



Middle East  
Centre

# Trends in Contemporary Conscious Music in Iran

*Dr Malihe Maghazei*



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## About the Author

Originally from Iran, **Dr Malihe Maghazei** joined the LSE Middle East Centre as a Visiting Fellow in October 2012. She is a social historian of the Middle East who specialises in the contemporary history of Iran. She has taught history courses including *World Civilization since the 16<sup>th</sup> century* at California State University, Fullerton and *Women in the Middle East* at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her research interests include gender and Islam, youth, culture, and intellectual movements in Iran.

Dr Maghazei has researched various topics in both Persian and English including the dominant discourse of orientalism on Muslim women, the feminist movement in Iran and Iranian youth. Her publications include: 'The Account of Creation in the Holy Scriptures: A Comparative Study between the Bible and the Qur'an', *Humanity*, Tehran, 2010; 'Islamic Feminism: Periphery or Growing Trend', Groningen University, Centre for Gender Studies, 2012; and 'Teens' Life in Iran' in *Teen's Life in the Middle East*, Greenwood Press, 2003. She has also translated works from English to Persian including Fatima Mernissi's *The Veil and The Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (Addison-Wesley Longman Incorporated), Nay Publication, 2001.

## Abstract

This paper studies the growing trends in conscious music in Iran, which emerged in the 1990s. It provides a brief historical overview of changes in conscious music in Iran since the Constitutional Revolution of 1905. Within the context of the current status of music in the country, the research then focuses on three conscious trends: rock, fusion and classical Persian music. This music, which is part of a broader intellectual and artistic wave, represents the needs and views of a diverse young population as well as society as a whole. Based on interviews with musicians and on content analysis of lyrics, the paper highlights the dominant concerns and lyrical themes within each trend as well as the commonalities. The strategies, language and approach of these three trends are not uniform. However, they follow the same path: awakening; challenging old dogmas and clichés; and launching critical debate within a global context.

## Introduction

This paper will examine three contemporary Iranian music trends (rock, classical and fusion) that serve as a means for socio-political and cultural criticism in Iran. Music, as an integral aspect of the daily life of Iranians, has always been a 'powerful force that affects key aspects of Iranian society' (Lucas 2006, 79). During the last two decades, through the growth of civil society, increased access to the Internet and satellite TV, a rising literacy rate and the formation of a large, young, educated, non-conformist and outward looking population, new trends in music, which can be called 'conscious music', have emerged. This is an innovative multi-genre music, which by entailing conscious-raising elements, has brought about an expansion of the functions of music beyond mere entertainment. In fact, the political, social, philosophical, mystical and moralistic meanings of this music deliver a multi-dimensional message. This music, while inspired by world resistance music, is also strongly influenced by Iranian literary culture.

Several labels have been given to this music including: alternative, underground, resistance, or protest and unofficial. However, 'conscious music' is not limited to underground or unofficial<sup>1</sup> rock and rap music, although it includes these. Conscious music also includes groups that have official permits in Iran as well as some of the groups who reside or publish their work abroad. Moreover, unlike the common understanding of resistance music that associates it with a specific movement and only targets political power, Iranian conscious music transcends that simple opposition to a single source of power and cannot be limited to a sharp dichotomy between 'resisters' and 'dominators'. The performers and users of contemporary conscious music feel committed to bringing change to society through criticising the existing socio-political structure, questioning some assumptions and norms in the tradition and raising multiple humanistic concepts and meanings, which have broad implications.

The performers and consumers of conscious music are innovative in terms of both musical structure and lyrics. They blend unconventional versions of classical and neo-classical poetry with their own lyrics, using various kinds of language such as humour, proverbs and monologues aimed at the authorities (including spiritual, historical, political and religious figures), as well as using theatrical music.

The lyrics, while rooted in the traditions of Iranian society, also reflect the musicians' insight and interpretations of the social situation to which others can relate. In other words, this music voices the new generation's views and needs. I use the anthropological definition of 'generation' as cohorts of people born in the same period who experience the impact of common historical events (Lamb 2001). Generational identity is produced by common experiences that lead disparate individuals to feel bonded to one another (Newman 1996, 376). In Iran, the needs and demands of youth coming from various backgrounds, including ethnic and religious groups as well as social classes, are different, but the imposed social order and official cultural policy have created a number of shared demands, critiques and problems for the young generation which transcend these social categories.

