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Citation: Nooshin, L. ORCID: 0000-0001-8737-5224 (2018). “Our Angel of Salvation”- Towards an Understanding of Iranian Cyberspace as an Alternative Sphere of Musical Sociality. Ethnomusicology, 62(3), pp. 341-374. doi: 10.5406/ethnomusicology.62.3.0341

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"Our Angel of Salvation": Toward an Understanding of Iranian Cyberspace as an Alternative Sphere of Musical Sociality

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Abstract. This article explores the emergence of the internet as an alternative sphere of musical circulation, focusing on the case of Iran and specifically certain kinds of music for which the internet has become the primary arena of musical sociality, in some cases replacing its physical public presence entirely. In particular, it asks how the spaces opened up by new media technologies have shifted the conceptual boundaries between public and private. The article begins with an overview of recent scholarly work on Iranian cyberspace and on the relationship between "public" and "private," providing a grounding for the case examples that follow.

این مقاله به بررسی ظهور اینترنت به مثابه فضایی جایگزین برای نشر، توضیع و گردش موسیقی پرداخته و به طور مشخص بر مورد ایران و انواع موسیقایی خاصی تمرکز می کند که برایشان اینترنت به بستر اصلی هموندی های موسیقایی(musical socialities) تبدیل و در برخی موارد حتی به طور کامل جانشین حضور فیزیکی آنها در فضای عمومی شده است. پرسش مقاله مشخصا این است که چگونه فضاهای گشوده شده به وسیله فناوریهای جدید رسانه ای مرزهای مفهومی میان حوزه های عمومی و خصوصی را جابجا کرده اند. مقاله با بررسی اجمالی آثار دانشورانه در باب فضای مجازی ایرانی و رابطه میان حوزه های «عمومی» و «خصوصی» آغاز می شود که فراهم کننده زمینه مناسبی برای بررسی های موردی پیش رو خواهد بود.

August 2002. I visit the private studio of composer, performer, and teacher Ramin Behna. We chat about recent developments in Iranian popular musics. Towards the end of our discussion Ramin produces a clear plastic bag in which I make out twenty or so cassette tapes and minidiscs. He explains that these are recordings made by young rock musicians, mainly from Tehran. Word had been circulated through informal networks a while back soliciting submissions for an online rock music competition. The organizers expected to receive maybe ten or fifteen; no one was prepared for the flood of recordings sent in (about seventy), an indication of

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> the number of "hidden" musicians working in private, in bedrooms, basements, and so on. The proposed competition is aimed at helping musicians, who face official restrictions and are mainly working in isolation, to reach audiences through a coordinated internet-based festival, the first of its kind. (field notes, August 2002, Tehran)

> April 2012. On a flat roof in Fin Alley, Tehran, singers Marjan and Mahsa Vahdat perform with a group of musicians: Atabak Elyasi on setar, Pasha Hanjani on ney and Ali Rahimi on daf. The song, "Dāram Omidi" (which they translate as "Twinklings of Hope") is set to poetry by Mohammad Ibrahim Jafari and inspired by the Kurdish song "Hey Dāyeh Dāyeh." I watch the performance on YouTube [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qgX3RpzKKmM, last accessed December 12, 2017]. It could not have taken place publicly because of the restrictions on solo female singing. And yet here these musicians record themselves in the public-private space of a rooftop with views across Tehran. In some sense this is a public space, since it is potentially accessible to other residents of the apartment block and overlooked by those in other buildings. At the same time, the musicians are somewhat hidden by the architecture and the air conditioning units, and the sounds are fairly contained and unlikely to reach the ears of many. But from this semi-hidden physical public-private rooftop space, the music is made visible and audible to (potentially) millions of viewer-listeners to consume in the virtual private-public spaces of the internet, while physically located in private domestic spaces—accessing the music via computers or other devices—or in public-private spaces outside the home such as internet cafés, cars, and so on. (research notes, March 2014)

The vignettes with which this article begins illustrate two moments in the entanglement of music in relation to privateness and publicness that has characterized much of the recent history of music in Iran. The first relates to the emergence of an alternative underground popular music movement in the period of liberalization that followed the election of President Mohammad Khatami in 1997. The second concerns the prohibition of solo female singing in public since the 1979 Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic. While the kinds of betwixt and between spaces that blur the boundaries between public and private, exemplified here by the rooftop musicians, are not unique to Iran, such spaces acquire heightened potency in the context of a deep-rooted, culturally impelled divide between public and private domains and a state apparatus that has, for decades and longer, sought to control codes of behavior in both. The long history of state control over what music can be heard in public dates to well before 1979, when censorship was aimed at political opposition to the Pahlavi regime's secularist-modernist pro-Western policies; following the revolution, the guiding principles changed as the government sought to regulate the conduct of its citizens according to Islamic jurisprudence. This impacted particularly on music, with its religiously contested status: certain kinds of music were prohibited, and others were severely restricted. This control continues to be enforced primarily

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through the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (Vezārat-e Farhang va Ershād-e Eslāmi, henceforth Ministry of Culture, tasked since 1983 with issuing permits for performances and recordings) and for broadcast media through the conservative-leaning Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Organization (IRIB). Effectively, any music in the public domain is by default officially approved, and in theory, any music that isn't approved cannot be heard in public. There is nothing in between.

In practice, this sonic control of public space has been multiply contested since the early days of the revolution through informal networks of circulation, including a flourishing black market and private concerts, and later satellite television. But it was the arrival of the internet that for the first time allowed musicians to circumvent central control relatively easily while also challenging the strong public-private divide, which, as in other Islamic societies, plays an important role in Iran. In a country where musicians have for centuries sought out such private-public spaces to avoid censure and worse, the relatively new space of the internet arguably allowed for radically new kinds of musical engagements while at the same time revealing interesting continuities with earlier modes of being "private-in-public" and "public-in-private."

This article seeks to understand the emergence of the internet as an alternative sphere of public engagement and, in particular, how the spaces opened up by new media technologies have served to shift the conceptual boundaries between public and private in ways that allow for the interpolation of these domains in quite new ways. I ask what kinds of musical socialities are made possible by the new interconnectivity: between musicians, between musicians and audiences, and between physically separated audience members. I'm particularly interested in what happens when the internet becomes the primary arena of musical engagement, in some cases replacing its physical public presence entirely. How can cyberspace be understood as a communally shared public space? And what role does music play in the formation of virtual publics? The article begins by considering current scholarly work on Iranian cyberspace, followed by an overview of recent theorization on the relationship between public and private, which together provide a grounding.

Setting the Scene

Iran first became linked to the internet in 1992 via the Institute for Studies in Theoretical Physics and Mathematics in Tehran (IPM) (Graham and Khosravi 2002:225).[1] It was initially used mainly by the university sector but soon attracted the interest of both government and private organizations. Reliable statistics on internet use in Iran are difficult to obtain: Abbas Johari (2002:81) cites an early survey (Arabshahi 1996) reporting sixty thousand users connected via IPM in

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1996, while Annabelle Sreberny and Gholam Khiabany (2010:13) give a figure of just two thousand for the same year. What is indisputable, however, is the significant rise in internet use from the late 1990s, with official statistics in 2006 of eleven million people, rising to twenty-three million by 2009 (Sreberny and Khiabany 2010:13), although what proportion of this access is through public outlets (such as internet cafés) as opposed to domestic settings or private devices is not clear.[2] Iran now has a well-established internet culture, evidenced, for instance, in the active blogging scene.[3] At the same time, as in other parts of the world, there remains a strong divide, largely along class and economic lines, between those with ready access to the internet (and the cultural wherewithal to use it) and those without.[4]

One of the central themes in the literature on Iranian cyberspace is a tension between government recognition of the economic, propaganda, and other benefits of the internet and intense anxiety in the face of a technology that offers an alternative public space to that sanctioned by the state. While the technologies may be new, the anxieties are not. As Sreberny and Khiabany observe, "Control over channels of communications has been a major issue in Iran since the introduction of the first newspaper almost 150 years ago. . . . [The] internet has just become the newest site of contestation and the latest technology to offer an alternative mode of communications to those directly controlled by the state" (2010:ix–x, 1). This "development/control" dynamic is also evident in the complex relationship between a rapidly growing private telecommunications industry and state policies that at times support and at others seek to monopolize and regulate it. The challenge for the government is allowing a technology that may serve its needs without relinquishing control over how it is used, a challenge described by Raymond Williams in relation to the growth of literacy: "There is no way to teach a man to read the Bible which did not also enable him to read the radical press. A controlled intention became an uncontrollable effect" (1974:125, quoted in Sreberny and Khiabany 2010:10). The Iranian government has sought to extend its control of public (and to some extent, private) life into the virtual domain, with the Ministry of Information and Communications Technology assuming the role of cyber-gatekeeper: filtering websites (particularly antiregime sites or those with sexually explicit content), controlling internet speeds to limit the downloading of music and films from abroad (Sreberny and Khiabany 2010:72–78, 82–84), closing internet cafés when politically expedient to do so (26, 78–79), and so on.[5] The cat-and-mouse game whereby internet users circumvent the blocking of sites with ever more complex antifiltering technologies that use proxy servers (and significantly reduce internet speed) is well documented in both the academic and journalistic literature.[6]

In her article "Critical Debates in Internet Studies: Reflections on an Emerging Field" (2005a), Sonia Livingstone identifies two broad strands in

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the internet studies literature, one informed by political economy and more critical of the internet as an antidemocratic space of capitalist expansion, the other informed by cultural studies and focused on the internet as a space for marginalized voices and a tool for challenging existing social orders.[7] Much of the writing on Iranian cyberculture has inclined toward the latter, viewing the internet as a space beyond government control, allowing for activities that are limited or prohibited in the physical public domain and for the flow of information and ideas, including between home and diaspora, in ways previously unimaginable. And it is as a new space of public discussion and negotiation that the internet has come to be characterized by some as an alternative public sphere, an idea that will be explored below. While the tendency to present the internet as a utopian space of (potential) liberation is not unique to Iran, the specific political circumstances and restrictions in the public domain have arguably led to a certain fetishization and a propensity to overstate its liberatory potential (for one example, see Sohrabi-Haghighat 2011). This is especially evident in writings outside Iran, which are often colored by the aspirations of certain diaspora groups toward social and political change in Iran: "Popular journalistic representations of the Iranian Internet . . . divide Iran's public sphere between the repressive governmental space of theocracy and the liberatory virtual space of *blogistan*. The North American press tends to draw rigid lines between a wired, progressive youth and a traditional, backward regime" (Elahi 2012:960).

