

Middle East and Central Asia Music Forum
Monday 8th November (2-6pm) and Tuesday 9th November (2-6.15pm) 2021

City, University of London (online)

<https://www.city.ac.uk/news-and-events/events/2021/11/middle-east-and-central-asia-music-forum>

SCHEDULE

Monday 8th November

Session 1: 2 - 3.30pm

Chair: Mariam Rezaei (University of Newcastle)

Iranian Female Composers and Sound Artists Panel

Speakers: Pantea, Golfam Khayam, Sevda Khatamian talk about and play examples of their work, followed by a Q&A session.

Break 3.30 - 4pm

Session 2: 4 - 6pm

Chair: Tala Jarjour (King's College, University of London)

Yalda Yazdani (University of Siegen)

'Women's Music in Marginalized Communities: An Ethnographic Study of the Role of Music in the Daily Life of Qashqai Female Singers Based in Rural and Urban Areas'

Mohsen Mohammadi (UCLA)

'Soft Colonialism: Transcribing Authority in the Persian Dastgāh Tradition'

Anne K. Rasmussen (College of William & Mary)

'Tarab in the Grooves ~ Reconsidering a Transitional Moment in the Arab American Arts Economy'

Tuesday 9th November

Session 3: 2 - 3.15pm

Chair: Laudan Nooshin (City, University of London)

Discussion Session: Is it time to move beyond the 'Middle East'? Renaming the Forum

Speakers:

Armaghan Fakhraeirad (University of Pennsylvania)

Claire Launchbury (Institute of Advanced Studies, UCL)

Kamyar Salavati (University of Tehran)

Darci Sprengel (University of Oxford)

Martin Stokes (King's College, University of London)

Break 3.15 - 3.30pm

Session 4: 3.30 - 4.45pm

Chair: Peter McMurray (University of Cambridge)

Film screening: *Gitara* (2019) by Stefan Williamson Fa (followed by Q&A with the filmmaker)

Break 4.45 - 5pm

Session 5: 5 - 6.15pm

Chair: Rachel Harris (SOAS)

Hamidreza Salehyar (University of Toronto)

‘Composing the “Self,” Improvising the “Sonic”: Agency in Shia Mourning Rituals in Iran’

Jonas Otterbeck (Agha Khan University)

‘Instil the Love of the Beloved: The Creative use of Sufi Thinking by the Artist Peter Murphy’

The Middle East and Central Asia Music Forum has been running since 2007 and is open to researchers, students and anyone interested in the music and culture of the region. In the spirit of fostering dialogue and interdisciplinarity, we hope that the issues discussed at the forum will be of interest to a broad audience, including musicologists, ethnomusicologists and other researchers in the arts, humanities and social sciences. In addition, we welcome those working on other aspects of Middle Eastern and Central Asian culture broadly speaking (dance, visual arts, media, film, literature, etc.)

Find out more about the Middle East and Central Asia Music

Forum: <https://www.city.ac.uk/arts-social-sciences/music/research/middle-east-and-central-asia-music-forum>

The Forum is convened by Professor Laudan Nooshin, City, University of London (l.nooshin@city.ac.uk) and Professor Rachel Harris, SOAS, University of London (rh@soas.ac.uk)

Abstracts and Biographies

Session 1: Iranian Female Composers and Sound Artists Panel

Pantea is a sound artist from Iran working with different media to imagine and share new narratives of ecological connections. She has experience in performance arts, film, photography and music. More recently, she is focused on developing a socially engaged practice by exploring possibilities brought about by sound and listening. She has performed and exhibited work in Iran, the Netherlands, Belgium, India, Turkey and Scotland. Her current PhD research-creation project revolves around co-participation in environmental conservation and restoration practices via an audiovisual praxis in the context of more-than-human thinking. In this presentation, Pantea will talk about her work and introduce her recent community-based artistic project, *The Everyday*, which investigates Iran's sonic heritage through the recorded sounds of everyday life. Such sounds represent and embody local knowledge, cultural practices of the vernacular and ecologies. In collaboration with artist and anthropologist Maryam Fazeli, the project aims to foreground and preserve the unheard sounds of everyday cultures, and highlight their underrepresented importance within Iranian culture and history. The process of this project, as well as ways to engage with it, are shared with the audience.

