



TAŞNIF

TAŞNIF (تصنیف), a type of vocal composition in classical Persian music. The term, an Arabic loanword, originally referred to literary compositions and then later also specifically to literary-musical compositions, for which it is better known today. There is disagreement as to what constitutes a *taşnif*, due in part to the multiplicity of its forms and in part to variation in the usage of terms for different song types, both historical and contemporary.

Song in the late Qajar period (ca. 1875-1925) was of several categories: religious, folk, urban popular, aristocratic, and political. For instance, in addition to *taşnif*, there were also *soruds* (anthem), *nawḥas* (religious song), and *tarānas* (folk and popular song). The designation *taşnif* has come to be regarded as a distinct genre of composed song associated with classical music, as found in aristocratic and in certain political and mystical circles. The late Qajar *taşnifs* may continue to be thought of as a form-type, even though later composers such as Mortazā Neydāwud and Moḥammad-‘Ali Amir Jāhed have expanded the range and scope of this classical *taşnif* (Caton and Safvate, pp. 144-46; Tsuge, pp. 200-205).

The classical *taşnif* is a song composed usually in a melodic type (*guşa*) of a modal system (*dastgāh*) on traditional love themes and metaphors, using classical poetic meters and form-types, for instance quatrains (*robā‘i*), lyrics (*ḡazal*), or *stanzaic verse* (*mosammaṭ*). These *taşnifs* are usually stanzaic and include a recurrent refrain thematically and rhythmically distinct from the verse. Their form may be distinguished from that of rhythmic (*zarbi*) pieces and classical poetry in general in that the poetic text may have, in



coordination with the musical theme, sectional divisions determined by line length, rhyme, and metric scheme.

According to [Nur-Ali Borumand](#), stanzaic *taşnif* is a song type having a verse and refrain (Borumand, interview, 25 December 1974), with both the words and music composed by one person. Its melody is based on the repertoire of Persian classical music (*radif*; [Mallāḥ](#), interview, 1975). Its rhythm is slow and regular (Farhat, p. 34), and the poetry of the verse may be from a *ḡazal* by a classical master of Persian poetry such as [Sa'di](#) and [Ḥāfeẓ](#) ([Loṭfi](#), interview, 1975) or from the old music masters of the court ([Sadeghi](#), class notes, 1969). Unlike the poetic forms of *ḡazal* and *qaṣida*, *taşnif* as poetry was originally intended to be composed with music ([Karimi](#), class discussion, 1975). 'Ali-Akbar Şeydā (d. 1906), 'Āref Qazvini (d. 1934), and Amir-Jāhed (d. 1977), the three best-known *taşnif* writers of this period, composed both poetry and music of their *taşnifs*. Other examples of this period do not adhere to this standard, such as those composed by [Ḡolām-Ḥosayn Darviş Khan](#) (d. 1926) and [Mortazā Neydāwud](#) (d. 1990).

There are a number of sources concerning *taşnifs* of the Qajar period. [Clément Huart](#) and A. Lemaire published Westernized musical arrangements of *taşnifs* and *taşnif* excerpts; [Alexander Chodzko](#) printed translations of 50 Persian songs mostly from the harem of [Fath-'Ali Shah](#); [Vasilli Zhukovskiĭ](#), *Jong-e tarānahā wa taşnifhā-ye Qājār*, and *Ādāb-e āvāzhā wa dekr dar manābar* contain Persian texts; and [Fairchild](#)'s work contains both texts and music. Other works of and about the Qajar period, such as those by [Yaḥyā Ārianpur](#) and 'Abd-Allāh Mostawfi, include smaller numbers of texts.

'[Abd-'Allāh Dawāmi](#) has stated that, during the late Qajar period, *taşnifs* were in the hands of one family, the family of [Ḥabib-Allāh Samā' Ḥoẓur](#), and that he learned *taşnifs* from them (interview, 28 September 1976; [Loṭfi](#), p. 13). [Samā' Ḥoẓur](#) was a student of [Moḥammed-Şādeq Khan](#), the head of the court musicians ([Kāleqi](#), I, p. 135), and was a master in *santur*, *tombak* (goblet-shaped drum, also called *dombak*, *zārb*), and singing *taşnifs* and metric tunes ([Şafwat](#), p. 61). Many of these *taşnifs* have been preserved through [Dawāmi](#), who, according to [Ruḥ-Allāh Kāleqi](#), knew all of the old *taşnifs* and was the “preserved tablet of old metric songs” (*lawḥ-e maḥfuẓ-e naḡmahā-ye wazndār-e qadim*; [Kāleqi](#), I, pp. 366-67). [Dawāmi](#), in turn, passed on his *taşnifs* to others, notably [Nur-'Ali Borumand](#) and [Moḥammed-Rezā Loṭfi](#). According to [Loṭfi](#) (interview 31 May 1975) and [Dawāmi](#), these old *taşnifs* of the late Qajar period were performed only for the aristocracy.