Such crude binaries between "a wired freedom-loving youth and a repressive theocracy" (Elahi 2012:962) fail to recognize both the government's cautious support of the internet and the increasing "Islamization" of Iranian cyberspace, seen, for instance, in the websites of state organizations, government officials, religious seminaries, individual clerics and politicians, and so on.[8] Studies such as those of Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi (2008) and John Kelly and Bruce Etling have shown the immense diversity of Iranian cyberspace, the latter noting that "conservative, pro-regime forces have by no means ceded the new media landscape to secular or reform-minded ones. Religious conservatives have a very strong presence in the Iranian blogosphere" (2008:21).[9]

Iranian cyberspace is clearly a complex place that cannot be understood in purely utopian (space of empowerment) or dystopian (space of centralized control) terms. More generally, it is notable that both the broader social science literature and lay discourse tend to coalesce around a series of such oppositions: between empowerment and control, celebration and skepticism, public and private, virtual and "real," continuity and rupture, and so on. For example, as indicated earlier, there has been extensive debate on whether the so-called new media are bringing about fundamental changes in social relations and communications structures or simply extending older forms of communication but

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with new tools (indeed, the term "new media" is itself part of the discourse of rupture, positioned as it is in opposition to "old" or "traditional" media). Livingstone usefully summarizes the arguments, including the view that the "visual, hypertextual, always-open representational forms of the world wide web permits new ways of thinking and understanding, by contrast with the linear, hierarchical, closed formats and thinking of the modernist era of print" (2005a:17, citing Kress 2003:n.p.). This in turn points to another binary: between the internet as a democratizing and decentralizing force and its potential to reinforce existing and even create new hegemonies. As Livingstone observes, "The early hyperbolic claims for the transformative potential of the internet to right the ills of democracy were quickly superseded. Research shifted to examining rather more modest claims for internet-mediated communication as complementing—rather than replacing—existing channels for political deliberation and action" (10). This raises interesting questions for a country such as Iran, where such channels have been quite limited, as will be discussed below.

Among the several binary tropes regularly invoked in discussions of the internet, perhaps the most recurrent is that of the online world as less "real" than the offline. Babak Elahi notes "the false dichotomy between communal face-to-face urban networks and the atomized networks of cyberspace" (2012:959), citing the earlier work of Manuel Castells and Arjun Appadurai on the intersection of "real" and "virtual" domains. Livingstone has also argued against such a binary, observing that "online communication does not displace but rather supplements or even stimulates face-to-face communication, strengthening social networks" (2005b:176), citing Steve Woolgar's suggestion that "'the more virtual the more real,' based on findings that the growth of online activities/spaces has in unexpected ways intensified, remediated or stimulated innovation also in offline activities and spaces" (2005a:14). The vignettes with which this article began position the musicians firmly in the physical spaces of the city—in bedrooms, basements, underground studios, rooftops—but they need to transcend such spaces in order to reach audiences; and in both cases, it is the internet that facilitates such transcendence. At the same time, while acknowledging the embeddedness of the internet in the offline world, the potential to hide identities on the internet can be liberating. As Sreberny and Khiabany observe, "Given the travails of the female body in the public space of the Islamic Republic, the absence of the body in virtual space can have a liberating and democratic impact" (2010:116), or at least the potential to become "disembodied" if one chooses. To quote from Peter Steiner's 1993 *New Yorker* magazine cartoon, "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog." The internet offers "opportunities for very public, but also anonymous, interaction in which individual users can reveal or conceal as much about themselves as they choose" (Graham and Khosravi 2002:236). Anonymity allows new voices into the public domain, and for readers, it becomes

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possible to access unmediated personal stories in ways previously unimaginable. For example, Amir-Ebrahimi observes that "the feelings of alienation and humiliation experienced by *chādori* [strongly religiously observant] girls have rarely been recognized (unless to project their apparent subjugation by their oppressive fathers and families). . . . [I]n Web logs, for the first time, religious women talk about their feeling of marginalization" (2008:247), including public hostility from more secular or at least less conspicuously religious individuals, often from more affluent and liberal middle-class backgrounds. Thus, "religious girls, like secular ones, find a new space to disclose issues about themselves. . . . [T]he hidden half of Iranian society is revealed in a global public space" (238–39). Given the limitations on the official offline public sphere, it might be argued that there are situations when the online domain is in fact more "real," "a new virtual public sphere that seems to be much more real, in its immediacy and accessibility, than all other existing public spheres in Iran" (237).

The discussion that follows seeks to problematize normative binary positionings of public and private, at the same time recognizing the continued discursive salience of the divide in many social contexts. In Iran the mutual reinforcing of this polarity by government policies and long-standing culturally sanctioned norms has rendered it all the more difficult to contest, and it was the arrival of the internet that for the first time allowed a serious challenge to both. From this emerges broader questions concerning the internet as an alternative public sphere—"a new virtual public sphere" in the words of Amir-Ebrahimi—and that take on heightened significance in countries where the public sphere as normatively understood may be limited or even absent.

In one of the earliest attempts to theorize the internet as an alternative sphere of public engagement in ways that departed from Jürgen Habermas's classic formulation of the bourgeois public sphere as it developed in eighteenth-century Europe as a new space of rational-critical debate ([1962] 1989), John Keane offers a critique of a singular, idealized public sphere model, arguing instead for a "democratic plurality" of "differently sized public spheres" (1995:19–20) comprising three levels: "micro-public spheres," "meso-public spheres," and "macro-public spheres." He notes the growing importance of the internet in facilitating macro-public spheres at the global level. While the internet has clearly created many new spaces for debate and exchange, the question of whether these constitute true public spheres has been widely debated (see, e.g., Papacharissi 2002; Downey and Fenton 2003; Dahlgren 2005; Livingstone 2005a). John Downey and Natalie Fenton trace some of the changes in Habermas's own thinking, distinguishing two aspects of the public sphere concept: first, that of "inventing a space where citizens may meet and discuss as equals"; and second, "the exclusions that characterized the actual bourgeois male public sphere" (2003:186–87) and on which critiques of Habermas have focused.[10]

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A central question, then, is the extent to which the internet can be understood as one of these alternative spheres "where citizens may meet and discuss as equals." Since the mid-1990s there has been a proliferation of writing on the social implications of new media, much of which argues for a more plural and transnational vision of the public sphere. Mark Graham and Shahram Khosravi invoke Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopia, suggesting that cyberspace can be understood not just as a space of plurality but as "a growing reserve of alternative, sometimes conflicting ideas, including alternative blueprints for cultural and social ordering. . . . It is a topos where submerged, subjugated, and excluded knowledges are increasingly accessible and where often private and semi-private opinion can become more available for much larger publics" (2002:242–43).

While the notion of the internet as an "alternative" or "virtual" public sphere is regularly invoked in the literature on Iranian cyberspace, these terms are often used rather loosely as a synonym for "public domain" or "public space" without any necessary connection to Habermasian or post-Habermasian thought and often in a somewhat romanticized manner without attending to the operations of power. Beyond the terms, there is little agreement as to whether this space allows for genuinely dialogic debate. Thus, in contrast to Kelly and Etling's assertion that the Iranian blogosphere represents "a robust platform for democratic discourse for a society with severely curtailed modes of practical political participation" (2008:21), Sreberny and Khiabany (2010:87–129) suggest that while weblogs have become sites of debate on issues such as gender, sexuality, women's rights, and so on, they lack efficacy in bringing about genuine social change. Similarly, Graham and Khosravi argue that "as an alternative political sphere . . . [C]yberspace is not, as yet, a decision-making forum. This privilege is still very much confined to the political institutions of real space" (2002:242); once again, the discussion is framed within a real/virtual binary.

While the discourse of "public sphere" has tended to dominate discussion in this area, some authors have moved away from the term, particularly in view of its strong associations with a particular period of European history. Sreberny and Khiabany prefer "Mouffe's notion of 'public space,'" which they regard as "less Eurocentric, more flexible and simpler" (2010:136), and Livingstone draws on Peter Dahlgren's concept of "civic culture" as "mediating between the private realm of individualised domesticity and leisure and the public realm of societal debate and politics" (2005d:33). Similarly, Elahi notes how the digital domain allows for the emergence of "new civil spheres" (2012:961, quoting from Rahimi and Gheytanchi 2008:47).[11] In the discussion that follows, I adopt a similarly broad understanding of shared social space in order to explore the impact of new technologies on the complex relationship between different modes of musical publicness while engaging with individuals' everyday experiences in ways that some public sphere theory does not.

