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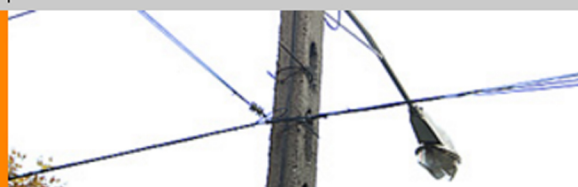
The Year That Passed

Back to the Old Days of Music

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Entertainment or Elevated Music

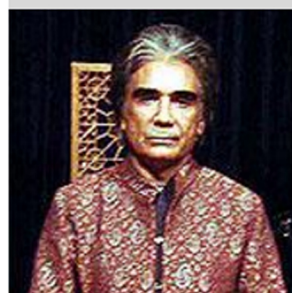
By Shadi Vatanparast
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During the Qajar Era (1794-1925), and especially under the reformist Prime Minister {Amir Kabir} and the reign of {Naser od-Din Shah}, the sociological manifestation of music in Iran went through a drastic change. It was in this period that the state apparatus deemed music as transgressive and socially inappropriate. City musicians went underground and music was heard only in private circles, losing its public, entertainment function. Regional music during the same period continued to have its ethnic, vocational and religious significance.

The SHEMSHAL Ensemble's performance of Qajar Music from 9 October to 2 November 2008 at the Niavaran Cultural Center in Tehran attempted to recreate the music that thus evolved during the Qajar era. Under the supervision of {Hossein Hamidi}, the Ensemble appeared on stage with full regalia of the time. In the first "scene," audiences were treated to trio performances, solo singings and percussion sections. In the second, the fourteen-member Shemshal Ensemble recreated art songs (*tasnif*) and vocal and instrumental sections (*avaz*), remaining faithful to the spirit of that particular era..



Songs in the concert were performed without concern for the decorum of High Art that Iranian "traditional" musicians today have assumed. These were upbeat songs designed to entertain the crowd. Notable contemporary singers like {Mohammadreza Shajarian} and {Mohsen Keramti}, as well as older singers like {Taj Esfahani} and {Eqbal Azar}, had previously adapted some of the Qajar *tasnifs* according to their own view of what Iranian music should be. But in the Shemshal concert, Hamidi had tried to preserve the entertainment value of the music, with its diverse sections -- *tasnif*, *avaz*, *reng* ("groove"), *zarbi-khani* ("singing to the beat") -- as well as its visual aspect. In almost every section of the program, Shemshal had come up with innovations. As such, the audience during the two-hour program was entirely captivated and entertained. In the first "scene," the Ensemble did away with microphones, which was instrumental in recreating the Qajar atmosphere.



Listen



Shemshal Ensemble

Most masters, singers and dexterous instrumentalists of Persian Music are familiar with the *tonbak* (Persian frame drum). A virtuoso player of *tonbak* used to be called *zarbgir* ("beat keepers") and he/she was by and large a good singer. Singing the *tasnifs* and upbeat lyrics requires familiarity with the diverse beats.



Although in the brochure of the concert the name of musicians were mentioned, the Ensemble had a *majlesgardun* ("MC") who would introduce performers using titles that had currency in the Qajar era, like "khan" and "khatun". The introductory part of the concert included the famous "Shahrashub" melody, much akin to the beat used in Iranian comic theater (*siyahbazi*) that was popular before the Revolution of 1979.

Players of the Persian instrument of *tar* performed it standing up, holding the body of the instrument over their chests; the way bard (*ashiq*) musicians play the *tar*. The famous *tar* player of the Republic of Azerbaijan, {Ramiz Guliyev}, has said that the technique of holding the instrument close to the heart was intended to highlight the music's mainspring. Both *tar* and *kamancheh* ("bowed spike fiddle") were different during the Qajar era, with 5 and 3 strings respectively, and in the Shemshal concert these intricacies had been observed. Even though the *tonbak* player in this concert wasn't the same as the singer (customary at the time of the Qajars) and although the instrument *shurangiz* wasn't around during the Qajar, the atmosphere exuded a sense of historicity.

Much like the time of Qajar, the pieces weren't arranged, the ultimate aim being to create a sense of merriment. Today, musical performances are marked by elaborate decors and traditional dresses. Most of our respected musicians are unwilling to perform in small gatherings, as they deem that beneath the station of classical Iranian music. Masters of our music avoid being seen in public and they seldom experiment with the music they tag "traditional."

When the Shemshal Ensemble's performance was over, musicians came to the stage to pay tribute to the audience. They performed their last piece before the audience would request an encore.

The Qajar Music performance of the Shemshal Ensemble in this age of our musicianship was able to go beyond the limitations set on music as entertainment, and it did so with power and dynamism, which was always a part of the popular culture of Iran.

Footnote

Shemshal is a wind instrument akin to flute and it is one of the older instruments of the Kurdish region of Iran. Shemshal was previously made of wood, but today brass or copper is used in its constructions. It has six holes and it is considered a bass instrument.

Sample Music

- [1] [Track I: Introduction](#)
- [2] [Track II](#)
- [3] [Track III](#)
- [4] [Track IV](#)
- [5] [Track V](#)

