

Discovering an International Language called music

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Abstract

Iranian music is a rich treasury of harmonious compositions, enchanting melodies and profound, illuminating lyrics. Yet, despite its extraordinary scope and astonishing resources, its deep connection with the essence of Iranian culture and the emotional and spiritual nature of the Iranian psyche, and a history spanning thousands of years, it is not recognized in Western circles as an international musical style, nor as a potential currency for cultural exchange. In its encounter with scientific, academic styles and classical Western music, Iranian music has remained a remote art. Our only accomplishment has been to acquaint a limited audience of educational concerts with this profound and deep-rooted art.

In the cultural exchanges between the East and West, our music has been left far behind that of India, Japan, Africa, and South America. Why has our music been detained from participating in an artistic exchange in the vast domain of art? This question sparked a discussion between Loris Cheknavorian, the composer, musicologist and conductor of Armenian origin, and Fereydoon Nasserri, the musicologist and conductor of the Tehran Symphony Orchestra.

Is Iranian music—composed of regional, folk, and traditional radifi music—capable of being performed on an international scale, and not simply regarded as an Eastern, marginal art?

Loris Cheknavorian: We have a style of folk music that exists among the people of the villages in various parts of the country. This music is the first of three main genres and has been passed down through generations. It is related to certain ceremonies, weddings, circumcision ceremonies, birthdays and such, and has no scientific bearing. In the past, musicians such as Bela Bartók and Komitas have transcribed the folk music of their own countries, but we have not yet attempted to record ours.

The second genre is our dastgahi, radifi or traditional music, which is just as valuable and broad as classical Western music. Mastery of this art requires years of practice and effort.

The third and final style of music is religious, such as that of ta'zieh (religious passion plays).

We find these main genres in the music of most nations. They are an intrinsic part of a country's musical culture. Yet there is another culture which is international, referred to as international academic music. It began with the establishment of orchestras, and is performed by them, using notes and based on scientific principles. Composers from many different countries and cultures have drawn from traditional folk pieces and melodies to create orchestral compositions. Tchaikovsky and Liszt could be mentioned as examples. The use of these melodies is clearly demonstrated in Beethoven's Third Symphony. This can also be achieved in Iranian music, using orchestral music, or what is referred to as the international language. The composer can present Iranian melodies and tunes within an international structure, so the world may become familiar with and enjoy these melodies.

Through the works of Aram Khachaturian, and Amiroff, the world has been acquainted with Armenian music and melodies. Artists, depending on the counterpoint and harmony of their music, can benefit from the folk music of their native land. When Bartók composed a piece, he employed harmonies that conformed to the folk music of his country.

Focus on the use of Iranian music, and its globalization through an international language has just begun. The reason for its absence thus far has simply been the fact that it requires talent and genius, genius that has perhaps not yet made an appearance.

Fereydoon Nasser: The existence of hundreds of musicians in Germany, Austria, Russia or Italy, from the pre-Baroque era to the present, is due to a number of factors. The most important is the culture of music these countries possess. One cannot find the soloists of Italy, Germany or Russia in Iran. The best solo performers of the world hail from these countries. Our connection with international music had remained severed in the recent years. The few composers we did have were unique individuals, such as Loris Cheknavorian, who left Iran to study in the West. And so in Iran there is but a small minority, while in the West, not only are general and folk musical styles firmly established, but there is also a strong musical culture that supports the continuity of academic music.

The late Minbashian founded a conservatory in 1939 with a handful of Czech and Iranian musicians. The history of these institutions is much older. We have no more than 60 years of sporadic development in this field, while the rest of the world has had 400 years of constant progress. Even so, our developments have been considerable for such a short period of time. Cheknavorian is an Iranian composer whose pieces are performed across the globe. His Rostam and Sohrab, based on the Shahnameh epic, is a composition of international repute. In Iran, we have 10 composers such as Ahmad Pejman and 'Alireza Mashayekh, whereas in Italy they have 300. The rise of notable composers requires, first and foremost, the permanence of a culture of academic music.

Yet we know that all new arts have entered Iranian culture as proponents of modernity. Classical Western music should be counted among them. We have advanced remarkably in theater, cinema and painting, but have had less success in the field of academic music. Our contributions are very limited. Why is it so?

