

# Evaluating cross-cultural Connections within the Modal Structure of Iranian Music

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**Abstract:** *The structure of Iranian music is unique. It does not conform to the system of tonal hierarchies that characterized European classical music between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. This paper focuses on successful music compositions that have cross-cultural connections in the contemporary era. It has shown that Iranian music by conserving its unique characteristics, has been able to combine with the music of other nations. Also, Iranian music can adopt modern compositions.*

Key-words: *modal structure, Iranian music, Persian music.*

## 1. Introduction

Persian traditional music, also known as Iranian classical music, consists of characteristics developed through the country's classical, medieval and contemporary eras. The forms of Iranian classical music can be classified into five categories that are named *Pishdarāmad*, *Tasnif*, *Chārmezrab*, *Reng*, and *Āvāz* (Figure 1). From these five forms *Chārmezrāb*, *Āvāz*, and *Reng* exist in the *Radif* (Asadi 2009). The *Radif* of Iranian music is inscribed as the list of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity. According to UNESCO's definition: "the *Radif* of Iranian music is the traditional repertoire of the classical music of Iran that forms the essence of Persian musical culture. More than 250 melodic units, called *Gushe*, are arranged into cycles, with an underlying modal layer providing the backdrop against which a variety of melodic motifs are set" (figure 2). The music of Iran has a modal structure, like other Middle Eastern music. Besides composing fixed compositions, the ability to improvise is the highest goal for Iranian musicians. A musician learns the *Radif* in its different versions and plays many fixed compositions by masters to develop his own ability of improvising. The real art of improvisation is unprepared creation which is crucial in Iranian music. Some

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popular masters like Mohammad-Reza Lotfi (well-known *Tār* and *Setār* player) believe that oral traditional instruction is the best manner of teaching Iranian music, as many techniques can be learned only by oral instruction.



Fig. 1. An example of *Pishdarāmad* . It is named *Kereshme* .



Fig. 2. An example of *Gushe* . It is named *Dād* .

## 2. Discussion

In studying Iranian music theory, this point should be taken into consideration that in Iranian music according to modal structure, tetrachords and pentachords are more important than scales. Persian music is a type of modal music in which different combinations of trichords, tetrachords, and pentachords make its modes (Kordmafi 2011). In fact, the *Radif* is the model repertoire with modal, rhythmic, and melodic potentialities anticipated for Persian classical music (Talāi 2001).

The modal structure has three main parts that include *Shāhed*, *Ist*, and *Mothoghayer*. *Shāhed* is translated as the 'tonic', which is not exactly correct since Iranian music is a kind of *modal* music not *tonal*. *Ist* can be considered as a stopping note. There are two kinds of that: the temporary one and the complete one. The temporary note is an impermanent cadence on which the *Gushe* rests *Mothoghayer* (variable). This is a variation of a note which is used in a *Gushe* (Asadi 2004).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Colonel Ali Naqi Vaziri wrote a theory for Persian classical music based on the theory of Western classical music. Vaziri tried to explain the modes of Persian music on the bases of western scales (Pourtorab 2020). He likewise tried to temporize the intervals of Persian music. Vaziri's theory dominated Iranian music schools and conservatories for more than fifty years and is still accepted by many. However, during the Revival era, many musicians tried to codify a theory for Persian music based on the structure of the Radif and the modes of this music. It is noteworthy to mention that in these explorations, they were also influenced by western ethnomusicologists as well (Keyvan 2009).

Classical music maintained the same style until the mid-1940s. Performances were mostly solo or by trios or quintets, and instruments mainly included tar, dulcimer, violin, tombak, and occasionally piano (Darvishi 2014). Gradually, however, small groups of performers were replaced by orchestras, small and large, with western and Iranian musical instruments side by side to create the desired combination. This arrangement later evolved as the "Golhā Orchestra", which was a pioneer of Iranian music for almost 30 years (Asadi 2004).

In this part, some contemporary successful examples are shown which combine the structure of Iranian music with international instruments and music.

In the contemporary period, many composers try to synthesize the Iranian music structure with other nations' music. In this paper, five remarkable compositions were chosen and the main characters are discussed.

