

SUSPICIOUS SOUNDS¹: **Iranian Traditional Music in Lives of Iranians under the Rule of the Islamic Regime**

Abstract

This study explores the role of Iranian traditional music in lives of Iranians after Islamic regime banned music. Questions: 1) What ties Iranian traditional music with lives of contemporary 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. 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). In the context of this writing, when addressing Iran, it is very important to note whether the people of the country are meant. One conflict point between the regime and many people of Iran is Iranian traditional music.

Backgrounds and Personal Motivations

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 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

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

replaced monarchy. The latter period is the focus of this writing.

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. In addition, this research is related to my ongoing dissertation which focuses on santur from perspectives of musical acoustics and ethnomusicology.

Research Questions

- 1) What ties Iranian traditional music with lives of contemporary 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 for this work, using articles and books available on various facets of this topic in Farsi, Arabic, English, and German.

Islam and Music: an Introduction

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 clerics². In the entire text of the Quran, the word music is not mentioned. The Qur'an's judgment on music is assumed based on expert interpretations mainly referred to this verse:

² 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 translates³ 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 (Omidisalar 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” (Omidisalar 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 Islam⁴” (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).

³ After comparing various translations, I chose using Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s prominent English translations, appearing closer to the Arabic original.

⁴ 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 pattern⁵ 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 establishes that music of *mutrib* (or *motreb*, among other

⁵ 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.

Romanized spellings of this Arabic word) is haram: “Music of mutrib is haram” (Khomeini 2013: 411)⁶. 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) “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, as mentioned, could have a connotation of Iranian music, it would be 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 six⁷. 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 about Music

It is cited from Muhammad that:

«كان إبليس أول من تَعَنَّى»

“Devil was the first who made music”

(Amili 1983: 231).

Also he is quoted⁸ saying:

«أَنَّ اللَّهَ بَعَثَنِي رَحْمَةً لِّلْعَالَمِينَ وِلْأَمْحَقِّ الْمَعَارِفِ وِلْ الْمَزَامِيرِ»

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

(Majlesi 1983: 250).

⁶ (Khomeini 2013: 411). “موسيقى مطرب حرام است”

⁷ Poets of Farsi poetry traditionally interpret prosody using syllabic manifestations called *aruz*. After analyzing several dozen such models as examples, I realized that almost all of them were interpretable as configurations of 6 rhythms.

⁸ These two books are among most important hadith references in Shia Islam.

Amili mentions from Imam Baghir, a Muhammad's offspring and an enormously important 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: 6⁹]" (Amili 1983: 226).

From another important 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).

Islam and Music in Iran Since 1979

Islam seems to still be addressing public as it did in early centuries of Islam. "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 sounds¹⁰" (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

⁹ This Quranic verse was mentioned earlier.

¹⁰ 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 lahwī¹¹ 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. That is while 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 rather than music.

“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*¹² 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 Iran¹³ 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 Iraq-Iran 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). Musics

¹¹ This refers to the first Quranic citation used.

¹² “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).

¹³ “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).

associated with the West, such as pop music, were labeled as symbols of imperialism. “Music can be seen as a part of a Western, and sometimes specifically North American, cultural imperialism” (Otterbeck 2004: 15) beside its alleged powers of seduction and corruption. This view gradually 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, such as 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 ministry¹⁴, where the word arts has been replaced for Islamic guidance (Aramesh(Masoud) 2021). In the meantime, music seems to have continued to play a prominent role in the lives of Iranians¹⁵, 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 Iranian national radio and television, Khomeini expressed: “If you are interested in Islam and the country, reform this organization. I mean, don't be so westernized as to necessarily broadcast music in the pauses between this news and that news. That is westernization. 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 the welfare of our children. It corrupts the brains of our children. If a young person has music in the ears all the time, that young person can no longer work or think seriously” (Khomeini 2010: 203).

Khamenei on Music

¹⁴ The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance

¹⁵ “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).