Many cultural studies in recent years stress the importance of music in producing collective identities. Eyerman and Jamison argue that the role and place of music should be understood and analysed in 'a broader framework in which tradition and ritual are understood as processes of identity and identifications, as coded and embodied forms of collective meaning and memory' (Eyerman and Jamison 1998, 41-42). Hence, decoding the process of identification and

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<sup>1</sup> In order to publish their work in Iran, all literati, musicians, filmmakers, artists and scholars must obtain permission from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Cultural products, including music, which lack permission but are distributed inside the country through illegal means are called 'unofficial' or 'underground'.



the collective meanings, reflected in Iranian conscious music, would help in understanding the insight of the musicians and their complex engagement with the collective consciousness of society.

## Political Songs before the Islamic Revolution

In Iran, there is a long tradition of addressing social and political issues through art. Considering the importance of poetry in Iranian culture and the long history of music in society, these have always played significant roles in promoting social awakening.<sup>2</sup> The use of political songs as part of a national movement can be traced back to the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911. The rise of political songs, as a new genre in Iran, is understandable in the context of broad socio-cultural and literary changes throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The expansion of relations with the outside world, the opening of new modern schools, the establishment of the printing press, the emergence of a modern intellectual class (*Munaver-al fir*), and the emergence of a literary renaissance called 'Literary Return Movement' (*Bazgasht-I adabi*) all were influential elements in the growth of political songs in the early twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> The *Bazgasht* movement coincided with the development of the structural basis of the performance of traditional Iranian music in this period, called *radif*.<sup>4</sup> The opening up of public space for musical performance outside the patronage of the royal court in the late nineteenth century brought about the exposure of the musicians to public nationalist demands and ideas, which paved the way for them to realise their capability to act according to these ideas (Lucas 2009).

These factors facilitated the dissemination of constitutional political songs among common people. Songs such as Aref Ghazvini's<sup>5</sup> *Az Khune Javanan-e ma Laleh Damid* ('Tulips have grown from the blood of our land's youth'), commemorating the martyrs of the Constitutional Revolution, gained widespread popularity and remained alive for a long time.

Reza Shah established a centralised, repressive government from 1925 to 1941 which limited public performance of political songs. However, songs which referred to social injustice, in general terms, continued to be performed. Some of the popular songs of the first decades of the twentieth century are still popular today, such as *Morghe*

<sup>2</sup> The roots of music in Iranian tradition and the blending of music with classical poetry are reflected, for example, in the first poem of *Mathnavi* by Mawlana Jalal-Din Muhammad, (1207-1273 AD), known as Rumi in the English speaking world, a well-known Persian poet, jurist and theologian. He is one of the most influential and popular Persian Sufis whose popularity transcends Iran. His works have been translated into many languages (See: *The Mathnawi of Jalálu'ddin Rûmi*, edited by Reynold.A Nicholson in 8 volumes; London: Messrs Luzac & Co. 1940). The poem highlights the point that human feelings and desires are integrated in the instrumental structure and nature of the sound of a reed (*ney*): 'Listen to this reed as it grieves/ it tells the story of our separations/ Since I was served from the bed of reeds /in my cry men and women have lamented'.

<sup>3</sup> *Bazgasht* advocated reviving the simplicity and elegance of classical poetry of the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. The forerunners of the *Bazgasht* movement such as *Yaghma Jandagi* (1782-1850), who transferred panegyric and elegiac poetic style into social criticism, presented a model for the revolutionary songs of the Constitutional Revolution (Tavakoli 2005).

<sup>4</sup> *Radif* is a collection of 200-300 melodies. These melodies' movements are ordered into several modes called *dastgah*. *Dastgah* consists of a series of tonal spaces called *gusheh* which are used as the context for each specific melody. *Dastgah* gives a general framework for musicians and compared to western music, performers in Persian classical music have more freedom to manoeuvre and could move from one *dastgah* to the next. In Classical Persian music, vocalists have an important role in deciding the mode and *dastgah*. This music requires the memorisation of models and scales and depends on both composition and improvisation.

<sup>5</sup> Aref was one of the most important political song (*tasnif*) composers of the time who wrote political ballads to raise public awareness and mobilise revolutionary sentiment.



*sahar* ('Morning bird').<sup>6</sup> The broad meanings and references to socio-political repression in this song contributed to its sustainability.

In the 1960s and 1970s, during the Shah's rule, some political songs were recorded and performed in the form of pop music. The three most well-known examples of this music are *Jom'eh* ('Friday')<sup>7</sup> and *Shabaneh* ('Night'),<sup>8</sup> both by Farhad, and *Yare dabestani* ('My grade-school friend')<sup>9</sup> by Ferioudon Foroughi. Among these songs, those related to a specific event, such as *Jom'eh*, have lost their appeal but *Yare dabestani*, due to its general theme, is still popular and is often used at public gatherings and political events, as a sign of protest. However, due to political censorship, these songs constituted only a small part of Iranian pop music during the Shah's period.

