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Recommended Citation

Shay, Anthony. "Six-Eight Beat Goes On: Persian Popular Music from 'Bazm-e Qajariyyeh' to 'Beverly Hills Garden Party,'" in Walter Armbrust (ed.) *Mass Mediations: New Approaches to Popular Culture in a Transregional World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 61-87.

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THREE

The 6/8 Beat Goes On

Persian Popular Music from *Bazm-e Qajariyyeh* to Beverly Hills Garden Parties

Anthony Shay

Only recently has the study of popular and mass culture been deemed fit for serious scholarly attention on a large scale. This seems peculiar in light of the fact that popular culture in its various forms celebrates and elucidates the “here and now” of every society, historical and modern, and reveals crucial discourses characteristic of particular societies. Popular culture, however, “still carries two older senses: inferior kinds of work cf. popular literature (popular press as distinguished from quality press); and work deliberately setting out to win favor (popular journalism as distinguished from democratic journalism, or popular entertainment); as well as the more modern sense of well-liked by many people” (R. Williams, cited in Strinati 1995, 3). The popular culture theorist Dominic Strinati considers most important the extent to which “people’s lives in western capitalist societies appear to be affected by the popular culture presented by the modern mass media.” He continues, “It is important in other kinds of societies as well, both historical and contemporary, but in these societies the sheer volume of popular media culture which is made available gives it a specific significance which needs to be looked at” (1995, xiii).

This avoidance of scholarly investigation into popular culture has been particularly prominent in Middle East studies, in which, aside from definitively “premodern” folklore, popular culture is presumed relevant only to the mass culture of the West. In contrast to nearly invisible popular traditions is what Edward Said (1978) terms the “timeless, frozen East” that possesses only what we would characterize as “high” culture. Our highbrow/lowbrow distinctions do not necessarily work well as a description of the state of Iranian culture, and yet they are relevant to some contexts.¹ Most native Iranian music scholars, and their non-Iranian disciples, often eschew the study of popular music forms because of their *amiyaneh* (popular) con-

notations and their often lower-class associations. I argue that popular music, especially the *mardomi* (people's music) genre, forms the Other, a negative space by which classical music is positively defined. No official canon for music exists in an Iranian context comparable to that which Martin Stokes (1992a) describes for government sponsorship in Turkey and Walter Armbrust (1996) discusses for Egyptian music in the context of icons such as Muhammad 'Abd al-Wahhab and Umm Kulthum. Nevertheless, the government radio under the Pahlavi regime sponsored a long-running series of classical music programs, called the *gol-ha* (flowers), which in fact provided a de facto imprimatur for classical music on a large scale. These programs were broadcast almost every evening and featured a large orchestra of Iranian and Western instruments and considerable use of harmony, counterpoint, and other Western techniques as well as Iranian ones. They typically opened with an extensive *pish-daramad* (overture), a *tasnif* (art song), an *avaz* (vocal and/or instrumental improvised section), and a restatement of the *tasnif* and sometimes concluded with a *reng*, or dance piece.² Thus a case can be made for the existence of a canon. Furthermore, the government never permitted broadcasts of songs by *mardomi* icons such as Mahvash, further emphasizing the difference between the genres.

I also argue in this chapter that unlike Westernized Persian popular music, which Iranian musical purists can, with justification, claim is "inauthentic" on a musical level, no such claim can be made for *mardomi* music, whose music and texts are extremely authentic and, in many cases, very old. Rather, in the manner in which Armbrust (1996) describes Egyptian reactions to the vocalist Ahmad 'Adawiya, many Iranian classical musicians and scholars dismiss the genre as vulgar "popular" entertainment, placing it beyond the pale of serious discussion.

In the modernist/nationalist discourse *mardomi* popular music also occupies a negative space: its cheerfully vulgar lyrics and music represent the old, the traditional, the backward; and its consumption was associated in the public mind with the urban proletariat and professions such as taxi driving and trucking. It presented to both educated classes and government officialdom a subversive genre in which sexuality, gender, and sly political references created varying degrees of discomfort. This contrasts with the manner in which Westernized Persian music represented, not modernity, but Westernization for a largely youthful population who aspired to live lives they imagined, through the media, to parallel the lives of their counterparts in New York, Paris, and London.

In contrast to Strinati, I argue here that the ubiquity of Persian popular music (or perhaps more accurately "musics," as I will discuss later) in the Iranian-American community represents, and formerly represented in urban Iran, in its own micro niche and environment, an imposing volume of production that holds relevant and diverse information for interested

scholars in many fields of the humanities. In addition, I argue that Iranian popular music holds a unique position among music produced for exile, diaspora, and immigrant communities in the United States, because virtually all of its production and performance takes place outside of its homeland (see Naficy 1993, 54–59, and Zinder 1992 for details of the business of recording and distributing Persian popular music). Most of the major figures in all genres of the Persian popular music field—vocalists, composers, lyricists, and producers—reside in southern California. In contrast, although they are hosts to a few popular musical artists resident in southern California, virtually all of the other large immigrant communities, for example, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Hispanic, Indian, Eastern European, and Arab, look to their homelands as the chief source of their popular, as well as classical and regional folk, music.

In this chapter I focus on one genre of popular music that I call “*mardomi*,” or people’s music (also known as *ru-howzi* or *motrebi* and *amiyaneh*, public or common), which has not been examined or analyzed in detail but rather reviled in the most strident tones, particularly by the self-appointed guardians of the sacred flame of “pure, authentic” classical music.³ Although I appreciate and follow with interest the performance and development of Persian classical music, I must emphasize that the relevance of traditional popular music lies not only in its long history in the Iranian urban world, a position that it has occupied for well over two hundred years, and much longer in the view of some scholars (e.g., Ardavan Mofid, interview, December 14, 1996), but also in its continued presence and popularity in the Iranian immigrant community of Los Angeles in a variety of significant contexts that are often different from those in Iran.

Ardavan Mofid is a theater historian as well as an accomplished performer in *naqqali* and *shahnameh-khani*, two related traditional storytelling genres, and in *siyah-bazi* and *ru-howzi*, two improvisational comic theater genres. He asserts that *ru-howzi*-style performances can be traced not only to the Safavid coffeehouses (1501–1725), well documented by several European memoirs, but also to the Sasanian era (242–650), when professional poets hired popular entertainers, known as *qavval*, to perform their poetry to music in a professional manner at court. According to Mofid, such performers are also documented through the Timurid period (ca. thirteenth–fifteenth centuries).

There are many variations of this type of theater. Today the principal urban forms are *siyah-bazi*, or the black play, so called because the main character is a clown played in blackface, and *ru-howzi*, or above the pool, so called because, in the past, one of the most typical urban performance venues was a temporary stage created of planks constructed above the pool that is a fixture in most older Iranian homes. Both forms use the blackface clown and other stock cast members, improvisation, earthy, sometimes

bawdy, language, double entendre jokes and puns, and sight gags, but according to Mofid and other informants, the *siyah-bazi* is a political theater that uses biting satire to expose political folly, whereas the *ru-howzi* is a social theater that satirizes domestic life. In other words, the content and the intent differ in the two variants. The term “ru-howzi” also refers to both dance and music styles that can be performed exclusively of any theatrical or dramatic performance. Parvaneh Azad stated that in her childhood (during the 1930s) “ru-howzi was performed in homes, but *siyah-bazi*, with its more political character, was more common in coffeehouses and other public areas which were commonly frequented by exclusively male audiences, who were more interested in political matters” (pers. com. February 4, 1994).

