

UDC: 781.6

THREE IRANIAN COMPOSERS IN DIASPORA: MUSIC IDENTITY IN A CROSS-CULTURAL CONTEXT

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Abstract:

In this paper I will discuss how Iranian composers Andre Hossein (1905-1983), Alireza Mashayekhi (1940) and Behzad Ranjbaran (1955) imitated Persian instrumental characteristics, or derived knowledge consciously or unconsciously from performing styles, melodic patterns and musical modes without literally imitating specific genres or idioms of Persian music. I will also compare how these composers incorporated folk references with similar approaches in other Western art music by Franz Liszt, Bela Bartók, Claude Debussy and Toru Takemitsu in relation to other folk traditions.

Keywords: Western Art music, Iranian composers, piano repertoire, Persian traditional music, analysis.

Note: This article consists of the text of a talk delivered at the Tbilisi International Musicological Conference 'Musical Identity and Cultural Crossroad' held at the Tbilisi State Conservatoire in Tbilisi, Georgia, 17-19 April 2015, on my ongoing doctoral research.

1. Context

Classical music as a specific Western cultural product is a eurocentric artistic activity focused on a cluster of major cultural and economic nations namely France, Germany, United States and others during the twentieth century. Classical music's increasing geographic scope ('localised globalisms') – with colonialism, westernisation and accelerated globalisation – encouraged peripheral countries to be educated in this art form. In this context, Iran's geographic position in relation to Europe and other Western countries assigned to it a status of 'peripheral country'. The implicit dichotomy centre/periphery has ramifications that go through economic to cultural aspects, including artistic and creative productions that central countries produce and disseminate to peripheral countries. Consequently many individuals have travelled to central countries to access the latest developments in the music field where some returned home and others stayed abroad (in 'spaces of enunciation'). Major historical events of the twentieth century such as the October Revolution of 1917, the first and second World Wars and, in Iranian history, the 1979 Iranian Revolution, resulted in a mass displacement of individuals that came from inside and outside Europe. With these events came a new musical identity: the 'emigrant composer' that we have come to know through composers such as Stravinsky, Bartók and Schoenberg who emigrated to the United States. It is in this context that my paper presents three Iranian composers: Aminoullah Hossein (1905-1983) who emigrated to France, Behzad Ranjbaran (1955) now living in the USA and teaching at the Juilliard School of Music, and Alireza Mashayekhi (1940) who pursued studies in Austria, Netherlands, lived abroad and later returned to Iran.

2. Aims

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how these Iranian composers explored the potential of Persian music in a Western paradigm by considering the influence of Persian elements in their music in interaction with 'western-style' approaches to melody, counterpoint, harmony, rhythm and

structure. Analytical findings will reveal the assimilation of Persian elements in different ways. These findings will show how they have imitated Persian vocal and instrumental characteristics, or derived knowledge consciously or unconsciously from performing styles, melodic patterns and music modes without literally imitating specific genres or idioms of Persian music. Examples of Persian folk music quotation, application of the *Dastgah* (Persian modes), texture inspired from Persian instrumental characteristics and performing styles, and the impact of improvisation in formal structure and performance are also discussed. The main obstacles to this research relate to the cultural decontextualisation that comes with the composer's creative freedom, melodic transformations that erase distinctive features, and compositional idioms strongly rooted in Western tradition.

3. Persian Modes (*Dastgah*)

I will start by identifying the use of Persian modes, also called *Dastgah*, in this repertoire. *Dastgah* refers to two separate independent concepts. First, it identifies a set of pieces traditionally grouped together called *Gushe*. Second, it refers to Persian modes. Many *Dastgah* have microtone intervals which the tempered tuning of the piano does not allow. Consequently in my discussion of *Dastgah* in this repertoire I will be referring to tempered *Dastgahs*. With this in mind I will show an example of the use of *Dastgah* in Alireza Mashayekhi's piano piece *Short Stories* which is in four movements. Figure 1 is an excerpt from the first movement which I argue that it suggests *Dastgah-e Shur*.



Figure 1. Mashayekhi. *Short Stories* (1993), b. 1-20.

