

IRANIAN MUSIC

A brief survey

By ROUHULLA KHALIGHI



Sri Rouhulla Khalighi, musician, composer and Director of the National School of Music, Tehran, came to India in March - April, 1956 to acquaint himself with the music and musicians of India. He visited important cultural institutions in various parts of the country and exchanged views with prominent artists. Since his return to Tehran he has been writing a series of articles on his impressions of India in *Musiqi-e-Iran*, the official organ of the Music School of Tehran. Sri Khalighi while leaving India presented to the Akadami a number of books pertaining to music and musicology in Iran, and also an eight-hour tape recording of Iranian music and orchestra.

Editor

Iran is an old country and we have had music in Iran from times immemorial. Although we have no written record of this age-old art during the *Achaemenian* period, the account given by the noted Greek historians, Herodotus and Xenophon, indicates that the art existed in Iran at that time.

The most ancient part of *Avesta*, the religious book of Zoroaster, named *Gata*, contains poetry, and we are told that such poetry was sung in the Holy places.

The Sassanian Emperors encouraged music and had great respect for the musicians of their courts. Khusro Parviz, a king of this dynasty, had able musicians at his court, the most important of whom were Barbad and Nakisa. To avoid monotony, Barbad had composed 360 songs so that the king may hear a new song every day of the year.

The instruments used at this period were : *Chang*, *Barbat*, *Tambour*, *Nay*, etc.

After the Arab conquest of Iran in the first century of the Islamic period, little attention was paid to the art of music. However, later on, during the Abbaside Caliphs, the Iranian musicians found their way to their courts. The most important of them were Ebrahim and his son Eshaq who were favourites of Haroon and Mamoun, the great Abbaside Caliphs.

The first book on the subject of Iranian music was written by Farabi, the most famous philosopher of the Xth century. After him,

Avicenna, Safied-din, Abdul Qader and some others wrote books on the subject. One can well understand from these books that Arabic music is based on Iranian theories. Zaryab, who learned music from Eshaq, was the first Iranian musician to go to Andalusia (Ancient Spain) and introduce Iranian music there. This was the first influence of Iranian music in Europe.

The books written by the Iranian musicians contain the rules of sounds, intervals, *maqams* (scales), and the variety of instruments such as *Tambour*, *Oud*, *Nay*, *Sornay*, etc.

About 70 years ago the first music school was established in Teheran for the purpose of training military bands. The principal of this school, Mr. Lemair, was a French musician employed by the Iranian Government. The staff-notations were taught by him in this school to the band players. He wrote a number of Iranian songs also. Some of the students of this school became officers of the military band afterwards. This school, however, did not have any tangible influence upon the national music. This school is now known as the Music Conservatory, an official school under the direction of the Department of Fine Arts in the Ministry of Education. This Conservatory has three courses : elementary (6 years), high school (6 years) and a college course of 3 or 4 years. The graduates obtain the degree equivalent to the Bachelor of Arts.

The Conservatory has an orchestra. The Symphonic Orchestra of Tehran consisting of about 50 players, is also attached to it and they play European classical music.

The first musician who decided to improve the national music of Iran was A.N. Vaziri, who was a well-known *Tar* player. He started with a study of staff-notations and the theory of Western music. Then, he went to Europe (France and Germany) and studied European music for five years. Upon his return to his native land 33 years ago, he established the first school of national music in Teheran. This writer was one of the first students of the school.

Mr. Vaziri wrote all the Iranian songs and *Radifs* (different *maqams*) by the system of western notation and taught them to his students. He introduced harmony to national music and composed different types of music which was played after a year by the orchestra of his school. The conservative musicians of the time were against him, maintaining that the writing of the national music will result in change and consequent loss of the real nuances of Iranian music. Mr. Vaziri ignored such musicians and their criticism did not affect his unflinching devotion to his work which is so popular now.

Mr. Vaziri wrote some books on music which were printed and taught at his school. I have sent a set of these books to the Sangeet Natak Akademi in Delhi.

For the information of the reader, I must say that Iranian music, in common with Indian music, has different *maqams* (Ragas) that is to say, major, minor and some others such as : *Shoor*, *Segah*, *Chahargah*, etc. The scales are composed of tone, semi-tone and three quarters of tone. For these special Iranian intervals, Mr. Vaziri invented two signs : *Koron* and *Sori*, with the help of which we write our music in the staff-notations.

I also think that I should give some information to the reader about our School of National Music. This school is under the direction of the Department of Fine Arts, Ministry of Education, and was established about six years ago. It has a six years' course and students are accepted after passing their six years of elementary school education. It is a State school and the students attend classes for a minimum of five hours per day. The students learn musical theory, sol-fa, musical diction, history of music and harmony. They also



Mr. Ebadi, a setar player

learn to play one instrument. The curriculum of the school includes other lessons in literature, foreign languages, mathematics and physics to ensure that our future musicians are learned artists.

The number of girl students in this school is more than that of boys as is the case in our Conservatory. There are at present about 45 girls and 25 boys at the school. The professors are 20 in number.

The school has three orchestras :

1. Orchestra of National Instruments with 10 players.
2. Orchestra of National and European Instruments consisting of about 12 players. (Compositions performed by this orchestra are not all harmonised).
3. The Orchestra of National and European Instruments having about 35 players. This is the grand orchestra and all compositions are harmonised.

Upon graduation, the students of the school receive a certificate from the Department



Professor A. N. Vaziri

of Fine Arts, which qualifies them to teach singing and music at elementary and high schools as State teachers.

Musical Instruments

The most important instruments now used and played in the school are as follows:

1. The *TAR* is made of wood with a skin on the surface of the case. It has six metal strings and is tuned from the left: c.c.g.g.c.c. This instrument is played with a plectrum and the sound is somewhat similar to the Indian *Sarod*. We use this instrument for vocal accompaniment, solo and also in our orchestra.

2. The *SETAR* is like *Tar* in appearance but is smaller and has no skin on the surface of the case. It is played by finger-nail and has four metal strings from the left: c.c.g.c. Its sound is light and is therefore used for solo.

3. The *SANTOUR* is a trapezoidal wooden box like Kashmiri *Santour*. This instrument is played by two wooden plectrums and is suitable for solo and vocal accompaniment.

4. The *ODU*, the Ancient Iranian *Barbat*, is now popular in Iraq and Egypt also. The instrument has 10 strings which are tuned: c.c.g.d.d.a.a.g.g. It is played by a plectrum made of eagle's feather and is most suitable for accompaniment purposes.

5. The *GHANOUN* is an old Iranian instrument. It is a box almost trapezoidal in shape on the right side of which there is a large wedge on a skin. Strings are provided over this wedge. On the left side of the box, there are small wedges under the strings which are all movable to permit adjustment of sounds. All the strings are of guts. This instrument is played by both hands with plectrums attached to finger tips. It has a pleasant sound and is most suitable for vocal accompaniment and also for use as accompaniment in orchestras using eastern instruments.

6. The *KAMANCHES* is the same instrument called *Saz* in Kashmir and is played by a bow. This has now been replaced by the violin as it is more complete. There are very few people who can play the *Kamanche* now-a-days.

7. The wind instrument is *Nay* or *Ney*. The *Sornay* is another wind instrument played in villages which is something like the Indian *Shehnai*.

8. The most popular percussion instrument is *Tombak* or *Zarb* which is the same thing as I have seen in Kashmir but it is made of wood.

There are many other instruments that are not used in the school such as *Dotar*, *Tambour*, *Gajak*, *Dohol*, *Nagareh*, etc.