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The issues considered above attest to the difficulties in making universal and essentializing claims for the internet; clearly, any understanding of cyberspace needs to be grounded in local social, political, and cultural specifics. In a country such as Iran, where the doors of civic engagement have for centuries been hard to pry open, musicians and others have managed to find small windows to make their voices heard, often through contesting the cultural, social, and religious policing of boundaries between private and public domains. The internet can be regarded as the most recent in a series of spaces and technologies that afford a blurring of boundaries between public and private; beyond this, in facilitating ever more complex interpolations of these domains, it arguably has the potential to effect a fundamental reconfiguration of the relationship between private and public. Since an understanding of this relationship is central to the case studies discussed below, the following section will consider a number of theoretical issues, drawing both on the music studies literature and on work relating specifically to Iran.

Public and Private: Conceptual and Critical Perspectives

In her recent work on music and space, Georgina Born notes the tendency within the literature to set out "a series of spatialised oppositions between public and private life" (2013:27, discussing Bourdieu 1979:142–43), which are often understood as mutually exclusive. However, as Livingstone observes (in a nonmusical context):

> Space turns out to be ambiguous or shifting depending on its use (the living room, the chat-room, the television studio, the music festival, the theatre). Even when certain spaces are conventionally associated with publicness or with privacy, people's uses of media in these spaces may contravene these conventions—for example, teenagers communicate privately in space that is conventionally public (using text-messaging in the cinema, for example) and they communicate publicly in space which is conventionally private (entering chat rooms, for example, from their bedroom). On the other hand, space is a resource frequently managed by others—hierarchically and normatively structured, rule-bound and unequally accessible—and hence it operates also as a constraint, "preferring" some actors or some activities over others. For example, one may argue that it was the considerable constraints exerted on their behaviour in public places which led teens to seize on the mobile phone to subvert, in modest degree, the constraints upon them. (2005d:20)[12]

There is a substantial social science literature on the theorization of public and private, some of which is surveyed in relation to music by Born, who suggests that while it might be fruitful to abandon "any merely dualistic conception . . . it is nonetheless important . . . to retain an analytical sense of the terms as potentially antithetical" (2013:25), thus reflecting lay usage (in English at least). To some extent, these terms can be aligned with notions of "outside" (spaces accessible

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to public view, as well as offering potential for participation) and "inside" (such as domestic settings). But there are many degrees of publicness and privateness that challenge the stability of such a binary construction: a workplace may be less public than the street but more private than the home. Within the home the shared spaces of the living room or kitchen are usually more public than the bedroom. And of course, the spaces offered by technologies such as mobile phones and mp3 players are simply the most recent manifestation of being "private-in-public" or "public-in-private." There is thus a tension between the binary spatial thinking encouraged by the discourses and the reality, which is rarely reducible to a comfortable opposition. Rather, as suggested by Livingstone above and by the rooftop performance cited at the start of this article, it is more one of interleaving, or as Born puts it, "fractal-like and recursive, such that they are capable of generating 'multiple nestings'" (2013:25, citing Gal 2002:81). The concept of nesting (public-in-private, private-in-public, public-in-private-in-public, etc.) seems highly apposite both to the case of Iran and more generally to the affordances of the internet. One of the difficulties, then, in theorizing concepts of public and private is the terminologies that one is bound to—because of their widespread currency and lack of obvious alternatives—while at the same time acknowledging their instability. Further, while these concepts tend to be discussed and represented in spatial terms, they increasingly reference modalities of experience beyond physical space.

Among the many issues that arise from the discussion above, two seem particularly pertinent to music (and sound more generally): the first concerns the ways in which music is deployed to both mark and transcend boundaries of various kinds; and the second relates to the broader theorization of the spatial, particularly following the work of Henri Lefebvre (1974) on the social production of space. The tension between the boundary-ma(r)king capacities of music, on the one hand, and its potential "agency in disturbing and confusing these boundaries" (Born 2013:59), on the other, is evidenced by its "leakiness" and refusal to be contained in a physical space.[13] As Born asks, "How is it that music and sound, catalysed by their social and technological mediation, engender such a profusion of modes of publicness and privacy? Sometimes constructing strongly bounded zones of experience, sometimes also recursive and nested assemblages—a range of forms of private-within-public, virtual public-within-private, public-within-public, private-within-public-within-private and so on?" (26).

Such questions concerning the mediation of public-private boundaries are particularly pertinent to the case of Iran. Moreover, and intriguingly for this study, many of the observations made for music and sound in relation to boundary negotiation are equally applicable to the internet. Of course, mediating technologies such as sound recording and broadcasting have long played a role in bridging and often subverting public-private polarities, allowing sounds

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from the public domain to become part of the private and vice versa. For example, in the context of Algeria in the 1980s and 1990s, Tony Langlois discusses the consumption of *raï* music on cassette tapes within private domestic spaces by women who could not otherwise access this music in live settings, widely regarded as unsuitable. Through the mediating technology of the cassette tape and playback facilities and often without the knowledge of their male relatives, women became imaginatively connected to a world of music making from which cultural norms proscribed their physical presence (email to the author, April 2015). Just as *raï* cassettes arguably allowed female listeners to adopt a public sensibility and feel part of a community in private, so technologies such as mp3 players and mobile phones allow people to be private in public.

Notwithstanding the considerable body of literature that seeks to interrogate concepts of publicness and privateness and to some extent offer universalizing theories, such concepts are clearly culturally and historically contingent. As in many Islamic societies, the public/private binary is of central cultural importance in Iran: the relevant terms in Persian are *omoomi* or *hamegāni* (public) and *khosoosi* (private), and the divide—which has strong gender dimensions—is particularly evident in areas such as architecture and dress code: "The division in Iran between a male Muslim public sphere of sociability and a female private sphere is reinforced by an aesthetic of modesty and concealment, which organizes social practice in the everyday life of Iranians. It is based on preservation of the duality of the esoteric/exoteric self (*baten/zaher*), veiled/unveiled, inside/outside (*andaruni/biruni*), and related/unrelated (*mahram/namahram*). This duality constructs a walled society in which architecture, dress, behavior, voice, eye contact, and relations with unrelated members of the other sex map onto the division between private and public" (Graham and Khosravi 2002:224). In practice, however, such divisions do not align neatly along a public-private axis but involve differing levels of public/privateness, determined to a large extent by family relations and, in particular, access to unrelated women. Thus, traditionally, even within the "private" domestic space, there was a separation between the *birooni* (outside), where visitors and others beyond the immediate family would be permitted, and the more private *andarooni* (inside). As well as being inscribed spatially, sonic segregation was also important. Thus, many houses traditionally had separate door knockers for male and female visitors, the latter usually higher in pitch. A woman would not normally open the door to a male visitor but might enquire as to his identity, protecting her modesty by disguising her voice, for instance, by muffling it. Such strategies reveal the extent to which the leakage of sounds—particularly gendered sounds—from private to public represents a potential threat to the sonic order.

Graham and Khosravi observe that the strong public-private divide in Iran is deeply rooted in and perpetuates "a dialectical relation between the inner self

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(private) and outer self (public). It involves hiding the core meaning of one's thoughts from the public" (2002:224). This can also be seen in much artistic expression, for instance where "the surface meaning of religious texts and Sufi poetry hide a deeper esoteric meaning" (224). Such hidden meanings can take the form of oblique resistance to social, political, and cultural controls. Working "under the radar" by shifting what is prohibited in public into an alternative, quasi-liminal, public-private domain of circulation is nothing new for Iranian musicians, who have faced restrictions of various kinds for centuries. There are many public-in-private and private-in-public spaces, sanctioned or otherwise, including women-only concerts in public venues that are hidden from the eyes and ears of men, who are prohibited even as sound engineers or backstage workers (DeBano 2009), rock concerts in private residential spaces such as basements (Nooshin 2005b), and so on. Further, musicians often communicate veiled messages through their lyrics and music, adding a further dimension to the private-in-public dynamic. Whether the prevalence of such hidden meanings is rooted in some kind of national psyche, as Graham and Khosravi suggest, or more likely developed over centuries in response to hegemonic forces (or perhaps both), there are clear resonances with the concept of "hidden transcripts" (Scott 1990) by which the "disempowered" make their voices heard in subtle ways that avoid direct censure. In this context, the potential of the internet to offer spaces away from the ever-present panopticism of the state takes on particular significance.

The 2002 Underground Music Competition

Iranian musicians of all kinds have been able to take advantage of the growth of the internet, but for those whose music is limited or prohibited entirely in public, it can take on extraordinary significance. The second half of this article explores the issues raised above with reference to two case studies: the unofficial popular music scene and the case of women musicians.

