



VAZIRI, 'ALI-NAQI

VAZIRI, 'Ali-Naqi (b. Tehran, 1887; d., Tehran, 9 September 1979), composer, virtuoso *tār* player, musical theorist, and educator.

Life. Vaziri was the son of Musā Khan Mirpanj, a high ranking army officer, and Bibi Kānom, a well-educated woman active in the cause of women's liberation. From childhood, Vaziri was inured to the rigors of military life, which seem to have been well suited to his temperament. He was only fourteen when, through his father's intervention, he was admitted to military service (Kāleqi, II, p. 38-39; Khoshzamid, p. 51). In the army, he distinguished himself enough to receive steady promotions. His youthful years coincided with one of the most turbulent periods of Persian history. The first decade of the 20th century saw the rise of a revolutionary movement which pressed for the establishment of a constitutional democracy and the curtailment of the monarch's unlimited powers (see [CONSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION](#)). Vaziri openly sympathized with the cause of the revolution, which made his position in the armed forces rather precarious. In 1909, he was charged with insubordination and was at risk of being incarcerated (Mir 'Ali-Naqi, p. 577). Soon, however, with evolving political conditions and the ascendancy of the revolutionary order, he was promoted to full colonel and was sent, as the head of a security force, to Māzandarān and Gorgān. The period between 1911 and 1913 was the high point of Vaziri's military career; thereafter, with the onset of the World War I and increasing intrusion by the British and the Russians in the affairs of the country, he became increasingly dissatisfied with a career in armed forces. In 1917, he resigned from the army, determined to devote his



life to music. But, to the end of his life, he was known to his friends as the “Colonel” (Kāleqi, II, pp. 62-64; Sepantā, 1990, p. 137).

Vaziri’s musical education began rather late and in a singularly desultory fashion. At the outset of his military service, when he was assigned, in the company of his father, to a regiment in the province of Gorgān, he came in contact with a fellow soldier who was the trumpeter of the regiment. From this soldier he learned how to play the trumpet (Kāleqi, II, pp. 38-39). Two years later, at age sixteen, on returning to Tehran, Vaziri asked his maternal uncle, a physician and an amateur *tār* player, to teach him how to play the *tār*. (He also studied the French language with this uncle.) From that point on, the young ‘Ali-Naqi developed an insatiable appetite for musical studies of all kinds. Serendipitous encounters with various musicians prompted study of different musical instruments. He received violin lessons from Ḥosayn Hangāfarin, who also taught him Western musical notation. Hangāfarin and a number of other musicians who befriended Vaziri had been educated at the Music School founded in the 1860s, with French teachers for training of military band musicians (Khoshzamid, p. 53). They were all familiar with musical notation and had some knowledge of the theory of Western music. In remarkably quick succession, Vaziri not only became a competent violinist but also learned to play the *kamānča* (Persian fiddle), *santur* (Persian dulcimer), and the mandolin.

One of his friends, Moḥammad Ḥejāzi, who was an amateur violinist, had been a pupil at the St. Louis missionary school in Tehran, established and run by French instructors. Ḥejāzi introduced Vaziri to one of his former teachers, a priest called Pere Geffroie, who was a musician and a good pianist. He took an interest in Vaziri and gave him several sessions of instruction in theory and harmony (Kāleqi, II, p. 41; Sepantā, 1990, p. 136). On Pere Geffroie’s return to France, Vaziri had further studies in harmony with Solāymān Khan, a former pupil of Alfred Lemaire, the long time principal and teacher at the above mentioned Music School. It was Solaymān Khan who urged Vaziri to study piano, so that he could better understand harmonic techniques such as chord progressions and modulation (Kāleqi, I, pp. 219-20, III, p. 43).

Concurrent with his growing fascination with the theory of Western music, and Western musical instruments, Vaziri was equally attracted to the intricacies of Persian traditional music. *Tār* was his favorite instrument, which he practiced diligently. For a period, he received instructions from Mirzā ‘Abd-Allāh, the celebrated *tār* and *setār* master and one of the most respected



musicians of the late Qajar period. Through his contacts with Mirzā 'Abd-Allāh, Vaziri became familiar with the repertoire (*radifs*) of Persian traditional music. He persuaded Mirzā 'Abd-Allāh to allow him to write down, in Western notation, the entire repertoire as performed by this great master. The task took some eighteen months to accomplish (Kāleqi, II, pp. 45-47; Akbarzāda, I, p.100). It must be understood, however, that Vaziri's notation was significant only as a documentation of Mirzā 'Abd-Allāh's rendition of the *radif* at a given time. The intention was not to foster performance of traditional music from notation, as the wealth of this music is in its ever changing manifestations through extemporization. It goes without saying that to perform the *radif* in a fixed manner, from notation, is bound to make it intolerably tedious.

