

reconsidering persian classical music

A list by [cd_r0ms](#)

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(a note on general orientation: rebecca stewart is an ethnomusicologist by training, but after several decades of fieldwork (concentrating mainly on [dhrupad](#) but also embracing [gagaku](#), [sinawi](#), and various forms of spiritually-oriented chant), she shifted her focus in the late 1980s to [historically-informed performance](#) of european medieval and renaissance polyphony ([josquin](#) especially), in the process elaborating a controversial set of theories around - not only how this music 'should' sound, but also the nature of 'modality' (a term she uses somewhat idiosyncratically) in music in general, the cross-cultural spiritual significance of the [overtone](#), the fundamental distinction between 'movement' and 'position' as organizational principles, and, by extension, the severity of the impact of western-style notation on orally-transmitted traditions.

in [these two](#) short articles, which i recommend, she lays out, with characteristic matter-of-factness, and with firm grounding in the physical processes by which we resonate parts of our heads and chests to produce pitched sound (i.e. singing, though her conclusions also become relevant for instrumental music), something approaching or resembling a coherent worldview, with significant implications for both ethics and aesthetics - or, at the very least, from my perspective, a productive framework for my own 'ethnographic' or 'traditional music' listening: a way out of what increasingly feels like the intellectual dead-end, the totalizing flatness, of generically postmodern pseudo-relativism.

in other words, her unblinking assumption of a kind of teleology or universality ('modal music ... in its most highly developed guise', 'the highest expression of chant', etc.) is, from one point of view, profoundly embarrassing, considering she is writing these words in the 21st century, not to mention ultimately circular in its logic - but, as someone raised in a jewish-secular-rationalist environment, what i've taken a long time to understand is the way that certain kinds of truth can be accessed only via leap of faith, via willingness to commit to the indefensible... and, crucially, a 'stewartian' aesthetic sensibility entails neither an elevation of european art music above other traditions nor a(n equally condescending) default assignation of superior 'authenticity' or 'naturalness' to nonwestern musics in general, but, rather, a serious engagement with the aesthetic sensibilities embedded within or contextualizing specific traditions, as distinct and potentially contradictory surface-level

expressions, with varying degrees and types of partiality, of the unifying underlying principles of (stewartian) modality.

(and, also crucially, what drew me towards this nexus of ideas in the first place is that stewart's own recordings, as well as recordings of the nonwestern musicians whose influence her schema most strongly reflects, immediately and increasingly struck me as the most richly rewarding in their respective fields, a trend which has persisted as i apply my understanding of stewartian-modal values to other bodies of regional music recordings.)

what this means for this (series of) list(s) is that while i am not strictly interested in chasing some illusory notion of authenticity for its own sake, i do understand western influence on nonwestern musics as almost exclusively an imposition of 'tonal' forms upon 'modal' ones, with attendant homogenizing shifts in stylistic priorities. the worldwide tendency towards conservatory 'preservation' of 'national' traditional music - conservatories themselves being a western import in which music is almost always taught via western notation, western notions of structure, complexity, etc. - tends to produce boring music, imo, which is then marketed, not only towards the west but towards the people it is meant to 'represent', as the 'real thing', feeding a vicious cycle in which western music comes to seem inherently more dynamic and intellectually engaging. consequently i am primarily interested in music which is actually taught via oral transmission, and which, as much as possible, or until as recently as possible, has been performed not by people primarily oriented towards western notions of musical sophistication, who invest in traditional music out of a sense of cultural pride or duty towards 'revitalization', but rather by people for whom this is simply 'what music is / what it means to be a musician'. as a corollary, i have become sensitive to the impact of the 'world music stage / circuit / festival' on, for example, vocal tone production, which, whether because of audience preference or microphone amplification, tends towards a kind of new-age-y, 'relaxing' homogenization - which, of course, i have no interest in.

alongside these loose 'criteria', i am also especially interested in musics which are currently performed by, or have historically been associated with, people with lots of time to devote to it. i am interested in something that could be called 'mastery'; i am interested in music which is richly theorized. this means i am often most interested in music associated either with hereditary aristocracy or with professional musicians, who in many societies have historically been 'the lowest of the low' - a kind of horseshoe theory of total freedom and total obligation...

and, within those spheres, i seek out music which practitioners consider, or which evidence suggests is, especially 'old' or stylistically conservative - not only because, in the 20th and 21st centuries, even outside conservatories, almost any stylistic shift in a traditional repertoire can ultimately be attributed either to simplification resulting from the music's diminished societal status relative to western music, or directly to musicians' aesthetic

sensibilities moving in a western/'tonal' direction. other reasons i value (and investigate) claims of stylistic conservatism are that these types of self-serious repertoires tend over time (since of course they do always change substantially across generations) to accrue more 'modal' features, and that in many parts of the world the wealthy states which historically supported the greatest concentrations of 'full-time' (either free or obligate...) musicians, and which even less-conservative performers today often credit with originating repertoire, technique, and theory, were already gone or in decline by the time europeans began direct colonization.

finally, while i respect the 'school' of traditional-music listening which hears these records as 'raw sound' only, and therefore gets excited about, like, unintentionally psychedelic cassette distortion, or jarring environmental noises, i am more interested in hearing them as documenting artists whose practices exist primarily outside of recorded media, so i favor clarity. on the other hand, attempts to mix and master these musics in the style of corporate-commercial releases are, of course, much worse...

what all of this adds up to is that the small portion of traditional music recordings i am actually excited about are typically among those least broadly publicized, and often, taken together, form a separate narrative than those most easily heard by curious listeners. the purpose of this list, then, is to collect recommendations, reflections, and information i find interesting within this particular sub-field of traditional music, all of which, informed by my orientation towards stewartian modality, may act as something of a 'corrective', or at least an alternative, to certain common strains of discourse around traditional musics which i see reflected on rym and elsewhere.)

in light of the degree of confusion, both online and in print, around the mechanics and history of iran's *dastgah-radif* system, i'm taking a more thorough approach here than [previously](#).

