Technical brilliance must not eclipse tombak's identity: *Virtuoso*



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REPORT EXCLUSIVE

Iranian tombak virtuoso Arash Farhangfar believes that technical advancement alone cannot secure the future of this important percussion instrument in Iranian music. The son of legendary musician Nasser Farhangfar, he argues that contemporary tombak playing must return to the instrument's authentic sound and distinctive identity while preserving rhythmic complexity, improvisation and the art of ensemble performance.

The tombak, a goblet-shaped percussion instrument, is a cornerstone of Iranian classical music. Over the decades, it has evolved from its traditional role as an accompanying instrument into a vehicle for increasingly elaborate solo performances, with musicians exploring new techniques and expanding its expressive possibilities.

Yet this development raises an important question: how can technical innovation enrich the instrument without obscuring its distinctive sound and musical identity?

Arash Farhangfar grew up in a family deeply immersed in music, poetry and calligraphy. He began learning the tombak from his father, the celebrated musician Nasser Farhangfar, at the age of eight. Throughout his career, he has collaborated with leading figures in Iranian music, including Mohammadreza Lotfi, Mohammad Reza Shajarian, Parviz Meshkatian and Jalal Zolfonun.

In this exclusive interview with Iran Daily, Farhangfar reflects on his early musical education, his father's legacy, his experiences performing with distinguished musicians, and his work as a teacher and author. He also discusses what he sees as a growing tendency to prioritize technical display over the tombak's authentic sound and the ability to perform within an ensemble.

For Farhangfar, preserving tradition does not mean simply imitating the past. It means understanding the instrument's fundamental principles, developing an individual musical voice and ensuring that innovation remains rooted in the tombak's distinctive sound, rhythmic language and expressive character.



Arash Farhangfar, tombak player, records the exercise from the instructional book "Siah Mashq".
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SEPAHVAND: You grew up in a family deeply connected to music and the arts, and your father, Master Nasser Farhangfar, was one of the most influential figures in the history of Iranian tombak playing. How did growing up in such an environment shape your musical outlook? And how did you find your own artistic voice while learning from a father whose style became a method in its own right?

FARHANGFAR: Growing up in such an environment naturally had a profound influence on me. My father was a major figure in Iranian music, and learning from him from an early age gave me an invaluable foundation. I was introduced not only to the technical aspects of the tombak but also to a particular way of thinking about music.

However, learning from a great master does not mean that a musician should simply reproduce everything that master did. One must understand the principles behind the music, learn the language of the instrument and gradually develop an individual approach. My father's method has its own distinctive characteristics, and I believe that preserving its values requires a deep understanding of those characteristics rather than superficial imitation.

You have worked with many prominent figures in Iranian music, including Mohammadreza Lotfi, Parviz Meshkatian, Dariush Pirniakan and other leading instrumentalists and vocalists. What have these collaborations taught you about the relationship between the tombak and other instruments, and how have they influenced your approach to rhythm, improvisation and musical dialogue?

Working with distinguished musicians provides an education that cannot be gained from technical practice alone. Each musician has a particular musical language, and accompanying them requires listening carefully, understanding their intentions and responding appropriately.

I have had the opportunity to work with important figures in Iranian music, including Mohammadreza Lotfi, Parviz Meshkatian, Jalal Zolfonun and Dariush Pirniakan. I have also accompanied musicians such as Ali-Asghar Bahari, Hassan Kassai, Ali Tajvidi and Fereydoun Hafezi. These experiences have helped me understand how different musical personalities approach rhythm, phrasing and improvisation.

I have particular admiration for Master Hassan Kassai. Working with musicians of this level teaches you that accompaniment is not simply a matter of maintaining a rhythmic pattern. It is about understanding the music as a whole, responding to the soloist and knowing when to contribute and when to leave space. The tombak player must listen attentively and remain musically alert. A successful performance depends on dialogue between the musicians, not merely on the technical ability of each individual performer.

