

# 3. The Concept of Radif and Three Paradigms of Persian Music in Contemporary Iran

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## **Abstract:**

*From 30 years ago onwards, Persian music, under the influence of Western philosophy, has been westernised in the sense that some elements of Western philosophy have strongly impacted Persian music. In this paper, I intend to propose a critical leap in Persian music which leads to the creation of three different paradigms in Persian music. Philosophically, Persian music can be seen from three perspectives: Transcendental, Secular and Nominalistic. The Transcendental view considers Persian music as something that is related to what comes from high up, i.e. God. In this paradigm, the concept of Radif is a very important element which has a high place in the history of Persian music. Contrarily, the Secular view focuses on the mundane feature of Persian music in the sense that musicians care to produce melodies by humans and for humans. If Transcendentalists consider music as "less is more," Secularists treat it as "less is bore." However, the Nominalistic view tries to leave the two previous paradigms behind by not considering any essence for music, and thus focuses on the contextual feature of music. I conclude by saying that we are now dealing with different "Persian musics" rather than "a Persian music".*

## **Keywords:**

*Persian music, Iran, Radif, Paradigm, Philosophy*

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# The Concept of Radif and Three Paradigms of Persian Music in Contemporary Iran

*Successive transition from one paradigm to another... is the usual developmental pattern of mature science.*

*Thomas Kuhn (1962,12)*

## 1. Introduction

Persian music can hardly be separated from Persian philosophy and mysticism. Persian history shows that almost since 1600 AD, Persian music has always had various ups and downs with different philosophies, whether before or after Islam.<sup>1</sup> However, it seems that from 100 years ago onwards, Persian music, under the influence of Western philosophy, has gone through a transitional phase, which can be seen as an act of Westernizing Persian music. That is, some elements of Western philosophy have strongly impacted local music philosophy. In this paper, I am going to propose a critical leap in Persian music which would lead to the creation of three different paradigms in Persian music philosophy. I argue that Persian music can be philosophically approached from three different viewpoints, which are the Transcendental, Secular and Nominalistic paradigms.<sup>2</sup> To make it clear, the Transcendental view considers Persian music as something related to Heaven and as something coming from God. The Secular view focuses on the mundane feature of Persian music, i.e. the music that is produced by humans and for humans. The Nominalistic view does not consider any essence of music, but focuses on its contextual features instead.

In the next section, I discuss Persian music and its key element, i.e. *Radif*. Then, I shall introduce three different philosophical Persian musical paradigms, namely the Transcendental, Secular and Nominalistic.

## 2. On the Concept of *Radif*

The traditional Persian music (Iranian music) is based on *Radif* (meaning “order” in Persian), which is a collection of old melodies that have been passed on orally from master to student from one

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<sup>1</sup> Radif (music) - *WikiVividly*. (n.d.). *Wikivividly.com*. Retrieved from: [https://wikivividly.com/wiki/Radif\\_\(music\)](https://wikivividly.com/wiki/Radif_(music))

<sup>2</sup> I feel that have to make it clear here that this research is not historical, hence my classifications are not based on the chronological order of the history of Persian music.

posterity to another.<sup>3</sup> Over time, centuries after the advent of Islam in Iran and after the Muslim conquest of Persia in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, particularly when the Qajar dynasty took control of the throne of Persia, each master has added new melodies to this collection.<sup>4</sup> The Qajar era (1785-1925)<sup>5</sup> is regarded as the flowering period of *Radifesque* musical system. The presence of prominent figures as Agha Ali Akbar Farahani and other reputed musicians, especially his two sons, Mirza Abdullah and Agha Hossein Gholi, are credited with the perfection of the idea of the systematic musical organisation called *Radif*. The first known versions of *Radif* are attributed to these two brothers. These melodies highly depend on each generation's memory, since they are expressed orally.<sup>6</sup>