unlike (20th-century theorizations of) [maqams](#) to the west and [ragas](#) to the east, iran's 12 dastgahs are *not* modes, in the typical sense of 'pitch set with characteristic melodic motion', though they are often troped as such. instead, each dastgah is a lengthy suite of short (many performable in under a minute) compositions with a set order; all 12 dastgahs together constitute 'the radif', the canonical body of melodies which a musician memorizes and then draws from, semi-improvisationally, during performance. and unlike, say, maghrebi [nubat](#), han [qupai](#), or virtually any other 'classical' music system in which preset melodies constitute the ground of theory rather than its result, the radif is not just a melodic 'outline' or 'skeleton': it already includes ornamentation, rubato, etc. - in other words, recordings of the radif itself, though basically pedagogical, can also be musically engaging.

having internalized this impossibly long, theoretically perfect ur-performance, then, what is left for persian classical musicians to do? to answer this question i'll ask another: where is 'mode' to be found in the dastgah-radif system? when i refer to the dastgah *mahur*, for example, i am, indeed, referring to an ordered list of *gushehs*, the small building-block pieces. but - it is also the case that most of these *gushehs* fit neatly into a pitch set basically equivalent to the western major scale, and that they feature recurrent melodic cliches; from this material we can of course synthesize a kind of underlying 'mahur mode' implicit in the suite. on the other hand, each *gusheh* is confined to a limited range within that pitch set, and comprises its own individual melodic contours - so we can, alternately, synthesize a 'modal identity' specific to each *gusheh*... and, more importantly, even within the bounds of *mahur* we have 'outlier' *gushehs* like *delkash*, which has nothing to do with our implied 'mahur mode' and instead sounds almost identical to (most of) the generally more 'minor-key' dastgah of *shur*.

an accurate performance of (not 'in') *mahur* doesn't repeat the radif exactly, but rather progresses, broadly, from *gusheh* to *gusheh*, perhaps skipping some and elaborating others at greater length, or briefly referencing an upcoming *gusheh* - ultimately engaging *all* of these understandings of 'mode'. where is the line, here, between 'improvising' and 'performing a composition'? is it more useful to think of *delkash* as a 'modulation' 'away' from *mahur*, or as an integral facet of the idea of 'mahur', looming already over the first moments of performance? crucially, there is no explicit theorization or codification of how to move from radif to performance, of what is 'according to the radif' and what is 'going too far' - there is only the trial-and-error judgment of more experienced musicians.

all of this is of course insufficient: so far i have established a firm grounding for performance only by solo instrumentalist or singer, with repertoire limited to individualized variation on 12 'pieces'. indeed the most 'hardcore' traditionalists do actually take this approach, except that an instrumentalist may accompany a singer by echoing or shadowing the vocal line, and a *tombak* drummer may accompany either a singer or an instrumentalist by, during the metered portions of each dastgah, playing, without embellishment, one of a handful of rhythmic patterns. how, though, to explain the rest of what you might find on, say, a [shajarian](#) cd? confusingly, alongside the radif there are also several genres of 'semi-classical' shorter pieces, often composed by known musicians within living memory, which are ambiguously 'associated with', but not really 'part of', particular dastgahs. among these the vocal *tasnif* has become particularly iconic as a vehicle for romantic or political lyrics in vernacular language, in contrast to the archaic mysticism (often also erotic, but always 'as a metaphor for' spiritual ecstasy...) of the poetry which structures the rhythms of the radif. the *tasnif* additionally allows for, at long last, true heterophony between singer and instrumental ensemble, because its melody is both skeletal and fully predetermined.

at this point i've basically covered the range of what is marketed today as 'persian classical music', at least outside of pseudo-new-age 'ethnic fusion' collaborations. but something is still missing: can it really be the case that a musician's only options are - to recombine endlessly the same old melody-fragments; or to step outside the bounds of strict tradition and into the arena of 'light classical' 'songwriting'? can there really be so little scope for 'innovation' or even 'change over time' within the tradition? as it turns out, historically speaking, of course not! what's missing here, the one glaringly critical piece of information that cd liner notes etc. are usually so quick to gloss over or obfuscate, is that the whole concept of 'the radif' as it is understood today is not more than 150 years old, at maximum.

the earliest middle eastern music-theoretical systems about which anything of substance is currently known are those described in manuscripts of the late-medieval islamic golden age, which, from cairo to bukhara, broadly agree on the cosmological and scientific primacy of, usually, 12 maqams derived from pythagorean logic, alongside various minor or derivative maqams and accompanying rhythmic cycles. beyond the basic understanding that music is made by pairing a maqam with a rhythm, what these exclusively theory-oriented sources don't clarify is how musicians *used* these mode-rhythm units - i.e. for composition or for spontaneous performance, with or without modulating, etc. - as well as how accurately these abstract schema ever actually described the practices of urban elite music-making across this vast temporal and geographic span.

between this period and the 20th century, with the glaring exception of istanbul, useful documentation becomes scarce, as scholars demonstrate their erudition not by producing new knowledge but rather by quoting or summarizing, often in verse, the same doubtless-outdated information set down during the 'golden age'. for the urban art musics of central asia and the rest of the middle east outside the ottoman court, tracing this history is basically a matter of collating oral traditions and guessing backwards from 20th-century practice. so: from, again, cairo to bukhara (though having by now spread past these) we find, still, lists of maqams as the basis for music-making - but nowhere do we find all the same names or pitch sets as in the medieval sources, and, more importantly, whereas the cairene and aleppine maqam is basically ottoman (there are hundreds of maqams; each is a mode serving as a basis for composition or improvisation; frequent modulation in performance is expected and appreciated), in bukhara and samarqand there are only six maqams, and they are not modes but rather long suites to be memorized and performed with minimal embellishment. it's only with the relatively recent importation of ethnonationalism and conservatory training that the many subtle degrees of gradation between these two extremes - baghdad's 'a maqam is a pre-existing suite but also there are moments set aside for improvisation or new compositions', for example - have been replaced by the strict separation of state borders: consider the nearly simultaneous

early-20th-century translation of the central asian maqams from literary persian into competing tajik and uzbek versions.

