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Roozbeh Nafisi

MA, final year PhD candidate, Departments of Ethnomusicology and Musical Acoustics,
University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna (Vienna, Austria)

ORCID ID: 0009-0000-0860-8924

email: rozbehn@yahoo.com

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Article

Santur-Playing Iranian Americans in Northern California



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Keywords: santur, Iranian Americans, Northern California, diaspora discourse in ethnomusicology, improvisation, Radif.

Abstract. In Northern California, there are Iranian Americans who play santur, originally a representative instrument of Iranian music. The present article focuses on this community, taking the following issues under consideration:

- What are the aesthetic conceptions of Iranian santurs and their sounds, held by santur-playing Iranian Americans in Northern California?
- What are the social applications of Iranian santurs in Northern California?

Regarding methods, participatory study in the field served as the basis for this work. Partners of the study took part in intensive interviews, and also shared their opinions on various music samples. Literary investigation was also applied, clarifying the necessary historical and social backgrounds. My particular interest in santur led me to conduct this work. An aspect of it lies in underlining of diaspora discourse in ethnomusicology. Although there are strong ties between Iranian santur practitioners in Iran and santur-playing Iranian Americans in Northern California, the latter group has its own distinctive social identity and follows its concerns. Their repertoire goes beyond Iranian music as understood in Iran: it includes folk music and takes influences from neighboring minorities, such as Indian Americans. Regarding social applications of santur in Northern California, this study focuses on two main trends: political motivations, and interest in establishing dialogues with neighboring cultures. In both cases, the role of Radif-inspired improvisation is strongly present. In Northern California, the santur is used by various segments of the society. This practice sometimes goes beyond the Iranian American community. As this study focuses on a specific practice of santur away from the instrument's original homeland, its outcomes can contribute not only to ethnomusicology, but also to areas of diaspora studies, music history, and such creative directions as music performance and improvisation.

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Рузбех Нафиси

Өнер магистрі, Вена музыка және орындаушылық өнер университетінің этномузыкатану және музыкалық акустика факультетінің докторанты (Вена, Австрия)

ORCID ID: 0009-0000-0860-8924

email: rozbehn@yahoo.com

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Солтүстік Калифорниядағы ирандық американдықтардың сантурда ойнау тәжірибесі

Тірек сөздер: сантур, ирандық американдықтар, Солтүстік Калифорния, этномузыкатанудағы диаспора дискурсы, импровизация, радиф.

Аңдатпа. Солтүстік Калифорнияда сантур ирандық музыкалық аспабында ойнайтын ирандық американдықтар тұрады. Бұл мақала осы қауымдастыққа арналған және келесі екі сұрақты қарастырады:

- Солтүстік Калифорниядағы ирандық американдықтар ойыншыларының ирандық сантурлар және оның дыбысы туралы эстетикалық түсініктері қандай?
- Солтүстік Калифорниядағы ирандық сантурлардың әлеуметтік қолданысы қандай?

Бұл жұмыстың негізі бірлескен зерттеулер болды. Зерттеу серіктестері қарқынды сұхбаттарға қатысып, әртүрлі музыкалық үлгілер бойынша өз пікірлерімен бөлісті. Әдеби зерттеулер де жүргізілді, бұл қажетті тарихи-әлеуметтік дереккөздерді нақтылауға мүмкіндік берді. Мені осы зерттеуге сантурға деген ерекше қызығушылығым итермеледі. Зерттеу қырларының бірі этномузыкатанудағы диаспора дискурсына ерекше назар аудару болды. Ирандағы сантур ойыншылары мен Солтүстік Калифорниядағы сантур ирандық американдықтар ойыншылары арасында тығыз байланыс болғанымен, соңғы топтың өзіндік әлеуметтік болмысы мен мүдделері бар. Олардың репертуары Иранда түсінілетін ирандық музыкамен шектелмейді: тек ирандық халық музыкасы ғана емес, сонымен қатар үнділік американдықтар сияқты көрші этникалық азшылықтардан алынған. Солтүстік Калифорниядағы сантурдың әлеуметтік қолданылуына қатысты бұл зерттеу екі негізгі тенденцияға бағытталған: саяси мотивтер және көрші мәдениеттермен диалог орнатуға қызығушылық. Екі жағдайда да радифпен шабыттандырылған импровизацияның рөлі айқын. Солтүстік Калифорнияда сантурды қоғамның әртүрлі топтары пайдаланады. Кейде бұл тәжірибе ирандық-американдық қауымдастықтың шеңберінен шығып кетеді. Бұл зерттеу өз елінен тыс жерлерде сантурдың нақты тәжірибесіне бағытталғандықтан, оның нәтижелері тек этномузыкатану ғана емес, диаспоратану, музыка тарихына және музыкалық орындаушылық пен импровизация сияқты шығармашылық салаларға да үлес қосуы мүмкін.

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Рузбех Нафиси

Магистр искусств, докторант факультета этномузыковедения и музыкальной акустики
Венского университета музыки и исполнительского искусства (Вена, Австрия)

ORCID ID: 0009-0000-0860-8924

email: rozbehn@yahoo.com

Статья

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Практика игры на сантуре американцев иранского происхождения в Северной Калифорнии

Ключевые слова: сантур, американцы иранского происхождения, Северная Калифорния, дискурс диаспоры в этномузыковедении, импровизация, радиф.

Аннотация. В Северной Калифорнии проживают американцы иранского происхождения, которые играют на сантуре – своеобразном иранском музыкальном инструменте. Настоящая статья посвящена этому сообществу и рассматривает следующие вопросы:

- эстетические представления об иранских сантурах и их звучании, которых придерживаются играющие на них американцы иранского происхождения в Северной Калифорнии;
- социальное применение иранских сантуров в Северной Калифорнии.