In order to understand if there is a specific *Dastgah* involved it is necessary to identify a least one of two elements: tetrachords or *gushe*. In figure 1 the main theme and its variations highlighted on the score differ in rhythm and length, but they all share a common set of characteristics: a downward melodic contour, auxiliary notes and stepwise sequence. These characteristics can also be found in the inner construction of a specific *Gushe* associated with *Dastgah-e Shur* as seen in figures 2 and 3. It is based on these similarities between Mashayekhi's piece and this *gushe* that I suggest the piece is written in *Dastgah-e Shur*.



Figure 2. Mashayekhi. Theme of Short Stories, first movement, b.1-2.

Figure 3. *Gushe Zirkash-e Salmak* of *Dastgah-e Shur*.

The next example is from Behzad Ranjbaran's piano piece *Nocturne: Night in a Persian Garden* which does not suggest the use of a specific *Dastgah* but contains a tetrachord (C#-D-Eb-F#). In Persian traditional music the tetrachord has a significant role for performers particularly during improvisation where the melody gravitates around the notes of the tetrachord (figures 4 and 5).

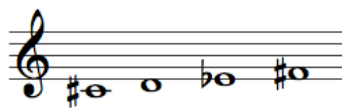
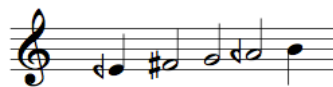
Figure 4. Ranjbaran. *Nocturne* (2002), b.7-8

Figure 5. Tetrachord in theme

Figure 6. *Gushe Hezar* of *Dastgah-e Chahargah*

The intervals of this tetrachord can be seen in a specific *gushe* of *Dastgah-e Chahargah* (Figure 6) but this is not enough information to associate this tetrachord with a *gushe* and consequently any Persian mode because the *gushe* needs to be distinctive enough in its melodic shape and length so that it can be recognised. In a tempered tuning this intervallic collection can also suggest Western musical modes. The next two examples show the similarities between the tempered *Dastgah-e Chahargah*, the Arabic scale and the Gypsy scale. Figure 7 is an excerpt from Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody No.3* which is based on the Gypsy scale (figure 8).

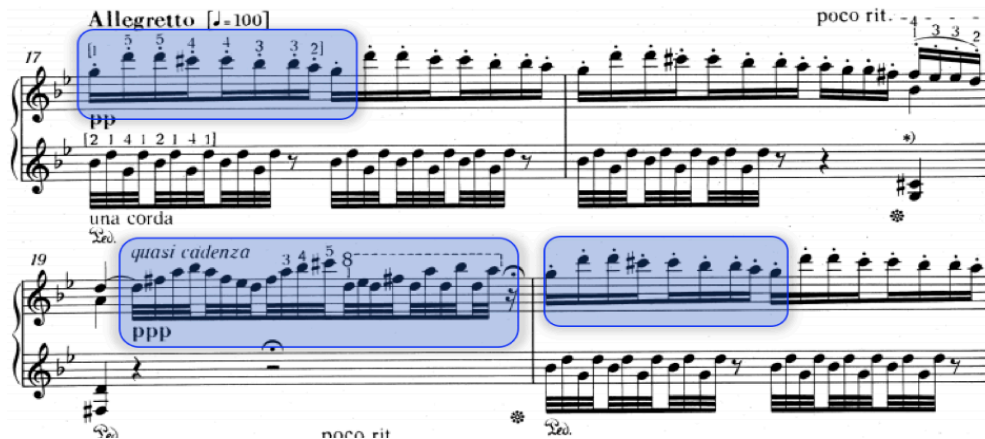


Figure 7. Liszt. Hungarian Rhapsody No.3 (1853), b.17-20. Highlighted: Gypsy scale

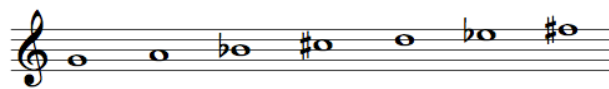


Figure 8. Gypsy scale in G

Similarly the melody in Debussy's *La Soirée dans Granade* is based on the Arabic scale which shares a similar intervallic construction (figures 9 and 10).

