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On the Unity of Persian Arts

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In Persian culture, the arts are not so clearly delimited as they are in the West. They seem to stem from an inner disposition and a perception of the world which can be expressed in different forms such as poetry, calligraphy, painting or music. This paper will point to some esthetic and structural specificities that are shared by music, poetry and miniature, and that can probably be traced back to the early Safavi period during which musicians believe that the *radif* took shape.

Space and frame

a. Miniature and *radif*

I will start to parallel on the one hand the miniature as the most completed and sophisticated pictorial form, and on the other hand, the most classical musical genre, based on the *radif*, the canonical repertory whose origin goes back to three or four centuries.

- The miniature is not exposed, is not posted, it is preserved from the light and the eyes between the pages of a book, it has no public life, and remains the privilege of a few amateurs. It is designed to be contemplated by one, two or three people at the same time, not more.

- Persian music, shared a similar statute, at least until the middle of the 20th century. Its space was the convivial evening party; one smoothened the lights for a better concentration, by taking care that the neighbors could not be aware that a concert was happening.

A nice proverb expresses it: for the *setâr*, two listeners, is not enough, but three is already too much. Dr Dariush Safvat has developed the concept of “principle of proximity” as a characteristic of Persian esthetics. The miniature has to be watched from a very close distance, preferably with a magnifier. Persian music is not conceived for concert halls, but for an assembly of amateurs; its instruments are not powerful like the Chinese or European ones.

b. Fresco and compositions

Of course, there was another form of painting: the fresco, which decorated not only the palaces, but also sometimes private houses, and which was therefore exposed to the sight. This genre corresponds to the “open” aspect of Persian music. I do not mean the instruments and the repertoire

designed for outdoor festivities and parades, but the extended traditional ensembles, as we can see in ottoman miniatures, with lutes, viola, cithara, flute, several percussions, etc.

To this category corresponds the traditional song genre, the *tasnif*, which was composed and written for special circumstances by the Masters of the safavi court; the tunes for dance accompaniment fit also in this category. It is known that dances were real shows extending over one hour or two, ending by acrobatic feats, as they are still represented, two centuries later, in Qâjâr painting. So there was also a kind of music whose space, like that of the fresco, was public or semi-public, since the dance shows were given to honor the visitors and the ambassadors. This entertainment music is the equivalent of the fresco, which naturally, represents often these concerts and choreographies given for foreign visitors.

We do not know up to which point the great masters had to contribute to this genre, but at the qâjâr time, their status was much higher than those who were just accompanying or training the dancers. As for the *tasnif*, it corresponds nowadays to the easy, extraverted and more popular aspect of the classical music, and therefore it is widely broadcasted. So I am going back now to the *radif* style that I consider the most representative of the great musical art, the parallel of which, at the top of Persian visual arts, stands the miniature.

The central place of poetry

Before elaborating on the analogies between music and miniature, we must keep in mind the central place of poetry among all the arts. Poetry provides subject matter for the calligrapher, a theme to illustrate for the painter, a text to sing or a rhythmic pattern for the musicians. Calligraphy provides the main decorative motifs to architecture and minor arts like metalwork. It blossoms in the art of text illumination (*tabzîb*) the equivalent of which -that is instrumental embroidery on a vocal line- is very important in music performance.

Poetry has two aspects: temporal and spatial, that is acoustic (the declamation) and visual (its transcription). Poetry is actualized in calligraphy, which — on a technical plan— is at the root of painting and the graphic arts. In return, the painters find their subjects in epic poetry or in the lyrical *ghazal*. As for the temporal, performative and acoustics aspect of poetry, it blossoms not in the declamation, but indeed in singing. Now for semantic and technical reasons, song is in the same relation to music as calligraphy is to painting.

In Persia like in China, the paintbrush of the miniaturist is the sublimation of the *kalam*. Painting arises from drawing, and drawing stems from writing. In the same way, the playing of instruments is reflecting the singing style which is the case in many traditions. The continuum: poetry - song - instrumental skill is the axis of tradition; separate them, as it is the tendency

for more than half a century in Iran, and you run the risk to break with tradition.

POETRY —> CALLIGRAPHY —> PAINTING

POETRY —> IMAGES —> PAINTING

POETRY —> CHANTING —> INSTRUMENTAL IMITATION

On another level, we find strong affinities between the *radif* and the *ghazal*. These affinities are natural since the *radif* is originally a model for chanting *ghazal* through a sequence of modal figures or melodic types called *gushe*. It is probably during the Safavi period that this sequentialisation of modal melodies or pattern developed. The treatises give many lists of chains of modal types, starting from one mode, and going back to it after a series of modulations.

