

# PERSIAN MUSIC

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The Rhythmic beat of the mother's heart is the first music every human hears. The rain drops, the thunder, the waves of the sea, the flowing of the river, the chirping of the birds and the unlimited music that the wind creates has been there in nature forever for humans to hear, contemplate and copy. Rhythm has a soothing effect on the mind and very soon humans started copying the sounds they heard in nature and to enjoy the relaxing effect of music. Even when forming languages humans made words from the sound they heard like the "cracking" of a wood, or the "gushing" of the wind or the "chirping" of the birds and such words are to be found in every language.

Persian music must have had its origin like all other music and latter words were used to create the rhythms while giving a message. The most ancient surviving component of Persian Music, with the use of words, is the Gathas of Zarathushtra. It is in the form of a poetry that has its own unique rhythm. It is so composed that the rhythm soothes the human mind thus making it easy to remember. The right music is known to relax the mind and take it to the Alpha stage, which is said to be the stage wherein the mind can think clearly and solve complex problems and memorize things. The Gathas were memorized for centuries before it was written down for the first time.

Persian Music is different in composition compared to Western Music. The notion of scale or octave is entirely foreign to Persian musical performance. Eastern Music and

in particular Indian Music has a common ancestral relationship with Persian Music.

Many musical instruments originated in ancient Iran and were introduced to other countries some maintained their name other were renamed but are still traceable. While some like the TAR which means 'string' in Paarsi has carried its name as a suffix to most string instruments that have developed since, like the GuiTAR, SiTAR etc.

The Persians had a deeper understanding of music and so they systemized and organized it. We do not have much information from the earlier era, but during the Sassanian era there were famous court musicians like Baarbad, Nakisa and Ramtin. Baarbad was the most famous among them. He reportedly conceived a musical system consisting of seven royal modes (Khosravani), thirty derivative modes (Lahn), and three hundred sixty melodies (Dastan). This was the oldest Middle Eastern musical system of which some traces still exist. Its enduring heritage is the names given to some *dastgahs* in the modern system of Persian music. Some of the titles of his compositions were 'Kin-e Iraj' (the Vengeance of Iraj), 'Takht-e Ardeshir' (the Throne of Ardeshir) these were perhaps epic songs; 'Baq-e Sahryar' (the Sovereign's Garden) 'Haft Ganj' (the Seven Treasures) 'Sabz Bahar' (the Green Spring) & 'Mah abar Kuhan' (Moon, cloud, mountain). We know of these titles from the writings of later historians but the actual composition were most probably destroyed by the invading Arab.

With the Arab Invasion of Persia (643-750 ACE) musical activity was suppressed for it was considered as a corrupting frivolous activity.

Then once again during the reign of the Abbasid Dynasty (750-1258 ACE) music was reestablished at the courts, and Iranian musicians were scattered throughout the Muslim world. Iranian court musicians had to adopt Arabic names and write in Arabic. Abu Nasr Farabi, an Iranian wrote '*Kitab al-musiqi al-kabir*' which laid the foundations of the musical tradition of the Muslim world, he worked at the royal court in Baghdad. Other Iranians like Abu Ali Sina and Safiaddin Ormavi, who codified the mode into twelve divisions with six melodies, also lived at this time. Ibn Khordadbeh was born about 820 ACE in Khorasan to a Zarathushti father. He grew up in Baghdad and studied music and literature with Ishaq al-Mawsili (770 ACE), a great musician and a family friend. Ibn Khordadbeh is the author of '*Adab al Sama*' (Listening Etiquette) and '*Kitab al Lahw Wal-Malahi*' (Book of Entertainment and Music). One of the surviving accounts of the musical instruments of the region, according to George Farmer, is contained in an oration delivered by Ibn Khordadbeh before Al Mu'tamid (870-893 ACE), the Abbasid Khalif.<sup>2</sup>

