

Twenty Years of Developments in Persian Music

Kambiz Roshanravan

Prior to the victory of the Islamic Revolution of 1979, music in Iran benefited from a particular splendor in that a wide variety of music, including classical, western and Iranian pop, traditional music, international music, children's music, film scores, folk music, jazz, and instructional music was available in abundant quantities. Listeners could find the music of their choice broadcast from a variety of radio programs or could purchase them from a variety of outlets. Musical performances, by small or mid-sized ensembles from Europe and the United States were regular events. During festivals, such as the Shiraz Arts Festival, the Touss Festival and the Culture and Arts Festival, chamber or symphonic orchestras, which included major international musical figures, would perform in Iran. Pop music fans could also attend a variety of concerts before the revolution and Iranian ensembles had the freedom to perform a wide variety of Iranian musical scores, for Iranian audiences. A range of radio programs, dedicated to providing their listeners with a variety of educational and explanatory programs on and about music, enjoyed popularity during this time. As such, one could contend that Iran, prior to the revolution, was a major center for international classical and modern musical performances, and Iranian musicians enjoyed the ability to be in touch with and stay abreast of the latest international developments in the music industry.

The victory of the Islamic Revolution spurred the incorporation of Islamic ideology into official practices. And, like other revolutions, or major political transformations, the beginning years of the Iranian revolution witnessed a degree of disorganization within government ministries. Political turmoil of the early days of the revolution, prevented, for a short while, new developments and productions in the music industry. During the initial stages of the revolution, because of prevailing perceptions about the inability to partake in their art, many Iranian musician and singers departed Iran for other countries. Those working in the pop industry were especially quick to flee the country. This was mainly due to the fact that many revolutionary officials viewed pop music as a symbol of the overthrown monarchy and sought, as a priority, to disassociate it from the culture of the country.

Along with the lull in the development and production of pop music, there were other musical genres, which suffered from a temporary halt in production. Slowly, with the stabilization of the political situation in Iran, the appointment of officials within government agencies and ministries, and the production of radio and television programs, bits and segments of classical music were broadcast, mostly as fillers between programs, from radio and television programs. Along side of these limited broadcasts, revolutionary

anthems were produced and broadcast. In this way, the production and broadcast of music in Iranian society began to slowly increase.

The Iraqi invasion of Iran spurred and increased greatly the production of military and *hemasi* anthems¹, and quickly began to influence the production of all types of music in Iran, including symphonic production and performances, traditional music, folk music, and even children's music. The influence of war music, in all musical sectors and institutions, was felt during these years. War music was produced and performed in schools, universities, and on radio and television programs (including children's programs) and its influence was particularly felt in the religious music that was produced during this period.

During the first few years of the war, Iranian music witnessed, for the first time, the adaptation of *nohe*, a religious song of mourning for prophets and saints, to honor the memory of war heroes and the war.² *Nohes* were used to incite the spirit of warriors, especially those present at the front lines, but also that of the country's youth, to beckon them to join the war effort. These *nohes* were broadcast broadly at the front lines and within cities and villages. *Nohes* were also broadcast regularly from radio and television programs, and because they were effective in stirring up public sentiment, they can be credited with bringing the greatest support to the front lines. Slowly, the more popular of the *nohes* were arranged for a wide range of performances by a variety of musical groups. This is a noteworthy development, because, prior to this period, *nohes* were usually performed without musical instruments.

The war also affected greatly the traditional and folk music industry, as these musicians too began to compose national and patriotic war anthems. These anthems, which were by far livelier than traditional Persian music, would be adapted and performed by traditional musical ensembles, which included traditional musical instruments, like the *tar*, *santur* (dulcimer), *daf* (a tambourine-like instrument) *kamancheh* (a violin-like instrument), *tonbak* (a tambourine-like instrument), and the *ney* (flute). The adaptation of war anthems by traditional music ensembles, was an unprecedented and unexpected event, and challenged general notions about the capacity for adaptation and innovation in traditional Iranian music.

