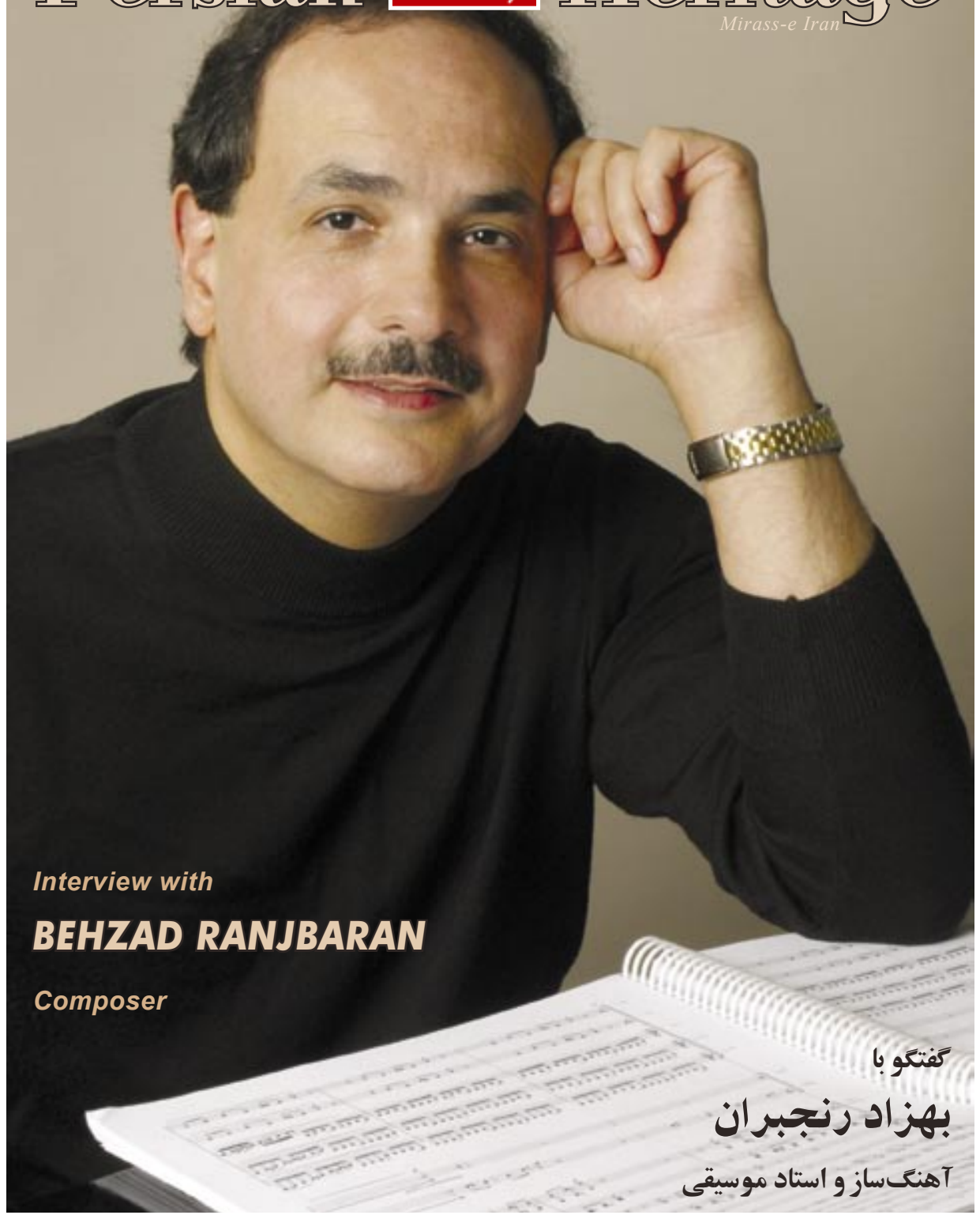


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Interview with

BEHZAD RANJBARAN

Composer

گفتگو با

بهزاد رنجبران

آهنگ ساز و استاد موسیقی



Professor Ranjbaran please introduce yourself to our readers?

First of all I would like to thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak with you and your readers. I was born in Tehran, Iran in 1955 and moved to the US in 1974 to continue my musical education. My formal training began at age 9 at the Tehran Music Conservatory where I studied the violin. Following my graduation from the Conservatory I attended Indiana University and later received my doctorate in music composition from The Juilliard School in New York where I currently teach.

