



The Persian Santurist – Part 4

Andrián Pertout speaks with Persian santurist Siamak Noory about his eventual arrest and imprisonment in 1981 (when the Islamic revolution in Iran bestowed the study of music with an illegal status), and his ultimate escape from Iran in 1986.

Siamak ultimately escaped from Iran in 1986 (during the Iran-Iraq war of the eighties), arriving in Turkey as a refugee, to then temporarily settle in Belgium where he studied the piano at the Music Academy in Antwerp with Hedvig Vanvarenberg before establishing a permanent base in Sweden in 1989. Here he studied the piano for two years at the Birkagårdens Folkhögskolan in Stockholm with Stella Tchaikowsky, and went on to graduate from the University of Göteborg with a Bachelor of Science in Musicology. Since 2001, Siamak has been living in Melbourne, Australia. He recently completed a Masters degree (Ethnomusicology) at the University of Melbourne.

The events that followed ultimately lead to your eventual arrest and imprisonment in 1981. How did you cope in prison?

SN: “The period that I spent in prison will never get out of my mind, and is unforgettable, but to think about those black days and nights makes me strong, and always encourages me to be more ambitious on my way and Iranian musical culture. The regime tortured me hard in the prison – I’ve still got the signs on my back – because I was musician? Why did I play the piano and the santur? Why did I become a musician? They wanted me to tell them my friends' names, who were also musicians, but they failed. Before that I had heard many times that music was illegal in Islam, but it had not been a serious problem until facing the Islamic army (Sepah Pasdaran), who took me to jail. Prison was a nightmare for me. To be in a small room with nearly eighty prisoners – all political prisoners – is not an easy task. I was living with people who were awaiting their execution in the following day or week. There, in the prison I faced lots of brave people, who were raised against the regime and were put in the jail. I have learnt a lot from those people. I was also active to teach those innocent people something about music and encouraged them to listen to the music history with its glorious in the past and in present time. I was trying to show them that music is not hobby and not for entertainment. I talked about Beethoven, his music and his personality. Beethoven’s spirit has

been always with me, and I have learnt a lot from this great master, how to think freely and how to appreciate freedom. Beethoven is one of my Gods and I always admired him that he had changed the title of his third symphony, which had been dedicated to Napoleon Bonapart in the first place, but when Napoleon became a dictator, Beethoven changed his mind and renamed it Eroica.”

How did you eventually escape from Iran and become an exile in Europe?

SN: “To be in exile is very difficult because you never feel at home. To escape from Iran especially in wartime was a huge risk. It was so dangerous and difficult to trust smugglers, because the only thing, which is important to a smuggler is money. They haven’t got any feelings for you and are not concerned about your life. I, with five friends of mine – two of them from the prison time – decided to leave the country. Life became very difficult, and especially for me as a musician. It was impossible to live in Iran after revolution because music counted as illegal and so there was no musical activity in the society. Poor people could not breathe, and make any objections against the regime, because people have been told that the country was in a state of war (war between Iran and Iraq). Anyway, we paid lots of money to the smugglers to take us to Turkey. You may ask, from where did I get the money? I sold my books and other property, and also received money from my teacher Ostad Payvar and my family. Otherwise I could not have offered it. Smugglers took us from a city near the border of Iran and Turkey (Rezaiyeh) to Turkey. And life in Turkey was very dangerous for Iranians, because in the past there had been many wars between Ottomans and Persians, and so we were not safe there at all. Anyway, in Turkey we stuck it out in a very bad situation. Millions of Iranians were obliged to escape from Iran and go to Europe via Turkey, and smugglers became millionaires from the money that Iranians paid them. Unfortunately the Turkish police and army caught many Iranians and handed them over to the Iranian Islamic army (Sepah Pasdaran) in the border. They were receiving a lot of money from the Iranian government for each person delivered to them. Turkish police imprisoned many Iranians in Ankara and Istanbul. They savagely raped poor young Iranian girls, and even boys who were escaping from their country to settle in peace. I really cannot describe everything, but for more information about prisoners in Turkey I strongly suggest for everybody to see a film called ‘Midnight Express’, which was made by an American imprisoned in Turkey, who finally succeeded in escaping.

“I stayed in Turkey for more than a year. I had no money to eat, and was living with eight people in a two-room apartment in Istanbul. The smugglers then sent me to Belgium, which was also a problem for me. Belgium is a very small country with ten million inhabitants, and people in Belgium are generally against foreigners. Refugees have serious problems there. Unfortunately, today racism in European countries grows rapidly and people in Europe probably do not know WHY a refugee escapes from his/her own country. What cause them to flee to other countries? I really want encourage people in the West to think about this case because, they have to realise that nobody wants to leave their native country/home and leave everything behind.

“Anyway, I settled in Antwerp, which is a city situated in the north. The city was beautiful, and I found a few nice people there. Nice people are everywhere of course, and if I talk about the difficulties in European countries I just talk in a general sense. The laws in Belgium say that refugees are not allowed to work or study. I do not know about today’s situation, but this law was very much against my future at the time in 1986. I had not escaped from Iran to come to Europe and sit around at home taking money from the government, and doing

nothing. I had come to do my further studies in music. So, I started going to the music academy to study the piano without telling anybody. I had to be very careful because if the government found out, it may have meant being deported to Iran. Anyway, while I was waiting for the result of my candidature as a refugee, I studied music in Mortsel music academy in Antwerp for free and thanks to the head of the school Mr. Cuyppers who kindly helped me in all way he could. After three years I moved to Sweden, because some of my friends told me that I could achieve my goal in Sweden.

“Sweden is a very beautiful country, and social life, even for refugees was very good until 1994-1995. After 1995 the political and economic situation changed. But when I initially moved to Sweden in 1989, the situation for refugees was pretty good, and all refugees got help to study or work. I called the music academy in Stockholm (Birkagårdens Folkhögskolan) from a refugee camp, and told them that I was a musician from Iran and wanted to study there. They invited me to Stockholm and conducted a test. After the test I was accepted, and after a few months began my studies there. At that time I only spoke English, and so the staff in the music academy helped me to learn the Swedish language. I was studying from 8am to 4pm at the music academy, and from 6pm to 9pm I attended evening classes to learn Swedish. This situation continued for two years. I finished my studies and took my papers to the music conservatorium in Göteborg, where I studied musicology for three years. After getting my bachelor from Göteborg University I planned to do my Masters and PhD, but problems started. As I mentioned before, after 1995, the social, political and economic situation had changed a lot, and racism had risen. And not only in Scandinavian countries, but throughout Europe. The staff in the musicological department did not want me to go further, a professor saying to me, “It is better for you to find another job, and do something else with your life.” His words were like a knife going into my heart. They simply did not want foreigners in the musicological institute. I did not know what to do, but fortunately I received my Swedish citizenship and my friends encouraged me to go abroad to do further studies. I applied for my Masters at UCLA in America, Auckland University in New Zealand, and Melbourne University in Australia. I was accepted in all of them, but USA was very expensive for me and did not know anything about New Zealand, so I chose Melbourne. I can tell you that Australia is the best country, and especially Melbourne, which is a multicultural city. I love the weather, and people are very nice. During my three semesters studying in Melbourne I have made many friends, but while living in Sweden for more than 12 years I can say that I have not got even one Swedish friend. It is very difficult for refugees living in Europe, and so I admire Australia for their concern about different cultural groups. After my studies I plan to go to Iran and help my people, because it is a musician’s duty to go back and preserve their musical culture.””

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ANDRIÁN PERTOUT

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