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PERFORMANCE PRACTICES OF PERSIAN
TRADITIONAL MUSIC

A musical tradition which has been transmitted and perpetuated aurally leaves very little evidence as to its past performance practices. It is very difficult to know exactly how a musical presentation proceeded, and what were the prevailing performance styles. Only written observations, by a participant, or a member of the audience, may help to give some idea as to how a 'concert' was conducted and what it entailed. Such accounts, however, are very scarce and, if available, are never adequately descriptive or reliable. It is subsequent to the advent of visual and sound recording that we can have a clear idea as to the content, procedure and style in the execution of this type of music.

It can be argued that a musical culture which is fundamentally aural tends to be tradition-bound and conservative. It may be reasonable to assume, therefore, that the performance procedure for this type of music does not change a great deal, and that what we know of it in our own time may not be too removed from how it was done in the more distant past. But it can be also argued that, since such a music lives in the memory of the performer and is subject to improvised renditions, a high degree of freedom is inevitably admitted resulting in gradual change in its content and style. It is also important to consider that the impact of the modern age of mass media and the force of westernisation, in particular, have been too great not to have seriously affected all aspects of such musical traditions. It is simply not credible to imagine that the performance procedure of, say, an Indian *raga*, a Turkish *makam*, or a Persian *dastgāh* has remained substantially unaltered throughout centuries.

On the other hand, not all musical traditions of the East have remained entirely aural. Composition of pieces with more or less fixed melodic and rhythmic content have been developed in some cultures where a form of musical notation has been employed. For example, in the context of the *Gagaku* ceremonial music of Japan, the *Gamelan* music of Java, and the Carnatic music of South India, distinct forms of notation - independent of western notation - have been used. The object, in these cases, is not an exact representation of all aspects (melody, rhythm, dynamics, etc.) of the music in notation, but a broad hint - an *aide-memoire*, one might say - as to the essentials of melodic and structural formation in a piece of music. Their reproduction is, therefore, intended to be more approximate than absolute.

As concerns the musical traditions of the Middle East, within the domain of the Ottoman Empire, from the 17th century, a flourishing school of composition, with predetermined melodic and rhythmic content, was developed. The essentials of these compositions, necessarily, had to be either memorised or be written down. The melodic source for each composition was the implicit melodic configurations of the makam to which the piece adhered. Rhythmically, the piece was set in one of the many rhythmic cycles known in the classical tradition. A system of notation, using the Arabic alphabet, was developed which, in turn, was replaced, in the 19th century, by the adoption of western notation. Accordingly, the inclusion of such composed pieces in the performance of Turkish classical music, more or less relying on notation, whether in the present time, results in aspects of predictability in the content of a concert. Yet, it must be emphasised that a concert of Turkish court music was only partly made of composed pieces; improvisational sections, free from reference to any notation, were also included.¹

The Mediterranean Arabs were for centuries subjects of the Ottoman Empire. Their urban musical traditions were closely affiliated with that of Turkey. By the 19th century, a technique of composition, similar to that of Turkey, based on melodic ideas inherent to each maqām,² had found currency in the Arabian musical centres of Cairo, Damascus, Tunis and in the cities of El-Maghreb (Morocco). The Arab *nauba*, a counterpart of the Turkish *fasil* (suite of pieces which make-up the format of a concert of classical music), included a number of pre-composed pieces which were learnt either from notation or through memorisation.

Persia, independent of Ottoman suzerainty, went her own separate way.³ Although, in the Middle Ages, it was the merger of Greek theory with Persian instrumental and vocal practices which had formed the backbone of learned musical systems throughout the Moslem world, from the 16th century, serious rupture in political and cultural ties moved Persia increasingly away from the rest of that world which was, by that time, largely under Turkish rule. Turkey's geographic closeness to the west, as well as her pressing presence in the affairs of the European continent, had been responsible for early inroads of westernisation. The musical effects of her contact with the west, among other things, had led to the emergence of the aforementioned trends towards composition of notated pieces. There was no parallel to this development in Persia.

