



KAMĀNČA

KAMĀNČA (کامانچا, lit. “small bow”), the most common term throughout much of the Iranian world for a spike fiddle with a small, often spherical, resonating chamber ([Plate I](#)).

Bows used in playing fiddles of various types, including those that do not have a metal spike (Pers. *sik*, *sikča*; cf. Ar. *rejl* “foot”) attached to the sound cavity, may also be called *kamānča*, *kamāna*, or *kamān*, though the French loanword *ārša* has become more common. Among the other names for spike fiddles in greater Iran and adjacent regions are Persian *gečak*, Turkish *ıklığ*, Arabic *rabāb*, and Iraqi Arabic *joza*. Cognates of *kamānča*, *gečak*, and *ıklığ* are used in a number of languages for fiddles with or without spikes, and cognates of *rabāb* refer to plucked lutes as well as to fiddles. As a 20th-century loanword in Egyptian Arabic, *kamānja* has served both as a name for the European violin and as a replacement for certain meanings of *rabāb* (Elsner, 1985); the European violin is likewise called *kamānja* in the Maghreb. Turkish *kemençe* and Armenian *k’aman* are also loanwords from Persian, applied in recent centuries to fiddles that do not have spikes, though the Ottoman *kemençe* was identical to the Persian *kamānča*. In modern Turkish, *kemençe* denotes two types of short-necked fiddle, associated respectively with the eastern Black Sea (*karadeniz kemençesi*) and the eastern Aegean (*kemençe rumi*). The former has three strings tuned in fourths and is well suited to a polyphonic style of playing (Picken, 1953-54; Ahrens). The latter resembles the Greek *lyra* and was once used in the suites called *fasıl* before being largely replaced by the European violin, which in Turkish is called *keman*.

The *kamānča* of Persian classical music has a spherical sound cavity of mulberry or walnut wood, covered with sheepskin. Most instruments have



four steel strings of ca. 33 cm length and are played with a horsehair bow. As the name of the Iraqi *joza* (lit. “nut”) suggests, its sound cavity is made of coconut, covered either with sheepskin or with a fish skin from the [Caspian Sea](#); the *joza* also has four strings of varying thickness.

The *kamānča* is indispensable in performances of the Azarbaijani *muğam* and the Iraqi *maqām*, both of which require an ensemble of three musicians. The Azarbaijani trio is made up of *kamānča*, *tār* (a waisted, long-necked lute), and a singer who also plays frame drum (*daf*), whereas Iraqi singers are accompanied by a *santur* (hammered box zither), together with a *joza*, and two or three drums as well. Instrumentation is more flexible in Persian classical music, where the ensemble that accompanies a singer may include *kamānča*, *tār* or *setār* (a smaller long-necked lute), *santur*, *ney* (end-blown reed flute), and *dombak* (goblet-shaped drum). Players of whichever melodic instruments are present on a given occasion take turns in providing responses (*javāb-e āvāz*) to each of the singer’s phrases. As these examples of instrumentation suggest, the sustained sounds of the *kamānča* contrast effectively with the plucked sounds of long-necked lutes. Another spike fiddle, the Turkmen *qijāk*, is commonly played in ensembles with the *dutār*, a long-necked lute with two strings. Both instruments accompany certain narratives of the Turkmen bards known as *bagšy* (Zerańska-Kominek, p. 94).

By the twelfth century, the *kamānča* is mentioned by Persian poets active in [Ġazni](#) and in the [Caucasus](#). In a verse by Mas‘ud Sa‘d Salmān (1046-ca. 1121), two minstrels (*rāmešgarān*) play *kamānča*, presumably a spike fiddle, and *rabāb*, in this case a plucked lute (p. 39). Another of Mas‘ud Sa‘d’s verses (p. 295) lists four instruments of pleasure (*nozhat, tarab*): *kamānča*, *čang* (harp), *barbaṭ* (short-necked lute), and *ney*. The sustained sounds of bowed instruments can resemble those of a human voice, and in Neẓāmi’s *Kosrow o Širin* (completed 1181), a *kamānča* played at a banquet is said to produce a lament reminiscent of Moses (p. 98 and n. 1: “*kamānča āh-e Musā-vār mizad*”). Any instrument played with a bow can be compared to an archer when a poet wishes to emphasize its capacity to penetrate the heart. The *gijak* boasts of its powers in a dialogue (*monāzera*) by the 15th-century [Chaghatay](#) poet Aḥmadi: “I am a smart mischief-maker. / Among string instruments I am an intoxicated archer: // The arrows of my amorous glances are lances that pierce the soul. / My plaintive voice burns people’s livers” (*Kurdak-i ‘ayyār men. / Sāz ičidā rind-i kamāndār men. / Ġamzam oqī nāvak-i cāndōz erür. / Nālalarim harča cigarsöz erür*; text and tr. cited after Bodroglieti, pp. 72-73, 82).

