The Social Position of Women within the Safavid Dynasty Musical Community

Zafari Jaker, PhD
Assistant professor of Music department,
The University of Guilan, Iran
Email: zafari.jakeri@guilan.ac

Abstract

The Safavid era musical community contributed towards prejudice between men and women. In the current study, we examine these concepts from two angles: women as musicians and women as listeners. According to literature, women in the Safavid era (1501-1735 AD) were dissuaded from music, instead being more engaged in the dancing arts, whereas men didn't participate in dancing and left it to women and young boys. Due to certain types of entertainment being associated with dancing and music in the Safavid era, there was an implied relation between these and prostitution. This led to musical careers being ones of low status, especially dancing. Also, women in the position of listener had various limitations in the Safavid era. They could only listen to music within groups of ladies.

Keywords: Female Musicians, Female Dancers, Music of Safavid Era, Social Position of Musicians in Iran, Music History of Iran.

Introduction

Social and popular attitudes towards music can be influenced by religion, politics, and other similar social dimensions. The religious and political restrictions which were placed upon

music in eras such as the early Safavid played a destructive role; their effects have had a long-lasting impact on the negative attitudes of society. By examining socio cultural behaviours around music, we can see the low status that music had in different periods of Iranian history. One of the subjects that we face in studying music is the absence of women from the historical development of music. This is not only true about music, nor is it specifically an issue pertaining to Iran's musical history: in many cultures, women traditionally had less access to scientific and artistic education and training facilities, and were distanced from scientific and artistic environments. In addition to socio cultural factors, domestic tasks such as taking care of children were considered as scientific and artistic barriers for women. Hence many women's names are often omitted or effaced from written musical history. This is very obvious in Iran's case. Although we can see representations of women as performers, singers and dancers in visual arts, such as miniatures, lithographs and figures on dishes and cloths, and even though the contribution of women to music houses is much-mentioned in literature, there have relatively few named instances of female musicians. For example, almost eighty musician from the Safavid era are mentioned in Mashhoon's book, but none of them are female (Mashhoon, 2001: 312-338).

In addition to women having a very limited presence in publications about music from various periods, we can also see how women were discriminated against in music. In the Safavid era (1501-1735 AD), this discrimination developed much further. Analysis of social and historical texts shows that music was present in society in multiple forms throughout the period. In spite of various pronouncements and prohibitions made against music from religious leaders, and the personal antipathy of some of the Safavid kings (such as Shah Tahmasp), we can see evidence of women singing, performing music, and dancing – both in the court of the king and in less formal gatherings. In order to best study the role of women in musical society, the following division is made: woman as performer and women as listener.

Amongst the resources that describe parts of musical life in the Safavid era, including the position of women, European travel accounts are worth highlighting. As a result of the new policies of the Safavid government, many European tourists and explorers visited Iran. Despite the similar observations noted by several of these explorers, we may gain some general concepts about musical culture under the Safavid dynasty.

Literature Review

Sasan Fatemi investigated and described the extent of male and female participation in music between the Safavid and Constitutional periods in his "*Musicians from Safavid to Constitution*" (2001: 27-39). Thisarea has also been studied, with an emphasis on visual resources, in Ialnaz Rahbar and Hooman Asaadi `s "*Position of Female Musicians in the Safavid Dynasty in*

Paintings" (Rahbar and Asaadi, 2012). In the current article, our purpose is to study the position of women in Safavid period music, while referring to various literatures.

Methodology

The results of the current study are obtained by reviewing literature and relying upon historical, descriptive and analytical research methods. In addition, gathering the subjects is achieved through bibliographical work. The resources which have been used in this study are set out in the literature resource group. Literary resources include ancient music lyrics, and historical and social notes from the relevant periods, especially those written by European tourists who traveled to Iran during the Safavid dynasty.

