

ROUNDTABLE: WOMAN, LIFE, FREEDOM: REFLECTIONS ON AN ENDURING CRISIS

The Birth of a University Music Genre in Iran’s Woman, Life, Freedom Uprising

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Aside from the obvious and central role of women in Iran’s Woman, Life, Freedom (*Zan, Zendegi, Azadi*) uprising that began in the fall of 2022, two other (f)actors have played a crucial role in defining the movement’s demands and propelling it forward, namely, students and music. University students have a long tradition of serving as righteous agitators of uprisings in Iran, both before and after the 1979 revolution, as does music in inspiring and soundtracking them. But in this arguably greatest ideological and political threat to the Islamic Republic since its founding, something unprecedented happened: the fusion of student activism and song in the form of a recognizable genre, unattached to a specific political ideology although fully supportive of the Woman, Life, Freedom uprising and its demands for liberation and freedom for all.

Although students were involved in music making both in 1979 and again, although to a much lesser extent, leading up to the 2009 Green uprising, it was within their capacities as political partisans—mainly leftist groups in the 1970s and reformist students in 2009—that they engaged in music. In the Woman, Life, Freedom uprising, on the other hand, different constellations of students that posted on social media under the umbrella group *Jam’i az Daneshjuyan-e Musiqi* (A Group of Music Students, henceforth referred to as Music Students) participated in the protests in their capacity as student artists who contributed music to the uprising.¹ These groups drew on the social and political capital that university students have accrued in postrevolutionary Iran to inject moral force into their musical pieces, and visually highlighted their status as students in the videos that accompanied the songs, as I will elaborate below. The distinction from prior protest music is that, whereas students have often been involved in music making, their songs previously have sprung from their political affiliations, and so we know them as leftist or Islamist anthems, for example, not as university anthems; their music did not actively, musically or visually, claim and exhibit their identity as students as the prime marker of their group. But in what some scholars have described as Iran’s postideological generations following the disillusion with ideology after the revolution, students draw from multiple ideological histories without bowing to any, instead highlighting their universal demands for freedom from their position as dissident students, drawing on the validated symbolism of the university.²

In discussing the features of some of these songs, I argue that the productions constitute a sort of genre, and one of the outstanding features of artistic production to emerge from this uprising. Drawing on an interview with the composer of two of these “university music”

¹ See their Instagram page: [music_students](https://www.instagram.com/music_students/?igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA%3D%3D), accessed 6 November 2023, https://www.instagram.com/music_students/?igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA%3D%3D.

² Hamid Dabashi’s “The End of Islamic Ideology,” *Social Research*, 67, no. 2 (2000): 475–518.

pieces, Adib Ghorbani, as well as one of the singers of these pieces who will remain anonymous for safety reasons, I also hope to elucidate some aspects of these songs' production processes, and factors that were considered in decisions about the lyrics and music. I hope that this short piece will lay out early groundwork for more research on this genre.

One of the most thrilling aspects of the Woman, Life, Freedom uprising has been its artistic character. In the months that followed the death-in-custody of Mahsa Zhina Amini, Iranians responded with a profusion of creative protest, from taboo-breaking slogans to urban interventions such as blood-colored fountain waters, affective and symbolic acts like offering sweets and hugs or cutting hair, and of course, the explosion of musical productions from Iranians all over the globe. At the same time, universities quickly became one of the main sites of protest across the country. At first, the state sent officials to "reason" with students, only to prompt boos and chants like "*Sistem-e fāsed nemikhāym / Mehmun-e qātel nemikhāym*" (We don't want a corrupt system / We don't want a murderer as speaker). And soon thereafter, security forces and regime vigilantes were dispatched to unleash physical violence against them. Students entered the revolutionary fray in explicit political demonstrations but also engaged prominently in its artistic facets, including music. The combination of an uprising that promoted the positive and powerful force of life and creativity and a group that acknowledged a historical responsibility to agitate against state repression culminated in the first popular song of this group, namely "Sorud-e Azadi" (Freedom Anthem).³ In its musical and performative style, this piece came to be representative of a majority of the other "university songs." Although these songs have a clear anthemic, march music quality to them that recalls songs from socialist traditions, the students chose them not for their political significations but for their revolutionary potential and the ease of production and audience reception that known anthems of this style have provided.

