

The Effect of Modernity on the Persian Classical Instruments

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Abstract

Different types of music can be classified based on various parameters. Consistent with several reasons, music can be classified into two categories: "Regional Music", which means music of different regions, and as the name reads, its source is adjacent area of big cities; and "Urban Music", which is a type that was common in cities. Music is almost found in every known culture, past and present, varying a lot in times and places. It may be concluded that music is likely to have been present in the ancestral population prior to the dispersal of humans worldwide, since all societies, even the most isolated tribal groups, have a form of music and related instruments. The culture of music is influenced by different aspects, such as social, economic changes & experiences, climates and access to technology to face other cultures. The emotions and ideas that music expresses, the situations in which music is played and listened to, and the attitudes toward music players and composers all vary between times and places. It makes us think that different places experience the challenge of modernity in the arts diversely. In this article, the effects of modernity on the instruments of urban music, alternatively known as "Persian classical music", have been studied.

Key words: modernity, urban music, Persian musical instruments, Performance

INTRODUCTION

This article is reviewing the influences of Modernity on Persian Classical Music. It is important to offer a proper definition of modernity and innovation as the modernity is a multi-faceted and complex phenomenon in music. "Modernity means constant renovation and understanding your new era. The word "modernity" is derived from the Latin word "modus", which means scale and balance. The word "modus" itself is the root word of both "mondo" and "moderatus" that the first one means "new" and the latter "balance". Therefore, modernity is a balance being new and fresh in time scale.

The concept of modernity includes some important elements such as:

- Adapting the times to be in the same era, since modernity is actually the passage of time.
- Being fresh and new which is the core of the definition of modernity.
- Keeping balance, since modernity is a bridge between traditions and innovations to fill in the gaps." (Jahan Begloo – 2003, 68)

"The latter one can be described more as the break in tradition does not mean any elimination of it but also creating a negation inside the modernity. Modernity has the power to criticize and reject itself inside which is called post-modernism. In fact this gap causes both a promotion of modernity and also preventing to uniform it ideologically. We

have pursued freer routes through the necessary balancing of tradition and modernity. Finally, we realize that modernity is not just a unique concept, since its nature is dynamic, which allows it to have various "beginnings" and "ends". For example, the industrial revolution can be considered a symbol of modernity in science and technology; democracy shows political modernity and aesthetic concept of modernity also gives us an image of a new relation between human and the beauty, as well as offering a new concept of desire. In this approach, aesthetic taste has been touched toward being more subjective, which has occurred exactly at Baroque era. Modern aesthetic shows us that no facts exist by accident and what we face it as just the infinity of various attitudes. Different aesthetic ideas, which are created by various attitudes, resulted from different cultural beliefs. Values and anti-values can be inconsistent and even contradictory at various "beginnings" and "ends". The aesthetic value is emphasized on tangible world that just describes human individually. Finding a bridge between the minds to transform a personal touch to a common sense is what remains. At this point of view, it is creating a social contract, respecting individual rights." (Jahan Begloo – 2003, 68)

Regarding different cultures and climates, the meaning of modernity can be quite different. The concept can be described as "end" in a particular area and conceptually it means "beginning" somewhere else. Another possibility is no "beginning" in even nomadic tribes.

DISCUSSION

Modernity and Music

Apparently finding "beginnings" and "ends" of music are not the same in developed countries compared with us as a developing country. For example, "the invention of printing industry (about 1450 AD) has had a significant impact on the evolution of music in Europe while influenced initially and performing dissimilar by arriving at our region. The advantages of this invention were significant by rapidly improving in training, increasing the popularity of music and the numbers of composers. The role of this element is not the same in different cultures regarding the time and the kind of effects on the music." (Roger Kamien – 2001, 201)

The influence of modernity on Persian music and allied instruments can be described by various "beginnings". For instance, "Tar" as the most developed instrument in Iran can be a symbol of innovation and attempting toward modernity, as well as making a break in the tradition of the past. Although formation and evolution of this instrument had been gradually like other cultural events worldwide, but there is just a single "beginning" behind the thought of this innovation and its necessity because the tools come gradually to the cultures when there is a demand. "The arrival and significant influences of western culture possibly was another "beginning" in Iran, which happened at the late of twentieth century, particularly Qajar dynasty. These changes seem to reach to the peak in different artistic fields such as music, painting, etc. at the time of Naseredin Shah Qajar while we cannot ignore the same influences and encounters before then." (Khaleghi – 1956, 98)



