The Shiraz Festival: avant-garde arts performance in 1970s Iran

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Abstract

For twelve years, The Festival of Arts Shiraz / Persepolis in Iran hosted musical, theater and dance performances mixing traditional Persian arts with contemporary avant-garde works by Western composers, including electronic music by Xenakis, Stockhausen, Cage, Tudor and Mumma. A proposed center for the arts, designed by Xenakis, unfortunately never came to fruition. A new generation of Iranian musicians was inspired by the presence of visiting artists, some studying abroad to further the country's art institutions. Iran during the final days of the Shah also presents a situation where artistic expression co-existed in an ultimately untenable balance with the political repression of Iranian citizens.

1 Introduction

Iran in the 1970s, during the final decade of Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi's reign, provided a home for the flowering of electronic music and avant-garde arts. An officially sponsored arts festival featured music, at times commissioned, by such musicians as Iannis Xenakis, John Cage, Gordon Mumma, David Tudor and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Western works were programmed alongside traditional Persian music, dance and drama, and contemporary Iranian cinema. Plans were developed for a significant arts center, which was to include state-of-the-art electronic music and recording studios. A new generation of Iranian composers and artists were inspired by the festivals to integrate contemporary techniques and aesthetics, often including electronics. Further developments within Iran came to a halt with the coming of the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

The Shah was interested in cultivating a technologically modern state within a traditional cultural context and an international political environment where other nations, especially Great Britain and the Soviet Union, coveted her land and oil resources. His search for support led to compromising alliances, including a 1953 coup supported by the United States Central Intelligence Agency and to political intrigue, all pointing to the growth of a police state that tolerated no political opposition. The Shah hoped to rationalize the secular base of his rule as a continuation of the ancient, pre-Islamic Persian Empire, unified by Cyrus the Great, in 539 B.C.E. The 2500th anniversary of this event, in 1971, provided a rationale for an international event at the ruins of the royal seat of Darius I, a successor to Cyrus, in Persepolis. The 1967 establishment of a Festival of Arts at Persepolis and the nearby university city of Shiraz simultaneously provided the historical linkage and the desire of the Empress Farah Diba, a former architectural student, to showcase the cultural enlightenment of her country. She was convener and a major presence at each year's Festival.

National Iranian Radio and Television (NITV), also founded in 1967, served as sponsor and administration. Sharazad (Afshar) Ghotbi, a violinist and wife of the television network director, was named festival musical director. The tone of festival programming reflected the Empress's artistically sophisticated, often Western, internationalist and contemporary tastes. In the final years of her reign, as her tastes began to shift towards more traditional Persian arts, so did the direction of the festival.

The Western orientation of much of the programming, however, proved controversial, especially as the Shah's rule waned and revolutionary Islam characterized the rising opposition. The Festival's seeming demonstration of artistic and intellectual openness sharply contrasted with the lack of freedom experience by the Iranian people. The opulence of the annual festivities paradoxically highlighted the increasing economic crisis experience by most Iranians. The vacuum created by the elimination of secular opposition was filled by rising Islamic religious movements, which viewed the festivals as anathema to their traditional worldview.
2 International Artists

The Festival of Arts, from its inception, featured a mixture of traditional Persian music and music from Eastern cultures, especially India, and Western European classical music. The 1967-1970 festivals included luminaries like Indian sitarist Ustad Vilayat Khan, British violinist Yehudi Menuhin, a Balinese gamelan ensemble and the Senegalese National Ballet. Traditional Persian arts were increasingly incorporated, including, beginning in 1970, annual performances of a Persian passion play, ta'ziyeh ("mourning" or "consolation"), portraying the founding events of Shi'a Islam. Peter Brook, one of several visiting avant-garde theater directors to show work at the Festival, was profoundly influenced by experiencing ta'ziyeh.

