

Sunday, March 12, 2006, 7pm
Zellerbach Hall

Masters of Persian Classical Music



Mohammad Reza Shajarian, *vocal*
Hossein Alizadeh, *setar, tar*
Kayhan Kalhor, *kamancheh*
Homayoun Shajarian, *tombak, vocal*

This performance is made possible, in part, by the generous support of the members of the Cal Performances Producers Circle and Friends of Cal Performances.

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PROGRAM

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| Solo Improvisation | Hossein Alizadeh, <i>setar</i> |
| In Dastgah Avaz-e Dashti
Pish daramad | Composed by by Yousef Foroutan |
| Saz-o Avaz | |
| Mara raha kon (<i>tasnif</i>) | Based on a melody by S. Ali Asghar Kordstani
Poetry by Molavi |
| Saz-o Avaz | |
| Bezan on Zakhmeh (<i>tasnif</i>) | Composed by Hossein Alizadeh
Poetry by Shafi'ee Kadkani |

INTERMISSION

- | | |
|---|--|
| In Dastgah Avaz-e Bayat-e
Zand and Afshari | |
| Najva (Moghadamme) | Poetry by Sa'adi |
| Saz-o Avaz | |
| Chahar-Mezrab | Composed by Hossein Alizadeh |
| Saz-o Avaz | |
| Selsele moo (<i>tasnif</i>) | Traditional |
| Saz-o Avaz | |
| Rags-e Zar (Avaz-e Afshari) | Composed by Hossein Alizadeh |
| Dasti Afshon (<i>tasnif</i>) | Composed by Hossein Alizadeh
Poetry by S. Sepehri |

PERSIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC

From high mountain ranges to vast desert plains and fertile coastal areas, Iran is a land of contrasts. Iranians often explain the profound spirituality of their music and poetry as a response to this landscape as well as to the country's turbulent history, marked by successive invasions from the ancient Greeks onwards. Rooted in a rich and ancient heritage, this is a music of contemplation and meditation which is linked through the poetry to Sufism, the mystical branch of Islam whose members seek spiritual union with God. The aesthetic beauty of this refined and intensely personal music lies in the intricate nuances of the freely flowing solo melody lines, which are often compared with the elaborate designs found on Persian carpets and miniature paintings.

Developed at the royal courts of Iran over many hundreds of years, nobody really knows how old Persian classical music is. The sparse documentary record dates it back to the pre-Islamic era before the Arabic invasion of 642 AD and later medieval treatises written during the golden age of Middle Eastern scholarship mention names of pieces that are still performed today, but the extent to which the music has changed over time isn't clear.

Until the early 20th century, Persian classical music was largely restricted to the royal courts, but with the declining influence of the monarchy following the 1906 Constitutional Revolution, this music found a new setting in small, informal gatherings at the homes of musicians and aristocratic supporters of the arts. Although still very much a private and elite affair, this marked the beginning of an increasingly public presence which gained momentum with the arrival of sound recording, broadcasting (Radio Tehran was established in 1939) and European-style public concerts (from the first decade of the 20th century, but regularly from the 1930s onwards). By the 1960s, Persian classical music had become available to a wide audience, but at the same time the growing pace of modernisation and westernization in Iran created a demand for all things Western—including Western music and Western-style Iranian pop which seemed to be more in tune with people's increasingly modernized lifestyle—and Persian classical music gradually became sidelined as a minority interest. Many fine classical musicians were performing and recording at this time, but in the context of a society which

seemed little interested in its own culture, it is not surprising that many of these musicians became preoccupied with trying to preserve the musical tradition rather than exploring new ways of developing and enriching that tradition. The headlong rush into modernization and westernization reached crisis point in the late 1970s and eventually culminated in the Revolution of February 1979. One of the most interesting aspects of post-1979 Iran was a "return to roots" reawakening of national consciousness in which Persian classical music played a central role. Such was the popularity of this music that by the mid-1980s—and despite the many religious proscriptions against music-making and the long period of austerity during the Iran-Iraq war—Persian classical music had attracted a mass audience of unprecedented size, with many young people in particular learning the music.

Persian classical music has experienced significant changes over the last 20 years, partly through a new confidence among those musicians willing to explore new musical avenues. The music you will hear tonight is deeply rooted and imbued with a sense of tradition and continuity, but at the same time they speak with a contemporary voice.

