Opening statement

The name Persia and the adjective Persian seem to have been practically expunged from common usage in the English language. Even the Persian Gulf has become The Gulf, as if there were no other gulfs on this planet. For the language spoken in Persia, the word Farsi is finding increasing currency. In the context of an English sentence one would not use the words Deutsch or Française for language spoken in Germany and France, but Farsi and not Persian is being used to designate the language of Persia.

A curious conspiracy seems to be at work to disinherit Iran and to distance her from her past, her glories, her ancient civilisation, and her considerable contributions to world culture, all of which are associated with the name Persia. As if Persia is no more; it has gone the way of Etruria, Babylon or Lydia. As if, now, there is only Iran, a new country, an artificially created political entity of the twentieth century, like so many others in the Middle East and Africa.

Of course, Iran is Persia and so it has always been. It is one of the very few ancient civilisations which has maintained its identity and individuality, with a marked degree of continuity, for more than twenty-five centuries. To be sure, properly speaking, Persia is only the south central region of Iran, but for sound historical reasons, from the sixth century BC to only a few years ago, the outside world has known all of Iran as Persia, and that is how it should have remained. Germany, Greece, Egypt, Finland, Japan and a number of other countries are known internationally by names different from the 'correct' native names. It would be confusing, and counter-productive to the interests of these countries, if they were to insist on the use of the native names by the outside world.

Unfortunately, misplaced notions of self-assertion led the Persian government, in the 1930s, to require the use of the native name Iran by foreign powers. In the post-World War II period, Persia has increasingly attracted international attention. Conflicts with the Soviet Union, oil crises, the reforms and excesses of the monarchy, and finally the revolution which has brought the clerics into power, have made daily headlines, all in the name of Iran. Correspondingly, Persia seems to have receded into an ever greater obscurity.

For my part, as ineffectual as it may be judged to be, I do not choose to contribute to this regrettable process of disassociating Iran with her past, and, as such, I have remained faithful to Persia. The adjective Persian is also what I have always used for all things pertaining to Persia, including her music.

Persian traditional music embodies two distinct types: the rural folk music and the urban art music. A country as vast as Persia (equal to the combined areas of Spain, France, the Low Countries, West Germany and Italy) necessarily possesses a folk music of great variety, particularly since her population (current estimates 50,000,000) includes diverse ethnic groups. No definitive study of Persian folk music has ever been made as the sheer scope of such a task makes it forbidding.
2 The \textit{dastgâh} concept in Persian music

The urban art music, on the other hand, is a tradition within the domain of the memory of a limited number of musicians. It is represented by a body of pieces which have been transmitted by rote, from generation to generation, for many centuries. Each piece revolves around unspecified central nuclear melodies which the individual performer comes to know through experience and absorption. The manifestation of the skeletal melodic outlines into a piece of music varies greatly from one performance to another, depending on the degree of freedom assumed in extemporisation. Within certain modal restraints, the music is fluid, subjective and highly improvisatory. It is rhythmically, also generally, free and flexible. The wealth of this music, therefore, is not in complex rhythmic patterns, nor in polyphony, which it does not employ, but in the many modal possibilities and the cultivation of highly embellished melodies. It is a personal and illusive art of great subtlety and depth. It is a difficult art to study, to understand and to communicate.

In the pages that follow, I have attempted to unravel, discuss and explain this musical tradition with as much systematisation as is possible to apply to an art which is so free of systems. The work is limited to the study of the contemporary tradition of the twelve \textit{dastgâhs}, although brief chapters have been devoted, at the outset, to historical and theoretic al matters. Chapters 4 through 15 cover each of the twelve \textit{dastgâhs}, and each chapter is conceived on the following format:

1. Analysis of the mode of the \textit{dastgâh}.
2. Discussion of the \textit{forud} (cadential pattern) of the \textit{dastgâh}.
3. The \textit{darâmad} (opening pieces.)
4. Discussion of the main \textit{gûsîs} (pieces) within the \textit{dastgâh}, including:
   a. Modulation to and from a \textit{gûsî}.
   b. Analysis of the mode of the \textit{gûsî}.
   c. Nuclear theme of the \textit{gûsî}.
   d. Transcription of an improvisation on the nuclear theme.