Iannis Xenakis developed a particularly close relationship with the Festival, his works appearing on three occasions. In 1968, he presented 'Nuits', a work dedicated to political prisoners. In 1969, 'Persephassa', a joint commission of French Radio and the Festival of Arts was performed by the Strasbourg Percussion Ensemble. Persephassa linked the ancient Greek goddess Persephone with parallel Persian and other ancient cultural myths. Xenakis' next commissioned work was the multimedia extravaganza, 'Polytope de Persépolis,' premiered on August 26, 1971, at the ruins of Persepolis.

The work is described in the Festival program notes as dramatically depicting "The history of Iran, fragment of the world's history, is thus elliptically and abstractly represented by means of clashes, explosions, continuities and underground currents of sound." The evening began with parts of Xenakis' 'Diamorphoses' (1957), his first electronic work. With lights filling the skies, bonfires blazing, lasers lighting up the ancient ruins and torch-bearing children mounting the surrounding hills, the sounds of the electronic work 'Persépolis' were diffused through six eight-channel listening stations positioned amongst the ruins. Sharon Kanach describes the latter part of the drama: "Suddenly, the groups of children disperse and climb down the mountain in constellation-like figures (the two horizontal lines of dots represent spatial landmarks on the sketch) and finally congregate between the two tombs where their torches spell out in Persian 'we bear the light of the earth,' a phrase by Xenakis. One last outburst and the 150 torch-bearers run past the ravine and disappear through the crowd into the forest of the Apadana's columns. The speakers grow quiet and 'Persépolis recovers its mineral silence... In real-time, Xenakis directed the spectacle from a control console with a walkie-talkie."

Still image from an Iranian video directed by Nasser Taqvai of the torch display during the 1971 performance of Xenakis, 'Polytope de Persépolis.'

The new work was met with mixed reactions. Critic Maurice Fleuret wrote: "...this work will be a landmark in the evolution of one of the most speculative and general philosophies of our time, especially by its annexation of vast acoustic and visual spaces and by placing living human presence within a mechanism that is dominated by musical logic." The Empress and National Iranian Radio and Television expressed their confidence in Xenakis by commissioning him to design and conceptualize plans for a new art center. For some, however, the spectacle evoked memories of the burning of Persepolis by Greek who historically preceded Xenakis, Alexander the Great, in 330 B.C.E.

The Merce Cunningham Dance Company (MCDC) performed in 1972. With the troupe was musicians John Cage, David Tudor and Gordon Mumma, who especially appreciated the value of the cross-cultural exchange: "It was of interest for the younger generation of Iranians to encounter cultural activities from elsewhere. More importantly, we had things to learn from Iran, certainly more from them than from us. [The visit] was one of the most extraordinary cultural experiences of my life." The dancers remember the experience strongly. Valda Setterfield remembers that "Persepolis was very special because of its incredible ancientness and endurance and the heaviness of the open air. It was wondrous. Dancing in the ruins was glorious and physically hard." Carolyn Brown looks back upon it "as a marvelous, unforgettable experience."

The audience was comprised of the Iranian political and cultural elite, plus foreign dignitaries and visitors. Security was tight, with the visiting artists assigned
individual military guards. The scene was, at times, best depicted in media society columns, which featured who was there and what they wore. Merce Cunningham recalled that the prop storage closet was filled with machine guns.

The MCDC gave three outdoor performances, comprised of two dance "Events" [a panoply of dances and sequences selected for a specific performance, sometimes juxtaposed in a simultaneous manner] and a musical concert. The first "Event," which utilized Andy Warhol's pillows crafted for 'RainForest' included two musical elements: a series of one minute stories, often humorous, by John Cage from his 'Indeterminacy' series and a collection of classic (circa 1930s) Argentine tangos Music during the second Event, set in the ruins of Persepolis, included 'Signals' and 'Landrover', both composed collaboratively by John Cage, David Tudor and Gordon Mumma and David Tudor's 'Rainforest', which Mumma describes as "a collaborative duo between him and myself, performing with a forest of electro-acoustic transducers of his own uncanny design."