Understood as such, *Radif* is therefore best seen as the traditional model repertoire of Iranian classical music that forms the *essence* of Persian musical culture. It comprises more than 250 melodic motifs or melodic units called *Goushes*, which are arranged in especial orders, that is to say, in seven primaries and five secondary cycles respectively named *Dastagh* and *Avaz*.<sup>7</sup> *Goushes* are actually the raw materials for improvisation, which constitutes the core of the Iranian performance. The seven *Dastgahs* are: Shur, Segah, Chahargah, Mahur, Homayun, Nava and Rastpanjgah. The *Avazes* are considered as derivatives of two of these *Dastgahs*: Abuata, Dashti, Bayat-e-Tork and Afshari *Avazes* are for Shur's *Dastgah*, while Bayat-e-Esfahan's *Avaz* is regarded as Homayun's *Dastgah*. The details of *Goushes* have been transmitted from one generation to another over 200 years. The *Goushehs* (e.g. Kereshme and Gerayeli) in Persian music, all together with different tonal spaces make *Dastgah*, which may contain approximately 10 to 30 *Gousheh's* melodies. Rhythm in these melodies comes in three different forms: symmetric, asymmetric, and free form. Such rhythm has been greatly influenced by the rhythm and meter of the Persian poetry (e.g. Sufi poets especially Rumi, Hafez and Saadi). Although the instrumental and vocal *Radif* can be different from the rhythmical perspective, their melodic structures remain the same.<sup>8</sup>

Since *Radif* is a collection of melodies that are orally transmitted from master to disciple, Iranian musicians mostly tend to believe that this enormous and important repertory should be preserved and passed on to next generations through their teachings. In fact, the mind of Iranian musicians cannot be separated from *Radif* because it is their cultural heritage and because it is deeply

<sup>3</sup> The UNESCO considers *Radif* as an intangible cultural heritage. See "Radif of Iranian music - intangible heritage - Culture Sector – UNESCO" (2008). For understanding the details of Persian music and what the *Radif* is, see: Farhat (1990); Miller (1999); Sepanta (1990); Khaleghi (1956); Akbarzadeh (2000;2002); Netti (1987).

<sup>4</sup> Hussain and Nabi Khaki (2014).

<sup>5</sup> Wikipedia contributors. (2018, March 26). Qajar dynasty. In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 02:35, April 14, 2018, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Qajar\\_dynasty&oldid=832594426](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Qajar_dynasty&oldid=832594426)

<sup>6</sup> Layegh, Haghypour, Sarem (2013).

<sup>7</sup> See "Dastgāh | Persian music" (n.d.).

<sup>8</sup> Netti (1987, Ch. 2). For general information about *Radif* and *Gousheh*, see "Radif (music) – WikiVividly" (n.d.).

rooted in Iranian musical culture. *Radif* is a distinguished repertory that is derived from the musical cultures of the various regions of Iran, and more than that serves as the syntax of Persian music.<sup>9</sup> It is the most excellent collection of Persian music, i.e. the finest tunes and melodies. If one wants to learn Persian music, one should get to know and learn *Radif*. It is by learning this musical language, forms and phrasing principles that one can compose a piece of music and play an instrument or sing a song. To acquire and learn *Radif's essence* and philosophy, one has to practice it for many years so as to be able to internalize, incorporate and play it by heart at any time.<sup>10</sup>

Being the spirit of Persian music and the soul of sound, *Radif* is always in the heart of Iranian musicians. The oral method of transmitting *Radif* is more acceptable among many Iranian musicians since the notation system cannot reflect the delicacies of this repertoire. The accurate articulations of these melodies are best transmitted through the oral method. Indeed, students should even watch the hands of their masters to learn every skill and movement. Since *Radif* has a unique system of fingering techniques, one might be able to make the sounds that one hears on a recording or reads in a notation, but one might not know the right positions and fingering techniques.<sup>11</sup>

Though some people are able to memorize many poems, they are unable to fathom their meaning and philosophy. There is a similar case with memorizing *Radif*. The philosophy of *Radif* should not be separated from its repertoire. In this sense, *Radifesque* spirituality and philosophy have to be transmitted in musical institutes, as well as academia and society.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. Three Paradigms in Persian Music Philosophy

After sketching a snapshot of the story of Persian music, we could now consider its philosophical background. Put succinctly, an elaboration of the Transcendental, Secular and Nominalistic paradigms is needed. The crucial point here is that this distinction is not historical in the sense that the Transcendental paradigm, say, is not necessarily related to ancient times. That is, it is possible to find, as we will see, some contemporary musicians in the Transcendental paradigm.

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<sup>9</sup> Talaei (1992) and Kiani (2005).

<sup>10</sup> See Romero (2003).

<sup>11</sup> See "Iran Chamber Society: Music of Iran: Iranian Traditional Music Instruments" (n.d.).

<sup>12</sup> See "Sound Garden" (n.d.).