THE MUSICAL TRADITION

Creative performance lies at the heart of Persian classical music. The importance of creativity in this music is often expressed through the image of the nightingale (*bol bol*). According to popular belief the nightingale possesses the most beautiful voice on earth and is also said never to repeat itself in song. A bird of great symbolic power throughout the Middle East, the nightingale represents the ultimate symbol of musical creativity. To the extent that Persian classical music lives through the more or less spontaneous re-creation of the traditional repertoire in performance, the music is often described as improvised. The musicians themselves talk freely of improvisation, or *bedabeh navazi* ("spontaneous playing"), a term borrowed from the realm of oral poetry and which has been applied to Persian classical music since the early years of the 20th century. Musicians are also aware of the concept of improvisation in styles of music outside Iran, particularly in jazz and Indian classical music. But as in so many other "improvised" traditions, the performance

of Persian classical music is far from "free"—it is in fact firmly grounded in a lengthy and rigorous training which involves the precise memorisation of a canonic repertoire known as *radif* ("order") and which is the basis for all creativity in Persian classical music.

Like other Middle Eastern traditions, Persian classical music is based on the exploration of short modal pieces: in Iran these are known as *gushehs* and there are 200 or so *gushehs* in the complete *radif*. These *gushehs* are grouped according to mode into 12 modal "systems" called *dastgah*. A *dastgah* essentially comprises a progression of modally related *gushehs* in a manner somewhat similar to the progression of pieces in a Baroque suite. Each *gusheh* has its own name and its own unique mode (but is related to other *gushehs* in the same *dastgah*) as well as characteristic motifs. The number of *gushehs* in a *dastgah* varies from as few as five in a relatively short *dastgah* such as *Dashti*, to as many as 44 or more in a *dastgah* such as *Mahur*. The training of a classical musician essentially involves memorising the complete repertoire of the *radif*. Only when the entire repertoire has been memorized—*gusheh* by *gusheh*, *dastgah* by *dastgah*—a process which takes many years, are musicians considered ready to embark on creative digressions, eventually leading to improvisation itself. So the *radif* is not performed as such, but represents the starting point for creative performance and composition.

There is very little documentary information before the middle of the 19th century, so the history of the *radif* is quite speculative. The evidence suggests that for many generations each *ostad* (master teacher) would have developed his own individual repertoire of pieces based on a broad tradition shared with other musicians. These versions of the traditional repertoire were passed down orally from one generation to the next, each generation developing its own variants. Around the middle of the 19th century, there were moves to standardise the repertoire, and Ali Akbar Farahani (1810–1855), master of *tar* (plucked lute) at the court of the Qajar monarch Nasser-e Din Shah (ca. 1848–1896) in Tehran, is credited with organizing the diverse materials of the traditional repertoire into a coherent structure in which modally related pieces (the *gushehs*) were grouped together into the 12 *dastgahs*. It was also around this time that this repertoire acquired the name "*radif*." Farahani's work was completed after

his death by his son, Mirza Abdollah (1843–1918), and this particular version of the repertoire came to be known as *radif-e Mirza Abdollah* ("Mirza Abdollah's *radif*"). A proficient performer, Mirza Abdollah was also active as a teacher, and was more aware than most musicians of his day of the importance of transmitting the repertoire to the next generation. Many of his numerous pupils became prominent musicians and they, in turn, taught this *radif* to their own pupils. There are, in fact, a number of different *radifs* in existence today (including interesting regional variations), mostly rooted in a shared tradition and each one usually associated with the particular master who developed it. Indeed, students of Persian classical music are often expected to learn a number of *radifs* of different schools (*mekhtabs*) of with a series of teachers in order to consolidate their musical knowledge. At the same time, in the course of the last century, Mirza Abdollah's *radif* (as developed and transmitted, and later recorded and published by his pupils and grandpupils) attained authoritative status, particularly in the version taught to many contemporary musicians by Ostad Nur Ali Borumand at the University of Tehran in the 1960s and 1970s.

A performance of Persian classical music is usually based in one of the 12 *dastgah* (although there is a technique known as *morakkab navazi*, by which musicians can move between different *dastgah* using shared *gushehs* as "bridges"). The musician (or musicians in the case of a group performance) selects a number of *gushehs* from the learned repertoire of the chosen *dastgah*, and presents these in turn, using each one as the basis for improvised performance. This progression of *gushehs* takes the music gradually away from the opening "home" mode of the *dastgah*, through a series of increasingly more distant modes and usually tracing a rise in pitch until the music reaches a climactic point (*ouj*) towards the end of the *dastgah*. This is followed by a release in the final cadential section known as *forud* ("descent") which returns the music to the home mode of the *dastgah* to end the performance. The resulting arch-like shape of the complete *dastgah* provides the music with much of its dynamic energy. The length of a performance can vary a great deal depending on the context, the number of *gushehs* selected by the musician and the extent of the musician's improvisations, but most performances nowadays are between 30 minutes and an hour long.

