History of electronic music in Iran

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This article aims to present in a brief form the history of electronic music in Iran – music that has been created by Iranians as well as the music by the foreign artists, who have managed to present it inside country. Iran shows a rare complexity when it comes to talk about the music, especially the music connected inevitably to the culture of the West. The domination of tradition and folklore in almost every area of life is one of the elements that strongly shape the cultural development of this Middle-Eastern country.

To be able to freely talk about the phenomenon of Iranian modern music, we need to point out the process of social changes that occurred forty years ago. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 inevitably sets the borderline between two different worlds in Iran, both in social and especially cultural area. From now on, "the particular sociological and political context of Iran, a country whose strong cultural structure does not simply allow for adopting new values, has always been problematic for composers"[1]. In widely understood contemporary, Iranian music connects two very different musical worlds – the local tradition and the music of the West. The changes that led to this situation have its beginning at the end of XIX-century, when economic and political relationship between Iran and European countries start to grow stronger. As a result, Persian music is full of musical elements taken from European tradition – on a surface, while its inner core of thinking stays deeply in Persian modality and philosophical ideas, like a solid monochrome canvas for the artist experimenting with a method of speech. Same thing reflects in the way of presenting and giving knowledge to all next generations of musicians. Traditional relationship between a teacher and his students was more like a relationship between a master (per. *morshed*) and his listeners, sacred connection, where students are devoted to his teachings and follow his path without a hesitation. The first music teaching institution of more western shape was the Music Department at Tehran University, which got opened within the faculty of Fine Arts in 1965[2]. The biggest aim of this facility was to put stress on the western type of educational services, which lead to receiving

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[1] Farhang Alireza, *Electronic Music in Iran: Tradition and Modernity*, Université Paris-Sorbonne Paris-IV, 2009.

[2] Momayyez Morteza, *Faculties of the University of Tehran. II Faculty of Fine Arts*, Encyclopedia Iranica, Vol. IX, Fasc. 2, pp. 142-143, 1999.

a diploma of Arts after fulfilling several-year study program in particularly chosen type of activity for an emerging artist.

It is very hard to analyze and describe the development of Iranian electronic music because of one simple fact – there are not a lot of written sources, presenting the situation of this genre of music in the past. The same issues appear while speaking about electronic music scene nowadays, which will be presented in further part of this work. Due to the very specific way of treating music in Iran, the musical layers that we know exist in most of the foreign countries, have been reduced here to only a several strongly speaking genres with dedicated to it audience circle.

Iran is truly a unique Muslim country, which does not totally ban the genre of music, although there have been some years that the development of musical language has been radically stopped[3]. Taking into consideration the history and all the social changes progressing in the country, I have decided to divide the history of electronic music in Iran into three periods:

- late 1960s – Islamic Revolution 1979 – first phase of electronic music in Iran
- 1979 – 2005 – phase of limited development of electronic music
- 2005 – till now – advanced development and researches in electronic music

At this part, I would like to present the situation of electronic music from the very first experiments until the current situation of the genre. A reader will approach several names, which create the history and present of the electronic music researches in Iran. Furthermore, to understand better all the phenomena occurring in the country, I will try to describe the attitude of people towards the electronic music, their expectations and as a result – actions that contemporary music scene artists take to please their listeners or create their own specific taste in this genre.

First electronic music experiments can be spotted in Iran during 1960s in a works of composers like Alireza Mashayekhi or Dariush Dolatshahi. Without a shadow of doubt both of them can be called pioneers of a genre in Persia, although we need to remember that still unpopularity of the Western, or also called, "foreign" trends in culture could seem not to be

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[3] A period right after the Islamic Revolution of 1978-1979 and through the war between Iran and Iraq, between years 1981-1989. Music was almost completely banned in the country. The only ones acceptable were the traditional music, war songs and revolutionary patriotic songs (author's note).

