

Ârash Mohâfez

Master degree of Ethnomusicology from Paris 8 University, P.h.D Student of Ethnomusicology in Paris 10 University, Member of Mahoor Music Quarterly's editorial board in Tehran, Member of CREM (Centre de Recherche en Ethnomusicologie) in Paris; Tehran, Iran

A CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATION OF AN OLD REPERTORY IN IRAN; ABOUT THE CREATION OF "AJAMLAR" ALBUM

***Keywords:** Persian Classical Music, Ottoman Tradition, Contemporary Iranian music Society, Ajamlar repertory, Ajamlar Album, Cantemir, Ufki, Innovation, Evolution, Old composition style.*

Musical evolution in Persian art music; a general perspective since the end of Qâjâr era

The question or the concept of "innovation" is presumably as old as the concept of "tradition". In other words, where and when there is a stabilized and classified musical practice, a "real tradition", we expect that there is also, at least, an artistic movement which can be distinguished by its more or less "changing approaches". "Creation" in a tradition without having a "changing approach" cannot be considered as "innovation"; it's just the tradition's continuity as it should be regularly. But this is the "changing approach" of a "creation", or even an "interpretation", which may lead to an "innovation". Systematic and targeted innovations, remaining within the tradition's general framework of course, create an "evolution" of a tradition, if these innovations are accepted by at least a minority of practitioners of the same tradition. And finally, "evolution" seems to be the only single way through which an older tradition can be profoundly continued and adopted as "contemporary art music", instead of being archaeologically preserved like museum objects. But each step of an evolution is surely among the most delicate and critical moments of a tradition's life; the border between an "original evolution" and an "hybridized evolution" can be

narrow, however, these two phenomena will make two very different destinies for the tradition in question. So, create an original enriching evolution within the tradition's general framework, without approaching to "fusion tendencies", for a contemporary society in a manner that a part of its art musicians accept it practically despite the normal hard resistances of its other "more traditionalist musicians", seems to be hardest and most dangerous challenge that a musician, or a musicologist, can be involved in.

This question of tradition, innovation and evolution can be discussed in several historical periods of Persian classical music, but to explain the concern of the present article, we should have a very general perspective of the problematic since the end of Qâjâr era (1786–1925). In fact, the most important "innovatory movement" which emerged in continuity of the Qâjâri traditional music was Alinaqi Vaziri's musical style. Vaziri (1887–1979), an intellectual military colonel, also *târ* virtuoso, went to Europe in 1919 for some musical educations and thus became acquainted with Western classical music. In his return to Iran, Vaziri wrote a new theory for Persian music in which he tried to explain the traditional system according to the Western concepts; he founded a music school to teach this "scientific theory" to the young generation of students; he organized a mixed orchestra of Persian and Western instruments such as violin, piano, flute, clarinet, etc.; and he composed some Persian style pieces with a sort of tonal harmonization and polyphonic orchestration.¹ This was the beginning of "Persian art music Westernization" which was followed particularly by the more mature compositions of Vaziri's best student, Ruhollâh Khâleqi. This westernized Persian music, with all its changing elements in comparison to Qâjâri aesthetics, succeeded to occupy the main time of the Radio programs, so it became very popular among many Iranians art music lovers.

As a reaction to this hybridized evolution, a new artistic movement emerged around 1970s initiated by Dâriush Safvat, a

¹ For more information about life, musical activities and theories of Alinaqi Vaziri, see. Vaziri, 2005; Miralinaqi, 1999; Khâleqi, 2007; Sepantâ 2004; Mashhun, 2010.

setâr player, who had studied in Paris and who had worked there as a music teacher in *Centre des Etudes de Musiques Orientales* led by some anti-Westernization ethnomusicologists such as Trần Văn Khê. Safvat also, after his return to Iran, founded a musical organization, called *Markaz-e hefz va Eshâ'e-ye Musiqi* (The Center of Music Conservation and broadcasting) which was supported by Minister of Culture and the Pahlavi Queen herself. The ideology of this *markaz* was sort of throwback to the “original aesthetics” of Qâjâri art music and the elimination of all occidental elements penetrated in Iranian musical practice. Safvat gathered some of the last masters of this music, who had become very marginal at the time, in order that the masters teach their traditional knowledge to a selected group of musicians from the younger generation. Here, the Qâjâri *radif* became the principal source of apprenticeship, and “non-metric improvisation according to *radif*” was presented as “the most artistic kind of Persian art music performance”.