Cheknavorian: Music is the most difficult of the arts. Proficiency in playing an instrument calls for 30 years of training and practice. A musician must begin training at the age of five to be able to perform well at the age of thirty. Few arts require such a time-consuming process. Film and theater are multifarious arts where collective creativity and skill are the focus. The language and techniques of painting can be learned in a relatively short time, but artistic creativity rests with the artist. Music is another matter altogether. It is a scientific and technical art. Mathematics and music are essentially intermixed. A musician transcribes mathematics in notes and melodies. Music depends on mathematics at very high levels, and on discipline and careful planning.

An orchestra is made up of a hundred musicians. All must possess the highest degree of competence and the necessary experience in their instrument of choice. Harmony and concord in such a group demands experience, practice and a unified group effort for this mathematical structure to become balanced and melodious. If a composer wishes to create, he must have full knowledge of orchestration and harmony. Harmony can be learned in school, but applying the principles at the level of an orchestra is another matter. Form, harmony, orchestration, technique, coloration, and time... These are the elements of music.

They must all converge to create a musical composition. It is after the creation of a piece that one can begin to analyze, to decide whether the composition is an important, original one or not; which means that talent is a separate issue. If there is no talent or genius, then training and skills are of no use. Musical composition is not an industry. Despite all the knowledge that a country like Denmark may possess, they do not have a single renowned composer in the history of music, yet Denmark is situated in the heart of Europe, next to two of the greatest musical cultures of the world. Even Norway has only Edvard Grieg to speak of, and Sibelius in Finland was an exception. But apparently another style of music, called popular music, has spread throughout the world.

Cheknavorian: This is the age of McDonalds and jeans. In the past, art was the domain of the aristocracy, and a great gap existed between the masses and high society, but in the modern world there was a move towards the accessibility of cultural and artistic resources, and the arts are no longer limited to a privileged few. People are drawn towards the simple and accessible. Rock music is based on emotion and enjoyment of rhythm. It has no scientific basis. The rhythms are repetitive, and occasionally limited variations are built upon these rhythms. The melodies are elementary and linear. Iranian rhythms and melodies have been incorporated into this type of music. They will not prove useful to the advancement of Iranian music. It's like a dash of saffron on a hamburger. It is a spice, but it cannot change the essence of the hamburger. Rock music is enjoyable and appealing, but cannot be compared to classical music. Anyone with a guitar and a familiarity with music can play a tune, but even several years of constant practice are not enough to play classical guitar pieces.

Nasseri: Even rock music has its own history. After the Beatles, Pink Floyd presented a more mature style with great brilliance. This brilliance is not accidental or without its formative factors. But even in rock or pop music we do not have a continuous trend in this country. Those producing pop music in the West employ tools and terms with a four-decade history such as guitars and drums, saxophones, and the like. Is the Iranian artist who approaches this field aware of the limitations and capabilities of Iranian instruments, or even the limitations and capabilities of Western instruments? Of course, a few creative musicians have begun activities to revive this art, after the twenty-something years of its inception, and our hopes have been raised for developments and originality in this field.

Does Iranian music on the whole have a place in the world of music?

Cheknavorian: Our national music has its own significance within the borders of our own country. National or folk music must be translated into an international language to gain global acceptance. Iranian music, art, and culture is a vast and highly valuable field, but ultimately a national one. In the dialogue among civilizations, our music must be presented in an international language, not in a national one. The Chinese can listen for hours to Chinese music, but Western listeners have a limited capacity for it. For the West, all aspects of Eastern culture are simply exotic concepts, and occupy limited space in their culture.

Regarding the dialogue among civilizations, civilizations can only communicate through a common language. In music, this common language is the language of orchestral music. With an orchestra, composers can introduce their music to the world.

Hungarian music was introduced by Liszt and Bartók. Tchaikovsky employed the Russian balalaika in his fourth symphony, and made it global. Iranian music is a comprehensive whole, but we have not been able to express it in international terms.

If Armenian music was to a certain extent, adapted to two languages, it was due to Armenians belonging to the Christian faith and close to European culture, and Europe being the birthplace of classical music. There is style of Armenian music that is church music. This style has remained restricted to the churches.