Основой для данной работы послужили совместные исследования. Партнеры по исследованию приняли участие в интенсивных интервью, а также поделились своим мнением о различных музыкальных образцах. Были проведены литературные исследования, которые позволили уточнить необходимые исторические и социальные источники. Особый интерес автора статьи к сантуру побудил провести данное исследование. Одним из его аспектов является особое внимание к дискурсу диаспоры в этномузыковедении. Хотя существует тесная связь между исполнителями сантура в Иране и американцами иранского происхождения, играющими на нем в Северной Калифорнии, последняя группа имеет свою особую социальную идентичность и придерживается своих интересов. Их репертуар выходит за рамки иранской музыки в том виде, в каком ее понимают в Иране: он включает в себя не только иранскую народную музыку, но также перенимает ее у соседних этноменьшинств, таких как, например, американцы индийского происхождения. Что касается социального применения сантура в Северной Калифорнии, то в этом исследовании основное внимание уделяется двум основным тенденциям: политическим мотивам и заинтересованности в установлении диалога с соседними культурами. В обоих случаях очевидна роль импровизации, вдохновленной радифом. В Северной Калифорнии сантур используется различными слоями общества. Иногда эта практика выходит за рамки ирано-американского сообщества. Поскольку это исследование сосредоточено на конкретной практике использования сантура вне его родины, его результаты могут внести вклад не только в этномузыковедение, но и в изучение диаспоры, историю музыки и такие творческие направления, как музыкальное исполнительство и импровизация.

Introduction

This writing provides a view of santur-playing Iranian Americans in Northern California, who constitute a minority in the USA having their own distinctive social identity. The repertoire they employ stretches beyond Iranian music as understood inside Iran. This study considers the following issues:

1. What are the aesthetic conceptions of Iranian santurs and their sounds, held by santur-playing Iranian Americans in Northern California?
2. What are the social applications of Iranian santurs in Northern California?

Regarding methods, participatory study in the field served as the basis for this work. Partners of this study took part in intensive interviews, also shared their opinions on various music samples (listening tests). Literary investigation was applied as well, clarifying the necessary historical and social backgrounds. Wherever relevant, reflections on my experiences as a santur-playing Iranian American who lived, played, and taught in Northern California (1999–2008) were also incorporated. My particular interest in santur, the instrument I play since childhood, led me to conduct this work, on the side of my dissertation on santur.

Backgrounds: Santur, Iran, Northern California, Iranian Americans

Santur, a representative instrument of Iranian music, is a wooden trapezoidal chordophone played by wooden mallets (see Fig. 1).

Iran, the homeland of santur, is a country in the Middle East. The domain of Iranian cultures lies beyond Iran's current geopolitical boundaries. This is because, over the course of its millennia of history, Iran has gathered different cultures under its domain, where they have been able to spread and merge¹.

To explain the meaning of santur-playing Iranian Americans in Northern California, I would first like to break down this term into its exponents. I suppose it is relatively clear what is meant by a santur player: a person who plays santur. I am not concentrating here only on professional santur players. I am also considering students and amateur players of this instrument.

What is meant here by Iranian Americans is a group of people who are of Iranian heritage and live in the United States of America. They are both American and Iranian

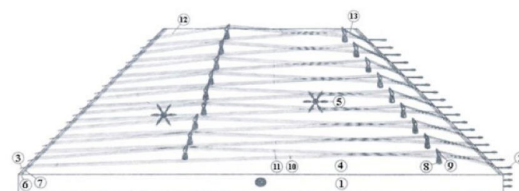


Figure 1. A "General Schema of the Santur" (Payvar 55).

at the same time. However, they have their very own cultural characteristics as well, which are different from those of other Americans and the people living in Iran. Many of them celebrate national and cultural festivals of both the USA and Iran. For example, many Iranian-born Americans celebrate *Norooz* (the Iranian New Year celebration at the vernal equinox,

1 "Still today, one should speak of not one but three Iranian states: apart from the Islamic Republic of Iran, Tajikistan and Afghanistan are both officially Persian-speaking and culturally Iranian. Uzbekistan has a large albeit mostly unrecognized Persian-speaking population [...]. The Kurds, who are spread out over half a dozen countries [...] are also part of the larger Iranian group, as are the Baluch of Iran and Pakistan, the Pushtuns of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the Ossetes and the Tats of Caucasus. Further afield, Iranian ideas and practices shaped those of cultures from Balkans to India and China until quite recent times" (Foltz xii).

according to the old Persian calendar) as well as Thanksgiving (a national holiday of the USA) in personalized ways. They have specific dialects and accents in speaking Farsi and English, contributing to an identity sometimes described as “Iranian in America and American in Iran” (Whitlock 13).

Northern California starts in the far north of the state and extends to the end of the San Jose region in the south. The major cities in this region are San Francisco, Sacramento, San Jose, Oakland, Stockton, Modesto, Fresno, Chico and Eureka. The federal government of the USA estimates that of the less than two million Iranian Americans living in the USA, about 40% live in California. However, there seem to be no exact statistics available on the number of Iranian Americans of Northern California among the 15.3 million Northern Californians. The main communities of Iranian Americans in Northern California are located in the San Francisco Bay Area, Sacramento and San Jose. They are growing steadily as more and more Iranians from Iran join them despite all immigration and political obstacles. “Even today many bright young Iranians are leaving for the USA” (Raji 193).

As it seems to be a common tendency in the Iranian diaspora around the world², the majority of members of Iranian American communities in Northern California are economically prosperous. “The Iranian-American population is well-educated, with six times the national average of doctoral degrees, and well-off, with 40 percent higher per capita income than the national average” (Larsen 26). In such administrative centers as the city of Sacramento, many Iranian American technocrats serve as government employees. Many of them also work as academics in university towns such as Davis. In San Francisco, there are many Iranian American technicians who work in the IT industry. This financial prosperity has supported music, including santur music, to serve as a cultural component.