The complex detail of the solo melody line is of utmost importance in Persian classical music—there is no harmony as such and only an occasional light drone (in contrast with the constant underlying drone in Indian classical music). As such, Persian classical music was traditionally performed by a solo singer and a single instrumental accompanist—in which case the instrument would shadow the voice and play short passages between the phrases of poetry—or by an instrumentalist on their own. In the course of the last century it became increasingly common for musicians to perform in larger groups, usually comprising a singer and four or five instrumentalists (each playing a different classical instrument). Nowadays one can hear both solo and group performances. The latter often follow a formula by which a performance begins and ends with an ensemble piece (with or without the vocalist) which are generally pre-composed (and often notated) rather than improvised and which frame the largely improvised and unmeasured central part of the performance. In this section, known as *avaz* (“song”), it is still common practice for instruments to take it in turns to accompany the singer rather than play together.

THE POETRY

Poetry has played a central role in Iranian culture for centuries. At times when Persian language and identity were under assault, it was poetry in particular which kept the essence of the culture alive. Such a time, still remembered as one of the darkest periods of Iranian history, was the Mongol invasion of the 13th century through which the sufi poet Mowlavi (also known as Jalal-e Din Rumi, 1207–1273) lived. The fact that such a period produced some of the finest poetry in the Persian language is a testament to the passion with which the culture was maintained against the odds. Moreover, it was through the poetry, particularly that of Mowlavi, that the message of mystical sufism found its most potent voice. With religious proscriptions against music, dance and representational art at various times over the past few centuries, the creative energies of the artistically minded have often found an outlet through poetic expression. It will be no surprise then, to find that an art form so imbued with history and which addresses some of the most fundamental and eternal

philosophical issues of human existence, should play such an important role in the lives of Iranians today. Poetry is also central to Persian classical music—it is still unusual to hear a performance without a singer—and vocal sections are usually set to the poetry of medieval mystic poets such as Baba Taher (11th century AD), Sheikh Attar (12th century AD), Mowlavi and Hafez (1325–1389) and, less often, to the words of classical contemporary poets.

Notes by Laudan Nooshin, Brunel University, from the liner notes of the World Village CD Without You.

THE INSTRUMENTS

Derived from the Central Asian *rebab*, the **TAR** (*long-necked, plucked lute*) emerged in its present form in the mid-18th century. It became the chosen instrument of the great Persian classical masters from the mid-19th through the early 20th centuries. The body is a double bowl carved from mulberry wood, with a thin membrane of stretched lambskin for its face. The long fingerboard has 28 adjustable gut frets. The three double courses of strings are played with a plectrum.

An ancient stringed instrument of Iran, the **KAMANCHEH** (*spike fiddle*) is the ancestor of most modern bowed instruments. It has a small, hollowed body made of walnut or mulberry wood covered by a thin, stretched skin and has a conical neck which is played vertically. The contemporary *kamancheh* has four strings, generally tuned in fourths or fifths.

The **TOMBAK** (*goblet drum*) is carved from solid wood and covered at the wide end with lamb or goat skin. It is held horizontally across the player's lap and is played with both hands. The elaborate finger technique consists of various rolling and snapping styles, which allow for a great variety of sounds.

The ancestry of the **SETAR** (*long-necked, plucked lute*) can be traced to the ancient tanbur of pre-Islamic Persia. Its pear-shaped body has a back of thin mulberry wood staves covered by a thin resonance board of the same material. The fingerboard has 25 adjustable gut frets, and there are four strings that are plucked with the nail of the index finger.

MOHAMMAD REZA SHAJARIAN is the undisputed master of Persian traditional (classical) singing and is regarded as a national treasure by both musicians and music lovers. He is perhaps Iran's most diverse and prolific singer of all time and has a huge repertoire of recorded works. In 1999, UNESCO presented him with the prestigious Picasso Medal in France and in 2000, the Ministry of Culture in Iran declared him the best classical vocalist. In the music of Iran, traditional singing is one of the most difficult arts to master. Shajarian is widely considered the embodiment of the perfect singer and a major source of inspiration to other musicians.

