Sounds like Iran: On popular music of Iran

Mehdi Semati

To cite this article: Mehdi Semati (2017) Sounds like Iran: On popular music of Iran, Popular Communication, 15:3, 155-162, DOI: 10.1080/15405702.2017.1343609

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2017.1343609

Published online: 17 Jul 2017.

Article views: 3898

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 1 View citing articles
INTRODUCTION

Sounds like Iran: On popular music of Iran

Mehdi Semati
Northern Illinois University

The pace and scope of change in the Islamic Republic of Iran in recent years have been remarkable. These transformations are readily observable to those who have traveled to Iran frequently. Yet the views on Iran, judging from journalistic and some academic writings in English, do not adequately engage these transformations. The Western press coverage of the Iranian presidential election in May of 2017 revealed some of these views in the form of certain clichés and familiar tropes. We were told, for example, elections are inconsequential and that the final authority rests with the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. However, the presidential candidate favored by the Supreme Leader lost the election roundly. We are often told that the public broadcasting services in Iran are “state-run,” as if public media should be less significant in the life of the nation. And yet, the content of the broadcasting outlets is discursively positioned in complex ways by various constituencies and audiences. We are told that the privately-owned press faces censorship. Besides stating the obvious, such a statement does not tell us much about news production, especially about the ways in which journalists negotiate restrictions and bypass them in subtle and complex ways. We are always reminded that free speech is severely compromised by a repressive regime, even though Iranians have access to all kinds of uncensored content (e.g., online media, satellite television from abroad) and, as with other populations, access desired media by bypassing censorship mechanisms. How else could we explain a sophisticated electorate that not only participated in the recent elections in massive numbers (73% of eligible voters) but also resoundingly rejected populism (something that voters in England and the United States could not claim in their recent elections)? To make matters worse, the vocabulary used to discuss Iran rarely escapes the familiar worn-out binaries: reformists vs. hardliners; moderns vs. conservatives (i.e., modernity vs. tradition); urban vs. rural; and the list goes on.¹ The subject of such discourses sounds like Iran, and it sounds stereotypically familiar, but it is not the Iran that one discovers upon visiting.

To be sure, Iran is not a liberal democracy, but the limitations of the political system are matched by a young, cosmopolitan, and relatively well-informed population. The cultural dynamism that is created by this population, often using and bypassing official media and communication systems, sustains a relatively open social space. Even if we label the Iranian political system as a “hybrid regime” that allows and relies on state-managed conflict and competition,² it is difficult to explain how a fairly cosmopolitan and sophisticated population would accept or live with the authoritarian tendencies of the Islamic

¹This is not to suggest these labels are entirely meaningless. The point is that their binarism and their deployment as expression of conflict between elites without addressing specific (media and cultural) policies prevent them from having any explanatory power.
²For a discussion of the power structure and the political system in the Islamic Republic, see Brumberg and Farhi (2016).
Republic’s political system, unless we take into account cultural dynamism, and the practices that absorb, mitigate, and attenuate the sharpest edges of authoritarianism.

Music making, music consumption, and various musical practices in Iran belong to this cultural register. The initial impetus behind proposing a special issue on popular music of Iran was to interrogate some of the prevailing narratives about Iranian society and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The articles in this issue contribute to this line of questioning by exploring the cultural dynamism that characterizes contemporary Iran not only in its cultural but also in its socio-political registers. The orthodox Western narrative embraced by academics, journalists, and politicians alike views Iran through a singular lens, that of the political. Accordingly, every aspect of Iranian social and cultural life is reduced to a dimension of either repressive measures by the state or “resistance” by its citizens. Even when Iranians contribute to the “happy campaign” inspired by Pharrell Williams’ song “Happy” by producing a video titled “Happy We Are From Tehran” (while playfully reflecting on Iran’s position in the world), it is read as a statement of resistance, and a statement about being unhappy in Tehran!