Issues under Consideration

1) What are the aesthetic conceptions of Iranian santurs and their sounds, held by santur-playing Iranian Americans in Northern California?

Identifying Iranian santurs and their communities in Northern California would become possible through understanding the social, cultural and historical coordination of the Iranian American communities in Northern California. It would be helpful to know where these people come from and what their original motivations were for leaving Iran and settling in Northern California. It would be important to understand how the history and social life of these people are reflected in their music.

2) What are the social applications of Iranian santurs in Northern California?

Like a seed planted in another earth and climate, Iranian music in Northern California keeps developing in new directions in different ways than it has already experienced in its Iranian homeland. The Iranian santur music had to interact with the conditions, demands and expectations of the new society, so that after overcoming challenges, it could eventually feel at home in Northern California.

² Another interesting instance is the somewhat similar case in Austria: “[...] there are more than 40 thousand Iranians in a country where they are the most elite group in the foreign immigrant nations. It has made Austria an attractive country for Iranian cultural activity” (Movahed and Mohammadi Zadeh 35).

Methods

Participatory study in the field, including interviews and listening tests, served as the basis for this work³. As I was unable to travel due to the demands of the pandemic, I contacted various prospective research partners and asked them if they could contribute through online interviews and listening tests. The contributors who kindly agreed to take part are Faraz Minooei (a professional santur player and teacher), Saeid Bashash (an engineering-academic who is also an advanced santur player in his free time) and an Iranian American from Rancho Cordova (near Sacramento) who wants his name not to be mentioned. The latter person is therefore quoted here as 'Anonymous'. Considering the time difference between Vienna (where I live) and California, one can imagine that the commitment to give interviews and taking part in listening tests would require much dedication, which I sincerely appreciate.

The total duration of the conducted interviews and listening tests is over ten hours. Each of them took shape as following: I contacted the collaborating persons and explained the general idea behind the project. I asked if we could continue with an interview and a listening test. The sessions were realized as video meetings via Skype. I called the contributors, and we had conversations using the Farsi language. I put various parts of the interviews into written words and translated them into English. My personal experience as a teacher and a player of santur among Iranian Americans in Northern California agrees with the results of this project. I believe that this work helps to uncover the social and acoustical profiles of the instrument.

Interview

I presented the considered issues in each interview, as well as the following detailed five questions to clarify the implications:

1. Please provide a brief self-introduction, including how you got involved with santur.
2. In your region, which occasions might commonly include santur performances?
3. Please introduce your region's santur communities (emphasizing on performance, pedagogy and making of the santur).
4. In your region, what are the ensemble settings in which the santur participates?
5. Please describe your region's typical santur repertoires.

Listening Test

I provided each participant with five audio samples, each one about one minute to a few minutes in length. I arranged these samples using largely not very well-known recordings, so that the commentary of the contributor would relate to what is heard, without an influence by knowing the person performing on the recording. After each audio was presented, following questions were asked:

1. Please comment on the type and sound qualities of the santur.
2. What is the possible performance occasion?
3. What are the tuning details?
4. What are the particular performance qualities?

3 Also, I used literary investigation and my own experience as a santur practitioner.

5. Please add any additional remark you might find important regarding the sample.

Details of the Music Samples Used for the Listening Tests:

For the listening tests, I sent five MP3 music segments by e-mail to participants during my Skype conversations with them. In order to ensure that the participants made their comments strictly on the basis of what they would hear on the recorded samples and not be influenced by written information, I marked the five e-mail attachments as "Sample 1", "Sample 2", etc., without giving specific information about each recording.

My intention in selecting these specific fragments as examples for the listening tests was to offer each contributor a variety of different styles of santur playing, even though all of the examples are from recent decades. In this way, the participants' comments could open up wider perspectives on studied questions.

Sample one is a segment of two minutes and twenty-six seconds selected from Mansour Saremi's solo santur performance in the mode titled as "*Bayat-e Esfahan II*" (Saremi 2) from a CD recording. The CD does not contain any information about the type of santur used in the performance. Based on the sound recording, I guess it is a conventional nine-bridge G santur.

Sample two is a segment of two minutes and fifty-one seconds in length, selected from a CD, featuring the recording of a private music event in which only a few people participated (Payvar 2). The participants are among the most renowned masters of their time. On this recording there is also a short talk by an unknown person about performing musicians (this talk is not included in the segment I arranged as the audio sample). I can imagine that this meeting took place around the 1950s in Tehran. On the sample there is santur (played by Famarz Payvar), then singing (sung by Mahmoud Karimi) which is complemented by setar (played by Daryoush Safvat). There is no accompanying percussion, except apparently someone holding the rhythm on a table. The music is in the mode of *Shour*, including a brief modulation to *Bayat-e Tork*. The santur used in this recording is most likely a traditional nine-bridge G one, made by Mehdi Nazemi, a maker from Yazd, as he is one of the people mentioned by the speaker.

Sample three is one minute and eight seconds of Pashang Kamkar's santur playing (Kamkar). It is played in the mode of *Homayoun*. This musical section was selected from a recording made in the santur making workshop of Davoud Shirazi, a maker from Shiraz. Kamkar is testing a nine-bridge G santur produced by him. The date mentioned by Shirazi is August 2018.

