Archiving of Persian Classical Music in the Past Century

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Abstract

The archiving of Persian classical music (PCM) through recording and transcription has developed significantly over the past century, shaped by political, technological, and cultural forces. While oral transmission has always been central to PCM, early twentieth-century efforts began to document the tradition through both sound recording and musical notation. These practices gained momentum under the Pahlavi dynasty, when modernization initiatives and growing nationalism emphasized the preservation of Iranian cultural heritage. Advancements in recording technologies, such as vinyl and cassette tapes, made it possible to capture performances and transmit them beyond ephemeral gatherings. A pivotal institutional development was the founding of the *Markaz-e Hefz-o Esha'eh-ye Musiqi-ye Irāni* ('Center for Preservation and Propagation of Iranian Music') by Dariush Safvat in the 1970s, fully supported by National Iranian Radio and Television. The Center combined oral pedagogy with recording and archiving, training a new generation of musicians who would continue these efforts after the 1979 revolution. As the Islamic Republic imposed new restrictions on musical performance, much of the archival work shifted to private spaces, but eventually resurfaced through private initiatives and independent publishers. The improvisatory

and context-sensitive nature of PCM poses challenges for archival methods, as recordings and transcriptions often remove the music from its social and spiritual contexts. Nonetheless, a hybrid model has emerged in which oral transmission, documentation, and performance coexist. In recent decades, there has also been increased attention to power dynamics in music preservation, leading to more inclusive efforts to archive regional, minority, and sacred traditions. Thus, the history of PCM archiving reflects not only technological and institutional shifts but also evolving aesthetic and ethical concerns about what—and who—gets remembered.

Keywords: Persian classical music, archiving music, music recording, music transcription, oral transmission, modernity in music, contemporary Iranian art, post-1979 music

Introduction

The archiving of Persian Classical Music (PCM) has been carried out in three primary dimensions. First, it has been preserved through sound recording, a process made possible by the invention and adoption of modern recording technologies. From the early twentieth century onward, recorded media allowed for the capturing and reproduction of musical performances, marking a major shift in how music could be transmitted across time and space. Second, archiving occurred through transcription using Western notation systems—an especially significant development given that PCM had historically relied on oral transmission. This shift to notation not only aided in pedagogy, particularly in institutional settings, but also made Persian music more accessible

to researchers and performers both inside and outside of Iran. Third—and perhaps most uniquely within the region—the archiving of PCM has been undertaken through a rigorous oral tradition focused on training a select group of highly talented musicians. This was exemplified by the establishment of the *Markaz-e Hefẓ-o Esha'eh-ye Musiqi-ye Irāni* ('Center for the Preservation and Dissemination of Iranian Music')[1] in the 1970s. At the Markaz, the emphasis was not only on documentation but on transmission: master musicians taught their students to memorize multiple versions of the *radif* and to reproduce and reinterpret the stylistic characteristics of earlier generations, effectively creating a living archive.

Within this broader historical framework, the history of music recording and transcription in Iran becomes a rich narrative shaped by technology, politics, society, and craftsmanship. Recordings reflect both domestic cultural developments and Iran's engagement with international trends. Prior to the accessibility of recording technology to the public, the lyrics of songs were sometimes published in newspapers. Aref Qazvini's political songs, in particular, were circulated this way and widely became popular even in Turkey and Afghanistan[2] and played a significant role in mobilizing people during the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911). While a large portion of the population was historically illiterate, they could perceive and internalize music—particularly songs—which made recorded media an influential cultural force.

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[1] Henceforth, *Markaz*.
[2] Haeri, Seyed Hadi. *Áref Qazvini, Shāer-e Melli-Ye Irān ('Aref Qazvini, the Nationalist Poet of Iran')* (Javidan, 1985), 20-21.

Within this broader historical framework, the history of music recording and transcription in Iran becomes a rich narrative shaped by technology, politics, society, and craftsmanship. Recordings reflect both domestic cultural developments and Iran's engagement with international trends. While a large portion of the population was historically illiterate, they could perceive and internalize music—particularly songs—which made recorded media an influential cultural force. Even in its early stages, music recording played a critical role in the dissemination of political messages. For example, the recordings of Aref Qazvini's patriotic and reformist songs in support of liberty and constitutional governance circulated widely and contributed significantly to the success of the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911). Thus, the multidimensional nature of music archiving in Iran has not only preserved artistic heritage but has also engaged with broader political, pedagogical, and technological currents over the past century.

Recording Practices in Qajar and Pahlavi Periods

The initial sounds in Iran were recorded by members of the royal court during the Qajar rulers' journeys to Europe in the nineteenth century and the advent of the phonograph and wax cylinders. According to Mobaseri, a music historian, twenty-five of these recorded cylinders are preserved at the Iran Electricity Museum, having been imported by Mohammad Hossein Amin-ol-Zarb, who also introduced the electric motor to Iran.[3] A significant quantity

[3] Behrooz Mobaseri, "Five Recording Periods of the Qajar Era and the Role of Artists from Markazi Province (1)," *Harmony Talk*, 2020, https://www.harmonytalk.com/25980 (accessed July 5, 2025).

of these cylinders is also maintained in private archives. Regrettably, the degradation of the original paper labels—containing handwritten audio content—frequently precludes us from identifying the performance or speaker. The subpar audio quality of the recordings exacerbates this ambiguity.

Gramophone Company (later HMV) and Odeon, two recording companies, recorded PCM and folk music by travelling to Tehran and Tabriz. The earliest recordings took place at the reign of Mozaffar-o-Din Shah Qajar in 1905 and were exclusively at the court in Tehran including the recording of Royal Military Ensemble. The final recording of the Qajar era occurred in 1914.[4] As the nation grappled with pervasive corruption in the courts and teetered on the edge of bankruptcy, European companies would not enter Iran until 1927, following the transition to the Pahlavi dynasty. Upon his coronation as Reza Shah in 1925, he and his son, Mohammad Reza Shah, endeavored to rapidly modernize Iran, prioritizing nationalism, industry, and secularization. Their initiatives sought to transform Iran from a primarily agrarian society into a modern state by establishing a centralized bureaucratic administration and a contemporary military to maintain order. Notable advancements were the promotion of the Persian language, the imposition of Western dress, and the augmentation of women's rights through increased educational opportunities and legislative reforms. The swift pace of modernization has prompted some historians to designate Reza Shah, the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, as a "pseudo-

[4] Behrooz Mobaseri, "Five Recording Periods of the Qajar Era and the Role of Artists from Markazi Province (1)," *Harmony Talk*, 2020, https://www.harmonytalk.com/25980 (accessed July 5, 2025).

modernist,"[5] and asserting that his "authoritarian modernization gradually changed Iran's traditional social as well as political setting."[6]

The social position of the gramophone in Iran swiftly transformed from a mere symbol of modernity and luxury to a contentious object capable of conveying messages and challenging the status quo. Following the recording and dissemination of *tasnif*[7] such as "Morq-e Sahar" ('The Bird of Dawn') by Morteza Neydavud and "Ey Dast-e Haq" ('O Divine Hand') which were politically oriented, the state became alarmed. Mohammad Dargahi, Director-General of the State Police Organization, conveyed to the ministers the *Bylaw on the Regulation of Sound Recording on Gramophone Records*, as approved by the esteemed Council of Ministers on May 6, 1928. The bylaw consisted of five articles and was duly signed:
Article 1 – All company representatives must, prior to any action, apply to the local police department to obtain special permission for their recordings and artists. They must also submit a written commitment to produce records in accordance with these regulations.
Article 2 – Under no circumstances shall records be produced without the knowledge and presence of a police representative, nor shall contracts be made with unauthorized artists.
Article 3 – In the contract concluded between company representatives and the artists, and submitted to the police department, the name of the recording device, the lyrics, songs,

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[5] Afshin Matin-Asgari, "The Pahlavi Era Iranian Modernity in Global Context," in *The Oxford Handbook of Iranian History*, ed. Touraj Daryaee (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 351.
[6] Homa Katouzian and Hossein Shahidi, eds., *Iran in the 21st Century: Politics, Economics and Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 49.
[7] In PCM, *tasnif* is a strophic, metric song. Traditionally, *tasnif* were composed in duple and triple meters, and the lyric has been employed in a syllabic form.

and compositions, as well as the identity of the individuals making the recording (including their full name, family name, and occupation), must be clearly stated.
Article 4 – After the contract has been signed, the police department must be informed in detail of the scheduled dates, times, and locations of the recording sessions.
Article 5 – In the event of a violation of these regulations, any records produced without proper authorization will be confiscated, and the violators will be referred to the Justice of the Peace Court for punishment.[8] This marked the first instance in Iran where sound recording became a matter of state oversight and regulatory concern.