Chapters 16 and 17 cover two categories of pieces which stand apart from the improvised body of pieces within each \textit{dastgâh}, but are nonetheless important aspects of the tradition. Scales and short musical examples are given in the text; longer musical examples are placed in the Appendix. All transcription and analyses were made from recordings of performances on \textit{târ} and \textit{setâr} by different musicians, particularly those of my own teacher Nasrollah Zarrinpanje. He, in turn, had been a pupil of Musa Ma'rufi and Ma'rufi's \textit{radif} was the basis of his teaching and performance.
1 A brief historical perspective

Of the musical arts of the earliest civilisations on the Iranian plateau, no tangible trace has remained. The Persian Empire of the Achaemenian dynasty (550–331 BC), with all its grandeur and glory, has left us nothing to reveal the nature of its musical culture. In the writings of the Greek historians, we find but a faint glimmer of the musical life of this period. Herodotus mentions the religious rituals of the Zoroastrians, which involved the chanting of sacred hymns. Xenophon, in his Cyropedia, speaks of the martial and ceremonial music of the Persian Empire.1

The first document of any extent on Persian music comes to us from the Sassanian period (AD 226–642). At the Sassanian court, musicians had an exalted status. Emperor Chosroes II (Xusrō Parviz), ruler from AD 590 to 628, the splendour of whose court is told in many legends, was patron to numerous musicians. Rámtín, Bámsád, Nakísá, Azád, Sarkáš and Bárbod were among the musicians of this period whose names have survived.

Bárbod was the most illustrious musician of the court of Chosroes II. Numerous stories about this musician and his remarkable skills as performer and composer have been told by later writers and poets. Bárbod is credited with the organisation of a musical system containing seven modal structures, known as the Royal Modes (Xosrovád), thirty derivative modes (Lahn); and three hundred and sixty melodies (Dastán). The numbers correspond with the number of days in the week, month and year of the Sassanian calendar, but the implications are not clear.2

We do not know what these modes and melodies were, but a number of their names have been related by the writers of the Islamic era. These names suggest a remarkable diversity of musical types and expression. Such titles as 'Rín-e Inrú' (the Vengeance of Inrú), 'Rín-e Siávúl' (the Vengeance of Siávúl), and 'Tabú-e Ahrádúš' (the Throne of Arádúš) seem to refer to historic events, and must have been epic songs. 'Báq-e Súrín' (the Garden of Súrín [The Queen]), 'Báq-e Sahrúyr' (the Sovereign's Garden), and 'Haft Gáni' (the Seven Treasures) seem to have been concerned with the glories of the court of Chosroes. And still others, such as 'Sáb Bú'hár' (the Green Spring), 'Máh abar Kúhán' (Moon over the Mountains), and 'Rúsán Čeráq' (Bright Lights) must have been compositions of a descriptive nature. Unfortunately, one can do no more than speculate about the nature of these compositions; nothing is known about the theories on which they were based.

On the other hand, the musical documents from the ensuing Islamic period abound in references to the music of the Sassanian era. An investigation of these works leaves little doubt that the music of the Sassanian period had been the germating seed from which much of the music of the Islamic civilisation grew.3

With the conquest of the Persian Empire by the Arabs (AD 642), for a period of nearly six centuries, Persia remained nominally within the framework of the vast Moslem Empire. In Persia, the Arabs found a culture considerably in advance of their own.4 Very soon after the
4 The *daṣṭgāh* concept in Persian music

conquest, Persian musicians were imported into every corner of the Moslem world. With the ascendency of the Abbasid dynasty (A.D. 750–1258), the seat of the Caliphate was moved from Damascus to Baghdad, within former Persian territory. From this time on, Persian musicians and scholars in all fields became the dominant figures in the formation and development of Islamic culture.5

I should point out here that it has been customary to recognise the Persian scholars of the Abbasid period as Arabs. This error, which has been consistently perpetuated even by some of the most reputable of Western authors, is primarily due to two reasons: firstly, the Persians, at that time, usually wrote in Arabic, as that language was the *lingua franca* of the Empire and was the language of the patron princes. Secondly, the Persians also bore Arabic/Moslem names, although they frequently sustained surnames which identified their place of birth; e.g.: Abolfażar Esfahānī, Sāfīddīn Ormāvī, Ali Jorjāni, etc. Most western writers have failed to associate these surnames with a place of birth.