The musical concert included Mumma's 'Ambivex', for trumpet (or cornet) with live cybersonic modification, and a simultaneous performance of Tudor's 'Monobird' and Cage's 'Birdcage', a collage of bird sounds, ambient sounds and recordings of Cage singing 'Mureau'. Mumma recalls that "Persepolis was quite isolated -- electrical power and all the local apparatus for our performances had to be brought in by truck and horse-drawn wagons. I was told that much of that sound equipment was obtained on loan from the Deutsche Rundfunk by the Iran government."

The major events in 1972 are highlighted by a headline in The Tehran Journal announcing the Festival: "Stockhausen to dominate festival." The focus of the week was daily performances of works by Stockhausen, providing a veritable Stockhausen festival. The programming included three of his "intuitive" works, plus 'Gruppen', 'Carre’, 'Stimmung', ‘Gesang der Jünglinge’, ‘Telemusik’, ‘Prozession’, ‘Kontakte’, ‘Spiral’, several of his ‘Klavierstucke’, ‘Hymnen’ and ‘Mirophonie I’. Stockhausen biographer Michael Kurtz describes the visit as the composer's personal "highlight of the year." MCDC dancer Carolyn Brown describes Stockhausen's appearance as like a "guru", "walking the streets of Shiraz white robed - thoroughly self-intoxicated, it seemed to me." This series of events concluded with a dramatic outdoors performance of 'Sternklang':

"As the gates of Delgosha Park were opened, early in the evening, a seething mass of about eight thousand poured up the star-shaped converging paths and the atmosphere was like a powder-keg. The mood of the musicians was very tense. The park had no broad grassy areas, so the spectators squashed together on the pathways, besieging the performers. Some of the many young people immediately clambered up the loudspeaker scaffolding and were hauled down again by the police, who were standing guard by the five groups of musicians. Stockhausen was convinced that his music would calm the listeners. And so it was. After half an hour of music the waves subsided. Over the whole scene was a starry Persian heaven - southerly constellations, a dark blue sky and stars that shone more brightly than in central Europe."

3 Impact on young composers

One of the most important aspects of the Festival of Arts was its influence on young Iranian artists and composers. Dariush Dolat-shahi, now a composer living in the United States, was a student at Teheran University when the first Festivals took place. Since the University's Music Department was actively involved in the events, being a student offered a close vantage point to the events. He recalls:
"Every year, I waited for the event to happen. These festivals were a major source of information for us about what was happening musically outside Iran. There were a lot of pieces for live orchestra and tape [programmed]. I received my own first commission when I was nineteen years old. My works were also played at the festival in 1976."

During this period, Dolat-shahi realized his first work for strings and tape, using "a small but heavy, 50 pound German tape recorder, a Grundig. I recorded on one channel and then played it back on recording to the other. It was really a test with sounds, but not a real composition." What he remembers most was that "

Dolat-shahi was one of many Iranian students who were sent abroad to further their education, with the hope that they would return with technological skills to contribute to their country's economy. His first scholarship sent him to Amsterdam, following which he returned home. Dolat-shahi taught composition at the Tehran Conservatory while awaiting additional funds that would allow him to complete a doctorate working in the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center, in New York City, in 1976. The rationale for this degree was that he might play a professional role in the sound studio of a newly proposed art center, which, unknown to Dolat-Shahi, National Iranian Radio and Television had commissioned Iannis Xenakis to design. Other students who came to Columbia-Princeton from Iran included Massoud Pourfarrokh and Ahmed Pejman.

While at Columbia-Princeton, Dolat-shahi prepared the tape portion of a Festival commissioned work, "From Behind the Glass", for twenty strings, piano, tape and echo system. In The Tehran Journal, critic Lazarian Shaghaghi writes that this work "conveyed a stimulating imagination of space, was original and good to listen to." Another work for orchestra and tape, 'Mirage', was also performed at the Festival. While there are no extant recordings of Dolat-shahi's works from the Festival, his electronic compositions from the late 1970s for the traditional Persian tar, sehtar and tape were released by Smithsonian Folkways.