A notable feature of this period was the institutionalization of art music and its accessibility to the public. Prior to that, for centuries, art music in Iran was practiced exclusively at the royal court or in the homes of aristocrats.[9] However, the state's new cultural policies—combined with advancements in sound recording technology—made art music increasingly accessible to the general public. Reza Shah, a military figure, showed no interest in entertainment and removed the court musicians upon his ascendance to the throne. Subsequently, the art musicians started private instruction, and during the subsequent period, European corporations arrived in Iran to record music without limitations from the court imposed during the Qajar period. This resulted in an expanded recording of music throughout the subsequent period of European companies. During the period of absence of recording, three authoritative musicians of PCM, namely Mirza

[8] Behrooz Mobaseri, "Five Recording Periods of the Qajar Era and the Role of Artists from Markazi Province (1)," *Harmony Talk*, 2020, https://www.harmonytalk.com/25980 (accessed July 5, 2025).
[9] During and Mirabdolbaghi 1991, 26.

Abdollah Farahani (1843-1918), his brother Hoseyn-Qoli Farahani (1853-1916) and their best student, Qolam-Hoseyn Darvish (1872-1926) passed away, an unfortunate coincidence.[10] To the present day, the most authoritative *radif*[11] of PCM are the versions of Farahani brothers. In 1927 a number of European companies including the German Polyphon Musikwerke and English His Master's Voice (HMV) came to Iran and recorded a variety of genres including the popular music performed in cafes, restaurants and hotels.

The number of cafes and restaurants in the capital city of Tehran increased as society became more modern. In order to entice customers, they introduced gramophones or live music concerts. During this recording period, we observe the names of renowned art musicians, including Ali-Naqi Vaziri, Qamar-ol-Moluk Vaziri, and Adib Khansari, as well as the names of popular and lesser-known vocalists, including Golriz Khanom, Moluk Parvin Khanom, and Mehr Afaq Khanom, about whom we have limited information.[12] The prevalence of metric songs (*tasnif*) and metric compositions over the *āvāz* section is a notable characteristic of these recordings. *Āvāz* is the traditional non-metric singing of Persian classical poetry and the sublime of Iranian art music. *Āvāz*'s melodic figures are borrowed from the *radif*. Typically, an

[10] A limited number of recordings were produced during the initial period, when they served as court musicians.

[11] *Radif* (lit. row, series) is the foundational repertoire of PCM—a structured collection of melodic figures known as *gusheh* ('corner') that are organized into twelve larger modal systems called *dastgāh*.

[12] An example of recording dated June 1933: Musa Marufi (composer), Mehr Afaq Khanom (vocalist), Musa Marufi (tar), Ebrahim Marufi (violin), Hoseyn Ostovar (piano), Mehdi Gheyasi (tombak).
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YpklKyQbAgM (accessed on July 6 2025).

instrumentalist is present to accompany the singer, and they are required to improvise in a call-and-response format. It is within the art of *āvāz* that the essential components of the *radif* are most fully realized and expressed. *Āvāz* is a more intricate form than the *tasnif*, necessitating that the musicians be familiar with the poem and choose an appropriate mode, melody, and modulation to effectively communicate its message (Simms and Koushkani 2012, 4-6). *Tasnif* was a more popular type of song aimed for entertainment and widely used in *motrebi* genre[13] and certain masters of *āvāz* have been noted to exhibit reluctance in performing *tasnif*.[14]

The recording companies, prioritizing financial gain, likely overlooked the record of *āvāz*. The fame of artists, whether in artistic music or the wider public sphere, compelled them to record their works. It was later during the second half of Pahlavi period that the recording and dissemination of *āvāz* came into serious consideration. The advent of recording and broadcast technologies fundamentally transformed the dissemination and reception of PCM, fostering its mass consumption and, in turn, reshaping both its aesthetic values and performance practices. As will be explained, the director of the Golha radio programs—a highly influential series of Persian radio broadcasts (1956–1979) dedicated to

[13] *Motrebi* refers to a historically popular entertainment that amalgamates music, dance, humour, and frequently improvisational performance, particularly linked to urban lower-class environments during the late Qajar and early Pahlavi periods in Iran (Breyli and Fatemi 2015).

[14] *Tasnif* shares similarities with other song forms in Iranian music, such as *tarāneh* and *sorud*. Generally, *tasnif* refers to composed vocal pieces within the framework of PCM, while *tarāneh* is more commonly associated with popular and accessible songs. In contrast, *sorud* carries an epic or ideological connotation, often linked to nationalistic, educational, or ceremonial contexts. However, the boundaries between these categories are not rigid; there is considerable overlap in both form and function across these genres.

traditional music and poetry—felt compelled to increase the inclusion of *tasnif* (composed songs) in order to make the broadcasts more appealing to a broader, non-specialist audience. Consequently, the [15] form itself grew increasingly complex, reflecting both the demands of mass audiences and the heightened attention of composers who responded to its evolving role in modern musical life. Furthermore, as Iranian radio programming began to incorporate non-Iranian musical styles, it evolved into a symbol of cultural hybridity—a phenomenon similarly observed in other national contexts[16] where mass media served as a platform for negotiating between local traditions and global influences. In contexts where modernization and identity politics intersect, music frequently serves as a "site of cultural contestation," as Martin Stokes (1992) has contended. In the same vessel, Timothy Taylor (1997) underscores the way in which musical hybridity reflects both cosmopolitan aspirations and concerns regarding cultural authenticity in the context of global media. In the context of Iranian radio, this merging not only redefined the boundaries of national music but also facilitated the development of new listening audiences that were attuned to both domestic and international sonic codes.

Golha Programs

Radio Iran was established in 1940, and at first, all programs were broadcast live. Until the end of World War II, sound recording equipment was very limited and mainly used in private studios or by foreign institutions. With the introduction of reel-to-reel magnetic tape recorders in the 1950s, Radio Iran was able to record

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[16] See (Turner 1990, 3) in Boyer, Dominic. 2006. "Turner's Anthropology of Media and Its Legacies." *Critique of Anthropology* 26:47–60.

and archive its programs. The Golha ('Flowers') program, broadcast on Radio Iran from 1956 to 1979, was the most influential example of PCM programming initiated by the national broadcaster. Conceived and founded by Davud Pirnia (1901–1971), with the support of Nosratollah Moiniyan (b. 1925), then director of Radio Iran, Golha represented a major cultural innovation. The program skillfully integrated poetry recitation, literary commentary, and live musical performance, elevating PCM to a new level of public engagement and prestige. Prior to Golha, the most refined expressions of classical Persian poetry and music were typically confined to elite settings—royal courts, aristocratic households, or private *majles*. Golha effectively democratized these art forms, bringing them into the homes of ordinary listeners via radio and creating a national platform for Persian literary and musical heritage.

Although Golha was a state-sponsored project and emerged within the framework of a secularizing nation-state, it nonetheless resonated with the ethos of the Sufi *majles*, the quintessential setting for the performance of mystical poetry and music throughout the Islamic world.[17] In this sense, Golha may be understood as a modern reinvention of the *majles* tradition, deeply rooted in the spiritual and aesthetic sensibilities of Persianate culture. A significant portion of the poetry featured in the *āvāz* (improvised vocal music) segments drew from the works of Sufi poets such as Rumi and Attar, as well as poets imbued with mystical symbolism like Hafez. By incorporating these texts, Golha not only preserved classical aesthetics but also recontextualized the spiritual

[17] For the practice of *majles* in other Muslim societies see Regula Burckhardt Qureshi, "Islamic Music in an Indian Environment: The Shi'a Majlis," *Ethnomusicology* 25, no. 1 (1981): 41–71.

dimensions of Persian poetry within a modern broadcast medium, appealing to diverse audiences across Iran.

Most of the leading musicians, vocalists, poets, and literary critics of the time contributed to the Golha programs, enhancing their artistic excellence and cultural prestige. Over the course of more than two decades, Golha evolved into a multi-faceted series comprising several sub-programs, each with its own thematic and stylistic orientation. These sub-series catered to a range of audiences, from intellectual elites to the general public, thereby broadening the appeal of PCM and literature. Among the most renowned series was *Golhā-ye Jāvidān* ('Immortal Flowers'), which featured extended performances and literary discussions intended primarily for an educated and culturally sophisticated audience. In contrast, *Golhā-ye Rangārang* ('Multi-Colored Flowers') offered a more diverse and accessible repertoire, incorporating shorter musical segments and a mix of vocal and instrumental works, thereby appealing to a wider, popular audience. Another notable series, *Golhā-ye Sahrāyi* ('Wilderness Flowers'), was devoted to the rich and varied traditions of Iranian regional and folk music, showcasing melodies and dialects from across the country's ethnolinguistic spectrum.

