

Melodic Circles

Urban Classical Music from Iran

Mehdi Rostami and Adib Rostami

Ethno-musicological guide to Iranian music and the album, by Ethnomusicologist Fariborz Rostami.

That which is called “Iranian music” is conventionally divided into two general branches: there is the music of Iranian ethnic minorities that includes various rural and nomadic traditions, each with its own distinct musical system, and at times overlapping given the complexities of the Iranian cultural geography. And then there is the urban musical tradition known as “*radif-e dastgāhi*” in the contemporary period.

This second musical tradition is rooted in another more than thousand years old tradition referred to as “*maqāmi*”, the theory of which is documented in old musical treatises. This tradition could be traced back to the pre-Islamic period, given the names of certain songs and melodies mentioned in the works of Persian speaking poets from the first four centuries AH (622-1009 CE),, but there is no written work to inform us about the structure and theory of pre-Islamic Iranian music. From the fourth century (10th century CE.) on however, there is a wealth of documentation about the *maqāmi* musical tradition in Iran and the Islamic world at large. Some of the best-known of these include, al-Farabi’s *Kitāb al-Musiqi al-Kabir* (10th century), Safi ad-Din al-Urmawi’s *Risālat al-Sharafiyā* and *Kitāb al-Adwār* (13th century), and Abd al-Qadir al-Marāghi’s *Jāmi’ al-Alhān* and *Maqāsid al-Alhān* (14th-15th century). The last treatise in this musical tradition is that of Shir Ali bin Muhammad Banā’i (16th century).

The first signs of a major change in this older musical tradition are seen in Forsat-od-Dowleh Shirāzi’s *Bohur al-Alhān* (1914). This is the first musical treatise to mention the “*radif*” and the “*dastgāh*” system which names the seven *dastgāh*. We do not know much about the gradual process of the change to the *dastgāh* system from the system whose theoretical aspects are written about by al-Farabi and others, and the structures of whose “melodic circles” (*adwār*) are analyzed by al-Urmawi and al-Marāghi.

Even though there are important differences between the two systems when it comes to the structure of the intervals, the synthesis of sounds, and the processes of melodic formation, they also have certain commonalities. In the descriptions of the structures of intervals (*ab’ād*) in the *maqām* system, where it is explained how each *maqām* arrives at its particular melodic form through a synthesis of distinct intervals, one comes across twelve *maqāms*: *Oshāq*, *Navā*, *Būsalik*, *Rāst*, *Hoseyni*, *Hejāzi*, *Homāyūn*, *Esfahān*, *Erāq*, *Bozorg*, *Zirafkand*, and *Neyriz-e Saghir*. Likewise, in the *dastgāh* system there are twelve general divisions: the seven *dastgāh*, which are *Shūr*, *Homāyūn*, *Navā*, *Chahārgāh*, *Māhūr*, and *Rāst-o-panjgāh*; and the five *āvāz*, namely *Bayāt-e Tork*, *Abu’atā*, *Dashti*, and *Afshāri* (which are subsets of *Shūr*), and *Bayāt-e Esfahān* (which is a subset of *Homāyūn*). This latter musical system comprises a tradition that has been orally transmitted by the Farāhāni family (a family of musicians in the Qajar court) to their pupils, and that continues to be taught and transmitted to this day. The *radif* is divided to the two general branches of instrumental and vocal, each of which transmitted through various “narrations” (*revāyāt*). Each narration—most of which notated and recorded today—is known by the name of the master who has transmitted and narrated that particular version.

The “*radif*” is a practical and performative repertoire for both professional instrumentalists and vocalists working within the *dastgāh* system. Each musician working within this tradition has to have learned the *radif* with one or more known masters (*ostād*) of the *radif*. The purest form of education in this tradition is oral transmission in which through years the student receives the minutiae of the tradition from the master. The ultimate goal of musical education within this tradition is for the musician to cultivate, through years and years of practice and performance, the capacity to improvise. Improvisation (*bedāhe pardāzi*) is the ultimate aim of this musical tradition wherein, ideally, the musician creates a new work in each performance. It is this notion of improvisation that is the true subject of the present work.

The present work, *Musical Circles*, showcases the technical and creative powers of two young musicians in a free improvisation on the basis of both the radif and certain ethnic musical tradition. In addition to the education they have received from various masters of the radif-e dastgāhi tradition, with personal creativity Mehdi Rostami (*setār*) and Adib Rostami (*tombak*) have arrived at such a level of mastery where in each performance they open a luminous window to musical discovery before us. Following is a short description of the instruments used in the present work, then a brief note about the performers' particularities, and finally a description of the work itself.

The Pieces:

Circle One: Bayāt-e Tork (traditional Iranian mode)

After an improvised introduction in the first part of Bayāt-e Tork comes a rhythmic piece that is an adaptation of a Kurdish song, played with beautiful variations. Then the *setār* introduces the next part of Bayāt-e Tork, in which the instrumentalist creates an ambient river of sounds. At the climax of this particular movement we gradually begin hearing certain intervals particular to the repertoire of the *tanbūr* (a Kurdish lute). With this the mode begins to change and holds us suspended between the *Esfahān* and the *Gharibi* modes of the *tanbūr* repertoire. Circle one ends with a powerful rhythmic piece of beautiful melodies and variations.

Circle Two: Bayāt-e Esfahān (traditional Iranian mode)

The *setār* places us within *Esfahān* mode with a fanciful introduction. This is followed by another subtle adaptation from Kurdish music that opens up a different world of sound. While the *tombak* keeps the rhythm going, the *setār* plays the *owj* (climax) in *Esfahān* mode. In the second part the piece transitions from *Esfahān* into *Shūr* mode and then into *Abu'ata*. This is followed by an adaptation of a song from the Fars province (south-western Iran, near the Persian Gulf) with light and wavy variations.

In the *dastgāhi* musical tradition, it is customary for the musicians to usher the listeners out of the heavier and deeper parts with a rhythmically and melodically simple form known as a *reng*, so here too, at the very end Mehdi and Adib Rostami prepare us for leaving the intricate twists and turns of Iranian music with a *reng*.