<https://pantearm.github.io>

Golfam Khayam: Reframing Persian tradition. Inner Dialogue East and West

I have always been fascinated by Persian oral tradition. However, how to reflect and integrate the traditional elements into a composition raises many questions and challenges, including notation, non-written elements such as ornamentation, traditional instruments' performance practice, harmonic outlines and orchestration. This presentation will offer a brief overview of Persian musical layers, leading to analysing and discussing the various strategies I have been developing for a musical synthesis, seeking a bridge between the worlds of 'East' and 'West', an inner dialogue that goes beyond tradition and seeks to elaborate a new musical language.

Iranian composer and improviser, **Golfam Khayam** (b.1983) has appeared extensively as performer (on guitar) and composer and her music has been performed worldwide: broadcast on Danish Cultural Radio, BBC Radio 3 (UK) and Deutcheweile; and performed in the Geneva Grande Salle, Aix en Provence Opera Festival and by the New West Symphony (USA), among many others. Since 2016 Golfam has been signed with and published by German record label ECM, and is currency Associate Professor at Tehran Art University www.golfamkhayam.com

Sound and visual artist **Sevda Khatamian** (b. Tehran 1989) documents ordinary matters, insignificant moments, coincidences and random incidents to remark on their patterns, and to discover their correlations and hidden meanings in the perspective of time. True life events are her main inspiration. Her writings are a contemporary memoir, a mixture of real-life experiences with the world of thoughts and dreams to express loneliness; a twist of humour is an inseparable aspect of her work. In this talk, Sevda will share her initial curiosity towards sound and discuss her on-going practices and experiments. She has been sketching a project to create narratives depicting scenery sonically using environmental sounds, collecting elements that could reflect the impression, as well as characteristic sounds of a place. The main objective is to express how it feels like to be in that place, both physically and emotionally. The medium of sound allows her to experiment with storytelling using a more abstract approach, to arrange dream-like and poetic compositions.

Session 2

Yalda Yazdani (University of Siegen)

‘Women's Music in Marginalized Communities: An Ethnographic Study of the Role of Music in the Daily Life of Qashqai Female Singers Based in Rural and Urban Areas’

Qashqai women in south west Iran play a vital role in the shaping of the area's rich musical heritage and music provides an important outlet for social stability and economic solidarity. The music created by these women not only facilitates social interaction but also educates the younger generation. An example of this is carpet making which in the Qashqai tribe has traditionally been in the domain of women. While tying the knots and weaving, singing is an essential part of creating a carpet. The women sing rhythmic songs in harmony with the movements and sounds of their hands, transforming single woollen threads into an ensemble of visual art. The song texts as well as the ornamentation and symbols woven into the carpets tell stories about creation myths, ancient knowledge, historical events as well as personal stories of the women and their nomadic life. By exploring the relationship between women's voices and carpet iconography, we can gain insights into how nomadic culture and knowledge is handed down through the generations.

In recent years some Qashqai nomads, subject to changes in society and other economic and cultural pressures, have begun to exchange their nomadic ways for life in urban centres whilst still carrying with them the experiences of their previously nomadic life. In most cases this change has happened within the space of two only generations: the parent's generation was still occupied with rural living, agriculture and herding, whilst the children grew up in urban areas. Women living in urban areas have been trying to keep their nomadic traditions alive by adapting them to new forms and contexts. The aim of this research is a clearer understanding of the role of music in the life of rural based Qashqai women in comparison with women based in urban areas.

Yalda Yazdani is an ethnomusicologist and curator. She was born in Iran. She is currently a research fellow and PhD candidate at the University of Siegen, Germany. Since 2009 Yalda has been involved in field research on female songs and music in different regions of Iran. In 2017 she founded and curated the festival ‘Female Voice of Iran’ and recently (2021) ‘Female Voice of Afghanistan’ in collaboration with Contemporary Opera Berlin.