Modern day scholars have done great injustice to everything Persian including Persian Music because they refer to everything Persian that has been recorded in the Arabic language as Islamic or calling Iranian scholars with Arabic names as Arabs. Not realizing that the Arab conquerors forced the change in names, script, and language and even forced their backward traditions on all the people of the countries that they conquered. Egypt is a good example, of how the people lost their advanced culture and knowledge to the Arab traditions. Iran had the same fate initially but it latter managed to resist the conquerors to the extent that it even designed its own religion - Shiaism. Iran not only preserved its language and culture but also exported it through its

various conquerors in the course of its history. Like, the Mongolians not only learned to speak Paarsi but also made it their court language in India. Culturally the Persians have always conquered their invaders and that has been so because of their belief, which promotes progress and they have always imposed their advanced civilization upon the usually artless invaders.

Whenever the forces of Islam had an upper hand Persian Music was forced underground where it persisted and whenever it had chance to show itself it came out in the open. For good reasons there is sadness in the tone of Persian music today and even the happiest songs have that sadness in their tone.

The modern *dastgah* system, a codification and reorganization of the old modes, dates back to the late Qajar dynasty.

For brief periods under non-religious regimes when Persian music has flourished in the open it has had the vulnerability of being influenced by foreign music like it did under the Pahlavi dynasty, when it was influenced by western music.

## INFLUENCE OF PERSIAN MUSIC

Persian Music is know to have influenced music all over the vast extent of the Persian Empire and beyond, at the same time it has for its share been influenced by others.

The influence on **INDIAN** music is still to this day evident. Indian music of today is based on two prominent styles the

Hindustani Sangeet and Karnatic Sangeet. The Hindustani style is common in Northern Indian and is influenced by Persian Music. The Indian Sitar is based on the Persian Sehtar, which has undergone changes to produce the Indian melodies. The Indian singing style of Ghazal, Tarana and Qawali are rooted in Persian music and the names are also Persian. They are usually sung in Urdu language rather than Hindi. (Urdu comes from the Persian word Ordu, which means, "camp". Urdu was the language developed by the soldiers at the military camp on the borders of India and consists of a combination of Persian and Hindi words.)

Apart from that Indian and Persian music have a common ancestral relationship, and both went on their separate paths to once again meet and influence each other. In the Shahnameh Ferdowsi tells us the story of how at the request of Bahram-e-Gour his Indian father-in-law sends 12,000 Indian musicians to entertain the people in his kingdom. The Indian Ragas (modes) have entered Persian music and are known as Rak for example Rak-e-Hindi, Rak -e-Kashmir in Mahour and Ramkali in Abu-Ata. Afghani and Baluchi music are a unique combination of Indian and Persian music and musical instruments.

**CHINA** also played a role in the musical exchanges. Several Persian musical instruments were taken to China and influenced by some characteristics of Chinese music. A good example is the "SORNA" (Persian Oboe), which, is related to some extent to the Indian "Shahnaye" in China it is known as "Suona". The "Barbat" (Persian lute) was taken to China and called "Pipa" the same found its way into Japan and they called it "Biwa".

**TURKISH** music has so much in common with Persian music that it can hardly be considered independent from each other.

**GREEK** music is said to be rooted in the Orient. The Greek goblet drum known as "Toubeleki" which is from the same family as the Turkish instrument called "Dumbelek", should have been rooted in the Persian goblet drum known as "Dombak". "Dombalak" is a Pahlavi (middle Persian language) name, which is a converted form of "Dombak".

**EGYPTIAN** music is also impressed by Persian music. The presence of Persian instruments such as Kamancheh (spike fiddle) and Santour (hammered dulcimer) as well as various Persian musical modes including Chahargah, Sehghah, Isfahan, Nahavand, Souznak, Rast, Basteh-negar and Souz-e del, in the Egyptian music is the best evidence to this end.

The Persian frame drum known as "Dayereh" was taken to **SPAIN** and **PORTUGAL**, whence it was taken to **BRAZIL** and became known as "Pandeiro".

