

Preserving a timeless heritage

Impacts of Iran's dastgahi music in UNESCO listing



By Neda Sijani
Guest contributor

In a celebration of Iran's rich cultural heritage, the Roudaki Hall recently played host to a gathering of guests who convened to commemorate the official registration of Iranian dastgahi music as an Intangible Cultural Heritage by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). This milestone achievement not only underscores the significant contributions of Iranian music to the world's cultural tapestry but also highlights the country's commitment to preserving and promoting its treasured musical traditions, dating back nearly two centuries to the Qajar court, where radif (meter) of Iranian music was first formalized by legendary musicians such as Ali Akbar Khan Farahani and his sons, Mirza Abdollah and Aqa Hossein Qoli.

Evolution of Iranian dastgahi music

The origins of this precious heritage date back to the early years of Iranian arts and culture, nearly two centuries ago. The formation of the *radif* of Iranian music is attributed to Ali Akbar Khan Farahani and his sons, Mirza Abdollah and Aqa Hossein Qoli, musicians of the Qajar court. The *radif* is a collection of traditional Iranian melodies, narrated in various instrumental and vocal renditions, organized in a specific order within the framework of different *dastgahs* and *avaz* (sub-*dastgah*).

Both *dastgah* and *avaz* include *gushehs*. But the difference between *dastgah* and *avaz* is the number of *gusheh*.

This collection has gained a significant place in the world, earning its registration as an Intangible Cultural Heritage in UNESCO. Examples of instrumental *radifs* include those of Mirza Abdollah and Aqa Hossein Qoli, while vocal *radifs* include the Davami *radif* and the Taherzadeh *radif*. It is worth noting that the first person to notate the *radif* was Ali Naqi Vaziri, and the first person to introduce it to the public was Darvish Khan. *Dastgah* is the standard musical system in Persian art music, standardized in the 19th century following the transition of Persian music from the Maqam modal system. A *dastgah* consists of a collection of musical melodies, *gushehs*.

Day dedicated to radif

Babak Khazraei, the head of the Music Faculty at the Tehran University of Art, spoke to Iran Persian Newspaper about the registration of Iranian *dastgahi* music in UNESCO, stating, "This event took place in 2009, and prior to that, a ceremony was held in its honor. However, the organization of this ceremony in mid-October this year was a pretext to dedicate a day in the calendar to *radif dastgahi* music. Many countries have done the same, such as Tajikistan's 'Day of the Six Maqams.' I suggested to my friends that September 30 be named 'Radif Day' or 'Dastgahi Music Day,' and I had previously proposed this idea at the House of Music, similar to 'Hafez Day' or 'Saadi Day.' From now on, we will gather on this day, celebrate, and hold a ceremony to commemorate this valuable heritage. I hope this event will be repeated every year."

Showcase for introducing Iran's artistic achievements

Khazraei spoke about the impact of this event on promoting the status of *radif dastgahi* music worldwide, stating, "The registration of Iranian *dastgahi* music is a showcase for introducing our country's artistic achievements. It can serve as a comprehensive resource for those interested in this topic or a group of intellectuals worldwide, making them aware of this valuable heritage. This event is a platform for familiarizing these individuals with our artistic achievements, similar to the registration of Chogan, Nowruz, or Yalda, so that the world becomes aware of the programs and activities taking place in our country."

Commitment to preserving valuable heritage

According to Khazraei, "Registering our traditional music in UNESCO is a reflection of our musical capacity in the world, especially for the educated class, so they can understand and know that there is a valuable cultural phenomenon and heritage in our country and realize its antiquity."

He commented on the commitment and responsibility of artists or officials in promoting and preserving this cultural heritage: "Registering a work is to preserve it from the risk of destruction or oblivion."

Therefore, one of the commitments of registering in UNESCO is to provide authentic documents and evidence of the existence of this phenomenon in that country. Another point is to commit to preserving and promoting it in education. Regarding Iran's *radif*, many festivals, concerts, and educational programs have been held, and this shows attention to this valuable heritage. We must commit to preserving and protecting this great cultural and artistic heritage and not abandon it."