Sample four was selected from a recording made by Iranian national television in Tehran (Varzandeh). The date of performance is not included in the recording. Due to the apparent age of the santur player Reza Varzandeh on the video, I suspect that the recording was made around 1970s. A known habit of this celebrated player was to use only his self-made instrument and mallets. Such a santur is easy to recognize here. Its dimensions are larger than conventional santurs'. The mallets used have no rings. In this recording Varzandeh plays in the mode of *Mahoor*, accompanied by an ensemble of Iranian instruments. The duration of this audio sample is two minutes and twenty seconds.

Sample five is a two-minute audio recording of a contemporary santur solo. I played it in 2019 at home in Vienna on a nine-bridge G-santur made of walnut wood by Daryoush Salari, a contemporary santur maker in Tehran. I wanted to expose

participants also to unusual playing techniques and get their input. Therefore, in this recording, I used such extended playing techniques as bowing the santur strings using a violin bow, and applying mallets without felt on a contemporary santur. This recording uses a combination of various modes, including *Abu-Ata* and *Dashti*.

Introducing Participants

The participants, all of whom are Iranian Americans from Northern California who play the santur, come from different backgrounds, as following.

Faraz Minooei is a professional santur player and santur teacher in his late thirties and resides in San Jose area. He places great value on tradition. At the age of nine he began to study santur in Karaj (near Tehran). Since he was fourteen, he studied under santur instructor Behnam Mehrabi. About twenty years ago he immigrated to Northern California. One year before moving to California, he lived in Turkey, where he had the opportunity to review his knowledge of *Radif*⁴ every day in his time alone. After moving to California, he completed his academic education in music, while also receiving further traditional training from masters of Iranian music in California, including Mahmoud Zoufonoun and Mohammadreza Lotfi. He also maintains close contact with colleagues and masters of Iranian music in Iran. He is an active santur educator in the San Jose area. He is also in the process of "giving a course on basics of Iranian music to Google employees" (Minooei). He could be seen as a member of the group of younger masters, as I will explain later.

'Anonymous' is a nickname for one of the participants, who for personal reasons wished for his real name not to be mentioned. He is an amateur santur player who finds the most important aspect of music to be its social side. 'Anonymous' is in his sixties, living in Rancho Cordova (near Sacramento). He was born in Tehran and immigrated from Iran to California about forty years ago, mainly for political reasons. Before moving to Northern California, he had no experience in playing any instrument. In his early fifties, he began studying santur with Roozbeh Nafisi in Sacramento, California. Since then, he dedicated some of his time to play the Radif of Iranian music, learn folk songs from Iran, and improvise with various musicians from other minorities in Northern California. His wish is that one day he can "learn the whole Radif" ('Anonymous'). In this study, he is placed in the pupil's category.

Saeid Bashash is a mechanical engineering academic in his late thirties who has a teaching position at San Jose State University. He is a part-time but advanced santur player with modern tendencies. Saeid Bashash plays santur since his youth, starting in his native Maragheh, a city at East Azerbaijan province, Iran. After finishing secondary school, he moved to Tehran to study for a technical Bachelor's degree. There he also continued to play santur. He emigrated to the USA in his early twenties for an eventual doctoral study. After spending few years on the East Coast of the USA, he moved

to San Jose. Besides santur he also plays tar. Occasionally he gives performances in Northern California. His santur teacher in Northern California is Faraz Minooei. On the one hand, Bashash is an advanced

4 "This music is based on the Persian Radif, an elaborate music system unique to Iran. [...] a series of modal scales and tunes that must be memorized – and is recognized by many as a quintessential Iranian heritage that is beyond ideological or political reproach" (Siamdoust 157).

santur player. On the other hand, he “does not really see himself as a professional santur player” (Bashash) and is motivated to take further santur lessons.

Findings

I start this part with a review of some key social and historical developments within the final decades of the 20th century, including some aftermaths of the 1979 revolution in Iran. I believe a realistic understanding of the communities and applications of santur among Iranian Americans in Northern California would not be possible without an in-depth understanding of these events. Then I share my findings based on interviews and listening tests, while also referring to my experience in Northern California and Iran as necessary.

Social and Historical Facets

The Iranian American minority in Northern California is by no means a very homogeneous population in cultural, political, ideological and economic terms. The Iranian immigrants to Northern California around 1979 and thereafter included royalists whose regime had been overthrown, as well as opponents of that regime and of the settled Islamic Republic. The social classes from which those groups came from are relatively clear. For example, the followers of Marxism came mainly from the working class as well as the intellectual bourgeoisie, some with an interest in the neighboring country of the Soviet Union at that time. It would not be surprising to notice that the types of music practiced or consumed by each of those groups could be very different from the music practiced or consumed by another group. “In fact, the Iranian diaspora in the USA has been a vital intelligentsia in producing powerful ideas about exilic identity that have contributed to debates about multiculturalism, diaspora, hybridity, and transnationalism” (Whitlock 17).

Around 1979 and immediately afterwards, music was an object of politicization under the heavy shadow of the political developments of the time. A few months after the revolution, music was condemned and banned by the Islamic regime⁵. Some of the music would bear the label of being promoter of imperialism, and some would be accused of serving as the opium for the masses, while masses were expected to guard the revolution. Some other music directions would be described by the Islamic state as trivial entertainment to rot the spirits of masses, and therefore their practice would be punished with penalties of the laws of the Islamic Republic. “In today’s Persia, public musical life is non-existent, save for the so-called ‘revolutionary’ music which is in service of the ideology of the state. All traditional musicians who were sustained through employment in radio and television, and as teachers at various schools, are out of work and are suffering intolerable deprivation” (Farhat 121).