what of 'persia proper' within this context? after a brief [safavid](#) renaissance centered on isfahan, the sound of which we can barely guess at, the dynastic patronage upon which maqam musicians had depended was interrupted by severe political and economic instability lasting well into the beginning of the [qajar](#) era. it's only in the mid-19th century, around the same time russian-educated azerbaijani nationalists translated the closely-related maqams of tabriz and baku into azeri, that [naser al-din shah qajar](#), partially responding to the supposedly more 'rational' and 'scientific' basis of western music, set court musician ali-akbar farahani the task of codifying his repertoire into what would later become the radif.

what was the nature of the 'raw musical material' available to farahani for this project? within the persian iteration of the strict master-student relationship common to orally-transmitted art musics in general, what was actually 'passed down'? what seems to have been standard is for a master, after decades of refining their sense of improvisation or 'spontaneous composition', to simply have their students memorize the most typical elements of their performance - signature melodies, ornaments, 'licks' they returned to often, routine modulations, etc. - which students would then be expected to gradually refine and elaborate, per their individual tastes, via their own lifetimes' worth of performance. in other words, and i'm exaggerating only slightly, *there was no theory!* a musician's relationship to theory might be something like: 'i know that the medievals understood the cosmological-scientific basis for correctness in music (even if i haven't actually read those texts), and i know that my teacher's teacher's teacher (etc.) was one of them, so even if the modes i play are not the same as the medieval modes, as long as i have internalized what i've been taught, then whatever i play, whatever sounds good to me, must be theoretically correct'. in this way what had been a brief modulation could, over generations, grow into a new mode, eclipsing its 'parent', or a new melody could spread 'laterally' from one mode to another or from one performer to another, and so on.

it should be noted that it was during this 'dark age' that persian musicians stopped talking about maqams, modes, and started talking about dastgahs, suites - but, cf. the azerbaijani usage, in which the meaning of 'maqam' simply drifted from 'mode' to 'suite', with 'dastgah' indicating a specific *performance* of a maqam; or the central asian usage, in which 'maqam' drifted in the same way, but 'dastgah' does not appear at all.

farahani's task, therefore, was to impose a largely arbitrary canonicity on the unruliness of this music - to decide, based on his own preferences, which of the many melodic ideas floating around the persian-art-music zeitgeist deserved to be preserved and enshrined as

the basis for future music-making, and then also to arrange those into a specific order. while this was perhaps always going to be an incomplete, imperfect process, his untimely death, leaving to his nephew the musical education of his young sons mirza abdollah and aqa hossein qoli, certainly further confused the issue, as each son separately completed his father's work, handing down not 'the farahani radif' but 'the mirza abdollah radif' and 'the aqa hossein qoli radif'. and it's unclear to me exactly how this happened, but it seems that by the time of the brothers' deaths in the early 20th century, the mirza abdollah radif, specifically, had become a lingua franca for the small world of persian dastgah-based music-making, displacing whatever disparate teaching repertoires had previously circulated.

but mirza abdollah never notated or recorded his radif, and even the earliest recordings and notations by his students reveal significant disagreements. by the time we reach the 1960s, a committee of prominent musicians assembled by the ministry of fine arts, all proudly tracing their lineages back to mirza abdollah, could fail so completely to reach consensus on a canonical radif for printed publication that, in the end, one of them was arbitrarily selected as sole authority. by this time, also, because farahani and his family had all specialized in *tar* and *setar*, persia's quintessentially aristocratic long-necked lutes, and their radifs reflected those instruments' ranges and technique, other musicians had disseminated 'adaptations' of the mirza abdollah radif for voice, *santur*, *ney*, and other instruments, which, of course, actually entailed significant modifications and additions. adding to the confusion, radif-authors have always sought to demonstrate the existence of, specifically, 12 suites, on account of that number's cosmological significance - but the gap between this ideal and actual practice necessitates such awkward compromises as the division between 7 'major' dastgahs and 5 'minor' or derivative *avazs*, with some of the latter rarely, if ever, performed, or containing only a fraction of the amount of 'material' available to the larger dastgahs (and note that the term 'avaz' can also refer more generally to 'improvisation', especially vocal, or, outside the context of music, even just 'sound').

paralleling these 'conceptual'/'structural' shifts, changing social/societal contexts have also exerted significant stylistic pressures. farahani and his sons were among an exceptionally small category of respected professionals involved with dastgahi music, which was mostly performed by and for well-versed aristocratic amateurs at private gatherings in courtyards or homes. in such a setting, performance of just a few dastgahs could occupy an entire evening, without a strict sense of overarching musical structure. another stratum of urban professional entertainer-musicians were basically disdained by the aristocrats as 'vulgar' or 'populist', while also, of course, serving as sources for musical ideas to be quoted, reworked, and absorbed. later in the 19th century, though, as the qajars struggled to adapt to the cultural implications of capitalist modernity, dastgahi music was gradually made to serve as a kind of unifying national music expressing fundamental 'persianness', a trend which accelerated under the more explicitly ethnonationalist pahlavis. and just like basically

everywhere else, radio in iran became the primary site of reification for both 'the nation' and its old/new 'classical' music, from broadcasts of western-orchestra-backed semi-operatic tasnifs to more 'traditional' solo or small-ensemble dastgah performance.

for most of the 20th century, then, following the collapse of older structures of patronage and social function, dastgahi music was mainly 'preserved' in the context of government-radio jobs filled by university-trained (as opposed to family- or privately-trained) musicians, who cultivated a 'modern' style emphasizing clarity, smoothness, and shorter melodic phrases. alongside this development, though, there was also enough funding for and interest in traditional arts that competing institutions like dariush safvat's 'center for the preservation and research of music', ostensibly opposing the commercializing/popularizing 'distortions' of the radio musicians, could train several generations of their own students. ironically, it is from this pool that the later-20th-century dastgahi-music 'stars' (shajarian, nazeri, parisa, etc.) are mostly drawn.