Persian identity is deeply embedded in the ancient tradition of Persian classical music which has simultaneously been transformed by the evolutions of Persian cultural values and beliefs over the time. The imperial courts of Safavid and Qajar dynasty did countenance the arts, but preserving a feeble link to the traditions of the past. For example the modern "dastgah", a codification and reorganization of the old modes, dates back to the late of Qajar dynasty. "The vary influence of the western music in Iran ought to be traced genuinely from the Qajar time onwards. That to what extent the Persian music could and can enjoy the impacts of the western music is a subject worth a great deal to study. Thoughtless Occidentalism and indisputable Orientalism overwhelmed by ignorance are two sides of the same coin and two faces of a reality with

hypothetically different natures that altogether constitute a, say, double ignorance." (Darvishi – 1994, 24)

Complicated relationship between tradition and modernity is illuminated in Rumi's word as he speaks of the holes in the flute (*Ney*) as wounds in the heart, bleeding with the anguish of separation and the desire for union. Music like poetry is capable with similar responsibility to record social developments. The poetic modes have a direct cultural and historical relation to the articulation of rhythm in music. In other words, music has the ability and necessary criterions to measure a culture's transition to the modernity. According to our investigations for a cultural medium to use as a vehicle in this exploration, music and musical literature presents themselves as a vessel navigating its course through many years. Generally speaking, we should always remember that criticizing something doesn't mean its absolute denial, because it was exactly during the classical and enlightenment period that long lasting music masterpieces were composed. Particularly, symphony is the biggest gift of the classical period, dedicated to orchestral music. Hence, modernity means current situation, which still exists. What we call post-modernism, is nothing more than comprehending the modernity and it doesn't mean the end of modernity and the historic start of another period. On such a ground all the incongruities are put beside each other and as quoted by Daryosh Shayegan, "The contemporary 40-patch life has begun, so it is not strange to see the polyphony of the Sitar with the Guitar or saxophone ..!" (Shayegan – 2001). The most power of Persian music and its individuality are derived not from the notes, but rather from the performance. The performer himself/herself is empowered to interpret, which is the real nature of modernity. Therefore, it can be argued that the burden of interpreting is too much. Some musicians choose easy way by cling to the basic tonal and interpretive standards that guide them safely from note to note. The training of a classical musician essentially involves memorizing the complete repertoire of the radif. So, the radif is not performed as such, but represents the starting point for creative performance and composition. There are, in fact, numbers of different radifs in current Persian classical music today, including interesting regional variations, mostly rooted in a shared tradition and each one usually associated with the particular master who developed it. "What is available today as radif – a collection of many old melodic figures preserved through many generation by oral tradition – in music were gathered by the best masters in their era and this arrangement had been applied to create a training method in Persian music. The idea came out of masters' minds that were considerably getting influenced by classified training methods of western music." (Talaee – 1993, 13)

Persian classical music relies on both improvisation and composition, and is based on a series of modal scales and tunes, which must be memorized. Apprentices and masters have a traditional relationship, which has declined during the

twentieth century as the universities and conservatories got the major centers to educate the arts, music in this case. Since this type of music is vocal based, it continues to function as a spiritual tool as it has throughout its history, and much less of a recreational activity. Although this study is focused more about these influences on the instruments, but it seems to be inevitable to discuss about the types of the instruments and performances. Each instrument, as a tool, is a manifestation of repertoire, a list or set of dramas, operas, musical compositions or roles which is prepared to perform, which is played by.

Instruments

A glimpse of popular instruments in Persian traditional music shows that they are principally made of three strings. Evidently, Tar and Setar as the most important and popular instruments amongst the major historian of Persian classic music, Farahani, had practically three strings too.



For example, old basic form of Tar had five strings setting as a double paired and a single one. Each pair is tuned in unison¹ to increase sound level most of the time. Today, this instrument is made by placing three double strings. Setar was also a three-cord instrument which had converted into a four-cord same as Kamancheh. Listening to the vocal samples of Tar and Setar show that the first string is the most commonly used and the others have been played to make sympathy² (harmonic accompanied), the so-called "Vakhan" or "Moshtagh". These stringed instruments have mainly a long neck and seem that left hand is moving more horizontally along it with less fingering application vertically for upper strings. It is also played just at the first position if there is any vertical movement. The same feature is more obvious in facing with the older instruments such as Tanboor³, Dotar, etc., which are using in folklore music. The length of the neck in stringed instruments depends on microtones (an interval

smaller than a semitone), horizontal movements and changing the positions along the neck are resulted of these intervals in Persian music repertoire.

In western classical music, the violin is played almost similarly by everyone. The violin is held in the same way and the same methods and strokes go on, but Persian music has a reputation for displaying a range of talent as the principles were passed from master to disciples as a part of our oral tradition. Every time the tone and the tune changes and every player performs according to his own taste, his own vibration which is quite unlike what you hear in the western classic orchestra where everything is predictable for the performer. This is why here artists can have their own signature style and many of these styles cannot be put in musical notations because they are the personal approaches of the artists and are passed on exclusively to their disciples. Persian musical instruments are not created to produce standard and fixed tunes. Of course, there are discrete ensembles but this does not mean everyone will perform the same way. Most Persian instruments produce high pitched tones and this also creates its own effects. The way music is produced and the way you feel about music is also a consequence of time and place. Traditional Persian music is meant more for live performances.

