

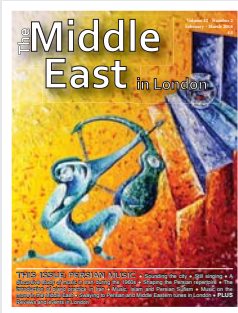
The Middle East

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East in London



THIS ISSUE: PERSIAN MUSIC • Sounding the city • Still singing • A discursive study of music in Iran during the 1960s • Shaping the Persian repertoire • The introduction of piano practice in Iran • Music, Islam and Persian Sufism • Music on the move in the Middle East • Swaying to Persian and Middle Eastern tunes in London • **PLUS** Reviews and events in London



Aida Foroutan, 'Protest', 2002. No. 14 of a series of 28 paintings called *Women's Life*, 2001-2015. Oil on canvas. 80 x 80 cm. Image courtesy of the artist

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The Middle East in London

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Laudan Nooshin recounts the rhythms of modern Tehran

Sounding the city: Tehran's contemporary soundscapes



© Laudan Nooshin

Buskers in Park-e Qeytarieh, Tehran

Standing on a flat rooftop in north Tehran on a warm summer's evening I am immersed in sound: the overlapping strains of the call to prayer echoing from local mosques; a rock beat from a passing car; the call of birds circling the mountains; a distant ringtone; picnickers in a local park; the low-level hum of the city below? (field notes, August 2015)

Tehran is a vibrant metropolis of more than 8 million inhabitants, cradled in the foothills of the Alborz Mountains; it has been a political and cultural centre for over 200 years. During this time it has experienced exponential growth from a walled town of around 60,000 to one of the largest cities in the region. Under

Pahlavi rule (1925-1979) an extensive programme of urban expansion led to the destruction of historic buildings regarded as symbolising the regressive traditionalism of the preceding Qajar monarchs. Reza Shah Pahlavi envisioned a capital city fit for a nation that was modern, Western-facing and secular. The dominant discourses promoted the idea of modernity as incompatible with tradition and the resulting tensions, which eventually erupted in the 1979 Revolution, can still be felt, seen and – crucially – heard in many areas of life.

Inspired by the work of ethnomusicologists such as Abigail Wood on the sounds of Jerusalem's old city and Matt Sakakeeny on New Orleans, I have recently embarked

on a project exploring the sounds of contemporary Tehran. Whilst Urban Studies has tended to privilege the visual and spatial, the recent attention to sound opens up exciting avenues of exploration in relation to the ways in which it shapes and is shaped by the urban context, and how it acquires meaning in relation to both public and private, live and mediated experiences. I became interested in such questions on my first extended trip to Iran as an adult in the late 1990s. One of my lasting memories, having arrived late at night and not having been in Iran for over 30 years, was being gently woken by the distant sound of the dawn *azan*, amplified over a city still hushed in the half-light. I felt that I was experiencing something quite unearthly. And of course, the beauty of its sound aside, the *azan* is a powerful symbol of religious devotion and piety, of the higher authority of God, of essence, of eternal

Recent attention to sound opens up exciting avenues of exploration in relation to the ways in which it shapes and is shaped by the urban context

It's interesting to consider both the immense changes to the sonic environment, but also how the more stable and familiar sounds – the azan, birds, water in the jooab – mediate the experience of rapid urban change

truth. Proclaimed by a disembodied voice from minarets which were once the highest points in the city, the sound is all-pervasive. This could indeed be the voice of God. Not only does the *azan* mark significant points in the day, until recently it would have been the most far-reaching sound in Tehran and the only sound to cross the boundaries between public and private domains.

Today, the peace and calm evoked by the *azan* continues to symbolise tradition, continuity and stability but the public soundscape over which it previously reigned is an increasingly diverse collage, some of which I sought to capture last summer: from taxi drivers calling out their destinations, the ubiquitous Tehran traffic, water flowing through the *jooab*, the bustle of the Tehran bazaar, the singing of birds – caged in shops and free in the mountains, the low-level hum of Tehran from the mountains, the buzz of electricity pylons, hawkers selling their wares on the Tehran metro, street musicians, to the women's section of a sports club or the muted sounds of a local shrine. I also talked to people about their sonic experiences of the city. One theme that emerged constantly was the rapid pace of change in Tehran's physical infrastructure – including new buildings, roads, tunnels, and so on – something I certainly felt after a five year absence, particularly in more affluent parts of the city. But even those living in Tehran described how the almost weekly changes left them disoriented, to the extent of occasionally getting lost in familiar neighbourhoods. Others talked about the city as an organic being, growing and metamorphosing almost like a character with its own will. In this context, it's interesting to consider both the immense changes to the sonic environment, but also how more stable and familiar sounds – the *azan*, birds, water in the *jooab* – mediate the experience of such change.

I was delighted to discover that I am not the only person interested in the sounds of Tehran. The Iranian Anthropology Association's 'Anthropology and Culture' group includes a project documenting Tehran sounds and conducting 'sound walks' around the city. It is led by Mohsen Shahrnazdar who writes about Tehran's 'unique and special sound', the result of

juxtaposition of the traditional and modern, with 'all the sounds present in industrial metropolises existing alongside what has been heard for centuries, such as the sound of peddlers, mosques, traditional bazaars, etc. In many locations, trendy cafes and restaurants where the modern and fashionable youth go can be five hundred steps away from a religious shrine or a traditional place that is mainly used by the older generations'. I encountered a particularly interesting sonic juxtaposition during a visit to the old Qasr Prison, now a museum and park which during the summer evenings of 2015 hosted a festival of 'Old Tehran'. In the block where political prisoners were previously held, the sounds of inmates and visitors shouting across the wide corridor that kept them physically separated, trying desperately to communicate with one another, have been reconstructed and broadcast to museum visitors. It was a disturbing experience from which I emerged into the festive outdoor sounds, with food stalls playing loud music and people enjoying performances of traditional *street theatre*: the sharp disjuncture between the sonic reconstruction of the prison's dark history and the present-day evening entertainment was quite unsettling.

A more peaceful experience was a visit to the shrine of Emamzadeh Saleh in north Tehran. With the sunset-tinted mountains in the background, worshippers moved in and out of the shrine, picnickers sat in the courtyard, an electronic screen broadcast religious songs and images, and visitors prayed and wept at the graves of the assassinated nuclear scientists, lending this space national as well as religious significance. Here I felt a strong sense of what Martin Stokes has termed 'public intimacy', mediated through the various sounds which seemed to bind people together in an intense and immediate way.

The 'Sounds of Tehran' project has only just begun, but I hope that by exploring some of the questions above, it will be possible to learn more about individuals' engagement with the sensory sound-worlds that they inhabit and the central role of sound in enabling them to make sense of the world around them.

Laudan Nooshin is Reader in Ethnomusicology at City University London. She specialises in Iranian Music

Emamzadeh Saleh shrine, Tajrish, north Tehran



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