This chapter, then, is an analysis of the *mardomi* genre as popular culture, traditionally performed in a variety of social contexts such as coffeehouses, cabarets, traditional theaters, and, later, the Iranian cinema and of how these have altered in a transformed national setting. Its musical analysis awaits a thorough study. Although this project is not specifically a postmodern one, I do wish to use a postmodern strategy to decenter the prominence currently occupied by Persian classical music in both the scholarly and the popular literature and thereby reveal the complexity of this traditional urban genre. In this project I wish to follow the idea put forth by the culture theorist John Docker regarding the importance of popular culture forms:

Modernist critical theory has demonized mass culture by apocalyptically condemning it as the chief danger to civilization. . . . Postmodernism—or at least the strands I like—does not ascribe to popular culture phenomena any single commanding meaning or purposes. . . . Rather it is interested in a plurality of forms and genres, a pluralizing of aesthetic criteria, where such forms and genres may have long and fascinating histories, not as static and separate but entwined, interacting, conflicting, contesting, playing off against each other, mixing in unpredictable combinations, protean in energy. . . . Postmodernism defends the “lower female genres” and their readers and audiences so excoriated by modernism this century. It sees popular culture as a frequent site of flamboyance, extravagance, excess, parody, self-parody, a self-parody that has philosophical implications for popular culture as a worldview, a cosmology, a poetics. (1994, xvii–xviii)

Docker’s statement clearly reveals the predicament of studying Persian popular music, which has indeed been demonized. In addition, much of its corpus originated as a female genre. In analyzing and outlining the contents of the lyrics of traditional Persian popular music, and the theatrical forms in which they originated, I use Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1984) notions of the “world upside down” and the carnivalesque, which constitute useful

theoretical tools for the analysis of the role of this indigenous popular music in Iranian society.

BAKHTIN: CARNIVALESQUE AND GROTESQUE

Bakhtin's concept of carnival as a subversive, disruptive world-upside-down event in which the repressive views, lies, and hypocrisy of the officially run and dominated everyday world are unmasked provides a powerful theoretical concept for any study of Iranian popular theatrical and related musical forms. Bakhtin was concerned with polyvocality and the fact that from the onset of the European Renaissance the voices of the common people were increasingly not heard. The Islamic Republic's ban on the performance of improvisational comic theater would seem to support this theoretical stance with empirical evidence of official reaction. In the European context analyzed by Bakhtin, a writer, exemplified by Rabelais, enacts an important role because he or she reflects the voices of the low, the peasant, the outcast. In Bakhtin's view, the healthy voice of the low, which questions the high—the church and the state—is an important check on oppressive officials in a healthy society.

A full-fledged carnival—such as those in Rio de Janeiro and New Orleans—does not exist in the Iranian culture sphere. By carnival I mean a massive demonstration of excessive eating, drinking, and sexual and bodily exposure, popularly associated with Carnival in Rio de Janeiro, that does not occur within an Islamic/Iranian context. Threads and themes of carnivalesque and grotesque subversion, however, can be found woven through the fabric of the Iranian world. Here the needle that pricks the official religious, social, and political powers most is the traditional comic theater in its many guises.

In many ways *siyah-bazi* and *ru-howzi* embody Bakhtin's notions of the grotesque and the carnivalesque. *Gholam-siyah*, the blackface clown, the "low Other," always wins over his master: the world upside down. *Gholam-siyah's* extravagant clothing, movements, speech, and lower-class language demonstrate Bakhtin's dictum, "the grotesque . . . cannot be separated from folk humor and carnival spirit" (Stallybrass and White 1986, 43). *Gholam's* bright red costume and conical hat, for example, are probably the closest thing to carnival costume in the entire Middle East. William O. Beeman, a scholar of Iranian linguistics, discusses the blackface clown: "The clown distorts normal physical movement by jumping, running, flailing his arms, and twisting his body into odd shapes" (1981, 515). This is, of course, part of his repertoire, for sight gags make up much of the comedy of traditional comic theater. This grotesque twisting of the body is also part of the dancing that occurs in the comic theater, especially by the male characters.

One of the most important elements in all Iranian performance practices—music, theater, or dance—is improvisation. It is this crucial aesthetic element that allows for the creativity and unending freshness that characterizes these performing arts and gives scope for their continued development. Mofid states that these theatrical forms are improvised to such an extent that if the price of bread were raised by the government in the afternoon, that evening, ten minutes before going onstage, the players would construct the play around that subject.

The subject or topic that we choose for the performance is always the latest political event, preferably a scandal or outrage. Sometimes the event that we choose to make fun of, a ban on chewing gum from a certain country or an unpopular tax on bread, is only hours old. If bread is the topic, we do bread. Sometimes the person who hires us tells us to address a particular subject. We are steeped in these matters and always attuned to the latest political happenings as subjects of our plays. But because they were improvised, you would never see the same play twice. (Pers. com. January 24, 1994)

In all of these forms the lower and weaker characters triumph, at least temporarily, in the theatrical context. Within the theater we can observe Iranian life, but in reverse: the servant orders the master, the daughter marries the suitor of her choice, the villager wins over the landlord—the world upside down. Theater scholar Peter Chelkowski's incisive analysis neatly sums up the social function of these theatrical forms: "Humour and laughter have generally been the only outlet for grievances against the harsh and autocratic governments, rulers and fathers. No other defense was available or exempt from punishment. Rigid social codes and mores were also softened by the antics of *Siyah* and the other comedians" (1991, 782).

In his analysis of Bakhtin, Robert Stam, a scholar of popular culture, neatly pinpoints issues of the carnival theory that are pertinent to this study. He observes that "artistic and narrative strategies associated with carnival[:] parody and burlesque in the form of the 'low take-off on what the high people were doing,'" are an exact depiction of Iranian improvisational comic theater in all of its forms (1989, 97). His characterization that "marginal and subversive art with its adversary relationship to power and to official culture . . . and the linguistic corollary of carnivalization [entail] the liberation of language from the norms of good sense and etiquette" (1989, 99) dovetails with both the literature and the personal interviews I conducted.

Mofid stated that, because of its political satire, the Iranian government is afraid of the *siyah-bazi* and that currently in Tehran it is being performed underground (pers. com. March 4, 1994). Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's observation of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English the-

ater echoes Mofid's view of Iranian governmental reactions to Iranian theater: "Whilst the godly railed at the theatre for its idolatry and its impiety, the State, even as it patronized the actors, feared their potential for sedition and subversion" (1986, 61).

Stam points out that "carnavalesque art is uninterested in psychological verisimilitude or conventional audience identification with rounded personalities" (1989, 109). His characterization is a valid description of two highly carnivalesque theatrical forms, the Italian/French *commedia dell'arte* and Iranian *siyah-bazi/ru-howzi*. The latter genre resembles *commedia dell'arte* in the use of stock character types and thin plot lines for the improvisatory high jinks that are the soul of this type of theater performance. In many ways the *siyah-bazi*, with its use of music and dance, epitomizes Stam's analysis of the musical comedy as a "two-dimensional carnival in which the oppressive structures of everyday life are not so much overturned (as in Bakhtin's conception) as they are stylized, choreographed, and mythically transcended" (1989, 92).

I suggest that Iranian traditional theater, in all its forms, embodies Bakhtin's notions of carnivalesque and grotesque, and this framework, coupled with the works of Stam (1989) and Stallybrass and White (1986), provides the most useful theoretical approach for its understanding. It uses lower-body humor, depicts the world upside down in which the weak, at least temporarily, are on top, and satirizes the powerful. Improvisational comic theater is a mirror of Iranian culture, but a mirror that reflects the opposite of the political and social reality of everyday life and therefore might be said to operate as a safety valve for the expression of political and social discontent and frustration.

Mardomi music, which is enjoyed, even if not openly, by many individuals of the upper classes, reveals the light side of Iranian life; it also exposes the underbelly of Iranian urban society that existed in the sometimes violent world of the former demimonde café, depicted in many Iranian films of the 1960s and 1970s, and red-light districts. In this manner, this musical genre begs for comparison with such genres as flamenco and jazz, but, unlike those genres, which developed relatively unmolested, the production of popular music was banned by the Islamic Republic.

I argue that in an Iranian context, of the two broadest popular musical types, traditional and Westernized, the latter form was often dismissed by Iranian and non-Iranian scholars and intellectuals on the grounds that it was admired and consumed only by those elements of the urban population, particularly the youth, who avidly sought to emulate the West. The presence of such Western-oriented music contributed to and fueled the discourse of nationalism, purity, authenticity, and nativism. Ruhollah Khaleqi claimed that one reason for writing his history of Iranian music was that, because of Westernization, "the people have sought European music.

