

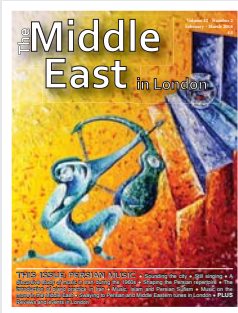
# The Middle East

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February - March 2016  
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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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# Iranian Classical Music: The Discourses and Practice of Creativity

By Laudan Nooshin

Ashgate Press, February 2015, £65.00

Reviewed by Stefan Williamson Fa

The central creative role of the performer in Iranian classical music has led to an emphasis on the role of 'improvisation' in describing the tradition. Drawing on years of in-depth research with Iranian musicians, Nooshin challenges such a description by questioning the dichotomy between notions of 'improvisation' and 'composition', suggesting such a binary has served to mark essentialised differences between Western art and Other music. Nooshin provides a detailed analysis and examination of the practices, discourses and social life of the *radif*, the repertoire which has been at the centre of the performance of Iranian classical music over the past century. The *radif* is a collection of pieces organised according to the mode which is studied and memorised by students and forms the basis for creative performance. Despite only becoming standardised fairly recently through the advent of notation, sound recording and the institutionalisation of musical education in Iran, the *radif* has become the marker and framework of authenticity and tradition within the performance of Iranian classical music.

The book makes important contributions towards understanding musical creativity and the creative process through the lens of Iranian classical music. Chapter two provides the wider context to the study in hand, summarising the historical and social developments which have led to changes in musical discourse in Iran over the last century. Here, Nooshin outlines how Iranian

classical music has been shaped significantly by the processes of modernisation and Westernisation, and by the introduction of new ideas about 'authenticity' and nationalism in the post-revolution period. She argues that there has been an emergence in binary thinking in relation to creative practice in Iranian music, between the act of composition and improvisation. Building on the work of other ethnomusicologists, she goes on to challenge this strict division by focussing on the limits of improvisation and the authority of the *radif*. Nooshin sees the ways in which musicians vary the material of the *radif* as central to keeping the balance between creative freedom and respecting the demands of tradition. This balance leads to a constant negotiation through performance.

Chapter three focusses on the *radif*, outlining more specifically the repertoire and its transmission. Chapter four, perhaps impenetrable to the non-musicologist, turns to the music 'itself', examining more traditional forms of performance practice by comparing a number of musicians playing a range of instruments spanning a period of more than 30 years. Here the focus is on one particular section of repertoire, *dastgah Segah*, to examine how musicians use the learnt repertoire to create new material in performance.

The final chapter turns away from this musicological focus through a portrait of a contemporary music project between *nei* player Amir Eslami and pianist Hooshyar Khayam. Their album *All of You* sought

to challenge the constraints of the *radif* through the development of a musical voice which is both rooted in tradition and responsive to the contemporary moment. Drawing on extensive interviews with the artists, Nooshin gives space to the musicians' own articulations on their approaches to the creative process in making the album. The final focus on this project not only hints towards the future direction of creative performance in Iranian music but also sums up many of the key themes of the book.

Nooshin successfully incorporates elements of postcolonial theory in a way which has long been absent in ethnomusicology. A particular strength of the book is the attention given to local discourses and terms used by the musicians themselves. This book is clearly aimed towards ethnomusicologists and is not an introductory guide to Iranian classical music. However, by combining musical analysis, social and cultural context and ethnographic insights it provides a broad and in-depth overview of Iranian classical music which will appeal to a wider audience.

*Stefan Williamson Fa is a PhD candidate in social anthropology at UCL whose research looks at the role of sound in Shi'i ritual in Eastern Turkey. He is co-founder of 'Mountains of Tongues' a project working to preserve and promote the musical traditions of the Caucasus region*

