

Gay Breyley

‘The Language of Love’: the legacy of Persian poetry and music in contemporary Iran

FOR CENTURIES POETRY has held a dominant position among the arts in Persianate cultures. It has inspired and shaped other art forms, especially music. This article examines this legacy in postrevolutionary Iran.¹ It focuses on three examples of music that have gained popularity across generations and a fourth example that is not so widely heard, but reflects the many different levels on which poetry is part of contemporary everyday life in Iran.

In the immediate post-revolutionary period, during the long years of war with Iraq (1980-88), art-music vocalist, Shahram Nazeri, sustained his audience with the texts of Maulana (Rumi) set to traditional Kurdish and Persian musical structures. Nazeri selected lyrics linking truth with virtue and the suffering of the devoted. After Iran’s post-war reconstruction, a period of reform in the late 1990s saw the resumption of locally produced popular music with government authorisation. Classical poetry now expanded its popular realm from art music to pop, rock and fusion. Rock and pop groups often combined Western instruments, rhythms and melodies with Persian texts, including the poetry of Hafiz, Rumi and Sa ‘di.

One of the first of these groups was O-Hum, whose first album, *Nahal-e Heyrat* (‘Sapling of Wonder’), drew directly from Hafiz. In more recent years, singer-songwriter Mohsen Namjoo has emerged as one of Iran’s most popular and innovative ‘serious’ musicians. Namjoo has set classical Persian poetry to music in unconventional ways and today he uses his own wry word play and metaphor in his lyrics. Namjoo’s work combines elements of Persian art music, traditional recitation and Western folk and rock. Finally, I turn to the work of contemporary Tehrani rappers who address current social issues, including the fate of street children who sell *fal-e Hafiz*, small envelopes containing lines from Hafiz, which are popularly used for personal guidance. These rap texts do not draw directly on Hafiz’s poetry, but they reflect the various ways that poetry continues to accompany Iranian lives in every kind of social setting.

In Persianate cultures, the various arts have maintained their close interconnectivity to a greater extent than in Western cultures. Poetry, in its aural and visual forms, music and other arts share crucial principles and, to varying degrees, are interdependent. The importance of symbolism and allegory and the capacity to bring to life the past, with its contemporary implications, and to inspire love and devotion, through connections to others and to the divine, cross artistic forms. In this context, an ideal social and spiritual encounter satisfies all the senses. Persian texts contain many poetic accounts of the pleasure derived by all, from kings to poor poets, from gatherings that achieve this aim. The sounds of an accomplished singer accompanied by sensitive musicians, in a visually



Shah Nowruz invites Nightingale to join his party.
From a manuscript of Badi' al-Din Manuchihr al-Tajiri al-Tabrizi, *Dilsuznama*,
dated 860 (1455–56), Edirne.
Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS. Ouseley 133, fol. 80v.

beautiful setting, whether ‘natural’ or skilfully created, with the textures of fine fabric and the taste of abundant wine and food, are complemented by the perfume of roses, musk and loved ones. In such a scene, the most significant component is the use of language – the words that accompany each art form and, often through metaphor, reveal ‘the truth’. The rhythmic and melodic patterns of Persian art music are drawn directly from classical poetry. Throughout most of Persian music’s long history, its lyrics have been viewed as the most powerful element. Most classical vocalists and some popular music singers select texts from the repertoire of classical poetry to suit their audiences’ situations and reflect their moods. Improvisation is central to this process, demanding great sensitivity, as well as virtuosity, of musical performers.

Although the moral roles of music have been the subject of debate and the social status of musicians has mostly been low in Persian contexts, the power of music, encompassing poetry, has always been acknowledged. In Firdausi’s *Shahnama* (‘Book of Kings’), the musician Barbad chooses a royal garden as the setting for his conquest of the king’s heart, which he achieves with a repertoire of balladry, heroism and spirituality. Barbad’s musical performance, his versatility, sweet nature and poetic words ensure his rise to personal power. While art-music was largely confined to the court until the 19th-century reign of Naser-ed-din Shah, other musical forms, including the recitation of the *Shahnama*, were available to the less privileged. Before literacy became widespread, the performance of poetic texts was central to cultural and social life. Texts gained new meaning with each performance, as they were linked to current events and listeners’ personal situations. Melodic recitation and music were the primary means of transmitting poetry across social classes, including people without access to books and other inscribed art. Although an ephemeral art, musical performance was one of the most easily transported, repeated and remembered. Performers were responsible for the interpretation and presentation of a range of narratives, ideas and facts. In contexts where direct speech could disadvantage or even endanger the speaker, a skilful performer conveyed messages metaphorically.