Almost all of the Persian masters who became well known after 1979's revolution are somehow the students of this *markaz* and they are more and less influenced by its ideologies. With the popularity they have gained in the new cultural circumstances of the country, especially thanks to their recordings during 1980s, very large number of young people became interested in the practice of *radif* and non-metric instrumental/vocal improvisation, despite the absolute lack of any support from the political system.

This evolution has led to a remarkable executive perfection of Iranian musicians in *dastgâhi* system during the last decades of 20th century, but it couldn't keep satisfying everybody; Although the question had been raised long time before this era for an ethnomusicologist as Jean During (*cf.* During, 2012: 8–11), an academic approach actively started, independently by During and Sasan Fatemi, an Iranian ethnomusicologist, almost since the beginning of 21th century. This academic approach noted that Iranian traditional repertory, including *radif*, *tasnif*-s, and all other artistic genres, are completely devoid of complicated rhythmic cycles, predefined formal structures, open-ended modal behaviors, and, brief, the “art of composition” as it's mentioned in the old Persian or Arabic musical treatises of 13th to 16th centuries, and as it exists still in the

art music of some neighbor cultures like Turkish-Ottoman, Tajik, Uzbek, or Arab-Andalusian traditions. As some solution models, both of these ethnomusicologists directed separately two musical projects with the general idea of revivification of old Persian rhythmic/formal structures; Fâtemi published an album named *Sarkhâne* (Fâtemi, 2010) which contains different pieces in old rhythmic forms like ‘*amal*, *robâ’i*, *pishrow* etc., composed by himself and some other young musicians under his direction. And During published another album named *Darâmad-e Dovvom* (During, 2012) which contains his own compositions made since 1980, focusing more on unknown rhythms/forms in today Iran such as *Owfar*, *Aksak*, *Gardun*, *Taqin*, *Saz Sema’i*, etc.

Thereby, some young Iranian musicians recently became very passionate to discover and revitalize the aesthetic and the missing elements of pre-Qâjâr Persian art music. The lack of old musical transcriptions of those times in Iran lead naturally these musicians to pay attention to some neighbor’s concerned repertoires. The recording of all vocal compositions attributed to Abdolqâder Marâghi, titled *Showqnâme*, under direction of Mohammad Reza Darvishi (2011) is an example of such activities. The author of this article, in his turn, has directed another album project, called *Ajamlar* (Mohâfez, 2013), in the continuity of the same innovatory movement with its own specific methodology and targets which will be explained in details right away.

The *Ajamlar* project’s theoretical backgrounds

The *Ajamlar* album contains certain *Pishrôw*-s (*peşrev*-s) attributed to “Unknown Iranian musicians”, i.e. “*Ajamlar*, *Ajamiyân*”, etc., and to “Known Iranian origin composers” as Hassan Jân, Changi Ja’far and Shâh Qoli in Ali Ufki (Ufki, 1976) and Demetrius Cantemir’s (Kantemiroğlu, 2001; Wright, 1992) collections of notation. *Pishrôw* form that existed in Iran at least since the Timurid period (*cf.* Marâghi, 1988: 251) was the most important and the first rhythmic instrumental piece of Ottoman *fasil* and often had a musical form of “A-B-C-B-D-B” during 16th and 17th centuries. The *Ajami Pishrôw*-s according to the great research of Walter Feldman (1996) and many historical sources as the manuscript of Charles

Fonton (2007: 23) are probably composed or transmitted by Iranian musicians who were “come” or “brought” to Istanbul, generally following the Safavid-Ottoman wars, from the cities as Tabriz and Baghdad, mostly by Sultan Selim I (d. 1520), Sultan Suleyman I (d. 1566), and Sultan Murad IV (d. 1640).

In addition to precious analytical works of Walter Feldman (1996) and Owen Wright (2001) on Ufki and Cantemir’s repertory, I studied also recently and exclusively some technical aspects of the *Ajami* repertoire in different Persian articles in *Mahoor Music Quarterly* (Mohâfez 2011; 2012; 2013a; 2013b; 2014). Also, I rewrote the complete collection of attributed pieces to “Iranian musicians” in Ufki and Cantemir’s collections in Persian today notation norms (Mohâfez 2015).