"Sorud-e Azadi" is a Persian rendition of the famous 1973 Chilean protest song "El pueblo, unido, jamás será vencido!" (A people united will never be defeated!).⁴ Composed in support of Salvador Allende's socialist movement, the song became an anthem for Chilean resistance to the Pinochet regime after the US-backed coup d'état put him in power. The anthem was subsequently picked up as a resistance song in different political contexts, including in Iran leading up to the 1979 revolution. The piece has a particular agentive revolutionary resonance; it is an anthem that accompanied a successful revolution in the past and is pregnant with that very possibility. In choosing this song, the students signaled an active and resolute position-taking in the uprising. When they first posted "Sorud-e Azadi" on social media in late October 2022, they announced it with the message, "This is how we will hold class!" all the while boycotting their regular classes.

Before exploring this and other pieces produced by this group in what I argue is a genre, I will clarify what I mean by "group" and "genre," given that the Music Students have comprised a changing cohort of people in different constellations and the musical repertoire shows substantial variation in terms of musical style.

Due to the given risks, the groups that have contributed to this repertoire have been secretive about their personal identities. Still, early on, a clear association between the Karaj-branch Music College of the University of Art (outside of Tehran) and this music became apparent: the "Sorud-e Azadi" videoclip starts with a pan of the exterior building before entering the inner foyer of the university where students are gathered to sing. Aside from that visual association, information about the identities of these musicians has not been made public. The insights I offer here are based on my conversations with some of the participants, as already mentioned, and do not jeopardize the safety of any individual.

³ See "Sorud-e Azadi": music_students, Instagram video, accessed 6 November 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CkTlvTztF0l/?igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA%3D%3D>.

⁴ See dty06, "El Pueblo Unido," YouTube video, accessed 6 November 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IstzHJGydzU>.

A few songs are in the Persian classical tradition, while others might best be characterized as anthemic pop music. But like “Sorud-e Azadi,” the majority and arguably more popular pieces in this university repertoire call forth musical styles associated with socialist, Third-Worldist traditions. A substantial number, at least four out of eleven songs that the group has posted, have very clear musical origins from various political contexts with melodies that would be familiar to most listeners, allowing for easy audience connection. These four songs are “Sorud-e Azadi,” as already mentioned, “Sorud-e Barabari” (The Song of Equality, produced in 1999 by women’s rights activists and sung in various feminist contexts since), “Sogandnameh” (Declaration of Oath, composed in response to the 2009 Green Uprising), and “Iran Ghargh-e Enqelab Ast” (Iran Is in the Midst of Revolution, first sung by dissident Fereyduun Farrokhzad in the early 1980s).⁵

Musically, these songs are perhaps best described as protest march anthems, spanning the semantic range between *hemāsi* (epic) and *sorud* (anthem) in Iranian music. They are often accompanied by guitar or piano music, propelled by drum snare rolls, stomping feet, and clapping hands, and a multivocal chorus that denies identification of individual voices. The lyrics call forth unity, resolve, and revolution. Other prominent features include sophisticated but catchy musical compositions, a dominantly female overtone in the choir’s vocal range, and radical feminist lyrics, as I will discuss.

Visually, the works are united in their representation of anonymous students in university settings, and their presentation on the Music Students’ social media sites.⁶ The music videos signal the simultaneously precarious and powerful position that these students hold. Their identities are concealed through videographic blurring, covered faces, or filming from a distance. We are often left to see just their hands and feet; we can also see that they are numerous, in some videos counting several dozens (Figs. 1–3).⁷ These productions relay that they are not the work of a niche group among music students. Rather, they reveal the mass unity and collective action behind these songs’ political declarations, issued by one of the most trusted sectors of society.

As mentioned by the people I have spoken with, the songs were in part chosen because they harness the revolutionary capital contained in their successive iterations, which reverberate in Iranians’ collective memories. But they are even more powerful because they serve as a corrective to previous versions. Parallel to the political claim at the core of the Woman, Life, Freedom uprising, namely, that no one is free unless women are free, the musicians lift the lyrics out of their gender neutrality and turn them to speak to the centrality of women in the struggle, such as in “Sorud-e Azadi:”

Rise! For Woman, Life, Freedom
 In the name of woman, in the name of life
 Rip the chains of servitude
 Our dark night will turn to dawn

⁵ For “Sorud-e Barabari”: music_students, Instagram video, accessed 6 November 2023, https://www.instagram.com/reel/Ckddj1BMTai/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==; for “Sogandnameh”: music_students, Instagram video, accessed 6 November 2023, https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cku2mwepSHq/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==; and for “Iran Ghargh-e Enqelab Ast”: music_students and iranianpopart, Instagram video, accessed 6 November 2023, https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cml8btzuata/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==.

