Musical Life in Qajar Iran

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Context of musicians and performance for nineteenth century Persian music.

MUSICAL LIFE IN QĀDJĀR IRAN

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Out of the variety of musical genres and contexts that existed in Iran during the Qādjār period (1794-1925), this paper will focus on the secular music that was performed for the aristocracy and the Qādjār court. This period was a time of revival for Persian traditional music. The traditional music repertoire that is currently being taught and performed can be traced directly to the Qādjār court musicians. Sources consulted for descriptions of musical events during this period include English and French traveller's narratives, photographs from the Albām-i Biūtāṭ-i Salṭanatī, the chronicles of Mustufī and Mayir al-Mālik and the music history of Rūḥullāh Khāliqī.

The secular music of this period was performed at dinner parties, evening entertainments (bazm), picnics, and weddings and other special occasions. Entertainers at these events might include instrumentalists, singers, dancers, actors, jugglers, fireaters, and wrestlers. Actual accounts of music during the dinner parties commonly mention the presence of a musical ensemble consisting of approximately two melody instruments; typically tār (plucked lute) and possibly kamānchih (spiked fiddle); and a drum, dayirih (tambourine) or dumbak (goblet-shaped drum).

Khāliqī (357-367) states that the drummer was often also the singer, particularly of a song form known as tasnīf. The total ensemble described in these parties was male, with the dancers dressed up as women. A notable characteristic of this period was that entertainment ensembles were typically either all male or all female.

In the evening dinner parties, musicians and other entertainers often performed throughout the evening, as described by Arthur Arnold (16-21) in 1875 in Esfahan:

> . . . In a rectangular recess, three musicians, sitting on the floor, discoursed strange songs and music. One had a wiry instrument, resembling a small guitar; another produced short screams from a sort of flageolet; and the third, who also contributed the chief part of the vocal entertainment, had a small drum. In the centre of the room, there was a Persian carpet of many and beautiful colours; round the sides were felts, nearly half an inch thick, and five feet wide, upon which most of the guests sat or reclined . . . The Khan was roaring, the singers twanging, piping, drumming, and shouting monotonous love-songs, when the first "dish" was served. A servant walked round the room carrying a large bottle of arrack in one hand, and wine in the other . . . Another servant followed with a plate, in which was laid about half of a sheet of Persian bread, thin, tough, and flabby. Upon the bread was a heap of kababs . . . For three hours this was the form of the entertainment; the talk and the music went on while the kababs, the arrack, and the wine circulated. About ten o'clock the real dinner began . . . For nearly an hour there was little talk, much eating and drinking; then some coffee, and after that the guests were hoisted on to the high saddles of their steady, patient mules, and jogged homewards through the narrow streets, lighted only by the lanterns of their attendants.

Court: The music of the court was of two types, that of the private gatherings and that of the official occasions and holidays, the latter using a military band, or nakārih khānih. The military band was used for public announcements, signalling sunrise and sunset, closing of shops, and for religious dramas and processions. During Nāsir al-Dīn Shāh's reign Western military music was introduced, which all but replaced traditional Persian military music.

Nāsir al-Dīn Shāh had photographers record the various events and people during his rule and kept the pictures in which is known as the Albām-i Biūtāt-i Saltanati. These pictures include representations of religious, Western military, folk, comedy, and court musical performances.

The pictures of musicians who performed for private court gatherings include the madjlis-i taklīd, or troupe of actors, and the court musicians, the ʿamalidjat-i tarab-i khāsa. The pictures of the type of group known as madjlis-i taklīd show a group of all male entertainers, varying in number from 8-14 with musicians, boys dressed as women, and other actors or bystanders. Of the musical instruments, the kamānchih and dumbak are present in all the pictures, with dayirih and balaban (double-reed wind instrument) appearing less frequently.

There were a total of 15 different photographs of the court musicians (See illustration). Again, they were all male ensembles, predominantly instrumentalists and singers, with two pictures including boy dancers. The number of performers in the photographs varies from 4 to 14. The musicians were most often seated in a kneeling posture. The most probable court orchestra ensemble, based on the pictures and historical accounts included one santūr (hammered dulcimer), one or two tar, one or two kamānchih, and one dumbak, with possibly a dayirih. The singers of the group either appear without instrument or with a dayirih or dumbak. In these pictures, some of the famous masters of Persian music are frequently seen, such as Mirzā ʿAbdullāh, Sādiq Khān, and Ghulām Hosayn. Of the 14 instrumentalists identified by name in the pictures, all but one are mentioned in Khāliqi's history.

The settings for these pictures varied: five were outdoors in the summer quarters at Sharistānak on the occasion of the Rūz-i Tabkh-i Āsh (Day of Cooking Soup), one was in Surkh-i Hisār, another was in another summer location, two were either indoors or in a tent, and eight were taken in a courtyard or side of a building.