### 3.1. The Transcendental Paradigm: ‘The Less is More’

In this paradigm, Persian poems are extremely important to the extent that even music is based upon poetic rhythms. Since the musicians who belong to this paradigm do not believe in using notes, they make their music on the basis of Persian poem-based melodies. These musicians orally teach music heart by heart in a way that encourages students to listen attentively to their tutors and imitate them passionately. Indeed, some of these musicians think that *Radif* is the most authoritative collection of melodies and students have to learn and memorise *only* these melodies. Changing these melodies and appealing to imagination to create new melodies is not welcomed by these musicians. Philosophically speaking, these people are “essentialist” in the sense that they treat Persian music as a *précis* of *Radif*. For them, *Radif* is the *essence* of Persian music. Therefore, Persian music is one thing and that is *Radif*. Every attempt to change this *essence* has to be abandoned, according to these musicians.<sup>13</sup>

In this paradigm of Persian music, students are told not to play decorative notes, that is to say, they should not remove, change, or add anything to *Radif* because “the less is more” and more than that music is merely created to *transcend* our spirituality. The less we use decorative notes, the more we understand the music. Indeed, the philosophy behind this is that Persian music is not for giving short-term pleasure to others. Instead, Persian music is for giving people spirituality, deep reflection and chance to detach from this mundane world. For example, for these people, *Avaz* Abuata is good for reflection. The believers in the Transcendentalism of *Radif* think that playing different melodies or *Goushes* only depends on the time of the day. For example, playing or hearing *Dastgah Nava* is suitable for night because playing or hearing *Nava* before sleeping makes you calm and ready for praying. Or playing *Shur* is more advisable in the morning because it gives us energy to start our day.

For Transcendentalists, music and musical instruments are sacred. Most of them believe that before playing an instrument you have to prepare yourself by doing some spiritual practices, e.g. *wudu*. I personally remember that my tutor, Majid Kiani, one of the prominent examples of the Transcendental paradigm, recommended that we wash our face and hand and wear white outfits before playing *Santur*. He strongly encouraged his students to be polite in front of *Santur*. For these musicians, playing an instrument is tantamount to an act of praying, while the instrument itself is a kind of mediator between the player and God. thus, we have to be polite in front of God because music is coming from high up, or as Rumi correctly puts it: “Amazing! Amazing! My Lord! It is coming from high up”.

<sup>13</sup> Majid Kiani is one of the best examples of such musicians. See e.g. Kiani (2004).

Individuality is another issue which can be discussed in this paradigm. Transcendentalists in Persian music often prefer to *improvise* individually in solos, rather than collectively playing a written previously rehearsed piece in an ensemble. In fact, these musicians think that Persian music is associated with improvisation, which *Radif* can help us master. However, group practicing often requires the use of notation and orchestration. In this sense, individualism for these people is highly preferred to collectivism.

However, one might object that how musicians improvise when they already know *Radif*. If improvisation means creating and performing music spontaneously and without preparation, then it seems that Transcendentalists have something else in their mind when they use improvisation.

Majid Kiani is probably the prominent example of Transcendentals in contemporary Iran, who advocates the high place of *Radif* in Persian Music. He believes that what old Persian musicians contributed to us through *Radif* is all that we should stick to.<sup>14</sup>

### 3.2. The Secular Paradigm: 'The Less is Bore'

Unlike the Transcendental paradigm of Persian music, the musicians who belong to the Secular paradigm believe that Persian music must be treated as a science and this can happen only through notes. By utilizing notes, we can talk about music in an *intersubjective* way, not just through the known oral tradition. Masters in this paradigm use notes for their students in their teaching. Secular musicians do not think that poem-based melodies are really important; rather, they believe that we can sacrifice poems for the sake of music. That is, in a situation in which music cannot fit into the poem, we should remove, sacrifice, or change the poem. This is because all that matters is entertaining more pleasure through preforming/performative music.

In this paradigm, decorative notes are essential to music. Indeed, these musicians believe that without decorations Persian music loses something because "the less is bore;" that is to say, the less you use decorative notes, the less 'bore' music you create. Secular musicians think that since music is for giving more pleasure to its lovers, this can happen only through using more decorative notes. For example, one of the famous decorative notes is "Dorrah," which is a triple note to be performed quickly, and which sounds very sweet particularly in Santur.

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<sup>14</sup> Kiani is much similar to Seyyed Hossein Nasr in Islamic philosophy. Nasr (1987) advocates that tradition is better than modernity.

For secularists, music, in this paradigm, is in itself not a sacred thing. For them, it is an instrument which musicians can use to create meery moments for others. In this sense, music is objectified as a kind of profession to make money.