Additional programs such as *Golhā-ye Tāzeh* ('Fresh Flowers'), *Barg-e Sabz* ('Green Leaf'), and *Yek Shākheh Gol* ('One Single Flower') were structured around specific themes or moods, with each episode exploring a particular poetic, musical, or seasonal motif. This thematic coherence, paired with high production standards, made each program a carefully curated aesthetic experience. Broadcast continuously from 1956 to 1979, the Golha programs were instrumental in shaping public taste and in cultivating an appreciation for PCM and classical poetry during the Pahlavi

period. With approximately 850 hours of archived recordings, Golha not only elevated the public's auditory and literary sensitivity but also laid the foundation for the modern canon of PCM. Today, it remains the most extensive and refined recorded archive of Persian music, providing an invaluable resource for researchers, musicians, and cultural historians alike.

Indicative of its far-reaching cultural impact, Golha became a benchmark for countless amateur musicians across Iran, many of whom imitated the music they heard on its broadcasts. The program's refined aesthetics and high production quality set new standards for musical performance, diction, and interpretation, making it a central reference point in the landscape of PCM during the Pahlavi era. In the post-revolutionary period, however, Golha's legacy became more contested, particularly among the musicians affiliated with Markaz. Some musicians within this circle viewed Golha as overly popularized or even commercialized, distancing it from the austere, pedagogy-oriented aesthetics of *radif* performance. Ironically, several of these critics—such as Mohammad-Reza Lotfi and Mohammad-Reza Shajarian—had themselves performed in Golha programs earlier in their careers.

Hushang Ebtehaj (1928-2022) known by his pen name Sayeh ('Shadow'), served as the final director of the Golha programs during the last years of their broadcast, overseeing their production until their discontinuation following the 1979 Revolution. A major figure in modern Persian poetry, Ebtehaj brought a distinctive literary vision to Golha, blending his deep reverence for classical Persian poetry with a modernist sensibility. Under his leadership, the program maintained its high artistic standards while also adopting a more streamlined and thematically unified format, often selecting poetry with philosophical or contemplative tones that

resonated with the social and political uncertainties of the late Pahlavi era. Ebtehaj's direction is often credited with preserving the dignity and artistic integrity of Golha during a period of increasing state censorship and cultural tension. His involvement also lent the program greater literary credibility, as he was both an accomplished poet and a respected intellectual voice. In retrospect, his tenure marks not only the culmination of Golha's aesthetic evolution but also its symbolic closure, as the program—like many facets of pre-revolutionary Iranian cultural life—came to an abrupt end with the establishment of the Islamic Republic.

While Hushang Ebtehaj brought a refined literary sensibility to Golha's final years, some critics (During 1991, 150-160; Nooshin 2005, 375-380; Lewisohn 2008, 90-95) argue his focus on philosophical poetry narrowed the program's thematic range and made it more formal and solemn. This shift reportedly reduced Golha's popular appeal and distanced it from the more vibrant and diverse styles of earlier periods. Additionally, some have suggested that his intellectualized approach limited the spontaneity and expressiveness characteristic of classical Persian music. Despite these critiques, Ebtehaj's leadership is still recognized for preserving Golha's artistic integrity during a politically challenging time.

Notably, musicians such as Majid Kiani (1989) coined the term *shirin-navāẕi* ('sweet performing') to describe the Golha style, suggesting a polished but less "authentic" form of classical performance. This label served to distinguish Golha from what was perceived as *asil* ('authentic') *radif*-based music, which prioritized fidelity to the oral tradition, simplicity, and spiritual depth over aesthetic embellishment. However, in the past two decades, this binary opposition between *shirin-navāẕi* and *asil* has

lost much of its force. As I observed during my fieldwork in 2006 and especially in 2022, a more inclusive and pluralistic view has emerged within the Iranian music community. The younger generation of musicians shows a strong interest in studying not only the *radif* but also the stylistic nuances, repertoire, and vocal interpretations preserved in Golha. For many, Golha now represents a valuable archive of performance practice, not a deviation from tradition but rather an extension of it. As Lewisohn (2008, 79) notes, "These programs … constitute an unrivalled encyclopaedia of classical Persian music and poetry."

The historical and cultural importance of Golha has also been recognized internationally. Jane Lewisohn has played a key role in preserving and promoting this legacy through the Golha Project, a comprehensive digital archive that makes the entirety of the Golha programs freely accessible online. In addition to curating the collection, Lewisohn has published a detailed historical study of the program (2008), offering insights into its production, ideological context, and lasting influence on Persian music. In 2012, an anonymous donor gifted his personal archive of Golha recordings to York University in Toronto, where it has been preserved and made freely accessible online.[18]

[18] The author was directly involved in the communication, authorization, and eventual transfer of this digital archive to York University. According to the donor, the archive was the result of many years of dedicated effort, during which he sought out and acquired copies of Golha recordings wherever they could be found—from private collections, antiquarian markets, and informal networks. He then commissioned specialists to digitize and restore the recordings, ensuring their long-term preservation and accessibility. In 2012, this invaluable collection was formally donated to York University in Toronto, where it was archived and made freely available to the public online. https://digital.library.yorku.ca/sound-and-moving-image-library-smil/golha-programmes (accessed on July 20, 2025).

In addition to its radio programming, National Iranian Radio and Television (NIRT) undertook a significant initiative in the 1950s and 1960s to record the *radif* of several master musicians, aiming to preserve the core repertoire of PCM. However, these recordings remained largely unavailable to the public until several decades after the 1979 Revolution, when they began to be released through private publishers including Mahoor Institution which later will be discussed. A particularly notable example is the *radif* recording by Ali-Akbar Shahnazi (1897–1985), the son of Hoseyn-Qoli Farahani and one of the most influential tar players of the twentieth century. Shahnazi performed two distinct versions of the *radif* for these sessions—often referred to as the "classical" and "advanced" cycles. For each version, he was paid 30,000 tomans, a substantial sum at the time, reflecting both the cultural importance of the project and the high regard in which he was held.

Beginning in the mid-1960s, Reza Ghotbi (1938-2024) served as the Director of the NIRT, a position he held until the 1979 Revolution. A close relative of the Pahlavi family and a Western-educated technocrat, Ghotbi emerged as one of the most influential cultural administrators of the late Pahlavi era. Under his leadership, NIRT underwent significant expansion, becoming a key institution for the production, dissemination, and archiving of PCM. Ghotbi was not merely an administrator but also a dedicated patron of the arts who allocated substantial resources to cultural programming. One of his most consequential initiatives was inviting Dariush Safvat to establish the Markaz in the early 1970s. The Center—housed under the NIRT umbrella—became a critical institution for the training of select young musicians, the documentation of oral musical traditions, and the cultivation of a national aesthetic aligned with notions of *esālat* ('authenticity') (During 1991, 123-125; Nooshin 2005, 376-377). Qotbi remained

the sole institutional supporter of the Markaz until the fall of the monarchy, and his patronage enabled the emergence of a new generation of musicians—including Mohammad Reza Lotfi, Hossein Alizadeh, Parviz Meshkatian, and Majid Kiani—who would later shape the post-revolutionary discourse on PCM. For his lasting contributions to the preservation and institutionalization of PCM, Ghotbi is widely regarded as one of the most significant figures in twentieth-century Iranian musical history (Rezania 2025, 141–143).

Markaz

The establishment of the Markaz was, in part, influenced by the expanding international discourse regarding the preservation of traditional music, particularly within the emerging discipline of ethnomusicology in Europe.[19] Simultaneously, it was shaped by a rising sense of nationalism in Iran and a critical response among certain musicians to the modernization and industrialization of music production.[20] These musicians perceived the new trends as catering increasingly to mass consumption, thereby compromising the authenticity and spiritual depth of PCM. For them, preserving the *radif* and traditional modes of transmission was not only an

[19] International conferences such as the International Music Congress held in Tehran from 6–12 April 1961, which focused on the theme "The Preservation of Traditional Forms of the Learned Music of the Orient and the Occident," reflected and reinforced the perspectives of leading ethnomusicologists of the time. The congress served as a platform for dialogue among scholars and musicians from both Eastern and Western traditions, emphasizing the urgency of documenting and safeguarding classical and learned musical repertoires amid growing concerns about modernization, cultural homogenization, and the decline of oral transmission practices.

