

MUSIC

Ancient Persian Music to Broaden Russia's Cultural Boundaries

By **KREMENA KRUMOVA**
Epoch Times Staff

Music that will take you to the driest places of Iran; that will unveil for you the mysticism of ancient Persia; and that will broaden your cultural perspective to the limit—this is what the latest “Concerto for Baluch” by composer Mehdi Hosseini aspires to do.

The Association for Contemporary Music of the St. Petersburg Composers Union will present “Concerto for Baluch (for six instruments)” composed by the Iranian-born composer Mehdi Hosseini. The six instruments of the composition are alto flute, contrabassoon, horn, xylophone, violin, and violoncello.

The world premiere of the Concerto, which will be staged on June 11 in St. Petersburg, is inspired by Persian folk music. It will endeavor to uplift the audience's souls and “create an atmosphere of openness to the plight of others.”

The music will be performed by selected soloists from the St. Petersburg State Conservatory and the St. Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra. Brad Cawyer, an American musician currently establishing a career in Russia, will be the conductor.

“My composition was selected for inclusion in this program by Association Director Georgy Firtich. Through this performance, he hopes to foster cultural understanding,” composer Mehdi Hosseini shared with The Epoch Times.

On Baluch and Iranian Folklore

In a special online interview, composer Mehdi Hosseini explained that Baluch is a name for a Persian ethnic group that inhabits a region in Southwest Asia. They speak their own Balochi language. The source materials for the composition are folk songs from two of the driest provinces in Iran—Sistan and Baluchestan.

Mehdi Hosseini began the Baluch compositional process by transcribing a recording made by a veteran dunali (doneli) player, Master Shir Mohammad Spandar from the region of Baluchestan.

The dunali is an end-blown flute which is usually played solo. It is said that some people go into a trance when exposed to the sound of this rare musical instrument. In this particular recording, Spandar made use of a number of Magam: Liku, Delgani, Zuljalal-Guati, and some other famous songs from the region. Magam (also spelled as a Mugham or Mugam) is very closely linked to the Persian musical tradition and represents a monodic music system, similar to an Indian Raga. It is not limited only to Iran but is used widely in the Middle East and Far East.

“I started to work on the Concerto in February this year and finished it just three weeks ago—on the whole it took about four months. But I have to say that it took so long because I was working on two other projects at the same time.”

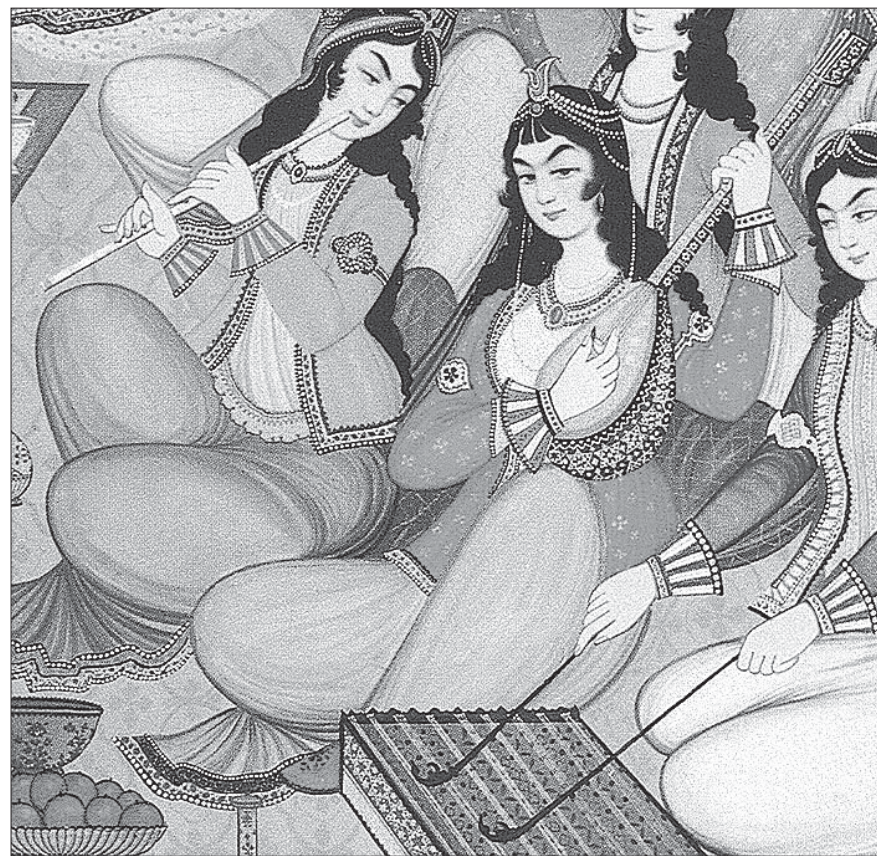
‘Persian music is like a Persian carpet, with solid form and structure, and great intricacy’