Persian music, like other eastern countries, has gained many experiences confronting Modernity. An example is the effort to perform the music polyphonically. This tenet has made many musicians and researchers explore and experience different ways to do so. Some believe that transferring the senses existing in Persian music is possible by the performances of Symphony Orchestra. Some people try to match and use traditional instruments and symphony instruments together to attain a new musical structure. Some believe that no western instrument can transfer the soul and senses of eastern music, except the native traditional instrument which have their origin from geographical and cultural roots. "The abstraction is rarely seen in Persian classical music which much depends on related instruments, especially various styles in performing. The study about Persian musical aesthetic would be incomprehensible if there is no consideration on performing features. The performance will determine the style of music and significant advantages would be result even by making the least of changes and adjustments in pitch or performing. Similarly, it also occurs in the instruments. For instance, adding an extra string, the technique of holding the instruments or how to tune them can change the performance and consequently the style and the music." (During – 2004)

By confronting effective factors of western culture at the late of Qajar dynasty – known as one of the "beginnings" or modernity – and the period thereafter, new efforts formed to make changes and improving Persian music with comparison by western culture. Pish-daramad, a free-standing composition played at the beginning of performance, was an

¹ it may refer to two notes sounding the same pitch, often but not always at the same time

² Sympathetic strings are used to enhance the sound of an instrument. They are typically not played directly by the performer, only indirectly through the tones that are played on the main strings, based on the principle of sympathetic resonance.

³ Referring to this topic that Tar and Setar are formed by making changes in Tanboor structure in past.

attempt along with these changes which has been charged to Dravish Khan. Present form of radif had been possibly influenced by designed western methods to provide a training method in Persian music. Ali Naghi Vaziri was one of the most prominent artists who had affected by the attitude of western culture in recent years. More interestingly, he had traveled to Europe to seek music education, then returning with some Western tendencies that propelled him to musical prominence. Vaziri was more than just a man balancing between Western influences and traditional facts. He represented the future of the cultural see-saw in Iran, which would move up and down to keep the balance according to the weight of tradition and modernity.

Vaziri had changed considerably in composing and playing instrument because of his wide knowledge and being influenced by western music. In comparison with other players, he was introduced a different method by applying Accords and Arpeggio to use the strings simultaneously. He always looked for new dimensions and perspectives in musical expression, and by doing so he revolutionized the style of playing the tar. The structure of Tar shows that 5th and 6th strings are not at the same thickness and also do not design for fingering, but created to use as a "Vakhan". Middle paired⁴ strings of the instrument also do not have a good sonority after performing 1st position and consequently the 2nd one and prefer to use different position in 1st string. Due to Vaziri's method, it was necessary to change the function of the 5th and 6th strings as harmonic or "Vakhan" to perform the melody. Moreover, applying all positions in each three double strings were required a new structure of this instrument based on this method. Next generations after Vaziri's time, according to performance technique of this instrument and also due to their attitude toward this method or older one, had been chosen their special ways to continue. As traditional Persian musicians were demoted, for generations, to virtually illiterate musicians who knew only how to perform and could not discuss their own music scientifically, the emergence of Vaziri as the exception placed him in a position of unquestioned authority.

Persian classical music is now performed by both traditional instruments and western instruments like the violin and the piano. The use of these Western instruments has caused changes in musical style and instrumental tuning, while placing increasing value on virtuosity of the performer. Technology has allowed Persian classical music to achieve more widespread audience; however, it has also created new performance traditions and permanent changes in musical program structure. The modernization and westernization of Iran have not only changed the structural components of Persian music in many ways, but have also exposed the art to the world.

Characteristic of Persian Instruments

Every nation has its own particular music and that music is the history and the language of that nation. Music speaks of different times and places and it takes on a new color at every level. Persian music which comes from the east has features that are peculiar to it. A brief comes as below:

- The music is mainly monophonic, with each instrument in an ensemble following one melodic scheme.
- The music is based upon a modal system; with each mode engendering different melodic types, called "gushehs" in Farsi. The execution of the melodic types is left up to the musician.
- The use of microtones divides the scales into more than twelve semi-tones.
- A priority is given to ornamentation.
- There are a number of substantial pauses in each piece.
- Melodies are concentrated on a relatively narrow register.
- Melodic movement occurs by conjunct steps.
- Emphasis is on cadence, symmetry, and motive repetition at different pitches.
- Rhythmic patterns are kept simple.
- The tempo is often rapid, and the ornamentation is dense.
- Vocal parts are often decorated with "Tahrir", a vocal ornamentation similar to yodeling.
- Also, Iranian music is unique in the Middle Eastern tradition in that the different melodic phrases or gushes are supposed to model the rhythmic stamp and melodic pattern of poetry.