with respect to my avowedly stewartian-modal orientation, given this 150-year narrative of sustained 'modernization'/'westernization', what is it about dastgahi music that excites me enough to have written this already-2,000-word introduction? 'zooming out' again to the broader world of maqam-based musics, we find that, in fact, dastgahi music is among those traditions *least* aggressively reshaped or marginalized by western aesthetic and intellectual sensibilities. the central asian maqams, under pressure from (czarist) russian government and russian settlement, had already been totally reworked into notateable and nationalist-compatible forms by the earliest soviet audio recordings; the azerbaijani form similarly had become by that time primarily a path of academic study by western-classical-educated musicians; egyptian governments have regarded cairo's traditional maqam ensemble as too closely associated with ottoman influence to serve as an emblem of national culture, and have therefore invested in westernized popular forms rather than bother to record older musicians; the legendarily nuanced maqam of aleppo, on the other hand, continued to 'thrive' (relatively speaking) in upper- and middle-class homes well into the 20th century, but syrian governments' relative poverty precluded commercial recording of much past radio-simplified styles...

what about istanbul, of course regarded in much of the 'maqam world' as the absolute center of cultural, and therefore musical, sophistication? in many ways ottoman and persian trajectories are parallel, but with the ottomans 'a step ahead': naser al-din shah qajar invited alfred lemaire to teach western music theory and reformat persia's military band along western lines in 1868, but sultan mahmud ii had already in 1828 invited giuseppe donizetti ('donizetti pasha') to do much the same for the ottomans, inaugurating a century-long trend of dwindling institutional support for the extraordinarily expansive ottoman maqam repertoire (such that by the early 20th century, tastes - or perhaps standards of

musicianship - had drifted to such a degree that one of the last ottoman sultans was said to have been bored nearly to sleep by the playing of none other than the radically virtuosic cemil bey); the post-1921 ataturk government was so ideologically hostile to the supposed 'decadence' (/ ethnic and religious pluralism) of ottoman maqam music that performance was banned for decades; meanwhile, in persia, reza khan's similarly 'modernizing' revolution of 1925 actually culminated in yet another dynastic government, which therefore had no ideological impetus to suppress musics seen as aristocratic or archaic. ultimately, then, though persia had for centuries been considered something of a cultural backwater, and early modern shahs' on-and-off prohibition of public music-making in accordance with shi'a censure contrasted sharply with the unreserved patronage of contemporaneous sufi-aligned ottoman sultans, dastgahi music eventually entered into the era of tolerably-decent audio recording technology (i.e., the late 1950s) with a unique combination, among maqam traditions, of reasonable healthiness and close continuity with its own history.

(and i should note here that i'm not just discounting all these other traditions out of hand: first of all, in each case i've found recordings i repeatedly return to, just fewer and farther between than for dastgah music; secondly, my personal/subjective assessment of that aesthetic gap preceded this larger historical investigation.)

in line with the soloistic orientation of the music, i'm categorizing my recording list by instrument, ordered according to a typically persian hierarchy: voice, tar, setar, santur, ney, kamancheh (and then bibliographic info). note, however, that all of my very strongest recommendations are for setar recordings specifically.



vocal

i've often seen it claimed that in dastgahi music, singing has 'always' or 'traditionally' been regarded as the most elevated form of artistic expression, with instrumentalists mainly serving as accompanists. obviously the fact that virtually every key figure in the 'early' (i.e. 19th-century) history of this music was a tar and/or setar player suggests a somewhat different history. regardless, there seems to have been a rather sharp stylistic shift with the early-20th-century pivot towards tasnif-singing, as singers started to prioritize clear diction, in contrast to an older style which tended toward abstraction, freely stretching syllables in the interest of 'purely musical' sense-making. and then of course, like everywhere else, microphone

amplification has encouraged a kind of 'croonerization'. some of the older or more conservative singers audible on record display an astounding attentiveness to the nuances of their own upper partials and the principles of stewartian-modal 'deep harmony'/'extended consonance', akin to [dhrupad](#) though expressed quite differently. this is still present to a surprising degree in performances by the later-20th-century 'stars' i mentioned earlier, but tempered by a borderline-new-age-y concern for smoothness and drastically simplified elaboration of melodic ideas (in other words, 'radio style', despite their educational background).



اقبال آذر [Eqbal Azar]

Songs of Eqbāl Āzar (1999) [Compilation]

i wouldn't typically recommend such poor-quality audio - i don't know what decade these are from or to what degree they have(n't) been cleaned up, just be warned, they are seriously ear-piercing and not in a fun way - but these are absolutely some of the most powerful recordings i've ever had the chance to listen to, eqbal azar sounding frankly demonic or angelic or idk just supernatural... azar was born in the 1860s or 70s, and these are complete performances of dastgahs/avazs (as opposed to 3-minute snippets), so we get the full effect of the abstract/oldschool type of singing i describe above - boundless, seemingly infinite creativity expressed over long melodic runs, full of extremely crisp *tahrirs* (the pseudo-'yodels' distinctive to persian traditional singing), which unfortunately do end up sounding kinda like chickens clucking thanks to the bad sound... anyway, at the very least these recordings are phenomenally valuable documents by which to orient our sense of what is even possible with dastgahi music. and it's worth noting that azar likely did not conceive of his own singing in terms of the radif, in terms of moving from gusheh to gusheh, but rather in 'pre-radifi' terms, in terms of 'pure' oral tradition, which is perhaps connected to this sense of freedom and on-the-fly ideation.

'songs 1' and 'songs 2' present complete dastgahs whereas the tracks on 'songs 3' and 'songs 4' are in the 2-3 minute range and therefore of lesser interest. there is also '[singing at 100](#)' which i have not yet had a chance to listen to beyond the samples on the linked page but i am hopeful records compelling performances in slightly better sound. as for azar's age - he is only really

'singing at 100' if we believe the 1861 birth year, which is the earliest of several i've found for him, and according to which he would have lived to be 110. i find it more likely that at some point around the turn of the century he found it expedient for professional purposes to age himself up a decade, which i believe was not uncommon in many parts of the world.

i should note also that the main tar accompanists on these recordings, ali akbar shahnazi and gholam hoseyn bigjekhani, also happen to be the only two tar-players whose recordings i recommend below. and, see the kamancheh section for notes on the use of the western violin in dastgahi music.