1. Safavid Women as Artists and Performers

The main goal of many musicians in Iranian history was to be part of the King's courts, where they could serve as a courtier. As well as at the parties of kings and grandees, people's homes, coffee shops, cabarets, and the streets were also among the places where music and dancing could be found in the Safavid era. By looking at existing resources, we can understand the presence and the roles of women in the world of music.

It has often been implied in Safavid-era literature that female artists were discriminated against. Chardin, who traveled to Iran in the times of Shah Abbas II (1642-1666 AD) and Shah Suleyman Safavid (1666-1694 AD), separated music and dancing as two different performance styles, each individually related to either men or women in Iran. "Dancing is a profession and a mystery for women, while musicianship is the realm of men in Iran" (Chardin, 1903: 425). However, this seems not to have been considered as a fixed issue, especially in performance, and the notion may have been conceived in courtly music houses. This doubt is due to the fact that many images from the miniatures of the Safavid era show women as singers and performers. Another source, Petro Della Valle, speaks about female performers and singers at a party in Hamedan: "three female musicians were singing and performing their own instruments" (Della Valle, 2001: 461). Thus, Chardin's idea about musicianship being a purely male domain is not one which we can fully agree with. In another example, women were known perform within female circles, such as the king's harems (Ibid: 279). However, while such male-female segregation is not fully confirmed, we can still say that it may have been dominant; European travelers who were familiar with male parties frequently describe musicianship as a male performance.

Rahbar claims about female performers: "with respect to the extant information about the activities of the wives of nobility in calligraphy and decorative arts, it can be deduced that female performers either belonged to female courtiers or were among the grandees themselves;

apparently it was not of importance if they were taught by male instructors. Female performers could be the children of male or female masters, or even their spouse. This demonstrates the kind of inheritable system which was in place, and this may be generalizable to women in public" (Rahbar and Asaadi, 2012: 130).

However, when it comes to dancing in the Safavid period, we can claim that it was a female profession much more strongly. According to Chardin, dancers were organized in groups, with a more experienced head dancer in charge of twenty performers. The group was at the command of the oldest among them (Chardin, 1993: 427). A point indicated by almost all European travel writers is about the presence of dancer-harlots in orgy parties given by the king and his grandees. Dancers were chosen from prostitutes, thereby offering other attractions quite apart from dancing. The fact that dancers came from this background implied the low status afforded to dance and music in the society of the Safavid dynasty in Iran. Tavernier added: "Men never dance –it is only performed by harlot women. They are invited to these parties to dance with open and uncovered hair and face…" (Tavernier, 2003: 289). Therefore, one of the methods of segregation between men and women in the musical society of the Safavid era was designating women as dancers, whereas men did not dance. This approach towards dance and even music in the time of the Safavids was considered unpleasant and reprehensible, and seemed strange to European travelers. This was, in part, because dancing had developed differently in Europe, where men had practiced it alongside women. To demonstrate its low status in Iranian society, particularly in the Safavid era, dancing was specially assigned to the harlot class of women. It should be noted that in Safavid bureaucracy, musicians were classified next to the harlot class, which shows the negative social attitude towards them. The director of music was called the "chalchi bashi"[1], whose duty was to supervise the provision of court music; all performers and dancers worked under him. The chalchi bashi was under the control of the torchbearer, who was responsible for debauchery and bawdy houses and music centers.[2] Granting the chalchi bashi total supervision of this form of entertainment was explained by the fact that the resultant taxes paid by these groups was spent on buying oil and suet for court torches and lights (Meysami,2010: 46).

