The Shiraz Arts Festival: Western Avant-Garde Arts in 1970s Iran

Robert Gluck

During the twilight years of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi’s reign in Iran, a panoply of avant-garde forms of expression complemented the rich, 2,500-year history of traditional Persian arts. Renowned musicians, dancers and filmmakers from abroad performed alongside their Persian peers at the annual international Shiraz Arts Festival. Elaborate plans were developed for a significant arts center that was to include sound studios and work spaces for residencies. Young Iranian composers and artists were inspired by the festival to expand their horizons to integrate contemporary techniques and aesthetics. Some subsequently traveled abroad for further study. Although the 1979 Islamic Revolution marked the end of institutions sustaining the avant-garde and scholarships for international study, creative expression sparked by the festival has continued in cinema and other arts.

FOUNDED OF THE SHIRAZ ARTS FESTIVAL

A central goal of Pahlavi rule throughout the 20th century was modernization and industrialization, while still maintaining independence from other nations, particularly Great Britain and the Soviet Union [1]. Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi hoped to ground his independence and authority in three assertions: secular rule, Pahlavi political hegemony and continuity with the ancient, pre-Islamic Persian Empire. In 1967, the Shah crowned himself Emperor and his wife Empress, thereby securing her right of succession. The upcoming 2,500th anniversary (1971) of the conquest of Babylonia by Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Persian empire, provided a rationale for an international cultural event at the ruins of Persepolis, the ancient pre-Islamic royal seat.

The Shiraz Arts Festival began in 1967 as a showcase for the royal court, especially Empress Farah Diba, a former architectural student, who convened each year’s events. Musician Gordon Mumma remembers her as “an extraordinary woman of considerable worldly knowledge” [2]. National Iranian Radio and Television (NIRT), also founded in 1967, served as festival sponsor. Sharazad (Afshar) Ghotbi, a violinist and wife of NIRT director Reza Ghotbi, was named musical director. Programming reflected Empress Farah’s Western-leaning, contemporary tastes (Fig. 1).

The decision to establish a festival that presented Western-oriented arts was fraught with potential conflict. Iran boasted of openness to intellectual ideas and the social integration of women, but the state sharply curtailed internal political expression, unwittingly fostering the growth of a radical Islamic clerical opposition who would prove to be offended by festival programming. The opulence of the court was on full display throughout the 11 years of events, highlighting the economic distress of the general populace. Nonetheless, the creative activity featured at the festival reflected the most forward-looking international efforts, presenting Iran to the world as pioneering and open.

EXPERIENCES OF WESTERN PERFORMERS AND ATTENDEES

For visiting artists, the Shiraz Arts Festival offered a remarkable experience. Merce Cunningham Dance Company (MCDC) dancers Carolyn Brown and Valda Setterfield recall their 1972 visit as a “unique . . . wonderful unforgettable adventure” [3] and as “heady and thrilling” [4]. Gordon Mumma...
GLOBAL CROSSINGS

Fig. 2. Performance of Joseph Chaikin’s Open Theater at the 1971 Shiraz Arts Festival. Still image taken from a Pars Video documentary.

An elite audience converged on the festival. Mumma points out that “the cost of admission was not only money, but also security clearance.” A 1976 column in Tehran Journal mixed criticism and gossip: “the Empress [appeared] in a multi-colored velvet siren suit that quite outshone most of the ladies’ gowns” [5]. Brown recalls that the audience “appeared far more interested in looking at the Queen and her entourage than at the dancing,” but Mumma found the audience to be serious and interested: “There were none of the aggressive arguments about ‘that isn’t music’ stuff that we often encountered elsewhere.”

Security was tight, as Mumma notes: “In Persepolis each of us was given a ‘guide’ (read ‘guard’) dressed in a Western suit with a tie and jacket. The primary jacket function was to conceal their weapons… We traveled in Iranian military aircraft.” Setterfield remembers: “Persepolis was absolutely filled with soldiers with rifles. They seemed to appear out of the woodwork at every corner. There was a real sense of wariness and danger. You looked at something extraordinary, old and beautiful, and suddenly you would see the soldiers.” Merce Cunningham discovered that pillows used in the Persepolis performance “were in a room full of machine guns” [6].

