

end of the imposed Iraqi war and under the differing policies of the Reconstruction Era [President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani] and subsequently the Reform Era [President Mohammad Khatami]. The authorities in the music sector decided to produce pop works in accordance with their own guidelines and regulations. Fereydoon Shabbazian, a musician and composer, along with Mohammad-Ali Moalem Damghani, a poet and lyricist, established a music council at state media tasked with overseeing and supporting pop music.

Composers such as Babak Bayat, Manouchehr Cheshmazar, Fariborz Lachini, and Touraj Sha'bankhani revitalized the fragmented pop music scene that had been dormant for two decades and linked it to that era. In an interview, Shabbazian states, "When we decided to launch pop music, we were determined to work with the best singers we could find in Iran. As you can see today, the music we presented and the singers we initially introduced are still considered some of the best. However, what we delivered wasn't really pop music, and we didn't want it to be labeled as such."

During that time, in addition to a few prominent pop music figures from before the Revolution who remained in the country and sought permission from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, a new wave of young singers also began to make their mark in this genre, gradually gaining significant recognition. Among the first pop singers after the Revolution were Khashayar Etemadi and Mohammad Esfahani, although in that brief period, around ten young singers emerged, each with distinct talents, who later became known as "the first generation of post-Revolution pop singers". This generation typically kicked off their careers on television. Thus, the music scene, which had previously been dominated by classical and traditional works, found itself facing a new competitor: pop music.

In the second half of the 1990s, the first post-Revolution pop albums by a handful of stars hit the music market.

#### Era of album flourishing

The 1990s marked the beginning of a renaissance in Iranian music following the Islamic Revolution. During this period, albums such as "Niloufaraneh," "Dehati," "Noon-O-Dalqak," and "Ghazalak" transformed the music landscape in Iran, encompassing both pop and traditional genres, with poets playing an indispensable role in this resurgence.

The first pop albums after the Revolution were released following the rise of the Reformist government in 1997. The famous pop and traditional singer Mohammad Esfahani debuted his first official and independent album titled "Golchin." In 2002, he released "Noon-O-Dalqak," which became one of the best-selling albums in the history of Iranian music. Shadmehr Aqili was another phenomenon of that era, achieving extraordinary sales with albums like "Mosafer," "Dehati," and "Par-e Parvaz." In 1999, Alireza Asar gained fame as a distinctive and heroic voice with his album "Kooch-e Asheqaneh."

Between 2002 and 2006, a movement emerged known as "Vasookht," producing numerous pop songs with anti-love and curse-themed lyrics, which were enthusiastically embraced by the new generation of music fans in the 2000s. Mohsen Chavoshi,

Mohsen Yeganeh, and Hamed Hakan were among the singers who released several Vasookht tracks.

After the flourishing of pop singers in the late 1990s, aside from a few, including Mohammad Esfahani, Hamid Hami, and even Shadmehr Aqili, who moved abroad, many first-generation pop stars faced a decline in their careers. Some attribute the downfall of this generation to the rise of new artists or a drop in the quality of their new albums. However, some of these stars believed that favoritism and a music mafia prevented them from being seen, which reflects a flawed policy and lack of oversight in the music industry during that time. Hamid Hami expressed that people in Iran do not show interest in high-quality music, which is why he attempts to hold his performances abroad. Qasem Afshar, another pop singer, attributed the lagging status of his contemporaries in the music scene to the chaotic environment of the music market during that decade. He stated, "In those years, music was not given much importance, and there was no commitment to producing musical works. These factors led my peers to experience disillusionment. I myself have also become disenchanted with the prevailing atmosphere of music in recent years."

Overall, the late 1990s and early 2000s can be regarded as a period of decline for pop music in Iran. In the 2000s, the state media organization and its various channels adopted new policies that did not prioritize pop music as before. Consequently, pop music again fell out of favor for a time. It was in the mid-2000s that new singers entered the professional arena, rekindling the audience's and officials' interest in pop music.

From the late 2000s to the early 2010s, the production and release of musical works underwent significant changes. The rise of the internet and the proliferation of digital tools drove these transformations. From those years onward, producing albums became less economically viable, and the release of singles became more common. Among those who entered the music scene, several new talents were discovered and introduced, receiving support in various ways. On the other hand, producers, who had played a minimal role in shaping the content and essence of pop music and other genres before the 2000s, gained substantial power, dictating which singer would produce works and perform on stage.

In recent years, pop music has also influenced traditional music, leading to the rise of a genre known as "traditional pop," which often neglects the proper fusion of lyrics and music. However, if this type of music develops correctly in its own right, it could become a valuable brand for the country's music.

#### Return of concerts

The holding of concerts was banned in the country for nearly a decade following the Revolution due to the prohibition of music; however, even today, organizing concerts sometimes faces challenges depending on the venue and timing. For instance, Ayatollah Seyyed Ahmad Alamolhoda, the Friday prayer leader of Mashhad, explained his opposition to concerts in this pilgrimage city in an interview in August 2023, stating, "I do not approve of mass music. You see, if a concert takes place here, it will turn into a concert market."