Outcome of registering an artistic achievement

Mir Alireza Mirali Naqi, a researcher of Iranian music, shared his thoughts on the registration of Iranian *dastgahi* music, stating, "In my opinion, registering an achievement is not a significant event in and of itself; it is merely a title. Registration is a contract on paper that may not have practical consequences. My question to my friends is, what impact has this

event had on our country's music, from education to performance? I believe that all the registrations that have taken place over the years have been more of a publicity stunt, and we have not achieved any positive results. Simply documenting something without taking further action is, in my opinion, more of a show than a genuine effort."

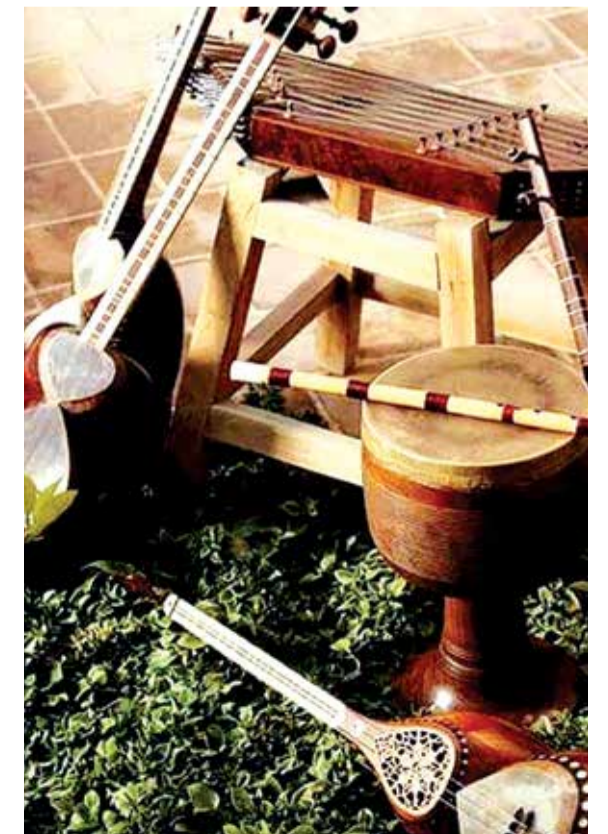
Fate of radif research institute

Mirali Naqi continued, "The registration of Iranian *dastgahi* music dates back to the past, and according to Hooman As'adi, it was supposed to lead to the establishment of a research institute dedicated to *radif* and supporting individuals with research ideas in this field. If this had happened at the time, we would undoubtedly have achieved remarkable results in this field by now. However, nothing happened, and the research institute was not established. Even many of our music education insti-

tutions are not as scientifically advanced as they were 20 years ago. In my opinion, registration is more of a show, but the significant event that took place at the Roudaki Hall a few nights ago, even if it was held under the pretext of registration, was the presence and performance of brilliant musical talents who shone on stage. The variety of narratives performed and the insight of the younger generation into technique and sonority were remarkable achievements."

Attention to culture as a comprehensive entity

Mirali Naqi evaluated the impact of this event on the world, stating, "In my opinion, it will not have a significant impact, as cultural interaction requires creating a suitable platform and context, which has never been adequately provided. A flow of events, the establishment of productive institutions, the appointment of competent management, the compilation of guidebooks, and the creation of short-term workshops are all necessary. We have never considered culture as a comprehensive entity, instead focusing on a single aspect. The growth of a culture depends on a collection of factors interacting with each other."



UNESCO recognition boosts global status of Iranian music

The *radif* of Iranian *dastgahi* music is a gift from Iranian culture to human culture, and its registration as an Intangible Cultural Heritage in UNESCO, in addition to introducing it globally, means that the world recognizes the importance of preserving it. This not only demonstrates the influence of Iranian culture worldwide but also facilitates interaction with other cultures and promotes Iran's cultural

status globally, secretary-general of the Iranian National Commission for UNESCO said. According to Hassan Fartoosi, The Iranian National Commission for UNESCO is proud to have contributed to the registration of the *dastgahs*, *avaz*, melodies, and *gushehs* of traditional Iranian music in the form of *radifs*, which was achieved through the efforts of the UNESCO Music Committee, established over 14 years

ago, with the participation of renowned musicians. However, it is essential to note that registration is not enough; from UNESCO's perspective, promotional and educational activities are crucial. I hope that this timeless treasure, passed down to us over the centuries, will be preserved, protected, and passed on to future generations by the efforts of you, the guardians of music.