DARIUSH DOLAT-SHAHI
Electronic music, tar and sehtar
There could not be a more seeming­
ly disparate compositional scenario
for a work for tar or sehtar and elec­
tronic music: one a mystically primi­
tive, manual instrument whose musical per­
formance heritage is one of improvision­
al spiritualism; the other a highly tech­
tical, modern medium grounded in accou­nted science, in direct defiance of any tradit­
onal notion of performance. Yet, in the skilful
masterpieces of Dariush Dola­t-shah, a com­
moran, basic mandate of each instru­
ment is profoundly explored: that per­
formance is unified with its own inner and
substance in expression, that is, that
musical elements determine the struc­
ture of the composition itself.

The tar and the sehtar are the two
most popular native plucked-string
instruments in the Persian musical tra­
dition. The sehtar dates back as far
as the 8th Century B.C., the tar, con­
siderably younger, first appeared in
the early 16th Century. The tar is a
double-strung instrument with a face of sheepskin membrane; its six
strings are usually tuned in g-c-d.
The 26 frets are movable along the long
neck, allowing the performer a wide
range of micropolyphonic pitches. The
sehtar is plucked with a small metal pic­
tum held between thumb and fore­
finger. 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 sen­
tar are movable along its slender
neck. The delicate timbre of the sen­
tar demands a small and intensely
intimate audience and is therefore
designed for the intimate, spiritual settings
of traditional Persian music.

Not only does the structure of the instru­
mant imply a performance tech­
nique based on the improvisation
of melodic elements, but the settings of
Persian musical traditions also im­
pies an emphasis on a spiritual,
rather than strictly rational, melodic
progression. Persian music is orga­
nized into 12 dastgahs (scales); each
dastgah provides 20 to 50 melodic
formulas or gashans. During a per­
formance, the musician selects, by
process somewhat more spiritual
than rational, the gashans and dast­
gahs upon which to base his improvis­
tional explorations.

Because of anti-musical Islamic struc­
tures, Persian art music never truly
developed as a concert or public art:
in the Western sense. Its traditional in­
struments are delicate in texture, per­
formance was confined to the royal
court or the privacy of one's home.
Under Islamic rule, only music for holy
war, sociopolitical ceremonies and
the chanting of the Koran was ap­
proved. Significantly, in direct oppo­
sition 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 Sufi's sacred
concert gatherings, the memories of
which Dariush Dola­t-shah admits as
a distinct influence on his work, this
composer seeks to attain the bal­
ance of electronic abstraction and
traditional spirituality. Another impor­
tant influence was the epic poetry of
eleventh century poet-historian Fer­
dows, in whose metered mytholo­
gies is contained one of the earliest
histories of Persia below the Arab con­
quest of 636 A.D. As in traditional Per­
sian musical traditions, harmony is less
important than melodic and rhyth­
ic activities; the more primary musi­
cal instincts, which are improved
from a consciousness that combines
the intellect and the intuition. The
electronic elements of the work, in
contrast to their usual role of an op­
posing 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-shah began his study of
Persian traditional and folk music
at the age of 10 at the Tehran Conser­
vatory of Music. After earning his Bache­
lor of Music degree from Tehran
University, the Dutch government
awarded him a four-year Fellowship
to study at the Amsterdam Conserva­
tory of Music and at the Institute of Sonology in Utrecht in the Nether­
lands. Dola­t-shah studied principally with Ton de Leeuw, Jos Kunst, G.M.
Koening and F.C. Weiland. Following
a brief term as Assistant Professor at
Teheran University, Dola­t-shah came
to the United States to pursue his doc­
toral studies at Columbia University.
During his time as a resident, Dr. Dola­t-shah has par­
ticipated in many international
events, including the Edward Van
Beinum Foundation and the Gauke­
namus Festival in the Netherlands, the
International Festival of Computer
and Electronic Music in New York,
and the 1983 27th Biennial Confer­
ce for Traditional Music at Colum­
bia University. His commissions and per­ormance have included those of the Tehran Symphony Orchestra,
the Penelope Festival of Arts, the Eng­
ish Chamber Orchestra, the Utrecht
Symphony Orchestra and the Nether­
lands Radio Philharmonic Orchestra.
In reviewing one of his performances,
the page of the New York Times char­
acterized the work of Dariush Dola­t­
shah as "tremendously beautiful.

Rachel S. Siegel

SIDE 1
1—Sama (tar and electronic) 8:40
2—Shabistan (sehtar and electronic) 6:40
3—Hür (tar and electronic) 3:10

SIDE 2
1—Zahob (tar and electronic) 13:10
2—Razm (tar and electronic) 6:20