welcome by native musicians. The platform for making people familiar with the recent achievements in culture was for sure the annual Shiraz Arts Festival, taking place in the ancient site of city Persepolis. The last Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, has initiated this event along with his wife queen Farah, a huge enthusiast of all the arts and cultural projects. Shiraz Arts Festival was created to be a show of Western avant-garde arts. Many artists from around the world have been invited to take part in a Festival or to prepare an artwork commissioned especially by the Festival. One of them was also Iannis Xenakis, commissioned by the organizers for 1971 edition of Festival, presented one and only performance of *Polytope de Persépolis* in the ruins of Persepolis[4], which was to be the first formal performance of electronic music spotted in Iran. The other works of Iannis Xenakis, performed at the Shiraz Arts Festival, were *Nuits* (performed at 1968 edition) for twelve mixed voices a capella or *Persephassa* (performed at 1969 edition) for six percussionists. The 1972 edition of Shiraz Arts Festival was completely devoted to the music of Karlheinz Stockhausen. The audience could see the performances of such pieces as *Gruppen*, *Stimmung*, *Gesang der Jünglinge*, *Telemusik*, *Kontakte*, *Carre*, *Prozession*, *Spiral*, *Hymnen*, *Mikrophonie I* or even *Klavierstücke*[5]. The events of 1972 were for sure one of more stimulating experiences for the emerging Iranian composers, not only in the matter of creating electronic music, but also in search of modern compositional ideas in general.

Alireza Mashayekhi[6] is called to be one of the first composers of avant-garde music in Iran. His electronic piece *Shur* (1968[7]) was the very first piece created in the history of Iranian electronic music, having its premiere performance at Shiraz Arts Festival in 1976. The piece combines the musical world of Persia and puts it into the modern surrounding: stretched harmonic structures make a dialogue with a prerecorded violin melody, presenting *shur* melodic pattern from Persian *radif*[8]. Most of his later electronic works also use *radif* as a main source of inspiration for creating tape music with or without instrumental

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[4] Kanach Sharon (ed.), *Musique de l'architecture*, Marseille: Parenthèses, 2006, p. 309.

[5] Based on the leaflets from 1972 edition of Shiraz Arts Festival (personal archive).

[6] Alireza Mashayekhi, born 1940 Tehran, Iran, is considered to be one of the pioneers of modern music in Iran by all Iranian musicians working nowadays in country and abroad.

[7] There is certain inconsequence in the dating of creating the piece *Shur* by Alireza Mashayekhi. Some sources say that he started to work on it in 1964 and completed it in 1968, while the others state that the year of completing the piece is 1966 and marks the beginning of electronic music era in Iran. Unfortunately, I did not have a chance yet to talk about this issue with composer itself (author's note).

[8] **Radif** is a collection of various old melodic figures preserved through several generations by oral tradition and collected into the radif books by several big masters of traditional music at the beginningof XXth century. It organizes the melodies and rhythmic patterns into a number of different tonal spaces called Dastgah. Information based on Zonis E., *Classical Persian Music*, *an Introduction*, Cambridge, 1973.

accompaniment. This specific style – a mixture of Iranian modalities with contemporary means of expression – mark the way of work of almost all Iranian artists until nowadays.

Slowly Persian composers start to be noted internationally for their works in the field of electronic music, to this degree, that some of first generation of electronic music composers like **Dariush Dolatshahi** and **Masoud Pourfakhar** receive a scholarship to study in Columbia-Princeton Music Center. The development of arts, especially in the field of music, has been radically stopped by the events of Islamic Revolution in 1979. Same thing happened with Shiraz Arts Festival, the creation of former political powers, which took place since 1968 till 1978 and was never organized after the new powers started to rule the country. What is more, the Music Department of Tehran University also stopped working. The attitude towards music in general was shaped by the overtaking Islamic believes, which excluded music from the field of science and banned all the activities connected with spreading it among the Iranians. The life of musicians was in constant danger as all activities connected to music were strictly banned under the penalty of imprisonment – playing music, teaching music, having the musical instruments at home or any other behaviors that could lead to the suspicion of spreading the music in society. The period of the revolutionary movement and time of war between Iran and Iraq state the lack of development in any area of social and cultural live. The country harassed by unexpected war events just after the political switch of 1979, could not raise fast from all suffers that fell on it at one moment.