What makes Juilliard the premier music school in the world?

Many factors contribute to the fame of this music school. Among those I should count the excellence of the faculty, the extraordinary level of talent and dedication of its students, its location at the heart of Lincoln Center in New York City, and its proximity to the Metropolitan Opera, the New York Philharmonic and other cultural mainstays. Also, in recent decades its reputation has been enhanced by the fact that some of the most celebrated classical performers, composers, actors and dancers have been trained at the Juilliard School.

INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR BEHZAD RANJBARAN

Composer

By: Shahrokh Ahkami

Was your interest in music in composition or playing violin?

My formal musical studies began with playing violin at the Tehran Music Conservatory. From my early years, I was very interested in composition and eventually followed my passion to be a composer. Currently I devote my time mostly to composition as well as teaching at Juilliard. However, I would love to have more time to play violin.

With your Iranian classical background was it difficult for you to make the change into western music and the United States?

I didn't have any difficulty in continuing my music studies in America since my training in Iran was in western classical music. The Tehran Music Conservatory was one of the only conservatories in Iran where western classical music was taught. So, my early musical training was primarily shaped by western classical music. In fact, at the Tehran Music Conservatory, we were not encouraged to learn Iranian classical music or play Iranian instruments. Most of our teachers were concerned that the quarter and microtones of Iranian Classical music would corrupt our musical ear! To the contrary, I believe that the study of Iranian classical music should have been encouraged, and included in the school's curriculum. In fact, the study of Iranian music undoubtedly would have enriched our musical education. Since I was interested in learning about Iranian music, I took some lessons at the National Conservatory of Music, which was devoted to Iranian Classical music. I was also hugely interested in Iranian folk music as well.

I am glad that I studied Iranian music on my own, as it has become a source of inspiration in my compositions in America. I incorporate elements of Iranian rhythm, melody and instrumental color in my mu-

sic. During my early years in Iran, it was rare to see renowned classical musicians play Iranian music. However, it was not uncommon at that time for Iranian classical musicians to study western classical music. For example, I vividly remember that Rahmatollah Badiyi studied violin in both Iranian and western classical traditions.

Do you have a mentor?

I studied violin with Vahe Khochayan and Hratch Manoukian at the Tehran Music Conservatory in the late 1960's. Like many of my teachers they were trained in Europe. I have fond memories of both and after all these years I am still in contact with them.

When I listen to your work it is obvious that you are influenced by the Persian culture and its music, am I correct? Please tell us about your works.

Many of my works are inspired by Persian music, literature and history. A good example is my "Persian Trilogy", a collection of three orchestral works inspired by episodes in Shahnameh. The London Symphony Orchestra conducted by JoAnn Falletta recorded these three works in a CD called "Persian Trilogy" several years ago. I became very interested in Shahnameh at a young age when my mother won a copy of it in a literary contest in Tehran in the early 1960's. I composed my Persian Trilogy for symphony orchestra over the course of 11 years, beginning with "Simorgh" in 1989, "The Blood of Seyavash" in 1994 and finally "Seven Passages" (*Haft Khan Rostam*) in 2000.

Shahnameh is the masterpiece of the Persian language and its stories reflect a wide range of human emotions and characters with all their complexities and inner conflicts. It has inspired generations of poets and painters but surprisingly, not many

musicians. Somehow, Shahnameh has not been prominently incorporated into Iranian classical music. However, I believe the epic nature of Shahnameh is well suited for the symphony orchestra with all its power and variety of instrumental colors.

The first work in the Persian Trilogy is “Simorgh”, which is somewhat similar to the Phoenix, a well-known character in the west. This piece was commissioned and performed by the Long Beach Symphony in Long Beach, California in 1993 with JoAnn Falletta, conductor. This piece holds a special place for me, as it relates back to my childhood. As you know Simorgh was said to have lived in the Damavand Mountains, which are east of Tehran. As a young child I remember running up to the rooftop in the mornings, hoping to see Simorgh circling the snow-filled summit of Damavand Mountain with the young white haired Zaal on her back.