عبدالله دوامی [Abdollah Davami]

Vocal Radif & Old Tasnifs (2002)

davami, born 1891, was, afaik, the first singer to promulgate an adaptation of the radif for voice, and later taught his vocal radif at dariush safvat's center. davami was initially trained as a tombak player (ironically the bottom of the hierarchy of musical respectability) and made his name singing early tasnifs, but was retroactively 'rehabilitated' as an authoritative source on the 'correct'/'pure'/'classical' performance of dastgahi music. [these](#) audio recordings of his radif date from shortly before his death, and unfortunately he really sounds here like a man with no teeth left in his mouth. for some dastgahs he is accompanied by mohammed reza lotfi on tar, whose style i don't care for but who does here add musical interest.

محمود کریمی [Mahmoud Karimi]

Course of Âvâz (2003)

karimi, born 1927, was davami's most serious student and strictly academic in his relationship to dastgahi music, i.e. did not pursue any kind of performing career, only rarely consented to be recorded for fear of disturbing the 'purity' of his repertoire and his relationship to it, etc... to me he emblemizes everything frustrating about what we can call the 'safvat school' of dastgahi musicianship: underneath the discourse of preservation and purity, and the problematic reification of 'the radif' as the 'real' basis for the music, there is an intellectualized detachment, a profound lack of vitality. karimi's [solo radif](#) recording has an extraordinarily meditative/'zen' quality which i find myself returning to, and his manipulation of overtones is impeccable, but this music has very little relationship to that of e.g. eqbal azar above. karimi is also in fine form on the ocora '[anthologie de la musique traditionnelle](#)' set. there is also '[vocal performances of ostad mahmoud karimi](#)', which is unfortunately poorly recorded despite the late date, and confusingly (see the santur section) features faramarz payvar accompanying alongside karimi's close associate dariush safvat. it should be noted that there is not much difference between karimi's singing of radif and his singing of dastgah/avaz; in each case he clearly delineates between different gushehs.



حاتم عسگری فراهانی [Hatem Askari Farahani]

Radif Avazi Be Revayet-e Hatem Askari Farahani - Set of 4 cassettes

i'm just going to quote [tawfiq](#) quoting [rob simms](#):

"Two important lineages of vocal radif-ha exist. The most influential and widely disseminated is that of Abdollah Davami (1891-1980), particularly as it was transmitted through his pupil Mahmud Karimi (1927-1984). This radif is characterized by its cogency and (particularly Karimi's) self-similarity: its dense transposition and recycling of motives, tahrirs, and entire phrases. The second line of vocal radif transmission is relatively little known. The repertoire preserved by Hatam Askari Farahani (b. 1933) extends back through his teacher Seyyed Zia Rasa'i (a.k.a. Zakeri) to Seyyed Abdol Rahim, an influential and somewhat legendary master active at the turn of the 20th century. Askari deliberately restricted his transmission of this very large repertoire to preserve its integrity from the abuses that can be associated with published radif-ha. Askari finally recorded this radif but it remains unpublished as yet. It is characterized by its large size due to the greater number of gusheh-ha, their lengthier duration, and the inclusion of rhythmic types that are normally only associated with instrumental radif-ha. Askari's nephew Farhad Farhani believed that the transmission of this radif included anecdotes describing the circumstances regarding the creation of particular melodies—a quasi-epic account of Persian music history (personal communication, 1998)."

to what extent are these cassette recordings of portions/abbreviations of the vocal radif as known to asgari distinct from 'actual performance' i.e. dastgah/avaz? regardless, asgari's chahargah on here was what led me to investigate dastgahi music more intensively - something about the patient accumulation of melodic interrelationships such that by the end there is a feeling like the universe itself has been re-tuned... dariush safvat accompanies beautifully on setar. recently, in his 80s, asgari [recorded](#) a more complete radif across several releases, but unfortunately his voice had aged significantly, and bahman kazemi, though a commendable musicologist and ethnographer, proved not as sensitive an instrumental accompanist.



رامبد صديف [Rambod Sodeyf] & مجيد كياني [Majid Kiáni]

Tarji'band: Dastgah-e Chahargah

even though he is the youngest singer i recommend here, born 1939, sodeyf comes closest to eqbal azar in terms of sheer force of vocal production, which is phenomenal to hear in more modern sound. unfortunately i find that like nearly all 20th-century dastgahi musicians he lacks a certain improvisational creativity (which is presumably virtually impossible to cultivate within the current social contexts for dastgah music-making...), and therefore becomes a bit tiresome to listen to over time. still, i've returned to [this](#) recording enough that i feel compelled to include it, not least because of the santur accompaniment from majid kiani (see below). sodeyf, like asgari and karimi, has mostly refused to be recorded in an attempt to preserve the spontaneity of his performance, but there is [one other](#) recording of him performing afshari, bayat-e tork, and nava with a small ensemble of relatively uninspiring instrumentalists.



tar

the tar is probably the most iconic instrument for dastgahi music, and within iran the most prestigious among the regional family of basically similar long-necked lutes. however this is not a respect accorded on the basis of antiquity, as the recognizably-modern tar is only about 250 years old, with other long-necked lutes or the arabic-style oud (extinct in persia prior to its 20th-century revival) predominating until then. and in contrast to the oud or to the ottoman tambur, the tar has a piercing, almost janglingly metallic tone highlighting some of the higher overtones, an effect further reinforced by the sympathetic vibrations of its paired strings. older musicians play up this essentially harmonic orientation by almost always strumming or plucking several open strings at once alongside the primary melody-carrying string, thereby constantly reinforcing the dense 'chord' or harmonic background which partially defines the modal space of the dastgah - like a smaller version of the tanpura in south asian classical musics, but simultaneously less complex because less precisely-engineered and more complex because far from rhythmically static. unfortunately as part of 'radio-ification', younger players trend closer to monophony instead of the seeming 'haphazardness' of the old school.