The period of 1979 till 1989 can be described as stagnation times in the cultural history of Iran, especially in case of music. Times after the war slowly bring a change into the society by slow but constant animation in the field of arts. In addition, after ten years of break, "the Music Department of Tehran University [got] re-opened, now emphasizing on theoretical aspects of music"[9]. The unfortunate part of this situation was the fact that through the ten years of ban of any musical activities in Iran, there were barely any highly qualified music teachers in the country, who could help in the process of growing acceptance of music after the war. Most of the prominent musicians from 1970s escaped the country in the years of revolution and war or some of them gave up their music careers and devoted to other works. In this situation, the world of Iranian contemporary music had to be rebuilt from the very basics.

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[9] Farhang Alireza, *Electronic Music in Iran: Tradition and Modernity*, Université Paris-Sorbonne Paris-IV, 2009.

The only person, whose efforts in the area of electronic music can be spotted during the times of 1980s and 1990s, is **Shahrokh Khajenouri** (b.1953). He is one of old generation composers, who were mainly dedicated to the genre of electronic music. Growing from the teachings of Alireza Mashayekhi, Khajenouri also followed the path of experimenting with Iranian folk music and processing it with help of electronic devices, many times very much primitive, but the only ones that were available in Iran at past times. Educated in London, Khajenouri experimented with "music concrète techniques and analog synthesizers, especially the VCS3, culminated in two major works: *Three Movements for Concrète Electronic Music* (1978) and *Life and Death of VCS3* (1980)"[10]. The major work, which got developed during 1990s in Iran, was a series of works for various instruments and computer music, entitled *Diagues*. First of them has been composed in 1997. Khajenouri continued to create works from those series for next several years, systematically organizing performances in various shows in Tehran, slowly opening the possibilities of presenting electronic works for all artists connected to the research in electronic music.

The process of slow searches and musical rediscoveries in officially not appreciated area of music mainly focused on the underground art scene. Every actions that were banned and seemed to be not approved by the government slowly developed on their own, usually thanks to those people that never gave up their passions. The electronic music researches, at least till the time of last presidential election in 2013, were usually lead undercover and mostly connected to electronic scene of ambient, drone or IDM, whereas the electronic researches growing from the classical roots of genre didn't provoke bigger interest of musicians. Most of the artists, due to lack of sufficient equipment on existing Music Universities, for creation of electronic music had to build their own private studios. This popular practice stayed promoted until this day. Electronic studio of Tehran University quite often lacks of some basic devices, which can be found in many recording studios or private composition studios in Iran.

In recent years, we can find more and more institutions or festival events that try to support the genre of electronic music, intermedia and experimental art. One of them is **TADAEX Festival**, which since 2010 supports all new media activities, mostly with the focus of new media arts and disciplines like computer science, video art or programming. Recently the festival started to include also the electronic music genre into their annual shows. The

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[10] Cont Arshia, Gluck Bob, *Electronic Music in Iran*, Electronic Music Foundation, Ltd., 2008.

International **Tehran Contemporary Music Festival**, which has run its first edition this year, eagerly supports the promotion of electronic arts. During the one-week performances, among young emerging electronic musicians from Iran, the festival invited Rezo Kiknadze, composer of classical and electronic music, as well as dean of Composition Department of Tbilisi State Conservatory in Georgia, who presented his own achievements, researches in the genre during concerts, and lectures.

