Female Agency, Genres and Aesthetics of Sorrow in Persian Classical Music

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Abstract: *In today's Iran, the prohibition of female musicians from public performance of dance, solo voice, and occasionally, instrumental music under the rules by the Islamic regime extremely challenges women to maintain active professional status in music. Starting my all-women Persian classical music ensemble in 2011, my colleagues and I agreed upon defining ourselves within the "artistic" scope without falling into the "flashy" tagline of marginalized "all-women group" (gorūh-e bānuvān). In Shi'a Iran (since the 14th century), a long-standing urge to legitimize music by differentiating classical art from the "undervalued" light-hearted music of lower-class entertainers (motrebs), followed by Iranian modernization and influence motivated by Western aesthetic schools led to emphasized divisions in the philosophy, ethics and aesthetics of genres. The ethos of sorrow, a dominant aesthetic expression in Persian classical music, has long defined the repertoire, genre and performing artistry through affiliation with maktab (artistic school) heritage and Persian mystic philosophy. The reinforcement of this ethos under Islamism through Shi'a emotional culture and socio-political boundaries for musical performance was more intensified in the post-Republic (1979) Iran. The aesthetics has contextualized a social fabric for defining professional female agency in a competitively male-dominated tradition and an escape from the stereotypical past image of female courtesan entertainers and overall marginalization of art music. In this chapter, through several examples, including my autoethnography as an Iranian female musician, I explore the quality of social aesthetics of sorrow as a distinction of genre, agency, class and their implications in the case of female music in Iran.*

Keywords: *Iranian music, gender, music education, Islam, social aesthetics of music.*

As I founded my all-women music ensemble in 2011 under Iranian state's restrictions on female musicians, my colleagues and I agreed upon defining ourselves within the "artistic" scope without falling into the "flashy" tagline of marginalized "all-women group" (*gorūh-e bānuvān*). This choice was based on the awareness of at least two controversial connotations regarding the concept of "women's music" in the professional domain of the early 21st century Iran: first, women as the inferior and less advanced performers, excluded from the serious musical scene, who occupy a place somewhere on the margins

as a vulnerable musical "visibility"; and second, the exceptional women daring to stand independently to perform their own music, yet often overshadowed or devoured by a social message or political atmosphere in resistance to the norms of a segregated society. Disregarding both, my focus was "the art by women as artists", but not a marginalized gender.

In this chapter, I discuss the socio-historical dimensions of genre, class and aesthetics in Iranian classical music and their impact on the emergence of female agency and female musicianship in Iran. I explore how the historical and present choices and limitations in the socio-political, religious and cultural context of Iran have shaped aesthetics of sorrow as a distinctive element of a musical genre and social class. By presenting historical cases of female musicians' agency and sharing my autoethnographic experiences as a female ensemble leader, performer and educator, I analyze how women navigate the music system, particularly in the art music of Iran and how they develop their agency inside that system.

The Phenomenon of All-Women Ensembles in Iran

Since the 1979 Iranian revolution, the female voice and dance have been eliminated from the public stage. Today, while women are allowed to learn music, they are under official restrictions regarding performance and their visible activity in the public space – especially for the mixed audience. These barriers are even more intense in some provinces, due to their local rules. Regardless of its dominance as one of the most historical and artistic cities in Iran, my hometown Isfahan has been long bearing the scar of prohibition on women's stage-performance. The political rules centralized around religious authority have marginalized women's performance even further, limiting instrumental music playing as well. My last public performances as a santūr player in Isfahan went back to more than a decade before opening my ensemble. They referred back to my conservatory graduation concert and a music festival held annually in commemoration of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. However, at the birth time of my ensemble, the oppression and conservatism in the post Green-movement[1] era of President Ahmadinejad had already terminated many musical events and normalized tight restrictions. In Tehran, the rules against women's performance were slightly milder, although extremely unstable, depending on daily policies, propagandas, and legalities by both political and religious authorities.