A small bow called *kamānča* (see above), strung with horsehair, was used in playing the *gešak*, a spike fiddle with two silk strings. The instrument is



depicted in most musical manuscripts containing the *Kanz al-toḥaf* (Figure 1), a treatise composed around 1350 and now attributed to Ḥasan Kāšāni (for this attribution, see [Music ii](#); for known manuscripts, see Mas'udiya, 1996, pp. 280-82, s.v. no. 144). Similar instruments are still known by some form of the word *gījak* in much of Central Asia. A spike fiddle whose two strings were normally, but not invariably, tuned a fourth apart is itself called *kamānča* in the treatises of 'Abd-al-Qāder b. Ġaybi al-Marāġi (d. 1435). Marāġi (p. 203) found its tone “more delicate” (*alṭaf*) and “more delightful” (*aladd*) than that of the instrument he called *ġežak*, which had a larger sound cavity and eight resonating strings as well as two strings that were bowed with a *kamān*.

Players specializing in the *kamānča* or *gījak* are occasionally mentioned in accounts of music at the courts of Iran and Central Asia, and depictions of the instrument are common in Persian art from the 1420s (Plate II) through the period of the Qājār dynasty (1779-1925). The *kamānča* player Ostād Šafar Šāh is listed among the musicians (*ahl-e ṭarab*) and instrumentalists (*arbāb-e sāz*) active at the Timurid court of Eskandar Solṭān (r. 1412-14) at [Isfahan](#) (Richard, p. 70). A record of musicians' salaries at the Ottoman court in 1525 lists more players of *kemençe* than of any other instrument, though their salaries were lower than those for players of the *'ud* and *qopuz* (Feldman, p. 110). One of these *kemençe* players, Šāh Qoli, may be the musician whom [Bābor](#) (1483-1530) names as a *ġečak* player active in 1506 at the Timurid court of [Hosayn Bāyqarā](#) (1438-1506) in [Herat](#) (Feldman, p. 111). European travelers to Iran, accustomed to the bowed string instruments of Europe, were favorably disposed toward the *kamānča*. [Engelbert Kaempfer](#) (1651-1716), who reached Isfahan in 1684, ranked it above all other Persian instruments for “the quiet sweetness of its sound,” and he admired the elegant inlay of gold threads and mother-of-pearl (Harrison, p. 150).

The *kamānča* has not been confined to courtly circles. Ebn Tulun (d. 1546), in his *Kitāb al-lo'lo' al-manẓum*, regards the *kamānja* and the *rabāb* as characteristic instruments of Kurds and Arabs, respectively (Shiloah, p. 224); the same observation is made by al-Qāderi in the *Rāḥ al-jām fi šajarat al-anġām* (Shiloah, p. 240). Percy M. Sykes (1867- 1945), the British consul at Mashad from 1905 to 1913, listed the *kamānča* among the musical instruments “used mainly by gypsies for playing at entertainments” (p. 161). In his encyclopedia of the regional musical instruments of Iran, M. R. Darviši describes 13 varieties of *kamānča* under various names, with three, four, or five strings.

Three *kamānča* players active at the courts of the Qājār shahs were recorded in the early 20th century: Bāqer Kān Rāmešgar (b. 1875), Hoseyn-Kān



Esmā'ilzāda, and Safdar Kān (for reissues see discography below). Some of Esmā'ilzāda's students abandoned the kamānča for the violin, among them Rokn-al-Din Kān Moqtāri (1887-1971) and Hosayn Yāhaqqi (1903-1968). The outstanding kamānča master of the mid-20th century, 'Ali Aşgar Bahāri (1905-1995), likewise turned for a time to the violin before becoming active at Radio Iran in 1953 and taking charge of kamānča instruction at the National Conservatory in 1957. Despite Bahāri's prominence on the radio, the violin largely displaced the kamānča in music composed or arranged for radio in the 1960s and 1970s. Interest in the instrument revived in the 1990s, and the kamānča once again became a fixture of the ensembles accompanying singers of classical music. Among the prominent kamānča players of the early twenty-first century are Darviš-Rezā Moneżzami (b. 1943), Ardešir Kāmkar (b. 1962), and Kayhan Kalhor (b. 1963). Festivals of regional music have drawn attention to the many varieties of kamānča found in the western and northern regions of Iran.

For a music sample, see [Hosayn Khān – Segāh](#).

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