“The Blood of Seyavash” is the story of the young prince Seyavash. His commitment to high moral principles becomes his downfall and eventually causes him to tragically lose his life. In Persian history, Seyavash stands as the symbol of courage, integrity, and honesty. Based on these characteristics I chose this piece for a ballet. Nashville Ballet in Tennessee produced it in 1994. The staging and the ballet costumes, inspired by the 16th century Persian miniatures, were truly magnificent. The performing team consisted of 16 dancers and a 50-member Nashville Symphony Orchestra. The ballet was a huge success and during the several performances, I had a bittersweet feeling; sweet for its success and a bit of sadness since there were no Iranians in attendance.

“Seven Passages” was the final work in the Trilogy taking its inspiration from the Seven Labors of Rostam in Shahnameh. Rostam is the main hero of Shahnameh and stands as a symbol of integrity, wisdom and courage in battles with evil forces.

I have always been fascinated by Shahnameh’s artistic excellence. It explores a broad array of human emotions and characters as well as celebrating integrity, courage and wisdom. Shahnameh is the magnum opus of Persian literature that belongs to the world.

Tell us about the success of these works and how the audiences have responded.

The response to these performances has been very enthusiastic and supportive.

A number of symphony orchestras have already performed the Persian Trilogy in recent seasons with success. Each one was special and memorable in its own way. Last year, the Philadelphia Orchestra performed “Seven Passages” as part of its educational programs in conjunction with Philadelphia schools. Thousands of young students learned about Shahnameh through these performances at the Kimmel Center in Philadelphia. This past season, Fort Worth Symphony in Texas performed “The Blood of Seyavash” with great conviction and flair. The performances with Fort Worth Symphony were part of my residency with that orchestra this year. Also, I should mention the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra performing “Seven Passages” on March 20th (the first day of Norooz) of 2009.

Have you written works inspired by other poets besides Ferdowsi?

I have several other large works inspired by Persian poetry. I should mention “Songs of Eternity” for soprano and orchestra with text from the Ruba’iyat of Omar Khayyam. It was premiered by the famed American soprano, Renee Fleming and the Seattle Symphony in 2002 and was just recorded by the Fort Worth Symphony. I have a particular affinity for this piece as it explores the timelessness of Khayyam’s poetry. It ends with the line “Seek out these, life once gone cannot be sought again”

Another work is “Open Secret” for chorus and chamber orchestra written on poems of Rumi. Last year, I also composed “We are One!” for chorus on the text by

Saadi. It was commissioned and premiered by the fifty-member Ithaca Choir in New York. It was a fascinating experience to see how this talented choir learned to sing “We Are One” in Farsi! The Ithaca Choir took the piece on an Eastern US tour this spring.

What direction is classical music taking in today’s world and how do you see your place as an Iranian composer in International scene.

This is an interesting question. Western Classical music initially evolved as a synthesis of several styles in Europe over a few centuries. During the 19th and 20th centuries, it was widely accepted by Russia and many countries in Asia, Middle East, North and South America. It has truly become an international language with great flexibility in incorporating many different traditions. Composers in each country have expanded the boundaries of this language with the sound of their native music. In Iran, many composers have written for the symphony orchestra in the last 70 years, so it has become a branch of Iranian music as well. My music is written in this international medium inspired by elements of Iranian art and music.

I am also very interested in world peace as an important social issue of our time. In 2005, I composed “Awakening” for string orchestra on the theme of war and peace on a commission by the “Great Mountains Music Festival” in South Korea. It is a celebration of peace and its triumph over conflict. I choose Awakening as the



title to underline the individual's responsibility and greater awareness in the sanctity of preserving peace. The 8 years of the Iran-Iraq war with hundreds of thousands of dead and wounded is just another reminder of the brutality of war in recent years.

Sejong Soloists premiered "Awakening" in the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Korea in a large peace festival. It was a truly moving experience for me to hear the piece in such a place; really unforgettable. Peace is a very important concern among the Korean people, as they have lived in the shadow of war for the last 50 years. The memories of war in the 1950's are still strong.

Earlier you showed me a picture where the notes of the musical piece formed the vision of the Arc of triumph, can you explain this?

Yes, the main 5-note motif is used to craft an "Arc de Triumph" in the music of "Awakening", visually creating a symbolic gesture to represent the triumph of peace over conflict.

You have traveled to Iran several times in recent years, have those visits influenced

your works?