Among institutions, which support the electronic music, we can surely name **New Media Society**. Their focus lays mostly on the visual arts, although several initiatives were taken up to rediscover electronic music through special concerts and workshops (for example live coding workshop of Sohrab Motabar, finished with *Microseries* concerts in duo with Saba Alizadeh). **Spectro Centre for New Music** is a place started by Iranian composer Idin Samimi Mofakham with Polish composer and conductor Martyna Kosecka. Their activities focus generally on the support of contemporary classical music, but one of the most active branches of their work is established from 2013 **SpectroDuo**. They mainly focus on electronic and electroacoustic experimental live shows, which are at times structured in complex forms and are at other times based on free improvisation. They use the skills in electronic music, which grow from their education time gathered in Poland and Armenia. Most of the shows of SpectroDuo uses MaxMSP for music experiments and Jitter for the live video projections.

The youngest institution encouraging the promotion of electronic music is **Contemporary Music Circle**, established in Tehran Contemporary Arts Museum. CMC, led by conductor Navid Gohari, tries to involve the music of contemporary scene into the events that can be presented and connected into the space of Museum, but not only. One of their recent achievements was organization of a four-day workshop and concert tour of Austrian electronic musicians and improvisers Renald Deppe and Johannes Kretz, which took place last September in Tehran in Lajevardi Collection private gallery space. All the mentioned above institutions and initiatives move the electronic music art scene and let it develop and keep up with the researches made around the world in the years, when electronic music in Iran didn't have a chance for fast and advanced changes.

During last ten years, we can notice a serious increase of artists dealing with electronic music in a professional way. Many of them received their education abroad the country and try to present concerts of electronic music in more and more official places in Iran. It is very

difficult to name all of them in this short presentation, especially to present the area of their work and the way how electronics are being used and treated by each artist. I permit myself to choose at least several prominent names of composers and artists specializing in electronic music and intermedia, whose works can be noticed in Iran during last ten years and who, in my opinion, shape the electronic music scene in Iran. The importance of my choice is dictated by the concert activities in Iran, participation in the Festivals presented and shortly described above as well as the popularity among the Iranian public, which enthusiastically attends the concerts and watches the experimental art scene made by those artists. I want to show not only the musicians, whose studies were influenced by teachings of Alireza Mashayekhi, but also those ones, whose experience comes from various environments and schools around the world and from inside of Iran.

Among the most popular musicians of electronic music genre is without a doubt **Ata Ebtekar** (pseudonym Sote), born in 1972 in Germany electronic composer, sound artist and recording engineer, whose focus stays on the usage of Persian modern scales and plays with tradition, same as it did Alireza Mashayekhi. As it comes to pioneer of electroacoustic music in Iran, Alireza Mashayekhi did not stop to work with electronic after the Islamic Revolution. Except the work *Shur*, he also created *East-West* (1973), "a series of works composed using algorithmic processes. Some of his works in the late 1970s and 1980s used the computer as a compositional device, including the programming language XPL"[11]. Born in 1961 in Iran **Shahrokh Yadegari** is a composer, sound designer and producer, who worked with such artists as Peter Sellars and Ann Hamilton. He mainly works as a music producer, but also specializes in the multidisciplinary projects, combining traditional and new media. His music compositional focus is the design of software interfaces for composition and live performance, which also inspired by *radif*, lead to very interesting sound solutions. The most representative compositions for this type of music are *Tear* (1999) and *Migration* (2005). **Alireza Farhang**, another emerging composer in the area of electronic music, got his Master of Composition with Ivan Fedele during studies in France. Then he took up the course of electronic and computer music in IRCAM. The focus of his works lies mostly in matches of instruments with live electronics, focusing on real-time operations (compositions like *Echo-chaos*, *Pénombre et particules* or *Imeros*). Alireza Farhang is also the author of several papers dealing with situation of electronic music in Iran, one of those is being quoted in this very work.

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[11] Cont Arshia, Gluck Bob, *Electronic Music in Iran*, Electronic Music Foundation, Ltd., 2008.