In this hodgepodge, instruments such as santur, specialized in the art music of Iran, which formerly were court instruments, were condemned as instruments of the royalists which with their opium-like effects on listeners and practitioners would prevent the masses from remaining active revolutionaries. Such condemnations by the Islamic regime provoked reactions among the Iranian people, especially the younger

5 “Music is a narcotic of minds” (Khomeini 200).

generation. "Increasingly, even young Iranians who care little about politics are rebelling against a society whose architect, Ayatollah Khomeini, once proclaimed 'There is no fun in Islam'" (Basmenji 19). One of those reactions was learning music 'illegally', against the state's suppressing rules. I was a member of this large group of the Iranian youth just before the 1990s⁶.

Some sense of unity has probably always existed among musicians of Iranian music. The heat of the revolution and its politics caused a more visible and radical ramification among them. A group, some of which were supporters of the revolution for the hope of realizing democracy, focused on bringing Iranian art music to the people by organizing performances in larger ensemble settings, using politically and socially critical texts, much of which were by contemporary lyricists. Meanwhile, other groups of musicians who did not want to get involved in politics became more isolated than probably ever before in Iran's modern history. These groups included some conservative traditional musicians, who related to the Radif in orthodox manners. Between these two extremes, there were other musicians, who depending on their inclination, felt closer to one of the two extremes, typically without being completely against the other group.

As the Iranian revolution proceeded to the establishment of the Islamic Republic, some opposition members who had escaped the new regime and its penalties (including a heavy wave of executions), ended up in Northern California. Later, musicians who up to then were not very politically active joined the active opposition, since most performing artists were banned from performing (which lasted until 1988⁷). The performance of Iranian music is still a kind of grey area of legality. For example, it is almost never the case that Iranian national television broadcasts images of musical instruments. The Iranian musicians who landed in Northern California gathered around a common suffering: the experience of being forced to leave Iran because they wanted to keep their music alive.

Besides what has been said so far, there are some less significant motivators bringing the santur-playing Iranian Americans of Northern California together, such as the ethnic-religious identity. "In addition to the class/political differences, there is a great diversity of ethnic-religious belonging compared to the demographic composition inside Iran; the Jewish, Armenian, Zoroastrian, Baha'i populations are relatively large" (Tsubakihara 337). Also, it seems common that influences through the music of other minorities in Northern California have caused particular developments in the artistic productions of the Iranian American musicians.

6 For years after that, I would still need to keep my music practice a secret. "One could not play concert then. It was around 1992 or 1993. They even shut down his shop a couple of times. They would come from [...] and would ask him to stop his activities. Then he decided that he would only teach at his home" (Bashash).

7 That year I started learning santur as a child. Ayatollah Khomeini issued a decree then, lifting strict bans on chess and music. However, the ban on music was never completely lifted until now.

A Sample Piece

Notation and lyrics for 'Tulips', a protest hymn used by leftists and political prisoners during and after the 1979 revolution, is provided here as a sample. Santur doubles the voice line. Creators of the music and the text are unknown, probably on purpose (see Fig. 2).

What Interviews Suggest

In this section I will first restate each interview question. Then I will present the findings based on a comparison of the data provided by participants.

1. Please provide a brief self-introduction, including how you got involved with santur.

All participants seem to share the following points regarding this question:

- Starting to learn santur based on strong personal motivations (as opposed to, for example, the will of parents): "I saw someone playing santur at a wedding at the age of nine or ten. I became interested and asked my parents to get me a santur" (Bashash).
- Experiencing "playing around" ('Anonymous') with santur in earliest stages of learning, seemingly like a child's play, to discover the instrument, relying on listening.
- Studying the Radif of Iranian music: "I have played Radif to a certain extent, although not completely. [...] I am more interested in Radif's metric pieces" (Bashash).
- Being strongly influenced by the teacher: "We would see him as a god and would not dare to ask many questions. I now regret that I did not ask him" (Bashash). This illustrates the nature of such influences, through traditional master-pupil relationships. However, this would not always prove encouraging for the student: "I thought that if I played santur and turned into someone like those people [the teachers who did not seem very passionate], I wouldn't want to play santur. So, I stopped for a while" (Minooei). This seems to have roots in the hierarchical structures of the traditional pedagogy of Iranian music.
- Being strongly influenced by the family: "My father thought that I should concentrate on my schooling, but my mother supported me when I started learning santur" (Bashash). Sometimes Iranian music does not seem to have been the family's preferred music style. Nevertheless, the families of this study's participants often supported the learner in studying santur. "My family does not really listen to Iranian art music. But they do not mind it either. I think they are just not so well informed about it" ('Anonymous').
- The apparent ineffectiveness of the Islamic State's ban on music in stopping music activities: "Concerts were not allowed [by the state]. The first concert I ever saw,

لاله ها Tulips

A socialist hymn, composer and lyricist unknown
Notation: Roozbeh Nafisi

♩ = 140-180

da mad laa le haa az de le ku ho dash t be yaa de a zi ze sha hi daa ne ma

mf

8 az aan akh ta raa ni ke af ruukh tand be daan saan be daa maa ne sob he se pid, be

16 paa ko nim par cha me khash mo kin raa pey af ka nim zen de gaa ni ye no vin kho ru she

23 maa bar ka nad ba naa ye bi daad be sar re sad in na bar de aa kha rin

دمد لاله ها در دل کوه و دشت / به یاد عزیز شهیدان ما
همان اخترانی که افروختند / بدان سان به دامن صبح سپید
به پا کنیم پرچم خشم و کین را / پی افکنیم زندگانی نوین
خروش ما بر کند بنای بیداد / به سر رسد این نبرد آخرین

Translation (by Roozbeh Nafisi):

Tulips bloom in fields and on mountains / keeping dear memories of our martyrs alive
The memories of shining stars / until the break of morning
We raise flags of justice / We form our today's living
Our movement topples the foundation of inequality / So comes this final battle to its end

Figure 2. Tulips (a Protest Hymn).

