

Interview with Morteza Varzi
about the life and work of the singer Gholamhoseyn Banan

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Mp3 of three 60 minute cassette tapes

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The first interview tape begins with a copy of a 20 minute memorial program for Banan on Radio Iran, by Khosrow Behruzi, March 7, 1986, which includes interviews with those who knew him, including Morteza Varzi

These tapes include some of the background material for the article entry on Banan for the Encyclopaedia Iranica (submission draft included here), the complete revised version which may be found in <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/banan-golam-hosayn>

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BANĀN, GOLĀMHOSEYN

Banān, Gōlāmḥoseyn (May 1911-February 27, 1986 /Ordībehešt 1290-Esfand 8, 1364 A.S.7), one of the foremost Persian singers of the twentieth century. He was known for the quality of his voice, phenomenal memory, exactness of style, ability to match poetry with music, and expressive interpretation of Persian poetry.

Banān was born into a prominent family in Tehran. His father was Karīm Kān Banān al-Dowleh, son of Mīrzā Fazlollāh Kān Mostowfī Nūrī. His mother was the daughter of Moḥammad Taqī Mīrzā Roknī (Rokn al-Dowleh), who was the brother of Nāṣer al-Dīn Shāh (MRI:13).

Banān's home environment fostered artistic development. The family had four pianos and an organ (Mallāḥ:3). His father sang and played the tār (long-necked plucked lute) (Farrehī:Abol Ḥasan Varzī), his mother played the piano, and his maternal aunt played the ney (end-blown flute). Once a week the friends of his father came to an informal party (bazm), bringing known musicians of the day (Mallāḥ:3).

Banān learned to play the piano from his mother and would sing and accompany himself (MRI:13). He also listened to and imitated recordings of his father's voice. His sisters studied the tār with Morteżā Ney Dāvud. Banān was present during his sisters' tār lessons, and would learn and memorize the pieces to help them remember their lessons. One day his sisters asked him to sing for Ney Dāvud, who recognized his ability and persuaded Banān's father to let him study voice with him (Mallāḥ:3-4).

He began working with Ney Dāvud at age 11 and later began his main vocal studies with the religious singer Zīā al-Dākerīn, who was a rowzeh kān (religious narrator) and one of the favorite singers of Banān's father (Mallāḥ:5-6, Behruzī). In addition to

his vocal repertoire, Banān learned the fine points of matching poetry to music. Later he also studied voice with Nāṣer Seyf. Banān was influenced by a number of other performers, both vocalists and instrumentalists. As a young man Banān listened to and imitated the voice of Jenāb Damāvandī. He was later impressed by Adīb K^Vānsārī, who he learned from indirectly by listening to his tapes. Other singers who indirectly influenced his style were Reẓā Qolī Mīrzā Zelli, Tāherzāde, Tāj Eṣfahānī, and Amīr Qāsemī. Although there was no systematic vocal radīf (repertoire) at that time, there were different regional schools. Banān's style was a combination of those found in Eṣfahān and Tehrān (Varzī).

In addition to Persian singers he liked the style of Western classical singing and at times tried to sing like a Western vocalist. His singing was influenced by the violin style of Abol Ḥasan Ṣabā, whose written repertoire (radīf) was formulated in conjunction with Zīā al-Dākerīn (Varzī). The composers Col. 'Alīnaqī Vazīrī and Ruḥollāh Kāleqī also influenced his style.

In school, Banān excelled in Persian literature. He was known then and throughout his life for his prodigious memory and his ability to pick up accents and impersonate movements and speaking styles (Mallāḥ:4-5). Banān began working for the Department of Agriculture in 1936 and later for the Irānbār Company in Ahwāz. In 1943 he returned to Tehran, working for the Ministry of Food and eventually holding the responsibility for distribution of bread coupons for the Department of Grain and Bread (Mallāḥ:8).

He began singing for Rādīo Tehrān in 1942. He first performed with Abol Ḥasan Ṣabā's ensemble, which included both

Western and Persian instruments. These programs were broadcast live, one or two evenings a week. Banān also performed regularly with the National Music Society (Anjoman-e Musīqī-ye Mellī), which performed once or twice a month. This music society performed the compositions primarily of Vazīrī and Kāleqī, which were essentially long vocal compositions (tasnīf) performed by a vocal soloist and accompanied by a large orchestra of Persian and Western instruments. Banān was first interested only in performing āvāz (traditional singing). But Kāleqī was impressed by Banān's voice and persuaded him to sing these new compositions with the orchestra. Although Banān did not read music, his ability to memorize allowed him to learn these pieces easily, writing the name of the gūshe (mode), rhythm, rests, and orchestral interludes in the margin of the lyrics (Mallāḥ:11).

Banān also performed regularly for parties, both formal and informal. When he was invited to formal parties, he would sing āvāz for several hours at the beginning of the evening. He paid careful attention to his choice of poetry and the music to fit the poetry, planning what he would sing by going over his notebook at the beginning of the evening. For informal parties, he would first entertain by telling stories and singing popular and comic songs, saving serious performance for late in the evening. Often at these gatherings, he would improvise rhythmic pieces (zarbi), accompanying himself on a drum.

Eventually his preference for singing led him to pursue a career exclusively in music. The National Music Society had by then divided into two organizations, the National Conservatory of Music (Honarestān-e Musīqī-ye Mellī) and the Flowers Program

(Barnāme Golhā, begun in 1955) (Varzī). In 1953 he became one of the first teachers at the Conservatory (Mallāh:9), although this was secondary to his performing career. He taught instrumentalists and vocalists using the traditional oral method of instruction (Mallāh:12).

