



UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Tuesday, July 1, 2025

Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Institute of Iranian Studies
Faculty of Arts and Science
University of Toronto

Dear colleagues,

Dr. Nasim Ahmadian has applied for the Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Postdoctoral Fellowship in Iranian Studies, and I am writing to you with full-throated support for her application.

Hailing from Iran, Dr. Ahmadian entered our program in September 2016, and quickly proved to be a doctoral student of extraordinary insight and talent, in both research and teaching, as well as a highly collegial member of our teaching staff.

She is a performer deeply immersed in the Persian musical tradition, as a virtuoso on the *santur* (hammer dulcimer) and *tonbak* (traditional goblet drum). She is also a musical trailblazer: one of very few women to have organized and led a traditional classical improvisatory musical ensemble in Iran.

As a scholar, Nasim is outstanding: creative, erudite, committed, conscientious—passionately dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge, and her own continual self-improvement through interdisciplinary study. Identifying emotional impact as the crux of the musical experience, while recognizing the cultural construction of that experience, her research program centers on a compelling, original topic: the aesthetic valence of sadness in the traditional (classical) music of Iran, what is known as *shirini-e gham*, “the sweetness of sadness”. While the somewhat paradoxically appealing ability of music to trigger sadness is a valued feature in many cultures, it is particularly prominent in classical Persian music, and it is inculcated in a process of aesthetic education through an intensive master-discipline relationship, one that she knows intimately both through research, and personal experience.

Interpreting this phenomenon, by unraveling its uniquely Iranian meaning and significance, is a task she has approached by reference to broad spectrum of sources in culture and history, particularly its spiritual and poetic traditions, and through an impressive variety of methods, including historical modes of literary analysis, historiography, and Sufi texts, alongside ethnographic (and auto-ethnographic) procedures of performative observation and interviews conducted with performers and listeners alike. Her methodology is impressively broad, erudite, and well-informed by ethnomusicological study and research, with particular attention to issues of gender and ideology, supported by fluency in her native tongue, as well as her long experience studying Persian music with some of its greatest living exponents, and as a formidable performer herself.

In my view, the inculcation of an aesthetic sensibility, a sensitivity to music’s emotional textures—complex, subtle and largely non-verbal—lies at the crux of musical understanding and is a critical topic for research on any musical tradition. But precisely because it eludes prosaic discourse, inhering largely in non-verbal or poetic modes of communication, the relationship of music and affect is not easy to grapple with. Most scholars and performers therefore avoid attempting to describe it, considering it to be a phenomenon transcending linguistic understanding. Dr. Ahmadian, however, possesses the creativity,

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insight, experience, theoretical depth, and interdisciplinary training – in music, mysticism, history, and literature - to unravel it. Indeed, in preparing her brilliant dissertation, she already has demonstrated that she can do so. In her postdoctoral project, she will be able to build on this foundational research to produce an important monograph that will transform the way we understand music education and aesthetic transmission in Iran.

Dr. Ahmadian is a scholar of proven ability. She is a published author, including an important book chapter “Female Agency, Genres, and Aesthetics of Sorrow in Persian Classical Music,” published in *Women's Leadership in Music* (Brill). She is exceptionally active in disseminating her research, having prepared and presented innumerable peer reviewed scholarly papers at international meetings. Witnessing Nasim in any academic conference I consistently find myself in admiration of her focused, reflective attention, expressed in insightful inquiries and enthusiastic, active participation in post-presentation discussions. Even when the audience is large and the lecturer senior, she always articulates the most profound and pertinent questions with poise, testimony to her passion for knowledge, her solid engagement with the issues, her seriousness of commitment, her focus and self-confidence, and her profound insights.

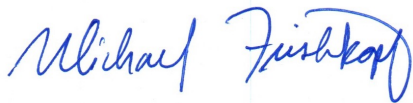
With her breadth and insight into Persian art music, with such a range of competencies, musical, linguistic, and theoretical, she is unprecedented in our department, among the many dozens of graduate students I have mentored over the past 25 years.

Nasim has also clearly demonstrated her enormous potential as a skillful teacher. Even before completing her dissertation, she excelled as a contract instructor in our music program, teaching courses to undergraduates and graduate students alike. In lecture and classroom, she is highly articulate, thoughtful, patient, and compassionate with students, an inspiring teacher always fully capable of handling responsibility with professional aplomb. In 2021 Nasim taught a course on Persian art music to a mix of undergraduate and graduate students. Several times she taught our Introduction to World Music course, managing over 80 students and several TAs. She also teaches *santur* to students in her studio.

Finally, Nasim has accrued significant leadership experience: in musical performance, as the editor of our graduate student journal (Intonations), and as former president of our Graduate Music Student Association. In the years to come she will undoubtedly play a key role as researcher, teacher, performer, and leader in the sphere of Iranian music, both in the academy, and for the public at large.

I firmly believe that as post-doctoral scholar Dr. Ahmadian will offer uniquely valuable contributions to the Institute of Iranian Studies community, even as she will benefit from your rich programs and resources. I wholeheartedly recommend her for this position. Thank you for giving her the careful attention it deserves.

Sincerely,



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