Until mid-19th century, Persia's relations with the west were slight, sporadic and none too momentous. The main contacts were with the British who were the overlords in the neighbouring India. There were also contacts of a more menacing nature with Russia - perhaps not really a part of the western world - to the north. By this time, Russian expansionist policies had resulted, through warfare, in the loss to Persia of her dominions south of the Caucasus mountains including parts of Georgia and Armenia, Nakhchivān, Kārābāgh, Dāghestān and Šīrvān.⁴ In any event, contacts

1 All discussions in this article are concerned with classical or art music and not with folk or regional music. It goes without saying that folk musics, everywhere, are transmitted aurally and notation, generally, is not used.

2 In Turkey this word is spelled as *makam* but *maqām* is the standard transliteration of the word which is Arabic.

3 Persia is the traditional western name for Iran. For reason of historic continuity and to evoke correct mental associations, some writers, including the present one, continue to use the name Persia and the adjective Persian in preference to Irān and Iranian.

between Persia and Europe, before mid-19th century, had produced no significant cultural influences. A gradual intensification of politico-economic entanglements with the two neighbouring powers came about in the second half of the century. The French, also, entered the scene on a more benign level and exerted marked cultural influence. Musically, by the beginnings of the 20th century, western impact was in evidence and similar developments to that which had, long before, taken place in Turkey were in progress. Among the many influences coming from contacts with western music were attempts at composition of fixed pieces and the use of western notation.⁵

In its classical or courtly tradition Persian music had always combined the art of composition with performance. The modal concept in Persian music, as is true in Turko-Arabian traditions, involves not only a set of tones but also certain melodic functions for those tones which lead to a manner of melodic behaviour. These melodic implications, however, are not firm or specific enough to constitute thematic material. Extemporised renditions based on these nebulous melody models, suggested by each mode, for all we know, had been, for centuries, the very life of Persian classical music. The only evidence which points to an evolution in the performance procedure and style of Persian music is the emergence of the *dastgāh* system. This is a procedure according to which a series of modes (*maqāms*) are grouped together as a large composite unit called *dastgāh* (system or a whole made of inner components). The initial mode in the group has a position of dominance and its title is given to the group as a whole. Other modes within the group maintain their own melodic identity and have their own titles, but they are recognised as belonging to the collection which goes under the name of the opening mode.

This is undeniably a highly simplified description of the basic structure of a *dastgāh*. A more detailed account lies beyond the scope of this article.⁶ There are no sources which would reliably identify the period when the *dastgāh* phenomenon had emerged. At the same time, there are no indications that it had currency before the 19th century. Prior to that time, as far as it can be determined, Persian classical music, the same as Turkish or Arabian musics, was performed on the basis of improvised renditions in the context of individual *maqāms*. The reason for the emergence of the practice of modal grouping is as uncertain as the period when it took place. In any event, this development is unique to Persian music and is one of a number of distinctions which set this musical tradition apart from those of Turkey and the Arab countries.

By the middle of the 19th century the *dastgāh* principle was firmly established. There were twelve *dastgāhs*, each containing a number of *maqāms*, linked together with a melodic cadential pattern which referred to the opening *maqām*.⁷ These cadences (*forud*), which were also subject to improvised expansion, affirmed the

4 The province of Šīrvān, subsequent to its incorporation into the Russian and eventually Soviet empires, was renamed as Āzerbāijān, now an independent republic. In fact, historically and geographically, Āzerbāijān is the area south of the River Araxes which forms the northwest region of Persia's present boundaries.

5 A full account of the westernisation of Persian music is given in this writer's article in MUZIKOLOŠKI ZBORNIK (*Musicological Annual*) XXVII, pp. 87-97.

6 Farhat, H., *The Dastgāh concept in Persian Music*, Cambridge, 1990, pp. 19-21.

7 Commonly, seven of the twelve *dastgāhs* are considered as primary and the remaining five are regarded as secondary or derivative. These five usually go under the generic name *āvāz*.

dominance of the initial mode while creating a sense of unity in the collection as a whole.

