

# Film/Video Reviews

*Avanegar: A History of Music Transcription in Iran*. 2022. Produced, filmed, and edited by Behrouz Jamali, 60 minutes. DVD. Washington DC: Dimension Media.

*Avanegar* is an educational film that outlines the history of musical transcription in Iran. The film begins in the thirteenth century and makes its way to the twentieth century outlining the important figures and documents regarding the transcription of music in Iran. In this regard, the title *Avanegar* is quite a fitting as it means “transcriber” in the Persian language. Mohsen Mohammadi, scholar of Iranian music, both compiled the research for the film and narrated this history on camera.<sup>1</sup> While the film is narrated in Persian, English subtitles and the depiction of rare historical documents makes the film both accessible and informative to a wide audience.

Staff notation today is an inseparable part of music in Iran. Today, within the local classical tradition staff notation plays a seminal role both in pedagogy and creative practice alongside the traditional oral methods. *Avanegar* tells both the story of the earliest encounters of Iranian music with notation methods, as well as the subsequent adoption of them by various musicians. The film’s narrative of musical transcription in Iran is broken up into four broad parts that provide overviews on: (1) medieval musical transcriptions in the Islamic World from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century; (2) European travelogues and songbooks collections on Persian music from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century; (3) the adoption of Western notation by Iranian musicians in the first half of the twentieth century; and (4) the musicological transcriptions by Iranian musicologists in the post-WWII period.

The opening section features the thirteenth century transcription methods of Safi al-Din al-Urmawi. While not examples of staff notation, Mohammadi explains how these early transcriptions mark the earliest attempts in the Islamic world to document melodies on paper, using letters to represent pitch and numerical values to designate duration. A transcription from Safi al-Din’s original manuscript is displayed for audiences unfamiliar with these documents. Subsequently, medieval Islamic scholars Qutb al-Din al-Shirazi (the thirteenth century) and Abd al-Qader Mara’iqi (the fifteenth century) are introduced through their works that used this method. The continuation of this method is traced to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Ottoman courts to the figure of Demetrius Cantemir (d.1723). A strength of this section is its discussion of the

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1. Mohsen Mohammadi is a historian and scholar on the music of Iran. He is currently the director of Indo-Persian music at the University of California, Los Angeles.

value of these transcriptions among today's Iranian musicians who are interested in reconstructing these melodies creatively, despite the ambiguities regarding pitch, tempo, and ornamentation.

In the following section the lesser researched topic of travelogues and European songbook pertaining to Iran are examined. Mohammadi provides a detailed list of such documents in his narration. This list begins with the first ever European notation of an Iranian melody by French jeweler and traveler Jean Chardin. Transcribed in his 1686 travelogue, *Journal du Voyage du Chevalier Chardin en Perse & aux Indes Orientales*, Chardin's transcription of the song "Pomegranate Branch" is displayed with the original transliterated poetry. Mohammadi describes the likely context of Chardin's encounter with this song in the courts of Safavid king Shah Abbas II (r. 1642–1666), while the reconstruction of this melody is played in the background by virtuoso *ney* performer Siamak Jahangiri. This is then followed by a sung rendition by Kazem Davoudian.

In a similar fashion the film tells the story of three songbooks on Persian music arranged for piano by Western musicians, telling the stories of the collectors and the efficacy of their transcriptions in communicating Iranian melodies. The three publications discussed are, (1) *Specimens of the Popular Poetry of Persia* (p.1842) by Russian diplomat Alexander Chodzko; (2) *Hymne National Persan* (p. 1873) by, the French band master of military music in the Qajar courts Alfred Lemaire; and (3) *Twelve Persian Folk-songs* (p. 1904), by American diplomat Blair Fairchild. A common theme among these publications was their lack of any recognisably Iranian melodies in the notations they made. This was sonically communicated through the performance of excerpts from these publications that were stylistically indiscernible from other typical piano songbooks. Mohammadi points out that songbooks had become a commodity in Europe, and as such, the priorities of these transcriptions were not the introduction of Iranian music to European audiences, but rather the creation of arrangements for piano that would translate into sales in Europe. Fairchild's publication, though, is mentioned as a more accurate transcription where Persian melodies can be recognised. This distinction was apparent in the images of Fairchild's transcription for they not only included the double staff piano arrangement but also included a separate line of the sung melody.

Another piano arrangement mentioned in the film is told through the story of the travels of Qajar king Mozaffar ad-Din Shah and his entourage in France in 1900. The episode tells the story of Iranian pianist Arsalan Nasser-Homayoun, student and assistant of Lemaire. In this trip Nasser-Homayoun was instructed by the Shah to arrange Persian music on the piano for a French woman, who would in return sing those arrangements back to the Shah. Nasser-Homayoun's piano accompaniment in this performance marks the first performance of an Iranian on a European stage. Eventually this work was published in *L'Illustration* journal in both 1900 and 1902 under the title, "Avaz Mahour: Transcript pour Chant et Piano"—originally attributed to Lemaire in 1900 and corrected to Nasser-Homayoun in 1902. The film continues this narrative, listing a collection of such books that were published in French through the collaboration of Lemaire and Nasser-Homayoun.

The second half of the film introduces Iranian musicians in the twentieth century who adopted Western notation for pedagogy, performance, and preservation. Mehdi Qoli Hedayat is introduced as one of the first to notate the traditional repertoire of classical Persian music—*radif*. Similarly, an account of Ali Naqi Vaziri's trailblazing incorporation of notation for instruction and composition are given. Abol-Hasan Saba and Mousa Maroufi's educational publications are also briefly overviewed.

The narrative of *Avanegar* eventually comes to the generation of music scholars who after WWII studied abroad. Among them are such figures as Hormoz Farhat, Khatchi Khatschi and Zaven Hacobian. This section of the film primarily focuses on Mohammad Taqi Massoudieh (to whom the film is dedicated). Massoudieh, recognised as the father of Iranian musicology, is introduced to us through his detailed transcriptions of various regional music traditions. Images of such handwritten analytic and ethnographic transcriptions are displayed in all their detailed markings. During these explanations Massoudieh's composition, "Two Movements for String Orchestra," plays in the background of this section, musically communicating another dimension of his career as a classical composer.

The whole film is interwoven with five musical intermissions featuring a live performance of contemporary Iranian composer Reza Vali's "Suite No. 2 (in five movements)" for flute, string quartet, and piano. The film is further enriched by the musical performances of well-established Iranian musicians—Layla Ramezan (piano), Siroos Jamali (robab), Siamak Jahangiri (ney), Navid Afghah (tombak), Ali Bahramifard (santoor), and Behzad Ravaghi (tar)—whose performances further contextualise the documents being discussed.

This review provides an overview of *Avanegar*'s main concerns using selected examples. As a whole, *Avanegar* is best characterised as an annotated bibliography on transcription in Iran being told through a visual medium. It is quite a useful resource for classroom use, assignments, and those with a general interest in the subject. Important names, dates, events, and institutions are mentioned chronologically through its narrative. Last but not least, the film's narrative tone keeps it quite accessible to all.

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