



PIANO IN PERSIAN MUSIC

PIANO IN PERSIAN MUSIC. The first piano known to have arrived in Persia was a gift from Napoleon Bonaparte to Fath 'Ali Shah (q.v. *Kāleqi*, pp.157-8). This was a small 5-octave instrument and must have been hopelessly out of tune by its arrival in Tehran; it is unlikely that it was ever put to any use. In the second half of the nineteenth century, subsequent to Nāṣer-al-Din Shah's visits to Europe, pianos were imported with increasing frequency and gradually found a place in the homes of a few of the courtiers who had also been to Europe. At the same time, the establishment of a music school, within *Dār al-Fonun*, with French instructors, for training of military band musicians, gave an impetus to emerging interest in western music. Accordingly, the piano began to find some use, beyond an ornamental piece of furniture in the homes of the nobility. But lack of familiarity with piano music and musical notation, in addition to the absence of qualified teachers, made the integration of this instrument into the musical life of the country quite problematic. Yet, the grandeur of the piano, both in appearance and sound, was compelling enough for some Persian musicians, with means to acquire the instrument, to try their hands at it.

There are fundamental problems, however, in using the piano for performance of Persian traditional music. By its very design, the piano is intended to serve polyphonic music. The layout of keys in front of the performer makes the use of both hands elemental and their equality self evident. Moreover, it is quite natural to play this instrument using all fingers, which is absolutely necessary when several notes are to be sounded



simultaneously. These factors combine to point to the unsuitability of the application of any keyboard instrument in a music that has no polyphonic texture, is largely improvisatory, and requires no more than one note to be sounded at any given time.

Persian music is equally ill served when submitted to a mechanical instrument with fixed pitches such as the piano. The tones in Persian music are not tempered and tend to be unstable. Since there is no polyphony this instability does not pose any problem. Arguably, the flexibility of tones is even desirable for it contributes to the intuitive and intimate character of this music. This tonal flexibility can be best attained on instruments with movable frets, such as the *tār* and the *setār*; or with no frets, as the *kamānčā* and the violin; or wind instruments without keys such as the *ney*. Even the *santur* is not an ideal instrument for Persian music; it needs to be constantly tuned and retuned to make possible performance of different *maqāms* on the same instrument.

Attempts have been made to overcome the tonal incongruity of the piano to the intervals of native modes by alterations in the tuning of the instrument. For example, the b flat in one or two octaves, in the mid-register of the instrument, is tuned higher to somewhere between b flat and b natural, a note which is named b *koron* (Vaziri's designation), to make that register capable of producing such modes as *Šūr*, *Dašti*, *Abu-'aṭā* (q.v.), *Navā*, etc. The flat version of b, available in other registers, is to make possible rendering of *Māhur*, *Bayāt-e Esfahān*, *Rāst*, etc. Such tuning alterations could be made of one or two more pitches, as the need may arise. Nevertheless, this is a highly unsatisfactory solution for it ignores the fact that the tempered and fixed tuning of the piano is in fundamental disagreement with all intervals in Persian music. Further incompatibility arises from the fact that Persian music employs a limited range of sound spectrum, roughly corresponding with the range of tenor and alto voices. All native instruments operate within that range; in vocal music, also, it is very uncommon to have a real bass or a true soprano. The piano, on the other hand, has a range exceeding seven octaves. Persian music would sound totally out of character if played on the very high or the very low registers of the piano; and, if high and low registers were to be consistently omitted, then clearly the instrument is not being used for what it can do.

The first native musician who developed a piano style for Persian music was Moḥammad Šādeq Khan, a well-known *santur* player of Nāṣer-al-Din Shah's court (Sepantā, p. 77-78). Famous among the later exponents of piano in



traditional music were: Mošir Homāyun Šahrdār (1885-1970), Morteżā Maḥjubi (1901-65), and Javād Ma'rufi (1915-93). The style that gradually emerged clearly mirrors that of the *santur*. Improvisation is mainly in the right hand and if the left hand is brought in, it is to double, in octaves, the melody line of the right hand. Notes of long duration are played as octave tremolo, as if to replicate the rapid strokes (*riz*) of the *tar* or the *santur*. Subtle points of nuance and articulation such as legato, staccato, marcato, leggiero, sforzando, etc. generally play no part.

In the twentieth century, some performers, inspired by western music, have introduced occasional chordal accompaniment, assigned to the left hand, usually in arpeggiated form. Only the primary chords of tonic, sub-dominant and dominant may be used. The inappropriateness of adding triadic harmony, be it at the most elementary level, to a monophonic and modal music does not seem to discourage their use; possibly some even believe this to be a way of modernizing and thereby improving the native music.

For a music sample, see [Āvāz-e Dašti](#).

For a music sample, see [Dastgāh-e Čahārgāh](#).

For a music sample, see [Dastgāh-e Māhur](#).

For a music sample, see [Hymn of Fozieh](#).

For a music sample, see [Iranian National March](#).

For a music sample, see [Kādem Misāq](#), [Hymn of Motherland \(sorud-e mihan\)](#).

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