Individual *maqāms* within the structure of a *dastgāh*, each having its own proper name, were generically called *gušé*. Although there were no 'composed' pieces as such, some of the *gušés* adhered, to some extent, to a predetermined format. This was particularly true of the improvisations which were not only guided by the melodic contour elemental to each *maqām*, but were also subject to specific rhythmic stipulations. Most improvisations in Persian music are non-metric, that is to say, they do not maintain prolonged rhythmic patterns. But there are a few *gušés* in the structure of each *dastgāh* which uphold clear and firm rhythmic designs. This type of a *gušé* is generically called a *zarbi* (metric) and is closer to the idea of a fixed composition. The 19th century performance of a *dastgāh* included a few such metric *gušés*, interspersed among the non-metric improvisations.

Later in the 19th century, two other genres of pieces found their way into the performance practice of a *dastgāh*, both of which were largely precomposed: the *reng* and the *čahārmezrāb*.

The *reng* is an instrumental piece in the popular dance metre of 6/8. It is possible that the *reng* was brought into classical repertory from folk traditions. The inclusion of a *reng* became increasingly common as the concluding number in the suite of pieces which constituted the performance of a *dastgāh*. *Rengs* could be also played outside the context of a *dastgāh*, for actual dancing.

The *čahārmezrāb* is a solo instrumental piece designed to display the virtuosity of the performing artist. It can be placed virtually at any point in the course of the performance of a *dastgāh*. It adheres to the modal implications of the *gušé* which precedes or follows it. The 19th century *čahārmezrābs* employ fragmentary thematic ideas which admit considerable expansion through improvisation. These short themes, or motifs, are clearly subordinated to the flurry of embellishments around them which aim to demonstrate the performer's technical prowess.

On the basis of the foregoing, we can conclude that, in the 19th century, the performance procedure of Persian classical music had undergone considerable evolution. It had developed the practice of chaining groups of modes into a system of 12 *dastgāhs*; and it had brought into usage a limited number of loosely composed pieces which could be repeated with relative consistency from one performance to another.

As to the manner and style of execution, a reasonably clear idea can be had from the practice of musicians of the older generation who were alive when recording technology became available. These venerable artists not only maintained a purer performance style, but also had distinct memories of how the older masters, long since passed away, used to perform. What we may call the 'authentic' style, as represented by these musicians, is more contemplative, draws more on extended improvisation and includes comparatively few composed pieces. It does not emphasise the display of sheer virtuosity at the expense of substance which characterises the style of many musicians of the younger generation. Most importantly, their renditions include a larger selection from the *gušés* within the repertory of each *dastgāh*. Some *dastgāhs* contain numerous *gušés*; to include all of them would result in a very lengthy duration of performance. Normally a selection is made which would exclude some of the *gušés*. In the authentic style, the selection is made in such a way as not to leave out too many of them, whereas in modern performances the majority of *gušés* are consistently

eliminated, which has practically caused their permanent expunction from the repertory.

The evolution of performance procedure, content and style, in the 20th century, has been marked by accelerated westernisation. A growing interest, on the part of musicians who had some exposure to western music, is shown in the composition of clearly defined pieces which are not subject to significant variation from one performance to another. The emergence of this type of composed music, mixed with improvised segments, brings about a degree of consistency and predictability in the performance procedure unknown before.

Two newly innovated genres of compositions became rapidly popular. The first of these was an instrumental type, a kind of overture to a *dastgāh*, called *pišdarāmad*. Its originator is believed to have been Qolām Hoseyn Darviš (1872-1926), a renowned *tār* player.⁸ He had travelled abroad for recording sessions and had gained some understanding of western music. Moreover, he was one of the early 20th century musicians who endeavoured to promote the cause of group playing. Up to that time, Persian classical music, by virtue of the paramountcy of improvisation, had remained fundamentally soloistic. Exposure to western music prompted some musicians to form instrumental ensembles in emulation of western orchestras. In order to be able to play together, such ensembles needed music with fixed, clear and unchanging melodic and rhythmic elements. The *pišdarāmad* was one of the forms developed for ensemble playing, although, being monophonic, it could also be played by a solo instrument.