The social history of Iranian popular music since the 1979 Revolution has been well documented, but of particular relevance here is the prohibition of all Western and "Westernized" Iranian popular music in public (and, in theory, in private) after 1979 as part of a broader alignment of government cultural policy with religious precepts (see Nooshin 2005a, 2005b, 2009, 2011; Siamdoust 2013; Steward 2013). Almost two decades later, as part of the liberalization that followed the election of reformist president Khatami in 1997, popular music reentered the public domain, initially as a new form of locally produced music known as *pop-e jadid* (new pop), which, with its slow-paced music and lyrical themes of love and loss, was deemed acceptable by the Ministry of Culture. At the same time, the relaxing of restrictions inadvertently opened the way for a new grassroots alternative popular music movement (somewhat in the manner

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of Williams's controlled intention / uncontrollable effect, mentioned above) that included a range of more problematic (from the government's view) styles, from rock and heavy metal to techno and, by the mid-2000s, hip hop.[14] Most of this music remained "underground," either because permits were denied or because musicians were unwilling to submit to the complex and lengthy application process. Indeed, the strong countercultural ethos of this movement meant that many preferred to work outside the legal public domain than within it with the requisite stamp of government approval (see Nooshin 2005b:477–80). In the two decades since 1979, musicians had become adept at finding alternative ways of circulating their music through the black market, informal channels, private concerts, and so on. But the arrival of the internet represented something of a different order altogether, and for grassroots popular musicians, it could not have been more timely, coinciding as it did with the emergence of this new alternative music scene.[15] The internet thus provided a serendipitous lifeline through which musicians could reach both local and more geographically dispersed audiences, including those who might not have had access to the music even with a sanctioned public presence within Iran. This they did through personal websites, Myspace pages, and eventually YouTube, as well as through Iranian music and other websites such as zirzamin.com and tehranavenue.com.[16] In the words of musician and studio owner Ramin Behna, the internet "was our angel of salvation [*fereshteh-ye nejāt*]; I mean it completely opened up everything that had been isolated and closed down. It affected everything" (interview with the author, 2 September 2015, Tehran). Many others expressed similar views. Siavash Kianian described the internet as providing "the only means by which this music could breathe" (email to the author, June 2015), and musician Bijan Moosavi described how its arrival:

> suddenly gave you access to this ocean of cultural products that was just unimaginable, particularly for a teenager living in that society in the years after the revolution. I will never forget my first encounters with the internet and talking about it in that excited way, because for the first time you could actually get lyrics to songs and sing along. The internet was like an open ticket, and you could go in every corner and look for whatever would catch your attention. So it started from there, but the internet also gave us access to technologies and knowledge: we were downloading software for recording music and tutorials on how to record music, and even on how to write music. . . . There was previously a limited amount of [popular] music being circulated, so almost anywhere you would go in different musical communities they were listening to the same stuff. (interview with the author, 22 June 2015, London)

Moosavi also noted that since only a small number of people had high-speed internet connections in the early days, they tended to control decisions on what music to download: "One of our friends had high-speed internet, and he was downloading and kind of dictating, like a taste maker. I say dictating because

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sometimes there were actual conflicts, and I would say, 'Maybe let's try this album,' and he was like, 'No, this isn't a well-crafted album' because he had access to the technology and the tools" (interview, 22 June 2015).

In this context, the decision to hold an online music festival was significant. The Underground Music Competition (henceforth UMC) was initiated and hosted by Tehran-based webzine tehranavenue.com, which was set up in 1998 by Sohrab Mahdavi and his cousin as a "Tehran 'city portal,' a magazine of art, culture, and society" (Mahdavi, quoted in Elahi 2012:969).[17] The festival was the brainchild of tehranavenue.com writer Hessam Garashasbi and a direct response to the growing number of grassroots bands whose access to audiences was limited for reasons outlined above; the aim was to bring these musicians to public attention. A call for submissions was circulated through informal networks, and the submitted tracks were eventually uploaded to tehranavenue.com, where listeners could access them and vote online.[18] In the years that followed, similar events were organized, but the UMC was significant in being the first coordinated attempt to provide a platform for music previously denied a space in the public domain. Moreover, as noted earlier, the level of response was entirely unexpected; no one had any idea of the number of bands working in relative isolation: "There was such a response, we didn't know what to do. Something like seventy bands sent in tracks. We were just amazed" (Behna, interview, 2 September 2015). For those who participated, the competition offered much-needed publicity, and the winners were offered free webspace and studio time, as well as contact with experienced professionals. A concert was also arranged at Tehran Art University (universities being exempt from the usual permit requirements) but was canceled at the last minute, as so often happens in Iran, for a variety of reasons, including caution on the part of venue operators (see Mirtahmasb 2003; Nooshin 2005a).

The case of Iranian rock offers a fascinating example of a music scene that arguably could not have developed without the mediating platform of the internet. I first became aware of this during visits to Iran in the late 1990s, but it was in the summer of 2002, as the UMC was being planned, that the wider implications became clear, as I have discussed elsewhere (Nooshin 2005b:472–74; 2008:73–74). Since that time there has been a proliferation of writings on what is now generally known as "unofficial" (*qeyr-e rasmi*) or "alternative" (*ālternātiv*) popular music, including much commentary on the UMC, both academic and journalistic, and at least one documentary film focuses primarily on this event.[19] While much of this work has recognized the central role of the internet in the growing alternative popular music movement, there has been little attempt to theorize this public-private space and its implications for musicians and listeners, especially where it becomes the primary (or sole) channel for dissemination.[20] For most alternative popular musicians in the early 2000s (and still today),

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cyberspace was the only sphere that they had. The arrival of the internet has clearly impacted on many aspects of music production and consumption in Iran, including an unimaginable range of previously hard-to-access music, possibilities for creative collaborations across geographical boundaries, the availability of online courses and other materials, and so on, but also the potentially devastating impact on the livelihoods of musicians, producers, retailers, and so on in a country with virtually no copyright legislation.[21] In the context of this article, however, I am primarily interested in what the UMC tells us about the role of the internet as a sphere of music sociality and circulation and the ways in which it mediates the shifting boundaries between public and private. This discussion draws on observations and discussion during fieldwork in Iran since the late 1990s and on the work of others who have written about the UMC.

One of the central themes to emerge in discussions with musicians and others is that the internet, and the UMC in particular, allowed for the emergence of an alternative grassroots popular music *community* that would otherwise have struggled to cohere and was the first of its kind in Iran. There was a strong sense that musicians who had previously been rehearsing in bedrooms and other private spaces, perhaps performing for friends and family but relatively isolated from other musicians and wider audiences, were now able to interact in ways hitherto impossible. This is not an insignificant matter: the element of liveness and the opportunity to perform for a responding—and, hopefully, responsive—audience can all too easily be taken for granted until musicians are deprived of it. Many described the feeling of working in a vacuum, and they craved feedback of any kind in order to develop as musicians. Thus, the UMC represented an admittedly limited engagement with listeners offering feedback in the form of votes and comments, even if they were not physically sharing the same space. In the words of Sohrab Mohebbi, lead singer of the band 127 (which came in third in the UMC): "The only club we have for playing is our website."[22] Theresa Steward observes of the same band that they "were ultimately forced to define themselves by their internet existence; they continually described themselves as solely 'virtual creatures'" (2013:163). Bronwen Robertson quotes from Yahya Alkhansa, 127's drummer: "'[Before the internet] there was no way of getting your band known. Not for us, not for any group. The year that the first underground music competition was held in Iran, it was the internet that made it possible. There weren't any real live shows. They put a bunch of songs on the website and people went to it and voted. The internet started this scene. And that's with the internet speed of that time! At 2 kbps it took two days to download one song!' (personal communication, 11 July 2008)" (2012b:47). Here, the internet is accorded a high level of agency: "It was the internet that made it possible," that "started this scene." For musicians such as Mohebbi and Alkhansa, the internet became a substitute for the "physical" space of a club,

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a way of making public what had forcibly been rendered private. Certainly, in terms of its potential for audience engagement, the UMC was an important watershed in allowing listener feedback, but in the early 2000s the possibilities for active dialogue with and between listeners and musicians remained fairly limited. Clearly, much has changed in the years since.

Spheres of Sociality

In what ways, then, might the shared space constituted by the UMC and by the online alternative popular music movement more generally be understood as an alternative sphere of public engagement, particularly in relation to apparently contradictory forces simultaneously cultivating new forms of "social solidarity and fragmentation" (Downey and Fenton 2003:199)? On the one hand, the internet clearly makes possible new kinds of affinity communities; on the other, such communities are not always easily found unless one is already aware of them. While public sphere theory may be helpful to some extent, the term itself and its necessary dependence on what Sreberny and Khiabany call the "fickle blurry binary" (2010:140) is not. Rather, I suggest, it may be more fruitful to think of the internet in terms of spheres or networks in which various forms of sociality become elided and experienced simultaneously. And this intersects in interesting ways with another problematic binary: that between individual and collective modes of musical consumption. For a young person listening to unauthorized music in their bedroom away from the view of the state or family, the internet becomes a space of privacy nested within the already private domestic sphere. At the same time, listeners are intensely aware of their connection to a wider community of like-minded people within Iran and beyond. While consciousness of "absent others" is a feature of mediated music reception generally, in its disruption of geographical and temporal boundaries, the internet offers a more immediate and tangible sense of engagement with others, as well as the possibility of interaction: the ability to read and offer feedback via comments on YouTube, Facebook, and other forms of social media, follow artists via their webpages, and so on.[23] In this context, what kinds of subjectivities and forms of knowledge are engendered when a listener's experience of music is largely (or solely) through online consumption and without a copresent community? How does such knowledge become embodied and shared with others? Expressions such as "collectivized isolation"—used by Jonathan Sterne (2003:166) to describe how sound technologies have encouraged increasing individuation of listening experiences—and "communitarian privacy" (Eisenberg, in Born 2013:60) are useful ways of describing modes of engaging in "publicness" while physically located in private space.