⁶ See music_students, Instagram account, accessed 6 November 2023, https://www.instagram.com/music_students/?igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA%3D%3D. There are other anthems (like the poignant and popular track “Avaz-e Leyla-ha”), which very much fit into this genre musically but were not posted on the Music Students’ site; see Āvāzhā-ye Band, YouTube video, accessed 6 November 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zMZeSGzLwYk>. Perhaps this and other songs like it were inspired by the “university genre.” Regardless, what they tell us is that the revolutionary anthem is very popular, despite its socialist connotations.

⁷ See also music clips to other songs on the Music Students’ Instagram account: music_students, accessed 6 November 2023, https://www.instagram.com/music_students/?igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA%3D%3D.



Figure 1. Anonymous feet stomping to the rhythm in the “Sogandnameh” (Declaration of Oath) music video. Source: music_studentss, Instagram video, accessed 6 November 2023, https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cku2mwepSHq/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==.

All the whips will turn to axes
 So that our blossoms turn into voices
 Me, You, and Others become Us again

In other places, the musicians composed original songs with feminist lyrics, such as in the song “Dast Dar Daste Ham” (Hand in Hand):



Figure 2. Anonymous hands playing the piano in the “Keh Parvardeh-ye Daman-e Yek Zanam” (Because I’ve Been Raised By a Woman) video. Source: music_studentss, Instagram video, accessed 6 November 2023, https://www.instagram.com/reel/CkfgcK3rgR6/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==.

For the tresses of the girls of revolution
For my people, following tradition
Don’t be afraid and agitate for the rights of women
Let’s shatter the banner of the enemy’s oppression
Because a bright future is expecting us
The past is almost a story on children’s lips



Figure 3. Anonymous students with their faces covered, singing in a darkened room in the “Rah-e Kucheh” music clip. Source: Instagram video, music_studentss, accessed 6 November 2023, https://www.instagram.com/reel/C10qh-CrFpy/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==.

The reverberation of laughter is loud and united
The chant Woman, Life, Freedom is the message of our generation.⁸

Elsewhere, the song adopts woman-centered lyrics, such as “Keh Parvardeh-ye Daman-e Yek Zanam” (Because I’ve been raised by a woman):

⁸ See “Dast Dar Daste Ham”: music_studentss, Instagram video, accessed 6 November 2023, https://www.instagram.com/reel/CkfgcK3rgR6/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==.

This is how my mother has raised me
 That for my homeland I am Ariobarzanes [Achaemenid military commander]
 Because I've been raised by a woman
 That I will give my life for my freedom
 That I'm a soldier for this soil and place
 This is how my mother has raised me
 That I will die but will not give in to oppression
 That I won't exchange my honor for colorful spreads
 This is how my mother has raised me.⁹

Despite the relative diversity in the musical styles, the preponderance of the protest march elements discussed, as well as the sociopolitical context, the secretive conditions for their production and distribution, and their student or student-adjacent associations, call out these songs as a genre. As Constant Bonard argues, genre (as opposed to musical style) depends “strongly on historical, social, or geographical parameters as well as on the composer’s, or other relevant observers’, assertions (e.g., declarations, manifestos).”¹⁰ I have elsewhere argued that if “leading up to the 1979 revolution the underground music group Chavosh, led by Hushang Ebtehaj (d. 2022) and Mohammad Reza Lotfi (d. 2014) and voiced by Mohammad Reza Shajarian (d. 2020) and Shahram Nazari (b. 1950), revolutionized traditional Iranian music to rise to the occasion of the people’s uprising, it is now these anonymous students who are offering a musical body that is both masterful as well as infused with urgency and moral rectitude.”¹¹ In the case of Chavosh, the genre was stylistically much more uniform than what we might call the “Woman, Life, Freedom university genre.”