Although, due to limited means available, Vaziri's introduction to Western classical music had been, to say the least, erratic, he was, nevertheless, overwhelmed by the richness and diversity of this musical heritage. He admired the expressive range of Western music, the beauty of polyphony, and the great possibilities it avails to composers. It was soon clear to him that, by remaining in Persia, he could not obtain the sort of well-rounded musical education he desired. By 1914, he had decided to seek further musical studies in France, but, with the outbreak of World War I in Europe, his planned trip had to be postponed. Late in 1918, after armistice was declared, Vaziri arrived in Paris, in the company of his friend and mentor, Moṣṭafāqoli Khan Bayāt, who had undertaken to assist in financing Vaziri's musical education. He was accepted at the *Ecole Supérieure de Musique*; however, since at the age of thirty-one he was considerably older than other students, he was admitted as an auditor. He attended classes in harmony and counterpoint, as well as receiving some instruction in violin, piano, and singing. Later, he also studied composition, privately, with Paul Antonin Vidal (1863-1931), a well-known French conductor, composer, and teacher (Khoshzamid, p. 56; Kāleqi, II, pp. 64-66).

In 1921, Vaziri moved to Berlin and was enrolled, as a mature student, in the *Hochschule für Musik*. There, he pursued further studies in musical composition and also attended classes in musical pedagogy. All through his years in Paris and Berlin, he continued with a rigorous work schedule in which practice of violin and piano figured prominently. While in Berlin, Vaziri associated with a group of Persian intellectuals who lived there and were publishing a periodical called *Armaḡān*. It was in this journal that Vaziri published his first article, "Ṣanāye'-e mostazrafa." He also published his first



book on music, *Dastur-e tār*, in Berlin.

At the end of summer 1923, Vaziri returned to Tehran, firmly resolved to work for the advancement of Persian music through the systematic application of Western techniques of composition and Western teaching methods. He made immediate preparations to establish a private music school. He devised a comprehensive curriculum covering practical training in musical instruments, both native and Western (primarily violin, piano, and *tār*), plus theoretical studies pertaining to both Persian traditional and Western classical music. Particular emphasis was placed on the study of notation, solfeggio, sight singing, and harmony.

In March of 1924, Vaziri's school, with the grand title of *Madrasa-ye 'āli-e musiqi* (Superior school of music), began its operation. He personally undertook the teaching of all subjects, but for administration and book-keeping he had part time assistance from a close friend, Solaymān Sepānlu, who was an amateur *tār* player. Among the first batch of students who registered for instruction were Musā Ma'rufi, Abu'l-Ḥasan Ṣabā, and Ruḥ-Allāh Kāleqi, who became major figures of Persian music in the 20th century. Other future celebrities whose musical education began with Vaziri included Esmā'il Mehrtāš, Mehdi Barkešli, Ḥosayn Sanjari, Ḥosayn Golgolāb, and his own cousin 'Abd-al-'Ali Vaziri.

Soon after the school began to function, Vaziri created a school orchestra composed of those students who already had some proficiency in playing an instrument. The orchestra was formed by a combination of instruments including violin, violoncello, piano, flute, clarinet, and *tār*. Later he added to the ensemble the bass *tār* (*tār-bās*), an invention of his own. In the summer of 1924, he founded a musical association called Kolub-e musiqi (Club Musical) A number of well-educated and progressive-minded individuals, all of whom knew and respected Vaziri and were in sympathy with his reformist views, took membership in this club. Prominent among them were distinguished writers and scholars such as 'Ali Dašti, Moḥammad Ḥejāzi, 'Ali-Akbar Dehḳodā, Sa'id Nafisi, Rašid Yāsami, Naṣr-Allāh Falsafi, and 'Abbās Eqbāl. The Club became a hub of cultural activity where the school orchestra gave concerts, conducted by Vaziri, often performing his own compositions (Kāleqi, II, pp. 33-36). He also presented lectures in the Club hall, on the significance of music as an art and its place in society. These concerts and lectures were open to both sexes. Vaziri's attempts at encouraging ladies to attend cultural events was an exceptionally daring move at a time when women in Persia were in



veil and were almost entirely excluded from public life.

