



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

June 28, 2025

Dear Fellowship Committee,

I am writing to recommend the application of Nasim Ahmadian for the Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Postdoctoral Fellowship in Iranian Studies for 2025-2026. Nasim is one of our outstanding recent graduates at the University of Alberta, and defended her excellent dissertation on aesthetics and pedagogy in Persian classical music in December, 2023.

As Nasim's co-supervisor (with Michael Frishkopf), I have witnessed her intellectual transformation, from her arrival as a classically-trained Iranian musician in *santour*, with high ambitions and burning questions, to a sophisticated scholar with a specialty in musical aesthetics and a deep knowledge of Persian traditions, a record of publications, and considerable organizational skills.

Nasim's ambitious book project explores how the unspoken aesthetics of Persian music, one of the world's great improvisatory traditions, is transmitted to students and listeners. She explores this transmission in traditional settings—through imitation and apprenticeship with a master, as well as in modern ones—within the conservatories and organizational settings in modern Iran. Nasim herself is a skilled improviser, who was trained as a teenager in the home studio of a master (*ustad*), and later, as a formal student in Tehran's premiere conservatory. For Nasim, the teaching and learning of improvisatory music is both an intellectual exploration, and a network of classical musicians, in which she has performed for decades.

In accordance with techniques in ethnomusicology, Nasim infuses her writing with her own experience in Iranian musical philosophical systems in a profoundly original and subtle way. For instance, the first chapter of the dissertation features translations of Persian poetry to illustrate the process by which teachers teach not just an instrument, but also the deep spiritual and aesthetic principles that can shape phrasing, mode, and melodic contour. We encouraged her to write some of her reflections in Farsi, and to integrate this "way of knowing" into her dissertation. Nasim pays attention to both the musical details and the larger meanings they create in her beautiful (and sometimes poetic) academic prose. It is this feature of her writing that elevates her thesis beyond a mere degree-granting exercise, and makes me confident that she will gain a book contract—a process on which I am advising her.



In her work at the University of Alberta, Nasim has had the benefit of two Iranian scholars who sat on her committee—Maryam Moshaver and Mojtaba Mahdavi-Ardekani. It was a pleasure witnessing these two scholars, with their deep embedded experience, strengthen Nasim's chapters on music's role in Iranian society, beyond the *maktab*. Her new plan, of incorporating more granular detail about the Golha radio program, would be assisted by detailed political and historical knowledge—which I am sure she would gain at your institute. At the same time, I am sure that she would enliven your colloquia with attention to poetic and aesthetic dimensions. I imagine that working on her ideas within a community of scholars of Iran would help her immensely.

Particularly impressive is Nasim's formation of a women's ensemble that played within Tehran's repressive public sphere. As she has organized and publicized an ensemble under such adverse circumstances, I have no doubt in her ability to thrive in a postdoctoral position. Nasim has also served as editor of *Intonations*, our graduate arts journal and as leader of our music graduate student association; and as a teacher of undergraduate courses, I have heard rave reviews from my students. I mention this only because I have found postdoctoral appointments to succeed best when collegiality, as well as academic promise, are prioritized.

I wholeheartedly recommend Nasim Ahmadian to your Institute. Please contact me if I can provide more insight into her remarkable work.

Sincerely,

Julia Byl

Associate Professor of Music,
University of Alberta