But because sufficient knowledge of it does not exist in everyone, they have become satisfied with the simplest form of it, jazz, . . . and in this manner they have ruined and corrupted our music" (1974, 2). The lyrics of this Westernized genre rely on Persian literary and popular poetry as well as on Western poetic models. Generally its texts do not present carnivalesque threats to middle-class values. Because of their sanitized lyrics, these genres of Westernized music form a relatively "safe" or "innocuous" body of music and, unlike mardomi music, are often played on the radio.⁴ The perceived threat for some Iranians lies in the Western musical elements.

Historically, however, traditional popular music—mardomi, ru-howzi, or motrebi music—was disparaged and excoriated because of the perceived low class of its performers and its contents, contexts, and consumers. The content and performance of this musical tradition, while sometimes featuring conventionally sentimental Persian lyrics, largely emphasize the politically and socially irreverent, sexually playful, and satirical, witty, and frivolous broadsides. Many of the best-known songs come from the ru-howzi/siyah-bazi professional theater as well as the *bazi-ha-ye namayeshi*, or women's domestic theater, and thus these songs embody Bakhtin's (1984) notions of the carnivalesque and the world upside down. These theatrical forms, and the songs used in them, are deeply revealing of aspects of gender, ethnicity, and Iranian hierarchical society, all of which the songs lampoon and expose. They are also performed and created by both men and women equally, in contrast to the heavily male-dominated classical music world (see Khaleqi 1974, 465–66).⁵

WHAT IS PERSIAN POPULAR MUSIC?

It is important to specify what is meant by the term "popular music," because, like much popular culture, Persian popular music is not only ill defined but also often carries a pejorative connotation among classical musicians, ethnomusicologists, and other scholars as the Other in a high/low artistic continuum. Although certain Iranian classical musicians attempt to create rigid categories to distinguish what constitutes classical and popular music, the ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl more accurately states that "the distinction between classical and popular music in the framework of Persian musical culture is not always easy to grasp" (1992, 157). He adds that the Persian terms for and categories of classical and popular music "seemed . . . to be used mainly by musicians of the classical tradition in order to denigrate the rest" (1992, 157). Nettl stands as the only ethnomusicologist to attempt a serious investigation of the topic of popular music, as an adjunct to his larger study of aspects of the classical music system (*radif*). He suggests, "[Classical music] is a system with an internal definition and is thus self-limiting. Perhaps we may then be justified in considering and labeling

what is left, if we also subtract music in a definitely Western style as well as certain religious musical phenomena such as Koran chanting, as Persian popular music" (1972, 219).

Although Persian popular music does constitute to some extent a blurred genre, Nettl's characterization falls short of adequately defining the phenomenon. For one thing, there is more than one genre of Persian popular music. One might look, for example, to Iranian contexts in which as long as the language of the particular musical production is Persian, the majority of Iranians will identify it as Persian popular music. In an Iranian context poetry and lyrics overshadow music and occupy a position unimaginable in Western society. This covers a wide range of musical output, including recent productions by young Iranian groups such as The Boys and The Black Cats whose rap music is clearly imitative of American productions and contains both Persian and English words, as well as the more classically oriented *tasnif* sung by vocalists such as Marzieh and Ellaheh, two well-known singers of the older generation. Both Marzieh and Ellaheh perform classical *tasnif* as well as newer classical songs that have become popular and other types of music that can be considered popular. This latter tradition of singing, to the accompaniment of a variety of traditional and Western instruments, is being carried out in southern California by a newer generation of vocalists such as Shakila, Mo'in, Sattar, Shahla Sarshar, Fayeze, and Ahmad Azad. The economic dynamics of survival requires many of the performers of classical music in southern California to also perform popular music, known as *shad* (happy), as many of them make their principal incomes from personal appearances at weddings and nightclubs, where such music is requested. Interestingly, some of these newer singers and groups are performing older popular songs from the *mardomi* tradition in updated versions.⁶

As space does not allow for a purely musical analysis, I define Persian popular music, or musics, as (1) urban music, (2) primarily in the Persian language (although occasionally another major language found in Iran, such as Gilaki, Azeri Turkish, or Kurdish, is used), (3) that captures the imagination, attention, and devoted following of a large and diverse audience. Thus it is the consumer and the audience member, as well as the context, that define the meaning of "popular."⁷ In contrast to classical music, vocal music dominates virtually all of the popular music genres, although an occasional *reng* from the *mardomi* tradition, such as *shateri*, may also be included. Further complicating the study of what may be considered classical or popular, certain classical artists, such as Golpayegani, became "popular" in the view of certain members of the classical establishment through radio, television, films, and nightclub and concert appearances.⁸

Two important genres of Persian popular music that will not be discussed fully here also deserve mention. In the 1940s and early 1950s

frankly Western types of music with Persian lyrics appeared. Songs such as Jamshid Sheibani's renditions of Persian-language tangos and the Jolly Boys' 78 rpm Columbia recording of "Atal matal" (syllables used for nursery rhymes) to the tune of "Bell Bottom Trousers, Coats of Navy Blue" were representative of the genre.⁹ A revolution in this style of Westernized music occurred in 1954 when the popular music icon Viguen sang "Mahtab" (Moonlight), inaugurating a new style of Persian and Western fusion, largely composed outside of the *dastgah* (modal) system and using only Western instruments. Viguen still performs widely in southern California, and among Iranians he is known as the "King of Jazz" (*soltan-e jaz*) (Zinder 1992). No history or analysis of popular music in Iran can afford to omit mention of the song "Mara bebus" (Kiss Me), which enjoyed phenomenal success and into which some segments of the public read political meaning beyond the overtly sentimental lyrics. Any historian describing and analyzing Persian popular music must also address the phenomenal career of Googoush, a vocalist and entertainer of true world-class talent. Googoush began singing in the 1960s and swept all before her. Her meteoric rise to fame in films, television, and her still-popular recordings recall the career of Frank Sinatra, and many Iranians reverently refer to her simply as "The Queen." Googoush is arguably the most popular entertainer in Iranian history.

Western music was not the only source of inspiration for popular music production in prerevolutionary Iran. The vocalists Jebbeli, Tajik, and, in the beginning of her career, Pouran sang many songs that were either direct copies of Arabic or, more rarely, Indian popular songs, or an attempt to emulate that style. This alarmed many Iranian nationalists. Compared to the Westernized production, this genre of popular music enjoyed limited popularity. The political scientist Mehrzad Boroujerdi wryly observes, "Today, in the closing years of this aging century, the West and modernity have replaced the Arabs and Islam as the favorite scapegoats of the Iranian intelligentsia" (1996, 179).

Many well-known vocalists of the older generation such as Ellaheh, Delkash, Pouran, and Iraj can be designated cross-over artists, performing with equal ease in classical and popular contexts. They often performed at large weddings and in fashionable nightclubs, and their recordings were top sellers. Therefore, in the Iranian case, there are several types of popular music, and they may be conceived along a continuum of musical content that ranges from that considered a legitimate portion of the classical *dastgah* system to that which contains increasing degrees of Western musical elements, such as instrumentation, harmony, counterpoint, vocal technique, and melodic and rhythmic patterns. The extreme is a style of music that is totally Western musically but with Persian lyrics. Musically, popular music exhibits some of the characteristics that Nettl identified, and which I

would call a blurred genre. This is why, for purposes of this chapter, the consumer and the context of performance largely define what constitutes “popular” music. It is true, as Nettl points out, that most Iranians do not seem to make the clear-cut distinctions between popular and classical that, according to him, classical musicians make. Such distinctions by nonmusicians often take into account the literary quality of the lyrics, the context, and the particular vocalist. Most important, the “consumer” may patronize the live performances and purchase the recordings of a wide variety of music—Persian classical, popular, and folk music and various forms of Western classical and popular music. As the sociologist Bennet Berger sagely observes, “Everybody knows (or should know) that real life is usually more complex and subtle than the analytic categories and other abstractions that social scientists must use to make generalizations” (1995, 69). Nettl’s sampling of musical tastes in Tehran in 1969 demonstrates that, along a continuum of educated to uneducated, and young to old, certain trends in musical preferences could be discerned. But by no means could he discern or predict any specific preference according to age or economic or educational group (Nettl 1970, 1972, 1992), demonstrating that it is analytically dangerous to essentialize audiences or musical categories. And, most important, most Iranian consumers of music happily listen to a wide variety of musical forms rather than confine their consumption to a single genre.