## The Status of Music after the Revolution

Since the Revolution of 1979 the status of music, as a controversial topic and source of differences among the ruling class, has been constantly changing and has been subject to many kinds of official control and restriction (Youssefzadeh 2000, 35). Some religious authorities absolutely oppose music while others argue that it should be used as a means of 'spiritual edification', maintaining that the Qur'an does not prohibit music (Nettle 1992, 146; Brown 2005, 247). In general, since the revolution, the social and legal status of music in the framework of the state's cultural policy, has undergone four phases: The first stage (1979-1988), when the revolutionary social atmosphere was guided by Ayatollah Khomeini (the spiritual and the political leader of the Revolution); the reconstruction era (1989-1997) led by Ali Akbar Rafsanjani; the reform years (1997-2005) led by Mohammad Khatami and finally the repressive period (2005-2013) headed by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (Semati 2008, 3).<sup>10</sup>

In the first period, the differences and conflicting agendas and views among the ruling class about cultural policy produced legal inconsistencies, irregularities and uncertainties with regard to music (Nooshin 2004, 242). Immediately after the revolution, a wide range of limitations were enforced on cultural activities including the production, distribution and consumption of the type of music assumed to be 'incompatible' with the values of the Islamic Republic (Youssefzadeh 2005). Public concerts were restricted, lyrics were rigorously censored (and still are today) and musicians had to go through a long administrative process to receive permission to release albums. Music schools were closed, pop music was banned, and women were prohibited from singing. During this period, television and radio often broadcasted revolutionary propaganda, religious hymns and war music<sup>11</sup> as a new genre (Ghazizadeh 2011, 378). However, classical Persian music (*musighi-asil*) managed to maintain its legitimacy to a certain degree.

<sup>6</sup> Written by Muhammad Taqi Bahar, widely known as *Malkol sho'ara*, (1884-1934). *Morghe Sahar* was performed for the first time in 1927 by the noted female singers Muluk-e Zarabi and Qamar al Muluk-e Vaziri.

<sup>7</sup> Written by Shahyar Ghanbari. It is about the attack by a small, leftist guerrilla opposition group on a police station in Siahkal, a village in the north of Iran, in February 1971. A heavy official response to the attack took place on a Friday. The song uses allegorical expressions like 'black clouds', 'mourning cloths', 'dense clouds' and 'blood', signifying despair at the oppression and dictatorship.

<sup>8</sup> Written by Ahmad Shamlou, the prominent contemporary Iranian poet.

<sup>9</sup> Written by Mansour Tehrani.

<sup>10</sup> In June 2013, Hasan Rouhani was elected president of Iran. He advocates a moderate cultural policy, similar to Rafsanjani, but it is still too soon to consider his policy as a new cultural phase.

<sup>11</sup> This music glorified the war with Iraq (1980-1988). It stressed the glory of martyrdom to strengthen patriotism and mobilization for the war.

During the second phase (1989-1997), under the presidency of Ali Akbar Rafsanjani and in the framework of his liberalisation policy, a kind of pragmatic cultural policy was launched. In the context of this pragmatic approach, an emphasis was placed on cultural affairs being handled by experts, not by the clergy, and an attempt was made to increase cultural openness and tolerance (Farhi 2004, 5). During this period, music schools were reopened, musicians began to go on world tours and more public concerts were held. In addition, classical Persian music and Iranian regional folk music prospered, but pop music remained banned.

Between 1997 and 2005, socio-political reforms and a policy of cultural relaxation created a freer cultural atmosphere. This period witnessed a flourishing of innovations and creativities in all genres of music, significantly classical music. Furthermore, for the first time, an Iranian version of fusion music emerged and the grass-roots pop music industry movement was revived.<sup>12</sup> Although female solo singing continued to be banned, female presence in all styles of music increased. It was during this time that a new form of multi-styles conscious music, with a strong emphasis on social and political issues was formed.

As a result of the socio-political and culturally repressive policy of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, between 2005 and 2013, musicians were yet again confronted with limitations and obstacles. But, as always in Iran, there were discrepancies between the official cultural policy and realities (DeBano, 2005). The relatively free cultural atmosphere that had been created for music was hardly reversible. Musicians exercised their agency by attempting to make this situation sustainable through various strategies including (but not limited to) using indirect or symbolic language to avoid censorship, establishing their own music websites and making temporary or permanent trips abroad in order to have a freer professional life. Iranian musicians benefited from communication technology and 'mobility' as characteristics of modernity to bypass the obstacles and legal restrictions. Consequently, the importance of the geographical location of musicians gradually lost its significance.