## 2.1. NeyNavā composition

*NeyNavā* is a studio album by Iranian Musician Hossein Alizadeh. It was released on 23 September 1983, through Māhoor Records. The word "NeyNavā" comprises two words: *Ney* (instrument) and *Navā* meaning the sound of Ney in Persian. *NeyNava* is a concerto for Ney and string orchestra and one of Alizadeh's most popular compositions. Rhythmic patterns and irregular time that come from *Radif* are used in this composition. Additionally, polyphony musical texture is used in this composition which is one of the main characteristics of the baroque period in European music. It is composed in *Navā*, one of the Iranian *dastgāh*. One of the main features of this piece is the quartal harmony which is belonging to twenty century and the composer uses it in *Navā Dastgāh*. The application of pedal notes as an octave or unison or together with the fifth right interval in the bass section of the orchestra is common to use in western and Iranian music which is also used in this composition.

The presence of 1/4 tone intervals in Iranian music always challenges the composer to harmonize in the form of tierce on the melody and in this composition Alizade has cleverly replaced tierce with quartal harmony.

## **2.2. Atashgāh composition**

Atashgāh is one of most beloved pieces of Kayhan Kalhor. The Silk Road Ensemble is a musical collective and a part of the Silk Road. The ensemble is not a fixed group of musicians, but rather a loose collective of as many as 59 musicians, composers, arrangers, visual artists, and storytellers from Eurasian cultures.

Kayhan Kalhor with the Silk Road ensemble has created a cross-cultural combination by relying on coloring and changing the meter; Using the resonance of open-handed strings in string instruments in such a way that the melody line is hidden in layers of unison and octave pedal notes. The melody is based on repeating the expansion of a seven-note motif and another six-note motif. These two motifs are interwoven and appear each time in music. The rhythmic and metric breaking of these two motifs creates surprising moments for listeners. This piece is composed in Nava Dastgāh, even though the motif movements are popular in European country music. The music in moments passes from theoretical minor to harmonic minor that corresponds to Isfahan Avāz and after that suddenly transfers into European modes and melodies, creating a sense similar to Renaissance music.

## **2.3. Violin Concerto Op.1**

Iranian-Armenian composer Loris Tjeknavorian's east-west Violin Concerto is a well-wrought piece. He is one of the capable conductors in symphonic music and opera. Presumably, it can be said that he is belonging to Armenian descent who live in Iran. He is more inclined towards European and Christian culture which can be obviously seen in most of his compositions.

The cultural connection exists in the third movement of this violin concerto. It inspires by Armenian, Azerbaijani, and European music. The melody line of the violin solo is influenced by Armenian and Azerbaijani music and has a connection with Isfahan and Dashti Āvāz in Iranian music, while the use of chromatic harmony is closer to Russian music. The way of creating melody and accompaniments in the orchestra is close to contemporary European music. The string orchestra's pizzicato is somehow reminiscent of the Comitias' miniatures for the string quartet. Furthermore, this composition is influenced by the violin concerto in D minor by Aram Khachaturian.

## **2.4. Trans Cultural Diffusion**

Trans Cultural Diffusion by Ashkan Tabatabaie explores various ways Persian tuning systems could blend with European tuning systems such as Equal Temperemr and Just Intonation. The performers find the accurate intonations indicated on the score in real-time using vibration sensors attached to their instruments and connected to their smartphones. This system was developed by the composer.

## **2.5. Gonah Eshgh**

Gonah Eshgh was composed by Ali Qamsari and recorded by Homayoon shajariang (Iranian singer). It is another example of cross-cultural connections. In this composition, Qamsari intelligently uses the guitar and creates conventional effects in this instrument in the Spanish flamenco style, and also combines them with melodies that exist in Shoshtari Gushe and using the instruments such as Kamāncheh and alto Ghaychak have a significant positive effect on the composition. Besides, the use of successive odd meters changes makes the composition close to twenty-century music and the composer uses the texture of flamenco melodies in this work.

## **2.6. Persian Trilogy**

Persian Trilogy is a set of three orchestral music composed by Iranian musician, Behzad Ranjbaran. These works are inspired by Shāhnāme, which is a long epic poem written by Ferdowsi many centuries ago.

The orchestration method that is used by composer is complexly based on European classical music and exists in the traces of Ravel, Richard Strauss, and Stravinsky. His rich orchestration, exciting rhythms, and powerful climaxes are balanced by lyricism and delicacy.

## **3. Conclusion**

According to the comparative studies in this research, it can clearly realised that the modal structure of Iranian music can be adapted to western and international music. This compatibility is due to many reasons such as similar modal materials and the ability to create similar timber with electronic music. Also, special rhythmic patterns and the ability to combine Iranian instruments with the instruments of a symphonic orchestra are providing suitable tools for creating fusion music.

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