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Conversely, the same media allow for being "private" in public space. Despite the sonic prohibition of certain kinds of music in public in Iran, digital technologies allow for its "silent" consumption via portable devices or in internet cafés: hidden in plain sight, as it were. Applications such as Telegram Messenger have become very popular means of circulating audio and video clips (partly because they are difficult for the government to monitor), although such technologies are clearly not accessible to everyone and are a relatively recent development. Returning to the UMC and the period before smartphone technology arrived in Iran, Mojtaba Mirtahmasb's (2003) documentary film *Sāz-e mokhālef* (*Off Beat*) includes a scene in which three rock fans listen to and discuss some of the UMC tracks in an internet café: they are situated and consuming music in the physical public domain, but the musical sounds (by law) have to be contained within the private space of the (shared) headphones. While such examples bear out the porousness of the public-private divide, which has been a constant theme in this article, such porousness is nothing new in a country where semipublic spaces have long been used to challenge public sphere controls: listening to popular music in the privacy of a car, holding "public" concerts in private homes, camouflaging satellite dishes on rooftops, rehearsing on a remote farm away from public ears, and so on.

As well as the impact on consumption, there is the question of how musicians who are denied a live performance context orient themselves toward both other musicians and those they imagine to be their audiences. Byron Dueck asks how musicians manage "multiple, overlapping social orientations: To what degree are musical interactions oriented toward publics of strangers, and to what degree toward social intimates? Are musicians mainly cultivating relationships, pursuing allegiances, occupying roles, and forming identities in relation to known kin, friends, rivals, and enemies, or are they more occupied with imagined audiences and circulating works and performances?" (2017:398). While such questions are clearly relevant to all musicians, many alternative popular musicians in Iran are obliged to orient themselves to imagined others more than might otherwise be the case. For these musicians, it was largely through the internet that they were able to "presume aesthetic, affective, and experiential intimacy with those they address . . . [and] train their bodies and minds to bring them into relationships with wider networks of mutually oriented performers" (Dueck 2017:400). Clearly, the internet has played a vital role in allowing these musicians to reach both local and more geographically dispersed others and thereby build allegiances of various kinds (allegiances that have in some cases facilitated their physical relocation from Iran to other countries). At the same time, the simultaneous attuning to different audiences is a complex matter, as I have discussed elsewhere (Nooshin 2008). Somewhat paradoxically, for Iranian

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musicians there is a sense in which the "hidden" spaces offered by the internet represent a return to earlier more traditional and intimate forms of making and experiencing music, now presented to an absent public writ large.

In the context of the public-private porousness already discussed, it may be relevant to consider the sense of social intimacy that seems to be engendered by the internet and social media in particular, through which people feel able to share with strangers in ways that are less likely in the offline public domain.[24] In part, this is because identities can be more easily hidden online. Ramin Sadighi, a music producer and founder of the Tehran-based Hermes record label, explained that he is careful to separate his personal and professional personas online:

> It does change your manner and behavior. I mean, I'm a fairly outgoing person, happy to be in a crowd. But on the internet, it grew. And now I have my personal profiles, like my Facebook page, but I'm also the owner of Hermes, which is now an appreciated record label in Iran. I have to combine this private lifestyle with a public presence. Some may feel that I avoid writing certain things because of censorship or whatever. But no, it's actually a hesitancy from me because I feel I may damage the image of Ramin the producer, so I have to be cautious. Sometimes I really have something to say, and I'm willing to say it in the most direct way. But then I tell myself, "Ramin, it's not a private environment. It *seems* to be private, but five thousand people are following you [on Facebook], and half of them are also following the Hermes page. So just consider what you are going to express." So these are things I need to consider when it comes to my exposure in the virtual environment. It's not even about cultural or political issues. It might be about something entirely unrelated, like football, for instance. . . . To be honest, I'm still the same Ramin in my physical private-public environment compared to what I present on the internet. I don't lie. I'm just hesitant in some respects. But many are actually lying, I mean, they show something from themselves that is absolutely not their reality. They don't even use their real picture but a fake one. (interview with the author, 22 August 2015, Tehran)

What makes the UMC such an interesting case study is that it was the earliest example in Iran of a musical community created and sustained by the internet. And what was particularly significant was a new *consciousness* of belonging to such a community. Further, beyond the core contingent of musicians and aficionados, the UMC became a vehicle for the emergence of a broader public for rock and other forms of alternative popular music that did not previously exist. There are clear resonances with Livingstone's work on the ways in which audiences and publics come to be constituted "as a collectivity rather than an aggregate of individuals" (2005c:11), thus creating new forms of belonging.[25] In his writing on musical publicness, Dueck draws on the work of Michael Warner (2002) to consider "publics from three perspectives—as networks of circulation, as audiences of (intimate) strangers, and as social

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formations built around shared forms of embodied practice" (2017:392–93). Particularly relevant here is Warner's notion of "'stranger' publics . . . publics engendered solely by participation in mediated discourses or other circulating forms of cultural material" (Born 2013:30). In the case of the UMC, members of this "sonic public" (35) remained somewhat hidden from one another, at least in the offline world, and therefore perhaps more than other groups had to "rely on processes of imagination for their very existence" (Livingstone 2005c:12). Among the various attempts to understand changing forms of audienceship, that set out by Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian J. Longhurst (1998) and discussed by Livingstone is particularly useful in identifying "three broad phases of the audience: first, the simple co-located face-to-face audience; second, the mass audience—lasting throughout modern history—aligned to the boundaries of the nation state and so most readily identified both with public service and with the needs of citizens; and third, the diffused audience, no longer containable in particular places and times, but rather part and parcel of all aspects of daily life, certainly in industrialised nations and increasingly globally" (2005d:26). While all three phases are found in Iran, the latter has taken on extraordinary significance, and not just for those unable to secure government permits. Pianist and composer Hooshyar Khayam discussed the difficulties of getting music published in Iran and how many working in permitted genres are turning to the internet: "Many artists have given up hope on music publication here. Maybe a few better-known artists still have the means of having their work published, but not everybody. Many good artists don't. Many of us have realized that the internet is a much more powerful means of finding the right public. Many of the younger generation don't buy CDs, they go on soundcloud or iTunes. They go to different sites, and they find out about new music like that." Khayam described how he had found a double bass player with whom he now works regularly through a YouTube link sent to him by a friend: "I was moved by his excellent performance, you know. This is what is happening, so the internet is doing a lot of things. And YouTube is very important. For myself, I go on YouTube almost every day and listen to all kinds of music, like German jazz pianists, for instance" (interview with the author, 18 August 2015, Tehran). Similarly, a collaboration between Khayam and the Lake Superior Chamber Orchestra in Duluth, Minnesota, came about through the conductor and artistic director, Warren Friesen, who "needed six more minutes of music for a concert": "So, I literally went into YouTube, and I put in 'piano and strings,' and let's see what comes up," he recalled. Thousands of pieces did, and Friesen listened to snippets of dozens of them. "I came across a piece called 'Stained Glass' by a composer I'd never heard of, with this funny name of Hooshyar Khayam. At this point I didn't even know that Hooshyar was living in Tehran. All I knew was that I liked his

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music" (http://www.mprnews.org/story/2015/07/23/duluth-orchestra-iranian-composer-make-music-history, last accessed 14 June 2017).

While there is nothing unusual about this experience, in a context such as Iran, where spaces of sociality in which musicians can hear each other's compositions and performances live are severely limited, the internet is clearly a crucial channel for networking. Without the internet it is highly unlikely that Friesen would have encountered Khayam's music. Similarly, Behna observed: "The least that you can say is that Iranian musicians know much more about the world. This is the biggest impact [of the internet] in my view. When they can access the whole of iTunes for ten dollars a month, they don't need to go anywhere. And it's working. We're seeing a lot of good work compared with twenty years ago. The internet had arrived in Iran at that time, but it wasn't accessible to everyone, and there was no Wi-Fi. It's very different now" (interview, 2 September 2015). Many musicians noted the impact of the internet on musical taste and a broader acceptance by the listening public of a wide range of styles. Sadighi stressed the importance of the internet for companies with limited advertising budgets and where the few offline outlets, such as national newspapers, don't tend to reach target audiences: "I can put an ad in *Hamshahri* [a national newspaper], and potentially five million people are going to see it, but maybe only five hundred of them might be Hermes listeners. But for our last concert, almost 70 percent of the tickets were sold through one event created on Facebook. . . . From that perspective the internet is very helpful for me. . . . This is one of the few showrooms that you have to present your music" (interview, 22 August 2015). This brings to mind Livingstone's analogy of the "walled garden" (2005b:174), in that social media allows musicians to reach target audiences but also has the effect of rendering such events relatively invisible to those not in this particular "garden."

Hide and Seek: Whose Alternative Public Space?

This article has sought to understand the internet as an alternative sphere of musical engagement, particularly for those whose music is proscribed in the official physical domain. The final section considers the case of women musicians working mainly in the genres of Iranian classical and contemporary music. Here it is not the music that is problematic from the government's point of view but the musicians themselves by virtue of their gender. As noted at the outset, solo female singing (other than to all-female audiences) has been prohibited in public since the 1979 Revolution. Choral singing is allowed, although the number of voices required to constitute a choir remains ambiguous. Women can also perform as backing vocalists. There are no official restrictions on female

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instrumentalists; indeed, there has been a remarkable rise in the number of professional and amateur female instrumentalists over the past twenty years or so, but securing a permit is not always easy.[26] Following my earlier work on alternative popular (mainly male) musicians and their extensive reliance on the internet, I was interested to find out how female musicians are using this space.[27]

The internet is used widely to promote women's agency in Iran, an interesting example being the website "My Stealthy Freedom" (launched 2014), where women upload photographs of themselves in public spaces without the legally required body and hair covering.[28] Given the complex process of gaining government approval and the obvious attractions of the digital domain, I had expected female musicians to be actively using the internet to disseminate their music through personal websites, generic music sites, social media, and so on and to create communities and networks of support, and many are.[29] The following description by *oud* player Negar Bouban is fairly typical:

> I have posted some of BOTH my released and unreleased music online, including sounds and videos, and that would include pieces I composed and played on the oud, and in some, accompanied by my own singing. When I say released and not released, I am referring to my so-far 4 official solo albums, of which 2 are released in Iran (oud solo) with the normal procedures of permits and through official labels, and the other 2 (with my voice) are the ones released in the US. There are also some things performed by me and posted on other websites. Some recordings are also made and then uploaded with the purpose of giving information either about the music or the musical instrument.[30]
>
> With all the above, I have found connections with, or I should rather say, I have been found by musicians, music-lovers and luthiers, event-organizers, etc., around the world, some of whom I kept in touch and worked with. So, in this respect, I think I have used the public space of the internet in favor of my music life. (email to the author, 15 December 2016)

Thus, Bouban makes available online music that already has a permitted public presence (purely instrumental), as well as that which doesn't (with her voice) (see figure 1 for a screenshot of Bouban's website).