While the category of "all-women ensemble" was hardly a preferred opportunity, my colleagues and I considered the initial proposition from my old-time conservatory master and the manager of an institution where I was teaching at the time. He was aware of our educational background in Isfahan Music Conservatory[2], a university bachelor's degree in Iranian classical music, and recent professional career as performers and teachers

1 This movement happened nationwide in protest to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency in 2009.

2 Official music academies in secondary and high school levels that exist only in a few major cities of Iran.

– albeit with the regular limitations for women – in the conservatory and private institutions. As a supporter and mentor, my teacher was optimistic that the idea of an all-women group performing for all-women audience would at least open a window for representing women's artistry, not to be wasted, while simultaneously adding more publicity and artistic resolutions to his institution and its inspiring leadership in the city. We found the potentials of this limiting, yet optimistic concept of "all-women ensemble" as an only – though narrow – possibility for our musical fulfilment. My years of teaching and leading Persian music ensemble courses in girls' conservatory[3] and my young students' substantial achievements in school concerts optimized my urge to collaborate with colleagues, motivate our students for the future roles, contribute to the city's gender[4] diversity, and pursuit farther horizons in professional performance. Women needed to experience and to be heard more independently – even if only by the female audience – in the male-dominated art music scene. Based on their competency, a selected number of young performers among my conservatory cohorts and other educated musicians were solicited to join the ensemble. I arranged a solid classical repertoire based on the *maktab* (artistic school) in which I was trained, with the aim of presenting a classical art performance, distinct from the common simplified or commercialized repertoire of many other groups. This was the beginning of my all-women *Nasim* Ensemble[5] (*gorūh-e bānuvān-e Nasim*) in Isfahan, Iran, that remained active and won several recognitions and awards from the most competitive Iranian international festivals until I left the country in 2016.

The recognition of my group as the only accepted ensemble from the province and the only female one admitted for competition among twelve selected classical ensembles nation-wide in the prominent annual *Fajr International Festival of Music* (Tehran) in 2013, brought some publicity. I received an interview from *Sharq Newspaper* to elaborate more on the status of female music in Isfahan. The interviewer quoted Mohammad Qotbi, a clergy member and then the head of Isfahan Culture and Guidance Administration, who (surprisingly) compared music bands to the national soccer team – where female performers must have (male) substitutes as of players in a soccer team. Qotbi stated, "this ban is an unwritten law that has been observed in the city for more than 10 years. Musical groups that perform in Isfahan must comply with the unwritten laws of his department and have a contingency plan to replace their female members" (Eng. Trans. *Radio Zamaneh* 2014). Insisting on the importance of Isfahan as a religious city, Qotbi's disapproval ruled

3 The post-revolutionary Iran (since 1979) obligates the gender-segregated education prior to the university level. This rule applies to music conservatories which are divided to boys' and girls' schools. The issue of teacher's same gender for each is still a point of conflict in provincial legislative systems as women are disallowed to teach in boys' school, however the lack of female teachers for some music courses makes the male employment in girls' schools unquestionable. This is a recurring matter of dispute – with less intensity in Tehran compared to other cities – between religious authorities and music directors.

4 The concept of "gender" in Iran stills remains in the male and female categories as formally recognized frames.

5 The state's official restriction on video-recording female music made the recording impossible. However, unofficial video samples and rehearsals can be found on "Nasim Ahmadian" YouTube channel.

locally, despite the official authorization from the Central Ministry of Culture in Tehran. *Sharq Newspaper* reflected, although briefly, my response to Qotbi as I emphasized the more fundamental issue of holding women, the equally professional and active talents, from the art scene by quoting me, "the omission of female players [performers] in Isfahan has led to the deterioration of the music scene in the province. Women make up half of the active and creative population and they have been paralyzed" (Eng. Trans. *Iran Times International* 2014).

In such an imposing socio-political and prohibitive frame, the idea of beginning an independent female ensemble of educated young musicians distant from Tehran, not only in a marginalized social life, but also a male-dominated art was a question of critical aims and attitudes. A female ensemble was unparalleled in non-egalitarian musical arena, yet unavoidably, a form of social resistance and professional solidarity that could simultaneously overshadow its own artistic value. For this reason, my focus was on presenting the music *per se*, the aesthetics and authenticity of the classical genre, rather than the prevailing gendered, political, or religious label that had long imposed definitions to Iranian music and its morality.