Female vocalists played a major role in sustaining the space open to music through various means such as singing in choruses, co-singing with female and male singers, and holding female-only concerts in music halls as well as private concerts for both females and mixed audiences.<sup>13</sup> In some cases, solo female singers were able to perform public concerts for mixed audiences, like Mahdiah Mohamadkhani who is part of the classical group Mah, by using the Islamic jurisprudence argument that a female individual voice is not recognisable in their music (Mozafari 2012, 264).<sup>14</sup>

Thus ironically, in spite of the lack of official support (and indeed overt hostility of the government) thanks to the efforts of musicians, Iranians have experienced a flourishing in music since the revolution. This flourishing includes a renaissance in Persian classical music (with a strong female presence) as manifested in the Aref ensemble, Sheyda ensemble, Dastan and Ghazal, the developing of folk music as reflected, for example, in the works of Kayhan Kalhor<sup>15</sup> and Sima Bina,<sup>16</sup> a revival of pop/rock, and finally the development of fusion music.

<sup>12</sup> Under this policy, for the first time since the revolution, Arian, a pop music group, received permission from the state to produce and disseminate its albums and hold concerts.

<sup>13</sup> These singers include Pari Maleki, Sheida Jahed, Hourvash Khalili and Najmeh Tajdid.

<sup>14</sup> Mozafari explains that in recorded albums or at public concerts, the male co-singers often lower their voices to allow the voice of female singers to be heard more clearly.

<sup>15</sup> Kayhan Kalhor is a *Kamanche* player (Persian spiked fiddle), composer and master of classical Kurdish music. He made some innovations by mixing the structure of Persian music with folk modes and melodies.

<sup>16</sup> Sima Bina is a renowned female vocalist and composer who, through her extensive research, revived many Iranian folk songs.

In this context, during the last two decades a new generation of conscious music has emerged. This paper will now examine the output of six highly prolific groups and musicians of this new generation: Shahin Najafi, Hichkas (Sourush), Mohsen Namjoo, Mastan (Parvaz Homa), Yas and Kiosk, as representative of trends in conscious music. Based on content analysis of lyrics and interviews,<sup>17</sup> an analytical assessment of contemporary Iranian conscious music will be made.

## The Trend of Rock and Rap Music

In the late 1990s, for the first time since the revolution, rock bands and rappers, who exist mostly underground, were formed in Iran. Iranian rock groups, like others, use the electric guitar, drums and various keyboard instruments, but they also combine these with Persian instruments and modes. I concentrate on Yas ('Jasmine'), Kiosk,<sup>18</sup> Shahin Najafi and Hichkas ('Nobody'). Among the rappers, Yas is the only one who has attempted to release his albums legally. All these groups began their work inside Iran, but, except for Yas, all left the country in recent years and now live in Europe and the United States: Kiosk in New York, Shahin Najafi in Germany and Sourush (the lead singer of Hichkas) in London.

These musicians, compared to others in fusion and traditional trends, are more likely to write their own songs, which use a more direct and explicit language, while still sometimes using metaphors. Reviewing the lyrics of these groups reveals that they share a set of themes, concerns and points of interests, although each has its own particular viewpoint and approach. In general terms, three themes can be identified in the lyrics of these musicians:

1. The economic, social, political and cultural situation in contemporary Iranian society.
2. Criticism of specific current and historical events in Iran.
3. Appreciation of Iranian literary culture as a source of inspiration and philosophical thinking.

The first theme contains a wide range of topics that the musicians express in reflexive ways. The topics relating to the economic situation include poverty, inflation, unemployment and the class gap. Social issues encompass addiction, hypocrisy or religious duplicity, the gender gap, brain drain, youth problems, immoralities, and self-censorship. In the domain of politics, they touch upon issues including corruption, administrative mismanagement, authoritarianism, discrimination, favouritism and autocracy.

In addition to social and political problems, one of the recurrent issues that these groups raise is religious hypocrisy or politicisation and manipulation of Islam by the establishment in order to control all aspects of Iranian society. For example, in *Mahdi*, Shahin Najafi addresses the Mahdi, the hidden Twelfth Imam. He begins singing in *Gilaki* (a language related to Persian which is spoken in the north of Iran) and then he transfers to rapping in Farsi, complaining to the Mahdi about poverty, the class gap, corruption and the privileged cleric class. At the end, he addresses the Mahdi, by saying that 'I came all the way from Chamkhabeheh to Qom to see you, however, I did not find you.'<sup>19</sup> Implicitly he shows his disappointment at the cleric's inability to do anything for his people.

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<sup>17</sup> The sources include those carried out by the author and existing interviews in various media.

<sup>18</sup> The name comes from the original formation of the band in Tehran, as they used to play in any possible small place (a 'kiosk' or small room) to avoid arrest.

<sup>19</sup> From a village in the north of Iran to the headquarters of the religious authorities.