Popular music presents an important cultural arena in this regard. It presents an arena in which we could assess popular knowledge and perception about Iran and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Questions regarding music’s permissibility; its contested nature; the legality and popularity of its production, distribution, and consumption; the mythology it expresses or conceals; sociability it embodies and fosters; and the affective states it engenders and reflects individually and collectively, all make popular music an important topic for scholarly investigations of its various contexts (political, cultural, social, legal, religious). These contexts in turn reveal important insights about Iranian society and the Islamic Republic as a governing structure. There is burgeoning scholarship on popular music of Iran, and this issue intends to contribute to that literature while interrogating some of the prevailing assumptions about Iran. Recent book-length contributions on Iranian music include the following: Gay Breyley and Sasan Fatemi’s (2016) monograph on “Iranian Music and Popular Entertainment” provides a historical discussion of popular music in relationship to popular entertainment genre of motrebi; Laudan Nooshin’s (2015) monograph on Iranian classical music is a musicological analysis of the discourses and practices of creativity in Iran; Bronwen Robertson’s (2012) book covers the Iranian “unofficial” rock music scene in Tehran. This special issue offers analyses on a wide range of scholarly concerns regarding popular music of Iran. As will become clear to the readers, these articles have important implications for the broader debates about cultural globalization and could point towards the possibility of a “global popular.”

The historical accounts of Iranian popular music in this special issue contribute some reflections on its political, cultural, social, legal, and religious contexts. These histories append post-revolutionary Iran, in which media and communication policies are divided into distinct periods or “republics”: the revolutionary period and Iran-Iraq war years (1980–1988), the reconstruction era and the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–1997), the reform era and the presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005), the post-reform period and the rise of the “principlists” faction and the militancy of executive

---

3 Although one could argue that this gesture by those who created the video is an example of postmodern “irony” and “playing with politics,” the popular press and the online reaction to the video did not include this possibility.
4 For a discussion of “global popular” see Thussu (2010, p. 222) and Dolby (1999, p. 292).
5 For more on the history of popular music in Iran, see Nooshin (2005, 2008, 2009) and Hemmasi (2013).
branch under the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2013; Semati 2007, 2008). The present context (2013–present), the era of “moderation and prudence,” to use President Hassan Rouhani’s language, is the era that witnesses the Islamic Republic’s reengagement with the West, especially regarding its nuclear program and the attempts to escape the regime of sanctions imposed on Iran by Western powers. In each period, communication and cultural policies of the Islamic Republic tend to reflect the degree of consensus or conflict between the elites within the governing structure. After the revolutionary and war years, the cultural and communication policy arena has been the terrain in which different factions engaged in a fierce struggle over competing visions of an Islamic Republic. In the absence of meaningful political parties that could compete to articulate different visions and policies, various media outlets have tended to function as platforms for various interests in the factional world of politics in Iran.

In terms of formal politics, insofar as the broadcasting outlets are controlled by the hardline elements associated with the office of the Supreme Leader, the print press (and later social media) have been used to challenge the hegemony of the hardliners, the faction closest to the security apparatus in the Islamic Republic. In its current manifestation, there is a struggle between the administration of President Rouhani, the judiciary, and other hardline factions over the fate of social media platforms. If President Rouhani has been denied the benefit of using the public broadcasting system to rally his constituencies, social media platforms have enabled him to bypass the broadcasting outlets.

The ever-growing gap that exists between the official culture of the Islamic Republic and the largely secular popular (and unofficial) culture of Iran is, to a large extent, a product of the state’s own modernizing policies and initiatives. The economic and social policies and higher education system, along with the resourcefulness and resiliency of the population, have given rise to a middle class and a highly educated polity. These modernizing policies and institutions are meant to propel the Islamic Republic of Iran as a major player on the regional and the global stage. A byproduct of these policies is the creation of a polity and a social space in which challenges to some of the major institutions and personalities of the political system come in large (i.e., election cycles) and small measures (i.e., routinized everyday acts that challenge the ideological foundations of the Islamic Republic). Musical activities in Iran have contributed to these measures in various ways and contexts. Moreover, the many ambiguities, contradictions and inconsistencies regarding what is permissible and what is not (political and cultural “red lines”) stem from conflicting interpretations of the law and religious rulings. These ambiguities, often skillfully exploited by those who contribute to the unofficial culture of Iran, lead to the formation of spaces of creativity, of challenging the socio-political and cultural norms in a sustained, if constrained, manner. In this context, the cultural policies that impact music production, distribution and consumption in its various forms have been shaped by these larger socio-political realities. One chasm separating an Islamic culture prescribed by the official ideology of the Islamic Republic and the popular culture as the lived experiences