Duality in Genre, Elitism and Social Class for Iranian Music

The aesthetic education of Iranian classical (art) music with inclination to the ethos of sorrow was established through various historical dimensions. Here, I focus on the important aspects coinciding with two dynamic changes during the Iranian modernization in early 20th century: first, the rise of musical elitism with an urge to draw a distinction between musicians as masters of the art music and the general *motreb* (entertainers) known as the lower class of the illiterate society; and second, the formalization of *maktab* to be an inclusive system of art education and ethics through dissemination of music as a "respectable" craft and crystalized national heritage.

Both these interdependent factors were outcomes of several socio-cultural changes in Iran regarding modernity, nationalism and Westernization. The new experiences included a general advancement in the educational system, increasing awareness toward national identity and the collective past, foreign relations and influence, and radical cultural directions such as *kashf-e hijāb* (unveiling women) in 1936 under Pahlavi regime. This period was also the beginning for music schools and publications, public concerts, new music bands, national radio and television, recording industry, and the emergence of bourgeoisie, especially in the Iranian urban life. The pinnacle of these changes settled new contexts for defining the arts, aesthetics, identity, class, educational tradition and performing stage. The result drew hard borderlines between the music of *motrebi* – as a light joyful music of the uneducated – and classical music – as the sophisticated art for the educated who are aware of Persian national heritage.

Although various regions and ethnicities in Iran have constantly added to the content and artistry of Iranian music repertoire, the bloom of modernized urban life and nationalism by the 20th century enhanced new cultural levels. An example is the social polarization of urban Iran, most notably in the spatial division of Tehran into the north and the south city. As Breyley and Fatemi (2015: 1) emphasize, this distinction marked

the north city or uptown (*bālā-shahr*) as the "modern" and the south city or downtown (*pāyīn-e shahr)* as the "traditional" caste of musicians. The social status of *motrebs* was as the following,

> The motreb [festive musicians] organized themselves under the direction of theatrical troupes with which they had previously been sporadically associated… In the eyes of many Tehran residents, the *motreb* is an illiterate, downtown [*pāyīn-e shahr*] musician. His manners are uncouth and he lacks respectability (ibid.).

Considering its historical and contextual layers of meaning, the term "traditional" in this division refers to illiteracy, lower values, and cultural and moral backwardness. It is noteworthy that the word "*motreb*" has been redefined in a fundamentally changed context throughout the history, as Breyley and Fatemi (ibid.) explain:

> If the word *motreb* (derived from Arabic, literally "one who creates joy or generates pleasure") once referred to all categories of musicians without differentiation, today – more precisely, since the beginning of the twentieth century – it has become a derogatory term that is applied only to musicians who perform at weddings, parties and other festive events, to distinguish them from those who practice Iranian art music.

The modified definition of *motreb* and its attached subculture agrees with the historical references to the term – especially after the Safavids' officialization of Shīism in Iran during 16th-18th centuries. According to William Beeman (2007: 47–50), the secular music in Shi'a Iran was marginalized socially and morally, attributed mostly to the non-Muslim, ethnic or minority groups (e.g., Jewish, Iranian-Armenian) who could perform it in public without religious shame. This status contradicts with theosophical use of the term praised in numerous Medieval treatises and Persian Sufi poetry. As Azadehfar (2014: 3–7) classifies the diversity of these views, many philosophers, scholars and Sufi poets (i.e., Rumi, Hafez, Sa'di, Roudaki) who were also accomplished musicians, praised music to the level of mystic practice, wisdom, and a connecting source between the dual celestial (heavenly) and terrestrial (earthly) worlds that built the core of Persian cosmology.

