

Music's journey in post-Revolution era:

A narrative of successive policies in Iran's music landscape



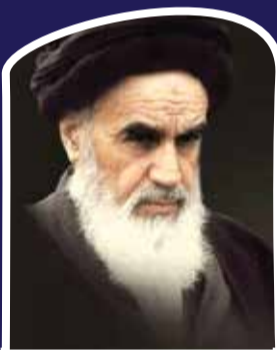
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A review of the history of music in the post-Islamic Revolution era reveals a series of policies that their proponents have gradually retreated from over the past four decades and today, music, with its diverse genres, has reached its current position. A glance at the opinions of some musicians regarding the status of this art in Iran provides a relative understanding of today's musical landscape:

Amir Esnaashari, a singer and tar player, has stated, "After the Revolution, we experienced a historical gap. Authentic artists who had a deep understanding of Iranian music were, in a way, banned from working or chose to emigrate. In the realm of pop music, had this connection not been severed, the music we currently refer to as pop would have evolved differently, following a logical trajectory in Iranian music rather than becoming the eclectic mix of the music of various countries that it is today." - Jamsheed Jam, the singer of the piece 'Yar-e Dabestani,' expressed that the situation is not "good." He stated, "We can have rap music that embodies our own atmosphere and culture. Nowadays, everything sung is merely a translated version, lacking originality and melody. The instrumentation of Western music does not align with our culture. The same applies to pop music; if a professional arranger takes the lead, the result would be acceptable."

Keyvan Saket, who prefers to label traditional music as "national," asserts that Iranian national music is dynamic and alive. This tar and setar player highlighted that Iranian music has undergone significant evolution and changes in form, content, and structure. He remarked, "The audience of Iranian music, due to its unique structure, needs to be more familiar with it and receive training in listening to truly appreciate the beauty of this art; as this issue may have made understanding Iranian music somewhat challenging for some people and today's youth in comparison to pop music."

Hamidreza Adab, a musician, said, "A significant part of [traditional] Iranian music is intertwined with Iranian rituals and culture and has managed to secure a prominent position in major world festivals, a status that other music genres in Iran have not been able to achieve." Adab continued, "Iranian pop music is a second-hand and third-rate imitation of Western pop and rock, a replication of a genre predominantly led by Westerners, while traditional music emerges from the very roots of Iranian soil." Abbas Qaed Rahmat noted, "It is possible to display authenticity and classicism in pop music as well, at least by utilizing rich lyrics; therefore, it is better to seek a balance between modern and traditional music in accordance with societal needs."



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Islamic Revolution and music

The Revolution and music are two terms that have not easily coexisted. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 abruptly marked the end of music, particularly the Iranian pop genre, which had gradually been evolving to compete with the best global examples. Iranian pop music emerged in the 19th century during the Qajar era and flourished with the advent of radio. This musical style transformed with the incorporation of Western instruments and musical techniques as well as with the brilliance of artists like Vigen, recognized as the "King of Iranian pop" and the "Sultan of Jazz" in Iran.

During the Revolution, the media and cultural atmosphere faced a generation accustomed to music, while simultaneously being deemed as containing corrupt themes that could waste the vitality of the youth. Imam Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic, viewed the complete eradication of music from Radio and Television as the only remedy, asserting that music, from the perspective of a Shia jurist, was considered haram (forbidden). During this period, pop musicians and singers, confronted with Islamic values, contemplated the impossibility of continuing this musical style in light of these values and thus opted to leave the country.

In the early days of the Revolution, Imam Khomeini referred to the way corrupt governments sedated the youth, labeling music as a means of this sedation. He stated, "The television shouldn't broadcast ten hours of music. A vigorous youth, once turned away from their strength, is rendered in a state of stupor, much like that induced by opium. This [music] is not much different." At that time, he remarked, "Eliminate this music entirely and replace it with something educational"; "Remove music. Don't be afraid of being labeled as an-

tiquated! If we are antiquated, so be it! Don't fear this. Such words are mere strategies to divert you from serious endeavors."