Although I cannot speak here to the ways in which most of these pieces were produced, I can reflect on the production of two of them, illuminating aspects of the making of these songs within a heightened revolutionary context. These two pieces were composed by a now US-based musician, Adib Ghorbani, who is a graduate of Tehran University’s music faculty. The first of Ghorbani’s pieces that the group adopted was “Biya, Keh Kuche Mizanad To-ra Seda” (Come, the Street Beckons You; also referred to as “Rah-e Kuche,” The Way to the Street).¹² The song starts with a few resounding notes on the piano before moving in a marching tempo toward the refrain, “Freedom, Woman, Life, Woman, Life, Freedom,” inverting the uprising’s slogan and capping it with “freedom.” It then crescendos to declare all that the protestors have overcome and in whose names they are fighting, namely the “sister’s blood,” the “brother’s torture,” and the “homeland’s name.” It has a catchy repetition of words both at the start with “Biya, biya” (Come, come) and throughout the song at the beginning of other phrases:

Come, come, the street beckons, beckons you!
 It’s calling you by your first name that is Freedom
 Tell, tell everyone with this old lump sitting in their throat
 Tell them they are not alone
 Freedom, Woman, Life, Woman, Life, Freedom
 Freedom, Woman, Life, Woman, Life, Freedom
 Because we have overcome the wall of fear
 In the end, we learned the way to the street
 Your hair kissed the winds

⁹ See “Keh Parvardeh-ye Daman-e Yek Zanam”: music_studentss, Instagram video, accessed 6 November 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/ClRQHjjsNyB/?igshid=MTRhZmU1ODE2NA%3D%3D>.

¹⁰ Constant Bonard, “What Is a Musical Genre and What Is Its Use?” (MA thesis, Université de Genève, 2014), 8.

¹¹ See Nahid Siamdoust, “Women Reclaiming Their Voices for Life and Freedom: Music and the 2022 Uprising in Iran,” *Iranian Studies* 56, no. 3 (2023): 577–83.

¹² See “Rah-e Kuche,” music_studentss and copy.paste.original, Instagram video, accessed 6 November 2023, https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cl0qh-CrfPy/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==.

And revived the city of the dead and dead winds
 Despite the boots
 And the assault of the lackeys
 In the memory of your sister's blood
 And your brother's torture
 In the name of our homeland's name
 Stay, and next to me
 Sing sing
 Because this sudden anthem
 From mouth to mouth
 Has reached each shore
 With joy
 Freedom, Woman, Life, Woman, Life, Freedom.

Engulfed by the spirit of musical activity surrounding the protests, Ghorbani had written this piece independently and subsequently asked a poet friend to write the lyrics for it. He had a female singer perform the song and posted it on his social media accounts, where it garnered some attention. But then someone got in touch with him anonymously and told him they were one of the university students behind the anthems and asked whether they could have the score to “Rah-e Kucheh.” Ghorbani says he was initially not sure what to think, but gave them his notes not expecting anything soon. “Within a week, all the sites had lit up with their version of my song, it was everywhere and got heard a lot more than my version,” Ghorbani adds.¹³

The students, who Ghorbani says are a constellation of current and former music students from different departments across mostly Tehran universities, rearranged the original version to adapt it to piano and transformed the style to the protest march music already described. They recorded a music video that was visually aligned with many pieces in the genre: we see two dozen students all dressed in black standing in rows side by side, holding hands in a dark room with the curtains pulled, their faces completely covered in black, stomping their feet rhythmically to the music, with a piano on the left guiding the chorus. They radiate a united front in their political resolve, taking risks to voice demands of the proverbial “street,” or the wider body politic.

The second piece, which Ghorbani composed for the group, titled “Beh Khak-e Sorkh-e Iran Qasam” (Oath to Iran’s Bloodied Soil) is the last piece on the social media sites of the Music Students.¹⁴ In considering the kind of music that he composed for the group, Ghorbani said, “The music had to have the capacity to unite people. It had to have paradoxical qualities of being both simple and deep. It had to have a mix of emotions, be sad and heavy but turn around to be productive and victorious. You have to have all these different feelings. And I tried to stay away from too many ornamentations, so that people could easily sing the songs.”

Aside from creating pieces that had “revolutionary resonances” in people’s memories, Ghorbani was also considering the students’ situation. “When you look at ‘Rah-e Kucheh’ you can see that it was made under pressure. The students don’t have time to practice it, they have this stress that at any moment someone might walk in on them, or follow them as they’re walking home, so you can’t workshop these pieces,” he said, adding, “You have to make sure the piece is easy to follow, has repetitions, more sequences, and doesn’t have a strange tempo that requires too much practice.”