## **INSTRUMENTS IN PERSIAN MUSIC**

The musical instruments that have been known in the long history of Iran (Persia) are too numerous to name here. So we will limit ourselves to those, which are widely used at the present time.

**Tar:** A plucked string instrument with six strings and a range of two octaves and fifth.

**Sehtar:** means 3 strings but despite its name it has four strings. It is from the Tar family and its range is the same as

the Tar but the rest of its features are different. The body is made of wood and is pear shaped with holes on the side to aid sound projection. Sehtar is comparatively quieter than the Tar and because of that it has been a favorite in Iran at times when playing music has been a taboo. The Sehtar is strummed by the nail of the right index finger.

**Barbat:** It is also a plucked string instrument with nine to eleven strings. The European lute is a derivative of the Barbat. The Arabian name for the ancient Persian instrument is Oud.

**Kamancheh:** A bowed instrument with four strings, played in the fashion of the violoncello, but with a size and tone range comparable to the violin. The body is usually a wooden hemisphere (similar to a round back mandolin), & the face of it is, like the Tar, a skin membrane. The unfretted neck is simply glued on to the body.

**Santour:** It is considered as the most important among the Persian melody instruments. It typically consists of a trapezoid wooden box with metal strings stretched across bridges arranged in courses; the typical Santour has 4 strings per note. It is played with delicate wooden mallets, with a range exceeding three octaves. It has the distinction of being found in right across the world's musical culture bearing different names like; Hackbrett in Northern Europe, Cymbalum in Eastern Europe, Santouri in Greece, Yang Chin in China, Dulcimer in Britain & North America.

**Ney:** The Ney is the simplest & also probably the oldest instrument used in the performance of classical music. It is a wind instrument that consists of a hollow cylinder with finger holes. It has a very compelling sound, unlike any other wind

instrument and that is because of the unique way in which it is blown into.

The upper edge of the Ney, which is just the top of a hollow cylinder, is placed between the two upper front teeth, inside the mouth. A small stream of air is directed with the tongue, and the upper lip surrounds the upper part of the Ney. Moving the lip and tongue changes the pitch (up to a whole tone) and tone quality. This technique is very difficult to learn but once mastered gives great control over the timbre. Advanced players control the amount of turbulence in the air stream allowing a large variety of sounds from pure tones to extremely breathy sounds. Neys come in all sizes and the size determines the pitch, long Neys are low pitched, and short Neys are high pitched.

**Tombak (Tumbak ~ Tunbak):** The principal percussion instrument in the Persian classical music. It is vase shaped drum open on the narrow end and covered with a tightly stretched skin on the other side.

**ZARB:** The Zarb is a larger version of the Tombak, which is a goblet - shaped drum with the narrow end open & the wide end covered by a skin, which is glued to the (usually wooden) frame. The playing technique of these drums is comparable, though not particularly similar, to the Indian Tabla - the player produces different sounds from a single drum according to how (& exactly where) they strike the surface with their fingers - hitting the center of the drum produces a deep booming sound, whereas hitting the rim makes a high pitched ricky-ticky sound.

**Dayereh:** Tambourine. The word Dayereh comes from the Pahlavi word "dareh". The history of Dayereh goes back to many centuries. An engraved bronze cup from Lorestan at

the National Museum of Iran, Tehran, portrays a double Ney (reed pipes), Chang (harp), and Dayereh in a shrine or court processional. In Tajikistan it is called DOIRA, in Afghanistan it is called DAIRA in Azerbaijan it is called GHAVAL, it is to be found in most of the countries of the Middle East in different sizes with names such as RIG - MAZHAR - BENDIR

**Dap:** Dap is one of the percussion-skinned instruments. Dap is the Phalavi name while in Arabicized Farsi it is called Daf. The Dap is to be found in the bas-reliefs at Bisoton and Hafiz the famous Persian poet has used it about a dozen times in his poems. Dap is a percussion instrument constructed out of shallow cylindrical frame over which a skin is stretched and jingles are also attached to the frame.

## References

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