In recent years I had the opportunity to travel to Iran and visit a few beautiful cities. As a result of the trips I composed "Shiraz", "Isfahan" and "Fountains of Fin" for chamber ensembles. Interestingly, when a performance of "Shiraz" for violin, cello and piano was broadcast live on the national radio in Australia, there was a talk that this piece was about the Australian Shiraz wine! Then it was clarified that indeed the piece was honoring the city of Shiraz in Iran and its famous poets and enchanting gardens.

The Philadelphia Chamber Players commissioned and premiered "Isfahan" in 2007 as the celebration of their 30th anniversary. "Fountains of Fin" for flute, violin and cello, was inspired by the beauty of the garden of Fin in Kashan, Iran, as well as a tribute to Amir Kabir, the great reformist prime minister of the 19th century. Amir Kabir was slain in the bath of the garden of Fin on the order of Naseraldin Shah in 1852. The bath in the garden is considered somewhat of a sacred ground. This piece ends with a eulogy for this great man who contributed enormously in modernizing Iran.

Amir Kabir was considered the father of modern Iran. His aspirations paralleled the modernization of Japan. It is interesting to see the contrast between the two nations today! I always wonder where Iran would be in world society if he were not slain!

Amir Kabir was a man of a great vision whose life was tragically cut short. It was a devastating loss in a critical time in the modern history of Iran.

Besides your music do you have any other hobbies?

Literature, history, poetry and world music! Among the music courses that I teach at Juilliard School, I particularly enjoy my world music class. I initiated the course

into the Juilliard curriculum a few years ago. It explores music from China, Japan, India, Iran and Middle Eastern countries to music traditions in Africa and Latin America. Learning and teaching such diverse musical traditions has been a most fascinating experience for me. It has provided me with more global view about the role of music in society in many countries. Also it has given me the opportunity to find parallels and contrasts between the music of Iran and other countries as well, particularly the neighboring nations.

Are there really similarities between Persian music and the music of India, Turkey, Greece and other Arab nations?

Absolutely. We have to keep in mind that these countries have much common history and interaction with one another over their long histories. One could see many parallels in their language, culture and even their cuisines. The music of Iran, Arab and north India has influenced one another in many ways. Particularly the Arab, Turkish and Iranian music have similar aesthetics, which was evolved much closer during the Islamic period. Each society has its unique characteristics, however one could easily find elements like instruments borrowed from one another. There is no purity in culture, rather a degree of authenticity.

There are also common elements between Iranian and Greek music in modes and vocalizing techniques, though not nearly as much as the countries we just discussed.

Do you believe Persian classical music is at a standstill?

This is a critical and important issue for Iranian music. Over the past 80 years serious efforts have been made to preserve Iranian Classical music through notation and recording. It is essential to protect and safeguard one of the most important musical traditions in Asia before it is harmed by the rapid changes in society. However we should support musicians who are experimenting with new approaches to Iranian music.

But, we should also distinguish between the purists who continue to perform on the path of tradition and those who are experimenting with new ideas. I don't see a conflict between the two approaches. In many countries like Japan the traditionalists coexist along with the experimentalists.

THEODORE PRESSER COMPANY
Behzad Ranjbaran
Awakening
for String Orchestra

Premiere: 26 August, 2005, International Inauguration Great Mountain Music Festival, Pyeongchang, South Korea
Time: 17'
Staff: String Orchestra
Commissioned by International Inauguration and the Great Mountain Music Festival in South Korea
Published in 2005, Kang

Andante con Basso - Large spirituale - Andante con Basso (1/80)

Preserving the sanctity of peace is a common desire of all humanity. It is hard to understand why humans at times are drawn to war, when prosperity and happiness can be gained by peace. It is so fitting to celebrate peace with music, an inclusive art form that transcends time, cultures and generations.

Awakening was composed as a reflection on war and peace. It is one continuous movement with three interconnected sections: *Andante con Basso*, *Large spirituale* and *Andante con Basso*. The melodic and harmonic basis of *Awakening* is a short motive, based at the outset of the piece and is continuously varied and transformed as the work progresses. The agitated first section is followed by a meditative and contemplative middle section (*large spirituale*). The final section shares many characteristics of the first section but with a sense of optimism that brings the piece to an energetic finale.

—Behzad Ranjbaran

Notes: the main 5-note motif of *Awakening* is used to craft an "Arc de Triumph" in the music, visually creating a symbolic gesture to represent the triumph of peace over conflict, measures 106 and 187 are a minor stage of measures 104 and 185.