So one should not compare this music with that of other nations because this music is as old as the time. It is quite evident that it is unique.

Group Performance

Regarding to cultural and historical facts, the most traditional instruments were initially meant for solo performance, and its particularly role was playing more in private ceremonies and was heard almost entirely at the royal courts of the monarchy which had found more opportunities to expose. Perhaps this is one of the main factors leading to solo performance in Persian music. Furthermore, the pressure of a kind of introverts over Persian music could be another reason of solo performance.

The instruments had fundamentally been designed and getting improved for solo performance showed their disability to play in group while the tendency was increase toward group performance, and the difficulties exposed gradually because of this conflict. Persian classical music was traditionally performed by a solo singer and a single instrumental accompanist in which case the instrument would shadow the voice and play short passages between the phrases of poetry - or by an instrumentalist on their own. In the course

⁴ is known "Sol" string.

of the last century it became increasingly common for musicians to perform in larger groups, usually comprising a singer and four or five instrumentalists, each playing a different classical instrument. Although this music was traditionally performed such way in unison, but the problems such as tuning and discordant of intervals in the instruments of the whole group were emerged despite of creating harmony. Nowadays one can hear both solo and group performances. Even though they have unique voicing, these instruments are intertwined in the ensemble to maintain a monophony texture.

Obstacles of Group Performance

Although many debates and discussions are considered about the nature of Persian music if it is basically suited for solo performing or not, the instruments are using in different types in group performance and also the necessity of changing the structure of instruments has been introduced to use them better in groups gradually.

Cases such as tuning, intervals and dynamic are fundamental and affective factors in group performance too.

Tuning and Intervals

Being in the same tune is the first issue which has been considered in a group performance for all instruments. Persian instruments essentially have some problems to tune quickly and staying tune for a long time due to various reasons such as the type of raw materials used in making the instruments' parts like strings, membrane and skin, as well as severe physical changes caused by the changes at temperature and humidity. For example, what we may hear of Ney, a common popular and the only wind traditional instruments, varies in tuning since any changes in location of the Ney around the mouth could make different sound as the physical parts like mouth, jaw and tongue are considered parts of the structure of the instrument under different conditions. The changes occur when the Ney player has to move the instrument around the mouth to change octaves in teeth technique which the player uses teeth to play the instrument in this method. This moving causes changes in the length of the instrument and finally undesired changes in the frequency (Zir – Bam) of notation.



This Technique, the "tooth and lip" technique, was introduced by Naye Assdollah, the famous Ney player of the Nasser court, to Persian Music and his new technique of sound production provided possibilities for development and change in the musical style of the Ney which give us a comprehensive body of information related to the structure of the instrument, its playing techniques, and its use in current musical practices. The study has determined that the music of the Ney belongs to a musical system which stresses individual traditions, but at the same time is unified by closely related structures and symbols.

Intervals are also another important subject to discuss in this paper. It is too difficult to reach a uniformed interval in group performance as there is not any stability of intervals in Persian music. Musician could be categorized in two groups due to their attitude in selecting the kind of intervals including the players who got influenced by tampered⁵ using in western music and the others who got influenced less.

Dynamic

In Music, dynamic range is the difference between the quietest and loudest volume (nuance) of an instrument, part or piece of music. Persian instruments lack the capability to use in a wide range in dynamic according to considerable cultural reasons. In other words, the loudest volume probably could not exceed more than forte⁶ in Persian instruments. This low range of nuance or dynamic range is performed intensely, especially in group performance.

CONCLUSION

Finally it should be mentioned that Persian instruments with their old structures and limited applications would be unable to achieve the contemporary era when it is passing through all its power and speed. On the other hand, this old music got confused among obvious influences of western culture as modernity or "beginning", which came and brought the innovation. Today, human mind is full of haste and turmoil, are occupied by high frequency sounds, the effects of which are clear among young generation and particularly the residence of big cities.

There is also no exception for music and the instruments in this case. At the time belonged to the electronic music and related instruments, which pull the young to modern music style such as Rock and Metal, our young generation face a traditional music, which does not meet their needs because of their old structures. They are looking for more speed, dynamics with much strong nuance and excitement melodies. Therefore, we have to consider this generation as a link between past and future – what actually are – to feel this

⁵ a system of tuning, in which every pair of adjacent notes has an identical frequency ratio.

⁶ a musical dynamic meaning "loudly" or "strong".

necessity to change the structures of the instruments and improve them in this respect.

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