Although there is no clear evidence on when and how the meaning of *motreb* was precisely recontextualized in reference to the light music of entertainment and festivity by the outcast, this frame seems to emerge with the formal establishment of musical education and dissemination of *maktab* pedagogy in Iran under Qajar dynasty (1789–1925). This was also the time of stricter boundaries for the male musical domains (Fatemi 2005: 400). While many distinguished musicians were still at the royal court's service, during this period the classical music began to embrace a deliberate and resentful separation from *motrebi*, entertainment and trivial pleasure. The reluctance or escape of some royal-sponsored educated musicians such as Darvishkhan and Vaziri from the royal or patronage's obligations on performing demands are the instances of art musicians' resistance to joyful musical service for the royalty and the tasteless crowd.

The class and educational gap between the art and entertaining genres and classified societies, for both men and women, becomes even more dominant during the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979). This era was also the epitome of artistic revival and institutionalization, modernization, intellectual awareness, and genre division in the musical scene

of Iran. With the Pahlavi's support of the ancient Persian identity and cultural affluency, many classical musicians constructed the basis of newly state-respected music. They aspired reflecting the artistic and cultural values to the highest levels of educational and aesthetic canons as they had encountered in Europe. Persian classical music was to flourish into its philosophical and technical grandeur as of the Persian poetry; this vision typically refused the light pop genres. The new elite's efforts, therefore, materialized in practice and scholarship as compensation for many centuries of scarcity and dismal in serious publicization of art music under the political and ethical authority of the Islamic state.

In his recent critiques on the overlooked case of *motrebi* culture in Iran and the popular entertaining music of the Middle East in general, Anthony Shay (2018: 11) argues that the contemporary scholarly attempts by Iranian and international intellectuals have despised the importance of this tradition by consigning them to the "historical trash bin" and condemning them as "imitative, repetitive, diluted and sensual". Classical music, on the other hand, is "creative, original, sober, and [above all], spiritual". Shay attributes a part of current public embarrassment of Iranian artistic society regarding the *motrebi* music to the dissemination of art music discourse as a high culture, emphasized through the international scholarly works by Dariush Safvat and Jean During and their influence on music studies over the past decades. In her historic analysis of the cultural and political degradation of the heavily featured *shesh-o-hasht* (6/8) groove in Iranian pop music, Farzaneh Hemmasi (2020: 39–40) also mentions the "unmodern, debauched, and vulgar" associations with the *motrebi* music that was restricted from pre-revolutionary state radio and television. The music of this genre, as Nahid Siamdoust (2017: 42–45) explains, refers to café music and *kucheh-bāzāri* (songs of the streets and bazaar), with their distinct style and performing space or a part of *ruhowzi*, which was a social theatre performed in house courtyards, offering a comical commentary on daily life (ivi: 21).

Nevertheless, it is impossible to overlook the formation of art musical aesthetics as a doctrine based on its content, structure, interpretation, affect, and performing space compared to other genres, including *motrebi*. Not only the repertoire and musical skills by the master, but also the audience and emotional setting were among the signifiers of the art genre in contrast to the *motrebi* tradition. With its affiliation to the educated, mystic poetry, music schools and concert halls, the classical genre was an invitation for the audience to sit silently in a formal venue, listen deeply, concentrate on the weighty content of the poetry and even have some knowledge of the noble Persian art history. It was "the music by the elite and educated, for the elite and educated". The *motrebi* genre, on the other hand, was known as the music of weddings and happy ceremonies, street events and lighter moods played by "performing troops" who were often from the lower society and working-class. Although their music had various levels of sophistication from which occasionally great musicians arose, the occupation was still appointed to their low rank[6] or in service to the upper class. In her categorization of the relationship between musical performance and social values, Ellen Koskoff also mentions the social-sexual role and marginality of women in the "class-stratified socioeconomic system" in the court music

6 There was a variety in the social rank, position, and performing stages of these minorities and public entertainers, however, they were often divided from the art music class.

context, especially in the Middle East and Asia (Koskoff 2014: 124). In Iran, the femininity and social inferiority were certain characteristics of the *motrebi* entertainment and at points, symbols of erotic pleasure and visibility as dancing and physical attraction were often left to women.[7]