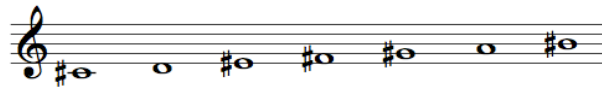


Figure 9. Arabic scale in C#



Figure 10. Debussy. *La Soirée dans Granade, Estampes* (1903) b.5-14. Highlighted: Arabic scale

What these examples share in common is that they give a 'exotic' touch to the music which is a very common approach in nineteenth-century music. As we move from nineteenth and early twentieth century into mid and late twentieth century, composers do not always use scales to specific cultures or regions. For instance, Takemitsu did not explicitly use pentatonic scales as a means to evoke his Japanese ethnicity or cultural background. What Takemitsu did was to subtly incorporate traditional Japanese music in a way that would require a detailed analysis and knowledge of Japanese traditional music. This will be discussed later on in this paper.

4. Folk Melody

One of the clearest references to Persian music is the folk melody (figure 11) in the first movement of Mashayekhi's Short Stories (figure 1). This reference, however, is altered in a way that it is not immediately perceptible.



Figure 11. Kurdish Folk tune (*Damkol Damkol*)

Using folk references to create a music language has been a common procedure among composers such as Bela Bartók and others. Figure 12 illustrates this with an excerpt from the first movement of Bartók's Romanian Folk Dances.



Figure 12. Bartók's Romanian Folk Dances: Stick Dance (1915), b.1-4

Comparing these two examples shows a difference of approach between Bartók's and Mashayekhi's pieces in that Bartók keeps the melody untouched and close to its original character with a simple left hand accompaniment, while Mashayekhi makes his own variations of the folk tune by changing the register, its length and occasionally adding or reducing notes. However it should be noted that Bartók also composed pieces where the folk tune is altered substantially (e.g. Eight Hungarian Improvisations on Peasant Songs).

5. Rhythm

Rhythm can also be another direct reference to a specific music tradition. In Behzad Ranjbaran's Nocturne there is a clear example of Persian rhythm where he uses a pattern common in dance pieces called *reng*. 6/8 time signature, dotted rhythm and syncopation are some of the *reng* rhythm common characteristics which can appear in different versions (figures 13 and 14).

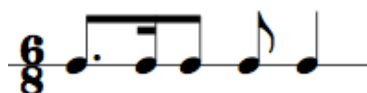


Figure 13. *Reng* rhythm



Figure 14. *Santur* player Faramarz Payvar (transcription by Kiana Shafiei)

Persian instrumentalists perform this rhythm with different ornamentations such as mordents, trills and so forth which might make this rhythm a little more difficult to recognise in traditional music. Ranjbaran makes use of one of these patterns with little to no alterations. The highlighted sections in figure 15 point out the presence of this rhythmic pattern in Ranjbaran's piece.



Figure 15. Ranjbaran. *Nocturne* (2002), b. 47-58. Highlighted: *reng* rhythm

The use of rhythms from indigenous source has been a common procedure for many composers, including Bartók, Debussy and Liszt. For example in *Two Romanian Dances* Bartók makes use of a rhythmic pattern from the Rumanian jew's-harp or *Dramba* (figure 16).



Figure 16. Bartók, *Two Romanian Dances* (1910), b. 1-2.

In another example Liszt has made use of the *Bókazó* rhythm typical in Hungarian dance (figure 17).



Figure 17. Liszt, *Hungarian Rhapsody no.3* (1853), b.12

And finally, Debussy uses the *habanera* rhythm to evoke the music atmosphere of Spain (figure 18).

Figure 18. Debussy. *La Soirée dans Granade*, Estampes (1903), b.1-4

These examples demonstrate the use of specific rhythms typical of a certain culture to emphasize the distinctive folk character.

5. Instrumental & Vocal Imitation

Next I will discuss examples of textures inspired by Persian instruments. Figure 19 exemplifies piano writing meant to resemble a *santur* kind of playing. *Santur* is a string instrument common in Persian classical music that is played with two light hammers.

Figure 19. Hossein. *Persian Legend* (1956) b. 28-34

Figure 18 shows a texture influenced by the *Chaharmezrab*, a more technical type of piece for *santur*. One of the characteristics is a repeated note in a high register that is played continuously while a melody is shaped in the lower register (figure 20).