MARDOMI:

TRADITIONAL POPULAR MUSIC IN PREREVOLUTIONARY IRAN

The most “traditional” and oldest genre of popular music was, and is, that played by the *motreb*, a professional public entertainer who sings, acts, dances, and plays a musical instrument. The music is often referred to as *mardomi*, *motrebi*, or *ru-howzi*.¹⁰ A singer of this genre is often called *khanandeh-ye mardomi* (people’s singer), as in the twentieth century the term “*motreb*” constitutes an insult. This type of popular, urban music, or one similar to it, certainly dates at least to the nineteenth century, and according to travelers’ accounts, such as those by Sir John Chardin (1987), Adam Olearius ([1662] 1977), and John Baptista Tavernier ([1678] 1961), probably centuries earlier. Thus when Nettl states that “before the introduction of broadcasting . . . whether there was a phenomenon which could be properly designated as urban popular music is certainly not clear” (1972, 218), I counter by suggesting that indeed the *mardomi*, *ru-howzi*/*motrebi* musical tradition was present during the period investigated in Tehran, and still lives in the changed and different conditions of the southern California Iranian immigrant community. I argue that *ru-howzi*/*mardomi* constitutes a genre of definable historical urban popular music in Iran. Singers like Susan, Afat, Mahvash, Aghassi, Iraj, Ahdich, and Parivash

were highly popular performers of this tradition, with large segments of the urban working class, among others, forming their devoted followers.¹¹ This musical genre predated broadcasting. Broadcasting and, more important, film and recording media simply made this popular music more available, more often, to more people than before the advent of electronic media. Because the sincere and cheerfully open vulgarity of much of this performative genre emerged from the women's quarters, low-class cafés and music halls, and the red-light district, much of this music was not heard on government-sponsored radio, which primarily broadcast Westernized popular music and Persian classical music. The lyric content of these latter genres was a good deal less problematic for squeamish officials than the rough-and-tumble verses of the mardomi music, with their carnivalesque celebration and social critiques of sex and politics. Rather, the chief medium contributing to the popularity of this popular genre was the privately owned film industry. The mardomi musical tradition figured in the majority of films from the 1950s to the revolution, appealing largely to the working class. "To satisfy the not-so-critical Iranian audiences of such films, who expected to be entertained, Persian singing and dancing and often a comedy character were almost always included in Iranian feature films" (Issari 1989, 159). M. Ali Issari's encyclopedic history of the Iranian cinema demonstrates that the majority of moneymaking films in any given year during this period fell into this musical category.¹² I argue that in many ways the film industry carried on aspects of the traditional comic theater, *ru-howzi*, which used this style of music, dance, and comedy. The frenetic pace and haphazard style of the production of this type of musical film in Iran, well described by Issari, required the musicians and comedians to improvise, thus retaining one of the most important elements of traditional performance—improvisation. The musicians sometimes used trumpets and accordions, in place of *tar* and *kemancheh*, but in its essentials mardomi music has retained its traditional performative core: its essence lies in the transgressive and earthy wit, satire, and daring double entendre of its often improvised lyrics; its principal site of live, public performance, for exclusively male audiences, was the working-class entertainment center of the Lalezar, while women performed in the context of domestic women's improvisational comic theater, which, following Sayyid Abu al-Qasim Anjavi Shirazi (1973), I call *bazi-ha-ye namayeshi*—theatrical games or plays (Shay 1995a).

In contrast to the study of classical music, which constitutes an important vehicle for high-quality literary poetry and virtuosic vocal and instrumental technique, mardomi musical genres are perhaps of more interest to the sociologist or ethnographer than to the musicologist for the revealing content of its lyrics.¹³ The rhythm of *ru-howzi* is always a driving or, alternatively, a highly sensual 6/8. The clever lyrics, often improvised and

embroidered on well-known themes, are more prominent than the often simple melodic construction. The structure of the lyrics is repetitive: the singer refers to a series of body parts, men's professions, or family relatives, for example, in a serial manner. Audience participation is encouraged through the use of response choruses that call "yes" or "why not?" thus serving as a motor that moves the song. The most popular vocalists are appreciated for their earthy, raucous, often bawdy and daring style of delivery rather than for beautiful voices and classical vocal technique. The delivery sometimes takes on a patter style, containing many improvised elements relating to the specific context in which it is performed. Male vocalists of this genre often emerge from the ru-howzi theater, while women generally learned the songs and lyrics in a domestic context. Thus both men and women perform and are familiar with this genre.

As Docker (1994) aptly indicates, many of the lyrics and the content of the traditional music emerge from the "lower female strata"—from the women's quarters, which, in an Iranian/Islamic context, are off limits to males. Nevertheless, men imbibed these lyrics and tunes, created by anonymous female genius, from viewing them as children in the women's quarters and from seeing them performed by women in the professional locales of the red-light district and the Lalezar district.

In the traditional households that far and away make up the majority in urban Iran, where financially feasible, separate living quarters (*andarun*, female; *biruni*, male) are the rule. Most of the men, at least from the more traditional quarters of the city, spend the majority of their social lives among other men, at one another's homes, in teahouses and cafés or other social gathering places, and in religious activities. The majority of women do likewise, carrying out their lives in the parallel but private world of the *andarun*. This is the setting of the *bazi-ha-ye namayeshi*, and so here we find the voices of countless unnamed women who created, and continue to create, this genre. I say "continue" because the improvisational nature of this theatrical form lends itself to constant change and evolution. It is within the context of the *bazi-ha* (plays) that anonymous women's voices of Iran are most tellingly revealed, as it is here that women have used their creativity to develop and express their concerns and emotions in the context of traditional theater. In the next section I discuss ru-howzi, *siyah-bazi*, and women's theatrical forms as historical and contemporary sources for this musical genre.

WOMEN'S THEATER

A notable, but less well known, urban form of comic improvisational theater is women's theater, *bazi-ha-ye namayeshi*. In contrast to the ru-howzi and *siyah-bazi*, women's theater—although characterized by many of the

same performative characteristics as the other forms—was created, developed, and primarily performed by and for women. Unlike the men's theatrical performances, these are strictly amateur, domestic productions. The contents of the sung and chanted verses, and the accompanying dancing and mimetic movements, deal with issues that are reflective of the lives and concerns of women. The political satire found in men's theater is absent in women's theater. Briefly, they principally differ from the men's comic performances in that they use more patter verse and dancing and less spoken dialogue. The clown figure does not exist in the women's plays.

Most important, in these games, women are allowed to behave outside the bounds of normal propriety. If the terms "grotesque" and "carnivalesque" indicate a distortion of the normal or natural to a degree of absurdity, then the women's games, like the *siyah-bazi* and *ru-howzi*, must also be included in the carnivalesque aspect of traditional Iranian life. As in Bakhtin's carnivalesque, the underdog always wins; this is one arena in which women always triumph.

The types of issues that interest traditional Iranian women form the topics of the lyrics of *bazi-ha-ye namayeshi*: keeping a husband's interest through being attractive and sexy; infidelity; children born out of wedlock; being forced to marry a man whom one does not like or know and who has been chosen by one's parents; problems with female in-laws (with whom a young bride traditionally lives); and proper and circumspect behavior. In these plays a woman may briefly escape the bonds of everyday behavior within the authoritarian, patriarchal system in which she often feels helpless and insecure and performatively act in a free manner denied her in everyday life. I maintain that these plays serve to mediate between what M. Reza Behnam characterizes as the "conflict between authoritarian and anti-authoritarian behavior," which he asserts pervades Iranian social and political life (1986, 9).