The most common belief about Persian music is that it is based on modal systems. However, on closer examination of the functional organization and sound materials of the music itself, this is not absolute.

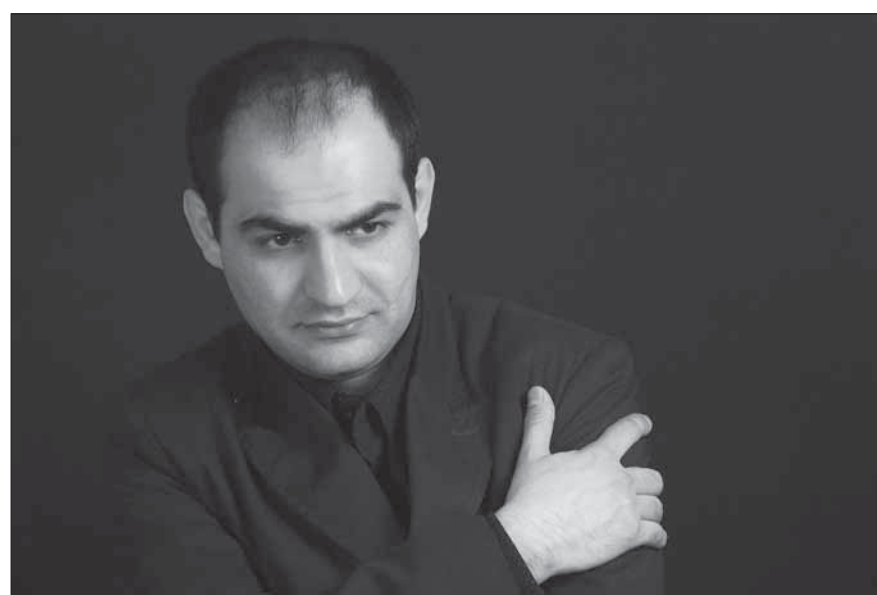
“At the heart of my work is the question of how Persian regional music relates to a monodic structure that can be perceived as both functional within itself and, at the same time, connected to modal and macro/microtonal systems. By ‘monody’ I mean a system where context is determined from note to note, as opposed to the harmonic system where context is developed from chord to chord. The aspect of modal and macro/microtonal systems is most easily heard by Western ears as an “out-of-tune” scale sound.”

Throughout Persia, regional folk music differs from Western music in that it is based on unequal temperament. Western music uses an equal temperament system which was developed in Europe in the 18th century. Equal temperament gives equal space between each of the twelve chromatic tones that comprise an octave.

Persian folk music, like most folk music worldwide, is built on non-regular intervals. To many people this is noticeable as the “out-of-tune” playing that they hear in Indian, Arabic, or Chinese music.