I believe that many of 16th and 17th centuries compositions, exist in mentioned Ottoman treaties, whether written by the anonymous composers, Turkish composers or other ones, not only are so close to their contemporary *Ajami*-Safavid style and usually haven’t mainly differences, but they show a very surprising proximity to the future Persian Qâjâri and post Qâjâri music from aesthetic and nature of melodic-modal system point of view. So, they’re not just the pieces composed by *Ajami* composers which have to be considered by contemporary Iranian musicians and music lovers, but each and every music piece written in these two 17th – 18th centuries Ottoman treaties, beyond the originality and nationality of their composers, can from many aspects be informative and worthwhile for consideration, for study and certainly valuable to be performed by Iranian today musicians. Due to these reasons and following this approach, some pieces belonging to unknown composers and some of known non-Persian ones of the same historical period which showed some meaningful similarities with Persian style, at least in selected compositions, have been also chosen to be performed as examples in *Ajamlar* CDs.

Previous performances of *Ajami* repertoire

Ajamlar CDs were not the first try for performing “Iranian repertory” pieces of Ufki and Cantemir collections in our time. Among the most famous Turkish ensembles that have performed

some *Ajami* pieces, “Bezmârâ ensemble” under direction of Fikret Karakaya and “Cantemir ensemble” under direction of Yalçın Tura can be named. Among the European artistes, Jordi Savall and decedent Julien Jalâleddin Weiss are the ones who performed some pieces of this repertoire. Kiâ and Ziâ Tabasiân are also among the few Iranian musicians who have performed part of *Ajami* repertoire of Ottoman tradition in their wide musical activities. Anyhow, the richness and beauty of this repertoire can attract anyone familiar with Ottoman musical tradition to play them for different reasons. So, it’s entirely probable that the number of musicians or ensembles who have played a piece or pieces of *Ajami* repertoire in their concerts or albums be more than the mentioned names.

Musical approach and aesthetic of the *Ajamlar* project

In none of practical steps of *Ajamlar* project, “reconstruction of performance style” or in other word “search for voice of Ottoman-Safavid musical tradition in 16th and 17th centuries”, was not the aim. First necessary means to do such desire is to have reconstructed musical instruments of that period, but even by fulfilling this difficult condition, it won’t be enough to achieve such goal, as by having the instruments should exactly or at least partially know the ancient music repertoire was played with which practical aesthetics and which details in playing technics. Since we don’t have enough information for regeneration of executive aesthetics of artistic music in Safavid period yet, *Ajamlar* project neither seeking for resuscitation of Persian composition’s sonic color in the Ottoman court, nor for simulation of their playing style; *Ajamlar* Project concerns exclusively were a try for “revivification of this music’s essential material itself” and “practical reconstruction of its relation with 19th and 20th centuries’ Persian classical music tradition”. Executive approach of this project to *Ajami* repertoire is an experience on revivification of some missing aspects of Old Persian compositions art, but in a way like by passing time and occurred changes in performances styles, they never have been forgotten between Safavid-Ottoman ages and Qâjâr tradition, which eventually by a bit luck and more suitable political-cultural situations could take place in Iran. In other word, as many musical modes and intervals apparently from

Safavid till Qājār time and after that have continued somehow in Iran, it was probable that some forms, rhythms and old composition technics also without such deep interruption could arrive to our time and for instance would continue living in today's Persian classical music beside *radif* or integrated in it. *Ajamlar* project is a simulation of this idea; the assumption is if a *Pishrôw*, apparently Iranian e.g. that of Shâhqoli, was transmitted verbally by Iranian musicians from one generation to the other and so a version of it has been reached to us, how it could generally sound today.

The necessity to realize such idea is to apply a multifaceted process of “homogenization” between old *Ajami* repertoire of Ottoman tradition and classical Iranian music aesthetics of our time. The aim is to “translate” a rich Persian-Ottoman composition collection, contemporary of Safavid time, to today Persian music language. The aim is to bring back the essence and component of this music under the Iranian contemporary musician's fingers. Such experience, means translation of this old music's essence to today's music language, by concretization of foundation and features of old art music for musicians society and Iranian interlocutors, seems be able to open clear windows for “systematic evolution” of their repertoires and having plenty of innovations in it.