[20] As an example, Farhat (1965, 274), one of the first Iranian ethnomusicologists of the time remarked on his concern that elements of popular music could "seep into" the classical music and "corrupt the classical tradition."

artistic imperative but also a cultural and national one (Rezania 2025, 95ff).

In 1968, Markaz was founded by Dariush Safvat with the full sponsorship of NIRT under the director Reza Ghotbi. As its title ('The Center for the Preservation and Dissemination of Iranian Music') suggests, the Markaz was established with two primary goals: the 'preservation' and 'dissemination' of Iranian music—specifically, PCM, rather than other regional or popular genres. The preservation efforts operated on two interrelated fronts. First, the *Markaz* identified and trained a select group of highly talented young musicians through systematic instruction. A cohort of elder masters taught the classical repertoire using traditional oral transmission methods, maintaining the *ostād–shāgerd* (master–disciple) model within a structured institutional setting. In order for the students to concentrate solely on their studies, they received a substantial monthly payment.[21] Second, the Markaz invested in the documentation of these repertoires by recording and archiving performances of the masters.

The center housed state-of-the-art recording facilities for its time, and students were granted access to these studios to record their own interpretations of the classical repertoire. This combined approach preserved performance traditions while also creating a valuable archival resource for future musicians and scholars. It has to be noted that music transcription has been a recent development in Iran, and the musicians who were invited, only knew the oral transmission. Conclusively, along with teaching music, Markaz was quite active in recording and archiving the

[21] Alizadeh noted that the 2500 toman (about $250 US in the 1970s) they received monthly was a sufficient payment for a family of four (Mosayyebzadeh 2014, 73).

music of old masters. Mehdi Kamalian was a crucial figure in the Markaz recordings, and some of these recordings were conducted at his residence.[22] In addition to him, some sound technicians from the National Iranian Radio and Television (NIRT) also collaborated in the recording process, as the Center for Preservation and Dissemination was fully supported by this organization and utilized the advanced equipment available at that time.

From another perspective, it can be argued that the Markaz functioned as a critical archival institution—not through written documents or formal publications, but through a dual approach that combined technological documentation with embodied oral pedagogy. It was globally unique in its method: while it preserved the past by recording the repertoires of master musicians using state-of-the-art technology of the time, it also created a dynamic and contemporized space for intergenerational transmission. The preservation of PCM was not seen solely as a matter of archiving sounds, but as a living, human practice rooted in interpersonal exchange. At the heart of this pedagogical model was the expectation that students internalize the *radif*, not by learning a single version, but by studying and memorizing multiple versions transmitted by different masters. This comparative approach allowed students to grasp the nuanced characteristics of individual *gusheh* (melodic units), not as fixed compositions but as expressive, malleable entities. Such knowledge could only be absorbed through imitation, attentive listening, analysis, and improvisation.

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[22] Mohsen Shahrnazdar, "Markaz-e Hefz-o Eshā'eh; Pāyāni bar Sonnat-e Musiqi-ye Irān ('The Center for Preservation and Dissemination: An End to the Tradition of Iranian Music')," *Anthropology and Culture*, February 8, 2013, https://anthropologyandculture.com (accessed July 22, 2025).

This mode of transmission, deeply rooted in embodied learning, cultivated a generation of highly skilled musicians who would later become the principal architects of post-revolutionary PCM. Many of these musicians went on to teach, perform, and record widely, disseminating the interpretive richness and aesthetic depth they had absorbed at the Markaz.[23] According to the vision of its founder, Dariush Safvat, the Markaz was not simply an educational institution; it was a model—a blueprint—for the preservation, practice, and dissemination of PCM. Its influence extended far beyond its initial mandate, shaping the aesthetic discourse, performance practice, and institutional structures of Iranian music for decades to come.

Private Sectors (*andaruni*)

In Iran, the *majles* or *mahfel* (lit. 'assembly')—intimate gatherings where artists, intellectuals, and their aficionados convene to perform, discuss, and reflect on music and poetry—has long served as a vital forum for the preservation, transmission, and refinement of PCM. These private assemblies, typically held in homes or informal settings, functioned as both pedagogical and performative spaces, where oral transmission, aesthetic critique, and spiritual engagement intersected. The Golha radio program, initiated by Davud Pirnia, can be seen as a modern, mediated extension of the *majles* tradition. While broadcast publicly over national radio, Golha preserved many of the intimate and refined qualities of traditional *majles*, including poetry recitation, musical

[23] Several foreign musicians and scholars, including Jean During, Bruno Nettl, Lloyd Miller, and Gen'ichi Tsuge, studied at the *Markaz* under Nur-Ali Borumand. *Markaz*'s pedagogical and aesthetic perspective significantly shaped their understanding of PCM and, in turn, influenced how the tradition was represented in Western scholarship. This engagement played a key role in framing the academic discourse on PCM beyond Iran.

improvisation, and aesthetic commentary. Pirnia, who came from a family associated with Sufi orders and known for hosting *majles* in their household, envisioned Golha as a platform to elevate the cultural literacy of the broader public through curated performances of PCM and literature. In doing so, he reimagined the *majles* as a national institution—accessible yet intellectually and artistically rigorous.

A similar continuity with the *majles* ethos can be seen in the founding of the Markaz. Markaz trained many of the leading figures who would go on to shape PCM in the post-revolutionary period. The pedagogical approach at the Markaz was grounded not in conservatoire models, but in the *majles*-like dynamics of *ostād–shāgerd* ('master–disciple') transmission. Indeed, both of the Markaz's founding directors, Dariush Safvat and Nur-Ali Boroumand, had themselves received their musical education not in formal academies, but in private gatherings and traditional settings. At the Markaz, they sought to replicate the structure and ethos of these gatherings by emphasizing oral instruction, improvisational competence, and deep immersion in the *radif* repertoire. In this sense, the Markaz was a consciously modernized *majles*, institutionalized within a state framework but rooted in a centuries-old practice of intimate musical pedagogy and transmission.

Although the institutionalization of PCM gained significant momentum during the Pahlavi period—through initiatives such as the establishment of the Tehran Conservatory, the Markaz, and the Golha radio programs—informal *majles* (private gatherings) continued to play a critical role in the performance, transmission, and cultivation of art music. These gatherings remained essential sites for the continuity of oral tradition and the refinement of

musical style and repertoire. Even as public venues and state institutions expanded, the *majles* offered a more intimate and dynamic space for musical experimentation, nuanced improvisation, and dialogical engagement between artists and informed listeners. Perhaps the most renowned *majles* gatherings during the Pahlavi period were those hosted at the house of Mohammad Irani Mojarrad (1872–1971), a wealthy patron, amateur musician, and devoted supporter of PCM. Mojarrad regularly invited leading musicians—as well as poets, intellectuals, and artists—to his residence, creating an environment in which music was not only performed but also critically discussed and transmitted. Several of the most influential musicians of the twentieth century, including figures such as Ahmad Ebadi, Nur-Ali Boroumand, Mahmoud Karimi, and Ali Tajvidi have acknowledged that a significant portion of their musical education took place at his house, sometimes even under his direct guidance. These gatherings, while informal, functioned as vital alternative spaces for the preservation and pedagogical transmission of PCM outside state institutions or conservatories.