From the outset, Vaziri enjoyed the support of not only his pupils but also most of the country's intelligentsia. But his zeal for modernization, his aggressive pronouncements on the need for musical reform, and most of all his teaching methods, met with hostile reaction by many musicians of the old school. In him, they saw a European-educated musician who, through the infusion of Western ideas and practices, was upsetting time-honored traditions. A number of articles, notably one by the popular poet and musician, Abu'l-Qāsem 'Āref Qazvini, appeared in newspapers, severely criticizing Vaziri for his Westernized views.

Conservative musicians were particularly troubled by Vaziri's emphasis on theoretical studies that rested on Western musical concepts. This was inconsistent with standard procedure of teaching by rote and on a one to one basis. Traditionally, the sole object was to learn to play an instrument well and to become adept at improvised performance with the use of melodic material from the *radif*. No notation or books were used; any understanding of the theoretical foundations of music was a mere by-product of practical training and was rooted in the teacher's views. Accordingly, most performers' theoretical knowledge of music rested on an oral tradition, and was often patchy, imprecise, and poorly articulated.

Vaziri remained undeterred by disapproving voices. Within two years of the founding of his music school, he had garnered a great deal of support and had gained much respect within the elite of society. His concerts and lectures were widely attended. He even received encouragement from Rezā Khan, who, when prime minister in 1924, had attended one of Vaziri's concerts at the Club Musical (Khoshzamid, p. 60). This was gratifying, but it was not Vaziri's intention to promote an elitist enterprise; his primary aim was to provide music with a public arena, where ordinary citizens could come to hear music and develop appreciation and respect for music as a great art.

By late 1920s, Vaziri had become the country's undisputed musical authority. His detractors were sidelined and his position, as the educated musician who had mastered both Persian and Western music, was widely acclaimed. In 1928, the Ministry of Education asked Vaziri to take charge of the old Music School (Madrasa-ye muzik), founded some sixty years earlier for training military band musicians. Accordingly, Vaziri acted as the head of both his own private school and the State Music School (*Madrasa-ye musiqi-e dawlati*), which was



financed by the government. Within a few years the two schools were amalgamated into a music conservatory with a five year course leading to an accredited secondary school diploma. A number of Vaziri's more accomplished pupils were engaged as teachers in this conservatory.

In 1930, Vaziri made a formal proposal to the Minister of Education recommending that music theory and group singing should gradually be introduced in the primary school curriculum throughout the country. This was an ambitious move at a time when very few were qualified to teach such subjects. It was, moreover, a most audacious move in a country where for centuries, due to religious proscription, public musical activity simply did not exist. Nevertheless, in keeping with modernization and far-reaching reforms that was transforming the country during the reign of Rezā Shah, the proposal met with approval. Unfortunately, given the dearth of music teachers, the program was introduced in only a few of the schools in the capital and eventually had to be withdrawn.

The ten years between 1924 and 1934 represent Vaziri's most productive period. He was active as a tireless educator, music administrator, and the leading spokesman for the cause of modernization of music. His prodigious accomplishments in publication of books and articles, as well as composition of a sizable corpus of music, shall be discussed below. In 1934, however, Vaziri fell out of favor with the Shah and was removed from the headship of *Madrassa-ye musiqi-e dawlati*. The rift leading to his dismissal, according to Ruḥ-Allāh Kāleqi, emanated from Vaziri's refusal to comply with a directive from the Royal Court for the school orchestra to perform at the Royal Palace in the course of a dinner given by the Shah for the heir to the throne of Sweden. Vaziri had responded that he and the orchestra will be honored to perform a concert at the palace, but not while the guests were having dinner.

In the following seven years, Vaziri remained largely absent from the front line of musical activity, where his presence had been so dominant during the previous ten years. This period allowed him more time for research and composition. Moreover, in 1936, the governing board of the University of Tehran appointed Vaziri to the newly-created chair of aesthetics. It was in this position that he demonstrated the remarkable versatility and breadth of his cultural attainment. He gave lectures not only on aesthetics in music and arts, but also on history of art and architecture. Vaziri retained his professorship at the University until his retirement in 1965.



With the abdication of Reżā Shah, subsequent to the invasion and occupation of Persia by the Allied forces in September 1941, and the succession of Moḥammad-Reżā Shah to the throne, once again Vaziri rose to prominence. During the preceding seven years, the state music school, now called *Honarestān-e musiqi*, under directorship of Ġolām-Ḥosayn Minbāšiān, had been purged of its Persian music subjects. It had become primarily a school geared to the study of Western classical music, with emphasis on performance, on the model of European conservatories (Kāleqi, III, p. 79). In 1941 Vaziri was reinstated as the head of this Conservatory and courses on Persian music and musical instruments were reintroduced. He was also asked to take charge of the music department of the recently established Tehran Radio. A third position that was offered him was the headship of music office within the Ministry of Education, with the brief to oversee music education throughout the country.