In performing the old notations, relying on personal taste within the explained theoretical foundations framework and beyond the fact that this repertoire belongs to which historical period, the first principle was based on the production's quality as an “enjoyable art of music”. In this part of project, many schemes have been considered to avoid an “archival”, “mechanical”, “soulless”, “flat” and “imitative” performance. Here, Ufki and Cantemir's transcriptions were not like “holly texts” for me that any personal interpretation of them would be an unforgivable sin. I believe what has been notated by Cantemir and Ufki with their limited possibilities of transcription was just the principal structure and skeleton of melodies, otherwise 16th–17th centuries' musicians also like contemporary Iranian, Turkish and other musicians were of course always applying lots of ornamentations, melodic enrichments, multiple timbres and different executive expressions, i.e. a complex of their own musical style's interpretations, in their performances. So, I believe that any

contemporary effort for performing old simply written transcriptions with the approach of “word by word imitation” could be unwillingly resulted a farness from the spirit of the music which is hidden behind the notes.

Persian instrumental ensemble and recording approach of *Ajamlar* project

Recorded pieces in *Ajamlar* project CDs not only, due to the apparent fundamental and documented similarity between potential scale of Ottoman music in the period and potential scale of Iranian *dastgâhi* music (cf. Feldman, 1996: 206–217; Wright, 1992: xvii–xviii; Wright, 2000: 17–18), have been exactly played with this second musical interval system, but also all these pieces have been mainly played with today’s common Iranian instruments in order to achieve the mentioned goals; with *târ*, *santur*, *ud*, *kamânche*, *ney*, *setâr* and *robâb*. The only less common instrument added to this Iranian ensemble is *bendir* due to need of basic, separated, clear and contrasted playing of *dum* and *tak-s* (different types of beating) and need of grandiose and resonant sonority. Nevertheless, this project has also benefited the particular sound and unique possibilities of *tombak*, both as the only percussion of the ensemble and also as the second and complementary line of rhythm. It should be noted that this instrumental combination is not at all far from the one in Ottoman court at 17th and 18th centuries; *ney*, *kamânche*, *ud* and also *santur*, with few organological differences from their current Iranian versions, were part of main instruments of Ottoman court music in 17th and 18th centuries (cf. Feldman, 1996: 110–163; Fonton, 2006: 48–61). The only important and fundamental Ottoman instrument which has no equivalent in our main ensemble is *tanbur*. Here, *tanbur*’s key role has been replaced by *târ*. Our *Robâb* also has the functionality not far from Ottoman *qopuz* or even old *shâhrud*.

The *Ajamlar* CDs recording method was the same as traditional and natural way of classical music recordings, i.e. simultaneously recording, in a condition not very far from a concert; after one or some weeks of repetition for each piece, the ensemble played the piece several times from the beginning to the end in studio, but every time without rupture and “punch” of recording engineer, without

intervention of recording observer (who controls the recording from outside the circle of musicians themselves) and also without using metronome, headphones, etc. Then, the ensemble selected one of these several performances of each piece which seemed better and more satisfying for publication.

“Iranian playing” with personal expression and practiced heterophony

Although playing the *Ajami* repertoire with current Iranian instruments gives quickly a Persian color to this music, but by its own doesn't do anything particular in direction of repertoire's homogenization with today Iranian classical music aesthetic. To achieve this latest object, I followed a key strategy in first step; in all selected pieces for performing, project's musicians were asked not to be limited to exact performing of old transcriptions, but by respecting the structure of each melody, try to absorb each and every notes in their personal playing style and as well try to play the musical content with Iranian aesthetics using different technical means. Adding different ornamentations to the melodies have been done in this step and based on musicians taste and their personal expression. Here, I didn't want to unify the different ornamentations of each melody's interpretations in different instruments; the goal was to superimpose the different layers of personal style performing of same melodies in a more or less heterophonic manner, unless in some cases that incompatibility happened. In such cases, the incompatible personal interpretations versus the majority were vetoed during repetitions and they have been replaced by other forms. Other aspect of this strategy was to create multiple sound layers with personal heterophonic variations on time values of internal structure of melodies. In this performance, musicians were asked to divide the certain beats of melodies into several homonymous or heteronymous notes, based on their personal interpretation, in order to increase the melodic density. The inverse case is also often applied to the melodies mostly by *kamânche* and *ney* players; some homonymous or heteronymous successive notes are converted to a single long note. Here again, the musicians personal variations and interpretations of a same melody are not voluntarily unified in the collective

performance; the objective was that the present lines of the orchestra flee from an absolute homorhythm and the instruments do not take same rhythmic cuts, at least for playing certain segments of each composition.

The majority of the executive details of this process of heterophonic “Iranian playing” of the *Ajami* repertoire are gradually selected, implemented, examined and then fixed by the musicians during our practice sessions, so almost no significant personal interpretation is made by improvised and non-practiced ways during recordings. However, the musicians were free to make changes in their executive interpretations and to benefit eventual instant inspirations which could enrich the melodies even during the recordings.