The revolution changed public practice but the centuries-old mechanism of private endeavor which I call *andaruni*[24] allowed

[24] I use *andaruni* (lit. 'inside' refers to the inside of the house where people could be relaxed and free from the limitations of authorities and societal boundaries) as a concept. Physically, it is mostly an urban phenomenon based on architectural designs that separate the inside from the outside; a tent would hardly produce such a binary. However, conceptually, it is deeply inscribed in Iranian culture and has been historically an immensely proactive and effective space for Iranians to practice and disseminate what was not permissible by authorities or social norms. *Zurkhaneh* in its inception, and especially *majles* are branches of *andaruni* and have functioned as an 'invisible college' that allowed Iranians to continue their martial arts, fine arts, and free dialogues hidden from criticization of authorities and in some instances from general public for the same reason.

musicians to effectively continue their activities. The authorities regulated public spaces and 'describing activities' to impose their own way as per Rorty (1989, 5), however truth also resided in private spheres, predominantly governed by the artists, particularly the canonical figures. Private performances—often held in homes—became crucial spaces for the preservation and reinvention of the classical tradition. Many such sessions were recorded, either professionally or informally, and some were later released as commercial albums or circulated through semi-official networks. A number of these albums were either partially[25] or entirely[26] recorded during a *majles*, though in most cases, the paratextual material (e.g., album covers and liner notes) omitted the accompanying spoken elements—such as anecdotes, humorous interludes, or pedagogical commentary—that were integral to the *majles* format.[27]

One of the few clues that these recordings were produced in the context of a *majles* is the presence of the term *khosusi* (lit. "private") in the title or subtitle. While this term has often been misunderstood in recent decades to mean a "private recording" in the modern sense of exclusivity or home production, its historical usage more accurately referred to a *majles*-based performance—that is, a gathering intended for a select audience of knowledgeable listeners and practitioners. Thus, albums bearing the term *khosusi* can often be interpreted as artifacts of this older, socially embedded performance tradition, reflecting the continuation of

[25] For example, the *āvāz* sections of *Bidād Homāyun* (1985) and *Navā Morakkabkhāni* (1986) feature Mohammad Reza Shajarian as vocalist.
[26] Such as *Homāyoun-Masnavie* (1984) by Mohammad Reza Shajarian, vocalist and Mansour Saremi, santur player.
[27] The website "Khosousi" has recently been established to disseminate unpublished private recordings: https://khosousi.bandcamp.com (accessed on July 22, 2025).

majles culture into the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The expansion of the internet in the early 2000s and the subsequent rise of social media platforms significantly accelerated the dissemination of informal *majles* recordings in Iran. Some of these *majles* recordings are uniquely valuable not only for their musical content but also for the contextual, non-musical information they preserve. These recordings often capture spontaneous collaborations, informal conversations, performance practices, and personal interactions that are absent from formal studio albums.[28]

Previously limited to analog cassettes and private collections, these recordings began to circulate widely through online forums, blogs, file-sharing websites, and later, social media networks such as Telegram, Instagram, and YouTube. This digital diffusion has enabled broader access to otherwise exclusive performances, preserving not only the musical content but also the social atmosphere and improvisatory spirit of the *majles*. In doing so, it has both democratized access to PCM and contributed to new forms of musical community and pedagogy among younger generations of listeners and performers.

Another influential *majles* was held at the home of Mohammad Mehdi Kamalian (1918–1997), a skilled musician and renowned

[28] One notable example is a rare duet between ney virtuoso Hasan Kasaie and setar player Parviz Meshkatian. This recording is of particular significance as no known official publication or album features the two artists performing together. As such, it documents a moment of artistic convergence otherwise lost to the official historical record, offering insights into the networks and aesthetics of contemporary Persian classical musicianship that formal archives often overlook. *Ejrā-ye Khosusi Hasan Kasaie (ney), Parviz Meshkatian (santur)*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yGjCAZpcdFk (accessed on July 20, 2025).

setar maker. Kamalian was not only known for hosting gatherings that brought together some of the most accomplished musicians of his time, but also for his meticulous documentation of these events. He personally recorded many of the performances that took place in his home, as well as broadcasts from Radio Iran. It is widely believed among musicians and collectors that Kamalian amassed one of the most extensive private archives of *majles* and radio program recordings. His recordings, much of which remain largely unpublished, constitute a vital but underexplored reservoir of PCM history.[29] An outstanding and much-needed project would be the systematic collection, cataloguing, and analysis of these informal *majles* recordings. Such an initiative could involve gathering existing private and publicly circulated recordings, documenting contextual information such as date, location, participating artists, repertoire, and the social setting of the performance. This would not only preserve valuable musical heritage but also provide scholars with rich ethnographic data on performance practice, interpersonal dynamics among musicians, and the transmission of PCM outside institutional frameworks. Given the growing accessibility of digital tools and platforms, this archival effort could be developed as a searchable, annotated database that serves both academic research and broader public engagement.

Post-revolutionary Period

The post-revolutionary condition of music and musicians in Iran has remained a deeply contested terrain, marked by contradictions,

[29] Adib Vohdani. 2003. "Tabib Setar ('Physician of Setar')." *Hamshahri*, September 2, 2003. https://images.hamshahrionline.ir/hamnews/1382/820611/news/_musical.htm (accessed on July 22, 2025).

hermeneutic paradoxes, ideological tensions, and unresolved questions that persist more than four decades after the 1979 Revolution. As Ayatollah Khomeini famously asserted, "Government can only be legitimate when it accepts the rule of God, and the rule of God means the implementation of the shari'ah" (Mahdavi 2013, 180). Within this framework, the Islamic Republic undertook a comprehensive project to align both public and private cultural practices with its particular interpretation of Shia Islamic law and ethics. One significant outcome of this alignment has been the revival—and intensification—of the long-standing debate over the permissibility and role of music in Islamic societies. The discussion of 'music and Islam,' which had always encompassed diverse and often contradictory views among jurists and theologians, took on renewed urgency. Under the Islamic Republic, music has been variably categorized into *halāl* (permissible) and *harām* (forbidden), with these distinctions often based not only on lyrical content or musical form but also on the presumed social function and setting of musical performance. This moralizing framework has complicated the lives and careers of musicians, while also producing new discourses of cultural legitimacy and religious authority within the musical field.

The sweeping cultural policy reforms and stringent restrictions imposed on music practice and performance in the early years of the Islamic Republic led to two significant developments. First, much of the public and institutional life of music was forced into the private sphere. Musicians increasingly turned to domestic spaces—homes, informal gatherings, and private lessons—as the primary venues for performance and instruction. Second, these constraints catalyzed a broader reevaluation of aesthetic values, authenticity, and creativity within the discourse of PCM. This shift encouraged deeper reflection among musicians and scholars

regarding what constitutes the 'authentic' core of PCM[30] and how it could adapt, survive, and remain expressive under political and ideological pressures.

The anti-Western ideology of the Islamic Republic (Movahed 2003, 93) also opened new avenues for critically reassessing the trajectory of musical modernization in Iran (Darvishi 1995). While state censorship imposed severe limitations on certain forms of expression—particularly those associated with popular and Westernized styles—it simultaneously encouraged a renewed focus on cultural authenticity and indigenous traditions. This ideological climate led to a revivalist turn not only within PCM, but more strikingly in the field of regional and folk music of Iran. State-sponsored institutions and independent researchers began to document and valorize local musical traditions as expressions of national identity and cultural resistance to perceived Western hegemony. This emphasis on 'roots' often aligned with broader post-revolutionary discourses that privileged rural and traditional lifestyles over urban cosmopolitanism.

Consequently, this heightened emphasis on authenticity led to increased scholarly and artistic attention toward Iran's regional and folk musical traditions. This shift manifested in several ways: the

[30] This approach initially manifested as a strong—at times obsessive—emphasis on 'authenticity', particularly in regard to preserving what was perceived as the unadulterated core of Iranian musical heritage. The pursuit of authenticity became a dominant discourse in both institutional and informal musical practices in the early post-revolutionary years. However, this essentialist framing of tradition soon came under scrutiny. A wave of critical scholarship and artistic reflection emerged, challenging the very notion of authenticity as static, unmediated, or culturally neutral. These critiques emphasized the historically contingent and constructed nature of 'authentic' music, questioning who defines authenticity, in what context, and to what end. See Kiani (1989) for the first and Fayaz (1998) for the latter perspectives.

incorporation of folk songs into formal pedagogy, the inclusion of traditional folk instruments such as the daf and qeychak in classical ensembles, and the systematic documentation and recording of regional repertoires by local and national institutions. Moreover, folk music gradually found a place in high-profile cultural events, most notably the *Fajr International Music Festival*, which, from the late 1980s onward, began to feature performances by regional musicians alongside classical and contemporary acts. This represented a significant revaluation of folk traditions within the national musical identity, one that both challenged and enriched the boundaries of PCM.

During the Pahlavi period, the only prominent radio program dedicated to Iranian folk music was *Gohā-ye Sahrāyi* ('Wilderness Flowers'). In addition to this limited public exposure, the NIRT took a more systematic approach to documenting regional musical traditions by sponsoring a research initiative titled *Gerdāvari va Shenākht-e Musiqi-ye Mahalli* ('Collection and Knowledge of Regional Music'). Under the direction of composer and ethnomusicologist Fozieh Majd (b. 1938), and with technical assistance from Mehdi Kamalian, the project conducted thirteen field trips across various provinces of Iran. The outcome was an archive of over five hundred audio tapes documenting diverse local musical practices (Youssefzadeh 2000, 37). Portions of this collection were later digitized and released on compact disc, some even through international labels, helping to bring attention to the richness of Iran's folk traditions beyond national borders. In a 2022 interview[31], the musician and broadcaster Behrooz Mobaseri recounted that Hoseyn Nasehi (1925–1977), an important modernist composer, had also undertaken a similar recording

[31] During the author's fieldwork.

expedition in the 1960s. However, according to Mobaseri, the collection of tapes from Nasehi's fieldwork was never located after his death.