---


7The expansion of social media, and promoting communication technologies that facilitate their rise, is driven by a specific philosophy of technology, and the political and commercial interests of powerful entities within the Islamic Republic of Iran. On elite discourse of information and communication technologies in Iran, see Semati, Faraji, and Hamidi (2016).
and cultural practices of musicians of various orientations is the space of musical creativity, self-expression, and aesthetic agency.  

Against this background, the articles in this issue take up several significant topics regarding Iran through examinations of popular music and the discourses of Iranian popular music in various settings. Laudan Nooshin, a prolific (ethno)musicologist of Iran, engages the academic and journalistic writings on popular music of Iran, although her argument can easily be applied broadly to writings on other subjects pertaining to the Islamic Republic of Iran. She addresses “fetishization of resistance” in the writings on music and youth culture in Iran. Nooshin provides the historical and conceptual contexts for the discourses of music and (youth) culture of Iran and the politics of such discourses in academic writings as well as in the popular press. In many writings by Iranian diaspora and journalists, various dimensions of cultural activities and popular music have been reduced to a specific range of meanings around the notions of “resistance” and “freedom” at the expense of other descriptions and conceptual resources to explain culture and music in Iran. Nooshin’s article seeks to explain this development in terms of a particular historiography of Iranian popular music and specific regimes of representation of popular music. That historiography examines why “there has been a tendency for popular music’s social meanings to be channeled through a singular metaphor—what might be called ‘music as resistance’—to the exclusion of other possible meanings” (p. 166). The regimes of representation that Nooshin identifies tend to privilege framing of Iranian music only in terms of politics and resistance. In this context, she is able to show that the sensationalist writings (be they academic or journalistic) about Iranian music tend to present a certain image of Iran and its music that is not only inaccurate and false (e.g., the framing of “Happy in Tehran” video), but also it reproduces a politically expedient discourse about Iranian society and politics (e.g., Iranians are always suffering under a repressive regime). Nooshin’s argument challenges us to ponder whose interests such narratives of resistance and freedom serve.

The import of Nooshin’s argument is clear beyond the discourses of music of Iran. The orientalizing discourses that engage in sensationalist writings about Iran tend to produce and mark an otherness. There is a whole genre of writing about Iran and Iranians that invites the reader to be amazed or mesmerized because Iranians also do this or the other thing: they play rock music, they go skiing, they have female soccer players, they have rappers, they have female race car drivers, etc. Such views tell us more about the writer and the position from which the writer speaks than tell us about Iran or Iranians. Although some musicians have used these tendencies to their advantage through acts of self-exoticizing in order to find a market for their music, other musicians have objected to depicting Iranians as perpetually victimized. As Nooshin points out, Salome, a female rapper from Iran, has objected to the projection of the image of women in Iran as victims in the works of expat artists such as Shirin Neshat. Salome goes even further by calling such works propaganda: “All this propaganda about how people are oppressed will give western countries more excuses if they are interested in occupying us. I see Iran as a family—even if the regime are ruling the country, at least they are still Iranian.”

---

8On musical practices and their incompatibilities with the vision of state agencies in Iran, see DeBano (2005).
9See Bronwen Robertson’s (2012) discussion of rock musicians’ self-exoticization as promotional strategy (p. 79).
10See Khaleeli’s report (2011, para. 8) in The Guardian.
Khaleeli (2011) demonstrates, Salome has addressed this issue in her rap. As Nooshin concludes her article, citing Steward’s (2013) research, the overt politicization of music in such cases reflects a “nostalgic desire” for reviving the countercultural movements of a bygone era in the West.