At the same time, and in contrast to its embracing by popular musicians—who not only do not aspire to a government permit but for reasons of street credibility often prefer to operate without one and are therefore less concerned about the consequences of online exposure—I found that many women musicians have a more complex relationship with the internet and have to exercise caution about how and where they promote themselves precisely because they *are* able to perform in public and therefore need to keep on the right side of the authorities. Thus, many described limiting their online presence so as not to jeopardize their chances of securing permits or, in the case of singers, being

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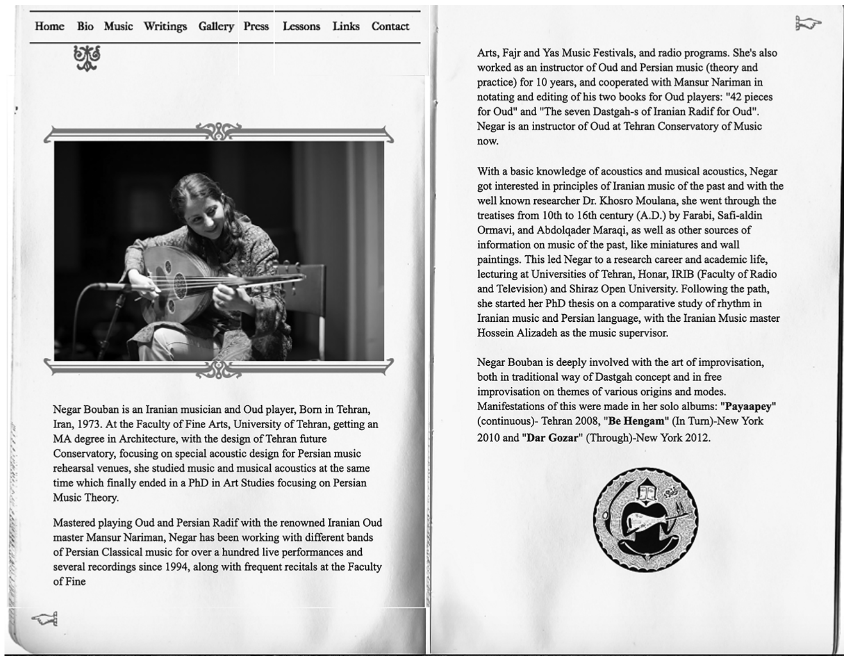

Figure 1. Screenshot of Negar Bouban's website (http://www.negarbouban.com/biography.html, accessed 10 March 2017).

allowed to tour abroad. One prominent guitarist and composer who lives in Iran but is active outside and has recently recorded for the ECM label, explained how local restrictions have impacted her relationship with the internet:

> As an Iranian woman, I have to be very careful about my presence on the internet. For example, I want to put material on YouTube, but because my clips don't have head covering [*hejāb*], I can't put them up there. Because I am living here now and if this video gets shared widely . . . I mean, it either has to be with *hejāb*, but then it's not appealing to audiences in Europe. It somehow forces one into the margins, unconsciously. Of course, I could avoid visual media and just upload sound files. But everyone else is on YouTube, and my friends ask why I'm not. But how can I? I gave a concert in Denmark but was wearing short sleeves and uncovered hair. How can I appear on YouTube like that? They may not give permission here. Or if you end up with lots of followers on YouTube, this can raise questions here—"who is this person?"—and one's name comes up [*miyād bālā*], and that may generate unwanted attention by the government or security services. Someone who gets fifty thousand views on YouTube, they will definitely take notice of it. It's very hard. (interview with the author, 29 August 2015, Tehran)

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Bouban made similar observations:

> It's one of those decisions one has to make. This is just my interpretation. It really depends on the individual. So when I go to Mr. So-and-so to get a letter signed, for instance, it depends on him personally and if he likes me. There is nothing in the law to say because you have uploaded your music, therefore we won't give you a permit. There is nothing like that. If they want, they can use it as an excuse not to give you permission. And if they want, they can ignore it and give permission. So there is no certainty, because it's playing on this fine line. (interview with the author, 1 September 2015, Tehran)

Many musicians described being more cautious now than in the earlier honeymoon days of the internet. Singer Ooldouz Poori related her experience of "dealing with the privacy at the same time with the publicity":

> Before I turned professional, I used to put my private photos taken from anywhere, selfies and family photos, online. Plus, I sometimes wrote down my feelings, not even about important things. After uploading two of my videos on YouTube, a large number of friend requests appeared and I realized that this room called Facebook or Instagram is not only my room and I am not the only person living in it! I realized that even my feelings and my diary could be important one day. So, I started to change my rooms into a public gallery and I became more reserved. If I want to describe it another way, we live in a special country with special rules; we are used to self-censoring but at the same time we need to reach larger audiences. So, in general we face some difficulties such as having scarf in the pictures or not being able to sing alone in videos. (email to the author, 21 December 2016)

Unlike some internet users, such as bloggers, anonymity is not an option for musicians who are building a career and need their work to be known. Thus, despite the issues, Poori explained that she uses her "real name online and I use the internet widely, any possible site to publish my videos, pictures of concerts I have participated in. I use any possible online ways to expand my music and to introduce myself to a wider media" (email, 21 December 2016).

Some female performers have become known outside Iran primarily because of their online presence. Singer Sepideh Raissadat, who has lived outside Iran since 2003, described how she first came to public attention through an online video clip recorded in a concert in Italy in 2009 (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wdBQZa-OB9E, accessed 22 December 2017; see figure 2 for a screenshot of Raissadat's website). Raissadat had performed live (outside Iran) many times, but it was through this particular video and its circulation that she was able to create a following for her music: "When my videos began to circulate on YouTube and other social media sites, I became aware of the blossoming possibilities that the virtual stage offers to women who are unable to be physically present on stages in Iran" (email to the author, 10 June 2015).[31] Indeed, on visits to Iran she is sometimes recognized in public, even though

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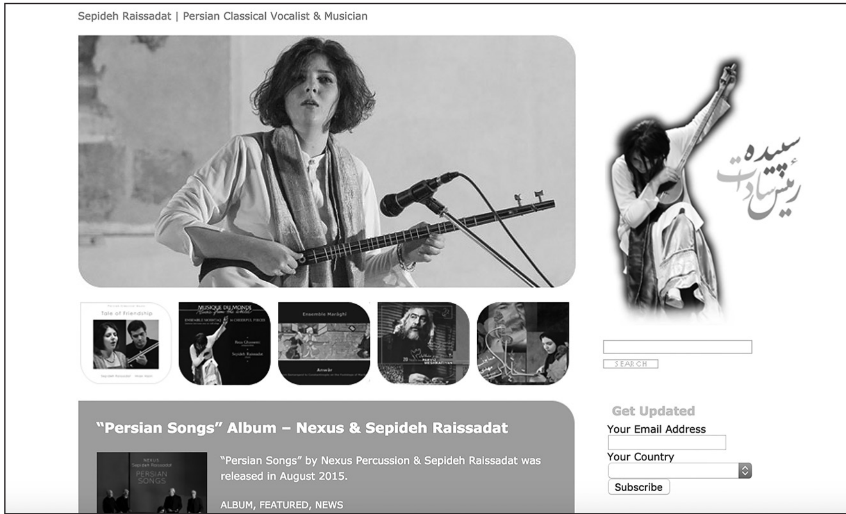

Figure 2. Screenshot of Sepideh Raissadat’s website (http://www.sepidehraissadat.com/ accessed 4.10.17)

she has only performed there once.[32] Echoing the earlier quotation from rock musician Sohrab Mohebbi, Raissadat observed that “the internet is my only stage” for reaching listeners in Iran.

Ultimately, each musician has to make her own decision: whether to have an online presence and, if so, how to manage aspects of self-presentation such as dress and hair cover. But it’s a fine balance between attracting enough attention to gain an audience, but not so much as to draw the eyes of the authorities. Some prefer to maintain a low profile at the expense of a potentially larger audience: “When you produce something, naturally you like it to be heard, but when I saw what happened to other musicians, I decided that if one can do one’s work slowly and quietly, and expand it little by little, that is more effective in the current situation” (Bouban, interview, 1 September 2015).

