



ŞABĀ, ABU'L-ĤASAN

ŞABĀ, ABU'L-ĤASAN (b. Tehran, 1281 Š./1902; d. Tehran, 29 Ādar 1336/19 December 1957), Persian musician and music educator ([Figure 1](#); [Figure 2](#)). He excelled as a performer and teacher of the violin, *setār*, *santur*, and *tombak* (*tonbak*; see [IRAN xi. MUSIC, DRUMS](#)).

Born into an aristocratic and relatively affluent family, Abu'l-Ĥasan had the exceptional good fortune of being raised in an environment that fostered love of music and arts. His father, Abu'l-Qāsem Kamāl-al-Saltāna, a medical doctor, was an amateur musician and poet. He descended from a long line of distinguished court physicians, all of whom were also known for their artistic talents (Mašḥun, p. 589). The Şabā household was a gathering place for musicians, poets, and artists. From his childhood, Şabā received every encouragement to learn how to play different musical instruments; he also exhibited interest and talent in painting, drawing, penmanship, needlework, and carpentry (Sepantā, p.182).

His first music teacher was his father, who was a competent *setār* player. He also learned about the rhythmic intricacies of Persian music, as played on the *tombak*, from Robāba Ravānbaḳš, a lady companion of his mother. A few years later, he received professional instruction on the technique of *tombak* from Hāji Khan Żarbi. At age ten, Şabā became a pupil of the celebrated *setār* player Mirzā 'Abd-Allāh (q.v.), who was a close friend of his father. On the latter's death in 1915, Şabā continued his musical education with the equally famous musician, [Ġolām-Ĥosayn Darviš](#), with whom he also received training in the technique of the *tār*. At the same time, he took up the study of *santur*



with 'Ali-Akbar Šāhi (Mašḥun, p. 590).

In his early teens, Şabā was attracted to the violin, which was beginning to make an impact as an instrument that was easily adaptable to Persian music and had proven to be more versatile than the native fiddle, the *kamānča*. His first violin teacher, Ḥosayn Esmā'ilzāda, was a well-known *kamānča* player, who also played the violin, but in the *kamānča* style, with short back-and-forth bow movements. Before long, Şabā began violin studies in earnest with Ḥosayn Hangāfarin, who was a graduate of the Music School, taught by French teachers, at *Dār al-Fonun*. From Hangāfarin, he also learned the basics of Western musical notation. For his regular schooling, Şabā was sent to the very best that was available in Tehran at the time, namely the 'Elmiya primary school followed by the American College for his secondary school education.

In 1923, Şabā was among the first group of students who enrolled in 'Alinaqi Vaziri's newly founded music school. As with the other pupils of Vaziri, he became deeply committed to the master's views on needed reform and modernization of Persian music. Şabā advanced rapidly and, as he was already a good violinist, he became an assistant to Vaziri, who placed him in charge of one of the courses taught at the school. When the school orchestra was formed, the first chair in the violin section, the leader's chair, was assigned to Şabā (Mašḥun, p. 591).

In 1927, Vaziri took this orchestra for a series of concerts to Rašt. The reception received in that city was so encouraging as to prompt Vaziri to establish there, two years later, a branch of his music school with Şabā as its director. In the two years (1929-31) that Şabā spent in Rašt, he not only administered the affairs of the school and taught various subjects, but he also made side trips to remote towns and village in Gilān and Māzandarān in order to collect folk songs. As such, Şabā must be credited as having been the first known Persian ever to study folk music. Some of the folk songs he collected and notated were later used as basis of his compositions for the violin: "Deylamān," "Zarda malija," "Dar qafas," "Kuhestāni," and "Raḡḡ-e čupi" (Behruzi, p. 131).