Vaziri's re-entry into musical limelight did not last long. By 1946, political upheaval, in the aftermath of World War II, resulted, once again, in his removal from the headship of the Music Conservatory and the music office in the Ministry of Education. Although he maintained some contact with Tehran Radio and his compositions were often heard on the air, as he approached his 60th year, Vaziri effectively retired from public life. He continued with his seminars on aesthetics and art history at the University of Tehran and lived long enough to witness the revolution of 1978-79, the fall of monarchy, and the beginnings of the Islamic Republic. The stringent policies initially adopted by the clerical regime, as regards music and its place in society, must have sat very painfully with Vaziri. Sadly, he did not live to see that these policies were gradually moderated, and that the public enthusiasm for musical activity rendered any remaining restriction ineffectual. He died in his home, on the slopes of the Alborz mountains north of Tehran, on 9 September 1979, aged 92.

By all accounts, Vaziri was an extraordinary figure, quite unique among Persian musician of the 20th century. From his youth he displayed forceful personal characteristics; he was uncompromising, resolute, forthright, and courageous. An enormously energetic man, he was never idle and kept a rigid daily work schedule. He was fond of sports and made a habit of daily physical exercise, which he maintained into his old age. As a highly articulate and charismatic man, Vaziri exerted influence on nearly everyone who came in contact with him. This was particularly true of his pupils who held him in great esteem. He was an avid supporter of reform and modernization. From



early life he was drawn to the dynamics of Western civilization and believed that Persia must be rescued from stagnation and backwardness through westernization.

Vaziri first married when he was only nineteen years old. His only surviving offspring, Badr Āfāq (Badri) was born three years later (1909); she married her cousin Ḥosayn-'Ali Mallāḥ, ten years her junior, who was a devoted disciple of Vaziri and became a distinguished scholar of music. At the time of his departure for Europe in 1918, Vaziri and his wife, Aḳtar Kānom, had separated. His second marriage to Odrā Ḥejāzi, a sister of his friend the writer [Moḥammad Ḥejāzi](#), took place in 1937 (Mir 'Ali-Naqi, pp. 577, 582).

Although Vaziri had been deeply moved by the grandeur of Western art music, he remained essentially committed to Persian music. In his view, Persian music had unlimited possibilities for development, but centuries of religious proscription had made it insular and inert. Its salvation and flowering, he firmly believed, had to be achieved through fresh creative output and the application of Western polyphonic techniques.

As a performer of the *tār*, he attained technical prowess on a level unmatched by any of his contemporaries. It must be added, however, that his accent on display of virtuosity represented a departure from the more contemplative performance style of traditional music and was not to everyone's liking. He was also a fluent performer of the *setār*, the violin, and the piano, and was well acquainted with most wind instruments.

Vaziri's most radical, and controversial, musical contribution was the theory of the quarter-tone scale. In a brief chapter on theory, in his first published book, *Dastur-e tār*, and more extensively in *Musiqi-e nazari*, he sets forth the proposition that all the modes of traditional music can be conceived within an octave scale of twenty-four equidistant (tempered) quarter-tones. This concept has no historic precedence in Persia and is not verified by the reality of Persian music. It was proffered with the intention of accommodating the application of Western harmony to musical compositions within Persian modes. For his quarter-tone scale, Vaziri derives justification from the fact that Persian modes employ, in addition to the semi-tone and the whole-tone, intervals that lie in between the two. He postulates that these intervals are equal to a three-fourths tone, disregarding the fact that they are highly unstable and almost never fall exactly halfway in between the semi-tone and the whole-tone. More remarkably, while Vaziri recognizes that the quarter-



tone, by itself, has no place in Persian music (Mir 'Ali Naqi, p. 297), he insists on taking it as the basic unit with which his twenty-four-tone-scale is constructed. Unfortunately, Vaziri's profession of the quarter-tone theory has planted, in the minds of many of his followers, to this day, the unsupportable notion that Persian music is founded on quarter-tones.

Works. Vaziri's creative output include books and articles, musical compositions, and recordings.

Books. *Dastur-e tār* (Berlin, 1922) is the first known publication of its kind pertaining to the study of a Persian musical instrument. It contains a brief chapter on the theory of Persian music according to the quartet-tone scale discussed above, while the main part provides a series of graded exercises and pieces written for the *tār* in Western notation.

Dastur-e jadid-e tār (Tehran, 1936) is a collection of more graded pieces for advanced studies of the *tār*, including many of Vaziri's own compositions.

