



## BAHĀRI

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**BAHĀRI**, ('ALI-) AŞĠAR (b. Tehran, 1284 Š./1905, d. Tehran, 20 Kordād 1374 Š./10 June 1995) master of the *kamānča* (long-necked bowed lute). Bahāri, one of the great instrumentalists of Persian traditional music in the twentieth century, came from a family long dedicated to performance of the *kamānča*. His maternal grandfather, Mirzā 'Ali Khan, a great *kamānča* player of the late Qajar era, learned to play this instrument under the greatest master of his time, Esmā'il Khan, father of Ḥosayn Khan Esmā'ilzāda. Mirzā 'Ali Khan had five sons and three daughters; three of his sons learned the instrument from their father, who also taught his grandson, Aşġar. Bahāri started lessons at the age of ten and, in three years of study with his grandfather, learned to play the *dastgāhs* (classical modal system) of Māhur, Šur and Segāh. Since the whole family lived in the same house, after his grandfather died Aşġar continued to learn, mostly by listening. Having also a good voice, he would sing to the accompaniment of his uncles at weekly gatherings of the great masters of the time. When he was twenty he was a good performer and singer, with a phenomenal memory.

At this time the violin was gradually replacing the *kamānča* as a popular performance instrument. Out of necessity, Bahāri also learned how to play this Western instrument. He took lessons from Reżā Maḥjubi, whose own violin style was derived from the *kamānča*.

The *kamānča* players in Bahāri's family performed both traditional Persian classical music (i.e., the *dastgāhs*) and traditional Persian entertainment music (known as *moṭrebi*). The *kamānča*, more than any other of the contemporary



classical Persian instruments, was associated with *moṭrebi* music, which was performed for popular theater, weddings and other festive occasions. Even while the violin was gaining acceptance as a replacement for the *kamānča* in classical music, Bahāri used the *kamānča* primarily for *moṭrebi* music, where it was still one of the central instruments. By playing *moṭrebi* music, which consists largely of metrical vocal and instrumental pieces (such as *čahār-mežrāb* and *reng*), Bahāri enriched his style and his knowledge of traditional Persian music.

In his thirties, Bahāri started performing *kamānča* for Radio Tehran, playing short solos for a weekly radio broadcast and accompanying other singers and instrumentalists. His participation in the music circles of Tehran owed much to Nur-‘Ali Borumand’s support. Borumand opposed the Westernization of Persian music, and felt that the violin could not replace the *kamānča* in the performance of authentic Persian music. He went against the fashion of the time, and recommended Bahāri to Ruḥollāh Kāleqi, director of the National Conservatory of Music, who invited him to teach at the Conservatory and later at the School of Fine Arts at Tehran University.

As a performer, Bahāri had a unique style of improvisation. A performer normally improvises within the limits of a particular *dastgāh*, but may also modulate from one *dastgāh* into another. This procedure is called *morākab-kvāni* (vocal) or *morākab-navāzi* (instrumental). In his own style of *morākab-navāzi*, Bahāri would choose a *guša* (piece) and play it not only within the context of a different *dastgāh* but in the actual mode of that *dastgāh*. He placed it so skillfully that it was hard even for a knowledgeable listener to identify a piece as a “guest *guša*.”

Bahāri composed many pieces of the genres *piš-darāmad* (overture), *reng* (classical dance) and *tašnif* (classical song). For the lyrics of his *tašnifs* he used the poems of Ḥāfez. Some of his compositions have been recorded in concert performances. With the rediscovery of the *kamānča*, Bahāri became a prominent performer of traditional music, and despite his advanced age he committed himself to promoting this instrument. In addition to live performances and recordings for radio and television, and frequent concerts in Tehran and in the provinces, Bahāri was invited to *bazms* (informal entertainments) held at the homes of prominent people, to formal and informal parties of the royal family, and to national and international festivals such as the Shiraz Arts Festival. He performed with Abu’l-Ḥasan Šabā, Aḥmad ‘Ebādi, Ḥosayn Tehrāni, Loṭf-Allāh Majd and Farāmarz Payvar at two concerts

held at the Iran-America Society in Tehran.

When the Center for the Preservation and Propagation of Iranian Traditional Music was established under the direction of Dr. Dāryuš Šafwat, Bahāri, together with other masters, was invited to teach traditional Persian music to students at the Center. Bahāri's contribution went beyond teaching; his phenomenal memory helped the Center to collect and record many old songs before they were forgotten. Many such songs were revived and performed by the singers Siāvaš Šajariān, Rażawi Sarvestāni and Parisā. For these students, Bahāri's style represented an authentic source of traditional Persian music. But for him, performance of the classical repertoire on the *kamānča* would have become a lost art.

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*Search terms:*

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