An outstanding contributor to the preservation and dissemination of Iranian classical and folk music over the past century has been the Mahoor Institute of Culture and Arts.[32] Founded in 1998 by Mohammad Mousavi, Mahoor quickly emerged as one of the most influential private institutions dedicated to Iranian music scholarship and publication in the post-revolutionary period. The Institute's initial undertaking was the launch of the *Faslnāme-ye Musiqi-ye Māhur* ('*Mahoor Music Quarterly*'), which soon gained a reputation as one of the most authoritative and scholarly periodicals focused on music in Iran. This quarterly featured peer-reviewed articles on PCM, ethnomusicology, history, theory, and instrumentology, and it helped bridge the gap between traditional performance practice and academic inquiry. It also served as a rare platform for musicological discourse in Persian at a time when such conversations were limited in Iranian public life.[33]

Under the visionary leadership of Mohammad Mousavi—who, despite not being a professional musician or formally trained scholar, has demonstrated remarkable cultural insight and dedication—the Mahoor Institute of Culture and Arts has become one of the most influential institutions in the preservation, documentation, and dissemination of Iranian music. Simultaneously with the launch of *Mahoor Music Quarterly*, the Institute expanded its activities to include the publication of high-quality audio recordings, educational materials, and scholarly

[32] https://mahoor.com/en.
[33] For a cultural contextualization of this issue, see Rezania (2024).

works. Its extensive discography features renowned figures of PCM such as Faramarz Payvar, Hossein Alizadeh, Dariush Talai, and Mohammad Reza Darvishi, including both re-releases of historical performances and previously unpublished recordings. Mahoor has also issued spoken word albums featuring leading cultural and literary figures, such as the poetry recitations of Ahmad Shamloo and the lectures of literary scholar Mohammad Jafar Mahjoub.

Equally important has been Mahoor's contribution to documenting Iran's regional and folk musical traditions. The Institute has curated numerous field recordings representing diverse ethnic, linguistic, and geographic communities, often accompanied by detailed booklets offering historical, linguistic, and ethnomusicological commentary. In addition to recordings, Mahoor has published critical editions of Persian musical treatises, historical documents, and translations of foundational texts in musicology and ethnomusicology. Mousavi's ability to bridge the worlds of academic scholarship and artistic practice has allowed Mahoor to serve as a platform for dialogue across generations, disciplines, and cultural boundaries, establishing it as a cornerstone of Iranian musical and intellectual life in the post-revolutionary period.

Mahoor Institute has become the longest-enduring music publication and production entity in modern Iran. Remarkably, despite operating as a completely private institution without any state sponsorship, it has outlasted many state-funded initiatives of the Pahlavi period.[34] This endurance underscores not only its

[34] *Majalleh-ye Musiqi* ('The Music Magazine') sponsored by the state was published in two periods: first from 1944 to 1946 under the direction of Ali-

institutional resilience but also the sustained demand for its scholarly and artistic output. Through its wide-ranging activities—including the publication of journals, audio recordings, educational materials, and critical editions—Mahoor has positioned itself as a vital node in the intellectual and artistic life of post-revolutionary Iran. It has played a central role not only in preserving traditional repertoires of Persian classical and regional music but also in shaping contemporary Iranian musical identity. Its legacy stands as a testament to the power of independent cultural initiatives in contexts marked by shifting political ideologies and state policies.

In the post-revolutionary period, a number of state-sponsored initiatives have emerged to support the publication and archiving of Iranian music, particularly under the leadership of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. One of the most prominent among these is the *Howzeh-ye Honari-ye Tabliqāt-e Eslāmi* ('Arts Department of the Islamic Development Organization'), which has played a central role in the dissemination and promotion of PCM. Through the publication of books, recordings, and pedagogical materials, the institution has contributed to the preservation and recontextualization of traditional Iranian music within the ideological and cultural frameworks of the Islamic Republic. The *Howzeh-ye Honari* is widely understood to operate under the direct authority of Ayatollah Khamenei, reflecting the strategic role that music and cultural production have played in shaping the post-revolutionary national identity (Youssefzadeh 2000, 55). Anecdotal reports and oral narratives within musical circles suggest that before becoming Supreme Leader, Khamenei was an admirer of PCM, a personal affinity that may have subtly influenced the state's selective

Naqi Vaziri, and later from 1960 to 1979 under the editorial leadership of Rubik Gregorian and Mohammad Taqi Masoudieh.

patronage of this genre. Despite the regime's ambivalence and at times antagonism toward various forms of music, the *Howzeh-ye Honari* has sustained a broad range of musicological and archival projects, including the reissue of historical recordings and the production of new scholarly and pedagogical materials. These efforts have provided invaluable resources for musicians, researchers, and educators, and have contributed to the institutional continuity of art music in the complex terrain of post-revolutionary cultural policy.

Musicians in Isfahan, commonly referred to as belonging to the *Maktab-e Esfahan* ('Isfahan school'), practice versions of the *radif* that differ from those taught and performed in Tehran. The Isfahan version is typically characterized by a greater number of *gusheh* (melodic units) and a stronger emphasis on vocal traditions. Hasan Kasaie is widely regarded as one of the most authoritative figures of the Isfahan school. He recorded three versions of the *radif*: the first, with setar and voice (performed by himself), was recorded during the Pahlavi period at Radio Isfahan in the 1970s; the second (Kasaie 2009), featuring setar and voice, was recorded during his later years. In 2010, the Municipality of Tehran published a four-CD album of the *radif* of Iranian music as performed on the ney by Hasan Kasaie, accompanied by a booklet, to commemorate his eightieth birthday. Other lesser-known musicians, such as Abbas Kazemi and Seyyed Reza Tabatabaie, have also contributed to the preservation of the *radif* by publishing full or partial versions based on the Isfahan school tradition.

Since the 1979 revolution, the recording of the *radif* has grown exponentially and continues to represent a vital endeavor for successive generations of musicians. This ongoing process reflects not only a desire to preserve the core repertoire of PCM, but also

an evolving engagement with issues of pedagogy, authenticity, and innovation. For many younger musicians, recording the *radif* serves both as a rite of passage and as a means of contributing to a living tradition—one that must be continually reinterpreted, analyzed, and transmitted in both oral and written forms. The proliferation of recordings across various instruments and interpretive styles has enriched the sonic archive of PCM and allowed for greater accessibility and comparative study. As a result, the *radif* has become a shared cultural framework that anchors creative expression while remaining open to redefinition in response to changing artistic and social contexts.

Music Transcription

For centuries, PCM was transmitted orally through *ostād–shāgerd* ('master-apprentice') relationships. Musical knowledge—particularly the *radif*, was preserved by memory, repetition, and imitation, devoid of any formal written notation. It was during the late Qajar and early Pahlavi period that Western notation was introduced in transcribing PCM. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the alphabetic notation system predates the widespread use of Western staff notation in Iran by several centuries, which demonstrates the intellectual sophistication of Persian music theory during the medieval period. Frequent references to music theory and modes emerged in theoretical treatises (e.g., *Kitāb al-Adwār* by Safi al-Din Urmawi in the 13th century), however they concentrated on abstract theory rather than the practical reproduction of compositions. Recent scholarship suggests that Abdol-Qader Maraqi (d. 1435)[35] (14th–15th century)

[35] A renowned music theorist and court musician during the Ilkhanid and Timurid periods, is most renowned for his treatises, including *Maqāsed al-Alhān* ('The Purpose of Melodies') and *Jāme' al-Alhān* ('Compendium of Melodies').

developed a systematic method of music transcription using Perso-Arabic letters to denote pitches and durations—a rare and sophisticated approach for his time.[36]

Mohammad Reza Darvishi, a distinguished Iranian musician and musicologist, initiated a significant revival of Maraqi's 15th-century repertoire over the course of six years through a public study and performance series. Darvishi meticulously edited and interpreted Maraqi's compositions during this period, reconstructing them from archival manuscripts that were interred in Iranian and Turkish collections. This scholarly endeavor resulted in the establishment of a dedicated ensemble, named after Maraqi, that performed these rediscovered melodies, introducing music that had been silent for centuries to contemporary audiences. Not only did the undertaking shed light on Maraqi's innovative use of alphabetic notation, but it also emphasized the medieval profundity of Persian theoretical and compositional practice.[37]

The Qajar court came into increasing contact with European music through diplomacy, military bands, and education. Alfred Jean Baptiste Lemaire (1842-1907), a French military musician invited by Naser-o-Din Shah Qajar, played a significant role in the introduction of European staff notation to Iran in the late nineteenth century (Nettl 1992, 245–247). Lemaire was assigned

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He documented the modal structures (*maqāmāt*) and rhythmic cycles (*iqā'āt*) of his era in these works.