The other category of composed piece was a type of ballad (*tasnif*) written for solo voice with instrumental backing. The rise of *tasnif* composition coincided with a period of revolutionary upheaval beginning in 1906. The thrust of the revolution was to establish a constitution and a parliament, and to limit the powers of the monarch. Revolutionary sentiments expressed in poetry were used as lyrics for *tasnifs*. Musically, *tasnifs* were composed in conformity with the modes of different *dastgāhs* and were ordinarily performed at the conclusion of a vocal rendition of the appropriate *dastgāh*. From mid 1920's the revolutionary movements were suppressed and the choice of lyrics for *tasnif* compositions were mostly made from the vast treasury of mediaeval love poetry.

To summarise, by the mid-point in the 20th century, the traditional 19th century style of *dastgāh* performance had been submitted to the following changes:

1. A pre-composed instrumental piece was added as a starter before the improvisatory sections were to begin. An increasing number of such overtures (*pišdarāmad*) were composed by different musicians, using western notation, for each of the 12 *dastgāhs*.

2. Similarly many vocal ballads (*tasnif*) were composed and notated for each *dastgāh*. They were normally sung at the conclusion of a vocal performance, although it was not uncommon for the *tasnif* to be placed at the beginning, to be repeated also at the end.

3. In addition to the few traditional *čahārmezrābs* from the 19th century, new *čahārmezrābs* were composed in the basic modes of different *dastgāhs*, as well as in the modes of some of the *gušés* of each *dastgāh*. As compared with the older style

⁸ *Tār* is a plucked instrument with a double resonating chamber, a long fretted finger board and six strings.

which employed only one or two such display pieces, it became common to give greater prominence to *čahārmezrābs* in the course of a performance.

4. A large number of new *rengs* were also composed and were used for the instrumental ending of each of the 12 *dastgāhs*.

5. The performance duration of a *dastgāh*, in conformity with the demands of radio programmes, had become much shorter than in the old style. This fact, added to the penchant for the inclusion of more composed pieces, resulted in a considerably reduced reliance on improvisation.

6. With a more truncated time span for the presentation of a *dastgāh*, many of the *gušés*, within the repertory of each *dastgāh*, were excluded which eventually led to their total deletion from the memory of most musicians.

7. A growing interest in western music brought into usage, within the context of Persian music, a few western instruments. Violin in particular became extremely popular. It was used both for solo improvisations and in orchestras mixed with native instruments. Clarinet and piano, also found some application, although the piano is singularly incompatible with the intervals and the character of Persian music.

8. In the old style, group playing was rare and, indeed, there was very little that a group could do together since the music was mainly improvisatory. By mid-20th century ensembles, containing four to six instrument, had become the standard for performance of *dastgāhs*. There were compositions that the group could play together and, in the extemporised sections, the instrumentalists took turns in leading the improvisation. The combination usually included a *tār*, a violin, a *santur*, and a *tombak*,⁹ a clarinet and a piano were possible additions.

From the 1950's to the revolution of 1978-79, the evolution of style and procedure in the performance of traditional music was marked by accelerated westernisation and commercialisation. This was the period of dynamic reforms and lively musical activity. The trends that had set in motion, in the first half of the century, the above mentioned changes were intensified. Composition of *pišdarāmad*s and *rengs* continued. *Čahārmezrābs* became more elaborate and virtuosic. This genre of solo instrumental composition, more than any other reflects the modern performer's departure from the traditional style which was essentially removed from display of showmanship. The old fashioned approach tended to stress the deeply-felt, meditative, even mystic, qualities in musical expression. The modern way became extroverted and much more concerned with the display of technical dexterity. A rendition of a *dastgāh* became, at times, dominated by numerous lengthy *čahārmezrābs*, composed either by the performing artist or by other known composers.