The first level of correspondence between *radif* and poetry is structural: ideally, each distich (*beyt*); is sung in one *gushe*, that is why, within a mode (*âvâz*, *maqâm*, *mâye*), most of the *gushe*-s end with the same conclusion (*forud*). This conclusion may be more or less varied, or just the same. The parallel is obvious between the recurrent conclusive motive and the rhyme (*qâfiye*) which remain the same at the end of each *beyt*, throughout a *ghazal*.

On another level of affinity, we notice that:

– The constitutive unity of the poem is provided by the distich. The distich is a self-sufficient sentence.

– The constitutive unity of the mode (*dastgâh*) is the *gushe*, a modal structure or an autonomous melodic line which stands by itself, though it has a specific position in the unfolding of the performance.

– Being autonomous units, the *beyt*-s do not have a logical link, so the whole poem often appears as lacking coherence. Except the first and the last *beyt*-s, it seems possible to modify the sequences of the *beyt*-s. Actually, in the different *oral* versions of a poem, the *beyt*-s are sometimes inverted, without the unity being affected.

– Parallely, there is no logical link between the *gushe*-s, apart (in most cases) from a modal relationship. Here too, the introductive and the conclusive *gushe* must be at their place, and it up to a point it is possible in a performance to modify the order of the other *gushe*-s. Their order as well as their number vary from one school to another. As a result, the performance, specially when purely instrumental may apparently lack some coherence.

To sum up, the work of the poet, according to a Hafez's metaphor, is to polish pearls and to string them to form a necklace

— The same applies to the *gushe*-s and the melodic figures.

About more technical affinities, I will not elaborate much. It is well known that the *gushe*-s is to a great extent shaped on the metric of the poems; they follow the stretchable prosodic patterns of the verses. Of course some

gushe are said to be purely instrumental, but recently some singers, like Asgari Farahâni and Mohsen Karâmati have given vocal renditions of the *târ-setâr radif* of Mirzâ Abdollâh, proving that the link between instrumental and vocal style is more tight than one thought.

A poem displays 2 or 3 rhythmic levels: the strict meter itself *fa'elatun fa'elatun*, the same meter performed more freely (ex. *man tar-ke 'eshq osâghar nemikonam*), and the actual rhythm of the speech (ex. *sadbâr-towbe-kardam // odigarnemikonam*). In the same way the *gushe*-s display several rhythmic layers: the apparently free one, the metric parts it includes, which are stretchable, and what I am calling the breath, the flow, which gives a sense of regular waves in spite the non measured shape of the *gushe*-s.

Motivic aesthetic

a. Clichés

I would like to underline a very important characteristic by which Persian *radif*-style performance demarcates itself from neighbor *maqâm* traditions. This characteristic is shared by poetry and miniature as well:

—In poetry, the elements of vocabulary, the metaphors, the symbols and rhetoric figures composing the *beyt*-s are largely drawn from a limited and conventional repertoire and are constantly repeated with variants.

If you have to compose a love *ghazal* in the academic style, you would pick up images from a stock of standards, such as *cheshm-e jâdu*, *zolf-e parishân*, *âbru kamân*, *sarv-e qâmat*, *cheshm-e kbomâr*, *sham' o parvâne*, etc.

If you want to compose a miniature, once the overall sketch (*tarh*) is set up, you have to draw among a stock of figures and motives and arrange them in a balanced way. You will choose a cypress, a grenade tree, a bush, then dispatch some grass tuft, animals such as gazelles or horses, men and women with Mongol faces, etc. There are standards and norms to sketch all these figures: even for a flower or a leaf, you have to conform to the canons established by the Ancients, which are not based on a realistic observation of nature.

From Maghreb to middle-East, the *maqâm* performance strategy, mainly in the improvisatory style (the *taqsim*) can be described this way: you follow a modal development with melodic motives going up and down, you target a tone on which to settle and rest, and from it you shift to another mode, and so on. This level, which can be called the itinerary (*seyr*), is a characteristic of Turkish and Arabic style, which is also found up to a point in Persian music. But what is much more important in the Persian (and Azerbaijani) classic school, is to expose and to chain the little compositions called *gushe*. The interpretation of a modal system, a *dastgâh* or *âvâz*, can feature between 4 to 30 *gushe*-s and sub-*gushe*-s, according to its duration. In Iran we have 2 or 300 of

these *gushe*-s, or more, in Azerbaijan around 150. In other *maqâm* tradition, there are no *gushe*-s but each *maqâm* can be developed by wandering through several other *maqâm*-s, allowing a greater modal freedom. There, creativity is mainly the ability to open unexpected paths and discover connections between *maqâm*-s. Here, in Iran, creativity is mainly the skillfulness and the elegance in the interpretation of the *gushe*-s, which, I repeat, are not only “compositions” but also a plastic substance which can be mould and shaped in infinite ways, yet remaining recognizable.