But in Armenia, the quarter-tone was abandoned 100 years ago. This helped Armenian music move technically closer to the international language. But how can musical composition elevate in Iran? Composing at an international level requires orchestras of that caliber. The first step is to perform the work of Iranian composers in their own country before offering them on the international scene.

Let's say a musical genius is born in Iran. What use is his talent if there is not a single orchestra to perform his work? If it is classical music that we are trying to uplift, then there should be orchestras in Tehran, Tabriz, Esfahan, and other cities. There should be smaller groups to perform duets, trios, quartets and quintets. A few chamber orchestras and one or two symphonic orchestras. Music demands an appropriate culture and environment, which we do not have. We have many noted musicians, Baghcheban, Nassehi, Ostovar,

Mashayekhi, Pejman, and others with worthy and presentable work, but only one orchestra, which is forced to play beyond its capacity, and is therefore worn down.

But we have not witnessed new global developments in classical music for quite a while now. The global culture, pop music, and a uniform way of life of the modern world are the reasons why there have been no significant or creative new faces in classical music since Xenakis and Britten.

Cheknavorian: There are of course great composers today, but times have changed. Young people are interested in pop music and rhythm. Television—perhaps due to economic factors, the influence of commercial advertising and the rise of a mass media culture—promotes this way of life, monotonous music, and pop culture.

Nasseri: I don't agree, there are good musicians all over the world, but a stereotype has emerged; in the past, music was an art, a culture, it is now a commonplace commodity, just like hamburgers.

In Iran however, we are in the process of creating a musical culture. Talented young artists are beginning to emerge. There are diverse areas in Iranian music, and they are all worthy of being performed. When we took Haj Qorban, the do-tar-player, to the Avignon Festival, the response was so overwhelming that most of the other events were cancelled. The audience gave a standing ovation of several minutes, and urged Haj Qorban to remain and play. Haj Qorban replied that he had planted caraway seeds, and he must go to water his caraway plants, otherwise he would lose this year's crop! The attraction that our music holds for a Western audience is a result of its depth, and a Westerner takes a cultural approach, not a recreational or consumer one.

Mr. Cheknavorian says that Armenian music has eliminated the quarter-tone, and this is a very complex topic, but the truth is that there are intervals in Iranian music that Western instruments have not been tuned for and cannot sustain. In Czechoslovakia, a musician named Alois Hába rose to prominence. The Czechoslovakian government came to his aid and commissioned special instruments for his use. A piano, a harmonium and a clarinet were built to his specifications, so he could play shorter intervals, even quarter-tones. Of course this is laboratory music and will not last. Music must be in tune with daily life.

I have been working as a conductor with the Tehran Symphony Orchestra for ten years now, but for many pieces we still lack skilled musicians and must employ guest musicians for certain instruments. If there were a conservatory, which trained 10 clarinet players a year, the orchestra could provide employment for only four of them. Six others could not be taken on. A musician needs a permanent home and employment. To provide these we need several orchestras, which we do not have. The government should extend support. A diplomat of the former Soviet Union once told me that should the Soviet government wish it, they could create a symphonic orchestra for every city in Iran.

This is no small claim, but he was speaking the truth. When I travelled to that country I understood the truth of his words. I spent a week in Armenia and there were two concerts every night.

We only have the Symphony Orchestra in Iran. Mr. Pejman is a good composer and writes impressive material for the orchestra. But if this orchestra is to perform one of his pieces, how much time and effort should be expended? And even if his work is a success, what of all the other composers? A variety of orchestras are needed. Our conservatory has been inactive for years. Vahdat Hall is the only venue for such events, and it seats a mere 800. Eight million people live in Tehran. If even a fraction of this population is interested in this style of music, we should have at least ten halls like Vahdat. An orchestra cannot perform every night. The musicians will be exhausted and lose their creativity.

These are the factors preventing us from meeting musical standards. We have the musicians and artists, but not the circumstances for presenting their work. The dialogue of civilizations requires facilities, tools, a common language and a great deal of hard work. We may seek to gain recognition through our maqami, traditional and folk music, but our capabilities, and those of our orchestra, are not sufficient for international relevance.