Discussing her rooftop video, Mahsa Vahdat explained that the group had thought that it would be an interesting place to record and had not anticipated that it would attract so much attention online. While the government is certainly aware of Vahdat’s activities, her profile abroad, including regular recordings, concerts and performances at festivals such as WOMAD, and winning the 2010 Freemuse Award, means that she is somewhat protected from possible consequences within Iran, where she lives, nor need she be as concerned as younger musicians about the impact on her career. Even for established musicians, however, posting material on social media can attract unwanted attention. A series

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of promotional videos by the all-female group Mahbanoo, established and led by prominent male musician Majid Derakhshani, and posted on YouTube, had repercussions when the clips went viral; the group's tour of Europe in the spring of 2015 was almost canceled when Derakhshani was prevented from leaving the country.[33] The other performers were allowed to travel but were told they might not be able to return. Some faced sanctions on returning to Iran, including not being allowed to teach or perform for a period of time. While reasons were not explicitly stated (as they rarely are), many that I spoke to attributed the incident to the video clips and the level of interest they attracted, as well as the performers' bright clothes and makeup, which may have been seen as a provocation by the authorities and a challenge to acceptable behavioral norms for women in public. Another possible factor was an interview with the BBC Persian Service in November 2014, in which Derakhshani was critical of government restrictions on female performers (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXuOqJEO-Ew, accessed 16 December 2017).

As a result of these kinds of experiences, some musicians avoid the internet and social media altogether. Farzaneh Mohammadian divided women musicians into those who aspire to perform in public (with the necessary permits) and those who have made the decision not to and who distribute their music through alternative channels such as the internet and private house performances. The former are aware that if their work becomes widely known through the internet, they may not be granted live performance permits. At the time of interviewing, Mohammadian was working with an all-female ensemble on a collaborative project with a female dance group, which therefore restricted their performances to female-only audiences (since dance is prohibited in mixed-gender public spaces). The consensus among ensemble members was that videos of their work should not be posted online in case this caused problems when applying for permits, even though it makes promoting the music much more difficult:

> Those who have done this usually face problems unless they have their own special channels [for getting permission]. And this is the main difference between promoting men's and women's music on the internet. Here the music of women needs to remain private or at least not as public as it is for men. For instance, I have an ensemble of women musicians. We play and sing my compositions. But even promoting our videos on Facebook can be problematic. We need government permission for our concerts, and these kinds of videos can make problems. Even for instrumentalists it shouldn't be a problem, but they have to be careful so it doesn't become an excuse. (interview with the author, 20 August 2015, Tehran)

Mohammadian explained: "All the obligations arise when you don't want to break the governmental laws in order to have regular concerts" (email to the author, 20 June 2015), although she suggested that musicians were prepared to take greater risks than just a few years ago.

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The theme of wanting to stay on the right side of the law is a constant one. Nasim Ahmadian, founder-leader of an all-female group that has performed at the high-profile annual government-sponsored Fajr Festival, explained that posting music online would turn her into a quasi-underground musician, something that she and other members of the group didn't want. She stressed how important this was to them as professional musicians who had undergone many years of serious musical training. Now living outside Iran, at the time she avoided using the internet as a promotional tool, and in private concerts the audience was asked not to film on their phones, "because the clips might go anywhere and create problems for us" (interview with the author, 23 August 2015, Tehran). A number of interviewees also expressed concern over the trend by which women musicians are used in an "exoticizing" way, potentially trivializing them, as "appearance becomes more important than the music." Similarly, Nafiseh Gholampour claimed that the growth of online video posting had led to a somewhat superficial (*zāheri*) approach in which women musicians wearing visually attractive bright and colorful traditional costume are sometimes foregrounded, regardless of their musical abilities (email to the author, 17 June 2015).

For those who decide to restrict their online presence, there are consequences when it comes to promoting their music abroad, as one musician related:

> They count on it [online presence]. The head of a festival, like the Montreal [New Music] Festival, for instance, they want to engage a group, they go and look at a few clips. . . . Our group sent a proposal to the Queen's New Music Festival in New York, and one of the first questions they asked was about potential audience numbers. They also requested YouTube links, etc., which we didn't have. We told them about our sold-out concerts in Iran, but they go and look on YouTube and see that we have nothing there. We weren't accepted for that festival. (interview with the author, 19 August 2015, Tehran)

Fortunately for this musician, a recent ECM album release has somewhat lessened her dependency on social media to prove her credentials to promoters abroad. At the same time, "if we start to become better known [outside Iran] and come and go on tours, there will definitely be a day when they stop me at the airport and say, 'Lady, where do you keep going?' I have this stress every time, because I go abroad to play at festivals, workshops, and other professional engagements. I always worry at the border, because of all the stamps in my passport, they might question where I am going. . . . It's also possible that nothing will happen, but the anxiety is always there" (interview, 29 August 2015, Tehran). Bouban described her experiences performing in the media-driven environment outside Iran:

> [You] either have to make an explosion, do something that gets a million hits, or disappear. People [outside Iran] who promote concerts or who want to publish your

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> CD, they want you to do something that will be seen, because the logic of the Western media is that everything has to be like a loudspeaker, and everyone has to know that such and such a thing has happened. In this environment, my decision is to do something slowly [*āhesteh*]. I upload my work and publish my CDs and give them to certain music shops in Tehran to sell, and I have an audience that I can connect with. So I don't limit myself, but I also don't do something [like Derakhshani] to attract attention so as to cause problems. (interview with the author, 1 September 2015, Tehran)[34]

An interesting example of how new media technologies are disrupting notions of public and private was reported by Raissadat in relation to a video posted on YouTube in April 2013 of a private (house) performance of the song "Khoosh-e chin" (music by Ruhollah Khaleghi, lyrics by Karim Fakour) by Mahdieh Mohammad Khani, accompanied by the Mah Ensemble, directed by Majid Derakshani (see www.youtube.com/watch?v=PAW9Vno6RGg, accessed 8 December 2017). Some online viewers mistook this for an official public concert, leading to widespread rumors that the ban on solo female singing had been lifted and that the performance was at Tehran's main concert hall, Tālār-e Vahdat, *and* attended by the Minister of Culture. The latter was subsequently obliged to make a statement clarifying that there had been no such concert and that nothing had changed.[35] Although it is obvious that the video was not filmed in a concert hall, the broader political context is significant: while the performance took place before the June 2013 presidential elections, in which the more liberal Hassan Rouhani succeeded Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the rumors started several months later and largely reflected and were fed by a broader mood of optimism and expectation of change in the postelection period.

A number of interviewees expressed concern over their inability to control the afterlife of clips online, in particular the potential misrepresentation of musicians by others:

> Would one really know or have control over what audience would be reached? What if your music is reposted and is misplaced and misunderstood (as happened to me)? Isn't it basically influenced by politically-motivated anti-regime talk in the media? What kind of media would reach the right audience for the MUSIC itself? So, I do use the internet but mainly to keep finding relevant people to my music around the world and to give access to audiences outside Iran who might be interested in my work. (Negar Bouban, email to the author, 15 December 2016)

Clearly, this issue is not specific to female musicians, but for singers in particular, online material can be interpreted politically. Following Raissadat's 2009 concert in Italy, the BBC Persian Service made a documentary about her, which was aired in November 2010 and made available online; as a result, she decided not to travel to Iran for four years (email to the author, 19 June 2015). As a female singer, she has found it hard to find a space where her music can be appreciated for its own

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aesthetic merits (as "the music itself") apart from political readings. It is also worth noting that there is little evidence (yet) of an online community or support networks for female musicians, in contrast to the rock musicians discussed earlier. Networking sites have been established but have tended to be short-lived, perhaps for some of the reasons discussed in this section. Interestingly, this contrasts with the often strong sense of intimacy and community found in private performances by women musicians.

Unlike (the predominantly male) rock musicians, then, who are largely excluded from Iran's physical public sphere but who use the internet to find audiences at home and abroad, women musicians are faced with a choice between developing an online presence, which may mean not getting permits or being allowed to tour, or eschewing an online presence and remaining invisible and inaudible to the outside world. In other words, to be heard in the offline world at home, these musicians have to remain partially hidden online. Interestingly, this applies not only to singers but also to instrumentalists, who, even though they are not contravening any laws, feel compelled to keep themselves somewhat hidden so as not to attract too much attention. Thus, there are clear contingencies in this case on the nature of the internet as a public space, as well as striking continuities with earlier traditional boundaries in relation to dress code, architecture, and behavior whereby women are kept hidden (or partially hidden) from public view/audition.

Concluding Thoughts

With its tightly controlled public space, Iran presents an interesting lens through which to explore the nature of the internet as an alternative sphere of circulation for musics otherwise restricted or prohibited. This article has addressed a number of questions relating to the new forms of belonging and cybersociality engendered by the internet and the formation of virtual publics. I have argued that an important dimension of this is the challenge that new media technologies present to deep-rooted conceptual boundaries between public and private. The alternative popular music movement was the earliest example in Iran of a musical community created and sustained by the internet, and for these musicians the internet was truly an "angel of salvation." By contrast, the case of female musicians brings into question some of the romanticized discourses by which the internet is presented as a democratizing space somehow disconnected from relationships of power in the offline world, and based on a normative assumption and expectation that the internet offers visibility to all. Such utopian discourses often fail to acknowledge the extent to which existing hegemonies may be perpetuated or reinforced online or indeed replaced by new ones. To return to the earlier quotation from Livingstone, the space of the

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internet can thus be understood as "unequally accessible . . . 'preferring' some actors or some activities over others" (2005d:20). The same forces that seek to keep women musicians hidden and inaudible in the official public domain continue to play out in cyberspace, presenting the possibility that the internet may in fact hide as much as it reveals.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Saeid Kord Mafi and Hadi Milanloo for providing the Persian translation of the abstract.

Notes

1. Iran was the second country in the Middle East to do so, after Israel (Siamdoust 2013:307).

2. Known locally as cafenet. Johari (2002:82) cites an article in the *Washington Post* that gives a figure of more than 450 in Tehran in 2001.