PROGRAMMING

The Shiraz Arts Festival always included traditional music from around the world. The 1967–1970 programming included Indian sitarist Ustad Vilayat Khan, American violinist Yehudi Menuhin, numerous Persian classical musicians and artists, a Balinese gamelan ensemble, the Senegalese National Ballet and performances of the Persian passion play Ta’ziyeh (“mourning” or “consolation”) portraying the founding of Shi’a Islam [7]. Ta’ziyeh, banned under the Shah’s father, influenced avant-garde Western theatrical directors Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski and Joseph Chaikin (who brought The Open Theatre [Fig. 2]). Visiting dance companies included Merce Cunningham in 1972 and Maurice Bejart in 1976.

The Western composer most closely associated with the Shiraz Arts Festival was Iannis Xenakis, who in 1968 presented Nuits, a choral work dedicated to political prisoners, some named and “thousands of forgotten ones whose names are lost” [8], and in 1969 presented the percussion work Persephassa, commissioned by the festival and Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision Française (ORTF). Persephassa links cross-cultural legends of the Greek goddess Persephone. Xenakis’s third and final work for the festival was the commissioned multimedia extravaganza Polytope de Persépolis, which premiered at the Persepolis ruins on 26 August 1971. Xenakis describes the work as visual symbolism, parallel to and dominated by sound… correspondingly to a rock tablet on which hieroglyphic or cuneiform messages are engraved… The history of Iran, fragment of the world’s history, is thus elliptically and abstractly represented by means of clashes, explosions, continuities and underground currents of sound [8].

Critic James Harley describes Polytope de Persépolis as “unrelenting in its density and continuously evolving architecture” [9].

Xenakis scholar Sharon Kanach reconstructs the scene as follows:

The audience was placed in the ruins of Darius’s Palace and was able to move freely between the six listening stations placed within these ruins. Each station had eight speakers, one for each track… The one-hour spectacle began in total darkness with a “geological prelude” of excerpts from Xenakis’s first electro-acoustic work, Diamorphoses (1957). Immediately afterwards, on the mountain facing the site, two gigantic bonfires are lit, projector lights sweep the night sky, and two red laser beams scan the ruins. Then, several groups of children appear carrying torches and proceed to climb to the summit, towards the bonfires, outlining in scintillating light the mountain’s crest… Suddenly, the groups of children disperse and climb down the mountain in constellation-like figures (Color Plate E) and finally congregate between the two tombs where their torches spell out in Persian “we bear the light of the earth,” a phrase by Xenakis. One last outburst and the 150 torch-bearers run past the ravine and disappear through the crowd into the forest [10].

The new work faced mixed reactions. The Empress and NIRT liked it enough to offer Xenakis a further commission for the design of a proposed art center. However, some Iranian critics, sensitive to the legacy of Western hegemony in Iran, associated Greek composer Xenakis’s torch spectacle with the burning of Persepolis by Alexander the Great [11] or suggested that the symbolism could be interpreted as the actions of Nazi brownshirts [12].

calls it “one of the most extraordinary cultural experiences of my life.” Setterfield’s memories of Shiraz include:

drinking watermelon juice for breakfast, huge insects buzzing around and drowning in the swimming pool, the heat of the ground being too much to walk to the pool without shoes. The nearby market was wonderful, filled with the sound of metal pots being beaten into shape and mysterious things to eat. When the sun went down, everything smelled like roses.
Xenakis (Fig. 3) responded that “fire and light represented goodness and eternal life…using children today as torch-bearers, representing the men and women of tomorrow, is a cry of hope for the future” [13].