The theme of enumerating the qualities of men by profession (often using double entendre) is reiterated in a number of plays. In *Zari be Pari goft* (*Zari Told Pari*), *Mashti Sanam goft* (*Mashti Told Sanam*), and *Hodor-modor* (*Nonsense Syllables*), one of the girls tells another why she will not marry the butcher, the priest (*akhund*), the perfumer, the grocer, the shepherd, the colonel, the tailor, the dervish, or the day construction worker, among others, because the description of their work describes the worst part of their (often sexual) behavior. It is also a subplot in "Khaleh ro-ro," a popular game song in which the girl is "six months married and seven months gone" until she enacts the birth of her child whose father could be the butcher or the baker, among many others.

A more elaborate play featuring men of different professions, involving a mother and daughter, is acted out in *Kiye, kiye dar mizaneh?* (*Who Is It, Who Is It Knocking at the Door?*). A series of men of different professions

and trades arrive at the door bearing gifts of their trade. In contravention of normative Iranian behavior, the mother urges the daughter to accept their offerings, and thus, implicitly, their sexual advances in return for the gifts, behavior that is never countenanced in real life.

Another major theme found in some of the *bazi-ha* is the tension between a young wife and her female in-laws, such as "Abji Gol Bahar." One such popular game, not included in the Anjavi Shirazi collection, recorded by Mahvash, is "In dast kajeh?" (Is This Hand Deformed?) The chorus responds, "Ki mighh kajeh?" (Who says it's crooked?). The young wife replies, "Madar shohar" (Mother-in-law); the chorus says, "Doshman-e te" (She's your enemy).

Sex is perhaps the most popular topic of these songs, especially in cafés catering to an all-male clientele. "Do ta limu daram, mikhari?" (I have two lemons, will you buy them?), to which the male response chorus answers, "Mikharam, areh, vallah" (Yes, I swear, I'll buy them), referring to the breasts. In another song with the same theme, "Jombun, jombun-e inja, menar-e jombun-e inja" (It's Shaking, Shaking Here, the Shaking Minaret [referring to a famous leaning tower of Pisa-like structure in Isfahan], Is Here), the vocalist also refers to her body.

Some of these games are seemingly performed for the sheer transgressive fun that they provide to the participants, who would never be permitted to act in such a manner outside of this group of confidantes. For example, one such game, "Murcheh dareh" (There Are Ants), is virtually a striptease (the very term used by Anjavi Shirazi [1973, 55–56]). During the dance-play, the main character points to various parts of her body asking, "Murcheh dareh che kar konam?" (There are ants [here], what shall I do?), to which the chorus responds, "Bekan o beriz, bekan o beriz" (Take it off and throw it away), referring to the various items of clothing until the performer is nude. In "Amu sabzi forush" (Uncle Vegetable Seller), the woman approaches the vegetable seller: "Sabzit barikeh? Dalun tarikeh." "Is your vegetable slender?" she asks. "The hallway is dark," she affirms. "Man na'na mikham, to-ra tanha mikham" (I want mint, I want you alone), she continues, asking many questions about his "vegetable" in exchange for which she will give a kiss, shake her body, and so on (Anjavi Shirazi 1973, 117–18).

Sattareh Farman Farmaian relates how, during her childhood, one of the servants in the royal harem entertained the others and how these transgressive games were enjoyed by women of both high and low status:

With Batul-Khanom there was someone with whom to sew, visit the baths, and enjoy the jokes, games, and clowning with which women entertained themselves in a big, fancy *andarun* like Ezzatdoleh's (daughter of the Shah and the first and former wife of Farman Farmaian's father). My mother was too strict a Moslem to clown, but she enjoyed watching the others' horseplay, especially

one of Ezzatdoleh's maids, who could paint her naked buttocks to look like two eyes and, dancing with them to the onlookers, would roll them so that the two eyes crossed. This made my mother, her little sisters, Batul and her daughters, and all the other women laugh until their sides ached. (1992, 37)

The value of such parody and satire should not be sold short. And yet this, in effect, is what scholars of Iranian music and theater have done by their failure to adequately analyze popular culture phenomena.¹⁴

CLASSICAL HIGH—POPULAR LOW

Earlier I alluded to the fear and loathing popular music and its accompanying performing style create among certain elements of the population, particularly strict Muslims and classical musicians, although perhaps for different reasons. Analytically it is important not to conflate and simplify such reactions and unproblematically refer to Islam's "well-known" repugnance to music, as many scholars have done (see And 1959, 1976; Farhat 1965), but rather to understand that these reactions are complex and that not all Muslims think alike. In many ways the phenomenon of popular music can be compared to jazz, tango, and flamenco (see, e.g., Savigliano 1995; Mitchell 1994). In a similar and parallel fashion, all of these genres have engendered similar reactions within their own societies. As the flamenco scholar Timothy J. Mitchell observes,

Spaniards concerned about the moral tenor of their society came to look upon deep song with deep contempt.

There is much to be learned from people who find certain musical styles transgressive and threatening. As Roger Taylor argued in an important essay, the spread of American jazz is best understood by studying the reactions of those who were hostile toward it. Alarmed musicians, clergymen, journalists, and even philosophers heard the new music as sensuous and indecent, suitable only for houses of prostitution; its primitive rhythms aroused animal passions; jazz embodied a spirit of lawlessness and a general revolt against authority. . . . Like early flamenco, early jazz has been associated with despised ethnic groups, gangsters, free-spending bluebloods, and hedonism. Only by disguising its orgiastic origins was jazz able to become part of the musical mainstream. (1994, 45)

It was therefore neither unsurprising nor unprecedented that one of the first acts of the Islamic Republic was to ban dance and popular music: both the Westernized variety for its associations with the West and the traditional mardomi music and performance for its perceived sexual, social, and political sedition. In contrast, the Islamic regime supports performances of classical music of a serious nature and positively valorizes regional folk music. This means that, in practical terms, unlike jazz, tango, and flamenco, which

largely resisted attempts at suppression and evolved into highly sought after, highly esteemed genres, mardomi music has had most of its creative roots and performing contexts destroyed. Its few professional performers in southern California, such as Susan and Aghassi, are often older and middle-aged and often perform songs from the prerevolutionary period that are familiar to their audiences. Younger performers enter the more socially acceptable classical music arena or the economically lucrative Westernized popular music field.

In Islam sexual segregation is a social response to the belief that, while sexuality is a powerful and legitimate force for both men and women, the force of uncontrolled sexuality is capable of tearing apart the fabric of society (for a full discussion of this issue, see Mernissi 1975; Haeri 1989). Uncontrolled sexuality can only be properly and effectively contained through segregation. It is therefore not merely the presumed vulgarity of popular entertainment that exercises the wrath of classical musicians, Muslim authorities, and sometimes establishment bureaucrats. Rather, it is the public performance of professional female dancers and singers in male space, performing before males who do not stand in a proper legal relationship to them, that incites the authorities to action. Throughout history, some, but by no means all, Islamic clergymen have inveighed against the use of dance and music. For example, in his famous *Kashf al-asrar* (Discovery of Secrets), Ruhollah Khomeini, later spiritual and temporal ruler of Iran, proclaimed that "music which encourages the spirit of passion and love among the youth is forbidden in the *shariat* and should be taken out of school programs" (1971, 313–14, quoted in Paidar 1995). Parvin Paidar, a scholar of Middle Eastern women's studies, observes, "Khomeini criticized Reza Shah [father of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last ruler of the Pahlavi dynasty] and Ataturk as 'idiotic dictators' [for] spreading 'the means of pleasure,' and preoccupying people with unveiling, European clothes, cinema, theater, music and dance" (1995, 121). However, some clergy do not regard it negatively. In a recent broadcast on Radio Seda-ye Iran (August 27, 1996), Ayatollah Haeri, in a live interview from Germany, stated that he was not against dance or music. "Music is the food of the soul [*ghaza-ye ruh*]," he declared. Thus there is disagreement among the clergy over this issue. As we have seen, "attitudes have varied widely, from outright condemnation to advocacy of it as a means of spiritual growth and enlightenment" (Caton 1983, 61). A full discussion of the topic of Islam and music is beyond the scope of this chapter.¹⁵