Mohsen Mohammadi (UCLA)

‘Soft Colonialism: Transcribing Authority in the Persian Dastgāh Tradition’

This paper seeks to examine the historical roots for considering the concept of *dastgāh* in Iranian music, the equivalent of the Western scale, a colonial approach that evolved into the current complex modal system of *dastgāh* and has become the ‘authentic’ lens through which ‘traditional’ Iranian music and its history are practiced and studied. Taking into consideration the first two musicians from Europe and Iran – Alfred Lemaire (1842–1907) and Ali-Naqi Vaziri (1886–1979) – who laid out the foundations of the current modal system, this paper explores the thinking behind taking the concept of *dastgāh* as the natural equivalent of the European concept of ‘scale’, and questions the process of mimicry of Eurocentric knowledge by Iranian scholars in the early stages of the formation of the current Iranian modal system.

Mohsen Mohammadi is an ethnomusicologist affiliated with the UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music. His training and publications span historical research, ethnography, and performance, and his area of expertise is musical traditions of the Middle East and North Africa. His diverse interests include colonialism, religion and power, as well as music and minorities. He has published several books and articles, of which some are available online: www.ucla.academia.edu/mohammadi

Anne K. Rasmussen (College of William & Mary)

‘Tarab in the Grooves ~ Reconsidering a Transitional Moment in the Arab American Arts Economy’

The music of Arab American entertainer Muhammad El-Bakkar was preserved in the grooves of six long-playing albums on the record label Audio Fidelity by producer Sydney Frey, whose stereophonic techniques in the late 1950s epitomized mid-20th century recording arts. Opening the flood gates for 30 years of belly dance records that followed, the album art and the accompanying narrative in the liner notes on El-Bakkar’s albums, traffic in kitschy stereotypes, essentialist racism and outrageous misogyny. A musical by-product of the intercultural fusion, syncretism, and rupture that occur in what I have named, the ‘diasporic domestic’, these artifacts of ethnic Americana are easy to dismiss. In this presentation, however, I suspend the penchant for post-colonial analysis associated with the influential thinker Edward Said. Rather than to think of the performers and producers of night-club era as victims of Americanization, commercialism, assimilation and some sort of broad brush white, consumerist, imperialist desire, I suggest we acknowledge the agency of entertainers in the business of Middle Eastern/ethnic-Americana as innovators and drivers among a creative globalizing community of artist-entrepreneurs who were hyper aware of the aesthetic preferences and economic possibilities of their day. By listening back to the voices of my early research in the Arab American community and by studying what Susan Nance has named, Orientana, over the long 20th century, I reposition Muhammad El-Bakkar amidst a field of academic purism, including my own, to discover *tarab* in the grooves of his records and his world.

Anne K. Rasmussen is professor of music and ethnomusicology and the Bickers Professor of Middle Eastern Studies at the College of William & Mary where she also directs the William & Mary Middle Eastern Music Ensemble and directs the program in Asian and Middle Eastern Studies (AMES). Her research interests include music of the Middle East and the Islamic world and music and multiculturalism in the United States. She has conducted extensive fieldwork in Indonesia and in Oman and among multicultural communities in the US. She is the recipient of a several prestigious fellowships including an ACLS fellowship in 2021 and she is an affiliate scholar-in-waiting with AIFIS – the American Institute for Indonesian Studies. She is the author of award-winning publications including her monograph *Women, the Recited Qur’an, and Islamic Music in Indonesia*, (University of California Press 2010, and with an Indonesian translation in 2019). She has served in a number of leadership positions including as president of the Society for Ethnomusicology (2015-2017). Anne Rasmussen blends teaching, research, and performance as a musician in a variety of musical styles. She sings, and plays the piano, as well as the Arab instruments, *‘ud*, *qanun*, and *riqq*. She normally maintains a busy schedule of rehearsal and performance with the William & Mary Middle Eastern Music Ensemble that she directs and as a soloist and collaborator with musical colleagues in the U.S. and abroad.

Session 4

***Gitara* (2019) by Stefan Williamson Fa (followed by Q&A with the filmmaker)**

Since the late 1960s the guitar has been adopted and transformed by musicians across the Caucasus. Inspired by traditional genres such as the courtly *mugham* and the songs and tunes of *ashiq* bards, guitarists have developed a unique sound, new techniques and styles of playing. *Gitara* traces the development of this musical subculture, following the lives of guitarists from the suburbs of Azerbaijan's capital Baku to the rural villages of Borçalı (Kvemo Kartli) in Georgia.