WALL PAINTING: Musical performance from 17th century Persia COURTESY MEHDI HOSSEINI



DRAWING ON TRADITION: Iranian composer Mehdi Hosseini, born in 1979 in Theran, now lives and composes in St. Petersburg, Russia. His music achieves a subtle fusion of contemporary composition and ancient Persian musical traditions which can be heard in his quartets, symphonies, and concertos. COURTESY MEHDI HOSSEINI

In his music, Mehdi Hosseini strives to explore the intersection of traditional Eastern music and neo-contemporary musical language. He believes that a monodic system can be generally understood as an experimental type of composition that proposes a new view towards folk music—a view that emphasizes the importance of the multiple sound forms used in this system as well as the rich heritage of regional music.

“When I compose, my task is to find the instruments which can be designed to use microtones as real function, not just as effect. For me, instrument means color, and I need all possible colors in my search.

My compositions use a wide range of instruments—typically orchestral instruments which I sometimes incorporate in non-classical combinations. I have composed for string quartets, something even Haydn was composing for, and also for a sextet which included an alto flute and contrabassoon. These instruments are typically only used within the context of really large orchestras.”

Persian classical music, collectively known as the Radif (row) consists of many ancient pieces that are called “Gusheh.” The Radif is fundamentally a repertoire of melodies collected by different people and added at different times. This repertoire is not like Western art music which is composed and intended to be played exactly as written.

Instead Gusheh is made up of traditional melodies, many of which are derived from popular and folk sources. The Radif is organized into twelve groups, seven of which are known as basic monodic structures called “Dastgah” (system). The five remaining are accepted as secondary or derivative Dastgahs and are called “Naghme” (chant) or “Avaz” (song).

“Persian music is like a Persian carpet, with solid form and structure and great intricacy. Yet, for the most part, it has remained unknown in the West,” Hosseini added.

From Iran to Russia

Before going to Russia, Mehdi

Hosseini was already working as a composer with Iranian National TV and other media corporations in Tehran. To broaden his experience, the 30-year-old composer moved to the St. Petersburg Conservatory. He was very satisfied with his studies and formed strong relationships with his teachers.

He also came into contact with many foreign musicians—some who had come to study at the St. Petersburg Conservatory and others, to give concerts. Thus, Mehdi became friends with many skilled foreign musicians who regularly organized concerts in the city and in other countries. In St. Petersburg, the cultural program is quite rich with performances are presented by highly accomplished musicians.

“However, I have to say that I have never limited myself concerning my compositional style. I always try to be myself. I have adopted neither the style of the Russians nor that of any other national music system. I still depend greatly on Eastern culture for comprehending the reality which my music attempts to explain.”

‘The responsibility of the composer is to strive for the highest human values’

Mehdi Hosseini concludes that the role and responsibility of the composer—and of all art as a whole—is to strive for the highest human values. It is to remain focused on the real purpose of art.

“Art does not give birth to morality, but, rather, the opposite—only by adhering to high ethical standards are people capable of creating art—the art of the good word, good act, good thought, etc.”

“People of all nations—of any philosophical or religious perspective—should not forget that all these schools of thought are simply paths to high ethical standards. It is these standards which form the moral paths that lead humanity to spiritual fullness. A composer is no exception to this truth.”

More about Mehdi Hosseini: <http://mehdihosseini.net/>

Rich Season of Music Ahead

By **EMAN ISADIAR**

SAN FRANCISCO—Music lovers in all nine Bay Area counties are in for an especially rich 2009–2010 season of symphony and opera. Below are some of the highlights as announced by the region's performing arts organizations.

San Francisco Symphony

The season will open on Sept. 9 with pianist Lang Lang, followed by a three-week festival exploring the music of Gustav Mahler and others with artistic ties to the composer. Segments of the festival will be filmed for future episodes of the symphony's signature educational series “Keeping Score.” Selected Mahler works will also be performed on tour in New York and in Lucerne, Switzerland, while SFS Media plans to release a new album with Mahler's “Symphony of a Thousand” recorded live at Davies Hall in November 2008.