The proliferation of *tasnifs*, after the second World War, more than anything else, attests to the commercial values that were discovered in music. This genre of vocal composition can be viewed as a counterpart of western pop music and was heavily influenced by it. In a new type of *tasnif* (more commonly called *tarāné*), adherence to traditional modes of Persian music was abandoned in favour of the major or minor tonalities. Great many *tarānés* were produced which were no longer intended to be an accessory to any *dastgāh* structure. Some of these were composed by musicians who did not belong to the classical tradition. These *tarānés* were recorded and marketed individually. They were sung by an increasing number of highly popular singers who

⁹ Santur is a trapezoid shaped dulcimer, the prototype of the Greek santuri but smaller. The tombak is a goblet shaped drum with skin covering the wide end and open on the narrow end.

drew vast incomes from record sales and from appearing in concerts. At the same time, the more traditional *tasnifs*, composed within the modal patterns of the *dastgāh* system, continued also to be produced by musicians who were active mainly in the classical tradition.

Paradoxically, while, in this period, Persia was experiencing rapid reforms and modernisation, a resurgence of interest in native values and a reevaluation of what seemed to be indiscriminate westernisation, were also mooted by a segment of the intelligentsia. The musical consequences of the pressures created by this sense of needed revival were marginal but not without significance. Among the moves made for a revival of the 'authentic' in music was a reawakened interest in some of the neglected native instruments. For example, the Persian fiddle, the *kamānčé*, which in the first half of the 19th century, owing to the popularity of the violin, had become practically obsolescent, made a stunning come-back. To a lesser extent, other instruments such as the *ud* (lute) and the *qānun* (psaltery), were also resurrected, although their application was largely in ensembles and not so much as solo instruments.¹⁰

Even more important was the renewed attention focused on the question of authenticity of traditional music and the concern shown, in some high quarters including by the Empress, on the preservation of aural tradition and its safeguard against the sweep of pop music. In 1968, a Centre for Preservation and Propagation of National Music was established under the aegis of National Iranian Radio and Television Organisation. The Centre employed a number of reputable old time musicians to conduct classes for the teaching of Persian musical instruments, and singing in the authentic manner. By late 1970's, the Centre had produced a number of dedicated young performers who were committed to the promotion of the old 19th century style of performance. Moreover, the Centre created an archive of recordings of the complete repertory of each *dastgāh* as performed by master musicians under its employ.

The Music Department at the University of Tehran, also, maintained a Persian music branch - apart from its main course of study which was concerned with occidental music - whose primary concern was the promotion of knowledge and practical skills in the traditional way. The leading figure in charge of this programme was Nur Ali Borumand, a blind musician of high reputation, who had a phenomenal memory-bank of *gušés* and their 'authentic' style of improvised performance. The efforts of this Department, also, resulted in the training of a number of well-qualified musicians who became prominent figures in due course.

The Ministry of Culture and Arts maintained a number of orchestras including one that was entirely composed of native instruments. The Ministry had under contract some of the best known performers of national music and organised occasional concerts by these musicians. Most importantly, this Ministry, in 1963, undertook to publish in western notation, a complete edition of the 12 *dastgāhs* containing all known *gušés* in the repertory of each. This was done largely through the efforts of a distinguished musician of the old school, Musā Ma'rufi.

It can be thus summarised that the period from the end of the Second World War to the revolution of 1978-79 represented rapid commercialisation and westernisation

¹⁰ The *ud* and the *qānun* were very prominent instruments in the mediaeval period. For reasons which are not altogether clear they fell out of favour among Persian musicians well before the 19th century, but they remained popular in Turkey and in the Arab countries.

in music, and, at the same time, ushered in a measure of renewed appreciation for the subtle beauties of native music and a growing interest in its preservation.