In another song called *Ay Naghi* ('Hey Naghi'), he addresses the tenth Shi'a Imam, and satirically says, 'Mahdi is in a deep asleep, so other imams should come and save the world, please do something for us'. Breaking religious taboos in satirical songs is becoming increasingly common in this trend, however, among these groups Shahin is the most candid.

For the most part, the lyrics of rock and rap songs reflect the personal experiences of the musicians in relation to the social and political situation. In fact, the autobiographical narratives of the vocalists are integrated in the melodic and harmonic fabric of many of these songs (Robertson 2013, 245). Some songs describe particular stories in the musicians' lives. For example, Yas said that 'most of my songs are rooted in the realities and have particular stories behind them and since Iranians are more interested in the content of music rather than the form, they easily can relate to my music'.<sup>20</sup> In one of his songs, *Pedar* ('Father'), he narrates his experience of losing his father when he was 17 years old and becoming the breadwinner of the family. Here, he highlights the selfishness and materialistic attitudes of businessmen. Similarly, Shahin Najafi narrates his mother's life as a way of raising the issue of women's subjugation in *Ma mard nistim* ('We are not men'). In *Taraf-e ma* ('Our area') he also describes poverty by referring to his own childhood. Sourush also stressed that most of his lyrics were based on his own experiences in family and society.<sup>21</sup>

These musicians express their personal narratives and link them to the larger political and social process. For example, Arash Sobhani (lead singer of Kiosk) wrote a song called *Nameh be sardar* ('Letter to the general'), in which he addresses a military official, whom he met during his military service. The military official was active during the revolution of 1979 and in the Iran-Iraq war, during which he was exposed to a chemical weapons attack. However, he finds himself unable to respond convincingly to the critical views of the youth (including his own children) regarding the present social situation. By narrating this memory in his song, Sobhani intends to disclose the fact that some of the high-ranking military officials, like many ordinary people, have faced dilemmas.

The second category consists of a wide range of themes relating to specific social incidents or historical episodes. For example, several of Yas's songs refer to humanitarian topics such as the earthquake in Bam in 2002, the Iran-Iraq war, and the killing of a boy while hiding behind his father in a gun battle in Gaza in September 2000. Kiosk also refer to some historical events and political issues such as the Holocaust, the US invasion of Iraq and the nuclear negotiations. The protests which followed the 2009 Iranian election are also a common issue in the songs of all of these groups: for example in *Hazrat ta'id kardand* ('The supreme leader confirmed it') by Kiosk, and Shahin Najafi's *Neda* and *Khoda khabeh* ('God is asleep').

The third recurrent theme in the songs of these groups is the musicians' reflections on society, history and culture in a broader sense. In these songs they express their desire for a deep change in people's perception, attitudes and insights. In general, the songs are aimed at rethinking views of Iranians themselves, and highlighting the positive and humanistic aspects of Iranian culture. In most of the lyrics there is a critical look at losing spirituality and humanity, lacking meaning in life and increasing materialistic and self-centred attitudes and fragmentation among people. When I asked Yas what changes he wishes to happen in Iran, he replied: 'We should start the

<sup>20</sup> Interview with author by email, 22 April 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with author, London, 12 June 2013.

change from ourselves, our outlook and our relationship'.<sup>22</sup> Sourush, responding to the same question, said that his main concern is 'injustice whoever represents it'. In sum, as the lyrics demonstrate, these musicians are seeking a multidimensional change and are not only targeting the political establishment.<sup>23</sup>

Another commonality among these musicians is that, in response to the government's over-emphasis on Islam as the official state religion, they highlight and sometimes even glorify Iranian civilization, history and culture in their lyrics. Towards this purpose, they praise national figures of the past and contemporary Iran in art, poetry and music and consider them as their enlighteners. In my interview with Yas, he stressed that we should explore, appreciate and revive Iranian cultural heritage. In his song, *Solh toui* ('You are the peace'), he addresses Mawlana by saying 'I worship you every day and repeat your name a hundred times. I get inspiration and strength from you. You are not limited to any country, you belong to all mankind and you are the one who taught me and many other people the culture of peace'. Similarly, Shahin Najafi, who named one of his songs *Bamdad*, a pseudonym of Ahamad Shamlou,<sup>24</sup> praises him as a strong resister who did not reconcile with the establishment and considers him a source of inspiration and meaning for art.

These lyrics show that the musicians are strongly connected to these poets, as also reflected in Yas's *Solh toui* ('You are the peace'). In this song he says that he repeats the name of *Mawlana* every day, in a form of prayer to increase his spiritual strength.