The 1972 festival was a veritable Stockhausen festival, the composer’s “highlight of the year” [14], featuring three “intuitive” compositions and Gruppen, Carre, Stimmung, Gesang der Jünglinge, Telemusik, Prozession, Kontakte, Spiral, several Klavierstücke, Hymnen (Fig. 4) and Mikrophonie I. MCDC dancer Brown describes Stockhausen’s appearance at the festival as like that of a “guru…walking the streets of Shiraz white robed.” The festival closed with an outdoors performance of Sternklang, in which

a seething mass of about eight thousand poured up the star-shaped converging paths…the spectators squashed together on the pathways, besieging the performers…[some] clambered up the loud-speaker scaffolding and were hauled down again by the police…Stockhausen was convinced that his music would calm the listeners. And so it was. After half an hour of music the waves subsided [15].

_Tehran Journal_ described the 1972 festival as “the most avant-garde and most controversial Shiraz Festival so far” [16]. Electronic music dominated the offerings, which included numerous concerts by Stockhausen, performances by MCDC featuring musicians John Cage, David Tudor and Gordon Mumma, and traditional Persian and South Indian music and contemporary Iranian theater and film. Electrical power needed to be brought into Persepolis from outside, notes Mumma, “by truck and horse-drawn wagons. I was told that much of that sound equipment was obtained on loan from the Deutsche Rundfunk by the German government.”

Merce Cunningham Dance Company gave outdoor dance performances at Shiraz and Persepolis, plus a musical concert. The dance performances included two “Events,” composed of material selected from the company’s repertoire “to allow for, not so much an evening of dances, as the experience of dance” [17]. The choreography was unrelated to the music, which included John Cage’s one-minute stories making up _Indeterminacy_ [18] and circa-1930s Argentine tangos. An “official” festival reviewer wrote: “Tuesday night, alas, was un-intense, overlong, extended, and—except for such ecstatic moments—tedious and exhausting” [19]. Music for _Persepolis Event_ (Fig. 5) included Signals and Landowner, collaborative compositions by Cage, Tudor and Mumma, and Tudor’s _Rainforest_ (1968), which Mumma recalls was “performed with a forest of electro-acoustic transducers of his own uncanny design” [20].

Setterfield remembers dancing at the ruins of Persepolis as “glorious and physically hard…the ground was rocky, so we had to wear shoes.” The only décor was helium-filled pillows designed by Andy Warhol (Article Frontispiece), tethered to the ancient pillars, as Mumma recalls, to “keep them from floating away from the performance.” Company administrator Jean Rigg remembers that “The winds came up, and many simply snapped their lines and floated off…the effect was great” [21].

The musical concert included Mumma’s _Ambives_ (“a composition for trumpet [or cornet] with live cybersonic modification”) and a simultaneous performance of Cage’s _Birdages_ and Tudor’s _Monohird_ (Fig. 6) [22]. _Birdage_ (1972) is a “complex, exuberant, and joyful” collage composed from sounds of birds, “Cage singing his ‘Mureau’ and…ambient sounds” [23].

**Impact on Young Composers and Artists**

The festivals proved influential on the rising generation of Iranian artists and composers. Brown recalls: “John Cage was greeted by many devoted fans as a much-loved ‘hero.’” Students at Tehran University, such as Persian-American composer Dariush Dolat-shahi, experienced the festival close up because the music department was actively involved in the events. Dolat-shahi recalls that “Every year, I waited for the event to happen. These festivals were a major source of information for us about what was happening musically outside Iran. I received my own first commission when I was nineteen years old” [24].

Dolat-shahi became “part of a group of four people who used to get together and listen to modern music including Schoenberg, Berg, Ligeti,” and realized his first work for strings and tape, popular instrumentation during the festivals, using a small tape recorder. Festival performances also influenced the development of Iranian theater, as Iranian-American writer and theater artist Zara Houshmand observes about a recent Tehran performance directed by Majid Jafari: “Jafari’s work, like that of Pessyani and so many Iranian directors, owes a huge debt to Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook, Tadeusz Kantor, and other leading lights of the European avant-garde who accepted invitations to the Shiraz Festival before the revolution” [25].