[36] For more details see Wright, O. (1994). "Abd al-Qādir al-Marāghī and ʿAlī b. Muḥammad Binā'ī: Two Fifteenth-Century Examples of Notation. Part 1: Text." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 57 (3), 475–515.

[37] See Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, dir., *Six Centuries, Six Years* (Iran: 2014), documentary film, produced by Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X2rmiOOafu8 (accessed on 7 July 2025).

the responsibility of establishing and training the first modern military band ('*Naqāreh-Khāneh*') in Tehran. His involvement was a pivotal moment in the history of Iranian music, as it became imperative to employ Western orchestration and notation systems for the instruction and performance of military music. The teaching music of PCM remained oral during this period; however, both teaching and documentation of PCM would be influenced by this initial institutional use of notation in the future. Lemair arranged and composed several pieces for solo piano based on the *radif* of PCM under the order of Mozaffar-o-Din Shah. He used tempered intervals for Iranian modes. They are one of the earliest examples of polyphonic music notation in Iran. Manouchehr Sahbaie collected, edited, recorded and published them.[38] In addition to his influential work in arranging Persian vocal music for piano, Lemaire is credited with composing the first official national anthem of Iran, *Salām-e Shāh* ('Royal Salute'), commissioned during the reign of Naser-o-Din Shah Qajar. This anthem, which became a symbol of early national identity, is commonly referred to today as *Nām-e Jāvid-e Vatan* ('The Eternal Name of the Homeland').

The most significant development was the transcription of the *radif* or more precisely the many versions of the *radif*. It seems the first person to notate the *radif* was Mehdi Qoli Khan Hedayat (1864-1955), a politician, musician, and scholar who also served as the prime minister of Reza Shah for six years from 1927 to 1933. He studied in Germany and his stay—culminating in his return fluent

[38] Manutchehr Sahbai, arranger and compiler, *Persian Āvāzes and Tasnifs: Collected, Arranged, and Harmonized by Alfred Jean Baptiste Lemaire* (Tehran: Mahoor Institute of Culture and Arts, 2003), https://mahoor.com/en/book/925-persian-%C3%A2v%C3%A2zes-and-tasnifs.

in German in 1879—proved formative in shaping his subsequent views on Western influence in Iranian culture. Hedayat took up a teaching position at *Dār-ol-Fonun* Iran's first polytechnic institute in 1885 and was later appointed special chamberlain (*pishkhedmat-e khās*) by Naser-o-Din Shah Qajar in 1893. He authored two volumes on music: the first, *Majmaʿ al-Advār* ('Compendium of Rhythms'), is theoretical, while the second is the *Radif of Iranian Music* (Mirza Abdollah). The *radif* of Mirza Abdollah was meticulously notated and includes distinctive symbols based on the performance of Mehdi Solhi (also known as Montazam-ol-Hokama), a distinguished setar student of Mirza Abdollah. This marked the inaugural documentation of the *radif* of Iranian music, occurring at an era devoid of a standardized method for notating the subtleties and techniques of the PCM. This transcription did not take much attention until recently.[39]

In 1922, Ali-Naqi Vaziri became one of the first to publish a music score in Iran: a pedagogical manual for learning the tar. Subsequently he transcribed the *radif* of Mirza Abdollah,[40] his teacher which took about eighteen months (Khaleqi 1954, 45-47). Vaziri, one of the most prolific Iranian musicians of the twentieth century also transcribed a *radif* of his own (2015), following the long-standing tradition in which each music master was expected to eventually produce a personal version of the *radif*, a practice that gradually declined in the post-revolutionary period. As Iranian music scholarship began to flourish—particularly with the

[39] First published by Mahoor Institute in 2014 https://mahoor.com/en/book/900-radifofpersianclassicalmusic. Second, edited by Shahb Mena and published by Khonyagar Publication in 2022. https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1401/09/21/2820102 (accessed on 20 July 2025).

[40] These notations were lost during his travels to Europe in 1918, with only the transcription of *Dastgāh-e Chahārgāh* surviving.

emergence of Iranian ethnomusicologists trained abroad—systematic efforts to transcribe the *radif* gained momentum. A notable example is the transcription of Mahmoud Karimi's vocal *radif* by Mohammad-Taghi Massoudieh (1976). Unlike instrumental *radif*, such as those performed on the tar and santur, which focus on instrumental techniques and improvisation within the modes, the vocal *radif* emphasizes lyrical phrasing and melodic development. However, it was customary for instrumentalists—especially ney and kamancheh players—to study the vocal *radif* in depth[41] to better understand its melodic and expressive nuances. In fact, ney and kamancheh musicians mostly learned the *radif* through the vocal tradition until the post-revolutionary period, when Mirza Abdollah's *radif* was specifically transcribed for these instruments. Massoudieh's notation was innovative, incorporating elements such as multiple grace notes to capture ornamentation more precisely; however, musicians often did not adopt this notation due to its visual complexity.

As Iranian music scholarship began to flourish—particularly with the emergence of Iranian ethnomusicologists trained abroad—systematic efforts to transcribe the *radif* gained momentum. A notable example is the transcription of Mahmoud Karimi's vocal *radif* Tby Mohammad-Taghi Massoudieh (1976).

A monumental initiative in the transcription of the *radif* was the publication of *Radif-e Haft Dastgāh-e Musiqi-ye Irāni* ('*The Radif of the Seven Dastgāhs of Iranian Music*'), compiled by the prominent tar player Musa Marufi during the Pahlavi period. This comprehensive work, the product of nearly three decades of meticulous effort,

[41] Most vocal *radifs*have been transcribed by instrumentalists, demonstrating their deep engagement with the tradition—for example, Tahmasebi (1995) and Payvar (1996).

represents one of the most authoritative attempts to codify the oral tradition of PCM into written notation. Marufi collaborated with and drew upon the knowledge of several of the leading masters of the *radif*, including Abol-Hasan Saba, Ali Akbar Shahnazi, Rokn-o-Din Mokhtari, Ahmad Ebadi, and Nur-Ali Borumand. His goal was to synthesize and preserve their distinct interpretations of the classical repertoire into a unified reference text. The volume was later edited and published by Mehdi Barkeshli, then head of the Music Faculty at the University of Tehran, whose scholarly background in both music and acoustics contributed to the work's technical rigor and academic legitimacy. As a complement to the publication, the entire *radif* was recorded by tar player Soleyman Ruhafza,[42] whose performance aimed to faithfully represent the notated version. These recordings were later released in a ten-CD box set by the Mahoor Institute in 2009, providing an invaluable audio counterpart to the transcribed repertoire. Together, the publication and recordings constitute one of the most significant efforts in the documentation and institutionalization of PCM in the modern era.

Marufi's *Radif-e Haft Dastgāh-e Musiqi-ye Irāni* was intended to serve as the central pedagogical *radif*, particularly within academic and conservatory settings, in order to standardize instruction and minimize discrepancies across different versions. However, the 1979 revolution and the subsequent restructuring of cultural and educational institutions disrupted this plan, leading to a more pluralistic and fragmented approach to *radif* pedagogy in post-revolutionary Iran. Following the 1979 revolution, several prominent musicians left Iran, while many of those who remained

[42] Available at https://mahoor.com/en/cd/20839-radif-of-seven-dastg%C3%A2hs-of-iranian-classical-music

were banned from public performance—figures such as Hoseyn Khajeh Amiri aka Iraj (b. 1933) and Akbar Golpayegani aka Golpa (1934-2023) among them. Some, like Parviz Yahaghi (1935-2007), became isolated and disheartened, abandoning even private practice. In contrast, a small group of younger musicians—many of whom had been trained at the Markaz and had composed revolutionary songs in support of the revolution—were granted limited opportunities to continue performing.