These court musicians played for private gatherings in the birūn(i), or men's and visitor's section of the court. They were the masters of the radīf, the traditional music repertoire. In addition to the events in the court, they performed for the shah when he went outside the city. On his yearly trips to the summer quarters, he took 7,000-10,000 people (Mayir al-Mālik, 126), including half of his wives. On his return he stopped at a place called Surkh-i Hesār for the Rūz-i Tabkh-i Āsh, which customarily took place during the month of Mihr (September-October) and was formerly held in Sharistānak. Princes and members of the aristocracy were invited to that event and entertainers were brought in the form of groups of clowns and jesters and court musicians.

Andirūn: The musical life of the court household was divided into two parts, that which took place in the birūn and that which took place in the andirūn, or women's quarters. During the reign of Fath ʿAli Shāh there was a large group of 50 female entertainers, i.e. instrumentalists, singers, dancers, and actresses attached to the andirūn. They were in the charge of the shah's wives and lived in a separate building. The women of the andirūn were educated to sing and dance by the best masters (Morier, 225). Mayir al-Mālik mentions (29-30) an incident where his grandmother was asked by Nāsir al-Dīn Shāh to find 10-12 pretty girls and send them to study music with the masters in order to play for the andirun. She sent them to the male court musicians to study for two years, after which she arranged a performance for the shah. Some of these girls were eventually made contract wives of the shah.

The ensemble of both the male and female musical groups were similar in composition including performers of tār, kamānchih, santūr, and dumbak; a singer, one or two dancers, and a number of actors (Khāliqī, 423-424).

However, the music of the female musicians was generally confined to the andirūn and few names of these musicians have been recorded (Khāliqī, 419). Little is known about their music; whereas the histories, works, and pictures of the male court musicians have been much better preserved and transmitted.

In addition to the music, dancing, and other entertainment that was part of the daily life of these women, evening entertainment took place in the large hall of the andirūn, in the garden, or in the apartment of one of the shah's wives. On occasion, a corner of the large hall of the andirūn was closed off by a screen and the male musicians were led in blindfolded to this enclosure, then were unblindfolded, allowing them to play for the gatherings of the shah within the andirūn (Mustufī 1, 518). In addition there were two mixed groups of musicians, having both males and females, of which the males were blind (Mayir al-Mālik, 39). The Dast-i Kūr, or Blind Ensemble, consisted of four men and two women; with tar, kamānchih, dumbak, two daf (large dayirih), and singer; and the group Dast-i Muʿmin Kūr consisted of four people; a man, his wife, and two daughters: with dayirih, dumbak, and hand organ. Muʿmin and one daughter sang and the wife and the other daughter danced. Early in the spring, the shah held an āsh party for his wives and the wives of the aristocracy. They ate out in a garden, where the women musicians and blind musicians were interspersed playing music (Mayir al-Mālik, 134-136).

In the andirūn at the end of the evening, it was customary for the court musicians to be present at the time the shah went to bed. The shah's sleeping quarters had four doors, one of which opened to a place where the male court musicians would play.

Situation of the Musician: Professional musicians were drawn from different groups of people, including religious minorities, members of tribes (Lorey, 163-5), and lūtis[1] (Sykes, 281; Orsolle, 240; Bassette, 273), and in the words of one observor (Bassette, 273) others of low social standing in society. According to Khāliqī (21) the professional musician was known by the term ʿamali-yi ṭarab or ʿamalidjāt-i ṭarab, merriment makers or workers, which he considered an indication of the low status of the musician. The musician's low status was greatly influenced by a generally held negative attitude toward secular music held by the followers of Shīʿih Islam.[2] The life of a musician under these circumstances was difficult and sometimes dangerous and music of the radīf, particularly, became a cloistered and generally closely guarded tradition.

The radīf musicians relied on patronage by the members of the court or aristocracy. Changes in the traditional system of patronage and private instruction began occurring in the mid-1800's when Western music was introduced in the form of a French bandmaster and military band. Military music instruction was established which later expanded into a conservatory of Western and then Persian music. The political and social changes of that time took Persian music gradually into more public arenas and made it available to a wider public. Darvīsh Khān, a traditional music master, is a transitional figure who grew up under the patronage system. As a member of a prince's retinue, he was obliged to travel with the prince and be at his disposal only. He eventually broke with this tradition and established his own orchestra under the auspices of the Society of Brothers, a dervish order.

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[1] Lūtī, according to Orsolle (240) is a man with no observable profession who practices a number of pursuits such as juggler, story-teller, and mountebank.

[2] An exception to this was the view held by some Sufi groups that music was a means of spiritual elevation.

The Music: Fairchild, in 1904, in the introduction to his notation of Twelve Persian Songs, describes the atmosphere surrounding Persian music:

> But one needs the setting of the Orient to realize what these songs are; the warm, clear Persian night; the lamps and lanterns shining on the glowing colours of native dresses; the surrounding darkness where dusky shadows hover; the strange sounds of music; voices, sometimes so beautiful, rising and falling in persistent monotony--all this is untranslatable, but the impression left on one is so vivid and so full of enchantment that one longs to preserve it in some form.

