

DARIUSH DOLAT-SHAHI

Electronic music, tar and sehtar



Sudi - Sharaf-Shahi

CENTER FOR FOLKLORE PROGRAMS
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RETURN TO ARCHIVE

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There could not be a more seemingly disparate compositional scenario as a work for tar or sehtar and electronic music: one a mystically primitive instrument whose musical performance heritage is one of improvisational spiritualism; the other a highly technical, modern medium founded in acoustical science in direct defiance of any traditional notion of performance. Yet, in the skillful work of Dariush Dolat-shahi, a common, basic mandate of each "instrument" is profoundly explored. That premise is the unity of thought and substance in expression, that is, that musical elements determine the structure of the composition itself.

The tar and the sehtar are the two most popular native plucked-string instruments in the Persian musical tradition. The sehtar dates back as far as the 8th Century B.C.; the tar, considerably younger, first appeared in the early 18th Century. The tar is a double-bellied instrument with a face of sheepskin membrane; its six strings are usually tuned in pairs. The 26 frets are movable along the long neck, allowing the performer a wide range of microtonal pitches. The tar is plucked with a small metal plectrum held between thumb and forefinger. By contrast, the sehtar is a smaller instrument, both in size and tone. It is a pear-shaped instrument made entirely of wood; the modern version of the instrument has four strings. Like the tar, the frets of the sehtar are movable along its slender neck. The delicate timbre of the sehtar demands a small and intensely attentive audience and is therefore ideal for the intimate, spiritual settings of traditional Persian music.

Not only does the structure of the instrument imply a performance technique based on the improvisation of melodic elements, but the settings of Persian musical structures also implies an emphasis on a spiritual, rather than strictly rational, melodic progression. Persian music is organized into 12 dastgah (scales); each dastgah provides 20 to 50 melodic formulas or gousheh. During a performance, the musician selects, by a process somewhat more spiritual than rational, the goushehs and dastgah upon which to base his improvisational explorations.

Because of anti-musical Islamic strictures, Persian art music never truly developed as a concert or public art, in the Western sense. Its traditional instruments are delicate in timbre; performance was confined to the royal court or the privacy of one's home. Under Islamic rule, only music for holy wars, sacramental ceremonies and the chanting of the Koran was approved. Significantly, in direct opposition to the Islamic clergy, mystic orders developed outside the legal and official framework of Islam, the Sufis. The Sufis believed that only through music could one attain true union with God, could bring a clarity

of thought and a balance of mind to the soul.

In the tradition of the Sufis' sacred concert gatherings, the memories of which Dariush Dolat-shahi admits as a distinct influence on his work, this composer seeks to attain the balance of electronic abstraction and traditional spiritualism. Another important influence was the epic poetry of eleventh century poet-historian Ferdowsi, in whose metered mythologies is contained one of the earliest histories of Persia before the Arab conquest of 636 A.D. As in traditional Persian musical bases, harmony is less important than melodic and rhythmic activities; the more primary musical instincts, which are improvised from a consciousness that combines the intellect and the intuition. The electronic elements of the work, in contrast to their usual role of an opposing abstraction, here serve only to complement and underscore the creations of the performer. The very structure of the work, the relationship between the electronic and human elements, becomes a metaphor for the balance, in the realm of higher consciousness, between the rational and the spiritual elements of the soul. The unity of thought and substance is ultimately achieved.

Dariush Dolat-shahi began his study of Persian traditional and folk music at age 10 at the Teheran Conservatory of Music. After earning his Bachelor of Music degree from Teheran University, the Dutch government awarded him a four-year Fellowship to study at the Amsterdam Conservatory of Music and at the Institute of Sonology in Utrecht. In the Netherlands, Dolat-shahi studied principally with Ton de Leeuw, Jos Kunst, G.M. Koenig and F.C. Weiland. Following a brief term as Assistant Professor at Teheran University, Dolat-shahi came to the United States to pursue his doctoral studies at Columbia University. Studying with Wen Chung, Davidovsky, Ussachevsky and Arel, Dolat-shahi received his Doctor of Musical Arts degree in 1981. Now a New York City resident, Dr. Dolat-shahi has participated in many international events, including the Edward Van Beinum Foundation and the Gaudeamus Festival in the Netherlands, the International Festival of Computer and Electronic Music in New York, and the 1983 27th Biennial Conference for Traditional Music at Columbia University. His commissions and performances have included those of the Teheran Symphony Orchestra, the Persepolis Festival of Arts, the English Chamber Orchestra, the Utrecht Symphony Orchestra and the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic Orchestra. In reviewing one of his performances, Tim Page of the *New York Times* characterized the work of Dariush Dolat-shahi as "tremulously beautiful."

Rachel S. Siegel

SIDE 1 1—Samā' (tar and electronic) 8:40
2—Shābistān (sehtar and electronic) 6:40
3—Hūr (tar and electronic) 3:10

SIDE 2 1—Zahāb (tar and electronic) 13:10
2—Rāzm (tar and electronic) 6:20

The music on this record was realized at the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center, and premiered at the Carnegie Recital Hall, December 1985.
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