Metaphor also enabled multiple layers of meaning, especially around the crucial theme of love and separation from the beloved. The beloved may represent a male or female romantic partner, a spiritual companion, the divine, an ideal such as freedom or justice, or any combination of these. Guided by a poet’s words, then, a musical performer works with his or her audience to create new meaning from old. In broad terms, this tradition persists, even in some of today’s popular music.

There are various ways to define popular music, but it may be seen as beginning in Iran as part of *ruhozi*, a form of comic improvisatory musical theatre. *Ruhozi* songs, while musically and lyrically simple, mocked the powerful and hypocritical with varying levels of wit. In the 20th century, with the advent of radio, the Allied military presence during World War II and the Pahlavi Shahs’ Westernisation policies, a new popular music industry developed. As well as the Western influences, this music came to be closely linked with the film industry and was influenced by developments in Arabic-speaking

countries, especially in the 1950s, when Egyptian film was popular. Most songs in this genre were composed for light entertainment, but among them were pieces that drew on Persian poetic traditions, or were interpreted as containing the multiple layers of meaning and allegorical references expected by readers of Persian poetry. Such songs were sometimes read as poetic protests against hypocrisy, injustice or other obstacles to freedom and love, and as articulations of longing for truth and freedom.

The 1979 revolution was partly inspired, according to some of its supporters, by popular songs interpreted as revolutionary. Shahram Nazeri describes the atmosphere directly after the revolution as one of re-awakening:

It was as if a nation which had been asleep for centuries had woken . . . as if a fire had suddenly been lit in a reed-bed. And each of these reeds, since they are burning, was obliged to think about itself, about its society, about its history . . . people gradually became interested in their own culture, because in reality for many years in Iran there was a long period of loss of identity.²

Iran's post-revolutionary euphoria was short-lived for many reasons, including the 1980 invasion of Iran by Saddam Hussein's Iraq, resulting in eight years of war. During the 1980s, as the Persian pop industry shifted its centre from Tehran to Los Angeles, many of Iran's art musicians – 'awakened' and 'burning', in Nazeri's words – sought to reverse influences perceived as Western on their music and its lyrics. This included a turn to classical poetry. On his 1980s album *The Language* [or 'voice'] *of Love* (*seda-ye sokhan-e ishq*), Nazeri combines the words of Rumi with Kurdish and Persian music.³ He includes Rumi's last *ghazal*, 'Go, rest your head', which resonated with Iran's by then grieving, war-weary population. Mohsen Namjoo, who grew up in the war years, describes this album as 'a musical blessing for the nation', as it musically and lyrically articulated the complex feelings of pride and national unity, determination and despair, that accompanied the war.⁴ In the context of post-revolutionary Iran, where many felt abandoned by former friends, Rumi's text also served as a multi-layered critique of all forms of false friendship. Nazeri's performance of Rumi's texts enables new layers of meaning to emerge, as it expresses the cruelty and injustice of abandonment and war, the necessity for faithful devotion to the cause in the face of injustice, exhaustion, grief and ongoing danger, and the harsh beauty of devotees' resistance against various 'dragons':

Go, rest your head on a pillow,
leave me alone;

Leave me ruined, exhausted
from the journey of this night
writhing in a wave of passion
alone till dawn.

Either stay and be forgiving,
or, if you like, be cruel and leave.

We have crept into this corner of grief,
turning the water wheel with a flow of tears.

Flee from me, away from trouble;
take the path of safety, far from this danger.
In a dream last night I saw an ancient one in the garden of Love
beckoning with his hand, saying 'come here'.
On this path, love is the emerald,
the beautiful green that wards off dragons . . .
Faith in the king comes easily in lovely times,
but be faithful now and endure, pale lover.
No cure exists for this pain but to die,
So why should I say, 'cure this pain'?⁵

After the Iran-Iraq War and Iran's subsequent period of reconstruction, Mohammad Khatami was elected president in 1997, bringing with him a program of minor cultural reform. This included the resumption of locally produced, popular music. Fusion, or *talfiqi*, combined such instruments as electric guitar and keyboards with the *kamanche* (a spike fiddle, which, earlier in the 20th century, had been one of the first Iranian instruments to be replaced by its Western relative, the violin), *setar* (one of several forms of long-necked lute), *daf* (frame drum) or *santur* (dulcimer). Fusion groups included Rumi (singing, as the name suggests, the texts of Rumi), Avizheh, Raz-e Shab and O-Hum. Unlike the other groups, O-Hum was not granted official permission to distribute its first album, which it recorded in 1999. Consequently, the band launched *Sapling of Wonder*, a term drawn from Hafiz, online in 2001.⁶ This launch initiated Iran's now widespread practice of sharing rock music online. O-Hum performed its first official concert in a Russian Orthodox church in Tehran, before making more songs available online in 2002, under the title *Hafez in Love*. The group has since left Iran and released its second album, *Aludeh* ('Polluted'), in Canada in 2005.