It may be argued that the issue of national origins should not be emphasised, as the broad amalgamation of national and cultural traits brought about during the Abbasid period seems to have blunted the significance of such issues. On the other hand the credit which is given to the Arabs is not their due. If 'Islamic' were the sole identification perhaps major objections could be removed, provided that Islamic is not taken to be synonymous with Arabian. As the present study deals specifically with Persian music, however, the common error of misplacing some of the key progenitors of this culture should be rectified.

At the outset, Islamic religious leaders had assumed a hostile attitude towards music, and regarded it as a corrupting frivolity. But under the Abbasids, whose court was fashioned after that of the earlier Sassanian emperors, and whose rule had become increasingly more secular, music and musicians flourished. Of the musicians whose fame, and in some instances whose writings on music have survived, I shall mention a few, but shall forgo a detailed discussion of their lives and works:

1.  Ebrāhīm Museli (742–803): born of a Persian family in Kufa. Singer and *ud* (lute) player of the courts of Mahdi and Hārūn al-Rashīd, he is known to have composed more than nine hundred songs. He had studied music in Rey, Persia, with a Zoroastrian by the name of Jawānījī.  

2.  Es’hāq Museli (766–849): the son of Ebrāhīm. Singer, composer and poet of great fame, author of a number of books on music, none of which has survived.  

3.  Abu Nasr Fārābī (872–950): the great musical theorist whose writings on scales, intervals, modes, rhythm and the construction of instruments became the basis for the writings of all Moslem theorists who followed him. He based his scientific investigations of music on the theories of the Classical Greeks, and was instrumental in reviving these early theories. His monumental book, *Kwtāb al-Muṣāq al-Kabīr*, has survived. He was from Fārāb, a town in the greater Khorāsān, and may indeed have been of a Turkic as is generally claimed.  


5.  Abu Ali Ebn-e Sinā (Avicennā (980–1037): illustrious philosopher, physician and musician who also based his studies on the theories of the Greeks, and expanded on the writings of Fārābī.  

6.  Sāfīddīn Ormāvī (died 1294): also a theorist of great fame whose two books on musical theory, *Rasā’l al-Ṣarḥfīs* and *Kwtāb al-ʾAṣfār*, contain numerous additions to the modal schemes given by Fārābī and Ebn-e Sinā. His definitive theory of intervals became the most
A brief historical perspective

accepted basis for the recognition of modes throughout the Islamic Middle East. (See chapter 2).

7. Qotbaddin Mahmud Sirāk (1236–1312): author of an important musical encyclopedia which contains examinations of the theories of Fārābī and Saffādīn, as well as his original contributions, and a complex system of musical notation.

8. Abdalqādir Marāqī (died 1434): the last great theorist of the pre-modern era; author of several books on scales, modes and musical instruments, in one of which he had employed a system of musical notation.

From the sixteenth to the beginnings of the twentieth century musical scholarship seems to have suffered a decline in Persia. In these four centuries no work of any consequence was produced on music. This was the period of Shiite ascendency. It is assumed that the proscriptive attitude of the Shiite clerics and their measure of dominance in the social affairs of the country may have been largely responsible for this musical stagnation.

It is true, however, that music as an art of performance was patronised by the imperial court and by the nobility both during the Safavid dynasty (1501–1722) and the Qajar dynasty (1785–1925). In fact, the emergence of the present system of twelve dastgāhs is primarily a development of the Qajar period. On the other hand, music was relegated more and more to a private endeavour existing under a cloud of suspicion.

From the beginnings of the twentieth century, influenced by growing westernisation, not only was musical performance elevated to a more publicly accessible position but musical scholarship was increasingly revived.

During the Pahlavi dynasty’s rule (1925–1979), reforms towards the modernisation and westernisation of Persia received great momentum. By the mid-1930s, a conservatoire in Tehran with many European teachers was producing musicians and performers in the tradition of Western art music. A symphony orchestra was formed and choral groups had been organised. Concerts of Persian traditional music, largely through the efforts of Ali Naq’i Vaziri, were given.