Warning against a view that reduces all aspects of culture and musical activities into a single dimension of “resistance” does not mean there is no struggle in the domain of culture, and it should not imply that there is no politics to culture. The presence of female musicians and female vocalists in public spaces, for example, is subject to various restrictions. However, resistance as a conceptual category does not explain how women have managed to assert their voice on their own terms, deploying various strategies of “subversive accommodation.” Malihe Maghazei’s article in this issue places women’s struggle to be heard in its proper historical context that goes all the way back to the constitutional revolution of 1906. As a historian, Maghazei demonstrates the degree to which women have successfully negotiated legal and cultural restrictions over the years, and how women have deployed various strategies in the post-revolution period to live with those restrictions while reasserting their presence in public performances in gradual but steady fashion. Using the work of Mah Banoo as a case study, she reads the musical activities by this group as “a rejection of views and official discourses that try to marginalize women and their voices” and as a “product of gradual but steady and consistent efforts in creativity, aesthetic agency, and insistence on being heard by female musicians” (p. 245) in the post-revolution period. Her analysis stands in sharp contrast to that of those who view Iranian women as helpless victims and in need of rescue by men (be they Iranian or Western men).

Theresa Steward’s contribution, along with Farzaneh Hemmasi’s article, highlight the connection between Iran as a geopolitical entity and Iran as a transnational imagined geography and home to those who have left Iran but are still bound by it culturally, emotionally, and psychologically. For those living in exile, or those who have left their homelands on their own accord, the relationship to the place where they come from is based on an imaginary construct, one that helps them construct a new identity that allows them to embrace not only where they come from, but also where they are. Music has always been central to such constructions given its affective abundance and the ambivalence that such affective richness could accommodate. Steward shows how one can observe hybridity in Mohsen Namjoos’ music that speaks of “here and there,” not unlike the cultural identity that such resources facilitate. Through an analysis of a specific song, she shows what goes into the making of a hybridized contemporary folk ballad that draws from Persian ghazal and Mexican mariachi songs, from mixed instrumentation (Persian and Western instruments), and from dastgah in Persian classical music and Spanish melody. As Steward points out in her contribution, “By manipulating language, poetry, and musical styles to craft a new soundscape, Namjoo pioneers a different approach to cultural identity as he creates and explores a new musical home.”

Hemmasi’s article is equally concerned with the music of exile and its contribution to the imaginary construction of a homeland, especially as she thinks through the porosity of genre and national and political boundaries. In both of these contributions,
one is compelled to wonder where “Iran” is in much contemporary writing, as a place to which “Iranians” in such writings belong. Much ink has been spilt discussing deterritorialization, the loss of “natural relationship” (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 129) between culture and place. In the writings by Steward and Hemmasi in this issue, attention has been paid to the processes of reterritorialization. In this context, Hemmasi examines an admired poem (Dobareh Meesazamat Vatan, or “I Will Rebuild You, Homeland”) by a beloved Iranian poetess, taken up by a popular Iranian singer in Los Angeles in exile, and now worked into a song. The choice of the musical format, as Hemmasi argues, is quite telling: the format of sorud, sometimes referred to as “march-hymn,” belongs to that of nationalist participatory song lineage. Interestingly, this musical format has been embraced by the Islamic Republic when it has suited its own ideological purposes for mobilizing revolutionary ethos and patriotic sentiment, commonly used during the Iran–Iraq war. In this instance, the deployment of the sorud as a musical format transnationally produces what Hemmasi calls a “transnational national anthem” that seems to engender affectively-charged nationalist sentiments across geographically dispersed Iranians.” The adaptability of the format and the porosity of the genre across national and ideological borders, which provides a platform for national identification, makes it possible to be Iranian and perhaps transcend the political divides at home and abroad.