Other important season events include new “Keeping Score” episodes featuring music by Berlioz, Shostakovich, and Ives to be broadcast on KQED in the fall; new residency projects with cellist Yo-Yo Ma and composer George Benjamin; and a star-studded roster of guest artists from violinist Itzhak Perlman to baritone Thomas Hampson. San Francisco Symphony will also host performances by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Berlin Philharmonic, Gewandhaus Orchestra, and Mariinsky Orchestra.

Music director Michael Tilson Thomas—or “MTT” as he is commonly known—will himself appear as the soloist in Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 23 in January 2010.

San Francisco Opera

The single most important element of the Opera's upcoming season is of course the highly publicized handing over of the proverbial—and literal—baton by outgoing music director Donald Runnicles to the charismatic Italian conductor Nicola Luisotti.

The season opens on Sept. 11 with Verdi's “Il Trovatore” followed by eight other productions, namely “Il Trittico” featuring Puccini's three single-act operas: “Suor Angelica,” “Il Tabarro,” and “Gianni Schicchi.” Mozart's “Abduction from the Seraglio,” “The Daughter of the Regiment” by Donizetti, “Salome” by Richard Strauss, Verdi's “Otello,” “Faust” by Gounod, Puccini's “The Girl of the Golden West,” and ending with Wagner's “Die Walküre.”

San Francisco Lyric Opera

Artistic director Barnaby Palmer will conduct a special gala performance called “Great Moments in Opera” on Saturday, Oct. 24, 2009, while the season officially begins in March 2010 with “The Barber of Seville” by Rossini. The final production of the season is yet to be announced.

Berkeley Symphony

Berkeley Symphony will open its season on Oct. 15 with “The Chairman Dances” by John Adams, West Coast premiere of “Peregrinos” by Gabriela Lena Frank, and Bartók's “Concerto for Orchestra.” This concert marks the debut of Joana Carneiro as the new music director succeeding Kent Nagano, who held this post for three decades.

Two other West Coast premieres are also being presented, which are Steven Stucky's “Elegy” on Dec. 3, 2009 and Jörg Widmann's “Con brio” on April 1, 2010. Although not a premiere of any kind, Esa-Pekka Salonen's “Five Images After Sappho” for soprano and chamber ensemble on Feb. 11, 2010 is another significant modern work included in the season.

While Berkeley Symphony is known primarily as a champion of new music on the West Coast, next season it will also perform standard symphonic works by Beethoven, Barber, Brahms, Sibelius, and Stravinsky.

California Symphony

Music Director Barry Jekowsky will open the next season of Walnut Creek's California Symphony on Oct. 11, 2009, with a new work titled “Mercury Interlude” by young American composer Mason Bates, along with Symphony No. 2 by Sibelius, Ravel's “Mother Goose Suite,” and Rossini's “William Tell Overture.”

The California Symphony will perform three other concert sets featuring Copland's “Lincoln Portrait” with narrator Will Durt in January, Bruch's Violin Concerto with soloist Chad Hoopes in March, and Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 1 with soloist Sarina Zhang in May 2010.

The season also includes symphonic works by Adams, Beethoven, Dvorak, Mendelssohn, Mozart, Tchaikovsky, and a world premiere commission by Mason Bates.

Festival Opera

Maestro Michael Morgan will kick off Festival Opera's 2009 season in Walnut Creek with Puccini's “Turandot” on July 11. The second and final opera of the season is Gounod's “Faust” presented in August.

Fremont Symphony

Music Director David Sloss will conduct Fremont Symphony's season opener on Sept. 26 with a concert titled “The World of Opera” with excerpts from well-known operas such as “Carmen,” “La Bohème,” “Don Giovanni,” “Rigoletto,” “Tosca,” and more sung by soprano NaGuanda Nobles, mezzo-soprano Layna Chianakas, tenor Mathew Edwards, and baritone Scott Bearden.