In general, these musicians have a deep and strong commitment to change and they believe that they can make a difference through their music. In one of his songs, *Bezar bekoshamesh* ('Let's kill him'), Yas says: 'it is time now I go to war equipped with my pen and paper'. Shahin Najafi, also constantly expresses his commitment in his songs, as in *Jan fada* ('Scarifying'): 'I will devote and spend all my life on this path'. Similarly, Sourush stresses that singing is a commitment or even a mission for him, as in *Oon manam* ('He is me'): 'I sing rap, because there is something in my heart, it is not for entertainment... rap develops this society'. These songs often start with criticism and despair but end with hope, illustrating that these musicians are optimistic about Iran's future.

Lastly, this trend is cosmopolitan in nature. These musicians travel temporarily or permanently to the West, perform and release their albums abroad, perform and record music with non-Iranian bands and take inspiration from world music. Cosmopolitanism is becoming an increasingly common characteristic among Iranian social and intellectual groups. 'Iranian political culture flexed its cosmopolitan muscles: in liberatory art and underground music, poetry and literature...' (Dabashi 2010, 214). However, at the same time they remain critical of the foreign policy of western powers and western media stereotypes of Iran. For example, in *Hoyat-e man* ('My identity'), Yas criticises '300', a Hollywood movie in which ancient Persia is depicted negatively. Sourush often refers to issues such as the double standards of the US position on Iranian nuclear power, as in *Bia Bia* ('Come Come'). In other words, these musicians keep a pragmatic balance between their patriotic principles and their outward looking approach.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with author by email, 22 April 2013.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with author, London, 12 June 2013.

<sup>24</sup> *Bamdad* in Farsi means morning. Shamlou (1925-2000) is one of the most influential Iranian poets and writers in modern times.

## The Persian Classical Trend: The Music of Homa

During the last two decades, classical Persian music through its creativities and innovations in form and content, has been involved in the process of current consciousness-producing music. Throughout its history, this style of music has never been limited merely to creational activities, but has always been spiritual. Certainly, those who are masters of this music, such as Muhammad–Reza Shahjarian, made an extended contribution in enriching this trend. However, as a representative of the younger generation of this trend, I will focus on the Mastan ensemble, which was founded in 2005 by Saieed Jafarzadeh (born in 1980) who is better known as Parvaz Homa. He is the lyricist, composer and vocalist of the group. In 2006 and 2007 he was able to hold a few concerts in Tehran, and, since then he has held many concerts abroad and released his albums outside Iran.

The lyrics of the melodies by Homa, which are mostly very thoughtful, reflective and philosophical, are drawn from his own written poems, the classical mystic poets such as Hafez, Omar Khayyam and Mawlana, but also from contemporary Iranian poetry. Unlike rock/rap trends, these songs are not very direct but through using metaphors, allegories, proverbs and mystical concepts they refer to specific social situations and events. Homa conveys the emotional dimension of his song's narrative (humour, sorrow and anger) to audiences through a combination of songs, spoken dialogue, dance-like motions and theatrical music.

Like other conscious music trends, Homa critically raises the issue of the abuse of Islam by the religion's custodians. For example, *K'abeh* (referring to the Kaaba in Mecca) addresses those authorities who go to Mecca for pilgrimage but perpetrate injustice and oppression at home. In *Mulaqat be Douzakhian* ('Meeting with infernal'), he complains to God that 'some people are looking for you around a stone, some people are taking our lives on your behalf, some people are looking for you by weapons in the battlefields and some using your name deceitfully'. He also addresses people: 'If God inspires his spirit into Adam and Eve, then God is in the heart of all human beings'. Homa delivers a pure and non-materialistic view of God in *Khoda dar rostay ma keshavarz ast* ('God is Farmer in our village') as he says 'I saw God was harvesting belief, dancing with the wind, running on the lawn, crying with fog, pouring his tears on the farm'. The song ends: 'God in our village is not friends with the authorities'. He performed one of the famous poems from the *Mathnawi*, by Mawlana, in the form of theatrical music, called *Musa va Sha'ban* ('Musa and shepherd') which is a dialogue between a shepherd and a clergyman. This dialogue reflects the contradiction between the clergy's perception of God and that of the shepherd's. The shepherd views God as accessible, sincere, reasonable and kind, while the clergy sees God as fearful, omnipotent, inaccessible and commandant.<sup>25</sup>

Homa also raises social and political problems and the malfunction of the establishment, but expresses them metaphorically. In some of his songs, such as *Modara kon* ('Tolerate') or in *Hay shah- bi khilal-o mast* ('You, the drunk carefree king') he addresses kings in general terms, complaining about various social ills, which indirectly refers to the current situation of the country.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, like in other trends, he gives importance to thoughtfulness, kindness, humanity, hope and unity while rejecting despair and compliance. In *Naleh sar makon* ('Don't mourn') he

<sup>25</sup> The story goes that after a cleric overheard a shepherd talking to God in an intimate way, he rebuked him, claiming that is not the proper way of talking to God, and warned him of the fires of hell. Hearing that, the shepherd was saddened and fled. But God reproached the cleric, telling him: 'you are not supposed to do that, your duty is to reconcile my people with me, or connect them to me not to separate from me'. The cleric then told the shepherd that his prayers were accepted by God. But the shepherd said: 'I don't fear Satan, or blasphemy, or flames, or separation, or death, I know God better than you do, God never wants to be manipulated in your hands, and never wants to cause fear'.