I was around 18 [around 1998]. In the neighboring Bonab, the town's policy changed, and a concert permit was issued. The ensemble was not professional. However, they played well and I had a great time" (Bashash).

2. In your region, which occasions might commonly include santur performances?

Although santur could be presented on various occasions in Northern California, it seems that almost like in Iran, the main events are private gatherings (as opposed to larger public events). The most popular presentations seem to be house concerts. "They often play at their private gatherings, although sometimes they are also interested in presenting [public] concerts. It is often in houses" (Minooei). "The occasion for playing depends on the time period. For example, I do not believe that many people today would play santur at weddings anymore" (Bashash). Sometimes santur players in Northern California also participate in public events such as cultural events organized by universities. "Sometimes the university organizes events during which I might play" ('Anonymous').

3. Please introduce your region's santur communities.

The santur communities in Northern California are mainly understood as circles of friends who share an interest in santur music. "There are many communities in [Northern] California. With friends, we would go and play together. Here we have a group of amateur players. Every two or three weeks we play together, working mainly on songs" (Bashash). What many of these musician friends share is that they "concentrate on an activity other than playing santur as their official profession" (Minooei). The profession of Saeid Bashash (a university professor) confirms this point. "We meet every few weeks with different learning people and present our work" ('Anonymous').

4. In your region, what are the ensemble settings in which the santur participates?

In Northern California, santur is used either as solo or in ensembles of Iranian instruments or mixed ensembles of Iranian and non-Iranian instruments. "Santur is often used either as a solo instrument or in chamber ensembles" (Minooei). Ensembles with non-Iranian instruments could include a liberal variety of instruments. "Last time we jammed with some friends who play harp, cello and guitar, and we improvised" ('Anonymous').

5. Please describe your region's typical santur repertoires.

In contrast to the case of santur playing in Iran, there seems to be a tendency in Northern California to include folk music in the santur repertoire: "Here we like to include folk music in our repertoire. That helps me remember the melodies better" ('Anonymous'). There is also an interest in music of other minorities and nations. "I am interested in all kinds of music: the music of Turkey, India, Japan, also Western music [...]" (Minooei). Such interests in Iranian folk music on the one hand and the music of other minorities on the other highlight how diasporic communities can connect through music. "Research on music in diasporic communities has demonstrated how music can function as a sort of social 'glue' connecting diasporic communities widely dispersed around the globe" (Solomon 205). Meanwhile the Radif, as well as compositions of Iranian musicians remain integral parts of the repertoire of the santur-playing Iranian Americans in Northern California. "I like to play metric pieces by Payvar and Meshkati" (Bashash). Improvisations in different styles also seem popular: "Sometimes we sit and make sounds, depending on what we hear from each other" ('Anonymous').

What Listening Test Suggests

I am organizing the findings here in order of the presented recording samples.

SAMPLE 1:

All participants were curious to learn the identity of the featured musician on this recording (however, no one made a correct guess). Two of the three people found that the instrument presented was probably a larger santur, whereas the instrument on this recording was apparently a conventional nine-bridge G santur. "This is a semi-professional santur, perhaps larger than a nine-bridge instrument. But it does not sound like a twelve-bridge santur" (Minooei). They all imagined this performance to be from several decades ago, apparently because of the special playing technique and the tuning details which the musician used. "He uses techniques which make me think that this is a little older than Varzandeh's time" (Minooei). One participant used this opportunity to express his opinion on an optimal santur sound quality: "A good instrument [like this] sounds soft" (Bashash). When I asked him to explain what he meant by soft, he said: "It means that [the instrument] sounds homogeneous and there is no 'knocking'" (Bashash).

One person said that this performance was a casual one. "[It is] perhaps in an open space, for example in a garden, playing for oneself or for a few people" (Minooei). Another person said: "It sounds like a private concert. As if some people were sitting there. It does not sound like a studio recording" (Bashash). The third participant thought that it "could be a studio recording" ('Anonymous').

All participants felt that this was not a good example of a very spontaneous improvisation. "He sounds as if he likes to calculate the music and set everything before the performance" (Bashash). One person commented: "He does not sound to be on fire. He sounds like he is a very logical player" ('Anonymous').

SAMPLE 2:

None of the participants felt that the instrument had any unusual features. They all thought that it was an older instrument. "It was perhaps made in the later Qajar period" (Minooei). Obviously because of the ambient noise (such as occasional whispers on the recording) all participants felt that the possible performance occasion was a private gathering. "It was perhaps a party. Maybe someone was playing the rhythm on a table. It is picked up by the microphone" ('Anonymous'). The tuning, especially around the microtones of the middle register, seemed inaccurate to two of the participants: "I think the quarter-step [of the first bridge in the middle register] was not accurately tuned" (Bashash) and "I would loosen up that quarter-step a bit" (Minooei). They all considered this to be a performance that would match the qualities of the styles of the early 20th century: "The nature of the sound suggests the style of Habib [Somaei]" (Minooei). This understanding was perhaps partly due to the sharper sound of the mallets: "The mallets had very thin felt on them" (Bashash).

SAMPLE 3:

All participants agreed that the recoding was a contemporary performance on a contemporary santur. They also agreed that the instrument was well tuned. "I have no problems with the tuning" (Minooei). One participant noted that the mallets probably did not have felt. They did not think that this music was so enthusiastically performed. "He sits somewhere alone playing and pretends to enjoy it" (Minooei). One participant thought that the reason was probably that the occasion was not a live performance: "This is a studio recording" (Bashash).

