

Electronic Music in Iran: Tradition and Modernity.

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Abstract

This paper aims to offer a general outline of the development of electronic music in Iran and its intertwinement with tradition. After presenting a brief history of electronic music before and after the 1979 Revolution of Iran, I will discuss in more depth the social, political and musical context in which three generations of Iranian composers have developed their musical language. With regard to the phenomenon of multiculturalism evolved in such contexts, the role of universities, the internet, and the use of personal studios will be taken into consideration.

1. Introduction

The particular sociological and political context of Iran, a country whose strong cultural structure does not simply allow for adopting new values, has always been problematic for composers. On one hand, there is increasing tendency toward Western art, science, and technology; on the other hand, the rich values of traditional music remain intact. This ambivalence presents a permanent challenge to composers in search of a suitable language to express their musical ideas. Traditional elements have been used by not only pioneers of Iranian electro-acoustic music, such as Alireza Mashayekhi and Darius Dolatshahi, during the 1960s, but also by younger generations who have the luxury of internet at their disposal. To the majority of young Iranian musicians of electronic music who come from a traditional musical milieu, modern technology has broadened possibilities for expressing new musical ideas within a traditional framework.

2. Historical and social context of music in iran

Many pioneers in the fields of mathematics, philosophy, medicine, physics, and music have rose from Persian Empire and Iran. According to Owen Wright, “The later half of the thirteenth century constitutes one of the most important periods in the history of Arab and Persian musical theory. It witnessed the emergence of a corpus of theoretical writings that not only demonstrate a considerable degree of originality, but also provide the framework within which all the major theorists of the following two centuries were to operate.”¹ One of the main preoccupations of these scientists was finding an exhaustive pitch system, *système des hauteurs*, which consist of all pitches available to play. This system, as François Picard says, “is a *sin qua non*, which culturally and historically stands as a database to musicians, even as an act of nature.”² Safi al-Din, al-Kindi (9th century), al-Fârâbi (10th century), and Ibn Sinâ (10-11th centuries) are the first theorists who formulated and developed such a system based on inherited scientific concepts from the Greek, i.e. the Pythagorean system.

3. Range of music

Hoomân As`adi, researcher and professor of ethnomusicology at Tehran University, divides music in Iran into three main categories³:

1-Classical

a) Western classical music b) Persian *Radif* music

2-Folk

3-Popular

Electronic music, as well as *Radif* (persian classical music) are sub-divisions of classical music.

4. Shiraz arts festival - the beginning of electronic music

Although first electronic compositions from Iranian composers date back to 1965,⁴ the first formal performance of this music was the work of Iannis Xenakis, *Polytope de Persépolis*, performed at the annual Shiraz Arts Festival in 1971. As described by Robert Gluck, “The upcoming 2,500th anniversary (1971) of the conquest of Babilonia by Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Persian empire, provided a rationale for an international cultural event at the ruins of Persepolis, the ancient pre-Islamic royal seat.”⁵ The first year of the festival took place in 1967 as a showcase for the royal court. Since the late 1960s up until the 1979 Revolution, prominent figures of avant-garde arts, among them Iannis Xenakis, Peter Brook, John Cage, Gordon Mumma, Davis Tudor, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Merce Cunningham, participated in Shiraz Arts Festival in Iran. According to Sharon Kanach, “The fifth year of Shiraz Arts Festival celebrated the 2500th anniversary of the Persian Empire. That year was announced the year of Cyrus the Great. Xenakis presented his one and only performance of *Polytope de Persépolis*, a commission of the festival. *Polytope de Persépolis*, the inaugural work of the festival, was performed at the ruins of Persepolis.”⁶ Among participants of the festival’s fifth year were The

Manhattan Project (USA), Peter Brook and The International Center for Theatre Research, Le Grand Cirque Magique (France), The Chamber Orchestra of Moscow, The Cracow's Philharmonic Orchestra, The Sunda Ballet (Java-Indonesia), Lakshmi Shankar & Thumri Singer (India), Joel Chaiken, the Hague Philharmonic Orchestra directed by Bruno Maderna, and The Open Theatre (USA).