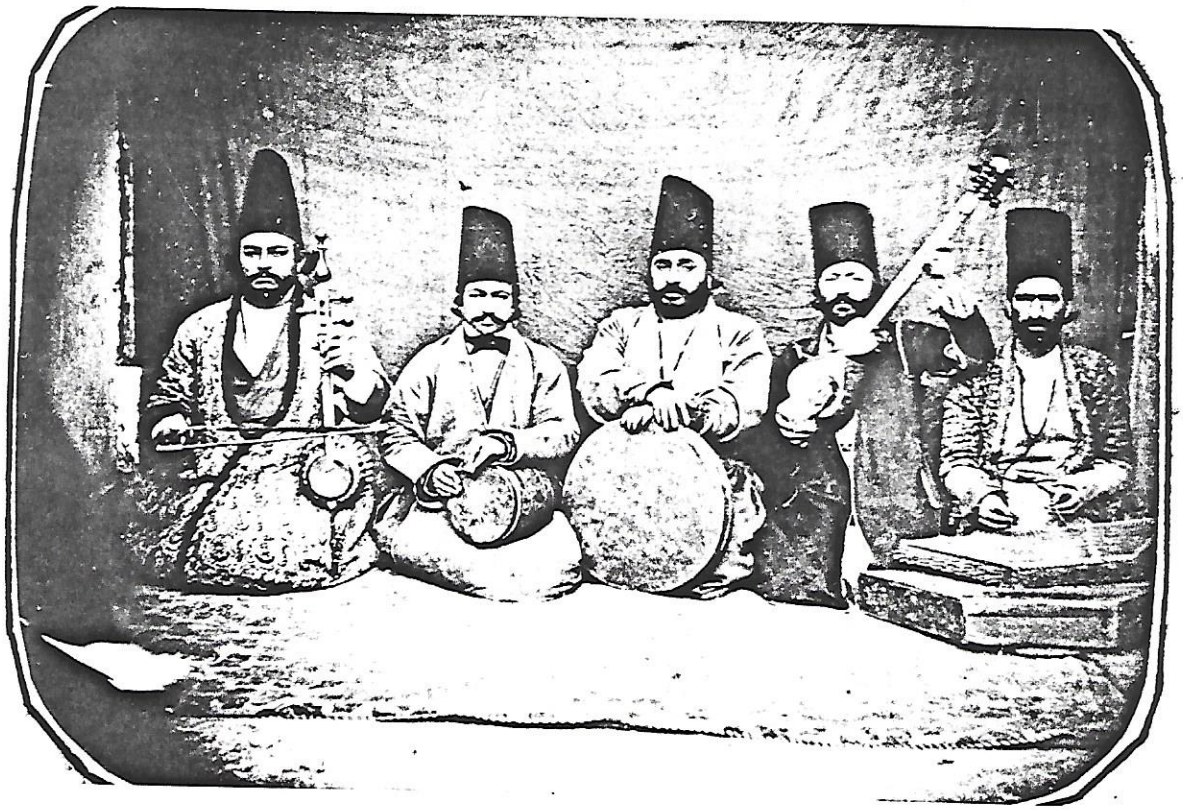
As mentioned above, the music that the court musicians played was known as the radīf or dastgāh music. This body of music has been passed down by them and continues to be taught and performed. The dastgāh, as a system of organization of Persian radif music, was established during the Qādjār rule by these same court musicians. The dastgāh was based on a modal progression of melodies and melodic motifs, and vocally was thematically and rhythmically organized around a ghazal, particularly one by the 14th century poet Hafez. Each vocal piece would be based on one or two lines of the chosen ghazal. A number of songs would follow this and in turn be followed by one or more dance pieces. The music is characteristically monophonic, melodically ornamented, and improvisatory.

The poetry is at least equal to the music in importance and acts as a unifying agent in the area of form, rhythm, and theme. The emphasis on the use of the ghazals of Hafez and the patronage by mystical orders has given to Persian radīf music and musicians a mystical character, so much so that the musicians themselves make a clear distinction between the entertainer and the musician of spiritual character who can create in himself and his listeners the hāl, or rapture (Caron and Safvate, 231-236).

Summary: The musical ensembles that played for the households of the court and aristocracy were small chamber groups consisting of 2-4 string instruments and 1-2 drums. Due to the general segregation by sex in society

at that time, the musical ensembles were also either all male or all female. They performed at private gatherings, owing partly to the system of patronage and partly to a general religious attitude that prohibited secular music and which kept such music guarded and confined. The music itself was highly ornamented and improvisatory, in which mystical-erotic poetry had an important formal and thematic role.

ILLUSTRATION



Court Musicians

(from left to right: kamānchih, dumbak, dayirih, tār, and santūr)

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