

● License Holder  
● ICPI CEO  
● Editor-in-chief  
● Deputy Editor-in-chief  
● Int'l & National Desk  
● Economy Desk  
● Sports Desk  
● Iranica Desk  
● Arts & Culture Desk  
● Language Editor

Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)  
Ali Motaghian  
Asgar Ghahremanpour  
Mostafa Shirmohammadi  
Javad Mohammad Ali, Amir Mozaffari, Delaram Ahmadi  
Zohreh Qanadi, Sadeq Dehqan  
Amirhadi Arsalanpour  
Leila Imeni  
Hamideh Hosseini  
Mehdi Ebrahim

● Editorial Dept. Tel  
● Address  
● ICPI Publisher  
● Advertising Dept. Tel/Email  
● Website  
● Email  
● Printing House

+98 21 84711225  
208, Khorramshahr Ave., Tehran, Iran  
+98 21 88548892-5  
+98 21 88500601/irandaily@iranagahiha.com  
www.irandaily.ir/newspaper.irandaily.ir  
irandaily@icpi.ir  
Iran Cultural & Press Institute



> [irandaily.ir](http://irandaily.ir) | [newspaper.irandaily.ir](http://newspaper.irandaily.ir) | [IranDailyWeb](http://IranDailyWeb)

Vol. 7959 ● Thursday, October 23, 2025 ● 100,000 rials ● 8 pages

# From Radif to resonance, allure of Persian music in West

By **Alireza Sepahvand**  
Journalist

## PERSPECTIVE EXCLUSIVE

In recent decades, Iranian music has crossed geographical and cultural borders to find audiences in Europe and the United States. From Mohammad-Reza Shajarian's concerts in Los Angeles to Hossein Alizadeh's performances and Kayhan Kalhor's collaborations with Western ensembles, and the growing popularity of artists such as Sohrab Pournazeri or modern electronic fusions rooted in Persian music — all show that the Western ear, despite profound cultural differences, is somehow enchanted by this sound.

But where does this attraction come from? What makes a listener in Paris or New York feel a sense of closeness and excitement when hearing the timbre of Tar (long-necked lute), Kamancheh (an Iranian spiked fiddle), or a Persian vocal performance?

### Desire for Novelty, 'the Other'

One of the main reasons Western listeners are drawn to Iranian music is its sense of freshness and otherness. In a world where Western pop music has become largely homogenized and predictable, the unfamiliar intervals, irregular rhythms, and unique timbres of Persian instruments create a surprising and refreshing experience. Iranian music, with its modal structure (the system of Dastgahs and Gushehs) and microtonal intervals, gently challenges the Western ear — as if it were hearing a new language of emotion. In fact, this difference functions as a form of Exoticism — that long-standing Western fascination with the mystery of the East. Just as 19th-century European painters were inspired by Oriental imagery, today's listeners seek new colors and emotional nuances in Middle Eastern, particularly Iranian, music.

### Intervals, modes connect East, West

One of the most fundamental differences between Iranian and Western classical music lies in their systems of intervals and modes. Iranian music is built on the Radif — a modal system composed of several Dastgahs (modes) and Gushehs (melodic fragments), each with its own tonal character, emotional color, and internal logic.

By contrast, Western classical music is based on major and minor scales and the equal division of the octave into twelve semitones (Equal Temperament), which gives it a sense of symmetry and predictability. In Persian music, however,

the intervals are subtler and more nuanced. The presence of microtones (quarter tones) between notes — absent from the Western system — creates a fluid and expressive quality, a sense of sliding and emotional flexibility. For the Western ear, these sounds may at first seem strange, but soon become deeply moving.

For example, the minor third in the Dastgah-e Shur is slightly smaller than the Western minor third, giving the mode a melancholic yet luminous feeling — unlike the darker, more rigid sadness of the Western minor scale.

Moreover, while Western scales remain fixed and repetitive, Persian music allows for modulation within a performance, with the Shahed (tonal center) and Ist (cadence) gradually shifting as the musician moves through different Gushehs.

This evolving tonality creates a sense of inner narration and emotional journey for Western listeners — as if the music flows not through harmonic progression, but through the transformation of spirit.

Interestingly, many 20th-century Western composers — Debussy, Messiaen, Bartók — also turned toward modal and non-equal temperaments for inspiration. In that sense, Persian music represents, for them, a return to the natural roots of sound and free modal expression.

Thus, the Western ear experiences Iranian intervals as something both new and familiar with new in tone and color, familiar in emotion and expression.

### Spirituality, inner reflection

In the fast-paced modern world, Persian music — with its emphasis on contemplation, silence, and introspection — offers a rare sense of calm. Traditional Persian singing, often set to the poetry of Rumi, Hafez, or Saadi, carries a deeply spiritual dimension.

