

ble and genuine nature, are never even invited to a single festival.” Tohidi, while holding out hope for the future of regional music, underscores that “raising awareness, supporting authentic artists, and creating spaces for dialogue and performance can go a long way toward safeguarding this priceless treasure.” The regional musician, stressing the importance of training skilled researchers, adds: “The Ministry of Culture, music faculties, and especially the Cultural Heritage Organization all have a key role to play. These bodies should stage specialized training courses and show researchers the ropes in proper research

methods, accurate documentation of instruments, and recording regional music. On the other hand, non-experts must be kept out of this field.” He also calls out the misuse of certain terms in regional music, explaining: “Words like ‘maqam’, more common in official and Turkic music, should not be lumped together with all regional music. This only highlights the lack of expertise among researchers.” While acknowledging the positive impact of recording and documenting regional music, Tohidi insists on the need to take stock of past research, noting: “Although ethnomusicology is now

taught at universities, many professors lack hands-on experience and apply the same research models to every region, even though each area calls for its own unique approach.” He brings up his own proposal for developing music tourism across Iran, stating: “By putting on small music festivals in villages and drawing in tourists, it is possible to boost the local economy and bring home the importance of music to local people. This approach is far more effective than large, centralized festivals, which have veered off course into commercialization and mass appeal, moving away from the

true essence of regional music.” This researcher emphasizes, “To keep regional music alive, young people must be given the chance to pick up and learn. Free classes, instrument donations, and even paying students can breathe new life into this cultural heritage.” He also voices concern over the dire state of regional music following the passing of veteran artists, stating: “Even though many great masters — who were the storytellers of their regions’ musical culture — have passed away, there is still hope. By drawing inspiration from recorded works, it is possible

to revive regional music.” Tohidi also criticizes the sluggish performance of the House of Music in establishing a regional music association, urging immediate action and the creation of a think tank and gathering place for dialogue and solutions. In conclusion, he highlights the unparalleled diversity of regional music in Iran, expressing hope that with the right catalyst, this valuable legacy can be brought back to life and handed down to future generations.

The full article first appeared in Persian on IRNA.

Iranian regional music at crossroads of modernity, authenticity

OPINION

Iranian regional music stands as one of the oldest cultural and artistic hallmarks of the land — a tune springing from diverse climates, oral traditions, and the collective experiences of its people. Over the centuries, this music has been passed down from generation to generation, handed over from one heart to another. It is not merely an art form, but a living chronicle of history, geography, rituals, myths, and the joys and sorrows of those who have lived through their culture and entrusted it to the future in the form of melody and song. Across Iran’s varied geography, regional music takes on many forms: from the dutar playing of Khorasan Province to Kurdish maqams, from Azeri love songs to the driving rhythms of Lorestan, from southern ritual music to the epic ballads of Baluchestan. This diversity is not a sign of fragmentation, but rather bears witness to the cultural cohesion of the Iranian nation, which, despite ethnic and linguistic differences, has pulled together a unified cultural identity. Regional music can be seen as the auditory memory of a nation, which, even without formal notation or documentation, has managed to recount local and national history. Many of Iran’s musical greats trace their roots back to these regions and oral traditions. Masters such as Gholamali Pourataei, Haj Ghorban Soleimani, Shahmirza Moradi, Ashegh Shojaei, Morad Bakhshi, Mohsen Jalilzadeh, Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, Yadollah Semnani, and many more were not only musicians or singers, but also cultural bearers who conveyed profound meanings of life and human experience beyond mere melodies. Throughout history, Iranian regional music has come up against numerous challenges — from being overlooked in official cultural policy to losing ground to urban and commercial music. In recent decades, a new concern has cropped up for enthusiasts: how can the authenticity of this music be preserved in an age of globalization and technological change? Should regional music remain strictly traditional, or can it move with the times while holding onto its essence?