Female Music and the Social Aesthetics

In his ethnographic history[8] of Iranian contemporary music, Rouhollah Khaleqi, the music historian, composer and educator (Khaleqi Vol. I. 2002: 360), emphasizes the lack of published evidence on the female's role in the art music. Except for a few female musicians' names mentioned in the court memoire of *Tarikh-e Azodi* in early Qajar era, women either decided, or it was decided for them to be excluded from the public attention. This absence, either through self-isolation or imposed marginality in the art genre interlinked with the moral criticism by the Islamic society and the attached image to the past courtesan performance. It increased the stereotyped stratification of female agency in *motrebi,* even though among them were high talents as singers, dancers and percussionists. Khaleqi mentions Mohtaram Kalimi and Ghodsi, to name a few.

Emphasizing this professional fracture in female's learning process of classical music, Khaleqi (Vol. I. 2002: 363–7) highlights a gendered, yet delicate aesthetic evaluation of female vocalists in Iran by which their training was deviated, especially when receiving admiration from their male counterparts or dedicated fans. The non-functional critical system and competitive stage for women, due to their position as alienated practitioners of the classical genre, as well as their physical and vocal charm, prevented them from the serious stage of aesthetic refinement and artistry.

What Khaleqi uncovers is an existing fact in today's Iranian vocal art, especially since the ban on female voice in post-revolutionary Iran. Women's vocal – and more broadly, instrumental – artistry is generally evaluated as lower levels of competency. In vocal music, this is notable in women's lesser tendency toward the risk of learning and applying sophisticated *tahrīrs* (melisma), advanced techniques, and as I discuss later in this chapter, moving beyond the structure of light *tasnīf* and *tarāneh* (metric love songs) pieces. Likewise, the situation stands in the instrumental music for the representation of advanced techniques, arrangements, improvisation and depth of interpretation. This dichotomy has affected the aesthetic arena of female music in a way that they are either over-encouraged by the non-expert feedback or dismissed for lack of substantial artistry by the experts' criticism. The extremes are lower for the formally educated women, especially the instrumentalists, due to their subtle self-projecting image, compared to the vocalist's central role.

7 See for instance the fresco painting depicting court dancers from Hasht-Behesht Palace, Isfahan, Iran, Safavid era, circa 1669. https://musiclifeword.org/material-culture/mehmoonifinal2/ (accessed 4 October 2022).

8 Originally published in 1954.

We should note that the gender-stratification of music education roots in a deeper texture of Iranian society in the 19th and 20th centuries. Khaleqi describes the social participation of Iranian women during the Qajar era as the following:

> In the streets[9], men and women had to follow separate pedways, even if they were a couple! Women were excluded from attending theatrical plays. The only two movie theaters in Tehran accepted men only. There were a small number of girls' schools and only few families were able to send their daughters to public education. In general, the facilities for woman's education were scarce. (Khaleqi Vol. II. 2002: 195)

However, in early 20th century, several fundamental and ideological changes occurred in the educational environment of music through the new attitudes by Ali-Naqi Vaziri (1887–1979), who is also known as the father of musical modernity in Iran. Vaziri was a former military colonel and a composer, virtuoso tār player, teacher and musical theorist who started the first formal music school of Iran, *madrasa-ye ʿāli-e musiqi* (Superior School of Music) in 1924, after completing his musical studies in Europe. He made enthusiastic efforts to include women in the educational environment (Farhat 2003). In the light of his moral and musical competency, Vaziri gained the state officials' permission to lead women-only art sessions for educated women of respected ethical reputation. Known to be the female's first formal art education, the music and painting courses were offered to a limited number of women during restricted hours with the least male attendance. The training resulted in the formation of a musical club and movie theater for women, and a number of concerts by these educated female performers under Vaziri. However, according to Khaleqi (2002, 196–7), the music program was soon terminated, due to the conflicts caused by unsupportive authorities and social hostility toward Vaziri's modern views.