Arrangement, ethos-melodic reading and orchestration

Result of above discussion is indeed giving collectively a Persian color and glaze to *Ajami* repertoire on the basis of specialty and aesthetic perception of nine contemporary musicians in the Persian classical music domain. Simultaneously with this process realization, and in order to “play with Persian style”, another more pre-planned strategy has also been followed which has more personal aspect; I believe that beyond their executive layer, the old simple transcriptions in general need special reading in different aspects in order to become an “enjoyable music”. It seems if we play their melodies in a “flat”, “without distinction” and “without characterization” way, we cannot reveal the depth of their beauties. Therefore, each selected piece has been first “arranged” somehow according to a uniform style and was given to the musicians in this form from the beginning. The most important function of these arrangements was the application of particular reading and ethos-meaning interpretation of the melodies. Withal, certain aspects of the performance heterophonic structures are planned in these arrangements. Here, it is the application of a kind of orchestration, relatively simple and apparently compatible with the nature of Persian music, that from one side helps a lot to realize my ethos-melodic readings, and from other side – by alternating changes in number of active instrumental lines in each moment and consequently the production of multiple sound combinations during the collective performance –

helps to get distance from the one-dimensional thin monotony which only uses several instruments instead of one. The patterns of instruments entry and exit into or from the orchestra's texture, in addition to, for example, arranging the solos, duets and etc., next to the orchestra's "Tutti", not only during the different compositions offer gradually an unique character and a particular role to each instrument – which leads auditor being able to listen every moment of this ancient music with multiple separable perceptions of different instrumentalists – but they produce a "quasi polyphonic sentiment" while the orchestra effectively plays a single melodic line, the sentiment who particularly keeps the auditor's ear more sensitive to hear better the heterophonic effects.

This approach, i.e. the ethos-melodic arrangements and the orchestration, in theory and on paper may seem more or less influenced by Western musical culture, however the idea of this type of performance with an instrumental ensemble not only is taken from the model of some Persian collective performances such as Ali Akbar Shahnâzi's orchestra and also those of the later Persian artistic recordings as Parviz Meshkâtîân's works, but it's in fact taken from the style of collective performance of some relatives of Persian music, particularly the Arab-Andalusian *Nowba*-s and Turkish-Ottoman *Fasil* who create "naturally" some deep impressions in "arrangement-orchestration kind" and "compatible real heterophonic effects".

Generating various executive expressions, such as creating extended nuances, sudden or gradual changes in dynamics, diversification of sonorities and finally make out different ethos in a collective performance also seems completely compatible with the nature of Iranian- Arabic- Turkish classical art music, so we cannot naively condemn their usage to be influenced by Western music aesthetics for this reason that they are also utilized in this last music; Fortunately, the importance, necessity, and abundance of the application of very multiple executive expressions in Persian, Arabic and Turkish classical solos or improvisations are not masked to anyone, so why should we expect musicians of these cultures who are so sensitive to these issues, suddenly leave their regular artistic styles and play flat, mechanical and without "emotional high and low" in orchestras?

This same question, certainly and with the same value, is also applied to the aesthetics of the collective performance of former musicians of these cultures such as Ottoman court's *Ajami* musicians.

However, I do not believe that *Ajami* repertoire in its own time was being played exactly like this Album. Neither, I do not want to introduce this performance as the only correct playing style of this repertoire; present performance, with all its aforementioned elements, is just a "contemporary personal interpretation" of an old music, the music that can be performed in a dozen other ways in contemporary societies and still sound great and greater.

Conclusion

The creation of reconstructive projects in general as *Sarkhane*, *Darâmad-e Dovvom*, *Showqnâme* and *Ajamlar* in contemporary Iranian society, and the recent intellectual efforts for integrating the lost rhythmic/formal/compositional elements in the today Persian *dastgâh* practice, would all these activities finally result to a "new evolution" of Persian art music in 21th century? That's only the history who can tell us the answer. Nevertheless, we've seen already some indications from the younger generation of musicians which led us to hope that the response to this question would be positive. Here is one of these indications; Iranian *Sepehr ensemble*, who won the first prize of Azerbaijan *Space of Mugâm Festival 2011*, devoted the complete half of its last concert in Tehran to play some absolutely "new compositions" inspired by *Ajamlar* album, in terms of both repertory aesthetics and also heterophonic pre-arranged performance.

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