This classical approach which was the norm until the middle of the 20th century, tends to loose ground in front of new trends in search of more freedom and less constraints. Most of the present day’s performances are not anymore made up of interpretations or paraphrases of a set of *gushe*-s, but are following the Turkish-Arabic approach, except that the modal itineraries are rarely original. The same stands true for Azerbaijani *mugham*: brilliant and creative musicians admit their limited knowledge of the *gushe* and *sho’be* system, though they still use a lot of micro-melodies or figures about which I will talk later. Free improvisation in the *taqsim* style, was the approach of a few respected master like Ahmad Ebâdi who told me one day something like: “I knew all these *gushe*-s, then I forgot them, and now I’m playing what I want”.

So we have now in Iran two main performance approaches: the *paraphrasic* one, and the *free* one, sometimes called *shirin navâzi* or fantasy style, which can be labelled more positively: *taqsim* style.

The same split appeared in miniature painting: some still reinterpret the ancient canons, at the risk to produce mere copy and *artisanal* (craftmen) imitations, others get rid of all the classical motives and use their drawing skill and technique to produce new forms, that are often of a disputable taste or artistic value, as it is the case of the musical “*taqsim* style”. In both miniature and musical new trends, the style tends to extravagance, to barocco, a new way to fill up space with drawing or melodic lines.

Between these two approaches, there is still an alternative way. It is not proved that all the *qâjâr* masters had memorized a *radif*, that is a set of 2-300 well-defined *gushe*-s. A musician trained in a deep musical environment, could have in mind only approximate images of the *gushe*-s (maybe not all, but at least the most important ones), and that was enough to give *radif*-style performances. It seems that it was the case of the *santur* masters: Sorur ol Molk, Aqa Mutallib and Somâ’i. (At another level, we can quote the famous Esfahâni *târ* player Jalil Shahnâz; like Ostâd Ebâdi, he had a mental image of the main *gushe*-s, but not a precise teaching version, that’s why these musicians could hardly teach and train students.)

b. Micro motives

Now, if it is possible to remain faithful to the classical style without a thorough knowledge of the *gushe*, it is because, at a lower level of organization,

the *radif* can be characterized by an abundant stock of minimal motives that are up to a point the substance of a *gushe*.

I mean that a *gushe* is not only a simple melody like that of a *tasnif* or *pishdarâmad* freed from measure constraints, it is made up of melodic-metric or ornamental chunks, comparable to the clichés found in poetry and miniature. These micro-motives or ornamental elements appear in different modal and melodic contexts, and various arrangements.

In my view, it is not the melodic line of an instrumental performance which defines its Persian character as opposed to other Turkish, Azerbaijani or Arabic styles; it is these instrumental chunks, or micro-motives. You can build a consistent improvisation just by inserting them in a general modal frame, without even clearly exposing any *gushe*, and still it will be Persian music. Reversely, if you follow the classical rules of modal development, but without featuring the *gushe*-s or at least these chunks, the result will be just something we can call “oriental fantasy”. In our days this approach is prevailing, whereas in the new Turkish ‘*ud* style we witness more and more borrowings from the Persian and Azeri style of *târ* playing.

Here are a few examples:

Maybe the minimal sub-motive is the *riz*, a kind of ornament which is found in many lute styles of various cultures, in order to maintain the resonance of a string. Yet the Persian *riz* is very specific and has no equivalent in other stringed instrument traditions.



The *riz* on 2 strings is typical too, but we find it in the Indian *sarod* and the uyghur *rawap*, plucked instruments which has some historical links with the *târ*. It is used mainly in *chahârmezrâb* sequences.



The *dorâb* is a quite wide spread ornament of plucked instruments, but the contrast between the short notes and the long and main note is very important.



The *shalâl* is a more complex motive:



The *tekîe* is less specific and can be found in Middle Eastern schools, but when it is displayed on extended motives, it gives what is called *tabrir*, a typical melismatic sequence and vocal ornament found only in Iran, Azerbaijan.