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Also, we have to keep in mind that what we call Iranian classical music is the music that is inherited from the 19th century. We really don't know how exactly Iranian music was centuries ago since the documentation was mostly theoretical rather than notational.

Has progress been made in Persian classical music?

I prefer to use the word change rather than progress since it is hard to define artistic progress. Music evolves through constant interaction between the forces of innovation and tradition. An innovative addition in music or in any aspect of culture might eventually become a tradition. Often, there is less resistance to change when the innovation is introduced gradually. However we now live in time of mass media and dizzying rapid changes in all aspects of life.

A number of musicians in Iran have developed innovative approaches to Iranian classical music. What direction this will take is still unknown. Ultimately, it is the people who will decide what aspect of innovation will become part of the next tradition. As we know, all aspects of our musical tradition, at some point, were considered innovations. For example the popularity of Pish-Daramad, initiated by Darvish Khan at the turn of the 20th century has now become widely accepted as musical tradition. Also, some traditions that have gone out of fashion during a time period may become popular again. For example, during the 1960's Kamancheh was widely replaced by violin in Iran. However the tide has turned again in favor of kamancheh in recent years.

What is your opinion of the new and younger musicians?

I traveled to Iran last summer for a brief time and was encouraged to see the diversity of music recorded in CD by the young musicians. A few decades ago there were only a few musical categories in Iran. But now there is a tremendous movement in fusion between classical Persian music, pop music, regional music and folk elements as well as electronic and religious music. I anticipate in short time we will witness an explosion of all kinds of musical experimentation in Iran. Looking at the tens of different Grammy Award categories in America might give us an idea of what to expect in the future in Iran. This is a widespread trend in many countries as well.

I particularly like the experimentation with regional music where the vitality of folk music is really exciting. There are young groups, particularly Kurdish, that are producing lively and innovative music.

Does this make you hopeful or frightened for Persian Classical music?

I am hopeful about the future of Iranian music. The documentation and recording of Iranian classical music and regional music is substantial. It has saved our musical heritage for future generations. In my recent trip, I purchased over 100 CDs of all kinds of music. I particularly like the anthologies of "A century of Avaz" and "A century of Tar" as well as many collections of Iranian masters like the "Radif of Mirza Abdollah". I also enjoy regional music, even finding a recording of music for Zorkhaneh! I have listened to that recording many times with delight.

The wealth of recorded music allows the Iranian musicians to create music that is fused by all these influences. It is not hard to imagine that soon Iranian music will be even more vibrant and diverse if we add the global influence to this mix.

Do you have an opinion on the new Iranian music coming out of Los Angeles?

From what I have heard, it is pop music that serves a segment of the Iranian community in Diaspora. I hope the Iranian community would broaden its support to other types of music like the Iranian classical, folk and even symphonic music.

You made a somewhat risky move when you began to compose music for Ferdowsi's masterpieces. What were the reactions to these pieces?

Composing the "Persian Trilogy" was my natural response to a fascination with Shahnameh, which was formed in my teenage years. I am thrilled that audiences and musicians alike have responded enthusiastically to these works. The Western audience is much more familiar with the stories of 1001 Nights, but know very little about Shahnameh. Part

of the popularity of 1001 Nights is certainly attributed to the beautiful music of Scheherazade by Russian composer Rimsky Korsakov, always a concert favorite around the world. However, Shahnameh is going through a renaissance of its own with new translations and exhibitions. In the concert world, thousands of people who have heard the Persian Trilogy in concert halls or through the CD have also become more acquainted with Shahnameh as well.

I should mention that the Persian Trilogy is just a small part of my works. I have also written other pieces like a violin concerto, inspired by Kamancheh, for the American violinist Joshua Bell, a cello concerto and a piano concerto. In my piano concerto, I was inspired by the sound of Deraz Nay, used in Norooz celebration in Persepolis as well as using DAF, a popular Persian percussion instrument. It was premiered by pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet, and the Atlanta Symphony in 2008.

As an Iranian composer working in America were you met with challenges?

It is always more challenging for an artist to work in a new country. However, I have been for the most part encouraged and supported by the musical community. It is the international character of classical music that allows composers and performers to work in different countries. Music is a powerful means of human expression that transcends borders and nationalities. I am delighted to see that more Iranian musicians are performing abroad. I hope this trend continues in the future.

