

manuscript studies but wanting to be introduced to others and/or to the specificities of other traditions; and librarians and restorers who will find here comparative data.

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LAUDAN NOOSHIN:

*Iranian Classical Music: The Discourses and Practice of Creativity.* (SOAS Musicology Series.) xiv, 242 pp. Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015. £65. ISBN 978 0 754 60703 8.  
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This book represents the culmination of more than two decades of research by the author on Iranian classical music. It stems from an initial period of fieldwork in Iran between 1987 and 1990 as well as more recent research trips, and draws on interviews with leading Iranian performers such as Shahram Nazeri, Hossein Alizadeh and the late Parviz Meshkati. In addition, the book includes transcriptions and musical analyses of a wide range of recordings, excerpts of which are included on an accompanying CD. As indicated by the title, Nooshin focuses on the concept of creativity, particularly in connection with improvisatory practices in Iranian music and the discourses surrounding them. Her central argument is that notions of creativity are ideologically freighted and shaped both by scholarly paradigms and by wider socio-political factors, most importantly the forces of modernization and the influence of “Western” modes of thought. Nooshin contends that the binary opposition between “improvisation” and “composition” is closely related to a host of other dualisms – East/West, oral/written, simple/complex and so on. Based on her research into the processes of learning and performing Iranian classical music, she argues that we should reconsider these “somewhat rigid noun-based categories, and recognise the complex interpolation of the compositional and improvisational” (pp. 155–6).

The opening chapter considers previous approaches to improvisation and creativity, dealing with an impressive range of literature from ethnomusicology, historical musicology, folklore studies and post-colonial studies. Here, Nooshin demonstrates her intention not simply to describe the practices and concepts of Iranian classical music, but also to offer “a reflective critique of the conceptual and discursive frameworks which underpin ethno/musicological approaches to and understandings of creativity” (p. 4). This broad contextualization allows her to make instructive comparisons with other musical traditions, such as South Indian music, jazz or eighteenth-century keyboard performance, and to show how ethnomusicology can contribute new perspectives to recent discussions about creativity in mainstream musicology, which, as Nooshin points out, often reinforce the binary opposition between improvisation and composition, with its attendant ideological associations.

Chapters 2 and 3 concentrate on notions of creativity within the context of Iranian classical music, drawing on sources in Persian and European languages as well as interviews with Iranian musicians. Nooshin describes shifting conceptions of creativity and improvisation in Iranian music during the twentieth century, arguing that these changes were linked to broader processes of socio-political transformation. Thus, contact with Europe from the mid-nineteenth century onwards led to efforts to modernize the Iranian musical tradition by, for example, the introduction of notation and the institutionalization of teaching. These and related developments, including the emergence of public concerts and recording technology, contributed to

a new awareness of the distinction between “composition” and “improvisation” (a term which did not have a Persian equivalent until a few decades ago).

Nooshin identifies a number of common tropes found in both local and foreign discourses that illustrate the tension between the apparently spontaneous and intuitive nature of improvisation on the one hand, and the importance of established conventions and disciplined training on the other. This tension is explored further in Chapter 3, where the author discusses the *radif*, a collection of melodic models organized by mode which forms the basis of improvisation and composition in Iranian classical music. Nooshin skillfully unpicks the established discourses surrounding the *radif* to argue that its authority as a canonical repertoire increased during the course of the twentieth century in parallel with the processes described in Chapter 2. The chapter also considers the role of the *radif* in teaching and its contested status as a symbol of authenticity and nationhood.

Chapter 4, the longest and most closely argued chapter, moves beyond discourse to examine the ways in which the structures of the *radif* translate into performance. Nooshin has transcribed and analysed a vast amount of material (29 performances and four *radifs*, details of which are given in an appendix), which she treats on a number of analytical levels, from large-scale sectional organization to phrases and individual motifs. Many valuable conclusions emerge from this, but Nooshin dwells at length on a procedure she terms “extended repetition”, which is identified as a central device by which materials derived from the *radif* are reconstituted into new improvisational patterns. Drawing parallels with Chomsky’s universal grammar, she argues that improvisation in Iranian classical music consists not simply in the rearrangement of previously memorized material, but rather in the abstraction of underlying compositional principles to create original musical statements.

The concluding “Postlude” looks at new approaches to improvisation in Iranian music, taking as a case study the album *All of You* (2010) by Amir Eslami and Hooshyar Khayam. Using extensive quotations from the musicians themselves, Nooshin reflects on the creative processes involved in their work, which she argues presents a challenge both to the authority of the received tradition of Iranian classical music, and to rigid binary approaches to composition and improvisation. Here, Nooshin gestures towards her more recent research on Iranian popular music by suggesting that such trends are connected with the emergence of a “civil society discourse” in Iran, and thus promote a more “democratic” understanding of musical creativity.

Although Nooshin writes that the book is “ultimately about understanding musical creativity as a meaningful social practice” (p. 27), she tends to focus on discourse and ideology rather than bottom-up social texture. This perhaps reflects the dominant ethnomusicological trends during the period when much of the research was conducted, but also, as Nooshin herself acknowledges, the practical difficulty of doing fieldwork in Iran, which led her to concentrate on more abstract modes of analysis. It is likewise unfortunate that – as so often in ethnomusicology – her concern with musical structures leads her to omit any detailed discussion of poetry, which is arguably a far more important element for many Iranian listeners. Nonetheless, this publication is a major contribution to the literature on Iranian music: it is both a masterly overview of the classical tradition, and at the same time a thoughtful reflection on the role of creativity in Iranian music and in scholarly discourse, while the wealth of ethnographic, bibliographic and analytical material presented here will soon make it a key resource for teaching and future scholarship.

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