



The Persian Santurist – Part 3

Andrián Pertout speaks with Persian santurist Siamak Noory about the Iranian music scene before the Islamic revolution, and the general change of attitude towards music and musicians post 1979.

In 1979, the Islamic revolution in Iran bestowed the study of music with an illegal status, consequently bringing about the premature closure of the Music Conservatory. “Because of the Islamic revolution in 1979, which caused an undemocratic situation, more than 3,000,000 Iranians became obliged to escape from the country. Of these three million nearly 60,000 came to Sweden during the 1980s. More than 1,000,000 people fled to USA and the rest mostly went to Germany, France, and other European countries,” explains Siamak. After the fact, for his own ‘anti-establishment’ beliefs in artistic freedom, he too becomes a victim of the ongoing institutionalised persecution. He recalls the events of 1981 leading to his arrest and two-year imprisonment:

“In the winter of 1981 I was playing piano in my apartment. I used to play at least eight hours a day, which did not please the Moslem neighbours. Suddenly, I heard some noises from downstairs. I waited in my room, knowing that there were people downstairs talking about me. They came up and without knocking rushed into my room. One of them used to be my close friend – before the revolution – who felt very envious of me with regards to my music. He was now working for the Islamic Army, which was created after the revolution. They told me that it was illegal to play an instrument or listen to music. They took away my grand piano, all my records and books, arrested me and put me in jail for nearly two years. I do not want to discuss what I saw and what they did to me, but instead what I want to say is that freedom is the most important thing in our human life and that I tangibly experienced how political persecution became a negative factor for Persian Art, especially music...”

What were some of your other activities within the Iranian music scene before the Islamic revolution of 1979?

SN: “I was also working on Radio & Television in Tehran, in the children section. I was working there with Mr Vanko Naidanoff, a Bulgarian musician and we made some concerts there, and I used to sing in the choir. In the concerts we used to use different instruments; a

mixture of Orff and the standard instruments, like trombone, bassoon, clarinet, violin, piano, and some other instruments. I also used to also play live in a theatre in Tehran. Some of my friends worked at the Ferdowsi Theatre – a middle size theatre hall in the middle of the city of Tehran – and I used to play the santur and sometimes Orff instruments in their theatre. The music for the theatre was composed by other musicians, and I only played it at their live show. I used to play alone and some times together with other musicians. I can tell you that I started such a wonderful musical life in Tehran and it is a pity that it did not last long. It now seems like a dream to me. I was growing fast in my musical life and working hard to get to my goal. I fought not only with my religious family who were against music, but also with a society that thought that a musician was worse than a prostitute. So you can imagine how difficult it was for me to get my goal in that society, and still I am fighting for it. I am now trying to produce CDs, continue my further studies, doing PhD at Monash under Professor Margaret Kartomi and Dr Reis Flora, write articles and books, etcetera.”

How did the general attitude towards music and musicians change post 1979?

SN: ““I believe strongly that music is a great part of human life and that no one can prevent or stop people playing instrument or listening to the music. Could you imagine life without music? Everything in this cosmos is based on melody and rhythm, such as birds singing, movement of water, animals jumping and running, the sea, a tree growing, and etcetera. But in Iran, as soon as the Islamic regime took power announced that according to the Quran and Islam music is illegal. They started to shut down all music schools, conservatoriums, universities and music institutes. No one could even listen to music in their privacy. There was no music on radio and television and the only ‘music’ that was allowed to be listened to were some marches and religious hymns (Quran recital) that called for music. They needed marches for war; to excite people (the war with Iraq). But people then started to learn music privately, because they could feel that life without music was empty and very boring.

“Today in Iran, in most families someone plays an instrument, and this is very good for Iranian society because music helps them express their feelings about all the pressures that comes from the regime. Music for me was and still is the ‘only’ way to express my feelings such as sadness, happiness, anger, etcetera. Today music became extremely popular in Iran, which is quite opposite to the time of the Shah. At that time music was of course free to be played and listened to, but people were not so interested in participating in groups or learning to play an instrument. The commercial music, which we call it ‘chip music’ or ‘motrebi’, was taking over, and the Shah was trying to Westernize Iran with these sort os music. He invited many famous groups from Europe and spend millions of dollars to make Iranian to be familiar to the Western culture. There was only Western hip-hop and roc music on the Radio & Television all the time. Today the situation is different, and healthy music (not commercial Western and Persian classical music) is growing fast. The political situation has also changed today, and with the new President, Mohamad Khatami, people can breathe a little more compared to Khomeini’s time. The regime knows that people want democracy and freedom, and that is why they give people a little more freedom, because they want to stay on power. But we are still far from being a real democracy. Music schools, institutes, universities and conservatoriums are privately doing their duty to the society, but everything is private. Today people are not allowed to drink alcohol, but they do make and produce their own wines and spirits at home privately. So everything is private today.”

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