Contents

*Iran Nameh*
Vol. XIX, No. 3
Summer 2001

Persian:
Articles
Book Reviews

English:

The Status of Music in the Islamic Republic of Iran
*Ameneh Youssefzadeh*

The Discourse of Cultural Authenticity in Iran
*Negin Nabavi*

Social Significance of Public Squares in Safavid Period
*Reza Moghtader*

Haj Sayyah and the Encumbrance of Attachment
*Ali Ferdowsi*

Sacred Canopy: Love and Sex Under the Veil
*Shahla Haeri*
The Status of Music in the Islamic Republic of Iran

Ameheh Youssefzadeh

This article consists of a brief description of the politico-cultural status of music in Iran with particular attention to various organizations that govern and control music and musical activities. It also reviews the importance attributed by a number of institutions to "regional music."

Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, music has been the subject of fierce political and religious debate in Iran. Its legal and social status has constantly been changing and continues to be the object of various restrictions because of music's alleged powers of seduction and corruption. Indeed, from the very outset, the official position of the Islamic regime was unmistakable. All concerts, and specially all radio and television broadcasts of foreign and Iranian, classical and popular music, were banned. Nevertheless, despite all the measures designed to stifle music, it could not be eliminated from Iranian culture. In fact, the very intention of abolishing music in public life unexpectedly led to increasing practice of music within the family circle by the younger generation of all social classes.

Following the end of the Iran-Iraq war and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, a number of limited liberalizing measures affected Iran's cultural life and led to official tolerance of certain genres of musical activities. Private and illicit production and dissemination of Iranian pop music, that closely resembles the pop music of the Iranian exile
community in California, has mushroomed. However, only specific versions of Iran’s traditional and regional music are officially sanctioned and thus allowed to be broadcast by the state-run radio and television stations. Furthermore, the emphasis placed on the preservation of purity of classical Iranian music is tantamount to the demand for an authenticity of musical expression that goes beyond the tradition it claims to respect.

Although one might be encouraged by the official interest in regional music, there are also reasons to worry about the swing of the pendulum by which the tradition upheld by the bards is set up by official cultural authorities as an intangible and insuperable dogma. The application of this dogma is entrusted to three official organizations dealing with cultural matters. They are to “protect” and “supervise” the “purity and authenticity” of Iranian music, and “control” what is heard and seen by the public in musical festivals and on national television screens. Music in Iran, therefore, continues to be closely controlled by governmental authorities, and to be subject to a very insidious form of censorship.

The Discourse of Cultural Authenticity in Iran

Negin Nabavi

The notion of ‘authentic culture’ [farhang-e bumi] is generally considered to have been associated with the rhetoric of revolution which emerged increasingly in 1978-79. Claims of ‘cultural revival’ and ‘regaining the past’ that were propagated at this time have been viewed by some historians as a reaction to the trend of secularization that had characterized much of what had been before. And yet, looking through the intellectual journals of the 1970s, it seems that if there was one major preoccupation for both secular intellectuals as well as the state, it was that of defining an ‘authentic culture.’ In other words, both the intellectual critics of the government and the government itself were equally engaged in defining the characteristics of an Eastern as opposed to a Western culture. This article will attempt to examine this discourse that can perhaps be best described as one of ‘cultural authenticity’, and which gained prevalence in Iran of the 1970s.
As will be discussed in this article, if this discourse became pervasive in intellectual circles, it was because two factors, which had been instrumental in its initial formulation, came together at this time. In the first place, the restrictions imposed by the regime in the way of political activity and freedom of expression in the mid-1960s, had meant that the intellectuals in search of challenging authority had to look for more indirect avenues of expressing their opposition to the regime. Secondly, the triumph of third world movements in defying Western powers served as an inspiration and provided the background for much of their writing in this period.

This paper will, therefore, discuss the discourse of ‘cultural authenticity’ in the context of third worldism, as well as the counter-culture prevalent in the West. It will also examine how this discourse gained the foreground, and consider the shape that it took in the 1970s, especially in the light of the state taking on this same talk of authenticity by implementing a cultural policy that emphasized the promotion of past traditions. For this purpose, among the sources, Iranian journals and periodicals of the period, such as Negin, Ferdawi, Farhang va Zendegi, and Tamasha, have been extensively consulted.