for a long time i wondered how a fretted instrument such as the tar was capable of reproducing the nuances of the microtonal relationships between pitches in different dastgahs, without which a stewartian-modal orientation would be unthinkable. it turns out the frets are adjustable, and are indeed minutely adjusted, by ear, prior to performance, such that the main notes of a given dastgah have the correct relationships while unused areas of the instrument's pitch-space are necessarily left horrendously out of tune. this has significant implications for the 'pseudo-modulations' i described earlier - returning to our example of 'major-key' mahur modulating to what sounds like (the main body of) 'minor-key' shur, for example, we find that this 'shur-in-mahur' may in fact be significantly different, and significantly more dissonant, than 'actual' shur. it would be interesting to see whether any of this is reflected in, say, karimi's solo radif singing. most likely the practice of accompanying singers with a fretted instrument has historically served to provide continuous reinforcement of reference pitches.

as the 'main' and therefore most public-facing instrument for dastgahi music, the tar has also been the primary focus of efforts toward 'modernization'. until the early 20th century it was held high on the chest but was then brought down to the lap, guitar-style. the older position is perhaps ironically preserved only in azerbaijan, whereas in other respects azerbaijani tar-making and tar-playing have been significantly less conservative than in iran. still, virtually every well-recorded tar player before the later 20th century is cited as some kind of 'maverick' or 'innovator', reflecting perhaps not only the transformative ferment of the era but also a more long-standing valorization of individual style.

علی اکبر شهنازی [Ali-Akbar Shahnazi]

Pishdarâmads and Rengs (2000)

probably my favorite personage in this history, shahnazi (1897-1985) was the son of aqa hossein qoli, and seems to have absorbed his family's legendary musicianship as well as its resolutely 'modern' mindset. he displays a 'controlled looseness' of rhythm, never settling for long into any one groove but constantly suggesting different directions, as well as a rapid-fire sense of melodic exploration absolutely characteristic of the old school, but he also delights in cute little arpeggiations and vaguely tonal-harmonic dyads reflecting an eager curiosity for newness in the form of western music. probably nobody before or since could have possibly had the specific background necessary to engender such a style.

though regarded as easily the best tar player of his generation, he was apparently edged out of competition for the role of tar instructor at dariush safvat's center by his more politically-savvy contemporary [nur-ali borumand](#). whereas shahnazi endorsed a vision of a creative and loose relationship to the radif, borumand emphasized strictness, and taught that the radif as he played it was exactly identical to the radif as played by mirza abdollah. however, it has also been claimed that borumand made significant 'corrections' to the radif that he learned, and even went so far as to destroy a set of 1910s recordings of a direct student of abdollah's because of the degree to which they did not align...

anyway, shahnazi recorded in the 1970s and 80s both his [father's radif](#), an invaluable document, as well as [another radif](#) of his own creation, including *pishdaramads* and *rengs* (modal introductions and dance-like short pieces, respectively) which stand alone enough to have been collected into a [separate release](#), which is imo the best introduction to his playing. there are also [two releases](#) compiling his dastgahi performances in the earlier decades of the 20th century, culled, i believe, from radio broadcasts, but i haven't had a chance to listen to them in full and the sound is so bad i haven't tried very hard to track them down. since he was evidently still a capable musician until very near his death, it's a shame that there don't seem to be any recordings of his dastgahi performance in decent sound.

غلامحسین بیگجه‌خانی [Gholam-Hoseyn Bigjekhâni]

Târ Solo (2002)

gholam hoseyn bigjekhani (1918-1987) supposedly represents the 'tabriz school' of tar, i.e. a distinctly azeri style though different from actual azerbaijani maqam-playing across the border. however it may be more accurate to say that he and his lifelong associate mahmud farnam (who accompanies on the markedly-azeri *dayereh* drum rather than the standard tombak) actually originated what would only later be called 'tabriz school', i'm not sure. regardless his playing already shows a clear move towards the semi-monophony of later generations, even if still more engaging than radio-style 'proper', and he did indeed end up managing a radio ensemble. probably if we had good recordings of another artist on the level of shahnazi i would not pay much attention to bigjekhani, but really i just love the sound of the tar and so have found myself returning to his '[tar solo](#)' as well as his '[khoshnavaz](#)' which compiles radio broadcasts with mediocre sound (though 'tar solo' isn't exactly amazingly well-recorded either...). after bigjekhani the next significant tar player is jalil shahnaz, born 1921, a key architect of everything i dislike about radio-style.



setar

everything i wrote above about tuning, frets, and the shift from modal-harmonic to monophonic orientation applies as well to the other aristocratic long-necked lute of dastgahi music, the setar (which i should note has only the most distant relationship to the south asian sitar). basically every known/named tar-player historically has also played setar, but this instrument is smaller, cheaper, and quieter, with a slightly less strident tone, and is therefore less-public facing, more introverted. apparently ali akbar farahani and his sons were the first to regard the setar as 'one of the main instruments' of dastgahi music, but i don't know if that means they adapted it from a preexisting 'folk' version, or if they developed it from an instrument to practice on into one suitable for semi-public performance. anyway, even though the position of 'musician who specializes in setar' would probably have been unthinkable prior to the early 20th century, it's perhaps because of this relatively marginal status that setarists from that era noticeably tend towards stylistic conservatism - with the significant exception of ahmad ebadi (1906-1993), youngest son of mirza abdollah, who, despite his traditional education, did for the setar what jalil shahnaz did for the tar, only earlier and even more intensively. as an aside, because abdollah died during ebadi's youth, he was primarily trained by his older sister mowlood, who otherwise does not feature in the oral history of dastgahi music, but whose presence here suggests a whole world of unrecorded women associated with dastgahi music long before the era of theoretically-egalitarian university training (cf. qamar-al-moluk vaziri [1905-1959], who [was recorded](#), if poorly, but represents a kind of transitional-populist modality, presumably unlike mowlood).