The post-World War II period brought intense westernisation to Persia. By the 1970s the musical life of Tehran in particular was comparable to that in many large European cities. A very active opera company, a fine symphony orchestra, a ballet company, chamber groups, music festivals and concerts by visiting international artists and groups provided a crowded musical life for the capital. The radio and television network made available to the public throughout the country every variety of music, native and international, light and serious, to suit all palates. In addition to the conservatoire and the School of National Music, the University of Tehran had a large Music Department which trained students in Western musicology and composition, as well as offering courses on Persian traditional music.

In addition to large numbers of highly placed performers (singers, pianists, violinists, conductors, etc.) and composers who were trained both within the country and through education abroad, a number of well-qualified musicologists have emerged. Ali Naq’i Vaziri and Mehdi Barkevi will be discussed in chapter 2 of this book. Among other musicologists, the most prominent is Mohammad Taqī Mas‘ūdī who was educated in France and Germany and who has published books and articles on both Persian classical and folk music.

In recent years, a number of Western scholars have taken an interest in Persian music and have produced books and articles of considerable importance. The eminent American musicologist Bruno Netti has published two books and a number of articles representing
6 The *dastgâh* concept in Persian music

varied interests in Persian music. Ella Zonin carried out research in the 1960s and has produced a book of general interest. Stephen Blum has done penetrating studies on the folk music of certain regions and has published a number of important articles. Nelly Caron and Jean During are two French scholars who have done research on Persian music and have published a book each.

Since the revolution of 1978–9, and the renewed ascendancy of Shiite clerics, music has once more been placed in a position of disfavour. A certain amount of musical activity, mainly in the service of the state’s ideological promotion, is being encouraged. All other activity is suppressed. The fate of music, both native and international, in Persia remains a matter of serious concern. Should the present regime remain in power and the current reactionary attitude be maintained, lasting damage to the musical culture of a venerable civilisation could be the inevitable outcome.
2 Intervals and scales in contemporary Persian music

In the course of the twentieth century, three separate theories on intervals and scales of Persian music have been proposed. The first of these, put forward in the 1920s by Ali Naqi Vaziri, identifies a 24-quarter-tone scale as the basis for Persian music. A second theory was formulated in the 1940s by Mehdi Barkesi according to which Persian music is defined within a 22-tone scale. The third view, arrived at by the present writer, isolates five intervals with which all modes are constructed and no longer recognises a 'basic scale' concept. In the following each of these three theories is explained and examined.

The 24-quarter-tone scale

The notion of the division of the scale into intervals of equal size has been the outcome of a western musical orientation. The fact that the European classical tradition, in its pursuit of a versatile technique of harmony, had developed the equal temperament, captured the imagination of those Middle Eastern musicians who came in contact with it. These musicians viewed the absence of harmony in their own music as a sign of its inferiority to western music. The desired musical advancement was thought possible only through the adoption of western harmonic practice. That, in turn, required equidistant tones.

There was a general awareness that the whole-tone and the semi-tone alone were not able to represent eastern music, which contained intervals unmistakably different from these two. In order to accommodate these 'irregular' intervals, a convenient solution seemed to lie in the adoption of the quarter-tone, and not the semi-tone, as the smallest unit.

The fact that such an arbitrary procedure of equalisation would distort the authenticity of their native music worried them little. To them, the ultimate goal was to rescue their music from its 'backward' state and to bring it to the advanced level of European music, which meant making possible the adoption of practical harmony. To achieve this goal any sacrifice was justifiable.

Already in the nineteenth century the Syrian musician, Mikhail Mashaqa, had proposed that the Turko-Arabian music could be best articulated in the context of a 24-quarter-tone scale.

In Persia, western musical influence began to be felt in the second half of the nineteenth century. Naseraddin Shah, who ruled from 1848 to 1896, visited Europe on three different occasions. He and his entourage came in contact with western music mostly at state banquets and ceremonial occasions, when he was received by European monarchs and heads of state. He was quite impressed by the pomp of these ceremonies, to which military bands and orchestras had much to contribute. In the 1860s, after his first European tour, he ordered the establishment of a music school for the creation of an imperial military band. The school,
8 The dastgah concept in Persian music

organised and taught by French instructors, was mainly concerned with the teaching of wind instruments as well as the rudiments of western notation and theory.