SAMPLE 4:

Probably due to the distinct style of playing in this sample, comments of all participants agree with each other. As I would ask the contributors for their comments, they would start by naming the artist. "This is Varzandeh, [playing] on a twelve-bridge santur. [...] I have a high opinion of almost every aspect of Varzandeh's playing. Also, that he made his own santur at that time. I respect him, even if he would make a mistake in any part" (Minooei). All participants knew the possible occasion of this performance. "Isn't this one of his last ensemble broadcasts?" ('Anonymous'). With regard to the tuning, only some general thoughts were shared. "I think he has one of the best tunings, because he heard a lot of music on the radio. His tuning might be very close to older Iranian tunings [...]. As he had very good ears, by listening to Habib on the radio he absorbed many influences from him, probably subconsciously" (Minooei). The most specific comment I received about this recording refers to the playing technique: "The mallet movements were not only striking. There was also some rubbing, etc. His tremolos were [therefore] 'foggy', as if the height of each mallet hit was relatively low" (Bashash).

SAMPLE 5:

This sample was the least known of all five listening samples. The tuning used there, also some playing techniques, are not usual. These aspects contributed to that each participant would listen very attentively and make specific comments.

Two persons assumed that the instrument used in this recording sample was an ordinary nine-bridge G santur: "It sounds like a normal santur to me, except that it has a really good sound volume. But maybe the high volume is due to mallets or the playing manner" ('Anonymous'). One participant found that it could be a larger santur: "It was not a nine-bridge [santur]. Maybe it was an instrument with fourteen or twelve bridges" (Bashash).

Two people thought it was a studio recording. Another person thought it was a preparation for an academic performance: "It is a preparation for an academic performance, like a presentation at a university" (Minooei). They all found the tuning accuracy acceptable, even if it did not sound ordinary at times: "The quarter steps were not too different from our usual ones – even if they sometimes sounded close

to half-steps. [...] It was a different atmosphere. It followed the *Dastgah*⁸ order, while the atmosphere would not necessarily follow the tradition" (Bashash).

8 "It signifies a set of pieces, traditionally grouped together, most of which have their own individual modes" (Farhat 19).

All participants assumed that there were at least two musicians on this recording: one playing the santur and the other playing a wind instrument. "The thing the wind player does on the side... it points out something... like a question" (Minooei). There was, however, one person playing, sometimes bowing the santur strings using a violin bow, which evidently sounded similar to a wind instrument.

Here are a few more remarks which the participants made about the playing technique used in this music. "To me it sounds a little like the third sample you sent me. Even though this player uses the lower register differently" ('Anonymous'). "I think it's a non-fantastic instrument, but the player has probably played it much and has found out how to make it sound good. Either there is no felt on the tip of each mallet, or it exists but is very thin" (Minooei). Another aspect of this recording which attracted the attention of participants was the application of modulation. "The transitions from modality to modality would not bring any big surprises. They came naturally" (Bashash). And: "You couldn't label this in a particular mode [of the Radif]. It was very free" ('Anonymous'). Pauses in this music were considerable for one participant: "The pauses between phrases... I liked this. Some seconds of absolute silence. I love listening to these longer pauses. A timely pause makes the listener think" (Bashash).

Findings Based on the Collective Data

Based on the collective data, I can provide the following summary under three categories of community aspects, performance approaches, and organological aspects.

Community Aspects

Social Presentations:

In Northern California there are regular public performances of santur music, usually as solo performances or within ensemble settings. There are also private specialized gatherings of santur practitioners (usually students, teachers and performers) including "house concerts and educational presentations" (Minooei) usually organized by or for students of a santur instructor. At such gatherings most or all participants know each other personally. Most santur practitioners in Northern California attend such gatherings perhaps a few times a year. Besides mentioned specialized occasions, santur is also featured on various celebrations. One participant said that he played santur for the occasion of his own wedding (Bashash).

Community Groups:

Among Iranian Americans of Northern California focusing on Iranian music, three main groups can be identified: masters of older generations, masters of younger generations, and pupils.

Masters of older generations are those who received their traditional education in Iranian music in Iran, then served in Iran for many years before immigrating to Northern California. The professional experience of these musicians does not usually include academic music training, although there are exceptions. Some of the most important names in this group are the followings (this list includes also those masters whose primary instruments are further Iranian instruments, while their works have been influential on santur music as well): Manoochehr Sadeghi (1938 Tehran), Mohammadreza Shajarian (1940 Mashhad – 2020

Tehran), Anoushiravan Rohani (1939 Rasht), Mahmoud Zoufonoun (1920 Shiraz – 2013 San Francisco Bay) and Morteza Neidavoud (1900 Isfahan – 1990 San Francisco).

Masters of younger generations are those Iranian American experts who spent considerable parts of their lifetimes outside Iran, receiving their training from the older generation of masters. Some of these individuals also have received higher education in music in California. This generation of experts seems to be somewhat less strictly bound to the traditions defined by the Radif. They often feel free to incorporate their experience as Iranian Americans into their work, while allowing for influences from other musical genres in Northern California. Followings are some of the better-known names in this group (specializing on santur or other Iranian instruments in close collaboration with santur music), all having lived in Northern California while some later moved to other places: Faraz Minooei (1980 Tehran), Koorosh Taghavi (1965 Gorgan), Babak Sabetian (1976 Sari), and Hamed Nikpey (1977 Tehran).

Pupils of Iranian music in Northern California are very diverse in terms of age, profession, political preference, etc. Their approaches to the education of Iranian music seem to vary according to their life experiences in Iran and Northern California. For students who are first generation Iranian Americans of their families, the traditional master-pupil relationship generally seems to be very important. They are enthusiastic about relatively more nostalgic repertoires, such as the songs they used to listen to in Iran. Later generations of Iranian American musicians, who have bigger life experience in Northern California than in Iran (some of whom may never have visited Iran), appear more open than the first group to exploration of Iranian music. "They show a more Western attitude in learning music than the 'first generation' individuals who are more committed to traditional learning etiquettes" ('Anonymous').