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" (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" (Mousavi 2021).

Social Aspects of Iranian Music under the Rule of the Islamic Regime

Music as a Protest Tool

Due to Islamic regime's position on music, even if musicians would not intention to use their craft as a protest, the regime would assume the practice of music a protest. It would be enough if a musical performance could attract a crowd and the regime could interpret it as a threat. For example, on June 14, 2023, during a performance by the Lian Ensemble at Tehran's Vahdat Hall, audience members, including women who had removed their compulsory headscarves, began singing and dancing. The ensemble was ordered to provide clarifications and the audience faced violent consequences (Lian Ensemble 2023).

Censorship of music began in first moments after the regime assumed power. On Thursday, February 1, 1979, minutes after Khomeini landed in Tehran, he stopped at the cemetery to give his first speech after arriving. As people began to clap, the circle around him asked people to stop and salute the Prophet of Islam instead. The ban on female singing followed soon after, continuing for decades¹⁶: "I didn't know women could not sing on stage in Iran, and I sang [during performing a cimbalom concert in Tehran in 2022]. And it was a big revolution. Wife of Hossein Malek [(1924-1999)] was a singer, and said afterwards that what I 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, 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 available accounts of protests show people clapping their hands and chanting their wishes. Instruments of Iranian traditional music have also found their ways among protesters, even in demonstrations outside Iran¹⁷.

Popularity

After revolution, Iranian traditional music more or less managed to survive the situation in

¹⁶ That is still the case.

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

homes of Iranians while all serious competitors were censored. This could be partly 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). Also few mechanisms have protected Iranian traditional music and contributed to its popularity in times of financial and socio-political difficulties, especially after revolution. I see two main categories for them: 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, the most common venues for the presentation of Iranian music became people's homes, where wedding celebrations with live music could also be held. That is while parties are traditionally not considered very appropriate occasions for the performance of Iranian traditional music (Safdari 2020), perhaps due to Iranian traditional music not being considered light music. 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 revolution¹⁸. For years, Iranian music lessons also took place almost exclusively in private homes¹⁹. 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 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 shops²⁰. It is common that instruments are bought directly from manufacturers. Better-known manufacturers in particular often have no stores visible from the outside. They offer instruments to order. They are sometimes very selective about their clients, including teachers looking for instruments for their students²¹.

Partly due to availability, Iranian music has engaged in other genres. Iranian instruments have

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ My santur lessons took place at my family's home. Kids in the neighborhood also took lessons at homes.

²⁰ I bought my first setar in 1998 from a street vendor in Tehran, who walked around with instruments on his back.

²¹ See the section on my personal experience.

served also as instruments of musics such as pop, folk and Western classical²². Meanwhile, there has also been a reverse phenomenon, at least during earlier decades after revolution. 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 living²³. 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 music²⁴ 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 Modern Technology

With the 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 may 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 would be 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 accuracy on two levels: firstly, frequency precision for each pitch, and secondly, unison precision for doubled strings (on instruments with more than one string responsible for a pitch). These factors have led instruments to sound somewhat different than before: "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 modern 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.

²² Consequently, some traditional tunings, especially those containing microtonal intervals, have receded under the heavy shadow of Western well temperament.

²³ See the section on my personal experience.

²⁴ 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).



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 Traditional 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 performing²⁵. “Even after being formally invited to perform at the festival, ensembles 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 performance²⁶. In addition to music bans also some musicians have been banned from performing, for instance if the artist has openly announced conflicts with regime's policies, like the case with the singer Mohammadreza Shajarian (1940-2020). Only some musicians have managed finding ways onto international stages²⁷. Also, some young Iranian

²⁵ 2019 was my last santur performance in Iran as part of a chamber program with a female singer. The only concert we managed was for the Austrian embassy in Tehran.

²⁶ On numerous occasions in past few years musicians of ensembles have refrained from 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).