Through this school's modest beginnings, Persia's first contacts with occidental music were made with the following consequences:

1. Through the study of the rudiments of western musical theory, the concept of a fixed pitch, major and minor scales, keys, etc. were learnt, none of which had any application in the native music.

2. Persian music was never submitted to any kind of notation. Isolated examples of notation found in medieval treatises were never an aspect of musical practice. They were tools of theoretical argumentation. Performing musicians had always learnt the music by rote and extemporised on the basis of modal and melodic models absorbed through experience. That is why composition was never developed into an art separate from performance. It was an aspect of performance and, as such, free from the need, or indeed the desirability, of being notated. In the school of music, students had to learn foreign music from notation so that they might be able to repeat it each time without alteration.

3. There was no Persian band music in existence. Inevitably the music taught at the school was standard western pieces for military bands, such as marches, polkas, waltzes, airs and the like. By learning such pieces, students came to appreciate the major and minor modes and, more importantly, the clarity of melodic and rhythmic forms. By comparison, only Persian folk music possessed this sort of melodic simplicity and rhythmic directness; the classical tradition, on the other hand, is melodically very ornate and rhythmically free and non-committal.

4. In studying the rudiments of harmony, students were impressed by the complete novelty of the use of more than one sound at the same time in a regulated and systematic way.

5. For use in military bands, western musical instruments were imported and taught. These woodwind and brass instruments were essentially incapable of producing intervals peculiar to native music. Later, other instruments were brought into the country. The violin, in particular, found great favour among the local musicians as it could fully express the intervals and nuances of Persian music. Quite to the contrary is the case of the piano, also introduced in the late nineteenth century, as it is undoubtedly the most unsuitable of instruments for Persian music.

6. Finally, the school of music introduced into Persia the idea of a methodical and pedagogically organised approach to the study of music. In the traditional way, the study of music was confined to the study of an instrument according to the personal methods of a teacher; any knowledge of the music itself was only incidental to the practical training. Western procedure introduced the idea of the uniformity of systematic study integrating the technique of performance with theoretical learning, all of which was written and taught with uniformity and precision.

Among the many pupils who received training at the school a few emerged as significant musical figures who became influential in setting the course of musical developments in the twentieth century. The most outstanding of these was Ali Naqi Vaziri (1886–1981), an energetic and highly intelligent man, who rapidly rose to the rank of colonel in the army. Vaziri was an excellent musician of the classical tradition and a virtuoso performer of the irār and the setār. However, he was fascinated by what he had learned of western music theory and, like many of his generation, was fired with zeal for westernisation.

Ali Naqi Vaziri was the first Persian to seek a musical education in Europe. He set out for France just before World War I and remained in Europe for some eight years. In France he
Intervals and scales in contemporary Persian music

studied harmony and composition and became familiar with a number of European instruments, such as the violin and the piano. In 1922 Vaziri produced the first of his several publications. The book, *Dastgeh-e Tār*, is ostensibly on the technique of the tār and contains exercises and pieces, from simple to difficult, for that instrument. The short text preceding the notated pieces, however, is far more important as it contains Vaziri's theory of Persian music. It is in this short introductory section of *Dastgeh-e Tār* that, for the first time, the view that Persian music relies on a 24-quarter-tone scale is expressed.

On his return to Persia in the early 1920s, Vaziri quickly became the most influential force in the country's musical life. He established a school of music of his own and set about training young musicians according to western methods. He remained faithful to Persian musical traditions but submitted those traditions to what he viewed as necessary reforms on the western model. His tireless activities, in addition to running the school and teaching, included writing books on methods of performance of tār (a second book) and the violin, giving public lectures, organising concerts, and in general promoting his new ideas on the reform of the national music. He wrote numerous compositions for solo instruments, particularly the tār, emphasising technical virtuosity, an aspect of music which the native art had never considered as an end in itself. He also wrote songs and even operettas. The most important of his books was *Musiq-e Nasari*, published in Tehran in 1934. In this book he elaborated on his theory of the 24-quarter-tone scale and gave an account of the twelve *dasgahs* (five *dasgahs* and seven *naymes*, as he calls them), in a highly personal and selective way.