استاد يوسف فروتن [Yusef Forutan]

سه‌تار [Setar] (2000) [Compilation]

this recording basically justifies, for me, all of the effort i've expended in writing this list - on some level, my project here is specifically to communicate, through all this contextualization, exactly how valuable it is for us to be able to hear, without imagining our way through layers of distortion, complete dastgah performances from yusef forutan.

forutan was born in 1891, and as his family was musically-inclined and wealthy he had the chance, after learning originally from his older brother, to study tar and setar with both mirza abdollah and aqa hossein qoli, as well as other now-legendary figures like darvish khan. he was not professionally involved with music but rather had some kind of extremely white-collar 'career' (in the sense that rich people have 'careers'), and made only a handful of public appearances as a setarist, apparently exclusively at benefit/charity-related events. meanwhile, though, he was an extremely active participant in what might be called the last gasps of the culture of the *majlis*, the courtyard gathering of amateur musicians. in his retirement he taught at safvat's center, and it is in this context that he recorded his radif, dastgah performances, and a large variety of short pieces passed down to him from many sources.

what's significant about forutan though is ultimately not repertoire but *style* - style which could only have been cultivated without expectation of audio recording, and without conceptualization of music in terms of notes, bar lines, etc. - in other words this is *seriously* music of oral tradition, and *not* in the way that dastgah, maqam, raga etc. are often described, even today, as musics of oral tradition, as though this is an immutable fact which stands outside of the processes of history... (of course it is actually not that difficult to find recordings of 'real oral tradition' if we look outside the belt of 'imperial statehood' from mali to japan, but - this is a topic for other lists).

like virtually all musicians of his generation or earlier (including in the western classical world and including those recorded at their physical primes), forutan does not play 'perfectly' in the sense demanded by audio recording's logic of infinite replayability - we can hear 'bum notes', ideas abandoned halfway through or 'drafted' several times, and so on. but with his hands moving

probably faster than his mind, with something we could call 'the radif' totally entrenched in his muscle-memory via endless repetition, what becomes clear once we submit to the logic of this playing is that *there are no mistakes*, not really - everything is somehow accounted for, in the next moment, as a 'natural' feature of the totality of the sound-world... as in the famous [robert johnson](#) recordings we can hear seemingly infinite micro-rhythms in the shifting relationships between different strings, forutan as affective storyteller; as in the [pupils of clara schumann](#) recordings that complexity is allowed to stretch out, with architectural coherence, over impossible lengths... and thankfully with forutan's aggressive attack he allows this music to sound really *crunchy*, not softening or glossing over some of the more dissonant harmonic (and, often plainly audible, overtone) relationships theoretically foregrounded by dastgahi music. this is not really 'intellectual' music and it's not really 'subtle', or it makes those descriptors seem outmoded.

i've highlighted [this](#) release over others involving *zarbis*, short pieces, because it seems that for forutan those call for a somewhat simplified style with a clearer sense of 'a melody' and 'a rhythm', but of course it's extremely fortunate that we have access to 'old zarbis 1', 'old zarbis 2', and 'radif of persian music on setar', all with great sound. and i have to mention tawfiq's [bootleg](#) as well, an album's worth of forutan recordings (including three dastgahs, which i am not yet well-versed enough to identify...) uploaded from a faulty pressing of an otherwise totally unconnected iranian folk music lp, what unthinkable luck!

سعید هرمزی [Saïd Hormozi]

Setâr 2 (2003)

saïd hormozi (1897-1976) is, for me, 'the other' non-radio-affiliated 19th-century-born setarist who by virtue of his connection to safvat's center was recorded in decent sound. between the later year of his birth and his family's opposition to his musical inclination, or perhaps for other reasons, he studied mainly with darvish khan (who had himself studied with aqa hossein qoli, but was also somewhat controversial for his efforts to 'modernize' his pedagogy) and not with any of the other 'greats', but was regarded as perhaps khan's most gifted student. hormozi's playing displays an extraordinary command of lengthy, complex melodic architecture, but can also be a bit dry or

staid in a way that prefigures later trends. still one of my favorite dastgahi musicians. 'setar 2' seems to compile the best-quality recordings available, in contrast to 'setar 1' which seems to be all from one session recorded on some very small device. there is also his 'radif of persian music on setar', like forutan's in good sound, and also like forutan's characterized by a 'looser' style of playing radif, you get the sense that even the radif itself is not quite as 'fixed' for these two as for later generations.

داریوش صفوت [Dariush Safvat]

Improvisation (I) (2008)

dariush safvat (1928-2013) is of course all over this list in his capacity as a 'preserver' of dastgahi music, opening the most influential school outside the official academic system, recording older musicians and publicizing those recordings, and so on. of his own solo performance (or with tombak, which was not standard for setarists of prior generations) we have several recordings of varying quality documenting sporadic concerts in academic contexts often in the u.s. or france.

safvat's enigmatic playing stands somewhat outside the dichotomy i have been establishing between the 'emotion/passion' of azar or forutan and the 'detachment' of karimi or the radio artists. for safvat's generation the 'crisis' of dastgahi music, which seemed to demand this rhetoric of preservation and purification, was this: whereas a forutan or an azar simply registered the affective identity of each dastgah or each melodic gesture as a natural fact, the same way i might register the affective distinction between major and minor keys, by safvat's time recorded media from the west was already ubiquitous enough that he too must have struggled not to hear everything in terms of major/minor. this is problematic enough for a listener but a virtually insurmountable obstacle for improvising dastgahi music, at least on the level of the older artists. for safvat, inspired by the esoteric tanbur ritual suites of [nur ali elahi](#) (not directly connected to dastgahi music, and anyway totally revamped by elahi from simpler materials, but worth investigating nonetheless), the way out of this conundrum was to emphasize the sufi-mystical dimension of dastgahi music, which he regarded as the absolute basis for the music and for the 'truth' of the radif. therefore his relationship to his music is indeed 'affective

rather than academic' (of course a totally reductive opposition...), but that affect, which to me seems like 'meditative mysticism' or 'patient revelation of somewhat alien truths', equally colors any dastgah he plays. still, what he retains from earlier generations, impressively given the relatively late date of his birth, is not only the harmonic orientation but also the commitment to 'working out his ideas' or in other words to play 'imperfectly'.