Taşnif composers of the late Qajar period are representatives of both traditional forms and of stylistic and thematic changes. One of the developments in the Iranian poetic style of the 19th century was the simplification of language, designed to appeal to a new mass audience outside the circles of the court and aristocracy. The *taşnif* composers, 'Ali-Akbar Şeydā and Abu'l-Qāsem 'Āref, both used language common to the people. While Şeydā's works were lyrical in their subject matter, 'Āref composed both lyrical and topical *taşnifs*, and was influenced, as were other poets and composers, by the events of the [Constitutional Revolution](#) (Badi'i, pp. 81-103).

After songwriters in the environment of the court, the most important *taşnif* composer was 'Ali-Akbar Şeydā (ca. 1843-1906) whose *taşnifs* are considered in Iran by classical musicians as the best examples of the classical *taşnif* of the lyrical tradition. He drew on both court (Dawāmi, interview, 28 September 1976) and popular tradition (Badi'i, p. 92). Borumand and Karimi felt that Şeydā's works were the best examples of old *taşnif*, in both poetry and music and in the relationship between the two. Badi'i states that the language of his *taşnifs* was close to the language of the common people and for that reason was easy for them to grasp (Badi'i, pp. 84-85;).

During the period of the Constitutional Revolution (1905-11), *taşnif* and *tarāna* played an important role in the process of struggle. Many poets of this period wrote both in conventional poetic forms, particularly the *gāzal*, and in songs. They published the texts of *taşnifs* and *soruds* in their journals and in separate song-sheets, as well as performing them or having them performed. The *taşnifs* were performed in revolutionary societies (*anjoman*), at informal gatherings, and in concert halls in the major cities, particularly in the theater of the Grand Hotel on Lālazār Street in Tehran (Caton, pp. 82-83, 90-91).

The most popular poet of this time, who also wrote *taşnifs*, was Sayyed Aşraf-al-Din Ḥosayni Qazvini (1871-1934), publisher of, *Nasim-e šemāl* (1907-11), a literary paper containing both serious and satirical poems (Ārianpur, II, pp. 61-77; Şadr Hāšemi, IV, pp. 295-302). Second to him in popularity was Abu'l-Qāsem 'Āref Qazvini, mainly known for his *taşnif* composition, but who also composed *gāzals*, some of which he himself sang in his musical performances. It was in 'Āref's *taşnifs* that Şeydā's lyrical *taşnif* joined with topical popular song and was used in the exhortative manner of the rest of the body of nationalistic, revolutionary poetry. What is more, it is mainly in 'Āref's *taşnifs* (e.g., "Hangām-e mey/"Az kun-e javānān-e waṭan," and "Ĉe ūrhā") that some of the major events following the granting of the Constitution in 1906 may be



followed (Caton, pp. 83-86, 112-17; Qazvini, pp. 358-60, 382-85). ‘Āref was the most influential *taşnif* composer and performer of the period of the Constitutional Revolution. He remains a nationalist symbol to the Iranians, and as such his *taşnifs* are venerated and performed as part of the continuing classical and national tradition of Persian music (Ārianpur, II, pp. 146-68, 349-61; Badi‘i, pp. 95-103; Ḥosayni Dehkordi, pp. 514-16).

As both Şeydā and ‘Āref had done, Moḥammad-‘Ali Amir-Jāhed (1894-1977) composed both words and melody himself. His numerous *taşnifs* include both nationalistic and lyrical themes. He accompanied himself on the *tār* (a string instrument) and taught his *taşnifs* to others (Kān-‘Ali, p. 24). Many of them, including “Amān az in del,” were recorded by the distinguished female vocalist [Qamar-al-Moluk Waziri](#). Borumand estimates (interview, 6 May 1975) that this *taşnif* was composed around 1935. Amir-Jāhed’s works are not considered by Persian musicians as having either the high qualities of those of Şeydā or the charisma of the ones by ‘Āref. They do, however, include many performable *taşnifs* that are also included in classical performances of the modal repertoire (*radif*).