3. In their groundbreaking study, Sreberny and Khiabany describe Iran as a nation of bloggers and estimate at least seventy thousand active bloggers in the late 2000s (2010:xi).

4. For historical and other information on the internet in Iran, see also Graham and Khosravi (2002), Johari (2002), Sohrabi-Haghighat (2011), Bajoghli (2012), and Akhavan (2013). For discussion specifically in relation to music, see Steward (2013:67–71) and Siamdoust (2013:307–12). Sreberny and Khiabany (2010:9) provide statistics on the wide disparity in global internet access and suggest that eventual universal access and "entitlement . . . could finally pave the way for a truly global public sphere" (10). They also note that internet provision and media communications more generally in Iran have been hampered by US-led sanctions and embargoes of various kinds since 1979 (21–24) and by the United States' position as the "undisputed gatekeeper of the so-called super highway" (24).

5. The Ministry of Information and Communications Technology was founded in 1906 as the Ministry of Post and Telegraph, became the Ministry of Post, Telegraph and Telephone in 1929, and was renamed again in 2003. See https://www.ict.gov.ir/en/home (last accessed December 15, 2017).

6. In relation to music, see Steward, who discusses the "pro-government group known as the 'Iranian Cyber Army,' [which] hacked websites such as the Iranian Twitter, as well as various music websites," in an attempt "to filter and 'purify' the internet in the Islamic Republic" (2013:176). See also Siamdoust (2013:311–12). However, Kelly and Etling's (2008) detailed analysis of Persian-language blogs provides statistical data that indicate less government blocking than might be expected from journalistic and scholarly rhetoric.

7. In her extensive work in this area, Livingstone has questioned the normative singular use of the term "internet," which in reality "refers to a diverse collection of technologies, forms and services bundled together" (2005a:3). Here, I follow general usage while also acknowledging the complex and plural nature of cyberspace.

8. Sreberny and Khiabany (2010:84–85) go so far as to suggest that religious factions in Iran have "colonized" the internet for their own ends. On the use of the internet in religious seminaries, see Johari (2002:81) and Mina (2007). Sreberny and Khiabany (2010:141–43) also discuss religious websites and bloggers. In her study of blogging practices among religiously observant individuals, including trainee clerics and with a particular focus on female bloggers, Amir-Ebrahimi notes that the internet gives religious students access to new ideas and ways of behaving and allows them to express views limited in the offline world. She discusses the establishment in 2006 of the Bureau

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for the Development of Religious Web Logs, which also organized a three-day camp for women that in itself "recognized the significant presence of religious women in the Iranian cyberspace and Weblogistan" (2008:238).

9. Kelly and Etling offer the most detailed empirical analysis of the Iranian blogosphere, using "computational social network mapping in combination with human and automated content analysis" (2008:2).

10. There is an additional issue here of the translation from the German *Öffentlichkeit* into the not-quite-the-same English "public sphere," which a number of authors have discussed (see, e.g., Warner 2002:47).

11. There is also the question of how notions of the public sphere intersect with ideas about civil society (Persian: *jāme'eh-ye madani*) that have become common in Iran since the early 2000s.

12. Livingstone (2005d:28–29) also observes that publicness is first learned and nurtured within the private domain of the family.

13. For example, see Wood (2013) on the sounds of Jerusalem's Old City and Rice's chapter in Born, which considers how hospital "sounds transgress the attempts to create zones of privacy manifest in the 'swish' of the drawing of the 'privacy curtain' around patients' beds, a screen that affords no sonic segregation" (2013:58).

14. In the late 1990s "rock" became an umbrella term for various kinds of alternative popular music, and this also reinforced the binary between the alternative ethos of such music and the increasingly legal, mainstream, and (according to rock musicians) artistically and musically unchallenging pop music (see Nooshin 2005b).

15. The late 1990s also coincided with the coming of age of Iran's so-called third generation: those born after the revolution with no memory of Iran before 1979 and who, given the almost doubling of Iran's population in the 1980s, represented a sizeable demographic. According to UN statistics (based on data from the 2001 Iranian census), 55 percent of Iran's population was under the age of thirty in 2001 (http://data.un.org/, accessed 5 May 2017).

16. Zirzamin.com was the first "umbrella" website for underground/alternative Iranian popular music. There is an interesting inversion of the situation described by Livingstone in which children or young adults who "lack privacy offline may choose, or may even need, to seek it online" (2005b:179). For the musicians described here, it is the lack of publicness offline that directs them to the internet.

17. Tehranavenue suspended its activities following the contested presidential elections of June 2009.

18. The original UMC website (www.tehran360.com/umc.html), which included a list of bands and a breakdown of voting, is no longer available.

19. Detailed discussion of the alternative popular music scene, including questions of style, aesthetics, and how musicians position themselves and their music, lies outside the scope of this article; these issues are dealt with comprehensively elsewhere. In particular, the reader is referred to Nooshin (2005b, 2008) and Robertson (2012a, 2012b, 2013). For discussion of the 2002 UMC and subsequent online festivals hosted by tehranavenue.com, see Nooshin (2005a:260; 2005b:472–74; 2008), Robertson (2012a; 2012b:45–55, 71–74), Siamdoust (2013:230–37), and Breyley (2015). Chapters 4 and 5 in Robertson (2012b) focus on the 2007–8 competition, TAMF86. The documentary film is Mirtahmasb (2003).

20. The Persian equivalent term for "movement" (*harekat*) was regularly invoked by musicians in discussion.

21. This is obviously significant for those unable to physically cross those boundaries. Such collaborations have, however, been limited by slow internet connections, exacerbated by government filtering of websites. Among many examples of online collaborations, see Sepideh Raissadat's "Collaborative Tasnif Composition" website (http://www.rameshgari.com, accessed 1 December 2017; see also Raissadat 2017). Female rapper MC Salome has produced music with a

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number of artists globally, most of whom she has never met, and has even "invited online friends and fans to contribute beats, artwork, ideas, etc. . . . The public nature of the internet makes these diverse relationships possible and its 'privacy' (i.e., her collaborators mostly don't know her real name, address, etc.) makes it safe" (Gay Breyley, email to the author, 20 June 2015; see also Breyley 2014).

22. Mirtahmasb (2003, see 28:30). I have translated quotations from this documentary film from the original Persian. For further discussion of the emerging online rock music "community," see Robertson (2012a; 2012b:59, 61).

23. It is worth noting that online engagement with music was predominantly aural until the mid-2000s, particularly in countries such as Iran where downloading was slow. The arrival of YouTube (in 2005) was significant in allowing audiences to experience both visual and aural dimensions of music both through recordings (and eventually streaming) of live performances and the growing number of music videos.

24. Clive Thompson (2008) coined the term "digital intimacy." Sharing with strangers is particularly evident in the practice of blogging, as Sreberny and Khiabany observe: "Many individual blogs are forms of personal exploration conducted in a public space. . . . Blogging as an activity plays powerfully on the cusp of the public-private: private matters are made public; public affairs are translated and coded for private, known readers" (2010:157, 160). They discuss blogging as a form of catharsis, something that "is not new in the West, but a major social shift within Iranian culture where personal and sexual issues receive no public articulation. Women making public their private pain and talking of such personal matters is a revolution in social relations in Iran" (119).

25. Elsewhere I have explored how music videos posted online in the aftermath of the contested 2009 presidential elections helped to create a "community of catharsis" in a context where such music was prohibited in the offline domain (Nooshin forthcoming).

26. For further discussion of female musicians, including debates around all-female groups, see DeBano (2005, 2009) and Mozafari (2013a, 2013b). Since 2015 the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance in Tehran, previously responsible for issuing most performance and recording permits, has devolved some decision making to its provincial branches. In some cases, particularly in cities with a strong religious heritage, such as Esfahan and Mashhad, this has led to permits being turned down or concerts canceled. Women musicians have been especially affected.

27. The following discussion is based on personal interviews conducted in Iran in August and September 2015 and online communications between 2015 and 2017.

28. The Facebook page also includes photographs of men wearing headscarves as a form of ironic comment on local modesty laws. The website has recently initiated a campaign entitled #MyForbiddenSong, described as follows: "In Iran women are banned from singing solo in public because of fears that our voices can trigger 'immoral behaviour.' Our new campaign #MyForbiddenSong gives Iranian women a public platform to have their songs heard and ensures that their voices are not erased from our country's musical memory" (http://mystealthyfreedom.net/en/, accessed 22 December 2017).

29. Female singers living in Iran who regularly post their music online include Sahar Mohammadi, Haleh Safizadeh, Kiana Kiaras, Solmaz Badri, Pari Mah, Sayeh Sodiefi, and Mahdieh Mohammandkhani.

30. Bouban also offers lessons through the following website: http://www.rhythmitica.com/ (accessed 18 November 2017).

31. Music videos commonly circulate between friends and family via mobile phone applications. I have been forwarded video clips of Raissadat on several occasions.

32. In 2000 as a backing vocalist on the album *Konje Sabory* (interview with the author, 2 October 2016, London).

33. For one example, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3f7ACBUihYQ (accessed 22 December 2017).

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34. Bouban also reported that some officials responsible for issuing permits had told her that they often didn't have a problem with the music but that certain musicians cause problems for others.

35. Raissadat email to the author, 19 June 2015; 2014:9–15. Raissadat first became aware of the rumors when she received messages congratulating her on being able to perform legally again in Iran. An indication of the power of such rumors / wishful thinking is that even as reliable a source as Siamdoust (2017:33) reports this as a public concert and as having taken place at the Tālār-e Vahdat.

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