The Legacy of Female Musicians

This awakening, yet turbulent era of music activism for women under the socio-cultural and religious struggles aimed at new aesthetic and moral divisions. A small number of young musicians, who set up the artistic and ethical models for the contemporary and future generations, blossomed. One of the eminent legends is Qamar[10] ol-Molouk Vaziri (1905–1959), a highly respected classical female vocalist with a distinguished mezzo soprano voice, who began learning at an early age through attending female *rowzeh* sessions with her renowned *rowzeh-khān* (*rowzeh* singer) grandmother, Kheir al-Nessa. *Rowzeh-khani* is a form of narrative and melodic recitation in a lamenting voice for the tragedy of Shi'a martyrs of Karbalā, which is performed at the religious gatherings. Similar to many well-known Iranian vocalists, Qamar began learning and performing *āvāz* (Persian vocal art) through the religious ritual and mournful Shi'a gatherings, with a focus on the musical interpretation of sorrow.

9 Translated from Persian to English by the author.

10 Evidently, she changed her last name to "Vaziri" in homage to Vaziri's efforts. Her iconicity in Iranian music and social values of charity is often compared to that of Umm Kulthum in Egypt.

In her remarks, Qamar emphasizes the role of these early trainings through accompanying her vocalist grandmother, ear training on the modal and tonal qualities of the Shi'a religious elegies and the chance of performing in front of the *rowzeh* audience as her first aural music schooling and effective way to become an esteemed Persian vocalist (Khaleqi Vol. III. 2002: 139; Nakjavani 2008). Qamar is also known for the first public appearance of an Iranian female vocalist without the obligatory Islamic veil (*hijāb*) in 1924 in Tehran's Grand Hotel. She began her professional music lessons with the great master of tār, Morteza Neidavoud, who first accompanied her voice on tār in a private gathering and advised flourishing her unique voice with a proper knowledge and skills of the *radīf* repertoire. The incident resulted in Qamar's completion of training with Neidavoud and upcoming fame and concerts. She soon performed *āvāz* and technically elevated *tasnīfs* on national radio and new recordings with many distinguished musicians including Abol-Hassan Saba (violin), Habib Sama'ee (santūr), Hossein Yahaqi (violin), and Neidavoud himself. Her refined interpretation of melancholy, deep lyrics and the vocal artistry not only made her a primary icon of female musicianship, but also established genuine models for acclaimed musicians and male vocalists of the following generations, including Mohammad Reza Shajarian, the great vocalist master of *āvāz* in Iran.

Among the following generation of female vocalists, several acclaimed artists such as Roohangiz, Delkash, Marzieh, Moluk Zarrabi, Khatereh Parvaneh, Sima Bina, Afsaneh, and Parisa arose, who were also educated musicians[11] and high-calibre performers of the art genre. They contributed to the establishment of female agency, not only through their specialized competency in Persian classical music, but also their publicity with distinguished orchestras and ensembles through then highly-valued music programs of Iranian national radio and television. These valued recordings are continuously referential as training models by contemporary musicians, including my ensemble.

The Impact of *Maktab* Aesthetics and the Ethos of Sorrow on Female Music

The ethos of sorrow (*huzn*) and its aesthetics form a predominant aspect of artistry and affect in Persian classical music, which have been appreciated and addressed by Iranian and Western scholars (Azadehfar 2017; Caton 2008; During 1991; Zonis 1973). A subtle, yet enriched emotional and technical interpretation of the classical repertoire, with its philosophical and mystic content through the ethos of sorrow relate the performance to the authenticity of this genre, which is the focus in *maktab* training. Accordingly, a deep classical performance is integrated with the understanding of Persian classical poetry, its themes and the rhetoric of mystic love and melancholy. By contrast, a performance based on light lyrics, festive moods, and less complexity reminds the music of entertainment and the less educated from the past.