Other performances include a fully-staged production in December 2009 of Tchaikovsky's “Nutcracker” with Yoko's Dance and Performing Arts Academy, a piano recital by local star Adam Neiman on Feb. 27, and an all-Broadway Pops Concert with guest conductor Greg Sudmeier on May 15, 2010.

Marin Symphony

Music director Alasdair Neale will conduct an all-Gershwin concert on Oct. 4, 2009 with pianist Keisuke Nakagoshi.

The four remaining concerts include Vivaldi's “Four Seasons” with soloist Elizabeth Pitcairne in November 2009, Copland's “Lincoln Portrait” and Brahms' Violin Concerto with soloist Vadim Gluzman in February 2010, and the world premiere of Three Songs for Soprano and Orchestra by Carlson with soprano Christine Brewer conducted by guest conductor Edward Abrams in April 2010.

Other works in the season are by Mozart's “Requiem” and Symphony No. 40, and music by Barber, Debussy, Tchaikovsky, and Wagner.



CHARISMATIC: San Francisco Opera welcomes highly acclaimed Italian conductor Nicola Luisotti as the company's new artistic director. TERRENCE MCCARTHY

Oakland East Bay Symphony

On Nov. 13, 2009, music director Michael Morgan will conduct excerpts from well-known operas by Verdi, Puccini, Donizetti, Mascagni, Wagner, and



NEW DIRECTOR: Joana Carneiro succeeds Kent Nagano as music director of Berkeley Symphony. DAVID WEISS

Bernstein, sung by soprano Hope Briggs, tenor Kalil Wilson, bass Kirk Eichelberger, and the Oakland Symphony Chorus.

Other season highlights include music from Armenia on Jan. 22, works by Ives, Duke Ellington, and a world premiere commission by Rebeca Mauleón on Feb. 26, followed in March by accompaniment to a screening of Buster Keaton's silent film “The General” and the “Organ Symphony” by Saint-Saëns with organist Christoph Bull.

A second world premiere commission will be presented on April 16, this time by composer Benedikt Brydern, along with Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1 with soloist Adam Neiman. Beethoven's Ninth Symphony will mark the season's final concert set in May 2010.

Peninsula Symphony

Maestro Mitchell Sardou-Klein will open the Peninsula Symphony's next season on Oct. 16 with Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2 with soloist Natasha Paremski, Wagner's “Rienzi Overture,” and Symphony No. 9 by Shostakovich.

The following concerts include Bach's “Christmas Oratorio” presented in late November with the Stanford Symphonic Chorus, an all-Gershwin concert in late January featuring “Rhapsody in Blue” with pianist Taylor Eigsti, Ravel's “Tzigane” with Elizabeth Pitcairne in late March, and Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5 in late May.

Symphony Silicon Valley

Symphony Silicon Valley will open its 2009–2010 season on Oct. 3 with conductor George Cleve in Ravel's “Mother Goose Suite,” Ravel's Piano Concerto with soloist Gwendolyn Mok, and Symphony No. 4 by Brahms.

In late October Alasdair Neale will conduct music by Copland and Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 1 with soloist Ingrid Fliter. Stephen Prutsman will conduct works by Albinoni, Respighi, and Vivaldi in early December, followed in early January by conductor Paul Polivnick, who will lead the orchestra in a world premiere by Gordon Lee titled “Young Impressions of the Old City” and Rimsky-Korsakov's “Scheherazade” and Rossini's Overture to “La gazza ladra.”

In late March, Leslie Dunner will conduct the orchestra in excerpts from Gershwin's timeless opera “Porgy and Bess.” In mid-May, Gregory Vajda will conduct works by Mendelssohn, Bruch, and Tchaikovsky, followed by a concert of Mozart and Mahler in June 2010, conducted again by Leslie Dunner.

The Bay Area is also home to Fremont Opera, Santa Rosa Symphony, Vallejo Symphony, Napa Valley Symphony, and Palo Alto's West Bay Opera, whose programs are available online.

Eman Isadiar teaches piano at the Peninsula Conservatory and writes about music in the San Francisco Bay Area.