Furthermore, in a nation in which Shi'i Islam is the state and majority religion, important elements, but by no means all, of the strictly religious population revile all music as sinful. This ambiguity of Islamic opinion may well be reflected in the emphasis on spirituality and Sufism into which musicians such as Safvat attempt to cast classical music.¹⁶ Thus the dichotomy

and barriers that scholars and performers of classical music attempted, and still attempt, to erect between those categories of music that they perceive as classical and popular enter the occasionally strident discourse of nationalism. Perhaps for some of the classical musicians, themes of authenticity and purity may be a matter of survival within an Islamic environment that Caton characterizes as “anti-musical” (1989, 61). Dariush Safvat, a conservative classical musician, expresses his opinions in an article entitled “Musiqi-ye pop faza ra masmus mikonad” (Pop Music Poisons the Atmosphere; cited in Miller 1995, 107). Lloyd Clifton Miller expresses some of these concerns:

Finally under the constitution (1906) music became free after 13 centuries of being subdued by religious disfavor. Official freedom of music, however, opened Pandora’s box and, according to master Safvat, it seems that every low class and uninitiated lout could and did become a “composer,” a “singer” or “instrumentalist.” Safvat says the more these charlatans were applauded, the more cocky they became and over the recent decades, authentic Iranian music was nearly totally destroyed by innovators and westernizers. (1995, 102)¹⁷

The term *asil* (authentic) is often applied to Persian classical and regional folk music by classical musicians and their followers (see During, Mirabdolbaghi, and Safvat 1991), thereby creating its dialectical Other, the “inauthentic.” In fact, with the notable exception of Bruno Nettl, ethnomusicologists have consigned Persian popular music to the trash heap of whatever does not constitute “pure” (*asil*) classical music, on the one hand, and religious or regional folk music, on the other. Consequently, the existence of this “inauthentic” popular music, which still permeates the urban scene in southern California with its rhythmic and ubiquitous presence from every radio in every public café, wedding party, or private home, is both acknowledged and dispensed with in a paragraph or two by the more daring musicologists. This quest for a return to a “golden age of authentic” classical music of pre-Islamic origin is abetted by masters and instructors of this rarefied form who feel beleaguered by the vulgar sounds of Westernized popular music, or worse, the indigenous sounds of *mardomi* music. Such attitudes are often perpetuated and magnified by their non-Iranian admirers. Thus Miller, in his description of popular music, follows his mentor, Dariush Safvat:

During the Pahlavi dynasty, the Ministry of Culture and Arts and the radio took the control of music away from the authorized masters. Because of this, people from the lower echelons of society with no spiritual conviction pushed their way into the limelight. According to Safvat, the *motreb* class of performers formerly involved with prostitution, procuring, alcohol and drugs suddenly became the purveyors of the tradition. Safvat explained that the modal

system was eventually altered or discarded in favor of cheap *tarane* (pop songs) fabricated by untrained amateurs who had the audacity to tamper with an art form perfected over thousands of years. (1995, 104)

What is not explained by Safvat and Miller is the fact that there is no possible way of knowing what music thousands of years ago sounded like, or who "authorized" the aforesaid masters.¹⁸

Jean During, Zia Mirabdolbaghi, and Safvat lay out a chart differentiating classical performance from *motrebi* (professional, nonclassical performances). In their scheme, among the attributes of classical performance is that it is creative, diversified, original, sober, balanced, and spiritual, whereas *motrebi* performances are imitative, repetitive, standard, ostentatious, diluted, and sensual. They acknowledge in their analysis that "this rather severe comparison does not attempt to discredit light music, which perfectly fulfills its function, but to clear up the current confusion between light and *asil* music" (1991, 21). In spite of such disclaimers, it should be noted that *asil*, or authentic, classical music is located at the top of the page next to "High Qualification" on their chart of the various genres of music found in Iran dividing the high from the low, the authentic from the inauthentic (1991, 25). To be sure, many ethnomusicologists and classical Iranian musicians vie to define classical music by its purity, spirituality, and non-contamination by Westernization and in so doing disagree among themselves on exactly which elements (such as harmony) are permissible, and under which conditions. This is done to categorize as "light" any music that they disapprove of or that they deem unworthy of scholarly attention. Some musicians, for example, would allow a recently composed *tasnif* to be considered to be classical (*sonnati*) if it meets certain qualifications, while others would deny it a place in the classical canon.

Thus Iranian music, classical and popular, in its performance and in its consumption, enters the discourse of nationalism and authenticity. Boroujerdi, while characterizing Iranian intellectuals in general, foregrounds the debate among music scholars as well: "They rejected the apish imitation of the West as fraudulent and the renaissance of the past as archaic. Nonetheless, the formidable ideological permeation of the West led many Iranian intellectuals, in search of indigenization and authenticity, to turn toward nativism and Islamicism" (1996, 176). While viewing Westernization with alarm and claiming that it is causing a lack of interest in authentic, classical music, particularly among youth, classical musicians often fail to mention that before 1906 this music was played only in the homes and courts of the Shah and aristocrats, who jealously guarded their musicians. As Becman writes, "The disparate quality of Persian music is rooted in the social conditions under which performances took place previous to the constitutional

revolution of 1908. Prior to that date there were no public performances of Persian classical music. All music was performed in private, either for the wealthy or in the private ceremonies of certain dervish orders" (1976, 7). Classical music was never heard by and did not belong to the masses. The performances in the mardomi/motrebi style of professional and street musicians, however, were widely available, leading to this music being termed *amiyaneh*, or public, by many. According to Khaleqi (1974, 470-74), several bands of motrebs, both all-male and all-female, consisting of musicians, a singer, dancers, acrobats, and actors, of varying size and quality, plied their trade in Tehran, and many photographs and paintings of them are extant.

THE BEAT GOES ON:
POPULAR MUSIC IN THE IRANIAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY

In Iran the Westernized genre of popular music represented modernity for its consumers. Its contexts, Westernized nightclubs and concerts, made the young people who patronized these performances feel modern and "up-to-date." After its almost total relocation among the Iranian immigrant community of southern California, Persian popular music began to take on subtle aspects of nationalistic identity and even defiance of the Islamic regime that had banned its performance and production. For decades the importance and impact of Persian popular music have loomed large in the Iranian community, both in Iran and, later, in southern California, home to the largest Iranian community outside of Tehran. Indeed, the chief consumers of the Westernized genre were many of those who fled the rigid Islamic order represented by Ayatollah Khomeini. Since popular music was banned in Iran by the Islamic Republic, this salience has not abated, and dancing and popular music can, in some contexts, be emblematic of resistance.¹⁹ Although its primary consuming audience now resides outside of Iran, every individual who has returned to Iran remarks on the wide, underground availability of this music in Tehran. Iranian exile life is saturated with the sounds and images of this music and its star vocalists, musicians, composers, and lyricists. Through a barrage of front-page photographs in leading print media, MTV-style video images on the many Iranian television programs, posters advertising the newest recording or upcoming concert in every grocery store, and frequent interviews with well-known performers on television and radio, the Iranian community in southern California is filled with the sounds and images of popular music.²⁰

Unlike Andrew Shyrock's (this volume) description of the Arab community in Detroit, which is made up of both urban and village and both highly educated and nearly illiterate populations, as well as several generations of now assimilated Arab-Americans, the Iranian community in southern Cali-

fornia (and nationally) is overwhelmingly urban, highly educated, and only one generation deep. This Western-looking group constituted the chief consumers of Westernized popular music, a trend that continues. The generations are not divided by the genres of music that they consume, but contexts differ. The young attend discotheques where they can dance in large numbers, while the middle-aged and elderly are more frequently encountered at concerts of both classical and popular music. Recent concerts by the very popular Mortazavi were attended by thousands of people of all ages. Middle-aged patrons are encountered in cabarets and nightclubs where the few singers of mardomi music, such as Susan, Shahnaz Tehrani, Aghassi, Hemati, and Hojjati, perform, but these do not approach the numbers of people who attend Westernized popular music concerts.

