santur accurate on the last audio sample of the listening test, while other participants found the instrument on the same sample tuned decently. Sometimes participants went as far as commenting on the material quality of strings and its influence on tuning. “I would change the whole strings of the right register and see if that would help” (Minooei 2020).

- Age of the Instrument:

The participants often used the expressions ‘old instrument’ and ‘new instrument’ while

referring to sound qualities. Sometimes while commenting about the possible age of the instrument, they would also think about the size of the instrument: “It must be an old instrument, probably with 11 or 12 bridges [on each side]” (Bashash 2020).

VII. CONCLUSION

Santur in Northern California can be identified as an instrument to meet the requirements of Iranian music as understood by the Iranian-American santur players in Northern California. The most commonly used santur there appears to be the 9-bridge G santur popular in Iran, however in recent years larger santurs such as the 11 and 12-bridge santurs have also become increasingly popular among professional players.

To answer the question of social applications of santur in Northern California, we are faced with two main trends: political motivations and the interest in establishing dialogues with neighboring cultures. In both cases, improvisation inspired by the Radif has an integral function.

Although there are strong ties between Iranian santur practitioners in Iran and santur-playing Iranian-Americans in Northern California, the latter group has its own distinctive social identity and follows its own concerns. The repertoire they use goes beyond Iranian music as understood in Iran. It includes folk music and takes influences from neighboring minorities. In Northern California, the santur is used by various segments of the society. This practice goes beyond the Iranian-American community.

APPENDIX:
Video Samples of Santur Practice in Northern California

- A Youth Collaboration: Santur and Tonbak
Armin Keihani and Azeen Keihani (2008) - Sacramento, During a Music Lesson at
Roosbeh Nafisi's Studio
www.youtube.com/watch?v=ppR1JiZo5lM
(Nafisi 2009)

- A Northern Californian Collaboration of Iranian and Indian Santurs
Tarun Bhattacharya and Roosbeh Nafisi (2007), Sacramento City College
www.youtube.com/watch?v=auNmMntgZ4
(Nafisi 2008)

- SWAY: A Contemporary Composition (Roosbeh Nafisi)
Roosbeh Nafisi (2005) - Sacramento, California State University
www.youtube.com/watch?v=rtfb8MqXoU0
(Nafisi 2005)

GLOSSARY

Chaharmezrab: a faster rondo form in 6/8 used in Iranian music

Dastgah: each chapter of the Iranian Radif

Radif: a classification system of the music material in Iranian music

Santur:an Iranian chordophone played with two mallets

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