<sup>26</sup> In *Hay shah-bi khilal-o mast*, Homa, he says: 'You, a drunk carefree king, are you listening to me? (a poor peasant), have you ever become embarrassed in front of your children for not having a piece of bread?' *Modara kon* is also a conversation with a king, advising him to care about people.

uses the well-known nostalgic song, that is sung by several famous Iranian vocalists, but he reproduces it into a new version, stressing hope, happiness and optimism. For example, he replaced 'Morning bird: mourn', from the original song, with 'Morning bird: do not mourn' and starts with 'we are frustrated of hearing sighs and groans'.

In fact, similar to other trends, Homa has a strong commitment in his music to reflecting people's needs. He says 'music in our generation is not merely an entertainment tool or to satisfy the aesthetical aspect but it is more of a sanctuary, a refuge, an alternative voice that people recourse to, probably this is because they cannot express their pains and problems themselves, so they would like to hear them from music'.<sup>27</sup> In other words, Homa, similar to other performers of conscious music, discursively expresses the needs of the general public, or in Anthony Giddens's term, the people's 'practical knowledge'. Practical knowledge is defined as what people (as social actors) know about their social condition but cannot express verbally, while literati, artists and scholars can express their awareness in discursive form (Giddens 1989, 374-375).

## Fusion Trends: The Music of Mohsen Namjoo

Fusion is one of the most common and dynamic features of the Iranian new music movement which carries variations in tempo and rhythm by combining jazz and pop with traditional Persian instruments. This new attractive and creative style mixes native instruments such as *daf* (a type of frame drum), *ney* (an end-blown flute) *tar* and *se tar* (a four stringed lute) with western instruments.

There are many contemporary Iranian music groups, both in Iran and outside the country, whose music can be defined as fusion. This paper will concentrate on Mohsen Namjoo as one of the most prolific and innovative musicians of fusion. Namjoo is a vocalist, composer and songwriter who initially trained as a classical musician, but then became a pioneer of the new wave of Iranian fusion music by incorporating western instrumentation, rhythms and harmonies from rock and blues into his compositions of folk and Persian classical music. He performed his first concerts in 1997 and officially released his first album in Iran in 2007, titled *Toranj*, but since then he has released his albums outside Iran.

Namjoo is a highly creative musician in form and content. He introduces a free style and an unconventional way of singing, by using mockery, sarcasm, humour and speech and by expressing emotions through laughing, crying and shouting. All these have made his eclectic music powerful, appealing and unique. The satirical language he uses, has become a typical characteristic of Iranian conscious music.

Namjoo's lyrics are intuitive, insightful and novel, as they are a blending of classical poetry (such as Hafez, Rumi and Khayyam), modern Persian poetry, his own lyrics and Iranian regional folk music. His recent albums, compared to his earlier works, are drawn more from his own lyrics and have become more direct owing to his residence abroad. In *Bouse hay bihoodeh* ('Useless Kisses') he refers to the social situation and specific political incidents such as the serial murders of Iranian intellectuals. In *Dahe Shast* ('Sixties') he comments on the repression of the post-revolutionary years and the effects of the Iran-Iraq war.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Interview with author by email, 27 April 2013.

<sup>28</sup> In this song he relates his life growing up during the Iran-Iraq war and the anarchical socio-political situation of the post-revolutionary period. The song is narrated from a child's perspective who begins school full of desires and wishes, but very soon is faced with all kinds of discrimination, pretentiousness, social gaps and the imposed cultural lifestyle. All these, he says, caused his childhood to end very soon.



He is critical of political and economic pressures in *Neo Kanti* ('Neo-Kantian') and, like other trends, he questions the extraordinary religious power of the clerics as for example in *Faghih Khoshgele* ('Beautiful jurist') where he addresses the Supreme Leader.

As a review of the other two trends also showed, criticism of abuses and manipulation of religion by the powerful religious authorities, as the custodians of religion, has become a recurrent theme of conscious music. This is a natural reaction to the undemocratic way of enforcing a particular interpretation of religion to Iran, a heterogeneous society. The actors of conscious music, like other cultural producers, do not target religion itself, but oppose those religious authorities, as part of the ruling classes, who impose their own narrow interpretation of religion on society as a whole.

