

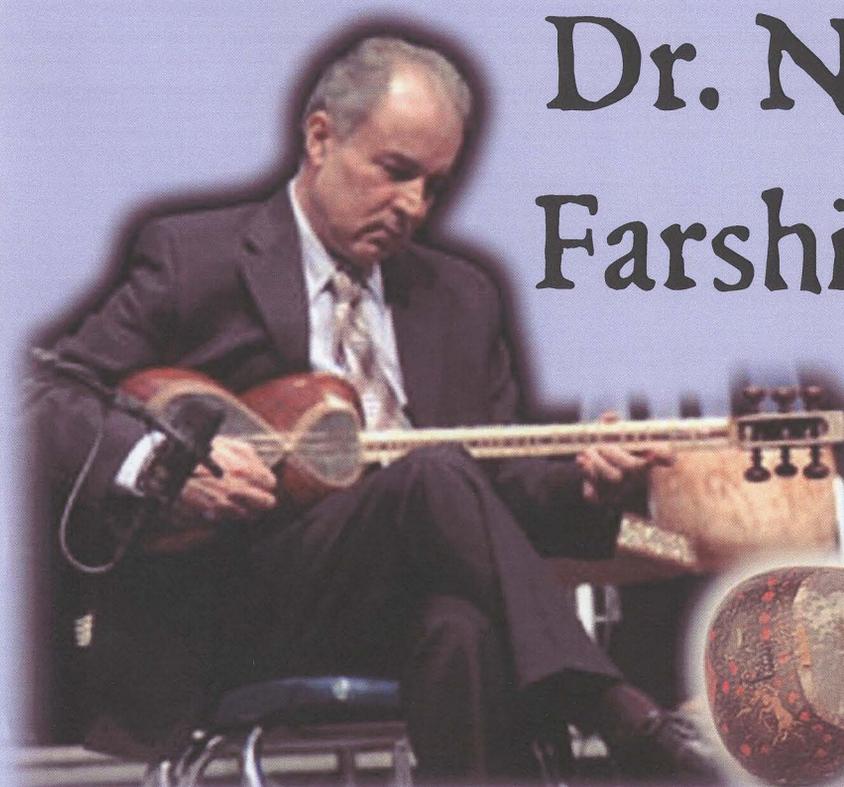
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Dr. Nader Majd and Farshid Mahjour



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A Brief Note on Persian Classical Music

Persian classical music dates back to 500 BCE. The Achaemenid Empire (550–331 BCE) used music in prayer, royal festivity, national ceremony, and war. At the time of the Sassanid dynasty (100 BCE–630 CE), Persian music reached its apex, with the royal ensemble performing songs by Barbad and Nakisa (two renowned court musicians). Barbad is famous for his system of 7 royal modes (Khosravany), 30 derivative modes (Lahn), and 360 melodies (Dastan).

In the next millennium or so, Persian classical music came under pressure from religious fanatics, and lost its liveliness. During this long period, Persian music continued to thrive in theory while debilitated considerably in practice. The Arab invasion (643–750 CE) was one of the prime causes for the suppression of musical activities. Nonetheless, at the time of the Abbassid dynasty (750–1258 CE) one can witness a revival of some forms of court music. Iranian musicians, once again, gained importance during this period. A prominent musician-scholar, Abu Nassr Farabi (890–980 CE), published his most celebrated book, *Kitab-e Musiqi Al Kabir*, which proved to be pivotal in the Islamic world, laying the foundation for the music traditions employed in many of the works of later centuries. Other Iranian scholars such as Abu Ali Sina (1000–1058 CE) and Safiaddin Ormavi (d. 1286 CE) launched the twelve-mode system with six melodies which are more or less standard today.

The socioeconomic dominance of hardline clerics for the next few centuries thwarted musical pursuits. Only religious music was allowed, either as a part of reciting the Quran or at other religious events. Music became associated with Islam and was an integrated part of rituals such as Taazeehe (religious musical theatre). Only the Safavie kings (1500–1672 CE), themselves resolute Shiites, patronized the arts, especially music.

Much of current Persian classical music finds its origin in the Qajar dynasty. Our collective memory in terms of practical music, as opposed to theory, dates back to this period. Mirza Abdulah (1843–1917) kept alive the memory of 3000 years of musical heritage. His teaching has become the pinnacle of much of the music literature in modern times. He was a maestro player of tar and setar, both long-neck plucked instruments, who taught succeeding generations the repertory of Persian classical music. He has passed on the long and wide-ranging oral tradition of music to his students while allowing them to put into writing much of his vast and invaluable recollection from the past.

The Qajar era is unique in the sense that musicians played at the royal court and private parties. Majlesi (private party) music is the most common type of music during this period. Some instruments such as tar and setar were introduced and others oud (lute), robab (Spike-fiddle), chang (harp), and Quanun (dulcimer-type instrument played with metallic pick) were abandoned. Agha Hossein Gholi (1853–1916), the leading musician, and his well-known student Darvish Khan (1872–1926) belong to the Qajar era, as do Aref (1882–1936) and Sheyda (d. 1906), the two musicians famous for their tasnifs (a kind of madrigal).

Nasser-Aldin Shah of Qajar (reigned 1848–1896) visited Europe in the mid-19th century and tried to copy the western-style theatres and opera houses in Tehran, the capital city of Iran.

He founded the Takieh-e-Dolat (prototype of a musical opera house) where musicians and actors could present their works. Many princes and princesses were engaged in music either by getting training or supporting musicians. The tar became the most prestigious instrument in a sense that in almost every noble family one member could play it.

The Pahlavi era (1906–1979) was a turning point in Persian classical music. Many music schools and academies were established by Reza Shah and his son Mohammad Reza Shah. The founding of national radio and television stations also played a crucial role in disseminating Persian music to the remotest corners of the country. Iran benefitted from the western educational system and many students graduated from colleges and universities, including music schools. Female vocalists were able to sing, for the first time, in public and a large number of works of music were introduced during this period.

Unfortunately, the rapid, unbalanced, and incomplete forced modernization towards the end of the Pahlavi era tainted, to a certain degree, Persian classical music. The masses turned to pop music as radio and TV stations (both public media) paid more attention to such music at the expense of Persian classical music. Academia became the center for training in Western classical music. Iranian traditional musicians suffered a lot and many of them found refuge in their homes.

In 1979, the Iranian revolution, later labeled as Islamic, brought a complete halt to musical endeavors. Ibn Khaldoun (770 CE), the Arab scholar and philosopher, states that music is among the first victims of socio-political upheaval. During the social displacement of 1979, the Islamic regime only allowed revolutionary songs to be played on radio and television stations, as other musical forms were banned. Many musicians either had to leave the country or were locked up in their homes. Nonetheless, the Islamic regime soon broke ties with traditional Shiite clerics—for the first time since the advent of Islam in Iran—lifting the ban on buying and selling musical instruments. This let Persian classical music flourish in the country. Moreover, as pop music was considered blasphemous and disrespectful, many religious families allowed their children to attend music schools, and the young generation turned to Persian classical music. Today, one can see young boys and girls freely carrying musical instruments in the streets in every city in Iran. In addition, introducing computers and the internet to society paved the way for writing and publishing the repertory of Persian classical music.

Dr. Nader Majd
Center for Persian Classical Music

The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to “preserve and present American folklife” through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Center includes the American Folklife Center Archive of folk culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Please visit our web site <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/>.