Government agencies offered scholarships to support young artists to study abroad. Among them were Dolat-shahi, supported by NIRT, and Massoud Pourfarrokh, supported by the Iranian Ministry of Art and Culture. The Shah once wrote:

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**Fig. 3. Iannis Xenakis in a heated dialog during the 1971 Shiraz Arts Festival. Screen-shot from a Pars Video documentary.**

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It requires lively insight and imagination to transplant Western technology effectively to a country like Persia. As I have said, much adaptation is necessary, and we largely rely for this upon the young men whom we send abroad for post-graduate study and who naturally encounter the problem of using their new knowledge in home conditions. Many of these adaptations are almost instinctive or unconscious, but others may require extended research [26].

As Gordon Mumma observes, “the outward looking ideas of the Iranian government and the aspirations of their intellectuals and younger creative artists” pointed to such collaboration.

Dolat-shahi first studied abroad in Amsterdam in 1970. In 1974, he returned to Tehran, but “felt the need to continue my education” and thus received an additional scholarship to attend Columbia University, where he was already familiar with the works of faculty members Milton Babbitt and Vladimir Ussachevsky. NIRT expressed interest in training him to play a staff role in the proposed new arts center being developed by Iannis Xenakis and sponsored by NIRT. “The idea for this studio had a lot of support, since a lot of electronic music was performed at the festivals. They wanted to have a major center of their own” [27].

Dolat-shahi thus began work at the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center in 1976, preparing the tape portion of his festival-commissioned piece From Behind the Glass, a composition for 20 strings, piano, tape and echo system. Critic Janet Lazarian Shagaghhi wrote that the work “conveyed a stimulating imagination of space, was original and good to listen to” [28]. The official festival program observed that “electronic music liberated [Dolat-shahi] from old concepts of melody and harmony and provoked further explorations into the raw material of music, i.e. sound” [29]. The 1976 festival also included Dolat-shahi’s Two Movements for String Orchestra (1970) and Mirage for orchestra and tape, which, wrote Shagaghhi, “easily unfolded its beauty; it bloomed as fast as it was started, the sound effects and the orchestral music blended harmoniously” [30]. The programming also included music by other forward-looking Iranian composers such as Alireza Mashaveki, Mohammad Taghi Massoudieh and Hommor Farhat, then head of the television network’s Music Council and an artistic advisor of the festival.

The final festival in 1977 featured works by Fawzieh Majd, Ivo Malec, Bach and Mashayekhi, who continues to actively compose music, including electronic music for a time, in Iran. Dolat-shahi recalls that in 1977 NIRT commissioned a work for electronics and chamber orchestra for the 1977 festival from Columbia-Princeton director Ussachevsky; but a few months before Ussachevsky’s scheduled departure from the United States, the declining political situation made a visit impossible. Chou Wen-Chung, chairman of the Columbia University music department, also visited Iran. He recalls:

My students Massoud Pourfarrokh and Dariush Dolat-shahi told about many of the problems faced by Iranian students. They came up with the idea of setting up a cultural exchange between the two countries at Columbia University, like The Center for U.S.-China Arts Exchange that I had already established… Massoud and Dariush arranged for me to go to Iran and meet with officials in that country.

The three of us went together as private citizens. It was probably in the late spring or late August of 1978, before the school year began, and we made a connection with the Minister of Culture. He was a very powerful man, quite westernized and close to the Shah. The Ministry building was like a palace. We had a couple of very productive sessions together. He was very pleasant and knowledgeable, well briefed on the intention of my trip. The Minister was very supportive of this
new idea and he offered to provide substantial funding. The Center would have been something quite exciting. It was to be broadly based around music in the context of a cultural exchange between the two countries. Iranian scholars and composers would come to the United States to interact with their American counterparts and be exposed to more advanced studies in terms of compositional principles and technology. There was interest on both sides for it to include electronic music. My interest on behalf of Columbia University was to send American musicians and scholars to research Persian music in Iran, not just ethnomusicology, but also looking to the future of their music. The Minister of Culture was interested in developing a center for cultural exchange in which students from both countries could study the old, represented by Iran, and the new, represented by the United States. The rest was up to me to convince Columbia University to work with us. There was no question in my mind that it would indeed happen. The next step would have been to invite the Minister of Culture to the United States, agree on terms and get the Center started [31].