The tombak has developed considerably as both an accompanying instrument and a solo instrument. In your view, how can performers expand its technical and expressive possibilities without losing the qualities that make its sound distinctive? What responsibilities do musicians have toward the instrument's authentic musical language?

We must focus on doing our own work. When you play the tombak, you should play the tombak. Your playing should not imitate another instrument, nor should you hold a tombak in your hands while trying to reproduce the expressive language of a different instrument. When you play the tombak, the sound people hear should be the sound of the tombak itself.

We need to give greater consideration to the instrument's authenticity. You can play with extraordinary technique and still play the tombak; you can be an accomplished musician and remain true to the instrument. Today, however, we have reached a point where someone performs exceptionally well and demonstrates impressive technical skills, yet when the performance ends, you feel like saying: "All right, well done! Now, could you play a little tombak for us?" That is precisely the problem. We need to reveal the instrument's authentic character and showcase the techniques that belong to the tombak itself.

The tombak-playing scene has become somewhat chaotic. You hear everything imaginable — every kind of noise. Master Siamak Banaei used the term "palasht-navazi" (lit. playing filthy) years ago, referring to playing that is disorderly, unrefined or lacking in musical coherence. Today, this kind of playing has reached its peak, and the situation has become quite troubling. In any case, this is one of the problems we are witnessing in tombak performance today.



Arash Farhangfar (3rd-R) poses for a photo with his father and legendary tombak player, Nasser Farhangfar (3rd-L) and other acquaintances in Tehran, Iran, in the summer of 1992.
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In addition to collaborating with the Sheyda and Aref ensembles and other leading Iranian music groups, you have also performed in duos with distinguished artists such as Master Reza Shafieian. What are the technical and expressive differences between playing the tombak in a large ensemble and performing in a duo? In the more intimate setting of a duo, how can a percussionist maintain an independent musical voice while responding to the subtlest musical nuances of the other performer?

In fact, I believe playing in an ensemble places greater limitations on a musician. Many aspects of performance change in a group setting. Playing in an ensemble is different from performing in a duo, particularly when improvisation is involved. An ensemble generally operates within a more defined framework, and with so many musicians playing together, the approach to the tombak inevitably changes.

When you sit down with just one other musician to improvise or perform a piece, however, I think the experience becomes much more comfortable, beautiful and engaging. A group can restrict your freedom to some extent, unless it is an ensemble you have worked with for years, rehearsed extensively with and developed a deep musical rapport with. That is a different matter altogether.

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Duo performances and small-group collaborations offer a different kind of musical environment. We, the musicians associated with the method of Farhangfar, often improvise in these settings. Even when a piece has been composed in advance, we try to preserve an element of improvisation, introduce variations and avoid performing in the same way every time or falling into predictable patterns.

You have performed in numerous countries across Europe, Asia, Africa and the Middle East. How have non-Iranian audiences responded to the tombak and its distinctive sonic and performance characteristics? Do cultural differences influence how listeners perceive rhythm and percussion, and how can a performer connect with such audiences without compromising the instrument's authentic identity?

When you perform in different countries, you often find that audiences — particularly in places where music is taken seriously, such as many European countries — have a different appreciation of percussion instruments. They enjoy percussion and are genuinely interested in it. Even when you perform instrumental music without vocals, they listen attentively and find the experience enjoyable.

Master Nasser Farhangfar is also internationally renowned. During your tours and performances abroad, have you encountered audiences who were already familiar with his artistry and his method of tombak playing? How has this familiarity influenced their understanding of your performances and the legacy of Iranian tombak playing?

Yes, many people were interested in the Farhangfar method. They knew my father, and I met many foreign listeners who were thoroughly familiar with my father's tombak playing, as well as that of Master Hossein Tehrani and Master Mohammad Esmaeili. They spoke of these masters with great respect and admiration.

Naturally, this makes my responsibility even greater. Whenever I perform, I always try to present both the Farhangfar method and