By the end of the 1980s, with the gradual return of pop music, the atmosphere of concert venues began to change. As young people embraced this genre, young singers began to stage concerts. The first generation of pop singers in the 1990s not only released albums but also performed concerts. Dariush Khashayar Etemadi, an established pop singer, was among the first to hold a concert after the Islamic Revolution, managing to do so in 1989 despite the challenges involved. Additionally, some music producers regard Khashayar Etemadi as the first modern concert organizer. Etemadi took the stage in 1999, and his concert was well-received by audiences. Music producer Mohsen Rajabpour believes that the true essence of concert performances began in 1999 with multiple and consecutive shows.

Alireza Asar, who was recognized as a distinctive singer in the 1990s and 2000s, holds records for concert performances during these years. In the 1990s, he set a record by holding 28 consecutive concerts. The band "Arian," considered the first Iranian pop music group, performed numerous concerts for 15 years during a time when concerts were not widespread, thereby establishing their place in concert history. Ehsan Khajeh Amiri, another pop singer, performed seven shows at the Ministry of Interior Hall in 2007, an event that had not happened before. It should also be noted that during those years, the concerts of Mohsen Yeganeh and Reza Sadeqi, following Khashayar Etemadi's success, also set records for concert performances in the late 2000s. Sirvan Khosravi, a composer, arranger, and pop singer, along with Mazyar Fallahi, are regarded as record holders for concerts in the 2010s.

Another success for domestic pop singers has been gaining popularity among expatriate Ira-

nians. In the fall of 2017, Mohsen Yeganeh held a concert at the large "Microsoft" venue in the United States, attracting 7,100 attendees. Notably, prior to Yeganeh, only two other singers had managed to fill this capacity. Challenges in organizing concerts in the late 2010s included the selection of performers and the methods of organizing concerts, as well as high ticket prices and a lack of real oversight regarding how they were conducted. Additionally, the introduction of a new policy requiring that ten percent of concert revenues be deposited into the government treasury has sparked further criticism.

#### Iranian Rock

Rock music, which emerged in Iran in the late 1960s, gained popularity with the rise of artists such as Koroush Yaghmaei, Farhad Mehrad, Fereydoon Foroughi, and Habib Mohebbian. Iranian rock was a style in which Iranian musicians made modifications to the Rock genre. While it attracted fewer fans than other genres, its followers were quite passionate. However, this musical style was largely forgotten after the Revolution for many years. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, Kaveh Yaghmaei remained the only Iranian rock singer officially active under the Ministry of Culture's approval, even holding a concert in 1994 that was dubbed the first Iranian rock concert after the Revolution. In fact, it can be argued that, following the Revolution, the genre that emerged in the Iranian music scene was not rock, but rather pop music, which found its place alongside traditional and classical styles. Shadi Vatanparast, a music writer and critic, states that the first movements began with the formation of modern revolutionary anthems and the presence of singers like Bijan Khavari and Hamid Gholamali, whose work produced a blend



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On the final night of the 40th International Fajr Music Festival, on February 17, 2025, the Ghaffari Orchestra and the Arabic Qanun soloist takes to the stage.

● FATEMEH AMUZAD/MEHR

between pop music and anthems. Vatanparast mentions that rock still did not have an official presence.

In the late 1990s, with the emergence of the Reformist government and into the early 2000s, Iranian rock music experienced a revival, marking the beginning of a golden era for Persian rock. In the early 2000s, Iranian youth's interest in this genre and its sub-genres intensified, leading to the formation of numerous groups. During these years, a limited number of concerts were held with official permits.

Regarding rock music, some experts believe that this style does not receive the same support from the Ministry of Culture as pop does. They attribute this lack of support to factors such as the level of excitement and impact of the genre, as well as the appearance and mindset of its artists. The lack of permits for releases has hindered the expansion of works in this genre.

Babak Chamanara from the Beethoven Music Center in Tehran states that pop music quickly overtook traditional music, even compelling music producers to follow this trend. However, he continues by saying that rock music, after those years, neither gained the permission to operate nor received support, and instead, it proliferated spontaneously among young people in homes and private gatherings. Shahram Sharbaf, frontman of O-Hum band, who has felt the barriers imposed by the Ministry of Culture, has acknowledged that "the height of the barrier has become shorter."

However, the 2010s truly marked a new era for rock music in Iran. During this period, many groups, both inside and outside the country, innovated and created music and lyrics, utilizing musical elements that had never been employed before, thus giving a fresh shape to the landscape of Iranian rock music.

Sharbaf believes that the momentum in Iranian rock music and fusion music will undoubtedly continue, but only those whose motivations and reasons for working stem solely from their love for music will succeed in overcoming the obstacles, as money or fame cannot provide sufficient motivation to endure the existing pressures.

#### Final thoughts

Ultimately, looking at the journey of music over these four decades and considering the rich heritage of Iranian music, which has a history spanning over three thousand years, these questions come to mind: Has this art form now returned to its rightful path? Would Iranian music have reached its current status if that gap or interruption had not occurred? Has this interruption led to the detachment of pop music from its Iranian roots, or is it the changing tastes of the audience and the influence of global music that has brought Iranian music to this point?

Moreover, a crucial point to consider is that poetry is the voice of the soul, and when it intertwines with the beautiful art of music, it becomes unforgettable. Is the measure of whether this art is on the right track determined by audience satisfaction, or should it be based on adhering to the guidelines set by the experts in the field?