Dolata-shahi's studies at Columbia-Princeton also occasioned the NIRT to commission a work by studio director Vladimir Ussachevsky [uncompleted due to the revolution] and a visit by Columbia University Music Department Chair Chou Wen-Chung and Dolat-Shahi to Iran, where they discussed a plan to create a Persian Studies program within the Columbia University Art Department. "They also spoke about establishing studies related to modern music and electronic music" to be supported with "major funding from the Iranian government."

Among other young Iranian composers whose work was performed at the Festivals are Alireza Mashayekhi, Mohammad Taghi Massoudieh, and Hormoz Farhat. Farhat served as Head of the National Iranian Radio and Television Network Music Council from 1969-1978 and as one of the Artistic Advisors of the Festival. Mashayekhi continues to actively compose in Iran, where his work reflects two varied interests: traditional Persian music and avant-garde Western compositional techniques and aesthetics; his electronic works reflect both trends. Even composers too young to participate in the Festivals were indirectly influenced.

3 Proposal for an arts center

Composer and architect Iannis Xenakis began work on a model for the new art center in the early 1970s, although preliminary discussions may have begun as early as 1968. Sharon Kanach notes that Xenakis based the plans on his 1970 design for Le Corbusier Center for the Arts in Chaux-de-Fonds, France. The plan was "to make Xenakis in charge of everything, but to hire Iranians locally to execute his ideas. The purpose was two-fold: practical - Iannis Xenakis was not going to move to Iran; [and] political - [Empress] Fara Diba wanted to make sure the Shah wouldn't be accused of farming out all the interesting work to foreigners."

Xenakis's "General Guidelines", according to documents found by Kanach in the Xenakis Archives, describe the project as an interdisciplinary and collaborative "scientific research center" for sound and visual arts, cinema, theatre, ballet, poetry and literature, to "continue all the activities year round of the Annual Festival of Shiraz-Persepolis." In addition to public presentations, the Center would support ongoing work by up to forty visiting and fifty permanent artists, scientists and staff members. The plan included forward-looking studies of traditional arts and "a Center for Studies of Mathematical and Automated Music", which Kanach believes to be likely similar to Xenakis' center in Paris, CEMAMu, the Center for Studies in Mathematics and Automation of Music. It was to include laboratories for "automated" digital and analog music, film sound editing, and two recording studios, a library and repair workshop, a 10,760 square foot "Hall of Nothingness" and parking facilities for 1000 cars. The proposed budget for the entire project was to be 35,000,000 franc (approximately US $7 million).

4 Political considerations and conflicts

The politics involved in Western artists participating in the ongoing Festival of Arts and in the proposed Arts Center were naturally complex and thorny. 'Polytope de
Persépolis' came under sharp criticism by opponents of the Shah living in Paris, the composer's home city, where he was taken to task for collaborating with a human rights abuser. Xenakis responded publicly in an open letter to the French newspaper, *Le Monde*, asserting that his right to free expression extended to Iran:

"... My philosophy, which I put into practice every day, consists of the freedom of speech, the right to total criticism. I am not an isolationist in a world as tangled and complicated as today's... It is imperative to uphold this ultimate right of the individual, especially today when it is impossible to name one single country that is truly free and without multifaceted compromises, without any surrender of principles ... The United States, with their Vietnam and their treatment of blacks. England, with its treatment of foreigners and the abominable torture of their Irish patriots. Germany and its permanent Nazism. The USSR and its degradation of the freedom to create and think. China and its Maoist religion ... All interchangeable cancers...."

Ultimately, Xenakis withdrew from any further engagement with the Iranian government, informing the Festival Deputy Director General, Farrokh Ghaffary: "You know how attached I am to Iran, her history, her people. You know my joy when I realized projects in your festival, open to everyone. You also know of my friendship and loyalty to those who, like yourself, have made the Shiraz-Persepolis Festival unique in the world. But, faced with inhuman and unnecessary police repression that the Shah and his government are inflicting on Iran's youth, I am incapable of lending any moral guarantee, regardless of how fragile that may be, since it is a matter of artist creation."