Activity Characteristics of the Past and the Present:

As with many aspects of Iranian American culture in Northern California, there are debates among musicians regarding commitments to inherited traditions on one hand and the necessity of cultural adaptations on the other hand, as "the dichotomy of modernity and tradition" (Khiabani 21). Among those santur-playing Iranian Americans in Northern California who have experienced considerable parts of their musical lives in Iran, or have immigrated relatively more recently from Iran, a more conservative attachment to the Radif seems to be a trend. "They try to hold on to what they perceive as their tradition. They may feel intimidated by the culture of their new home" ('Anonymous'). This seems closely related to Iranians' post-revolution experience. "The Iranians who came to California in the wake of the 1979 revolution had witnessed a radical, to say nothing of violent, transformation of Iranian cultural norms which they identified as an integral part of their identity. The experience of loss naturally fueled a desire in them to restore and maintain what was seen as threatened with extinction" (Rahimieh 2). Meanwhile, the younger generations in their Northern Californian homes seem less afraid of losing a native culture and feel free to practice their musical heritage in a less conservative way.

Occasions:

In Northern California specific santur performances take place contributing to various occasions ranging from "celebrating the feast of the winter solstice"

(Bashash) to “occasional celebrating of weddings, for example in San Francisco” (Minooei). On most such occasions it the majority of participants are Iranian Americans.

Other Cultures Borrow from the Santur:

Influences of santur music and repertoires of other Iranian instruments in formerly irrelevant contexts are becoming more and more widespread in Northern California and furthermore in the West, mutually enriching both sides. “The advantage, though, is that music offers a richness of methodological possibilities and points of view, opening new windows on diasporic neighborhoods” (Slobin 243). Followings are some prominent examples:

- The flexible 6/8 rhythms of Iranian music and poetry are retained as pivotal points of improvisations in pop music.
- Other cultural minorities such as the Turkish-Americans apply santur in performances of their music, handling the Iranian santur like a native instrument of their own.
- Baroque musicians of contemporary times apply Iranian instruments such as santur and setar in their performances.
- Contemporary Western music composers write for santur, tonbak and other Iranian instruments, treating them like European instruments. There are various composers who could be mentioned here, like Georges Aperghis and Viola Falb.

Formation of New Musical Languages:

As santur music felt at home in Northern California, influences in the expressions of santur in Northern California became recognizable. To my experience in Northern California as a santur player, while collaborating with Iranian Americans and with musicians coming from other Northern Californian cultures, musical accents are recognizable within the Northern Californian Iranian santur expressions, for example while applying ornamentations and rests. It seems fair to say there is generally less musical ornamentation applied in the music of santur-playing Iranian Americans in Northern California compared to the santur music produced in Iran. “Maybe more straight-forward and less ornamented musical expressions help santur music communicate more easily with Jazz music” (‘Anonymous’).

Performance Approaches

Importance of Virtuosity:

It seems that santur-playing Iranian Americans in Northern California, especially the ones belong to younger generations, have higher expectations regarding virtuosity in performance, compared to the past generations of santur musicians in Iran. A collaborator mentioned in a listening test: “He sounds not to be a virtuoso in santur-playing, although he might be highly virtuous about the knowledge of Iranian music [in theory]” (Bashash). “At present, there is a tendency to include more than one *chaharmezrab* in the performance of a *Dastgah*, as the virtuoso demands of such pieces serve to display the instrumentalist’s technical prowess” (Farhat 13).

Feeling and Moment:

In their comments, all collaborators spoke of ‘feeling’ and ‘moment’. “It was a good feeling. Together with the voice it was a good moment” (Bashash). Considering

the contexts of talks, these expressions suggest spiritual effects of performances on listeners, caused by the focused presence of the improviser's mind while making music.

Organological Aspects

Larger Santurs Becoming Popular:

It seems that larger santurs which were more common decades ago in Iran, such as eleven-bridge and twelve-bridge ones, are getting popular among professional Iranian American santur players in Northern California. "It is a matter of time to get your hands used to playing them" (Minooei). "Nine-bridge santurs are sometimes too limited" (Bashash).

Tuning:

Comments on common audio samples varied sometimes vastly in case of tuning. For instance, one of the participants did not find the tuning of lowest register of santur accurate on the last audio sample of the listening test, while other participants found the instrument on that sample tuned decently. Sometimes participants went as far as commenting on the quality of strings and its influence on tuning. "I would change the whole strings of the right register and see if that would help" (Minooei).

Age of the Instrument:

The participants often used the expressions 'old instrument' and 'new instrument' while referring to sound qualities. Sometimes while commenting about the possible age of the instrument, they would also think about its size: "It must be an old instrument, probably with eleven or twelve bridges [on each side]" (Bashash).

Conclusion

Santur in Northern California can be identified as an instrument to meet the requirements of Iranian music as understood by Iranian American santur players in Northern California. The most commonly used there appears to be the nine-bridge G santur popular in Iran. However, in recent years larger in size such as the eleven- and twelve-bridge santurs have also become increasingly popular among professional players. To answer the question of social applications of santur in Northern California, we are faced with two main trends: political motivations and the interest in establishing dialogues with neighboring cultures. In both cases, improvisation inspired by the Radif has an integral function. Although there are strong ties between Iranian santur practitioners in Iran and santur-playing Iranian Americans in Northern California, the latter group has its own distinctive social identity and follows its own concerns. The repertoire they use goes beyond Iranian music as understood in Iran. It includes folk music and takes influences from neighboring minorities. In Northern California, the santur is used by various segments of the society. This practice goes beyond the Iranian American community.

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