As one might anticipate, certain changes occur in the musical production of Persian popular music in its new environment. First, in Iran music rarely carried references to Iran or patriotism, whereas in the United States many singers perform songs valorizing Iran, such as "Keshvar-e man" (My Country), which I heard performed in 1996 by Houshmand Aghili.²¹ Songs and themes that cater to feelings of nostalgia are now staples of Iranian singers in southern California.²² Second, many members of the younger generation have fewer linguistic skills in Persian than previous generations, and therefore the lyrics are of less importance than the driving 6/8 beat that animates the Westernized popular musical genre and to which they can dance. Abbas Chamanara, proprietor of the principal and most complete Persian music store in southern California, declared, "Instead of the sad and sentimental music that was produced in Iran, these kids want fast dance music."²³ They want *shad* [happy] music for dancing" (pers. com. December 10, 1996). Many older Iranians, who venerate fine poetry, vehemently decry the decline of literary quality in the music currently produced in Los Angeles. For these listeners, the poetry takes precedence over the music.

A small group of younger musicians, of Iranian parentage but born in the United States or brought here as young children and steeped in Western forms such jazz and New Age genres, are searching through Iranian classical and regional music for inspiration to create new types of fusion music.

RU-HOWZI/MOTREBI MUSIC IN THE IRANIAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY

Mardomi music currently enjoys some popularity in the Iranian immigrant community in Los Angeles. However, because its live performance contexts were severed by the authorities of the Islamic Republic, it was repudiated as vulgar and backward by many in the middle class who supported Westernized musical forms and who emigrated to the United States. In the United

States it has nostalgic value. Several people told me that they now listen to more traditional music in the United States than they ever did in Iran, "because it takes me back." In their new environment Iranian-American youth have no cultural or linguistic skills for its apprehension, preferring instead the lively, driving dance rhythms of the synthesizer and flocking to discotheques and concerts where it is played at an incredibly high volume. For these reasons, for the young mardomi music is largely marginalized and eclipsed by the more popular Westernized forms.

Mardomi music now forms a nostalgic memory of Iran for the older and middle-aged public who experience it in some nightclubs, parties, and theatrical re-creations. Before the revolution of 1979, new output of this musical genre for the movies and entertainment district cafés was enormous, but in the United States, by contrast, its largely middle-aged and older performers often rely on songs they performed in Iran. A contemporary feeling is maintained by clever references to topical subjects, southern California landmarks, and American situations, as well as nostalgic references to Iran.

Mardomi music can also be experienced in *siyah-bazi*, a theatrical form that is still performed in the Iranian-American community in southern California. *Siyah-bazi's* emphasis on quick adaptation to new themes and topics currently enables a focus on subjects that revolve around political folly in the Islamic Republic and adjustment to life and customs in America. The highly nostalgic appearance of the blackface icon of *ru-howzi* and *siyah-bazi* theater, *Hajji Firuz*, who heralds the coming of *No-ruz*, the Persian New Year, appears on Iranian television networks both live and in animation performing mardomi-style music. The Persian New Year, with its patriotic and nostalgic character, is also the time when some of the well-known performers of this style, such as Bahman Mofid, Hojjati, Morteza Aghili, and Shahnaz Tehrani, can also be seen on television.²⁴ In addition, many of the advertisements for Iranian food products and services use mardomi-style 6/8 rhythm and its patter style of verse, which is somewhat different in structure and tempo from that found in the more Westernized popular music that dominates Iranian television and radio. Because of its domestic connections, mardomi-style performance is also sometimes used in children's songs. Most recently, with Ardavan Mofid and Bahman Mofid's successful new play, "*Haft darvazeh*" (*The Seven Gates*), it has begun to form a classicized and nostalgic look at Iranian performative genres, from the storytelling genres *naqqali* and *shahnameh-khani* to *ru-howzi*. In this review several references to the Lalezar district were made and short mardomi-style songs were performed. *Shateri*, one of the urban dances associated with the *ru-howzi/motrebi* musical genre, appears in a variety of music videos documented by Hamid Naficy (1993, 178–87), as well as in a recent classicized choreography featured in concert by the AVAZ International

Dance Theatre.²⁵ Thus mardomi, like jazz and flamenco, may gain a new lease on performance life in new contexts and environments by those who appreciate the droll, satiric messages it conveys.

CONCLUSION

Mardomi/ru-howzi music constitutes a historical genre of popular music of Iran's urban centers, but because it is perceived as vulgar, Iranian musical scholars and their non-Iranian students and disciples have shunned it as an appropriate area of serious study. Some ethnomusicologists, such as Bruno Nettl (1970), questioned the very existence of popular genres before the advent of mass media. This avoidance, in favor of the study of highbrow music, has been unfortunate, as the texts of the mardomi/ru-howzi songs and the contexts of their performance contain vital information about many aspects of Iranian society, including attitudes toward gender, sexuality, and social relationships. Mardomi/ru-howzi music, through its satirical, earthy lyrics, represented a subversive genre discomfiting to the burgeoning middle classes of pre-1979 Iran and represented for many of them a backward expression of traditional life.

Persian classical music and Westernized popular music, by contrast, were regularly aired on the government radio, bestowing on the former the imprimatur and appearance of a semiofficial canon. Unlike Turkey as described by Stokes (1992a) and Egypt as characterized by Armbrust (1996), Iran before the Islamic Revolution did not use music as a symbol of modernization.

Whereas Armbrust (1996) shows a distinct generational split in patterns of musical consumption in Egypt, surprisingly, Iranian-Americans do not exhibit such sharp generational differences. Many people of all ages enjoy Westernized popular music and flock to concerts where it is performed. Concerts by Dariush, Ebi, Mortazavi, and Leila Foruhar draw thousands of people of all ages. The generational difference can be seen more in terms of the venues where the music is enjoyed: the younger generation flocks to discotheques and prefers music that is danceable; the older generation prefers concert and nightclub settings. For the older generation, the meaning and the quality of the lyrics form the most important element in their listening experience, whereas the younger generation, generally less fluent in Persian, seeks music with a driving, danceable beat.

Mardomi/ru-howzi lyrics are replete with many references to specific sites and customs unknown to the younger generation, with its limited experience of life in Iran. Because of this it provides nostalgic memories of the old country for those old enough to remember but remains largely meaningless for most younger people. Significantly, the singers of this genre are middle-aged and older: new performers in the United States en-

ter the potentially lucrative Westernized popular music field or, more rarely, study classical music. Lyrics created for current popular songs have more patriotic and nostalgic content than was formerly the case in Iran. These are still not numerous compared to the sentimental and romantic lyrics of the vast majority of popular songs.

The entire popular music industry, banned by the Islamic Republic, re-located to southern California. It is unique in that it produces music not only for the millions of Iranians now resident in the United States and Europe but also for consumption in Iran. This music is made available in Iran through an elaborate system of illegal importation through the Gulf states where many Iranians work as well as through Iranians visiting home from abroad. Anecdotal evidence from every visitor to Iran attests to the widespread consumption and availability in Iran of popular music produced in southern California.

It is difficult to predict whether mardomi music will thrive in Iran, where reports of underground performances of *siyah-bazi* continue.²⁶ In the Iranian-American community, barring a revival, it will most likely fade with its aging performers.

NOTES

My sincere gratitude to the ethnomusicologist Danilo Lozano for his valuable comments and generous suggestions.

Bazm-e Qajariyyeh (parties from the Qajar era, 1795–1925) often took place in the extensive gardens of the rich and are documented in memoirs, paintings, and photographs of the period. As a vocal performer of music of both the classical and popular genres for more than forty years, I have personally experienced the powerful hold these 6/8 rhythms in all their manifestations have over their Iranian listeners. Early in the 1950s, when I began learning songs from both the *motrebi* and the classical traditions, I was struck by the unique 6/8 rhythms found throughout the Iranian world, including Azerbaijan, Armenia, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan, all of which are connected through important elements of dance, music, literature, and shared history, among others. In this vast region the 6/8 rhythm was or is performed in its many variations, including a nearly 7/8 rhythm in the eastern parts of this area. Iranian musicians told me that this rhythm ran in their veins and was called *shir-e madar* (mother's milk) because, like mother's milk, the rhythm was imbibed as young children. For a sampling of 6/8 rhythms found in Persian music, see Faramarz Tehrani's *Ritm-ha-ye varzeshi* (Exercise Rhythms 1991), a manual on how to play the *tonbak*, a goblet-shaped drum. Some scholars will perhaps argue that it is the poetry or music that excites the interest of an Iranian audience, but personal experience has shown that when the audience hears a 6/8 rhythmic introduction of a *reng* (dance piece) or song, even before any lyrics are sung or any melody is played, they begin to snap their fingers (*beshkan*) or clap in time to the

rhythm in happy expectation of what is to follow.

