

Iranian Music Culture in Los Angeles

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The Iranian community in the Los Angeles / Southern California area is quite large; estimates range from 100,000 to as high as 400,000¹, with most of that number having arrived during the 1970s and the 1980s. This community now includes all of the religious faiths traditionally present in Iran: Muslims, Bahais, Jews, Armenian and Nestorian (Assyrian) Christians, Zoroastrians, and various Sufi orders.

The occupations pursued by the members of this community are as eclectic as those of the surrounding American society, and include medicine, engineering, and all types of businesses -- from banking and clothing boutiques to frozen yogurt. Other less-westernized professions include both halal and kosher butcher shops, marriage solemnizing, calligraphy, and astrology. Los Angeles can also boast of locally-produced Iranian television and radio shows, and an Iranian "yellow pages" directory.

The musical life of the Iranians in Los Angeles is as varied as the work life -- everything is represented from the most traditional styles of music, to westernized Iranian popular music, to Iranized American rock-and-roll. This paper provides a basis for understanding Iranian musical culture in exile today, by discussing traditional forms and contexts for musical performance in Iran, and contrasting them with what can now be found in Los Angeles.

Before the 1979 revolution, several musical genres and contexts existed in Iran; some were very traditional, whereas others had developed more recently as a result of increasing westernization. The preferred and traditional setting for playing "serious" Iranian urban music has long been a gathering called a bazm, an intimate gathering in a private home at which refreshment and musical entertainment are provided. We will describe the bazm, as our experience suggests that Iranians still consider this the "ideal" musical experience, and that it somehow forms a point-of-departure for other Iranian urban musical forms.

For Iranians, Iranian art music is not exclusively an entertainment; they view it as a spiritual, as well as a social, activity. The spiritual content of this music plays an important role, and it is

¹ Sources include estimates from the City of Los Angeles, the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service, the 1980 United States Census, and various private organizations. Everyone concedes the difficulty in developing an accurate count; this is responsible for the wide disparity between the estimates. Those on the "low" end tend to count only legal and official sources; however, it is believed that there are significant numbers of "uncounted" Iranian immigrants. The same sources estimate the total population of the Los Angeles / Southern California area at between 13,000,000 and 16,000,000.

evident that for many Iranian musicians playing music is an important, semi-sacred activity. They say that appreciating and understanding Iranian art music requires much effort.

Iranians -- both musicians and non-musicians alike -- feel that one must achieve a certain state of mental and emotional preparation before one can participate and contribute to the proper atmosphere of a musical performance. Much effort went into creating this atmosphere at the bazm. An important feature of the bazm was the concept of h̄al, a word of Arabic origin that means "state" or "condition". In this context, h̄al has acquired a mystical connotation, referring to the spiritual mood of the audience and the performer. One of the main responsibilities of the performer was to comprehend and facilitate the h̄al of the audience, and of the total performing situation.

The connection between the performer and the audience was expedited by a common cultural background. Both listener and performer in a bazm were steeped in a poetic and philosophical tradition which bound together their expression and experience of the music. The performer's communication with the audience and their common experience would provide the environment for potential inspiration, and a creative performer-listener relationship.

The success of the bazm, therefore, was largely dependent upon the ability of the performer to create a sense of unity among all of those present. According to his awareness of the mood and needs of the audience at any one moment, the performer would draw from his storehouse of melodies, each of which have their associated moods; he would literally play on the emotions and spirit of the audience, drawing out of them sadness, remembrance, healing, or joy as the inspiration moved him. A prerequisite to this was improvisation, the creative ability of the performer.

The musical selections would be meditative; much of it would not employ cyclic musical rhythms. The performance would continue in this vein until the performer felt the listeners were fully satiated. To conclude the musical performance, a dance piece would be played to "break the spell". At this stage everybody, skillful or clumsy, would be dragged into the dancing. This dancing would help them to release the emotional tension built up by the music, and would prepare them for the main meal, which was always the end of the entertainment, often some time in the early morning.

It is clear that not every performer could mediate such an experience. As a result, a high value would be placed on those whose abilities had proven suitable; this, in turn, permitted these performers to make their living performing only such serious music.