Along with traditional music ensembles, symphonic orchestras, the national orchestra, folk music groups in various regions of the country and military orchestras were busy performing war anthems. It should be mentioned that folk and regional music groups are

¹ Hemasi anthems represent a new genre of music in Iran, with epic, revolutionary songs and lyrics.

² Nohe is a type of religious music and song. It is used to commemorate and honor religious figures and prophets and is particularly associated with the mourning festivities of Aashoora (when Imam Hossein, grandson of the Prophet Mohammad, was killed in Karbala--currently in Iraq). Nohe is made up of two independent phrases, the first being of greater importance, which is continuously repeated. The melody of a Nohe is usually derived from the traditional *radif* or from folk melodies, both with deep national and cultural roots. Nohes are usually relatively slow and deliberate and their lyrics tend to incite religious fervor. The rhythm and the lyrics of the Nohe are designed to sway listeners and mourners into beating their chests in a rhythmic fashion. The beating of chests, a mourning tradition, is especially associated with religious mourning, and Aashoora mourning festivities.

typically comprised of six musicians and a singer. The instruments used by these groups tend to have limited sound and performance capabilities. Though they can easily play local folk tunes, they are limited in their capacity to perform more complicated musical scores, such as anthems. Nevertheless, in various parts and regions of Iran, one can find noteworthy examples of war anthem composed by folk musicians. These anthems tend to resemble the specific musical and cultural characteristics of their regions and are usually accompanied by dance and verse.

Another major contribution of the Imposed War on the development of music in Iran can be observed in the general popularity of military orchestras. Military orchestras, before the revolution, would only perform on military bases and for military audiences. Military officials predominantly composed and arranged the music performed by these orchestras. On occasion, these orchestras would perform classical music or other famous compositions. After the war, military orchestras became much more accessible to the general public and were given a broad forum for displaying their technical and musical skills. Children's music too was influenced greatly by the war. In fact, some lovely and delicate pieces, commemorating the war and war heroes, were composed during this period.

With the commencement of the first International Fajr Film Festival, in 1982, which included a category for best film score, the attention of many composers turned to the composition of film scores. This trend was successful in engaging many talented and well-known musicians and as such the years that followed can be called the "golden age of film score composition." In fact, the best Iranian film scores were composed between 1983 and 1989 while the nation was at war.

By 1984, the use of a variety of music without verse, including classical, light listening, international and light pop, was being broadcast from radio and television programs. As such, music was increasingly being used in public forums, but still the production of public programs, dedicated to the analysis and history of music composition was forbidden. Music was used predominantly to fill gaps between radio and television programs and to provide variety. In those years too, broadcasting of songs with female vocalists and displaying musical instruments were forbidden. And despite the broadcast of music by the media, composers, singers and songwriters were never mentioned.

Concerts too were limited in number. So much so that the mid 1980's witnessed fewer than 20 musical concerts, which included predominantly performances by traditional and folk musical groups and symphonic orchestras.

The omission of musical programs from radio and television broadcasts, the closing down of music schools, and the restrictions placed on musical performances and concerts, the purchase or the possession of musical instruments, broadcasting of songs with female vocals, and the displaying of musical instruments during television broadcasts were the main reasons for the static state of music during the first few years of the revolution. The Islamic nature of the Iranian revolution, and the religious beliefs that became part and parcel of every government organization and ministry, attributed to the strict regulations

against music in general. These restrictions created a fertile ground for the flight of many musicians from Iran and the abandonment of musical production and performances in Iran's provinces, both of which carried with them dire consequences for the art of music and the music industry. In fact, during the early days of the revolution, the limited musical productions and performances allowed were exclusive only to Tehran, the Capital city.

It was under such circumstances that the Fajr music festival was established in 1985. A variety of traditional and folk musical groups, from throughout the country, participated in this festival. The Fajr Music Festival was successful at organizing several triumphant concerts and was faced with overwhelming public support, enabling it to act as an impetus in promoting new developments and transitions in the art of music and the music industry in Iran. The general public's support of the Fajr Music Festival enabled organizers to expand the scope and size of the Festival each year, so that by 1991, the Fajr Music Festival had become an international event, with participation from both large and small musical groups and ensembles from Asia and Europe. The duration of the Fajr Music Festival, in its first year, was five days, which was expanded to fifteen days by 1999, with performances in twenty halls. As such, the festival can be seen as a major factor in the transitions and developments of the Iranian music industry.