Figure 20. Faramarz Payvar. *Chaharmezrab Nava* (transcription by Kiana Shafiei)

As you heard in Hossein's piece there is a repeating pattern while in the santur example there is only one repeating and in both there is a melody line shaped in a lower register.

Based on this example, André Hossein falls in line with many other composers such as Liszt who have imitated non-classical instruments. An example of this can be found in Hungarian Rhapsody No.3 heard it earlier where Liszt evokes the sound of the gypsy cimbalom (figure 21).



Figure 21. Liszt. Hungarian Rhapsody No.3 (1853), b.17-20

As you can see, Liszt achieves this imitation by using arpeggio and tremolos on the left hand but not all references to cultural elements are as obvious as those discussed so far. For instance, Toru Takemitsu subtly incorporates traditional Japanese music elements (figure 22).

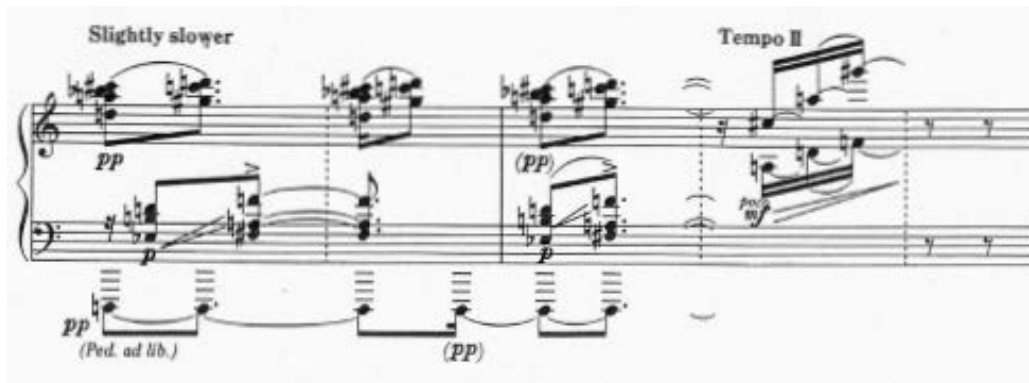


Figure 22. Takemitsu. Rain Tree Sketch II (1992)

In figure 22, the cluster chords in the right hand suggest the *sho* instrument – a mouth organ – which belongs to the traditional Japanese *gagaku* ensemble. As you may well know, clusters can be mistaken with 20th century compositional practices. Different musical lines in this same example also suggest different instruments which belong to the ensemble. The low register could be the bell, the middle one *shamisen* – a three-stringed instrument played with plectrum – and in the top one *sho*).

6. Improvisation

Some aspects of the improvisatory aspect of Persian music have been suggested in Mashayekhi from a structural point of view. Mashayekhi does this by creating a ‘free form’ based on melodic variations, usage of note addition, ornamentations, and rhythmic and metric irregularity. I highlighted the theme and its different variations on the score. In Figure 1 the theme and its variations differ in rhythm and length. Notes are added, melodies are embellished and rhythms or meters are changed. Overall, these changes can sound as if the performer is improvising.

The improvisatory character in other repertoire such as Liszt Hungarian Rhapsody No.3 comes from the incorporation of the gypsies’ improvisatory style. This improvisatory character consists of continuous thematic transformation and abrupt changes of moods with slow and fast sections one after the other.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the examples shown in this presentation demonstrated the assimilation of various cultural elements into the composers’ compositional language. From the Iranian composers, it is Mashayekhi that shows Persian music most closely to its traditional characteristics by using *Dastgah*, *gushe*, folk tunes, instrumental technique and the concept of improvisation in structure. Similarly to Takemitsu, Mashayekhi integrated cultural elements in a not very obvious way which required a closer analysis to reveal them. With Ranjbaran and Hossein it is not so much about quoting from the indigenous music of their birthplaces, but presenting certain viewpoints. Ranjbaran and Hossein used some sonorities and elements to create a general atmosphere, they both make use of scales which are more familiar to western audiences as oriental scales, the *santur*-like imitation in their pieces is more recognised by western audiences and their structure is not conceptually derived from Persian music. We find similarities of this in Liszt with the usage of the Gypsy scale and cimbalom-like textures for piano or in Debussy with the Arabic scale and *habanera* rhythm.

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Article received: 2017-04-06