Other contexts for other musical styles were also found in pre-1979 Iran. In the 20th century, full-length stage concerts began to be organized following the western classical model, utilizing large orchestras of both western classical and Iranian traditional instruments playing highly-arranged versions of Iranian traditional music. Such concerts were generally attended by only a

small minority of mostly western-educated people, and were generally devoid of the intimate atmosphere that creates the desired h̄al. Nightclub music was also popular, including styles such as Ruhozi and J̄ahelli, and venues such as the L̄al-e Z̄ar theater and the Golden Horizons nightclub. This spanned repertoire from traditional Ruhozi theater, various versions of tasnif and tar̄ane (composed songs), to pop music and stand-up comics.

It has been difficult to develop a reliable picture of music in Iran since 1979. The first music to reappear on television was, interestingly, western classical music, apparently because of a feeling by the Iranian authorities that because such music lacked the emotional and poetic underpinning of serious Iranian music, "it's not real music". It seems that the music conservatories were closed for several years, are now open again, but only for the study of serious music (and military music and western art music; this excludes all popular Iranian music, dance music, and songs with lyrics that are not religious). Tribal and rural musicians buried or otherwise hid their instruments so that they could not be confiscated. Many musicians left Iran; many of these came to Los Angeles.²

In Los Angeles today, many of these musical genres are found; however, folk music is not much represented. Some of the performers now in Los Angeles were well-known in Iran, including Bijan Samandar, Mehdi Takestani, Aqili, and Alahe. There are also a few who are perhaps more traditional even if less well-known, such as Morteza Varzi and Zolfonum. In addition, there are many musicians and singers who perform westernized popular-style Iranian music, such as Ebi, Hayde, and Vigen.³

Most of these traditional musicians received their training in Iranian classical music before they left Iran. A very few, such as the singer Shahla Sarshar, finished their studies here. However, only a small number, such as Morteza Varzi and Manoochehr Sadeghi, were trained in the older manner of apprenticing themselves to a recognized master for a long period of time; most of the available musicians and teachers are conservatory-trained. Rather than having studied "at the feet of a master", they have learned a westernized form of Iranian traditional music, using sheet music and western-style scientifically-organized teaching methods. The training received by these musicians placed less emphasis than did the traditional methods upon the art of improvisation, which in the past was considered a vital element of Iranian traditional music; instead, these musicians mostly play composed pieces, often using sheet music rather than

² The information in this paragraph comes from personal communications and interviews with people who have been in Iran since the 1979 revolution (Iranians and Americans), or have been in contact with relatives and friends who remain in Iran. The whole topic of music in Iran since the 1979 revolution awaits a thorough analysis.

³ The large Iranian community in Los Angeles also attracts a large number of guest performers. In recent years, this has included distinguished musicians such as Payvar, Alizadeh, and Lotfi.

playing from memory.

The bazm is one of many of the traditional cultural institutions that the Iranian community in Los Angeles have brought with them, and it still retains much of its original character. In accordance with tradition, a great deal of social status is still to be gained from having musicians -- especially traditional musicians -- at one's parties, and in treating them well. This seems especially important for the Iranian community in exile: many of these people were formerly quite wealthy, and lived a life-style that is impossible for them to maintain in this country. Perhaps where high financial status is no longer possible, high social status is especially important.

The events found today at a bazm include both traditional elements, plus elements altered to suit new circumstances. Drinks and light snacks, rather than the traditional mezze, are served as guests chat with one another, and the main meal comes in the middle of the party (i.e., around 10:00 or 11:00 p.m.), rather than at the very end, as was formerly the case. The meal usually consists solely of traditional Iranian food, served in great quantities, and personally prepared by the hostess, together with her daughters, daughters-in-law, and other female members of the household.

Sometime after the meal, the lights are dimmed and the musical performance begins. This performance to a great extent conforms to traditional practice: the order of musical events (pi^v-dar⁻amad, dar⁻amad, vocal and instrumental av⁻az, rhythmic pieces, dance pieces) is identical to that introduced around the turn of the century. Traditional modes and tunings are used. In former times, the music went on till dawn; this is no longer possible in the close living situations of apartment life. These days, the music must end earlier in order to accommodate neighbors.