Peyman Bozorgnia

Answering these questions is no easy task. Unlike some other musical forms, regional music is deeply tied up with its social context, language, rituals, and environment. Any ill-informed intervention can tear it away from its roots and reduce it to a shallow, rootless commodity. In an interview with IRNA, musician and researcher Peyman Bozorgnia painted a comprehensive and concerning picture of the current state of regional music, warning of eroding authenticity. His analysis makes it clear that while Iranian regional music is still alive, its survival hinges on prudent management, understanding, solidarity, and stronger support. The following is the text of the interview with Bozorgnia, which has been edited for clarity and concision. Today, Iranian regional music is facing two major challenges: first, managing the inevitable changes brought about by globalization, the rise of digital media, and

foreign music; and second, preserving its authenticity and intangible heritage. For 30 years, these have been pressing concerns for those in the field, and the passing of veteran artists has only ramped up the worry. The lack of suitable successors has set off alarm bells for the future of regional music. Regional music, as the national and folk music of Iran, is inherently subject to change. The influence of other musical pieces — whether from neighboring countries or the West — on instruments, techniques, and maqams is undeniable. Traditional instrumentations are shifting, and some techniques and maqams are falling by the wayside. These changes are evident across wind, string, and percussion instruments. Without proper planning to keep these changes in check, the identity of regional music is under threat. Preserving the authenticity and heritage of regional music is very important. The traditional oral transmission, once carried out through maktab schools and masters, is now giving way to Western notation systems and new teaching methods, which have undermined some masters’ confidence and broken up the chain of knowledge transfer. In the past, music was

A musician plays Tanbur, an Iranian traditional music instrument.
● AMIN KARIMI/TASTEIRAN

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Musician Peyman Bozorgnia (standing) makes a speech at the unveiling of the music orchestra of the regions of Iran, held at Vahdat Hall, Tehran, in March 2022.
● SEYED SAEED REZA RAZAVI/MEHR

taught within families and inherited, with students putting in long apprenticeships under strict masters. Today, this tradition is falling out of favor, and formal education often works against the authenticity of the music. Notating traditional pieces sometimes strips away their spirit and core characteristics. Education is the main concern for those involved. The current educational system does not measure up to the needs of the field. There is, in fact, no comprehensive educational system for regional music. Efforts to set up a university for regional music have so far come to nothing. While some masters stick to traditional teaching methods, many students, lacking proper instruction, drift toward blending regional music with other genres. Although the new generation needs to get to grips with modern music theory, the culture and authenticity of regional music must not be left behind. Combining modern musical knowledge with a deep understanding of traditional maqams and instrument use is essential. The lack of a proper educational system has led many artists to settle for learning just a few pieces, rather than mastering the full range of traditional techniques and maqams, and thus they cannot live up to their role as regional musicians. The shortage of veteran teachers and the failure to tap into their experience only adds fuel to the fire. There must be a fundamental rethink, and a systematic approach that brings together traditional and modern methods to ward off the destruction of this valuable cultural heritage. Regional music in Iran is in a critical state and needs special attention. Although efforts are underway in current festivals, they are not paying off. The key question remains: Is this music dying out or simply undergoing change? Musicians must band together and bounce ideas off each other. Regional music has not been entirely wiped out, but it is certainly in flux. There are more regional musicians than ever, but unfortunately, the soul and authenticity of the music are fading away. Repertoires, melodies, stories, and the original culture of regional music are slipping from memory. To preserve regional music, a forward-looking approach is needed to get the ball rolling for the new generation. This does not mean throwing authenticity out the window; rather, by making changes that strike a chord with today’s youth, the music can be made attractive to them. For example, local instruments can be used to create new and appealing sounds — using the bass sound of the dutar instead of a Western bass guitar, for instance. Unnecessary dogmatism should be set aside so that regional music can move forward with innovation while holding onto its roots. Iranian regional music is deeply rooted and does not need to borrow from rootless elements of other genres to be appealing.

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