5 The politics of visiting Iran

The Merce Cunningham Dance Company was invited to return for a second visit to Iran, possibly in 1976. This time, the dancers voted not to go, a position taken in 1972 by musician David Behrman. Cunningham, Cage and Mumma wished to return, despite the intense political pressure to boycott Iran. Mumma believed that the visit was important "because of the people and their culture, for whom my respect required entering their communities, and learning of their world from their perspective. Their government regime was not their choice." Dancer Carolyn Brown notes that Cunningham believed that the visit was important since "the work itself might change people's minds." Mumma also held that the MCDC's work modeled values important to convey to the Iranian people, including creative, free action and a non-linear, non-hierarchical way of thinking and acting.

6 End of an era

The presence of an annual Western-oriented arts festival, associated with the Empress, national television and thus the Shah's regime inevitably became a point of contention. Historian William Shawcross observes: "By the mid-seventies this had become one of the most controversial cultural events in the country. Among its most notorious performances was one by a Brazilian troupe whose members bit the heads off live chickens in the course of the action ... sometimes [the Empress's] enthusiasms seemed to jar. Although she was determined to preserve Iran's past, her contemporary tastes were often too avant-garde, too cosmopolitan, for most of her countrymen." Queen Noot of Jordan recalls that a performance of the music *Hair*, controversial in the West, "had a far more jarring effect in an Islamic culture ... Living in Tehran, I also became aware of the depth of religious fervor among the Shi'a branch of Islam ..."

In 1977, as the end of the Shah's regime approached, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini declared to an audience of "religious students and clergy" in a mosque in Najaf, Iraq, while in exile: "You have not been informed about it, and it is difficult to speak of. Indecent acts have taken place in Shiraz and it is said that such acts will soon be shown in Tehran too, and nobody says a word. The gentlemen (clerics) in Iran don't say anything. I cannot understand why they don't speak out!" Even some Iranians who were oriented towards the West began to associate the Shah with the perceived excesses of Western culture of which the Festival was symbolic. The declining economy increased the gap between rich and poor, which was highlighted by the lavish spending of the wealthy royal elite exhibited at the Festivals. Although programming towards the end of the Festival began to tilt further towards traditional Persian arts and Empress Farah articulated a more cautious message in the final year of the festival, it was too late. Political suppression increased and Islamic political groups strengthened. The Shah and his family went into exile in 1978, the year before the 1979 Islamic revolution, which ended all support for contemporary arts and scholarships for musicians and artists studying abroad, including Dariush Dolat-shahi. A planned 1978 Festival of Arts was cancelled.
7 Conclusions

Despite its political controversies and relatively short lifespan, the legacy of the Festival of Arts is striking. The Festival opened young Iranians, especially musicians and theater directors, to new approaches to creative expression including advanced technological developments. This was particularly unusual under a repressive regime. Some who were influenced by the Festivals have remained in Iran under Islamic rule and others have gone abroad to pursue their lives and work. Avant-garde composers, directors and choreographers from the West, in turn, had an opportunity to learn about Persian culture and participate in an unusual, unprecedented cultural exchange, sometimes influencing their own future work. Iran in the 1970s presents a fascinating study of how an authoritarian government can remain officially open to the most forward-looking Western ideas, while strictly forbidding its citizens' free political speech. This unstable model could not survive for long, especially in the face of declining popular support.

While the proposed Arts Center never came to fruition, the idea that such an institution could be a possibility in Iran is worthy of note. The international history of contemporary arts and of electronic music in particular is a story of rarely reported developments in unlikely places under unusual circumstances. Such narratives help explain how traditional societies encounter Modern ideas and technologies and how they exchange ideas with other societies. It is also a part of a larger historical narrative of contemporary and electronic music and art that remains only partially told. In many parts of the world, that story includes an ongoing struggle for free expression. Art thus perpetually remains a beacon of hope for the freedom of the human spirit.

8 Acknowledgments

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