These plans collapsed, as did planning for the 1978 festival, as the revolution approached.

A PROPOSED CENTER FOR THE ARTS

The success of Xenakis’s monumental *Polytope de Persépolis* led to his engagement as “Engineering consultant in charge of the architecture of a Cité des Arts in Shiraz-Persepolis” [32]. Discussions for the proposed center actually may have begun as early as 1968 [33]. Xenakis’s design was based upon his plan for “a very similar project he devised [in 1970] as a Le Corbusier Center for the Arts [in Chaux-de-Fonds]. The plan, as far as can be told, was to make Xenakis in charge of everything, but to hire Iranians locally to execute his ideas” [34].

To summarize Xenakis’s proposal, according to his “General Guidelines,” the Center was to be an interdisciplinary and collaborative “scientific research center” for sound and visual arts, cinema, theater, ballet, poetry and literature, to “continue all the activities year round of the Annual Festival of Shiraz-Persepolis.” In addition to public presentations, the center would support ongoing work by up to 40 visiting and 50 permanent artists, scientists and staff members. It was to be “essentially based on the most advanced research and technological events, leading us towards the future of Art,” open to all people, fostering exchange between its participants and the city (not “an intellectual ghetto”), sharing resources with the university, cultivating traditional arts “observed through the light of the most advanced research and experimentation.
criticized Xenakis for collaborating with Islamic opponents of the Shah publicly in Paris, the composer’s home city. There, *Persépolis* extended to Iranians living in arts center were complex. Negative reactions by Iranians to Xenakis’s participating in the festival and proposed visit: 

**CONSIDERATIONS AND CONFLICTS**

The politics involved in Western artists planning never reached the stage at which administrative details, including Dolatshahi’s formal role, would be defined. and not through the normal musicological, theatrical, choreographic... academic traditions.

In his plans, Xenakis referred to the sound arts element as a “Center for Studies of Mathematical and Automated Music,” which Kanach believes likely to have been similar to Xenakis’s center in Paris, CEMAMu, the Center for Studies in Mathematics and Automation of Music. The proposed center was to include laboratories for “automated” digital and analog music and film sound editing, two recording studios, a library and repair workshop, a 10,760-square-foot “Hall of Nothingness” and parking facilities for 1,000 cars. The proposed budget was 35,000,000 francs (approximately US$7 million) [35]. As nothing was put into writing at the time, it is possible that plans never reached the stage at which human rights abuser. Xenakis responded in an open letter to the French newspaper *Le Monde* asserting his right to free expression:

> What motivated me to go to Iran is this: a deep interest in this magnificent country, so rich with its superposed civilizations and such a hospitable population; the daring adventure of a few friends who founded the Shiraz-Persépolis Festival where all the various tendencies of contemporary, avant-garde art intermingle with the traditional arts of Asia and Africa; plus the warm reception my musical and visual propositions have encountered there by the young members of the general audience. . . . My philosophy, which I put into practice every day, consists of the freedom of speech, the right to total criticism. I am not an isolationist in a world as tangled and complicated as today’s . . . it is impossible to name one single country that is truly free and without multifaceted compromises, without any surrender of principles [36].

Ultimately, a combination of factors, particularly his displeasure with the Pahlavi government, led Xenakis to cease further involvement with the proposed arts center and the festival. He wrote Farrokh Ghaffary, the festival Deputy Director General (addressed by Xenakis as P. Gaffray),

> You know how attached I am to Iran, her history, her people. You know my joy when I realized projects in your festival, open to everyone. You also know of my friendship and loyalty to those who, like yourself, have made the Shiraz-Persépolis Festival unique in the world. But, faced with inhuman and unnecessary police repression that the Shah and his government are inflicting on Iran’s youth, I am incapable of lending any moral guarantee, regardless of how fragile that may be, since it is a matter of artist creation. Therefore, I refuse to participate in the festival [37].