Historically, the praised aesthetic frame focusing on the depth of melancholy and sorrow roots not only in the turbulent emotional life and cultural memory of Iranians' battles and misfortunes over the centuries, but more deeply, in the philosophy and poetics of love and *'irfan* (mysticism) in Persian thought and literature. However, in the mu-

11 Mostly under trainings of Vaziri and his musical descendants' *maktabs.*

sical culture, this aesthetic quality dominates the structure, performance, and authenticity, due to the historical exploitation of music as an illegitimate craft or a disgraceful occupation, unapproved by religion and moral values of the society. Thus, the *maktab* education and its framework not only provided a method of transmitting music as a secular art to the selected deserving pupils, but also created a respected cultural identity for independent musicians. Through this shared awareness, the art musicians in modern Iran focused their efforts on the establishment of *maktab* – and its aesthetic values – as a division or sanctuary for the art genre. In her survey of the integration between musical genres and current socio-political issues of post-revolutionary Iran, Ann Lucas (2006: 84) also highlights a more secure position in terms of the state's persecutions for Iranian classical music due to its "erudite reputation" that was "housed in conservatory-style facilities and integrated into governmental bureaucracy before the revolution". It resulted in a more "lenient regulation" of classical music compared to other genres. Ameneh Youssefzadeh (2000: 38–41) also brings examples of the new cultural policies by the Islamic Republic to legitimize traditional Iranian music under directives of "development of spiritual culture".

Nevertheless, it is also considerable that a long-term marginalization of women in public musical arena, firstly within the context of Islamic restrictions on music performance, then intensified by the elite male-dominated class of the Shi'a society, and finally through the extreme prohibitions by the Islamic Republic have faded out women's image of artistry and activism on the aesthetic arch of musicking. This paucity has increased the educated female musicians' preference to pursue the aesthetic values of melancholic expression and ethos of sorrow as the "erudite" authenticity in the classical *maktab* repertoire and interpretation.

An example for the aesthetic division in the artistry of the genres through *maktab* is the interpretation of classical *āvāzī*[12] repertoire, which requires years of intensive training and dedicated master-apprentice relationship. It is a collection of modal vocal and instrumental pieces with metric flexibility, interpretative elements, and abundant ornamentations in the *radīf* repertoire. Performing *āvāz* is sophisticated, interpretive, expressive, and it requires not only a demanding understanding of Persian poetics and symbolic emotional components, but also an advanced level of musical techniques, dynamic expression and improvisation integrated with the memorized *radīf* material. Additionally, the musician is required to represent the mood of the *dastgāh* (mode), its *gūsheh* (modal sections), and the phrasing dynamics as well as learning how to create, direct, and fulfil the mood of performance. This is merely a brief example of the aesthetic framework of *āvāzī* that differentiates its artistry and affect from the simple *tasnīf* and *tarāneh* music in the more popular (*mardomī*) and entertaining genres.

This is a potential reason for the artistic modern evolution of *tasnīf* in terms of the content, message and artistry toward themes of freedom, justice, patriotism and social improvement, especially by the new wave of poets and songwriters such as Malek o-Shoara Bahar and Aref Qazvini. This change occurred in light of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911) and categorized the new high-calibre works under the title

12 Lit. vocal in Persian. A lot of its artistry derives from the vocal centrality of Persian music.

of "revolutionary *tasnīf*". Yet, the traditional *tasnīf* was attached mostly to the entertaining mood, lyrical content and easy-reaching to the audience crowd.

Within the context of these boundaries, the framework of aesthetic interpretation is more identifiable for the female musicians who follow *maktab* training. Their level of artistry is a deliberate decision and effort to exclude themselves from the preconception and the past public image of an "entertainer" and find their place as respectable performer musicians and teachers in a male-dominated and historically marginalized art. Thus, the musical elements such as virtuosity, improvisation, interpretive complexities, emotional expression, and professional display, along with the choice of repertoire, poetry, body movements and sexual visibility form the evaluative approach for the authenticity of *maktab* aesthetics, including the ethos of sorrow.