Namjoo, similar to other musicians, does not promote passivism and hopelessness, for example in *Hamrah show Aziz* ('Oh dear join us'), he calls for solidarity in the face of repression and hardship and at the end of *Neo Kanti* he offers a constructive critique and hopes for a better future. In referring to social ills and the political situation, he is not always explicit and sometimes uses metaphoric language such as in *Biaban ra sarasar meh gerefteh ast* ('There is fog all over the desert'), which is based on one of Ahmad Shamloo's poems. In this song he implicitly describes the dictatorial social situation of the post-1953 coup. By performing this song, he intends to show an analogy between the historical period of the early 1950s and the post-Iranian election period in 2009, both characterised by the suppression of dissent.

However, Namjoo's work, unlike that of rock musicians and rappers, is not overwhelmed with social issues. He prefer using the word 'sorrow' instead of 'protest' for his critical songs.<sup>29</sup> He has mentioned several times, in his interviews and lectures, that instead of only targeting the government and political regime, he is more concerned with complex concepts and limitations or deficiencies in human relations in a broader sense. As an example, in *Jabr-e joghrafiai* ('Geographical determinism'), he criticizes the concept of determinism that justifies hierarchal world power relations by saying that 'being born in Asia is called geographical determinism', then he addresses citizens of these countries: 'they [world powers] put your hands on your head'. He implies that the world powers have imposed the falsehood that the situation of these countries is rooted in their own distinctive peculiarities. Then he adds 'they don't allow you to play in the game', and turns to God, asking 'what do you think, when do you take our side?'

Moreover, as a musician, Namjoo's priority is bringing change to music itself, as a response to the desire of Iranian intellectual audience and musicians.<sup>30</sup> In fact, he has introduced a new kind of fusion music by combining Persian music and western music in a creative way that makes it hard to define a piece as purely Persian or western, such as in *Delyaman* (Mansouri-Zeyni and Sami 2013, 15). We may say that this is partly due to the nature of traditional Iranian music structure, which gives the composer great freedom to improvise. He regards fusion as a highly important and multi-dimensional mission, beyond its aesthetic aspect: 'fusion is music which mixes everything together including lyrics, tone of singers, keys of music, cultural backgrounds and genres'.<sup>31</sup> In short, his innovative music, his statements, and, like the musicians in other trends, his collaboration with non-Iranian musicians show Namjoo's deep desire for transcultural experience and apathy for the 'us' versus 'them' attitude.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Euro news on 12th December, 2012. <http://persian.euronews.com/2012/12/18/mohsen-namjoo-talks-to-euronews/>

<sup>30</sup> Ibid

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

## Conclusion

Iranian conscious music in modern history has gone through various stages: from the political songs of the Constitution Revolution in the early twentieth century, to an enforced relative silence in the middle of the century, to its limited reappearance in the form of pop music in the 1970s and finally to the emergence of the current multi-styles conscious music. However, despite all of the fluctuations, this kind of music was never fully silenced and along with changes in the social situation, changed its tones and modes and consequently was successfully sustained. The dynamic and reflexive characteristics of Iranian conscious music are reflected in both form and content. The musicians, as agents of change, by expressing practical knowledge of common people along with their understandings and perceptions have produced 'multiple consciousness'.

As Michel Foucault stresses: 'power is not an institution and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategic situation in a particular society' (1990, 93). This is true with Iranian conscious musicians in that they engage with power relations in a complex way, not just with a particular institution. They bring various deep humanistic concepts into consciousness, present new ways of looking at the past and future and challenge many institutionalised concepts, norms and social taboos. Thus, this music, by addressing multi-sources of power relations, is far from uni-dimensionally targeted at the government.

The importance of current conscious music lies in the fact that it shares the distinctiveness of other Iranian cultural products (including visual art, film and literature) which set them apart from those of the pre-revolutionary period. In other words, this multi-genre music, by diversification of content and form, being cosmopolitan and at the same time being critical, represents the dominant discourse of the current Iranian cultural or intellectual trends and also the voices of the new Iranian generation. In general, the correlation between the musical styles and the content makes this music more effective and understandable.

Reviewing the content of conscious music shows that while it reflects the immediate social environment, it also reveals the insights of musicians, as manifested in some grand concepts beyond time and place. We might conclude that cultural products and the social and historical context (or agency and structure as Giddens calls it) are equally important elements. In other words, the literary and artistic creations are shaped by contexts, and the circulation of cultural products produce and reproduce new discourse, consciousness and a new social power within a culture.

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