Mohsen Namjoo has also left Iran for North America, but according to Touraj Daryaei, Namjoo's music is 'more in sync with Iran than any political leader or writer today, or the expatriate artistic production'.⁷ Of course, Namjoo himself is now part of the 'expatriate artistic production', but he spent his formative years in Iran during the war. His song '60s *Decade* (in the Iranian calendar, the 1360s correspond approximately with the 1980s) tells a bitter coming-of-age tale, in which the questioning child is crushed by war and violence, authorities and neighbours, as he undergoes an education in absurdity. Namjoo's songs demonstrate his understanding of Islam and its texts, as well as his insider knowledge of and satirical approach to many aspects of contemporary Iran. In his early work, Namjoo set a range of Persian poetry to his music, including a version of Hafiz's *Zolf Bar Bad* ('Tresses in the Wind'), which gained popularity in Iran and the diaspora. *Zolf Bar Bad* displays Hafiz's customary wit and use of imagery, paradox and hyperbole:

Let not the wind into your tresses or I will go into the wind
Let not seduction be your way or I will lose mine
Drink not with any old contender or I will drown in pain
Savor not your wine or I will turn red in sobriety

Lock not your hair or I will be locked in remorse
Twist not your hair or I will get twisted

Become not the rival's friend or I will become mad with rivalry
Feel not for others or I will cease to feel

Open your face and I won't need a flower
Stand tall and I won't need the air of heights

Paint not the town red or I will shed blood for tears
Cherish not the other's company or I will perish

Steal not the limelight or all light will leave me
Ogle not or I will melt beneath your gaze

Be kind to this poor suitor and come to my aid
For me not to appeal to the Messenger

Hafez will never turn away from you
For he became free the day he was entrapped by you.⁸

Finally, Tehran-based hip hop trio Metro 707 performs a different kind of music, which does not draw directly on classical poetry, but illustrates how this poetry remains part of everyday life in contemporary Iran. The members of Metro 707 were born as the Iran-Iraq War ended, in the late 1980s. Rather than romantic love, their primary textual concern is social love and devotion – love for the unloved, devotion to the neglected and recognition of the exploited. The group's late lead rapper, Nazila (1987-2012), wrote *Ye Barg-e Fal* ('A leaf of fate') after learning of the murder of a nine-year-old boy who had sold *fal-e Hafiz* on the streets of South Tehran:

Like gambling over life and death
You have to become a slave, even for a small amount of money . . .
It's raining sorrow down on people
Everyone has to remain in a deep sleep
Where's Ali with that agate ring? . . .
You can see the autumn of dreams in the falling leaves
Or those children who instead of games and homework
Sell flowers and shed tears
The child's dream is that no stranger sees his pride being shattered
He'd wipe his tears with anger and hatred
His little body gave way under pressure
His urge to cry turned into a bitter grudge
Waiting to take revenge on society
He has no escape from this unfortunate future . . .
He's seen no hope, even in broad daylight
Why has the kind Lord become his enemy?

My share of tomorrow is in everyone's hands
Let's not sing of sorrow and this old tale
Come and sympathise with these child labourers
Practise what you preach . . .
Prisoners with dead hearts, a bird with no wings
There's no air in this world, even for an entrapped fish

There's no room for us at the intersection of thoughts . . .

His cold corpse there under a shadow . . .
You passed them by so callously
Have you ever wondered what they dream of? . . .
In their eyes you see sorrow instead of hope
It's very hard to forget a child
You hear a cry that shatters your pride
Could you look even just for a minute? . . .
His hands froze over in winter
The money from selling *fal-e Hafiz* was no cure for his wounds . . .
How quiet is his lifeless body . . .

You struggled weakly in that man's grip
The week before *eid*, time to meet death
Everyone said he went innocently to eternal sleep
They'd beaten you and sworn at you
But I didn't read anything about this crime and pain . . .
Just a child among the thousands of victims
The ones you see with *fal-e Hafiz* and balloons . . .

Know that you and I are also somehow to blame
Why are we quiet and don't say a word?
Lord, look at us hidden in the dark . . .
We're like a bunch of animals in the jungle
One day we'll all pay for this
Because we've forgotten there's a God.⁹

To conclude, as Ramin Sadighi and Sohrab Mahdavi observe, '[t]he resplendent reserve of Persian poetry is akin to a verdant pasture where musicians can graze. Perhaps this is why, while there is no shortage of contemporary poets in Iran, there are so few songwriters'.¹⁰ For centuries, palaces, teahouses and private courtyards were venues for the dissemination of poetry in Iran and the Persianate world. Performers and listeners took pleasure in the sounds and semantics of the Persian language and its capacity for interaction with other arts. Today, venues include the internet, concert halls, streets and private basements, as the union of Persian poetry and music continues to entertain and inspire.