Erum Naqvi’s contribution addresses music education to some extent in the context of Persian classical music, known to Iranians as “musiqi-e sonnati” (traditional music) or “musiqi-e assil” (authentic or original music). From a broader perspective, her contribution demonstrates the dynamism in the Persian classical music scene, and the ways in which, contrary to popular perception, this tradition is shown to be far from static and unchanging. Moreover, her research demonstrates a vibrant concert scene and a musical culture that is part of the official culture of the Islamic Republic, one that is entirely legal and far from the pervasive discourses of “underground” music. This is partly because this tradition of music was never subject to the legal restrictions other genres of music faced after the revolution of 1979. However, its vibrancy and dynamism have more to do with the rise of a broader culture of creativity, music making, and concert going that is both organic and, in part, subject to the logic of supply and demand in tandem with the growth of a larger musical culture in contemporary Iran. The professionalization of Persian classical music Naqvi discusses in her article is an important development in the musical culture in Iran for what might be a renewed popularization of this genre among younger audiences. This lively Persian classical music scene could also be read as a response to the need and the demand for public sociality that is relatively free of constraints the state usually imposes on such scenes of publicness.

Performance in this genre of music has been historically associated with extensive spontaneous extemporization (referred to as bedahe navazi), within a structured system known as radif, learned and internalized by musicians as they go through training with their ostaad (maestro). Such a performance, traditionally, took place in intimate settings and in the privacy of small group gatherings. Naqvi’s research discusses both spatial and temporal transformations that are shaping this genre of music, as well as its professionalization, and other social and technological factors that have created the contexts for these transformations. Naqvi focuses on specific conceptual dynamics, shared by these
musicians she has interviewed for this research project, to examine the shifting concert conventions of this genre of music; however, her arguments have broader important implications (see above).

Collectively, these contributions depict a social space and a cultural sphere that defy simple explanations along any one particular dimension or axis of politics. The one-dimensionality in explanations about Iranian cultural register, that everything is about resistance, has been more the product of the imaginations of those who offer such explanations than reflecting complex realities of Iranian society. The complexity of Iranian socio-political and cultural registers is partly a function of a gap that exists between the official and the unofficial domains, complicated by elaborate rituals and norms of maintaining the separation between private and public spaces, a separation that is now constantly rearranged, contested and erased by communication spaces facilitated by new communication technologies rampant in Iran. Each contribution in this volume is an invitation to consider these complexities from different perspectives.

The broader implications of the arguments of the articles in this issue are relevant to the scholarship of Iran and the scholarship of popular communication. I have tried to make some of those implications for Iranian studies clearer in these pages. The implications for scholars of popular communication might be best explored in terms of cultural globalization. Popular music as a cultural form lends itself easily to a global media flow, where it is taken up by local populations as a resource for expressions of identity, among others. Robertson’s (1994) concept of “glocalization” is often deployed to address the dynamics of global-local interactions, as in the global circulation of rap and hip hop (Mitchell, 2001). Although such dynamics could be observed in Iran as well (Nooshin, 2011), and so dispel any claim to Iranian exceptionalism, the analyses here reveal a more complicated picture. To return to our example of the resistance narrative, it is clear that the Western legacy media still provide the dominant narratives about the global south. At the same time, that narrative is articulated differently in different locations, provided the location is subject to reterritorialization. For example, in Los Angeles and New York, as bases for Iranian expats and artists in “exile,” that resistance narrative is used to their own advantage in order to appeal to a Western sensibility. Some of the musicians in Tehran might use the resistance narrative strategically, to refashion their own identity in order to find a market for their music outside Iran. Still other musicians, as the previously mentioned example of Salome indicates, might reject this resistance narrative in order to reclaim their own allegiance to the local/home, and to refashion their identity vis-à-vis a rejection of a Western gaze. None of this should mean that youth and youth culture in Iran are in any sense exceptional. The rejection of that exceptionalism, however, is not to reaffirm the clichés of the dominant narratives about the so-called Islamic republic. It is precisely the opposite. A fuller understanding of Iranian society requires that we study the complex contexts in which such a narrative serves different purposes for different actors.

References

Bayat, A. (2010). Life as politics: How ordinary people change the Middle East. Amsterdam, the Netherlands: The University of Amsterdam Press.