Over the years, as the officials of that era at Radio and Television believed that if music were removed from the national media, people would turn to illegal and unconventional sources, this indeed happened. A generation accustomed to music sought to satisfy their tastes and fill the void left by the absence of music, turning to the works of singers in exile. Consequently, "Los Angeles singers" remained at their peak for about two decades, while pop music and, consequently, the Iranian rock genre were sidelined within the country for many years.

On the other hand, this period marked the peak and flourishing of revolutionary anthems, which were being created underground in the years leading up to the Revolution. Since music is a reflection of society and emerges from within each nation, the exhilarating days of the Revolution propelled music toward an epic direction. Mohammad-Reza Lotfi, a composer and founder of the "Chavosh Cultural and Artistic Center," discusses the transformation of music in the years following the Revolution in a series of radio programs titled "Contemporary History of Iranian Traditional Music." He states, "Given the social currents and revolutionary fervor, people were not in a position to appreciate traditional music—that is, instrumental and vocal music. The youth were out in the streets, filled with excitement. They expected us to present social and revolutionary compositions."

Over these years, the tone of music became increasingly heroic, with pieces gradually taking on the form of anthems.

Evolution of music in Iran

As the early years of the Revolution passed, more and more anthems infused with revolutionary

and heroic sentiments emerged. At this juncture, Imam Khomeini, witnessing this content growth, endorsed the broadcasting of stirring and exhilarating revolutionary music on state media. Saeedeh Shabrang, a researcher of oral history, notes during a discussion on the book "The Cry of Freedom," which includes the oral memoirs of Composer Ahmad Ali Ragheb, that one of the highlights of this book is the memory of creating the anthem "Shahid Motahar" and the private meeting between musicians and Imam Khomeini. Ragheb recounts an instance where the Imam stated, "I have listened to most of your anthems and I approve of many of them, which is good, but you are just at the beginning, and you need to gain experience. Our music must distance itself from the music of the Pahlavi era. If we endorse music, we are endorsing the kind of music that other forms cannot influence. Generally speaking, contradictions in the views and thoughts of significant figures are often sensitive. To understand the reasons behind this transformation in opinions, it's essential to recognize that these apparent contradictions, especially concerning Islamic laws and the perspectives of a Shia authority, carry even more weight. Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei remarks on Imam Khomeini's changing viewpoints: "The Imam believes that time and place affect interpretation. This means that the subject changes, even though a person may think it remains the same; however, the subject has indeed changed, and consequently, its ruling changes." Ayatollah Khamenei further asserts, "In practice, we do not witness contradictions; rather, this reflects the dynamism of his legal thought, which is not limited to a specific area like music but also manifests in fields such as cinema." Thus, the distinction between halal [Permissible] and haram music emerges. In a fatwa is-

sued on September 10, 1988, the Imam introduced a new concept called "halal benefits." In his view, "music" can be utilized for "halal benefits."

In this fatwa, the Imam specifies in response to a question regarding "buying and selling musical instruments for legitimate uses," stating, "The buying and selling of shared instruments for the purpose of halal benefits is permissible." He adds, "Listening to and playing entertaining music is haram, while dubious sounds do not pose a problem, and buying and selling instruments solely for entertainment is not allowed, but there is no issue with shared instruments." The issuance of this fatwa garnered significant attention and was perceived among experts as a major shift in the overarching music policy.

As mentioned, in addition to changes in the lyrical content of music, its tone also became heroic during these years, with pieces increasingly resembling anthems. During the Iran-Iraq War (1980s), the influence and impact of traditional music on society continued unabated. Musicians, throughout the late 1980s, not only produced traditional music pieces but also took a serious look at the war and the sentiments of the community. Many pieces created by the Chavosh Cultural and Artistic Center were heavily influenced by the political atmosphere in Iran. Mohammad-Reza Shajarian and Shahram Nazeri sang most of these pieces. However, aligning with political and social events was not the only characteristic of traditional music in the early years following the Revolution; in fact, the most significant works in the realm of authentic Iranian music were produced during these years.

Return of Pop music

After remaining on the sidelines for 15 years, Iranian Pop music regained its footing in the early 1990s, a few years after the