It is very important to describe the artists, who were born after the Islamic Revolution and already had a chance to receive their education in electronic music abroad. As well, thanks to the spread of electronic equipment and accessibility of modern devices to work with sound in Iran, those artists have managed to gain a wider popularity and their art has been noticed in Iran and abroad. One of those musicians is **Arsalan Abedian** (b. 1982), who right now is a PhD student at Hannover University of Music. Research of this young artist grows strongly from the fixed media works, which are balanced with the instrumental accompaniment of live sounds. He creates tape music, 8-channel tape music and classical music. He already represents a group of those electronic music composers, who slowly walk beyond the stereotype of usage of Iranian scales and modes in their research with new media. Another artist representing similar way of thinking is **Sohrab Motabar** (b. 1984), educated in Institute of Sonology electronic musician, who uses his live-coding skills in Motabar-Roessler Duo, actively touring and giving concerts around the world. He composes with algorithms, chaotic functions and not standard synthesized sounds as a way to give rise to obscured dimensions and experimental modes of perceiving and listening. Similar road to his represents **Veddad Famourzadeh**, a sound artist and vibro-acoustic engineer, who is exploring the integration of sound art and electronic music with different soundscapes and diverse musical traditions of Iran. He is especially interested in human-computer interaction between compositional algorithms generating a polyphonic textural ambient sound and choreographed improvisation of ethnic players.

Some of electronic music artists, who recently work in Iran, also received their education in Iran thanks to the private studios and mentorship of older generations of composers. Some of them are self-taught musicians, who have developed their skills in electronic language as a hobby and transformed it later into the main area of their expertise. Slowly, except ambient, drone or IDM, which are still the ruling genres in the country, the art of field recording or highly experimental multidisciplinary performances gains more and more popularity. **Porya Hatami** (b.1981) is an experimental sound artist based in Sanandaj. Working in the field of ambient/minimal, his compositions explore the balance between electronics and environmental sounds, utilizing processed acoustic and electronic sources and field recordings. Similar approach is represented by **Soheil Soheili** (b.1983), a self-taught musician, who is a Tehran-based artist and producer, also having experiences in both live and studio recording. His works have been screened and performed in a couple of domestic festivals and live venues but he is still considered unknown to the mainstream art scene. It is

also worth to mention **Arash Akbari** (b. 1987), a musician, new media artist and designer, living and working in Tehran. His works ranges from experimental audio/visual performances to interactive installations. He is interested in generative systems, human computer interaction and real-time graphics and intersection between physical and digital.

It is just the short list, presenting several artists working with electronic media in connection of music. There is many more inside the country as well as abroad, who deal with sound in more or less advanced way. There is also many musicians, who grow their roots in DJ music or commercial electronic music, but as an interesting phenomenon for the artists in Iran, they still balance on the boarders of complicated electronic music or intermedia projects. So many aesthetic and technological approaches in electronic music, coming from completely sophisticated ideas to the projects based on simplicity, balancing around the world of commercial electronic towards the Computer Music, show a wide spectrum and a lot of possibilities for the next generations of emerging artists in this genre in Iran. Even if computer and electronic music remains still somehow marginal, there is a huge amount of musicians fighting hard for this situation to change. While Iran opens more and more to the possibilities offered by the world free of sanctions and less politically tied in the area of art and culture, there is a hope that very soon, the electronic music Iranian artists based in the country will get a green light to create in comfortable conditions and be noticed around the world.

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Internet magazines about general scene of electronic music in Iran:
www.sixpillars.com
www.subrosa.net
www.ajammc.com

Websites of Festivals and organizations connected to spread of electronic music in Iran:
TADAEX Festival – www.tadaex.com
Tehran Contemporary Music Festival – www.tehrancmf.com
New Media Society – www.newmediasoc.com
Spectro Centre for New Music – www.spectrocentre.com
Contemporary Music Circle – www.tmoca.com

List of Iranian electronic artists mentioned in the work:
Alireza Mashayekhi
Dariush Dolatshahi
Masoud Pourfakhar
Shahrokh Khajenouri
SpectroDuo (Idin Samimi Mofakham & Martyna Kosecka)
Ata Ebtekar
Shahrokh Yadegari
Alireza Farhang
Arsalan Abedian
Sohrab Motabar
Veddad Famourzadeh
Porya Hatami
Soheil Soheili
Arash Akbari