of the five recordings titled 'improvisations' or the transliterated 'badihe pardazi', i am highlighting the [first one](#) because it's the only one i have been able to hear so far (i will update this once i've listened to the others), and because it's more interesting than the [radif recordings](#) which can also be found. i should note that safvat also plays the santur at a high level, and i believe parts of 'improvisations 2-5' record his santur playing as well.



santur

the santur has a much longer history in iran than similar instruments like the cimbalom or yangqin have in europe or china, respectively, but, nevertheless, unlike with the long-necked lutes, there is no 'family' of santur-like instruments used in folk or ritual contexts, and historically significant santurists are fewer and farther between than singers or (se)tar-players. each pitch on the santur is produced by one main string which is struck by the hammer as well as two additional sympathetically-vibrating strings tuned to that same pitch, enabling and encouraging, as on the tar and setar, a tone production with 'rapid attack, rapid initial decay, extended additional decay'. tones seem to hang in the air, simultaneously fast and slow, suggesting again the overall harmonic orientation of the music.



مجید کیانی [Majid Kiáni]

Grands maitres du santur / Great Masters of the Santur (1991)

majid kiani (1941-), i believe one of the first musicians to have studied primarily at safvat's center, seems to have wrestled with basically the same issues as safvat and come to a more academic/scholarly solution - a lifelong commitment to researching and 'recreating', in as much detail as possible, the style of legendary santurist habib somai (1901-1946), who trained few students and left only brief and indistinct recordings. while of course no one can say whether he 'succeeded', and certainly he himself is not naïve to the impossibility of such a task, the result has been the cultivation of a style which, while grounded in the characteristic 'dryness' of later-20th-century dastgahi performance, retains enough 'fire' to veer towards 'acerbic' in a way i find compelling.

apparently at some point kiani was embroiled in controversy with the more commercial santurist faramarz payvar (1933-2009) regarding the wrapping of cloth around the tips of the santur hammers. this innovation of payvar's results in a softer and more pianistic tone, and makes the santur easier to play, but for kiani this unacceptably dilutes the desired severity of the tone, and more importantly makes impossible the subtle gradations of pressure and attack described by older musicians. these are the kinds of minutiae we are talking about here...

aside from '[great masters of the santur](#)' or 'art of the santur', his most recent recording afaik, kiani can also be heard on the simply though inaccurately titled '[radif](#)' as well as on the ocora '[anthologie de la musique traditionnelle](#)' set along with karimi, all in beautiful sound.



ney

as in former ottoman territories, the ney in persia connotes sufism, but whereas in istanbul this means that the ney has historically been played by the most prestigious court composers, in persia this has resulted in the ney's marginalization from mainstream dastgahi-music culture (notwithstanding the sufi-ness of dastgahi music more generally, which i guess has had an easier time being pushed underground or ignored when not expedient). isfahan is specifically known as a historical center for persian ney playing owing apparently to safavid patronage, and indeed [hassan kassai](#) (1928-2012), by far the most influential ney player of the 20th century, was born there. my understanding is that kassai was responsible for adapting the radif to suite the ney and to some extent adapting (the playing and construction of) the ney to suite the radif - in other words, the repertoire of the generation before his might not have been closely related to the dastgah-concept in the first place, or might have been an early-diverging branch. basically every recorded contemporary persian ney player belongs to kassai's teaching lineage.



kamancheh

the traditional kamancheh is another instrument with close relatives everywhere from west africa to indonesia. in the early 20th century, as in south india, the western violin, confusingly also called the kamancheh, was retuned and adopted with such enthusiasm that the older kamancheh was almost totally displaced. iranian violin can most compellingly be heard on [this](#) recording of rokneddin mokhtari (1887-1970). however, later in the 20th century, with the new emphasis on supposed 'authenticity', [ali asghar bahari](#) (1905-1995) - one of few remaining traditional kamancheh specialists - became engaged in teaching a new generation of kamancheh players, and now the western violin is itself nearly 'extinct' in this repertoire. bahari apparently learned within his family, who had traditionally been *motrebi*, entertainers of the type looked down upon by oldschool majlis musicians. while i would love to have recordings of *that* repertoire, what we have instead - adaptations of radif-based music for kamancheh - is, i think, as with kassai above, basically 'neo-traditional'. i don't think it's a coincidence that those

instruments historically common in persia but only recently incorporated into dastgahi performance are also those with the least capacity for the 'harmonically-oriented' type of playing i described earlier.



bibliographic & further notes

laudan nooshin's '[iranian classical music: the discourses and practice of creativity](#)' is easily the most compelling book on this subject, with effective discussion of the ambiguities both of the music's recent history and of the improvisation/composition dichotomy. i also read or skimmed lloyd clifton miller's '[music and song in persia: the art of avaz](#)', which was sort of naïvely idealistic but had some technical information i couldn't find anywhere else; owen wright's '[touraj kiaras and persian classical music: an analytical perspective](#)', which honestly i cant remember anything about; owen wright's '[music theory in the safavid era: the taqsim al-nagamat](#)' which was totally fascinating for overturning received wisdom with new evidence but also insanely dry past the first bits; mohsen mohammadi's '[modal modernities: formations of persian classical music and the recording of a national tradition](#)' and ann e. lucas' '[music of a thousand years: a new history of persian musical traditions](#)', both of which basically said the same things as laudan nooshin's historical-overview section but in a lot more detail and with much worse editing. i also found the bizarre little [farabisoft](#) website an invaluable resource on specific instruments and musicians of note.

my next area of focus will probably be qin and then non-qin chinese traditional ensemble musics, which will both be much shorter than this probably. there's just fewer recordings and less information that i can find...