The pre-rehearsed and orchestrated concert is yet another issue about which both Transcendentalist and Secularist paradigms differ. In the secularist paradigm of Persian music, different instruments can work together as an ensemble playing written scores. In fact, these musicians think that collectivism in music, i.e. playing different Persian instruments together simultaneously such as Santur, Setar, Kamanche etc., helps in the creation of a more pleasant melody. It is worth noting here that Parviz Meshkatian was the role model for this group practicing. He had a huge impact on Persian music especially after the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

Persian poetry has changed tendencies after the constitutional Iranian revolution from classic to modern. The modern tendency has different weights, orders and instructions that cannot easily fit into *Radifesque* melodies. This implies that musicians need to create new melodies for these new poems. Since Persian music has a close relation with Persian poetry, with neo-Persian poetry we can therefore talk about neo-Persian music. The impact of this change in Persian poetry is not restricted to the Secular paradigm. We can find such impact as well in the Nominalistic paradigm as will be shown later.

Parviz Meshkatian, Hossein Alizadeh, Mohammad Reza Shajarian, Faramarz Payvar, Shahram Nazeri, etc. are all prominent examples of the Secular paradigm. They are famous for the new melodies they have contributed to contemporary Iranian music, especially after the Islamic Revolution.

### 3.3. The Nominalistic Paradigm

Although Transcendentalists and Secularists have differences regarding the nature of music, there is at least one thing they tend to share. Philosophically speaking, both Transcendentalists and Secularists paradigms are essentialists in the sense that both of them believe in the essence of Persian music. Both see *Radif* as the essence of Persian music, Secularists, unlike Transcendentalists, tend to add decorative notes for the sake of the pleurability of the event. However, one cannot find such essence in the Nominalistic musical system. Nominalist musicians entertain the belief that Persian instruments do not have an independent identity, which is always in flux due to the constant changeability of human contexts. This makes us think that since Persian music and its necessary instruments have neither an essence nor an identity, it could easily combine with any other sort of

music, say, Western music. Yet if Transcendentalists and Secularists both share the same view that instruments such as Santur have a static essence and an unchanging identity, Nominalists, who are contextualists, think that we can play Santur the way we play piano and make it sound exactly like a piano. Nominalists, thus, think that Persian music can be performed with other types of music, say, Latin American music such as Flamenco music. Ardavan Kamkar, as one of the prominent Santur players, is famous for using Santur to produce piano music.

Melody is another feature strongly related to the Nominalistic paradigm. It is accepted that in one piece of Persian music only one melody can be used. The pace of the piece from starting to ending is often constant. However, in the Nominalistic paradigm we no longer need to have these regulations. That is, different melodies can be utilised in one piece of Persian music, while the pace can be changed whenever the player wants to do so. For example, these musicians use different melodies from Persian and Western traditions (with different paces) in one piece of music.

In the Nominalistic paradigm, we can find some notes that are not well-tuned. In fact, the players who can be categorized under this paradigm often use non-tuned notes (Nakook) which sound unpleasant to the ears. They believe that there are no absolute models and rules for playing instruments. Everything in music is relative; therefore, unpleasant notes might be pleasant to some listeners. According to Nominalist musicians, we have to consider non-tuned music as a kind of music.<sup>15</sup>

Ardavan Kamkar, a Santur player, and Mohsen Namjoo, a singer-songwriter and Setar player, are prominent Nominalists in contemporary Iran. Most of their melodies are not necessarily coming from Persian music. Kamkar is famous for his kind of merging Iranian and orchestra Western music together particularly in his album, *Mahi Baray Sale No* (A Fish for New Year). Namjoo is famous for his somehow meaningless poems in his Western-like blues and rock music particularly in his album, *Az Pooste Narengi Madad* (Trust the Tangerine Peel). This way of treating Persian music makes some people call Namjoo Bob Dylan of Iran.<sup>16</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that we can make a distinction between three different philosophical paradigms of Persian music, i.e. the Transcendentalist, Secular, Nominalistic paradigms. Each of these

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<sup>15</sup> Siamak Aghaei, a Santur player, is famous for playing such Nakook non-tuned notes particularly in his album, *Ze Baade Ma* (After Us).

<sup>16</sup> Fathi (2007)



paradigms has different laudable features. Which is better? That I cannot tell. Currently, each of these paradigms has their own followers and admirers, masters and students in Iran. The gist of this paper is that Persian music, like many other sciences, has developed through history, and this makes it difficult for us to talk about only *one type* of Persian music, instead of talking about “Persian musics.”

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