Other artists also experienced conflicts with the political situation in Iran. Carolyn Brown recalls that while there was no controversy about MCDC’s 1972 visit, “we were not unaware of the political difficulties and sensed there was worse to follow.”

Merce Cunningham Dance Company was invited to return a few years later, in 1976. Gordon Mumma recalls the opposition of friends and colleagues to the proposed visit:

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**POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND CONFLICTS**

The politics involved in Western artists participating in the festival and proposed arts center were complex. Negative reactions by Iranians to Xenakis’s *Polytope de Persépolis* extended to Iranians living in Paris, the composer’s home city. There, Islamic opponents of the Shah publicly criticized Xenakis for collaborating with and a human rights abuser. Xenakis responded in an open letter to the French newspaper *Le Monde* asserting his right to free expression:

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Merce Cunningham Dance Company was invited to return a few years later, in 1976. Gordon Mumma recalls the opposition of friends and colleagues to the proposed visit:

> [composer/pianist] Frederic Rzewski, and particularly [artist] Jean Tinguely argued with me most strongly. Tinguely said I was being “immoral to condone a repressive and elitist regime.” My argument in response was that my going to Iran was because of the people and their culture, for which my respect required entering their communities, and learning of their world from their perspective. Their government regime was not their choice.

Company administrator Rigg recalls that reconsideration of the second visit to Iran began with an Iranian poet’s visit to Merce and John. It was an interesting discussion. Merce decided to put the question to the dancers. I was charged to gather information for the meeting. I recall a trip to Amnesty International’s office at 72nd and Broadway. [MCDC dancer] Meg Harper spoke eloquently against going, and the decision was made [38].

The “interesting discussion” was one in which the Iranian poet attempted to dissuade Cunningham and Cage from going, while they offered counterarguments [39].

David Behrman recalls that at that point, “there was a controversy about the politics, and several members of the company at that time, including me, said we didn’t want to go, because the invitation was from the Shah’s inner circle” [40]. Indeed, the company voted not to go, which Brown remembers as “a political decision on the dancers’ part but Merce would have gone, believing one should present one’s work wherever, and the work itself might change people’s minds, that is, to open them.”

Gordon Mumma strongly advocated
going to Iran, as did John Cage. Mumma observes:

Political pressures in the United States were very intense, similar to the arguments for not interacting with the apartheid situation of South Africa. Merce, John Cage, all of us were caught in this crossfire of words. Refusing the invitation would go unmentioned and unnoticed in Iran; quickly forgotten in the United States, and nothing would be accomplished. . . . I can’t imagine anyone taking the “armchair” position that it is immoral to attend to creative artists from “repressive and elitist regimes.”

THE APPROACHING REVOLUTION AND THE END OF AN ERA

The Shah’s hold on his regime was tenuous. As Dolat-shahi recalls, “the political situation was growing difficult. Islamic political demonstrations started in 1973 and 1976, especially at Tehran University.” Some festival events were particularly disturbing to religious Iranians. Historian William Shavcross observes, By the mid-seventies this had become one of the most controversial cultural events in the country . . . sometimes [the Empress’] enthusiasm seemed to jar. Although she was determined to preserve Iran’s past, her contemporary tastes were often too avant-garde, too cosmopolitan, for most of her countrymen [41].

Queen Noor of Jordan concurred: “The aim of the Shiraz Festival was perfectly commendable—to spark cross-pollination between Iran and the rest of the world through a program that reflected the latest trends in theater and the performing arts. Unfortunately, this approach backfired badly” [42].