The success of the Fajr Music Festival and its popularity with the public was a major factor in the decision to establish other such festivals, including The Sacred Defense Biennial Music Festival; Young Musicians Festival; Folk Music Festival; Yaas Music Festival (exclusive to women); and Pop Music Festival.

With the end of the war with Iraq in 1988, military anthems and marches had taken a back seat to other types of music in Iran. Musical concerts slowly increased in numbers. The public was receptive to this trend and demonstrated its support by purchasing cassette tapes and CDs in increasing numbers. Slowly, pop musicians began to partake in their craft by creating popular music which was broadcast in limited hours on radio and television programs. Of course, the film industry had provided a venue for the production and broadcast of pop music since 1985. But, it wasn't until 1988 that pop music could be heard independently. In fact, it only became available for sales at this time.

In the late 1980's an increase in import of electronic musical instruments, including synthesizers, sound generators, samplers and sound mixers, allowed those with ready access to these musical instruments the ability to compose their own music. Composers of film scores quickly adopted these new instruments for use in their work. Youth were especially interested, and began playing these instruments at home. The popularity of these instruments was so great that they created a generation of young amateur musicians who composed and performed music with heavy influences from Western pop.

Amateur composers of this type of music quickly took the place of the more professional composers working in the film industry. The few remaining composers in this field were also forced to take up the new technique, and utilize electronic musical instruments to compose Western-style pop as film score. By the early 1990's, the "golden period of film

score composition" had come to an end and Iranian film scores were mostly composed by amateur composers, with little or no musical training.

The 1990s also witnessed an increase in radio and television musical broadcasts. This trend created greater demands for the composition of music and the amateur musicians quickly turned their attention to this medium. Using the electronic instruments at their disposal, these amateur musicians composed and produced music more quickly and at lower costs, making them more attractive to television and radio producers. Before long, over 80 percent of the music broadcast by media outlets was produced by this new generation of amateur musicians. This trend greatly reduced the quality of music being broadcast by radio and television programs. In fact, today television and radio advertisements utilize this type of music and the services of these amateur composers exclusively.

The children's music industry in Iran also quickly adopted Western-style pop, composed by amateur musicians utilizing electronic instruments. Unfortunately, the absence of traditional Iranian music in children's music produced in Iran is greatly noticeable. The extreme focus on the production of pop music for children and youth threatens to disassociate the young Iranian generation of today from its cultural and musical heritage.

The production of pop music with lyrics began in 1997. This music was meant predominantly for radio and television broadcasts. This trend allowed new musicians, composers and singers to enter the music industry. These new musicians, like their predecessors in the new pop age, were mostly amateurs, but they benefited from the great support of the television and radio industry, which broadcast their music and songs regularly and on a daily basis. It did not take long before 80% of the music broadcast from media outlets was comprised of this new Iranian pop with lyrics (still heavily influenced by Western pop). The new trend was met with great enthusiasm by Iranian youth and families and soon these amateur musicians produced cassette tapes and CDs of their music for sale. From its entry into the market, this type of pop music attracted the attention of producers and financial backers, to such a degree that investors failed to show much of an interest in investing in the production of other types of music. Due to this trend, other music produced in Iran quickly lost much of their market share as sales dropped. Also the demand for pop concerts increased greatly and to such a degree that in the short time that followed, a large proportion of the musical concerts in Iran were pop concerts. These trends too influenced the International Fajr Music Festival, which in its fourteenth year in 1999, included an independent section titled "the People's Music" dedicated to pop music.

Traditional Iranian music, which suffered from a growing lack of popularity, since the early 1980's, began a transformation, which reflected the growing influence of pop music in Iran. Discouraged by low sales, producers spurred composers to revise the structure of traditional music, particularly by eliminating much of its rhythmless section. This new rhythmic style of traditional music, composed in short pieces and produced on cassettes and CDs, has lost much of its artistic authenticity and can no longer be classified as traditional Iranian music, in the true sense of the term. Fortunately there are still

musicians and singers, though limited in number, dedicated to preserving the classical art form of traditional Iranian music. They continue to compose and perform this type of music.