During the period of Constitutional Revolution, a number of poets, such as Şādeq Khan [Adib-al-Mamālek Farāhāni](#) (1860-1917), Hāji Mirzā [Yaḥyā Dawlatābādi](#) (1864-1940), [Moḥammad-Rezā Mirzāda ‘Eşqi](#) (1893-1924), and [Moḥammad-Taqi Malek-al-Şo‘arā Bahār](#) (1886-1951), wrote nationalistic songs (see Machalski; Ārianpur, II, pp. 123-46, 271-74, 361-81; Panāhi, pp. 192-212; Badi‘i, pp. 109-13). Bahār, an outstanding literary and political figure, wrote the lyrics to a number of *taşnifs*, the most famous of which is the revolutionary song “Morġ-e saḥar.” The music was composed by Neydāwud, a master *tār* performer and teacher in the court music tradition (Badi‘i, pp. 112-13; Panāhi, pp. 206-11; Ḥosayni Dehkordi, pp. 10-13, 236-38).

Symbolism in classical *taşnif* poetry resembles that of the classical *ġazal*, using the same themes of the lover, beloved, wine, and springtime. Borumand has stated that *taşnifs* are based mainly on the theme of love, whether it is love for a person, for God, for music, or for the homeland. Both [Franciszek Machalski](#) (p. 71) and Mojtaba Khoshzamir (p. 26) concur that the great majority of *taşnifs* are lyrical, the rest being divided among topical, satirical, and other themes. Ārianpur (II, p. 153) has compared the amatory *taşnif* to the mystical *ġazals* in its adoring emphasis on flowers, wine, beauty, and the unfaithfulness of the beloved. Like the older *taşnifs*, those of Şeydā also continue the tradition of love-oriented poetry using traditional symbols and metaphors. The *taşnif* was

used as a format for writers like ‘Āref and Bahār to educate their audience politically. They drew upon traditional poetic symbols and themes, sometimes altering them to suit their purposes, and made open propaganda in ways not at all in accordance with the tradition of veiled allusion. Classical literature presents metaphors and abstractions in such a way that one is never sure, for example, if wine represents actual wine or serves as a symbol for something else. In the *taşnifs* this was true also. In some *taşnifs*, particularly those of ‘Āref, there also appeared more concrete images. ‘Āref, in his political *taşnifs*, left the world of veiled allusion and classical turn of phrase to address current issues and conditions directly. This directness of ‘Āref provides a contrast between the *taşnif* and the *ğazal*.

Starting in the time of Reżā Shah Pahlavi (r. 1924-41), the composition of critical or satirical *taşnifs* expressing individual views was suppressed in Iran, although Persians in other countries continued the tradition. Types that were encouraged were nationalistic or instructional *soruds* and lyrical *taşnifs*, although continuing experiments and influences from the music of other cultures and from the folk music tradition within Iran have changed some of the musical appearance of the *taşnif*.

Since the *taşnif* is a compositional form cultivated particularly by musicians associated with the court, it shares many of the characteristics both of classical poetry and of classical music, that is, the music of the *radif* or *dastgāh* system. It has been placed, however, in a flexible category between popular and classical. The *taşnifs* that more closely approach the classical norms have become accepted by the classical musicians and included in their repertoire. These *taşnifs* can be performed separately or in groups or can be incorporated into a *dastgāh* performance. Borumand has stated that the *taşnif* is usually performed in a series from slow to fast; two to four *taşnifs* are followed by a dancing tune (*reng*; Interview, 3 December 1974).

In the past, performance styles were solo-oriented and non-standardized (Tsuge, p. 194). Traditionally speaking, the *taşnif* was performed by a singer accompanied by a small ensemble, usually consisting of one or two melody instruments (e.g., *tār* and *kamānča*) and a drum (*tombak* or *dāyera*). Although Şeydā, ‘Āref, and Amir-Jāhed all performed their own *taşnifs*, only ‘Āref became known as a public performer. Among the most famous of singers of Şeydā’s *taşnifs* in former times was Jamāl Şafawi (Badi’i, p. 83). One of the earliest performers of ‘Āref’s *taşnifs* was ‘Abd-Allāh Dawāmi (1891-1981). Later singers learned *taşnifs* from him with a view to preserving and reviving



them.

