

The Persian Santurist - Part 2



Andrián Pertout speaks with Persian santurist Siamak Noory about the history of his instrument, and his performances in and around Tehran in the early 80s.

The Iranian santur is an integral part of the traditional orchestra, sharing the lute repertoire of the tar and setar. It is also utilized in the motrebi 'entertainment music' genre, but folk styles are excluded. An article by Jean During, Scheherazade Q. Hassan, and Alastair Dick describes the santur's construction thus: "The santur consists of a trapeziform case made of walnut wood, approximately 90 cm wide at the broad end, 35 cm wide at the narrow end and 6 cm deep. The sides form an angle of 45 degrees to the wider end. The strings are fixed to hitch-pins along the left-hand side and wound round metal wrest-pins on the right by means of which they are tuned with a tuning-key. Each quadruple set of strings rests on a movable bridge of hardwood (kharak). These bridges are aligned almost parallel with the sides of the case. The right-hand rank corresponds to the bass strings and that on the left to the treble strings. In the centre of the santur the low-pitched strings on the right cross the high-pitched strings on the left." Adding to this, the instrument features three courses of strings (the bass strings made of brass, while the treble ones, steel), with a total of 72 strings or 18 groups of strings, capable of producing 27 different pitches, and is played "by striking the strings with two hammers (mezrab) held in three fingers of each hand."

What is the history of the instrument that you play, the Persian santur?

SN: "Santur and the name of Payvar have become synonymous in Iran. Whenever the name of santur appears in a book or in an article, the name of Payvar joins the article as well. And a brief description of this instrument is central to an understanding of Payvar's contribution to Iranian music. Today dulcimer-type instruments such as the santur are almost an international instrument, being played from the USA in the West, to China in the East. The santur plays an important role in both folk and classical music in many countries. It also takes an important part in the Dance & Folk Festival (Tanz & Folk Fest) at Rudolstadt in Germany, which is held every year. In 1996, Faramarz Payvar was invited to play at that festival, which I attended. There I met many different santur players from different parts of the world such as Iran, the USA, Hungary, China, Germany, Switzerland, Greece, Austria, Rumania, Russia, Iraq, Turkey, and India. Dulcimer-type instruments have different names in different countries, such as Das Hackbrett (Germany), cimbalom, or zimbalum (Hungary), santir (all

Arab countries), sandori (Greece), Yangchin (China), and psaltery, or dulcimer (English countries). Surprisingly, I noticed that the santur-type was very popular around the world, and was made in different sizes and played in different ways.

“And the history of the santur goes back to ancient times, and can be traced to a millennium BC. In some Babylonian (1600-911 BC) and neo-Assyrian (911-612 BC) iconographical documents we can find a horizontal harp, which is related to today's santur (dulcimer-type). Also, in the Old Testament the name of santir appears among other instruments which were in use at that time. Mehdi Setayeshgar - an Iranian santur player and researcher - in his book “Santur's Speciality in Iranian Music” states that: 'The earliest documentation of the existence of santur was found in the archaeologist's excavation site which belonged to Babylon and Assyrian (669 BC) in the South-west of Iran. This documentation shows similarity to today's santur, but unlike today's players, the santur player of that time used to hang the instrument on his neck with the help of a rope.' In Europe the instrument was, and still is, in use in the field of folk music, and has changed form to suit current musical needs. Nevertheless, in many European countries the santur-type or dulcimer is still widely played on different occasions. The cimbalom is also used in symphony and chamber orchestras. Some famous composers like Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) have composed pieces that include cimbalom, and skilled players like Aladar Racz and Toni Irdache have played them.”

Did you perform in and around Tehran in those days? If so, what type of occasions were they?

SN: “As I mentioned before, I started to learn music in special libraries, which were made for children and teenagers. These libraries belonged to the government and called 'Kanoon-e Parvareshe Fekriye Koodakan va Nojavanan'. Children from the age of five or six could go there and learn to read, and attend different courses. Music and painting courses were the most popular courses, among others. The Orff method which came from Germany, was very good and attracted children. Still my friend Mr. Nazar teaches this method not only to children but to adults as well. I can remember having a concert for Carl Orff and his assistant in Tehran in 1978. We were twenty kids who were chosen from different libraries in Tehran, and worked very hard for about two months to prepare some pieces to play for Orff and his company. After the concert he was so astonished to hear very technical pieces on an instrument that had been invented for children. He could not believe his eyes. We played some Persian music, which was arranged for Orff instruments, and also some classical Western music. For example, some Hungarian dances by Brahms, the last part of symphony number nine by Beethoven, the first part of symphony number forty by Mozart, and some other pieces. Orff was very surprised to see us playing such beautiful pieces on his instruments and decided to take us all to Germany to study music professionally. Everything was arranged, and the government was very happy to be sending twenty of us to Germany to become professional musicians. But unfortunately a few months later, Islamic revolution happened in Iran and everything was ruined by the new regime. The Shah was obliged to escape from Iran, music conservatories were shut, and music became illegal and counted a big sin to be played and to be listened.

“But I played with our Orff group until twelve years old. I then started to play the santur and progressed very fast. At the age of fifteen I had already started to give concerts as a professional musician. Ostad (Professor or Master) Payvar had a programme for his pupils to play monthly in a private concert that he arranged himself. Ostad also asked me to play every month in those private concerts and I had to prepare new pieces for these occasions. Payvar

inherited this tradition from Vaziri and also put on 'free concerts' in his advertisements to help people attend the concerts. He wanted to encourage people to go to such concerts, and tried showing them that music is not only illegal but also and is a beautiful phenomena in this cosmos."

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