The pop mania has also affected the composition of folk or regional music in Iran. This is unfortunate, as folk music in Iran benefits from a long and proud oral and cultural history. Folk music and songs are passed on from generation to generation. Unfortunately, the movement of most young musicians, from various regions of Iran, away from traditional Iranian folk music and toward pop or a blending of folk and pop, threatens the existence of this art form. This is not to say that there are no more musicians and composers dedicated to this art form. Nevertheless, they are few in number and their dedication to the preservation of this strong oral tradition is not enough to maintain the livelihood of Iranian folk music. There needs to be more vigilance on the part of policymakers with respect to efforts designed to protect this rich cultural heritage. Unfortunately, Iranian society today, is moving toward pop music at accelerated rates, and this movement has negatively affected the production and sale of many other types of music in Iran. As such, music of a high artistic quality, traditional music, folk music and even children's music needs the support of policymakers and government officials, so that it can continue to survive, develop and thrive.

Possibly the most important development in the Iranian music industry in the last few years has been the establishment of *Khaneh Musiqi* or the House of Music, in 1999, by the Society of Music Guilds of Iran. This non-governmental, not for profit, association is dedicated to protecting the rights of Iranian musicians and promoting their art form, both in Iran and internationally. *Khaneh Musiqi* is dedicated to preserving the art of music in Iran by teaching and training skilled musicians, promoting Iranian music and musicians internationally and establishing a databank on Iranian music and musicians. *Khaneh Musiqi* places particular emphasis on preserving and supporting traditional, folk and orally transmitted Persian music. *Khaneh Musiqi* holds special events and frequently extends invitations to musicians, composers and producers working in all fields. *Khaneh Musiqi* has attributed to a more positive outlook among Iranian musicians, who can now look to this organization for the protection of their rights, their wages, social benefits, job security and the promotion of developments in the music industry.

An examination of the developments in Iran's music industry over the past twenty years: would not be complete without an analytical examination of musical schooling in Iran over the same period. After the victory of the Iranian Revolution, the instruction of music in institutions of higher education, universities and cultural centers was halted. In an attempt to respond to demands for music instruction, informal instruction within homes continued. Needless to say, in an environment where the official instruction of music and the production and carrying of musical instruments was restricted, the demand for music instruction outweighed the number of qualified instructors. This was partly due to the fact that families did not have a full array of leisure activities available to them and began to turn to music as a hobby for their children. Soon, nearly all experienced musicians took up the informal instruction of music. With the demand being greater than what could be supplied by the limited number of qualified instructors, music students with extensive,

and even limited amounts, of training took up instruction as well. As such, the quality of music instruction in Iran greatly declined. Still, the demand for music instruction remained unanswered. Additionally, the demand for music instruction increased the production of musical instruments. As such, this profession soon became a very well paid field of work.

The demand for music instruction is still on the increase. Fortunately, this demand is being attended to through formal educational institutions. In Tehran alone, there are currently four universities, three technical schools, and over seventy instructional centers dedicated to music instruction in a variety of fields. Additionally, all the cultural centers associated with the Tehran municipality offer some sort of music instruction. Unfortunately, many of the instructors engaged in music instruction have little formal musical training and experience themselves.

The broad popularity of music in Iran can be viewed as both a positive and a negative development. The unprecedented development of music in Iran has, unfortunately, not benefited from an appropriate depth and has occurred mostly on superficial levels. Currently, the music industry in Iran suffers from a dire shortage of experienced and well-trained musicians in all fields and there is not enough effort and resources dedicated to developing well-trained and qualified musicians. It is a stark reality that over 85 percent of the musicians engaged in the music industry, are comprised of amateur musicians. These musicians, with their limited knowledge and training in music, are unfortunately serving as models and are guiding the younger generation of Iranians interested in music.