Opposition to the festival grew in Iran and provided fodder for religious revolutionary ideologues in exile. In 1977, Ayollah Ruhollah Khomeini, in a mosque in Najaf, Iraq, declared “[It] is difficult to speak of. Indecent acts have taken place in Shiraz and it is said that such acts will soon be shown in Tehran too, and nobody says a word. The gentlemen [clerics] in Iran don’t say anything. I cannot understand why they don’t speak out!” [43]. Even some Iranians who supported Westernization reacted negatively [44]. An Iranian businessman was quoted as saying “we were only just beginning to listen to Bach, Stockhausen was impossible” [45].

Empress Farah articulated a more cautious message in the final year of the festival, noting that “in any art festival it is difficult to have free expression by the artists and expect it to appeal to all the different social groups” [46], but it was too late. Speaking in New York City in January 1978, she defended the importance of balancing past and present in a traditional society:

We in Iran, as in most other Asian societies, are faced with the tension between our own traditional values and the demands of Western science and technology and all that it brings along in its wake, including nihilism and despair. . . . We wish to learn from the experience of the West without emulating it blindly . . . [or] losing knowledge of ourselves [47].

By 1977, economic decline had particularly affected the middle class. The excesses of the wealthy elite highlighted the increasing gap between rich and poor. The Western cultural manners of the elite became a tool of the opposition in their complaints against the regime. Political suppression increased and Islamic political groups correspondingly grew in strength. The Shah and his family went into exile in 1979, the year of the Islamic revolution. The climate for experimental art turned hostile. Dolat-shahi recalls:

At the beginning of the Islamic revolution in Iran, my scholarship was cut off by the new government. All of my dreams were ruined, so I decided to learn more about art and so I took some courses. That told me what kind of government it was going to be. My family gradually left and now there is no one there.

CONCLUSION

Despite political controversies and a relatively short lifespan, the Shiraz Arts Festival proved influential both to Western artists, who were provided with an unusual abundance of resources to show their work to highly receptive and engaged audiences, and to young Iranian musicians and theater directors, some of whom remained in Iran under Islamic rule and others of whom left the country. Western artists also found that their visit provided enormous opportunities for learning about the Iranian people, their history and culture.

Iran in the 1970s presents a fascinating case study of how an authoritarian government can remain officially open to forward-looking Western ideas, while still strictly limiting its citizens’ free political speech. This unstable model could not survive for long, especially in the face of declining popular support. While the proposed arts center never came to fruition, its development represents a story that deserves to be more widely known. This story of cross-cultural exchange is one among many rarely reported narratives without which the international history of contemporary and electronic arts cannot be fully told [48].

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References and Notes


2. Except where noted, quotations of Gordon Mumma are from an e-mail correspondence with the author, 24–28 December 2005 and 9 January 2006.

3. Quotations of Carolyn Brown are from an e-mail correspondence with the author, 25 December 2005.

4. Quotations of Valda Setterfield are from a telephone interview by the author, 25 January 2006.

5. Tehran Journal, August 1976. The exact date is unknown as the source is a photocopy of a page from the original paper, saved by Dolat-shahi. Many records in Iran were destroyed following the Revolution.


11. Xenakix [8] Section 4.08.

12. Segments captured on a video compilation from the 1971 festival, Pars Video.


15. Kurz [14].


17. Shiraz Arts Festival official program [7].

18. See <www.cfdl.org/indeterminacy/about.html>.


21. E-mail correspondence with the author, 8 January 2006.
22. Shiraz Arts Festival official program, September 1971.

23. Joel Chadabe’s description can be found here: <www.emfmedia.org/catalog/em113.html>.


27. Kurz [14].

28. Tehran Journal, April 1976. The exact date is unknown as the source is a photocopy of a page from the original paper. Many records in Iran were destroyed following the Revolution.

29. Shiraz Arts Festival official program, 1976.


34. Sharon Kanach, e-mail correspondence with the author, 12 December 2005.

35. Summarized from Xenakis [8] Section 3.06.


37. See Ref. [21].

38. E-mail correspondence with the author, 30 May 2006.

39. E-mail correspondence with the author, 19 December 2005.


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