During the 1920s, while studying with Vaziri and assisting him in his teaching for some seven years, Şabā was a most unlikely employee of the state ammunitions workshop (*qur-kāna*) in Tehran, where he learned to work with metal and wood. This experience helped him in later life with his hobby of building musical instruments, particularly setārs and santurs. He had also a



lifelong interest in painting; in his youth, for a period, he received instruction from the famous painter, Kamāl-al-Molk Moḥammad Ġaffāri. A number of Şabā's oil paintings are extant; they clearly demonstrate that he had the potential of becoming a serious painter (Behruzi, p. 155).

From 1931, while maintaining close relations with Vaziri, Şabā effectively left Vaziri's orbit and established himself independently as a private teacher. His fame as a musician and a caring teacher spread quickly; by the mid-1930s he was widely known, not only as the country's leading violinist, but also as its most inspiring teacher. Although his reputation primarily rested with the violin, he had also pupils who received instruction from him in tombak, santur, and setār. The most celebrated master of the tombak in modern times, Ḥosayn Tehrāni, perfected his art under Şabā's tutelage. Also, the leading santur virtuoso of the second half of the 20th century, Farāmarz Pāyvar, had been a long-time pupil of Şabā. In intimate gatherings, and when he wished to play for himself, Şabā favored the setār. Most musicians who knew him closely agree that he was an inspired setār player whose sensitive and restrained style was perfectly attuned to the gentle nature of this instrument. As to the violin, there is hardly any major violinist of mid to late 20th century Persia who had not received instruction from Şabā. Such well-known performers of traditional music on the violin as 'Alī Tajwidi, Mehdi Kāledi, Homāyun Kōrram, Ḥabib-Allāh Badi'i, Maḥmud Du'l-fonun, and 'Abbās Şāpuri were among scores of Şabā's devoted pupils (Behruzi, p.139).

The unique violin style developed by Şabā rested on a solid Western technique, acquired under Vaziri's tutelage, but adorned with florid mannerisms of authentic Persian music. His bowing technique was far more advanced than those who came to the violin by way of the kamānča. He employed short up-and-down movements as well as the full length of the bow for a smooth flow of sound in legato passages. Şabā was methodical in the use of dynamics and knew their value in achieving heightened dramatic effects. Other Western technical devices such as portamento, staccato, spiccato, and pizzicato, were brought into play, none of which had prior application in Persian music. As to the left-hand movement on the fingerboard, he advocated frequent change of position to higher registers, thereby extending the range of sound beyond the normal practice. At the same time, he contrived means for the articulation of various ornamental figures peculiar to Persian music. Accordingly, in his violin style, the wealth of Western technique of violin playing was enhanced by the decorative characteristics of



native music. Contrary to Vaziri's teaching approach, however, Şabā did not recommend practice of purely technical exercises (*études*) to his pupils. He believed that all needed skills can be attained in the process of learning actual pieces of music. In his view, emphasis on technical exercises tends to make for a cold and dry performance style (Sepantā, pp.185-86).

Şabā was not very active as a composer; he considered himself primarily a performer and a teacher (Mallāḥ, 1958, p. 88). Nevertheless, his creative contributions, particularly as the innovator of a distinct style of *čahārmežrāb* for the violin, deserve to be taken seriously. Traditional *čahārmežrābs*, in common use as a part of the 19th-century classical repertory (*radif*), were generally fragmentary passages, based on descending four-note patterns, which do not amount to melody lines of any interest. These *čahārmežrābs* function more as a short rhythmic interlude in the midst of free-metered extemporization of the *āvāz* genre; at the same time, as they are in a fast tempo, they serve to display the technical mastery of the instrumentalist. Şabā's *čahārmežrābs*, on the other hand, are extended compositions that have developed melodic contents, including modulation to other modes, together with much rhythmic vitality. They are technically demanding pieces with specified and varied use of double-stops that point to the influence of western music.