Among them, a few demonstrated exceptional talent in both composition and performance, most notably Mohammad Reza Lotfi, Mohammad Reza Shajarian[43], Hossein Alizadeh, and Parviz Meshkatian. These musicians quickly rose to prominence and came to define the sound of post-revolutionary PCM. Their shared background at the Markaz, coupled with their commitment to artistic integrity and innovation, contributed to the institution's enduring influence. Consequently, the *radif* they had emphasized in their training—specifically the *radif* of Mirza Abdollah as transmitted by Nur-Ali Boroumand—gained substantial attention and became the dominant pedagogical and performance model during the first two decades after the revolution.[44]

Subsequently, multiple versions of this *radif* were transcribed and recorded, reflecting its central role in post-revolutionary pedagogy. Among the earliest full recordings were those by Hossein Alizadeh (on tar and setar) and Majid Kiani (on santur), alongside partial recordings by Mohammad Reza Lotfi (tar) and Pashang Kamkar

[43] The eminent vocalist Mohammad Reza Shajarian, though not formally enrolled at the *Markaz*, studied extensively with Nur-Ali Boroumand and maintained close artistic collaborations with many of its graduates.

[44] For the santur and violin, Abol-Hasan Saba's *radif*, transcribed by himself and later edited by Faramarz Payvar, has remained the foundational repertoire most commonly taught to students as their first introduction to PCM.

(santur). The first published transcription was produced by Jean During (1984), followed by others including Ahad Behjat (2000), Pashang Kamkar (2005), and Shahab Mena (2005). Notably, Dariush Talai remains the only musician to have published both a complete setar recording and its corresponding transcription. Talai also developed a distinctive method of notation that he describes as *āmūzeshi/tahlili* ('educational/analytic'), aiming to preserve the interpretive nuances of the *radif* while making it pedagogically accessible. It should be noted that from the earliest stages of introducing Western notation to Iran, Iranian musicians recognized the need to adapt and expand the system in order to document musical characteristics unique to Persian music—features that Western notation could not adequately capture. Ali-Naqi Vaziri was a pioneer in this regard. He introduced two new symbols, *koron* and *sori*, to represent microtonal intervals—tones slightly lower or higher than Western semitones—which are fundamental to PCM. Vaziri was the first[45] to formally document and define the term *shāhed* in the context of Persian music to describe the central or focal tone within a *gusheh* conceptual framework of Persian music theory. This innovative approach to both notation and theory has continued throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.[46]

While earlier transcriptions and recordings of the *radif* were primarily based on performances on traditional instruments such as the tar, setar, and santur, more recent years have seen the emergence of multiple versions adapted for other instruments, including the kamancheh, ud, and ney. These newer interpretations

[45] Vaziri 1934, 20-30.

[46] Examples include symbols introduced by Faramarz Payvar, Parviz Meshkatian, and Hossein Alizadeh to represent specific instrumental techniques.

not only expand the pedagogical possibilities of the *radif* but also reflect its adaptability across diverse timbral and expressive contexts.

The transcription of the *radif*—and of music in general—has been an extensively vital practice during the post-revolutionary period, serving both as a means of preservation and as a pedagogical substitute for more restricted forms of musical transmission. One reason has been its relative acceptability within the framework of Islamic law. Unlike live performances or audio recordings, which may be subject to stricter religious and cultural scrutiny, written notation is often viewed as a neutral educational tool. As such, it has posed fewer challenges to Islamic sensibilities in post-revolutionary Iran, allowing music education to continue in more regulated or conservative environments, such as public institutions or semi-private music classes.

One of the most prolific and influential figures in the field of music transcription in Iran is Faramarz Payvar. He is arguably the only musician of the past century who meticulously transcribed the entirety of his own compositions, creating an extensive and coherent body of pedagogical material. In doing so, Payvar effectively established a comprehensive *maktab* ('method' or 'school') for the santur, allowing students to progress from beginner to advanced levels solely through his written works. His transcriptions are notable not only for their technical precision but also for the way they systematize stylistic and interpretive elements of PCM. In addition to his own compositions, Payvar undertook the transcription of a large corpus of pieces by earlier masters,[47] some of which had never been documented in any other form.

[47] Such as the entire vocal *radif* of Davami and 186 old metric songs (Payvar 1996).

These transcriptions preserved otherwise undocumented repertoire and performance practices, offering invaluable insights into Iran's musical heritage.

Throughout his life, he published approximately twenty volumes of scores and left behind hundreds of pages of unpublished manuscripts. His contribution has been pivotal in shaping the santur's pedagogy, elevating the instrument's status in Iranian music, and setting a standard for the role of notation in oral musical traditions. In 2017, Ali Samadpour, in collaboration with Vahid Tehrani Azad and the Kherad Institute, established the *Khāneh-ye Payvar* ('Payvar Foundation'), an institution dedicated exclusively to editing and publishing the handwritten scores of Faramarz Payvar. According to Samadpour, the complete collection may ultimately comprise as many as thirty volumes.

Among the next generation of musicians, a particularly notable figure is Arshad Tahmasebi, who has published several volumes of transcriptions compiling the works of prominent Qajar-era musicians such as Aref Qazvini and Qolam-Hoseyn Darvish. In addition to these historical collections, he has also transcribed a wide range of instrumental and vocal repertoires, contributing significantly to the preservation and accessibility of Iranian musical heritage. The domain of music transcription in Iran has undergone significant expansion over the last twenty years and remains a dynamic and essential focus for younger artists and researchers. This surge reflects a broader interest in preserving, analyzing, and teaching PCM in written form—often as a complement to oral transmission. While the majority of these transcription efforts have taken place within the private sector, particularly through independent musicians, researchers, and publishers, state-sponsored institutions have also made notable contributions to

this expanding field. One prominent example from the younger generation is Khonyagar Publications, founded by Shahab Mena. This independent initiative has been instrumental in publishing high-quality transcriptions and educational materials related to not only Iranian music but also the Western classical music.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the archiving of PCM has developed into a complex and adaptive process shaped by evolving political, technological, and cultural forces. From the early twentieth-century attempts to document oral traditions through recording and transcription, to the institutional initiatives under the Pahlavi dynasty, and later the post-revolutionary shift to private archival efforts, the preservation of PCM reflects both continuity and innovation. The founding of the Markaz marked a turning point by integrating oral pedagogy with modern recording technology, setting a precedent for hybrid preservation methods. Despite the improvisatory and context-sensitive nature of PCM—which resists complete capture in fixed media—documentation practices have increasingly coexisted with performance and oral transmission, creating a layered and resilient archival culture.

Two notable developments also stand out in the broader history of Iranian music archiving—and by extension, in the practice and performance of the music itself. First is the persistent adaptability of the PCM tradition in engaging with modernity. Musicians and scholars have actively embraced technological tools and institutional frameworks not as threats to tradition, but as instruments for its preservation and expansion. This is evident in

the innovations at the Markaz, which fused traditional oral transmission with recording and notation, and in the continual modification of Western notation systems—including the creation of new symbols—to better represent the microtonal and expressive subtleties of Persian music. It is also evident in individual endeavors by figures such as Ali-Naqi Vaziri, who pioneered the integration of theoretical concepts and notational symbols like *koron* and *sori*, and Faramarz Payvar, who meticulously transcribed his entire body of work and those of earlier masters, creating a comprehensive pedagogical repertoire for the santur. These contributions reflect a broader commitment within the PCM community to engage with modern tools and systems in service of preserving and transmitting an evolving musical heritage.

Second is the enduring reliance on private initiative when state or social conditions have extensively reduced or even failed to support the preservation of PCM. Throughout the past century, private individuals and informal networks have stepped in to record *majles* performances, transcribe repertoires, and publish educational materials, often in the face of censorship or limited institutional backing. These grassroots strategies—motivated by artistic devotion rather than political endorsement—have played a crucial role in sustaining the living tradition of PCM. Together, these two developments highlight a uniquely Iranian model of musical preservation: one that is flexible, community-driven, and deeply invested in balancing fidelity to tradition with openness to change.

Despite the fact that public performances and music instruction were severely restricted in the aftermath of the revolution that took place in 1979, the centuries-old mechanism of *andaruni* reemerged. In order to adapt, musicians went back to their own private spaces

for the purposes of teaching, recording, and working together on artistic projects. Under these limited conditions, the continuation of *andaruni*-based activities preserved the survival of PCM and even contributed to its growth. Together, the adaptation to contemporary technical means and the endurance of *andaruni* highlight a paradigm of cultural preservation that is distinctively Iranian. This approach strikes a balance between faithfulness to tradition and strategic innovation, as well as community-driven effort and silent opposition.

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