Other examples :



These figures have no name (except for instance Mohammad Sâdeq Khâni, Hâji Kuchak, Hâji Hasani, *chahârmezrâb* which are less short). They can appear in any modal context, like chameleons. Sometimes they give birth to a real *gushe*, but still without specific modal assignation; for instance the metro-rhythmic figures Baste-negâr, Hazin or Maghlub which appears in many *âvâz*-s and *dastgâh*-s. Anyway, this was just a short clue. A systematic approach could list a few dozen of these examples which are the constitutive elements of the traditional persian radif style.

c. Hand technique: *mezrâb* and *qalam*

Most of these *radif* sub-motives rely upon a hand or finger technique which demands a certain skill. Even the apparently simple *riz*, is difficult to master with its accent and release. It includes a short silence, and is shaped in a way comparable to the drawing of a *bâ* letter with a *qalam*, that is, the thickness of the line is variable as is the intensity of the tremolo. In the *setâr*, —an instrument that is probably at the origin of other instrument techniques—, we find many tricks to pluck the strings in different ways which shed various light

on the notes. That is: one does not simply select a note, like one strikes a keyboard key, very often, the note is preceded and followed by a mist of sounds from the resonating opened strings. This provides a specific dynamic to the main tones of the melody and generates a hierarchic perception of sounds: some are salient, some are silent or faint, some are stressed, and some are mere allusions.

The technical tool on which relies this esthetic is the fingernail (*nâkbon*) or the plectrum (*mezrâb*): when plucked from above, the sound of the string is not the same as from below. This slight nuance is used to shape the melody in a binary system, in the same way as in calligraphy where the up-down and right-left directions of the *qalam* draw thin or bold lines. At this level too appears a striking connection between calligraphy and instrument playing. The idea, the mental image is not sufficient to account for this esthetic: in these arts, as well as in miniature, the gesture, the hand or fingers' movement is essential as well.

Of course, we are referring here to the classic style. In the modern trend, these subtleties tend to disappear. Imagine calligraphy made with a ball-pen, and you will have an idea of the new instrumental style in Iran.

(Yet even in modern Iranian painting, calligraphy has been an essential source of inspiration. After a figurative period in which Iranian painting was cut off from its roots, the natural way to reboot creativity and retrieve a cultural identity (at least for a while) was to investigate the potentialities of calligraphy, and to adapt it to a new pictorial grammar, an achievement of painters like Reza Mâfi and Hoseyn Zenderoudi.

Compulsion for filling up

Other shared characters could be underlined between music and the visual arts, notably between the development structure of the *radif* and the architectural structures as they reveal themselves in time. A walk in a bazaar follows the same patterns than a melodic-rhythmic itinerary (*sayr*) (see During 1982).

To conclude this short survey, I will point to some aesthetic points which may be a bit banal, that's why I'll just allude to them.

First is what some called "the horror of void" or better said "the compulsion for filling up" that provides its density to the miniature and decorative arts, as well as to music with its abundance of micro-ornaments that one does not find elsewhere, except perhaps in North India, which is not a mere coincidence. (Remember that there too, the art of Persian miniature, as well as poetry *-sabk-e hendi-* have blossomed).

Let's quote also the taste for brilliancy: the luminous colors, the absence of shadow (all motives appear in full light), the abundant use of mirrors in decoration (notably since the qâjâr era during which appear new forms as well

as a new musical tradition). All that finds an echo in the Iranian taste for clear and high pitched voices and for metallic sound, a taste which led to the disappearance of the gut and silk strings instruments like the *'ud* and the harp.

The withdraw of the subject

As a conclusion, I'll say two words about the "trans-personal" character of traditional arts which put aside the individual ego, or confines it within very narrow norms.

Persian music has not much to tell us regarding human feelings, drama or personal passion; its message is universal, it talks about love, desire, separation and union. The scenes of the miniature, even when they figure fight and battles, do not express any passion; the lunar faces of the heroes do not betray any affect, and in a corner of the sheet of paper, you see a shepherd totally foreign to the events, playing a flute or lute. This perspective has been called "the divine view point on the world", a theme that was admirably documented by Orhan Pamuk in his book *My name is Red*.

The same applies to Persian music: its emotional potential must be surpassed, sublimated, in order to enjoy its meditative, mystical or sapience dimension. If it may appear sad, it is actually not; not more than miniature. The flow of sounds, the intensity of the stream and the density of ornamentation is implemented, as to stun the ears and finally to pull up the listener above his ordinary affects. The debate remains open between those for whom music must elevate the subject above realism and illusory agitation for a better deployment of its beauties, and those who, in the line of Western expressionism, think that it should transmit a human message. Human, too human.