Both as a performer and a teacher, Şabā did not have much patience for lengthy improvisations in the free-metered *āvāz* genre. He considered many of the lesser *gušas*, in each *dastgāh*, as devoid of individual character. Accordingly, his performances of various *dastgāhs*, as well as his notated and published versions of them, were highly selective in the choice of *gušas* and were interspersed with numerous rhythmic, mostly *čahārmežrāb* type, pieces. This approach to the performance of a *dastgāh* is commonly known as a *majlesi* rendition, as opposed to the inclusion of all, or most, of the *gušas* within the repertory of a *dastgāh*, which can make for a pedantic and occasionally tedious presentation (Sepantā, pp.182-83).

In addition to his *čahārmežrābs*, Şabā composed a limited number of pieces in other genres. His three volumes on the method of violin playing contain composed pieces geared to the needs of students from beginner to the advanced levels. A *piš-darāmad* in Bayāt-e Tork by Şabā was published in *Hejdah qeṭ'a piš-darāmad* (ed. Loṭf-Allāh Mofaḵḵam Pāyān, Šerkat-e entešārāt-e čāp, Tehran, 1950), and a *reng* by Şabā, also in Bayāt-e Tork, is included in *Bist o panj qeṭ'a-ye žarbi* (ed. Loṭf-Allāh Mofaḵḵam Pāyān, Šerkat-e entešārāt-e čāp,



Tehran, 1948). Most Persian traditional musicians who try their hands at composition are drawn to vocal music. Composition of songs (*taşnif, tarāna*) seems to be the favored genre. Şabā, on the other hand, wrote no vocal pieces; clearly his creative impulses were focused on the violin and the needs of his pupils.

Above all else, Şabā was a tireless and dedicated violin teacher. In the main, he taught privately at his place of residence. From 1941 to the end of his life, he also taught at the Conservatory of National Music (Honarestān-e musiḳi-ye melli). In addition, with the establishment of the first radio station in Persia in 1940, he was engaged by the music department of Tehran Radio, where his violin solos were recorded and broadcast to the delight of a vast listening audience. He was also active as the conductor of one of the orchestras at the Ministry of Culture and Arts (Wezārat-e farhang o honar), which, subsequent to his death, was named the Şabā Orchestra.

A much admired figure, Şabā was a household name throughout his life. His lofty position as a versatile musician, as well as the founder of an individual style of Persian violin playing, have been acknowledged by all. Yet he was a shy, unassuming, courteous, and retiring man. As a teacher, he was generous and giving; of what he knew, he held nothing back and had little interest in the material rewards of his profession. He found it difficult to turn away the ever-increasing numbers who appeared at his door wanting to study with him. In an interview that was broadcast from Tehran Radio, one week before his death, in response to a question, Şabā indicated that, throughout his life, he had given instruction to some 3,000 pupils (Maşḥun, p. 596; Behruzi, pp. 133-34).

Şabā's publications include three books on the study of violin and four on santur. The first two violin books contain notation of a selection of guşas from different dastgāhs; they also contain several čahārmežrābs that are his own compositions. Moreover, three of the folk songs he had collected in Gilān and Māzandarān have been included among the rhythmic pieces—"Deylamān" in the first volume, "Amiri" and "Zarda malija" in the second. The third book contains eighteen rhythmic pieces in different modes; they represent some of his most striking compositions. Şabā's four books on the study of santur contain notation of selected guşas from all the dastgāhs, together with numerous original čahārmežrābs. The importance of these study books, at a time when very few publications of pedagogic value in music existed in Persia, cannot be overestimated. On his untimely death from heart failure at age 55,



Şabā left two manuscripts, one on the technique of tombak, and the other on the study of setār. Unfortunately neither has been published. His death was mourned in poetry (by, e.g., Šahriār) and in a dirge, called *Ba yād-e Şabā*, in Segāh mode composed by Mehdi Kāledi and broadcast on the radio with Ġolām-Ḥosayn Banān as vocalist.

For a music sample, see [Deylamān](#).

For a music sample, see [Sabā, Zard-e Malijeh](#).

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