1. For an excellent discussion of what constitutes highbrow and lowbrow, Lawrence W. Levine (1988) details not only how cultural canons are constructed but also how the cultural hierarchies of what constitutes “high” and “low” are dynamic categories that mutate under changing economic and social conditions.

2. The most detailed and important study of the *tasnif* is Margaret Caton’s Ph.D. dissertation (1983). However, it should be noted that, like many ethnomusicologists, she limits her study to *tasnifs*, which belong to the classical canon in the opinion of most ethnomusicologists and Iranian classical musicians.

3. *Motreb*, a word of Arabic origin meaning “one who gladdens or makes happy,” refers to public entertainers who variously and in combination acted, played musical instruments, sang, and danced. Historically such a category of performer dates back at least to the fourteenth century, where the term is found in the poetry of Hafez. These entertainers were linguistically and conceptually set apart from the serious musicians of the court. In the twentieth century, when public performances of all kinds of music became available, *motreb* came to refer, disparagingly, to those who play light music. It needs to be stressed that the designation “*motreb*” in the twentieth century constitutes a loaded insult, and those performers who consider themselves classical musicians are very sensitive to its negative connotations. I have personally heard numerous musicians disparage one another by using this term.

Truly low-class street musicians, as well as certain types of itinerant rural performers, were often called *luti*. The depiction of parties in Persian miniatures, accompanied by dancing and wine, and Europeans’ shocked descriptions of wild drinking bouts, as well as the untimely deaths of several rulers of both the Timurid and Safavid dynasties (1501–1725) from overconsumption, graphically demonstrate that these gatherings were not contemplative philosophical affairs but revels calling for entertaining, rather than serious, music.

4. An exception to Westernized popular music containing “safe” lyrics were some songs performed by Dariyush that contained covert political criticism.

5. Ruhollah Khaleqi suggests that because women “went in search of decorating themselves to captivate hearts . . . they made little effort to acquire art and leave some traces of it and therefore the pages of history are filled with the names of male artists” (1974, 466). Khaleqi’s portrayal of women as artistic lightweights extends through his chapter “Women and Art” (465–86), in which he characterizes women as more likely to inspire art than to create it.

6. As an example of this, I was recently interviewed on Radio Seda-ye Iran, the twenty-four-hour Persian-language station and asked by the host, Ali Reza Meibudi, to sing “*Yek hamumi sita sazam, chehel sotun, chehel panjereh*” (I Built a Bathhouse for You with Forty Pillars and Forty Windows), an old *tasnif* that hovers perilously between the classical and *motrebi* traditions and that has become associated with my performances. After I sang a verse, he segued into a new version, replete with synthesizers, by Shamaizadeh, an older popular music performer from Iran.

7. Regarding context, certain classical musicians insist that the setting for the performance of classical music must be intimate, contemplative, and spiritual, a setting where both performer and listener may concentrate. Thus songs performed at weddings and cafés cannot be considered classical. During, Mirabdolbaghi, and Saf-

vat advise that classical music should be performed that “suggest[s] an element of *hal*, contemplation, and concentration to younger generations by striking a balance between poetry and music, helping them liberate themselves from the ill effects of the age of the machine and the culture of money, violence and sex” (1991, 248).

8. In fact, one of the most successful attempts to “popularize” classical music was made by the immensely popular classical avaz singer, Golpayegani, of whom Lloyd Clifton Miller disparagingly writes: “Golpayegani was a promising vocal master who recorded on the UNESCO album entitled ‘Iran’ wherein he was accompanied by Borumand on *tar*. Sadly, he later fell victim to the applause of audiences and eventually decayed into a pop singer who crooned to audiences, milking them for cheers by exaggerated and contrived expressions of emotion” (1995, 229–30). While Golpayegani was reviled in some soi-disant elite classical circles, many Iranians praised him for saving classical music by performing it in new contexts for audiences who would otherwise never have listened to it. Reactions to Golpayegani’s performances are not unlike those that criticize Luciano Pavarotti’s “popular” appearances.

9. In an interview (December 23, 1996), Jamshid Sheibani told me that, in fact, he was the first singer to incorporate Western elements in his songs. He sang for the official opening of Radio Tehran in 1940 where he sang “Bi to” (Without You) and “Delbar-e tanaz” (Flirtatious Sweetheart). Sheibani insists that these songs and others he later recorded were “in the seven *dastgahs* [modal systems], but the rhythms, a slow rhumba and a tango, were Western.”

10. An excellent sampler of four tapes dating back to the 1950s is available. It is titled *Shabi dar kafeh-ha-ye Tehran* (A Night in the Cafés of Tehran, 1987), published by Iranzamin Publishing Co. (P.O. Box 16234, Irvine, CA 92713), with the assistance of Morteza Varzi.

11. When Mahvash was killed in an automobile accident, thousands of bereaved fans attended her funeral.

12. Issari’s work gives a year-by-year entry for every film made in Iran during the period, with complete credits, including all of the major actors, singers, and, occasionally, dancers involved.

13. For a more detailed discussion of the types of lyrics found in this genre, see Shay 1995a.

14. See also Pechey (1989, 51) on the importance of Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque in literature.

15. For a full discussion of the topic of Islam and music, see Choudhury 1957; Nelson 1985.

16. Some writers claim that this music is so spiritual that only Sufi poetry should be used for its performance: “But any traditional poetry with mystic and metaphysical meaning written in the metric system could be used. Yet one should choose Sufi or spiritual works such as those of Rumi, Hafez, Saidi and similar writers. Works of Omar Khayyam might not be suitable for song texts in the *radif*” (Miller 1995, 227–28).

17. Even with these changes, certain classical musicians disagree:

The current tendency is to compensate for the disappearance of light music by arranging classical or popular airs in a pleasant and novel manner. Some traditional musicians

completely disagree with this method, which, ironically, they call *pop-e-erfani*, “mystic pop.” What the purists criticize is not the music itself, which performs its function—to entertain—but the fact that it is presented as an expression of the learned tradition. (During, Mirabdolbaghi, and Safvat 1991, 54)

18. Morteza Neydavud, perhaps more wisely than those claiming pre-Islamic origins, states, “I don’t know, and I don’t think anybody else can. Even if you ask Darvish Khan, he would say that he got it from another master.” He adds, “The origin, and originators of the *dastgahs*, modes, and the *gushes* are actually unknown” (During, Mirabdolbaghi, and Safvat 1991, 202).

19. In Iran contexts for performing in secret, and even publicly, in defiance of the Islamic Republic’s ban on this dance form, supply ample evidence that the performance of this dance creates a space for resistance to the regime. It is significant that Iranian women from throughout the diaspora chose to taunt the Islamic regime through the vehicle of dance at the International Women’s Conference in Beijing in September 1995 (reported on Radio Seda-ye Iran, September 1995).

20. For an in-depth discussion of the Iranian recording industry and other issues of media in the Iranian diaspora of southern California, see Naficy 1993.

21. Music with patriotic themes, such as the well-known “Ey, Iran,” constitute a single genre of music called *sorud* (hymn or anthem). Musically the sorud differs from all other forms of Iranian music: it is played in 2/4 and 4/4 rhythms and intended to be sung by groups, and it is often taught in school.

22. See Naficy 1993 for a full discussion of how nostalgia permeates Iranian music and television.

23. For a discussion of a similar intergenerational discourse on the topic of “sex, drugs, and rock and roll” in another Middle Eastern context, see Armbrust 1996.

24. A sampling of such performances of *siyah-bazi* and *mardomi* music and lyrics can be found on *Tanin Show, No-Ruz 1373* (1992), published by Caltex Records (9045A Eton Ave., Canoga Park, CA 91304).

25. The AVAZ International Dance Theatre is a repertory dance company that performs a large repertoire of dance and music from the Iranian culture sphere.

26. Ardavan Mofid, pers. com. January 27, 1994.