In this perspective, the aim of my ensemble was to present classical music within the *maktab* aesthetics and emotional scopes, though beyond the gender stratifications of artistry. While I was firm in maintaining the female identity, there was no intention for false boundaries on the content and quality. My classical repertoire and *maktab*-calibre performance was maintained equally throughout our concerts with a female vocalist for female-only audience, as well as when performing in *Fajr Festival* with a male vocalist – due to its restrictions on performing for the mixed audience. The performers' outfit and visual appearances were carefully chosen to be subtle and traditionally formal. The setting and arrangements for the audience demanded extensive attention to the artistry, silent listening, interpretive poetry and ethos of melancholy. Our focus on collective emotional cultivation and dynamic interpretation was frequently appreciated by the audience. The program contained a classical repertoire of successful works with reference to both male and female vocalists from the pre-revolutionary era of Iran, which had not been performed often after 1979.

Coda: New Paradigms for Female Music and the Public Image

After a strict shut down, the gradual resume of musical education for women in the post-revolutionary Iran and fundamental changes under the new regime has made women aware of their qualified voice through promoting themselves as professional art musicians. They have developed enthusiastic efforts toward the classical aesthetics and credibility found in Qamar and other distinguished female musicians who took *maktab* and/or formal music school education. They have entered the competitive male-dominated ground and when restricted by law, they take the women-only opportunities. In a close study of the female-only musical events in Iran, Wendy DeBano (2005: 455) highlights the symbiotic relationship between music and gender roles in Iran:

> Arguments about the permissibility of music in Islam, the general social status of musicians, the important distinction between professional and amateur musicians, and the hierarchy of musical genres in a given context cannot be divorced from issues of gender.

In a broader context, the matter of gendered musical phenomena such as "women-only ensemble", "women-only concerts/festivals" have been debated as the alternative meth-

ods by the political regime to "foster gender segregation" in Lucas's terms (Lucas 2006: 81) and open a (controlled) space for female activity through giving semi-free yet Islamic identity to women empowerment in Iran. This semi-open space is subject to multiple dimensions of criticism and controversies among both female and male musicians and audiences.

Projecting on the case of female music in contemporary Iran, my observations and personal engagement as a musician and ethnomusicologist confirm the existence of multi-layered perspectives and priorities by women ensembles: The resistance to the primary concept of "women's music as a division" is reflected in firm avoidance of some groups to perform in non-negotiated female-only events, while others, such as *Nasim* Ensemble, stand to perform autonomously within the aesthetics of the art genre. For several reasons, including publicity, other groups (e.g. *Mahbanoo*) moderate the aesthetic challenge and female autonomy in favour of the entertainment. These are among the facts contributing to the rearrangement of the socio-cultural fabric for Iranian classical music and its emotional aesthetics not only for women musicians, but also for the gender-free domain of artistry at large.

Today, in the first half of 21st century, aesthetic paradigms of classical music are going through a major change under the dominance of social media. Women dress up and flash out their visuality, as well as their music and picture. Their caution for self-portrayal with head-covering is still maintained while presenting solo vocal performance – illegal in the Islamic Republic law. Many female ensembles (e.g., *Gillariss, Bahar-narenj*) now release their works exclusively on social media or perform on foreign satellite channels. Regardless of the length and level of their studies in *maktabs,* women publicize their education via sharing photos and selfies from the classroom settings by renowned masters such as Shajarian and Lotfi. While the authenticity of genre, repertoire and live performance stand on the margin, the new visual accessibility and competitive virtual publicity (e.g., number of followers, comments and music video clip circulations) rearrange the aesthetic criteria for female performers. In addition, women's access to music education and their arrival in various fields of music have encouraged male musicians and composers to work with women, especially in terms of vocalists, or all-women groups with a male leader. The goal is often to satisfy the prompt visual and sonic needs of the forever judging audience who quickly roll down their social media pages to the next post, leaving prompt comments in attack or favor of women performers. The expression of female agency is shifting from aesthetics of sorrow and musical techniques toward the visibility of performance, space and self-portrayal. Whether or not these changes lead to the formation of new aesthetic structures and performing ethos in female musicianship will be a question for future research and observation.

Figure 1: Poster of Nasim ensemble's concert (designed by artist Najmeh Moradi Chadegani) depicting symbolic elements of Isfahan's historical architecture, calligraphy and Persian colorful birds. The announcement reads "For Women only". The venue was a private music institution in Isfahan, 2012. Image used by permission.

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