H⁻al still plays a central role in the bazm. Great emphasis is placed upon pleasing the musicians, as it is understood that in order for them to play well, they must feel relaxed and comfortable, and must feel that they are "in communion" with their audience. A great show is made of providing comfortable cushions, drinks, snacks, and subdued lighting.

The singer or musician may still make musical selections on the spot, based on the audience's perceived current state, and the musician's judgment about how they will react to various musical stimuli. Iranians still associate specific emotions with each musical mode; catharsis through the shedding of tears is also still highly desirable.

Dancing is perhaps more common today at the bazm than was formerly the case. However, the traditional attitude persists that music is to be preferred over dance, and that "nice girls don't dance". A girl or woman still must be given considerable urging before she will dance, even if she truly wants to do so. In any case, this is social dancing, not a professional entertainment. Traditionally, a professional dancer might have been hired to perform for the guests. There are apparently no professional traditional Iranian dancers in Los Angeles, so if a host wishes to have

a professional dancer at his party, he must usually resort to an American-style belly-dancer.

Other events of a strictly traditional nature still do occur at a bazm; these include recitation of poetry (which might be composed extemporaneously by the speaker); guest performances of singing, or less frequently, on an instrument; and f̄al-e H̄afez (a traditional form of fortune-telling).

For some Iranian musicians, exile has increased the attraction of traditional classical music. Iranian musicians who never before played Iranian music are being drawn to learn and perform the traditional music of Iran. For example, one musician who in Iran played only western-style classical music has begun to organize concerts of Iranian traditional music, though in a westernized style, using a small symphony orchestra plus a few traditional instruments. Those who have played Iranian music are finding a renewed interest in previously unexplored musical areas; one young t̄ar player has "rediscovered" and found merit in the works of a composer he found uninteresting at home.

It is not generally possible for a traditional Iranian musician to make a living in the traditional manner in Los Angeles. Therefore, a conflict presents itself as a result of exile in Los Angeles; this is the need to preserve "artistic purity" while making a living. In Los Angeles, the younger generation prefers rock and disco music; there are movies and nightclubs, and less of a social taboo on dating. It is therefore in the Iranian nightclubs that most musicians can find their sole means of support. Music at such establishments usually consists of a combination of Iranized Arabic-style belly-dance music, Iranian popular and dance songs, and simplified versions of tasnif and tar̄ane. Many of the more-traditional musicians perceive performing in nightclubs as having a deleterious effect on the spirituality of their music, and explicitly avoid such places. This not only makes it difficult for them to make a living at music, it may serve to limit their exposure, and hence, their popularity. There is little interaction between nightclub and classical musicians.

Perhaps because of the difficulty of obtaining and maintaining traditional Iranian musical instruments, in combination with a notion of what is expected in America, most nightclub musicians tend to use the instruments that are readily available, such as the electric piano, violin, electric guitar, and electric bass. Except for the violin, these instruments are completely unsuitable for playing traditional musical scales and modes, or for playing in the traditional intimate, contemplative setting, such as the bazm. This increases the separation between the traditional and popular musicians; without the proper musical intervals, and with such a disparity in instrumental volume, it is difficult to play together. And where a violinist who plays in a nightclub may study with a classical master to add additional depth to his playing, there is no equivalent experience open to an electric piano player.

One notable exception exists across this isolation: the dombak, the wooden drum used in Iranian art music, often appears in Iranian nightclub and rock-and-roll bands. It is not uncommon for there also to be a drum-set and a separate trap-drummer. With or without the

dombak, there is a distinctly Iranian flavor; for example, the widespread use of many fast 6/8 rhythms that are simplified versions of the traditional ^Vsir-e m̄adar dance rhythm.

The only other traditional Iranian instrument that makes more than token appearances in such orchestras and bands is the santur (somewhat akin to the American hammer dulcimer). We have even seen a solid-body, electrified set̄ar (small lute, plucked with the fingers).

Even when traditional Iranian musical instruments are used (for example, in a concertino accompanied by a small western-style symphony orchestra), they might be played in non-traditional ways, such as playing harmonies on set̄ar and t̄ar, playing highly-arranged orchestrations of traditional pieces, playing new compositions which do not follow traditional patterns, and so forth.