Stefan Williamson Fa is a Gibraltarian anthropologist and ethnomusicologist currently working as a Research Fellow at the University of Birmingham (UK). His academic interests focus broadly on sound and music in religion, particularly in Islam. For this he has conducted extensive research in Turkey, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Morocco and Iran as well as in his home region of Gibraltar and Andalusia. Beyond his academic research and publications Stefan is also a record, concert and tour producer, working closely with musicians and artists from the Caucasus, West Asia and the Mediterranean.

Session 5

Hamidreza Salehyar (University of Toronto)

'Composing the "Self," Improvising the "Sonic": Agency in Shia Mourning Rituals in Iran'

While ethnomusicologists identify improvisation as a critical component of lament performances, the performers of Shia mourning rituals in Tehran do not usually refer to improvisation in their discussions of ritual performances. Rather than innovative sonic/musical tactics, these performers emphasize the role of moral self-cultivation and divine intervention in the creation of affective lament performances. Given that improvisation is often presented as the subject's (semi)volitional 'negotiation' within a scene of constraint (Siddall and Waterman 2016), I investigate the implications of my interlocutors' discourses for the conventional conceptions of improvisation. Inspired by the anthropologists of Islam who define agency and selfhood through actors' cultural codes (e.g. Mahmood 2005, Mittermaier 2011), I argue that my interlocutors' discourses on moral self-cultivation and divine intervention both challenge and expand our understanding of agency in improvisational performances. Engaging with the works of ethnomusicologists who present improvisation in the Middle Eastern musical traditions as an intersubjective process (e.g. Shannon 2003), I present how my interlocutors' discourses define improvisation as an integral element of everyday life whose analysis also requires careful consideration of encounters and decision-making beyond the moment of musical performance.

Hamidreza Salehyar is a doctoral candidate in Ethnomusicology at the University of Toronto. Supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, his doctoral research focuses on Shia mourning rituals in Tehran, Iran, investigating definitions of agency and selfhood as negotiated and performed through these sonic practices. Hamidreza is a recipient of the Canadian Society for Traditional Music Student Paper Prize (2019), the SEM's Religion, Music, and Sound Section Student Paper Prize (2018) and the British Forum for Ethnomusicology Student Prize (2017). He currently serves as the Co-Chair of the SEM SIG for the Music of Iran and Central Asia.

Jonas Otterbeck (Agha Khan University)

‘Instil the Love of the Beloved: The Creative use of Sufi Thinking by the Artist Peter Murphy’

This presentation analyses the Sufi lyrics of Peter Murphy, iconic rock legend dubbed the (grand-, god-) father of goth, and former singer in cult rock band Bauhaus. Murphy has for more than three decades written highly original Sufi lyrics to his music. Most of this time, he has lived in Turkey. Although he is very open about his attachment to Sufism in interviews – it is even noted in the English Wikipedia article on him – I have failed to find one single scholarly article on this influence on his work. This article explores and interprets his lyrics with reference to his biography and to Sufi tropes. The main material is Peter Murphy’s solo albums starting with *Should the World Fail to Fall Apart* (1986). The study is part of a larger project focusing on creativity and Islam in different forms of popular culture. The main idea is to conduct a number of case studies of individual artists. I hope to be able to contribute with an original meta-analysis focusing on creative processes in relation to religion. I am attempting to get in contact with Peter Murphy but am failing. If anyone has a good contact, please share.

Professor Jonas Otterbeck works at the Agha Khan University – Institute for the Study of Muslim civilisations. His research focuses on Muslims and Islam in Europe and thematically covers Islamic discourse, religion and migration, Islamic popular culture and Islamophobia. His latest book is *The Awakening of Islamic Pop Music* (EUP, 2021) a history of Islamic pop music with a case study of the Islamic media company Awakening. His articles can be found in, among other journals, *Contemporary Islam* and *Popular Music and Society*. Together with Ted Levin, he is editor of the Edinburgh University Press series ‘Music and Performance in Muslim Contexts’.