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In a Persian Garden The Santur

Nasser Rastegar-Nejad



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Nasser Rastegar-Nejad, a poet, singer, and musician from Iran, began at an early age to write poetry. He became a student of Professor Ebrahim Sarkhosh, a famous musician from Iran. From him he learned the many complex scales of Persian music. At the age of seventeen he began composing songs for Professor Sarkhosh's music, and, by twenty-one, his songs had become very popular. His compositions were frequently heard on RADIO IRAN and were recorded for Philips and other recording companies.

In the United States he has given many concerts at leading universities and institutions, including The Asia Society and Wesleyan University. He has also appeared at Princeton University and New York University. On these occasions Mr. Rastegar-Nejad sang his own poetry, accompanying himself on the Santur.

Mr. Rastegar-Nejad is particularly concerned with the preservation of the traditional music of Iran. Therefore, in all his performances, he is careful to avoid the influence of Western music (which he knows and admires) because he feels that such influence tends to corrupt Iran's traditional music.

THE SANTUR

The Santur is a Persian dulcimer played with delicate wooden mallets. Its range exceeds three octaves. The Santur was invented by the great Persian philosopher and musician,

Abu Nasre Farabi, in the Ninth Century A.D. Written account indicate that Farabi's premiere performance on the Santur took place at a party of Persian nobles in Sayfeddole's palace. Farabi played three dramatic Persian scales. The first made his audience laugh. Farabi changed his scale but at the second piece the audience burst into tears. Again, he changed his scale, but the third piece put them to sleep. Disconsolate and feeling that his music was not appreciated, Farabi left the city.

Persia had a sophisticated musical culture during the Sassanid period (A.D. 224-642), which had attained a brilliant glow under the rule of Khrosro II (590-628). Upon the fall of the Sassanid dynasty under the impact of invading Arab armies, Persian music was absorbed by the Arabs and became a main formative element in what has since been known as "Islamic Music." Later in the Eastern Moslem Empire, a new "golden age" of Persian fine arts flourished under the vigorous royal patronage of the Safavid dynasty (1499-1746).

Today, Iran has been experiencing the influence of classical and popular Western music. These influences have, at times, threatened to engulf the native classical tradition. But the innate charm and unique qualities of traditional Persian music are sufficient to guarantee its survival for all time.

The repertoire or radif of Persian classical music consists of a body of works that encompasses some 250 pieces or gushes. The gushes or scales are arranged in 12 modal classifications. Seven of these are known as dastgah and five subdasgah, or avaz. The pieces allow the solo performer a wide range of personal expression and improvisation. To contemporary Western musicians, accustomed to seemingly unlimited freedom, 250 gushes may seem to limit the Iranian composer unduly. Yet the source material and the rules, which govern improvisation, are very flexible. Not bound by the printed page, the composer performer allows his fancy to roam according to his talents, mood and inclination. Each performance is therefore a creative experience different in length, melodic construction and emotional meaning. The music parallels most strikingly Persian poetry in with sensuality and mysticism are delicately interwoven and exquisitely balanced.

A performance of a dastgah (mode) generally begins with an overture, a composed and metered section called pish daramad. Next come a number of preludes, daramads, which reveal in ore detail the mode and melodic contour of the dastgah. Always included is at least one section of dazzling virtuosity called chaharmezrab, and a final piece, reng.

Mr. Rastegar-Nejad plays five classical pieces on the Santur. Each represents a particular Persian scale or gushe.

TRACKS

1. DASHTI (left), 11:29 - This is the mode used in most folk songs of North Iran. Its characteristic sad quality conveys the mood of the misery of life; it seems to cry out about the pain of human existence. This selection in Dashti-left tune would be sung by women. Dashti-right is for men.
2. SHUR, 14:37 - expresses and evokes the irresistible need for involvement in the suffering of others, impelling one to immediate, uninhibited, humane response – indeed a surrender to one's own destiny. Each movement of the selection expresses this special quality of Shur in a different way.
3. ABU-ATA, 12:41 – Rastegar-Nejad says his first teacher, the late professor Sarkhosh – whose son is now a great tar (a plucked string instrument) player, told him Abu-Ata is the song of the friendless wanderer; As he matured as musician, he came to understand how profoundly right his teacher's interpretation was. Abu-Ata conveys the mood of a wanderer who pleads for help, peace, hospitality and friendship – but never finds it.
4. AFSHARI, 12:38 – The mood characteristic of melancholia of the deeply distressed person.
5. HOMAYUN, 15:52 – The scale of kings, is played with muted mallets. Originally reserved for use of the court this scale was performed only in the presence of royal personages. Homayun is majestic, dignified, and tender in mood.

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CREDITS

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