Born in 1940 in the city of Mashhad in north-eastern Iran, Shajarian started studying singing at the age of five under the supervision of his father and at the age of 12 he began studying the traditional classical repertoire (*radif*). He studied with the great masters Ahmad Ebadi and Esmael Mehrtash and learnt the vocal styles of singers from previous generations, including Reza-Gholi Mirza Zelli, Ghamar-ol Molouk Vaziri, Eghbal Azar, and Taj Esfahani. He started playing the *santur* (hammered dulcimer) under the instruction of Jalal Akhbari in order to better understand and perform the traditional repertoire, and later continued his studies with Faramarz Payvar. Shajarian was deeply inspired by the late master vocalist Gholam Hossein Banan. He studied singing under the guidance of master Abdollah Davami, from whom he learnt the most ancient *tasnifs* (songs). Davami also passed on to Shajarian his own interpretation of the *radif*. Shajarian's singing career began at Radio Khorasan in 1959 and he rose to prominence in the 1960s with his distinct style of singing, at once technically flawless, powerful and intensely emotional. Since then, he has had an illustrious career that has included teaching at Tehran University's Department of Fine Arts, working at the National Iranian Radio and Television Organisation, researching Iranian music, and making numerous important recordings. He performs regularly throughout the world.

HOSSEIN ALIZADEH was born in Tehran in 1951. After graduating from the Music Conservatory, he entered the School of Music of the University of Tehran in 1975 where he received his degree in composition and performance. During the same period he studied with various *ostads* of traditional Persian music such as Ali Akbar Khan Shahnazi,

Nur Ali Borumand, Abdollah Davami, Mahmood Karimi and Houshang Zarif. It is from these masters that he learnt the *radif* of Iranian classical music. Alizadeh was awarded a position with the National Orchestra of Iran and later became the conductor and soloist of the Iranian National Radio and Television Orchestra. He founded the Aref Ensemble and performed with the Shayda Ensemble, both dedicated to the promotion and advancement of Iranian classical music. Alizadeh participated in the orchestra of the famous Bejart Ballet Company in a performance of *Gulistan*, a ballet by Maurice Bejart. In the early 1980s, he further expanded his formal education by studying composition and musicology at the University of Berlin. In 2000, the Ministry of Culture in Iran declared him the best contemporary artist. As a teacher he has trained many young musicians and has written and published a number of etudes for *tar* and *setar*. He has composed many works of contemporary and neoclassical Iranian music, including *Hessar*, *Ney Nava* and *Song of Compassion*, as well as several film scores, including *Gabbeh* and *A Time for Drunken Horses*. In addition, Alizadeh has recorded the entire body of the *radif* based on the interpretation of Mirza Abdollah. He has performed extensively throughout the United States, Europe and Asia and has appeared on many radio and television programs around the world. He has taught at the University of Tehran, the Tehran Music Conservatory and the California Institute of the Arts. His latest CD, *Endless Vision*, has just been released on the World Village label.

KAYHAN KALHOR was born in Tehran in 1963. At the age of seven he began his music studies under Master Ahmad Mohajer. A child prodigy on the *kamancheh*, he was invited at the age of 13 to work in the Iranian National Radio and Television Orchestra, where he performed for five years. At 17, Kalhor began working with the Shayda Ensemble of the Chavosh Cultural Center, the most prestigious arts organization at the time in Iran. While performing with Shayda, he continued studying the Iranian classical repertoire (*radif*) with different masters. In addition, he spent much time in different regions of Iran, including Khorasan in the northeast and Kurdistan in the west, and absorbed regional repertoires and styles. He studied Western classical music in Rome and at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, where he received a degree in music. Kal-

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

hor has composed works for Iran's most renowned vocalists, including Mohammad Reza Shajarian and Shahram Nazeri, and he has also performed with Iran's greatest masters, including Faramarz Payvar and Hossein Alizadeh. In 1991, he co-founded Dastan, the renowned Persian classical music ensemble, and in 1997 he formed the ensemble Ghazal, which performs improvisations based on Persian and Indian music. His recent commissions include works written for the Kronos Quartet, and for Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Project, with whom he regularly tours around the world. His forthcoming CD on the ECM label features his newest project with Turkish Alevi musician Erdal Erzincan.

HOMAYOUN SHAJARIAN, born in 1975, is the son of master vocalist Mohammad Reza Shajarian. He began playing *tombak* at the age of five and a year later began studying under the instruction of Os-

tad Nasser Farhangfar and Jamshid Mohebbi. He later attended the Tehran Conservatory of Music. As well as *tombak*, Homayoun plays the *kamancheh* and studies the vocal tradition with his father. Since 1991, he has played in many ensembles accompanying his father on *tombak* in concerts in Europe, Iran and the United States. His last tour with this ensemble marked his first as a vocalist. As a disciple of his father, Homayoun has developed many similar vocal qualities and will continue a new generation of the great Persian vocal tradition.

THE MASTERS' two World Village CDs, *Faryad* and *Without You*, have both been nominated for Grammy Awards.

This tour is organized by World Music Institute, New York www.worldmusicinstitute.org.