²⁷ 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 (Hosseini Malek) passed away” (Herencsár 2021).

musicians have managed opportunities to study music abroad, and some have pursued creative approaches combining their knowledge of Iranian music with musics outside Iran. This has led to emergence of new techniques and styles in performance and composition²⁸.

Personal Experience: My Santur Learning in Iran (1988-2000)

In 1988, during final months of the Iraq-Iran war, my mother heard of a santur teacher. This was no ordinary event, as nobody could openly give or take music lessons then²⁹. Meanwhile, music was an inseparable part of lives of many Iranians, albeit in secret. On December 28 I took my first santur lesson. It was briefly after the ceasefire and there were still evening blackouts³⁰. We did not notice that the electricity was out and the door ringer would not work. Around five p.m. someone knocked on the window. A bearded tall man in his late twenties appeared, of whom we later learned that he had to jump over the wall of the house. He was a student of English literature at Tehran University who could not finish his studies due to *Cultural Revolution*³¹. This gave him the opportunity to join the private santur studio of Faramarz Payvar. Our lessons continued around seven years almost without interruption on Tuesdays at five. I can hardly remember an occasion when I talked at school about my training, except with a few close colleagues who also secretly engaged in music. I later realized that this was also the case with various musicians around my age.

Mr. Safdari brought me a santur bearing no signature of the maker and 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, almost like the sound of the qopuz, of the 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

Some countries, including the U.S., do not even have consulates in Iran due to conflicts like regime's 1979-1981 hostage-taking of diplomats.

²⁸ See my article *melodic (de)comspotion* for more details.

²⁹ Khomeini's regime lifted the official ban on music few months earlier, probably due to the pressure it felt from the ban (i.e. radio and television programs were not easily manageable without music). Nevertheless, the presence of music was kept to a minimum, and music never really got allowed so far (see Figure 4). Concerts were still prohibited frequently, even in smaller cities (Bashash 2020). Nevertheless, traditional communities dedicated to preserving traditions of Iranian music maintained their activities (Aramesh(Masoud) 2021).

³⁰ I remember that especially in last months of the war, Tehran and other major cities lost electricity most evenings so Saddam's bombers could not have a good sight of cities.

³¹ 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.

Imran Heydari, who focused on Ashiq music until revolution and later made santurs on the side. 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 neighborhood of music shops in 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, following Khomeini's, did not change much in the state of music. Meanwhile, one could clearly 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-Abadi³². 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 tonbak. 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 correct. 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 over to my mother with utmost secrecy.

My early inspirations to learn santur were my mother's encouragements and my father's gramophone recording of Faramarz Payvar (1933-2009). As my mother asked me if I wanted to learn santur, I did not know what it was. As I heard the recording, the crystal-sounding santur swept me away. Later I realized that Payvar's playing also inspired others across generations to engage in music: "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. It was on Varzandeh's passing" (Aabyaar 2021), and "I used to listen to Payvar and Marzieh on the radio" (Safdari 2020). I did not have an option to choose among instruments. "If tar would be available, I might have become a tar player instead" (Aramesh(Mohsen) 2021). Later, as my first concert visit, my parents got me to a performance by Ardavan Kamkar, a child protégé. It was among first permitted concerts. Tickets were hard to get³³. I enjoyed Kamkar's virtuosic performance, not knowing he would

³² He became a member of the Assembly of Experts of the Leadership.

³³ For years after that there were long lines of enthusiasts outside concert halls waiting for tickets. The allowed number of tickets per person 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.

be my teacher later³⁴. Those years, I saw santur only once on TV: a war propaganda featuring a *hymn group*³⁵ from Abadeh, honoring an anonymous martyr of the *holly defence*³⁶.



Figure 3: Instrument carrying permit from 1980’s, issued by Ministry of Islamic Guidance (Aramesh(Mohsen) 2021)

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

³⁴ 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).

³⁵ 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).

³⁶ That is the regime's reference to the eight-year Iraq-Iran war.

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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