All through the twenties and the thirties Vaziri dominated the musical scene. He was 'the' educated musician who articulated theories and had western training. As traditional Persian musicians were reduced, for many generations, to virtually illiterate musicians who knew only how to perform and could not discuss their own music scientifically, the emergence of Vaziri as the one exception placed him in a position of unquestioned authority.

Vaziri's quarter-tone theory, which is arrived at by way of a further division of the western equidistant 12-note chromatic scale, is entirely irrelevant to Persian music. It is an artificial creation devised to make possible the adoption of a kind of harmonic practice, based on western tonal harmony. It would be difficult to accept that Vaziri was not aware of the fact that Persian music makes no use of the quarter-tone and that intervals other than the semi-tone and the whole-tone are not achieved through multiples of the quarter-tone. He must simply have believed in the desirability of their being adjusted to correspond to an equidistant quarter-tone scale so that a kind of harmony may be imposed upon the music. Clearly, he did not propose to do this in order to destroy the music, but, as he saw it, to advance its possibilities into the realm of polyphony. He and many other Middle Eastern musicians of the early twentieth century regarded a monophonic musical tradition as intrinsically inferior. Their aim was to make the necessary adjustments so that polyphonic writing could be admitted into their music, and understandably they took western music as their model.

Vaziri's pupils, and their pupils in turn, have remained totally committed to the ideas of the great master. Not only was he 'the' educated musician who 'knew what he was talking about', but he was also endowed with a charismatic and forceful personality which seems to have subjugated all who came in contact with him.

I met Ali Naqi Vaziri only once, in 1958. He was retired and in semi-seclusion at the time. I
The *dastgah* concept in Persian music

was taken to his home, in a mountain village in the suburb of Tehran, by his devoted disciple Ruhollah Xáleqi, who had become a close friend of mine during the period when I conducted my early research on Persian music. Vaziri was 72 at the time, and I found him to be far more vigorous and lucid than any other musician I had interviewed.

Although Vaziri’s theoretical views must be unequivocally refuted, the importance of this musician in the twentieth-century developments of Persian music cannot be overestimated. He was a man of unquestionable integrity and his devotion to the ‘cause’ of Persian music, as he saw it, was boundless. His innovations in the notation of Persian music have become the standard and, in the present book, I have used the two signs *khorom* (p) and *sori* (q) which he invented to indicate the microtonal lowering and raising of tones, although, as used by him and his school, they are meant to lower and raise a pitch by an exact quarter-tone.

The 22-tone scale

More than any other contemporary figure, Mehdi Barkellí has endeavoured to find a scientifically accurate basis for the scale of Persian music. His findings are grounded in the theories of medieval writers, particularly those of Abu-Nasr Fárábi and Sáfiiddín Ormávi. Barkellí, a physicist by profession, made an extensive investigation, in the 1940s, into the measurement of the intervals of Persian music. Before evaluating his findings it is necessary to give a synopsis of the medieval theories of intervals upon which Barkellí’s theories rest.

By the time of Fárábi (tenth century), the Pythagorean intervals of limma and comma had become the basis of the fretting of musical instruments. The octave contained two conjunct tetrachords and a whole tone. Each tetrachord yielded five pitches and four intervals. The five pitches were named after the open string and the four fingers which produced them when pressed on any of the strings of the *ud*. Taking the open string (*Motaq*) as the pitch C, the pitches shown in figure 1 were produced by the stopping of the string.

![Figure 1](https://www.cambridge.org)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>c (Motaq)</th>
<th>d (Sabbáhe)</th>
<th>e (Vosá)</th>
<th>f (Bansar)</th>
<th>g (Xamsar)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>64</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>296</td>
<td>243</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The positions of *Sabbáhe* (index finger) and *Bansar* (ring finger) were clear and the intervals produced were a natural whole-tone and a major third from the *Motaq*, respectively. The position of the *Vosá* (middle finger), however, became a subject of controversy.

The earliest known *Vosá* was achieved by descending a whole-tone from the Xamsar (little finger) (f). This *Vosá* yields the Pythagorean minor third (e'), which is higher than the *Sabbáhe* (d) by an interval of 256/243, the Pythagorean limma. This e', which I shall call v₁ produces the interval of 243/241 from the *Motaq* (c).