The revolution which brought down the time honoured institution of monarchy in 1979 has replaced it with a peculiar form of theocracy without precedent in Persian history. The Islamic fundamentalism which appears to be the dominant persuasion of the regime of the Shiite clerics in Persia today has demonstrated marked ambivalence towards music. For the first few years, after taking the reigns of power, the regime showed uncompromising disapproval for music. Music schools were closed down, orchestras were disbanded and all public musical activity was brought to a halt. Even radio broadcasts of music, both native and western, were terminated. Before long, however, the futility, if not the fallacy, of such a policy became obvious. It was clearly impossible to expunge music from the life of a people who could perform music at home at will, who had access to recordings of all kinds, and had short wave radios capable of tuning into foreign broadcasts. It was also realised that it would be very difficult to manage 24 hour radio and TV programmes without music, and impossible to attract an audience even if it could be done. Most importantly, the very theological foundation of the rejection of music was brought to question.¹¹

Within a few years this hostile policy towards music was largely revoked. Only music judged to be vulgar and licentious in content - necessarily relating to textual content - has been ruled out. Native traditional music, as well as western classical music, have received the regime's endorsement. The prevailing attitude, at the present time, seems to be favourable to the survival of the tradition in good health. Whereas before the revolution the purity of the classical tradition was at risk of being compromised by the impact of commercially successful pop music, now the rejection of this type of music may serve to safeguard that purity. What remains objectionable, needless to say, is any regime's presumption to dictate to its citizens and to impose its will on artistic matters.

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¹¹ Islam's position on music is theologically unclear. The fact that music can move and excite the listener is difficult to explain and is thus suspicious. For this reason, the Moslem clerics - and indeed many clerics in the Judeo-Christian traditions, as well - have had problems with music. However, there are no specific proscriptions regarding music in Islamic scriptures.

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POVZETEK

Perzijsko klasično glasbo predstavlja velik obseg tradicionalnih modusov (maqām), ki določajo melodične modele za improvizacijo. Glede na to, da gre za ustno tradicijo, si ne moremo prav natančno predstavljati načinov in postopkov, ki so določali njihovo izvedbo v preteklosti. Vemo pa, da sta v 19. stoletju struktura in način izvajanja te glasbe doživela pomembno spremembo. Modusi so bili urejeni v 12 skupin (dastgāh). Začetni modus v vsaki skupini je pomenil povezovalno silo, s katero so ob pomoči kadenčne formule z imenom forud dosegli ponavljanje.

V prvi polovici 20. stoletja je začel vpliv zahoda v precejšnji meri določati tako vsebino kot način izvajanja tradicionalne glasbe. Repertoarju improviziranih dastgāh so bile pridane dokončno oblikovane skladbe v zahodnjaški notaciji. Gojili so štiri kompozicijske zvrsti: pišdarāmad, instrumentalna uvertura; reng, sklepna plesna glasba; tasnif, vokalna balada; in čahārmezrāb, solistična virtuoza instrumentalna skladba. V modo so prišle male skupine, v katerih so tradicionalne instrumente povezovali npr. z violino, klarinetom in klavirjem.

Od petdesetih let do revolucije 1978-79 sta zahodni vpliv in modernizacija še naraščala. Zaradi poudarjene komercialne vrednosti se je močno množila komponirana glasba, posebej ljubezenske pesmi. Več pozornosti je bilo usmerjeno v razkazovanje virtuoznosti, kar je šlo na račun duhovnosti, tako bistveni za "avtentično" perzijsko glasbo.

Kot posledica revolucije, ki je na oblast pripeljala šiitske duhovnike, je bilo sprva ostro cenzuriranje vsake glasbene dejavnosti. Postopoma se je ta stroga politika umirila. Danes sta tako domača tradicionalna kot zahodna klasična glasba široko sprejeti in doživljata svoj razcvet. Zato pa lahka oz. pop glasba nima dostopa do javnosti.