Social Significance of Public Squares in Safavid Period

Reza Moghtader

In the architectural history of world great cities, main public squares have been referred to as important elements of urban design. These main and often magnificent squares have always been built with particular attention to the over all design of the surrounding buildings and monuments. They also serve as the most open and accessible part of the city and are utilized according to the cultural needs and traditional values of the nation. Great Iranian cities have also been marked by the presence of this distinct urban feature, particularly during the reign of a number of Safavid kings in the 16th and 17th centuries. Indeed, Safavid architectural legacy can be deemed as the most lasting and historically significant achievements of the period.
Haj Sayyah and the Encumbrance of Attachment

Ali Ferdowsi

Why for so many Iranians the change in citizenship is tinged with a sense of shame? This essay pursues this question to its very genesis, to the moral and political tribulations that tormented Haj Sayyah, the first Iranian who became a naturalized US citizen on May 26, 1875.

After spending about ten years in the United States, preceded by about as many years traveling throughout the old world, Haj Sayyah left San Francisco, the port of his naturalization, for his country of birth. When he arrived in Iran, he was welcomed by a fierce rivalry among the elite to meet his acquaintance. Even Naser al-Din Shah, the then king of Iran, excitedly asked him to become one of his majesty's retainers. Haj Sayyah declined, knowing well that exoticism is a highly perishable commodity. He was right.

Advocating modernization, human rights and liberal reforms, he soon became a pariah, first sent into fourteen months of tormenting internal exile, and then imprisoned under harsh conditions for twenty-two months. When finally released, he felt ostracized, entrapped and, "knowing of the victimizing nature of most Iranians," vulnerable. It was then that he, confounding every one, appeared at the U.S. Legation in Tehran, in early January 1893, with a decree of naturalization in hand, and asked for protection as a U.S. citizen.

Haj Sayyah's asylum at the legation lasted about six months and traversed the entire tenure of Watson Sperry, the humane and headstrong US ambassador, who unflinchingly supported Haj Sayyah, both against Tehran's arbitrary persecution and the prevarications of his superiors in Washington. Haj Sayyah later reported the episode in his Memoirs. Thus we are offered two narratives, one penned by Haj Sayyah, and the other implied in the official communication between the U.S. Legation in Tehran and the Department of State. Comparing the situations of correspondence and discrepancy between the two, each narrative betrays its own peculiarities. This, in turn, allows us to reflect on ways through which the imperatives of shame and pride produce and contort Haj Sayyah's account of his citizenship and asylum.

When a youthful Haj Sayyah embarked on his world travels, he did so, he says, in search of humanity, and to be disencumbered from the
fetters of attachment. As to the first, there remains a picture of him, one of those staged 19th century photographs, where Haj Sayyah, gazing into the void, is sitting by a prominently displayed sign that reads: “I found the book of humanity blank.” No more successful, it appears to me, was he in his striving for detachment. At the end, it was, ironically, his friend and protector, the Ambassador Watson Sperry, who, to save his friend’s neck, had to insist to the Iranian authorities that notwithstanding Haj Sayyah’s US citizenship, he is “as much a subject of His Imperial Majesty as …if he had never stepped across Persian frontiers.”

Sacred Canopy: Love and Sex Under the Veil

Shahla Haeri

The article attempts to elaborate on the subliminal messages of desire and intimacy in Iranian movies. Unlike the representation of love, which has been beautifully expressed in infinite variety in Persian literature and miniature paintings, the cinematic expression of intimacy, desire and sexuality has been more circumspect and metaphorical than direct and obvious in the Iranian post-revolutionary movies. Although with the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Islamic legal and traditional discourse has become the dominant factor, the “erotic” discourse that is that is embedded in Persian poetry and popular culture has struggled to survive. The author suggests that there has always been a tension between the religious norms that regulate gender relationship, on the one hand, and the erotic discourse that tends to subvert the very same norms by encouraging the culturally meaningful play of amorous eye contact, nazar bazi.

In reference to four specific films, the author contends that the Iranian cinema has succeeded in subtly breaking down the religiously sacred wall of sex segregation, exposing women- who have are supposed to remain silent and anonymous and secluded- to intense attention, even active voyeurism. Cinema, by its very nature, has made the transgression of the frontiers of sex, gender, and sexuality possible. Indeed, when the Islamic republic transformed Iran into a veiled society, the desire to uncover, to reveal and to look under the canopy of Islamic society turned stronger. Furthermore, cinema has eradicated the boundaries of public and private domains and rendered the categorization of the medium and control of its message problematic.