

The (Mis)Fitting Virtuosa:

Women, Bodies, and Instrumental Excellence in Iranian Classical Music

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 is widely assumed to have restricted the role of women in public life and in music under the guise of creating a moral and pious society (Gheytanchi 2001; Amir-Ebrahimi 2006). And yet, forty-three years later, the place of Iranian women in music tells a different story: there are now more female instrumentalists than ever before in the country's history. My dissertation is an ethnographic study of the lives and careers of female musicians who professionally perform the instruments of Iranian classical music. Examining these instrumentalists' diverse roles as performers, composers, educators, and music entrepreneurs, this project seeks to understand what happens to women that try to heterosocialize (Shahrokni 2019) the male-dominated sphere of Iranian classical music as they add their artistic contributions to its repertoire and ultimately shift the soundscape of this musical tradition. In so doing, I investigate ways in which women's increasing presence in the space of Iranian music has challenged men's exclusive claims on musicianship and musical virtuosity, initiating a refashioning of the concept of musical authority. I contend that Iranian female musicians' efforts should be understood as part and parcel of women's broader movements toward equality and equity in Iran and more broadly in the Middle East.

My work as a comprehensive ethnography will be one of the first monographs exclusively devoted to women and music in contemporary Iran, a topic that has been largely neglected with only a few English language papers and book chapters published on the subject (e.g., Chehabi 2000; Youssefzadeh 2004; Fatemi 2005; Mozafari 2013; Hemmasi 2017). The Persian sources (e.g., Maleki 1380 [2001]; Jahangiri 2015) are even fewer and exclusively deal with historical subjects. Moreover, because of its engagement with professional female musicians, this dissertation offers a qualitative investigation of Iranian women's professional lives and expands the current literature on this topic (e.g., Moghadam 2000; Bahramitash and Esfahani 2011; Bahramitash 2013, Kian 2014) from a unique perspective. More broadly, my thesis also addresses a gap in the studies of women and music in the Middle East (e.g., van Nieuwkerk 1995; Danielson 1997; Lengel 2004; Lohman 2010; Berkov 2013) by simultaneously considering both social and artistic aspects of female musicians' work, rather than marginalizing one to highlight the other. By doing so, my dissertation offers a political intervention in how Euro-American academia and public perceive Iranian and Middle Eastern women and their various sociopolitical struggles.

My research complements both abovementioned fields by shifting the focus from voice and singers to instruments and instrumentalists. Writing about singers in Iran, intentionally or unintentionally, posits the hegemony of voice as a political metaphor. In such a narrative, women's singing becomes the metaphor par excellence for their resistance against patriarchal oppression, which overshadows discussions of women's music-making as both artistic endeavour and political activism. In this sense, concentrating on instrumentalists allows us to perceive their activities outside that narrow "agentive voice" paradigm, and opens new spaces to see how other kinds of politics are also at work in women's music-making in Iran.

Chapter One of my dissertation employs notions of conditional inclusion (Hackl 2018) and misfit (Garland-Thomson 2011) to demonstrate how female musicians are constantly suspended between inclusion and exclusion, a gray area in which they have only provisional access to positions of authority. Chapter Two shifts the attention to the concept of musical excellence and combines ethnography with music analysis to engage with the technical details of my informants' musical work. It expands on women's aforementioned suspense between inclusion and exclusion to show how the men in the music scene tend to accept women as virtuosi only if they are framed as "exceptional women" (Nenić 2015) or even "honorary men" (Cvejić 2015); a process that female instrumentalists battle to subvert. Chapter Three deals with female musicians' presence on Instagram, examining how they negotiate their visual and sonic identities on a platform that privileges image over sound and rewards visual attractions with an increase in the number of followers, attention, and income. It investigates the strategies that female musicians employ to use this platform as a new space that empowers them in their careers. Chapter Four discusses how some female musicians are trying to redefine women-only concerts as legitimate occasions of music-making. Faced with criticisms that undermine the artistic and economic importance of these female homosocial spaces, these musicians endeavour to use these concerts as unique opportunities to expand the sphere of their influence within the Iranian music scene. Together, these four chapters demonstrate how because of their gender, these female instrumentalists are forced to undertake extra labour and cost—physical, mental, and financial—to sustain their careers in a music scene that does little to accommodate their presence.

Completion Timeline

I aim to defend the dissertation in the summer of 2023. Two of the dissertation's four body chapters are complete and have been approved by my dissertation committee. I am currently writing

the third chapter on gender and musical excellence, which I will submit to my committee in the early fall. I have also drafted the fourth chapter on women-only concerts and have presented some of its arguments and cases in previous conferences. Given the current state of the chapters that I have written and the ones that I am working on, I plan to submit a complete draft of my dissertation—including the Introduction and Conclusion—to my advising committee in April 2023, and anticipate defending in July of the same year.

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