In the 20th century, the performance of a modal system (*dastgāh*) evolved into a combination of improvised and non-improvised forms in the following order: *piš-darāmad* (preamble), *čahār-mežrāb* (rhythmic instrumental), *āvāz* (nonmetric vocal), *taşnif*, and *reng* (Tsuge, pp. 192-95; Zonis, pp. 137-48). With the nonmetric *āvāz* as the core of a *dastgāh* performance, metric pieces (*čahār-mežrāb*, *zarbi*, and *taşnif*), which may be placed between some of the *guşas* (pieces) of the *āvāz*, add variety. Both Gen'ichi Tsuge (p. 191) and Manoochehr Sadeghi (p. 165) have stated that the *taşnif* changes the mood and creates motion and excitement that contrasts with the nonmetric rhythm of the *āvāz*.

In 1955, Iranian radio began to present the Golhā programs (“Orkestr-e Golhā,” p. 26), aimed at illustrating the perennial thematic and aesthetic relationships between poetry and traditional music in Persian culture. A number of vocalists became identified with singing the old *taşnifs* in this program. For instance, Marzia, who began singing on the radio in 1948, rejuvenated public interest in the works of Şeydā by performing them in this program (*Majalla-ye musiqi* 6/3, 1957, p. 22). *Ġolām-Ĥosayn Banān* (1911-1986), a prominent vocalist who began singing for Tehran Radio in 1942 (Mallāḥ, 1/11-12, p. 9), later on started performing in the Golhā programs, particularly the *taşnifs* of ‘Āref.

The *taşnif* may also be sung outside of the *dastgāh* format. Choice of *taşnif* and performance style may vary according to whether the singer specializes in *āvāz* (vocal improvisation on the *guşas* of the *radif*) or *taşnif* (Caron and Safvate, pp. 159-60). Traditionally the distinction is made that an *āvāz* singer is able to perform the *tahrir* (melisma) and a *taşnif* singer has a strong sense of rhythm and often is an accomplished *tombak* (goblet-shaped drum) player as well (Caron and Safvate, pp. 15-60; Kāleqi, I, p. 357).

The performance of a *taşnif* may vary according to the individual performer, the audience, the medium of performance, and whether it is live or recorded. A performance for an intimate gathering of aristocrats in the Qajar court differs from a re-orchestrated version of the same piece for the radio program “Golhā-ye rangārang,” first broadcast in the 1950s. Before the development of the modern concert, the classical *taşnif* was sung within the environment of the court and aristocratic circles. Performers were hired to be part of the retinue of princes and played and sang at private parties and celebrations and picnics, and within the private quarters (*andarun*) of the family.

The classical *taşnifs* draw on formal elements that are found in folk, urban, popular, and classical poetry. They are difficult to place in any one category due to their variety and the extent to which classical poetry was influenced by folk elements during the time of composition. Persian musicians and musicologists have not known exactly where to place the *taşnif* in importance or in quality or genre. There has been a tendency to group *taşnif* with *tarāna* and *sorud* into one category as “song.” Since the quality and style of *taşnif* varies, as does its melodic and poetic similarity to the *radif*, it is understandable that attitudes would be mixed. Some musicians, such as Borumand, have felt that the *taşnif* is an important form and that there are many *taşnifs* of high quality, particularly those composed by Şeydā and ‘Āref (Caton, p. 33).

Some of the late Qajar *taşnifs* form a part of the contemporary classical repertoire. These and later *taşnifs* may be sung as part of a *dastgāh* performance or be performed in a context of similar types of *taşnifs*. Of the classical *taşnifs*, there is a consensus of those that would be included in a *dastgāh* performance. These are the works of Şeydā, ‘Āref, and other composers of classical *taşnif*, particularly Amir-Jāhed. Şeydā, ‘Āref, and Amir-Jāhed represent the ideal in *taşnif* composition, since they composed both lyrics and music themselves and also performed them (‘Āref for a public audience). Most of these *taşnifs* were composed before 1925 (the conclusion of the Qajar era).

These standard, accepted, classical *taşnifs* went through periodic revivals in popularity, underwent new arrangements, and were presented in different ways. In the late 1970s, particularly, the classical musicians, in their efforts to reactivate traditional music, made considerable efforts to learn additional *taşnifs* from old masters or from recordings in order to be able to re-present and re-record them. The classical *taşnif* continues to be an enduring part of the classical tradition and has found its place with the other composed forms that are now part of a *dastgāh* performance.

For a music sample, see [Tasnif \(balākeš\) – Dastgāh šur](#)
[Tasnif-e Mobtalā](#)



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