Despite their precautions, the students involved in these productions knew that they were taking risks. Especially early on when large groups of students took part in identifiable university spaces, or when the University of Art Music College building was visible in “Sorud-e

¹³ Interview with author on Zoom, 15 May 2023.

¹⁴ music_students and iranianpopart, “Beh Khak-e Sorkh-e Iran Qasam,” Instagram video, Farvardin 1402 (12 April 2023), <https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cq8paoCO48m/?igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA%3D%3D>.

Azadi.” But as one student told me, “Everyone wanted to pay their dues and contribute to the uprising and understood the unique position of music and the arts in supporting the revolutionary spirit.”¹⁵ As the media have reported, the security forces have countered students harshly, and by now dozens of students across Tehran universities have been suspended or expelled. For now, the musical activity appears to be forced into silence.

The Music Students’ very last post is from mid-June 2023; it shows security forces raiding Tehran University’s College of Music.¹⁶ Soon after, University of Art authorities issued a statement requiring that all women wear the *maghna’*e, the Islamic Republic’s official headcover, rather than the more casual headscarves that students have made acceptable in university spaces over the last decade. As the state has forced the Woman, Life, Freedom protests to recede with its use of brutality and violence, the students have continued to serve as a bulwark of protest and resistance.¹⁷

After the enforcement of the *maghna’*e, University of Art students issued perhaps one of the most iconic responses to cap this period of uprising in postrevolutionary Iran. They started their letter not with the customary “In the name of God,” but “In the sublime name of freedom” (Be nām-e boland-e āzādi), and wrote: “We will continue our struggle for a free Iran and . . . will not give in to oppression as long as we live. We will prove that nothing will go back to how it was.” The antagonism between students and officials, as well as the impossibility for a “return to how it was” was perceptible in the sheer tone of the students’ statement.¹⁸ They wrote, “An ocean of blood separates you from us,” and added, “Since we have become “we” for about a year now, we have no words with you, except for one word: no.”¹⁹

That little but mighty two-lettered word (“na” in Persian) captured the position of this entire uprising. This was not an uprising for reforms. This was a revolutionary uprising for a wholesale overthrow of a system with which no form of compromise was possible. Other universities and civil rights group issued statements of support for the students at the University of Art, and one group stated that they understand this “no” to be addressed to the entirety of the Islamic Republic by society at large.²⁰ And, true to the artistically rich nature of this movement, people have created graphics and artwork centering on the word “na” following the students’ statement.

As we approach the one-year anniversary of the Woman, Life, Freedom uprising, nothing seems settled. Although the protests have died down, perhaps the most-repeated attribute these days about the uprising is the Persian proverb “*Ātash-e zir-e khākestar*”; that it is like fire underneath the ashes, ready to ignite at any moment. Regardless of the eventual political outcome of the uprising or its potential continuation, scholars of Middle Eastern studies have a mighty body of musical works to write about, with this university genre as one of the most distinct and powerful musical forms among them.

¹⁵ Google Meet interview with one of the student singers who must maintain anonymity for safety reasons, 3 July 2023.

¹⁶ See music_students and iranianpopart, Instagram video, accessed 6 November 2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/CsZMgcbNyMo/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==.

¹⁷ “Hemayat-e Sarasari az Daneshjuyan-e Daneshgah-e Honar,” Akhbar-Rooz, 18 June 2023, <https://www.akhbar-rooz.com/206677/1402/03/28>.

¹⁸ The head of security at the University of Art even threatened students that in the case of any protests or gatherings, “We will fire with machine guns.”

¹⁹ See the University of Art students statement, “Bayaniyeh Daneshjuyān-e Daneshgah-e Honar: na Ejbar, na Sarkub va na Dushka Digar Asar Nadarad” (Neither Force, nor Suppression, nor Machine Guns Have an Effect Anymore), RadioFarda, 24 June 2023, <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/32473416.html>.

²⁰ See the statement of civil society activists, “Na’ dāneshgāh-e honar-rā, ‘na’ jāme’e be kolliyat-e jomhuri-ye eslāmi midānim” (We consider the Art University’s “no” society’s “no” to the entirety of the Islamic Republic), RadioFarda, 25 June 2023, <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/iranian-civil-activists-statement-on-students-protests-against-mandatory-hijab/32475143.html>.