Dastur-e violon, (2 vols., Tehran, 1933-37), a book of graded exercises and pieces for the violin.

Musiqi-e nazari (3 vols., Tehran, 1934). The first volume is an introduction to Western musical notation, tonalities, and their scales. The second volume covers the theory of Persian modes, explaining the structure of *Dastgāh* and *āvāz* system according to the author's quarter-tone theory. Here, Vaziri introduces some modifications to the traditional classifications; for example, he recognizes not seven, but only five *dastgāhs* (Šur, Segāh, Čahārgāh, Homāyun, and Māhur) and refers to the remaining two (Navā and Rāst-Panjgāh) and the five secondary *dastgāhs* (Abu 'Aṭā, Dašti, Bayāt-e Tork, and Afšāri) not as *āvāz*, but as *nağma*. He also makes alterations in the scale of *Bayāt-eEsfahān*, in order to make it correspond with the harmonic minor scale of Western music. The third volume is concerned with the theory of Western music and the principles of harmony.

Sorudhā-ye madāres (Tehran, 1933), a collection of anthems, composed by the author, for use in primary schools. He is also the author of a book on aesthetics (*Zibā-šenāsi dar honar wa ṭabi'at*, Tehran, 1950) and another one on the history of visual arts (*Tāriḳ-e 'omumi-e honarhā-ye mošawwar, qabl az tāriḳ tā Eslām*, Tehran, 1961).

Vaziri's unpublished works include a book on "Instrumentation," a book on



“Harmony in Persian music,” “Advanced exercises for the study of violin,” “Advanced exercises for the study of *tār*,” and “Exercises for the study of *setār*.”

Articles. A collection of four of Vaziri’s lectures, given at the Club Musical, under the title of *Dar ‘ālam-e musiqi wa šan‘at*, was edited and published as a booklet by Sa‘id Nafisi in 1925.

In addition to the article on fine arts, referred to above, published in *Majalla-ye armaġān* (Berlin, 1923), Vaziri wrote a series of articles on the issue of harmony in Persian music and four articles on theatre arts. They were all published in *Majalla-ye musiqi* in 1941-42.

A collection of Vaziri’s unpublished short articles, some of his professional letters and interviews, plus editor’s commentary were collated, edited, and published by Sayyed ‘Ali-Rezā Mir-‘Ali-Naqi, under the title: *Musiqi-nāma-ye Vaziri* (Tehran, 1999).

Compositions. It is very difficult to account for the exact number of Vaziri’s musical compositions. All of his books on study methods of musical instrument (violin, *tār*, and *setār*) contain numerous pieces that he wrote for these instruments. They are mostly short pieces geared to the student’s need at various levels in the learning process. He also wrote a number of occasion-pieces such as anthems, hymns, and marches, such as *Sorud-e mehr-e Irān*, *Sorud-e ey waṭan*, *Mārš-e varzeškārān*, and *Mārš-e madāres*.

His songs (*taṣnif*), on classical, or contemporary poetry, in various Persian modes, are perhaps his most important compositions. These are artfully composed pieces with marked attention to the emotional content of the text as reflected in music. In each of them, melodic references to one of the *dastgāhs* establish a bond with traditional music; at the same time, a thin harmonic underpinning gives the piece a light polyphonic texture. This merger of Persian modality with elements of harmony and counterpoint represents Vaziri’s cautious approach to the objective of modernizing native music through the application of Western compositional techniques.

Vaziri also composed incidental music for a number of plays which went under the heading of operetta. He is reputed to have written a few symphonic movements (Sepantā, 1990, p. 148), but apparently they were never performed.

Notable among his purely instrumental compositions are pieces for *tār* solo and *tār* duets. These compositions are heavily imbued with Western mannerisms, devised to display virtuosity and technical dexterity. Use of large leaps, double stops, chords, runs in parallel thirds, all alien to traditional Persian music, characterize works such as: *Bandbāz* (Acrobat) and *Žimnāstik muzikāl* (Musical gymnastics). In his duets for two *tārs*, he employs contrapuntal devices such as imitation, inversion, and canon.

During the 1920s and 1930s, some thirty seven 78rpm recordings were made, and were commercially marketed, containing compositions (mostly *taṣnifs* and *soruds*) by Vaziri (Sepantā, 1990, p. 147). Included were also a number of *tār* solos of his own compositions, as well as improvisations in various Persian modes. Many of Vaziri's vocal pieces, and solo performances on the *tār*, were recorded for radio broadcasts. Some of these, presumably, have been preserved in the archives of Tehran Radio.

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

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