There are other contexts and genres of Iranian music available in Los Angeles. For example, a large portion of the Iranian community in Los Angeles is Jewish. This community seems to make a special effort to support Jewish musicians and singers, leading to some unique events. When the singer Shahla Sarshar had her "debut" a few years ago, a large party was held at a local synagogue, featuring a sit-down dinner, five "warm-up" bands (themselves featuring well-known popular singers), hours of non-stop dancing, and (at about 1:30 am!) the featured debut performance, which consisted of av̄az and tasnif. All 1,500 attendees stayed to the very end, and seemingly could have gone on all night.⁴

The folk music of Iran is not much represented in the Los Angeles immigrant community, perhaps because most of these immigrants are urban; perhaps we just have to look farther.

However, we are acquainted with the families of Luri and Qa^Vsq̄ai khans who live here. No one in either of their local families plays music, although there are several musical members of this particular Qa^Vsq̄ai family, whom author Friend has met and recorded during previous trips to Iran.

Other evidence of the effects of exile of Iranian musical life includes the following:

- o It is common for modern Iranian popular-style music in the form of audio cassettes to be played at a bazm prior to the beginning of the live performances. Presumably, many parties are held at which this is the only source of music, and therefore music and the experience of h̄al are not the central themes of the gathering.

⁴ But not the author (Siegel), who was playing the t̄ar in the small orchestra that accompanied her. The other instruments in this orchestra included santur, violin, dombak, and an uninvited rock-and-roll drummer.

- o Many Iranians in Los Angeles find it easier or more suitable to go to nightclubs at which westernized popular-style Iranian music is played, and turn less to the bazm for their musical fulfillment.
- o Despite the fact that Iranians in Los Angeles appear to be knowledgeable about and interested in their traditional music, there are few students studying with the traditional masters. Multiple efforts in the recent past to develop schools for teaching traditional music have had mixed results.
- o It is nearly impossible to obtain traditional instruments from Iran; it is also difficult to repair and maintain them. This makes it difficult to pursue studies of this type of music.

There are currently efforts underway in Los Angeles, by both Iranians and interested Americans, to arrest the growing westernization of Iranian traditional music, and to preserve as much as possible of the traditional music in its traditional form. For example, both Iranian and American instrument-makers are learning to reproduce traditional instruments using local materials, although this results in prices for instruments that many find shocking. There is a growing interest among Iranians (as well as some Americans) to study with the available traditional masters. Organizations have been established to preserve and perform traditional music: these include the Bah̄ari Ensemble, the Oṽsṽs̄aq orchestra, members of one of the local Sufi groups, and The Institute of Persian Performing Arts.

The pressures of living in exile in the United States have certainly had an effect on the social and cultural life of the Iranians in Los Angeles. However, regardless of the individual attitudes towards contemporary events in Iran, Iranians in Los Angeles deem it important to retain contact with traditional aspects of their culture. This is true even for those whose musical sophistication is not great, or for those who prefer westernized Iranian music to traditional Iranian music. While westernization certainly is a factor in the cultural life of Iranian immigrants, it is clear that many of the most significant of their cultural traditions are still cherished and preserved.

Partial Reading List:

H̄al and Bazm:

"Cultural Parameters of Iranian Musical Expression" (five papers from the 1986 MESA panel of the same name), edited by Margaret Caton and Neil Siegel, 1988.

Tasnif and Tar̄ane:

"The Classical Tasnif: A Genre of Persian Vocal Music", Margaret Caton, Doctoral Dissertation, 1983.

"37 Years of Tar̄ane" (music on cassettes recorded in Iran before the 1979 revolution).

"A Night in the Cabarets of Tehran (^VSabi dar k̄afe-h̄a-ye Tehr̄an)" (music on cassette tapes recorded in Iran before the 1979 revolution), published by Iranzamin Publishing, 1987.

Iranian Classical Music:

"The Dastgah Concept in Persian Music", Hormoz Farhat, Doctoral Dissertation, 1965.

"Improvisation in Nonrhythmic Solo Instrumental Contemporary Persian Art Music", Manoochehr Sadeghi, MA Thesis, 1971.

Notes: