

Tombak speaking in 'universal language of rhythm'

Musician proving that Iranian percussion instrument can shine solo



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INTERVIEW EXCLUSIVE

The Iranian percussion instrument has the potential to move beyond its traditional accompanying role and establish an independent presence on international stages, says Iranian musician and instructor Milad Valizadeh.

Valizadeh, a tombak player, believes that the Iranian percussion instrument can shine on international stages as an independent instrument rather than serving solely as an accompaniment to vocals and melodic instruments. Emphasizing the importance of preserving the authenticity of Iranian music and the universal communicative power of rhythm, he discusses the goals of Kooban, an ensemble that explores new possibilities in Iranian percussion through group performances featuring tombaks alone, without melodic instruments.

Valizadeh began his professional journey in Amol, a city in northern Iran, where limited educational opportunities and a shortage of qualified instructors presented significant challenges. Through perseverance and continuous practice, he eventually moved to Tehran to study under prominent musicians, including Kambiz Ganjei, Navid Afghah and Mohammadreza Lotfi. These experiences helped him deepen his understanding of tombak performance, rhythm and the theoretical foundations of music. His collaborations with leading figures in Iranian classical and regional music have also shaped his understanding of the instrument's role in different musical traditions. Valizadeh regards rhythm as one of music's most fundamental elements and a language that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries. From this perspective, he sees the tombak not merely as an accompanying instrument but as one with considerable potential for independent performance and meaningful communication with audiences unfamiliar with Iranian music.

The establishment of Kooban reflects this artistic vision. By bringing together multiple tombak players without relying on melodic instruments, the ensemble seeks to explore the instrument's sonic, rhythmic and performance possibilities in a different format and create opportunities for its appearance at international events.

In this interview, Valizadeh discusses his artistic journey, his experiences working with prominent Iranian musicians, the independence of the tombak, the importance of preserving musical authenticity in a global context, and the challenges facing music education today.

SEPAHVAND: You began your career outside the capital and eventually performed in different countries. What made you believe that an Iranian instrument such as the tombak could cross the nation's borders and connect with audiences who might not even know its name?

VALIZADEH: My journey was full of ups and downs, particularly because of the limitations I faced in my hometown. There

was a shortage of teachers, experienced mentors and other educational resources.

I decided to make the most of the opportunities available to me. Through persistent practice, studying photographs of prominent musicians and finding ways to motivate myself, I continued pursuing my goal until I eventually moved to Tehran.

That was where my professional training really began under the guidance of the distinguished

master Kambiz Ganjei. I also studied with Navid Afghah for a period and learned music theory and rhythmic cycles, known as *advar*, under the late master Mohammadreza Lotfi.

I subsequently joined musical ensembles and gradually began working with respected musicians. These collaborations have always served two purposes for me: they have been an extension of my education and an opportunity to gain

practical experience.

My activities in Iran and abroad, as well as my participation in various album recordings, have helped bring the tombak into greater prominence, both in ensemble performances and as a solo instrument. This is particularly evident outside Iran, where rhythm and percussion occupy a special place and instruments such as the tombak can demonstrate their distinctive capabilities.

Unlike many Iranian instruments, the tombak is fundamentally rhythmic. When you perform for European audiences, do you feel they can connect with its rhythmic language even without knowing the Iranian modal system or the instrument's cultural background? What has your experience with international audiences been like?

As I mentioned earlier, rhythm holds a special place throughout the world because it is full of movement and energy. It is undoubtedly capable of attracting audiences. Rhythm is a universal language, and this applies to the tombak as much as it does to other percussion instruments. These instruments often draw large audiences and generate considerable curiosity. People are particularly surprised by the tombak's wide range of nuances

and the variety of sounds it can produce. Discovering how such diverse sounds emerge from a single instrument often encourages listeners to approach it with greater interest and appreciation.

You have worked with a diverse range of Iranian musicians, from leading performers of classical and percussion music to artists specializing in regional traditions. What have these collaborations contributed to your personal musical language? In particular, how have your experiences working with figures such as Ardashir Kamkar, Majid Derakhshani, Navid Afghah, Kambiz Ganjei and Faraj Alipour influenced your understanding of ensemble performance and the role of the tombak?

Working with these distinguished masters, who are a source of pride for Iranian music, has been an invaluable learning experience. It has been, and will continue to be, a source of knowledge and inspiration for me. My collaborations in both Iranian classical music and folk and regional music have broadened my perspective and deepened my understanding of music and rhythm.

Each of these musicians has a distinct artistic identity, musical vocabulary and approach. A percussionist, particularly a tombak player, must understand these different musical worlds and be able to communicate with each of them. You cannot rely on the same



Kooban Ensemble, founded by Milad Valizadeh (3rd-r) and comprised of tombak players, poses for a photo with their instruments after a performance.

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Tombak player Milad Valizadeh (R) performs on stage outside Iran with the legendary Luri kamancheh player and vocalist, Faraj Alipour.

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