He continued to work for the radio two to three times a week, performing 15-minute segments that included āvāz and a short taṣnīf. He performed songs in the style of the day as well as more classical pieces. These song compositions included works by Ruḥollāh Kāleqī, Naṣrollāh Zarīn Panje, 'Alīnaqī Vazīrī, Morteṣā Maḥjūbī, Akbar Mohsenī, and 'Alī Tajvīdī. Lyricists for these pieces included Rahī Mo'aeyeri and Navvāb Ṣafā.

He became one of the prominent singers to perform for the programs "Colorful Flowers" (Golhā-ye Rangārang) and "Eternal Flowers" (Golhā-ye Jāvīdān). These programs were a continuation of Kāleqī's efforts to revitalize Persian music. They were arrangements and orchestrations of traditional Persian music, along with newer compositions that utilized basically Persian melodies with Western orchestration, harmonies, and interludes.

In 1958 Banān was in a car accident and lost the sight in his right eye. This incident had a profound impact on his singing. Not only did it cause him to take his work more seriously, but from that time he began to sing more rhythmic pieces that had popular appeal (Mallāh:13-15).

He retired from active singing around 1967, although he continued to sing occasionally at private parties.

He was known to be generous and full of fun. He was well-informed and enjoyed philosophizing and discussing fine points of

musical performance. He was careful and exact in his own performance and worked daily to improve his singing (RI:20). He did not perform for television, preferring to sing for a live audience. Since he also did not perform in nightclubs or concerts, the majority of people knew him only through the sound of his voice on radio and recordings. He led a relatively simple life, singing almost daily for formal and informal gatherings.

He had four marriages and two children. His first wife was the sister of Col. 'Alīnaqī Vazīrī, well-known composer and performer. He was close friends for many years with the family of Morteẓā Varzī, whose recollections and musical insights have greatly contributed to this biography.

Style of Singing

Banān was known for the quality of his voice as well as for his style of singing. He had a relatively low-pitched, soft, and relaxed / ^{vocal style.} His facial expression and singing style were also relaxed. The ideal vocal quality of his time had been high-pitched and intense, possibly due to the tendency of religious singers to project for their large audiences. Banān's vocal quality was greatly influenced by Jenāb Damāvandī, whose voice was high-pitched, but also soft and very relaxed.

Banān's style of vocal ornaments (tahrīr) was also clear and soft. Kāleqī has likened it to the sound of pearls dropped on a marble floor (Varzī). His use of these vocal ornaments was systematic in type, length, direction, and place. His use of rests was also systematic. He knew how much and where to put a pause in order to create and resolve suspense for the listeners.

Banān had knowledge of both Persian music and poetry. He was a mystic and felt the art and history of Iran was expressed best in its poetry (Farrehī). In selecting music for a poem, he was careful to choose pieces (gūshes) that fit the meaning of the poetry. He was also careful to match the melody and ornaments to the poetry and was attentive to poetic interpretation. He never put a ghazal to music until he had understood its meaning and accepted it (Mallāḥ:8). He had great control and musical skill and expressed whatever meaning or feeling was in the poetry; varying vocal quality, intensity, and timing.

He planned the essential outline and direction of his performance shortly before he performed. At times he would modify the traditional order of the pieces to fit the poetry. He would also choose specific lines of a ghazal and at times would vary their order. He then developed his musical expression and improvisation according to poetic interpretation.

He developed a style that was uniquely his own, drawing from a number of influences. He worked on his style in private; experimenting, innovating, and perfecting it. His favorite accompanists, Reẓā Varzande on the santur (hammered dulcimer) and Lotfollāh Majd on the tār, had developed the ability to play and to follow him according to this style. He also enjoyed working with the pianist Morteẓā Mahjūbī and with the violinists Mehdi Kāledī, Mahmud Tāj Bakš, and Parvīz Yāhaqī (Varzī; Šafā:193).

Of his hundreds of recordings (Šafā:195), the best-known include taṣnīfs and performances of āvāz and taṣnīf from the Flowers Programs. His/ ^{best-known works} include: Marā 'Āseqi Šeydā ('Alī Tajvīdī and Monir Tāhā), Kārṯān (Morteẓā Mahjūbī and Rahī Mo'aeyerī) with

Āvāz-e Deylamān, K^vāham-e Gol Kār Gardam (āvāz), Moštāq-o Parīšān (‘Alīnaqī Vazīrī and Sa‘dī), Navā-ye Ney (Morteżā Maḥjūbī and Rahī Mo‘aeyerī), Che Shūrḥā (Abolqāsem ‘Āref), Man Az Rūz-e Azal (Morteżā Maḥjūbī and Rahī Mo‘aeyerī), Āmādī Jānam Be Ġorbānat (Ruḥollāh Kāleqī and Šahriyār) (Varzī), Ātešīn Lāleh (Morteżā Maḥjūbī and Rahī Mo‘aeyerī), and Mastī-ye ‘Āšeqān (Ruḥollāh Kāleqī and Navvāb Šafā) (Šafā:193).

Place in Persian Music

Banān's voice appealed to and was respected by a wide variety of people. Although he was primarily a performer of traditional āvāz and was trained in the dastgāh system of Persian music, he adapted to the musical trends of his day and performed the more Westernized compositions of Kāleqī and others. He also performed popular songs that appealed to people that did not have a background in classical Persian music.

In addition to being technically skilled in both poetic interpretation and musical expression, he was extremely versatile and innovative. He carefully crafted his performances, ever developing and perfecting his style. Beyond the expertise of his craft, Banān had great power of emotional expression and communication and was able to touch people's hearts. He took them away from themselves, refreshing and transforming them spiritually. The ability to place people easily into this state (ḥāl) is considered a unique gift and for this Banan became a legend as a supreme interpreter of Persian poetry and music.

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