Even for a Western listener unfamiliar with the language, the tone and delivery convey a distinctly mystical feeling. As Kayhan Kalhor once said, "Even if the listener doesn't understand a single word of the poem, they still feel the emotion." Through long sustained notes, slow improvisations, and open sonic spaces, this music detaches the mind from external noise — offering the same serenity many Westerners seek in meditation or new-age music.

### Technique, improvisation in dialogue with freedom

Another element that captivates Western listeners is the role of improvisation.

In Western music, improvisation survives mainly in genres like jazz, where audiences al-



ready appreciate its spontaneity. When an Iranian musician like Kalhor or Alizadeh creates music in the moment, that living creativity feels deeply authentic and exciting.

Improvisation in Persian music is a kind of dialogue — between the musician and the instrument, between tradition and the present moment. This contrasts sharply with Western classical music, which generally relies on fixed, written structures. To the Western ear, such performances embody life and freedom: a direct, emotional communication rather than a repetition of pre-composed notes.

### Universal language of emotion

Though the Persian musical system is complex and deeply rooted in tradition, the emotions it conveys are universal — sorrow, longing, love, spirituality. These are expressed through tone and inflection rather than words.

For instance, Shajarian's voice can move a French listener who doesn't understand Persian, simply through its sorrow, beauty, and grandeur. Persian music thus becomes a bridge of shared humanity.

When the sound of the Ney (end-blown flute) or Kamancheh rises plaintively, the listener, regardless of language or culture, connects it to their own experiences of love and loss.

### Cross-cultural collaborations bridge two worlds

Since the 1980s, Iranian musicians have engaged in fruitful collaborations with interna-

tional artists. Kayhan Kalhor's works with the Kronos Quartet, or his performances with Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble (which won a Grammy Award), as well as his "Ghazal" project with Shujaat Husain Khan, are among the most prominent examples.

These collaborations introduced Persian music to Western audiences through familiar formats and ensembles, creating a kind of cultural translation — preserving authenticity while making communication possible.

### Instruments showcase East unique sound

Traditional Iranian instruments — Tar, Setar, Santur, Kamancheh, and Ney — produce timbres that sound both unusual and poetic to Western ears. Their tone lies somewhere between roughness and delicacy, as if resonating from the depths of history.

In Western orchestras, each instrument serves a specific technical role, but in Persian music, the instrument sings. The Ney, with its sighing breath, or the kamancheh, with its human-like tremor, convey a deeply personal emotion that stands apart from the polished, studio-produced sounds of modern Western music.

The growing global interest in acoustic and organic sound textures has further increased appreciation for these instruments.

### Poetry, philosophy reveal culture's hidden depth

Persian music is inseparable from poetry. The verses of Rumi, Hafez, Khayyam, and

Saadi, often sung in traditional performances, carry profound philosophical and mystical meanings. Even when Western audiences don't understand the language, the translated texts or general concepts deeply move them.

Themes such as divine love, transcendence, unity of being, and the impermanence of the world are universal. Thus, Persian music is not merely sound — it is a vessel of thought and reflection.

### Reflections in media, academia

In recent decades, Iranian music has become a serious field of study in Western academia. Courses on Tar, Daf, and Persian vocal music are now offered at institutions like UCLA and universities in London. Numerous scholarly articles and ethnomusicological documentaries have explored the Dastgah and maqam systems, showing that Persian music appeals not only to the ear but also to the intellect.

Global media have increasingly highlighted Iranian artists, while digital platforms like YouTube, Spotify, and Instagram have made their works more accessible to international audiences.

### Human authenticity, emotional sincerity

Many Western listeners sense a rare honesty in Persian music. There is no theatrical "showmanship" in the Hollywood sense — only direct emotional expression.

This is why live performances by artists such as Alizadeh,

Kalhor, or Pournazeri — without elaborate visual effects or digital enhancements — can be profoundly moving.

Here, music is not a commercial product but a manifestation of the soul. For Western audiences weary of cultural consumerism, this authenticity is precious.

### Globalization, search for shared identity

In an age of globalization, cultural borders are fading. Western youth, particularly newer generations, seek to understand non-Western cultures. For them, Iranian music is not merely a listening experience but a cultural journey — a journey into a poetic and spiritual past.

At the same time, young Iranian musicians abroad are blending traditional roots with contemporary genres such as electronic or jazz, making Persian music more globally resonant. This fusion of tradition and modernity forms a bridge between worlds, showing that beauty can indeed be a universal language.

The appeal of Iranian music to Western audiences can be summed up in three words: difference, depth, and sincerity. Structurally, it differs from what the Western ear is accustomed to; emotionally and spiritually, it offers greater depth; and humanly, it speaks with unfiltered honesty.

In a world where much of music has become a consumable product, Persian music reminds us that sound can carry a soul. Perhaps that is why, whenever the Ney or kamancheh echoes in Western ears, it awakens something timeless — a feeling born of history, love, and humanity.