Xenakis's work was among the forefronts of the Shiraz Arts Festival. In 1968 he presented *Nuits* (1967) for twelve mixed voices *a capella*. This nine-minute piece is a collection of phonemes and syllables derived from Sumerian, Assyrian, Achaeans, and Persian texts. It is dedicated to political prisoners.⁷

Persephassa (1969) for six percussionists, commissioned by ORTF, was premiered in 1969.⁸ James Harley explains, "[*Persephassa*] held in the picturesque setting of Persepolis, an archeological site in the deserts of Iran. [...] Mr. Xenakis, with his own attachment to the ancient civilization of his native Greece, as well as his leadership to the avant-garde, was a good match to the aims of the festival."⁹ The big success of this piece led him to more ambitious projects.

Xenakis presented his *Polytope de Persépolis* on 26 August 1971. It was the inaugural show of the festival at the ruins of Persepolis:

"At nightfall, Xenakis deploys an impressive artillery of technical material and human aid for over an hour (the 7-min *Diamorphose* as prelude together with 56 minute of its original electronic *Persepolis*). The material consisted of two laser beams, anti-aircraft projectors, large oil lamps, and torches carried by 150 men.

The 'scenario', or rather the sketch of Xenakis's *Persepolis*, with annotations by his wife Francoise, may seem abrupt at first glance. However, it is surprisingly scrupulous, both with respect to the topology of the show as well as its unfolding over time through coordinated sequences."¹⁰

Gruppen, *Carre*, *Stimmung*, *Gesang des Jünglinge*, *Telemusik*, *Prozession*, *Kontakte*, *Spiral*, *Klavierstücke*, *Hymnen* and *Mikrophonie I* are among the pieces of Stockhausen, performed in 1972 in the festival.¹¹

In 1968, Alireza Mashayekhi (b. 1940) completed his first electronic composition *Shur*. In 1976, this piece was played at the festival. Among the first generation of Iranian electronic composers Daryoush Dolatshahi and Masoud Pourfakhar received scholarships to study electronic music at Columbia-Princeton Music Center. In the last year of the 1977 festival, Dolatshahi got a commission from National Iranian Radio and Television (NIRT) to write a piece for electronic and chamber orchestra.

5. The 1979 revolution and its impact on the musical scene of iran

After the Arab invasion in the 7th century, due to certain religious considerations, the practice of music vacillated between acceptance and rejection. Strong cultural heritage on one hand and new socio-religious values on the other compelled Iranians to make compromises between their cultural values and religion.

"In Islamic sphere, the beauty of nature refers to the supreme Artist, and this association is so immediate and exclusive that the exoteric traditions have forbidden the depiction or imitation of nature, with which man pretends to surpass the divine creation. Thus, Islamic civilization has essentially cultivated abstract and geometric forms, forms which speak more to the intelligence than to the senses, more to the mind than to the soul. It is the same thing in music: the musical form which is considered perfect is the song associated with poetry and cyclic rhythms, an unadorned form but one which is structured in extreme detail, resting on unshakable foundations, objective music which requires the perfect unity of the performers."¹²

Like astrophysics, mathematics, geometry, politics, philosophy, and logic, music was considered a science in ancient times. The Islamic revolution of 1979 was a turning point at which traditional and religious values countered western modernity. Music or practice of music was not tolerated by many religious authorities. Carrying or possession of any musical instrument, as well as teaching and learning music put people at risk of legal difficulty. After the Iran-Iraq war, the number of people turning to cultural activities considerably increased. Music gradually became one of the most important activities of the youth. Although today learning and playing music is an inseparable part of many people's lives, the lack of institutions supporting serious music is palpable. Mohamadreza Darvishi, Iranian musicologist and researcher, believes that the equivocal position of religious authorities on music is the first problem to be solved.¹³

6. Department of music of tehran university

The music Department at Tehran University, the oldest and largest university of Iran, is the first academic musical institution in the county. It was founded in 1965 within the faculty of Fine Arts. After the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979 the High Council of Cultural Revolution made changes to the higher educational programs. The music department closed its doors to students for several years. The official website of the University of Tehran explains:

"The academic programs at the Faculty of Fine Arts were revised. Under this new revision, the faculty's objectives were enhanced. Students were to be trained and educated to become dedicated professionals. The faculty was to give quality education and training to students so that they could fulfill the nation's social and cultural needs. In order to achieve its objectives, the faculty had to undergo changes that would benefit the needs and preferences of our Islamic society."¹⁴

It was only in 1988 and after a gap of 10 years that the music Department of Tehran University re-opened, now emphasizing on theoretical aspects of music. Throughout time, more attention was paid to practice of music. Today, both traditional Persian music and electronic composition are taught in this department. It is the only academic institution in Iran which has been recently equipped with a small and limited studio devoted to composition of electro-acoustic music.

7. Electronic music in Iran - today

The history of electronic music in Iran is an ongoing process of confrontation and reconciliation between modernity and tradition. Shiraz Arts Festival opened new horizons to the artistic and intellectual milieu in Iran, and attracted many composers to the idea of working with synthetic and processed sounds. Inspired by these new influences, most Iranian composers of electronic music from the first generation went abroad to acquire knowledge of this music and gain experience with it. Although composers of post-1979 Iran did not have the advantage of the government's support for studying abroad, modern technologies and Internet opened new horizons to composers who wish to work with electronics. Iranian musicians have never benefitted from professional studios of electronic music; however, advanced computer hardware and computer programming have enabled composers to create home-studios with modest budgets. Today there are various kinds of open-source software which allow musicians to experiment composition by sampling, editing, synthesizing and processing sounds with no cost. Miller Puckette's book, *The Theory and Technique of the Electronic Music*, is one of the most popular texts available to composers with a technical background. Providing some material equipment for a concert of electronic music is much easier than finding instrumentalists to play an instrumental work. Organizing a private concert of electronic music is more realistic than waiting for six months to receive an unguaranteed permit for a public concert.

8. Traditional cultural identity as the most common feature of composers

For composers with multicultural backgrounds, artistic identity has always been a challenge. Western science and culture present a wide horizon on which composers base their artistic identity. On the other hand, composers benefit from having their roots in rich values of traditions. This, however, creates a web of contradictions in which composers may be forced to either compromise or choose a 'third way'. In "The Horizon of Mixed Influences" Dariush Shayegan, an Iranian intellectual and scholar, explains, "Doubly open-ended, we are at one and the same time a project directed towards the archaeological past of our knowledge (tradition) and telos of our future. This combinatory art of recording heterogeneous spaces and identities constitutes the 'third way'".¹⁵ Most Iranian composers of the younger generation have a completely traditional background. They are musicians with traditional training, good knowledge, and high skills of Iranian classical music. Shahrokh Khajeh-Nouri, composer and Professor at Arts University explains: "While many musicians with western classical training are afraid of any derivation from [their] traditions, these young composers could successfully integrate Persian traditional music into their composition with most modern artistic approach."¹⁶ For those who want to express new musical ideas, new technologies provide appropriate medium. As I mentioned above, Iran lacks institutions supporting serious music, and the western classical training has not been institutionalized. Although Persian classical music is a cultural heritage, musicians are compelled to find a way out of the confined structure of Iranian traditional music. Thanks to the oral tradition, they develop a musical cognition of this music that trained musicians of western classical music do not develop of Western classical music. Azin Movahed states in an interview, "Comparing with students practicing western classical music, Iranian musicians have a more developed musicianship. The 'oral tradition' practice allows them to develop their musical perception. They are therefore not dependent on the bible which is the text, the score. They actually develop their musical mind from very early stage of training."¹⁷ Kiawasch Saheb-Nasagh, a young composer and a professor of composition at Tehran University believes, "Musicians feel that there should be something else in addition to tradition through which they express themselves and justify their beings [as musicians]."¹⁸ Saheb-Nasagh calls this a necessity of our time. Relying on their knowledge and skills, Iranian musicians go further. They experiment and explore new horizons, beyond the strict rules of tradition. In the past, Persian cultural identity was in interaction with other ethnic, national and religious identities. Today, this interaction does not exist. As Dariush Shayegan observes in "A Tamed Schizophrenia: 21st-Century Talks", "Today, these exclusive cultural identities are strung between the 'not yet' and the 'no longer', i.e., not yet modern and no longer traditional."¹⁹ The traditional young musicians, having developed their musical mentality, need to express themselves in a language capable of transmitting their ideas.

Contrary to composition of western classical music, a composer of electronic music does not need to have strict classical training. Musicians of traditional milieu who have already developed a musical mentality can utilize their skills and knowledge toward a new language which is electronic sound.²⁰ Let us not forget that techniques of traditional training allow students to be players, composers, and improvisers at the same time.

¹ WRIGHT, Owen, *The modal system of Arab and Persian music A.D. 1250-1300*. Oriental Series 28. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 1.

² PICARD, François. "Scales and modes, for a generalized musicology" PDF on the web, <www.crlm.paris4.sorbonne.fr/Echelles.pdf>

³ Houmân Asaadi, Personal Interview, June 8, 2009.

⁴ *Shur* (1968) is the first completed electronic work of Alireza Mashayekhi (b. 1940), the Iranian pioneer of New Music. In most of his electronic work, he uses *Radif* as the basis of his compositions. Technically speaking, in this piece a stretched sound creates a harmonic texture within which the pre-recorded sound of violin plays the melody of *Radif*.

⁵ GLUCK, Robert. "The Shiraz Arts festival: Western Avant-Garde Arts in 1970s Iran", p.p.: 20-28, In: *Leonardo*, February 2007.

⁶ KANACH, Sharon (ed.), *Musique de l'architecture*, Marseille: Parenthèses, 2006, p. 309.

⁷ Before the public performance of this work, Xenakis read the following acknowledgements to the audience, "To obscure political prisoners: Narcisso Julian since 1946, Costas Philinis since 1947, Eli Erythriadou since 1950, Joachim Amaro since 1952... And to you: thousands of unacknowledged ones whose names are lost. KANACH, Sharon (ed.), *Musique de l'architecture*, Marseille: Parenthèses, 2006, p. 309.

⁸ *Persephassa* is a monumental work that was written for the Percussions de Strasbourg. Xenakis focused his attention on the relativity of space and time. Six drummers standing in a circle, play a variety of percussion instruments, sirens and whistles. According to Sieve theory, time intervals are systematically displaced within individual screens, creating complex cross-rhythms, tangled phrases, changes in accents and density.

⁹ HARLEY, James. "Iannis Xenakis: Persepolis.", p.p. 92-93, In: *Computer Music Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 1, Spring 2001.

¹⁰ KANACH, Sharon (ed.), *Musique de l'architecture*, Marseille: Parenthèses, 2006, p. 309.

¹¹ For more information about other artists participating in the festival see: GLUCK, Robert. "The Shiraz Arts festival: Western Avant-Garde Arts in 1970s Iran." p.p.: 20-28, In: *Leonardo*, February 2007.

¹² DURING, Jean. "The « Imaginal » Dimension and Art of Iran.", p.p. 24-45, In: *The world of music*, 1977.

¹³ SHAHRNÂZ-DÂR, Mohsen. *Interview with Mohamadreza Darvishi on the music in Iran*, Tehran: Nashr-e Ney, 2004, p. 104.

¹⁴ *Background*, on the web: <<http://www.ut.ac.ir/en/faculties/fine-arts/background.htm>>.

¹⁵ Mayor, Federico, ed. *Letters to Future Generations*. Paris: UNESCO, 1999. 153.

¹⁶ Shahrokh Khajeh-Nouri. Personal Interview. June 2, 2009.

¹⁷ Azin Movahed. Personal Interview. June 4, 2009.

¹⁸ Kiawasch Saheb-Nasagh. Personal Interview. June 3, 2009.

¹⁹ *The Future of Values, 21st-Century Talks*. Jérôme Bindé (ed.), Paris: UNESCO, 2004. 149-153.

²⁰ Although there is a natural interaction between environment and conception, electronics remains only as a tool to transform musical ideas into sounds.