As well as harlots, young boys also participated in dancing. Dance and music was attended in places such as cabarets and coffee shops in the Safavid era, but individuals performing in these places were often young boys: "several cabarets can be seen in the northern part of the square [Isfahan]. These houses are the same as taprooms and cabarets, places where vagabonds usually go, and Surkars [3] or little dancer boys perform lascivious moves and dances…" (Olearius, 1984: 240). Figueroa describes coffee shops under Shah Abbas I's reign as follows: "boys from different nationalities, Cherkasy, Georgian, Christian and even Muslims are taught in these coffee shops. In fact, they area type of school for these boys to learn all kinds of lascivious and shameful dances and even other loathsome rascality, as discussed in the description of Isfahan…" (Figueroa,1984: 341). Also, Olearius indicates that these little boys

were from lower social class, many being born illegitimately or not belonging to a family (Olearius, 1984: 78). By the time Katof was writing, some adolescents were dancing wearing leg bells, and some of them the Daf, fistula, or hornpipe. Shah Abbas frequented teahouses almost every night, and there some adolescents danced for him (Katof, 1977: 67-68). Figueroa reviews a welcome ceremony as well as a royal banquet in Isfahan and the coffee shops in Shiraz, where two rows of dancers can be seen: "one row of women and another row consisting of six or seven boys with long hair like women and skirts down to their ankles…" (Figueroa, 984: 132). Olearius also mentions young boys and adolescents who played the Tombak and danced on the Chahars hanbeh Suri Day (Olearius, 1984: 78-79).

As a result, we can see that there were both female and young male dancers in the Safavid period.

Generally speaking, lots of information can be found in European travelogues relating to the social position of musicians and society's attitudes towards music in the Safavid dynasty. Chardin,who lived in the period of Shah Abbas II and Shah Suleiman, sees dancing and singing as a performance carried out by lower class people. He believes that men had the best vocal tones, but because it was considered contemptuously similar to dancing, few of them tried to sing. He designates dancing to women and musicianship to men in Iran (Chardin, 1993: 425).

One noteworthy point that can be seen in western travel-writing is that none of the authors looked at the moral health of dancers, including women and little boys (Fatemi, 2001). For example, Smith, the Dutch ambassador in the time of Shah Safi, reported: "Dancing is not common here. Only harlots and scoundrel youths are sometimes induced to do it" (Smith, 1977: 85). By relying on evidence derived from Safavid-era travelogues, we may conclude that the music provided in court ceremonies, as well as that in coffee shops and cabarets, was frequently considered as drunken party music, and was lacking in artistry. According to Fatemi, if music was "evil" in the Safavid period, it was an essential evil. Because it was part of the same genre as debauchery and drinking wine, it meant that all three activities were essential evils (Fatemi, 2001: 31).

2. Safavid Women in the Position of Listener

Discrimination between men and women in the position of listener was another common tradition in the musical culture of Iran. The roles of male and female audience members were not the same in the Safavid era. Women were not able to appreciate the music and dancing in banquets in the same way as men. Harlot dancers may often have performed in women's circles, but male performers were not allowed to participate (Olearius, 1984: 297). In other words, harem women had their own arts, such as singing, playing tunes, and dancing (Kaempfer, 1981: 226). Sanson implies that different techniques and arts, such as performing and dancing, were taught

amongst the women of the harems (Sanson, 1967: 119). Music performed by women was often for the harem, and thus for female listeners as well as the king, meaning that it was considered to be a domestic concern. These women performers could be from the harem, or handmaiden-musicians[4]. This division based on gender in the music of the Safavid era is very clear. Della Valle talks about a wife of the king who played music and sang (Della Valle, 2001: 279). He also comments that Shah Abbas, who has killed an opponent and taken his wife into his harem, ordered some female performers to sing mourning songs (Ibid: 678). Thus, women could only appreciate music informal ceremonies or in a domestic environment, while men have a wider range of musical entertainment on offer.

Conclusion

This study seeks to show that the musical society of the Safavid dynasty discriminated between men and women, and that this can be evaluated in two ways: through women in the position of artists and women in position of listeners. Safavid-era women as performers were sometimes distanced from performing and participating in dancing, while men did not dance, delegating it to women and young boys. Assigning harlot women and young boys as dancers and musicians in the Safavid era associates dancing and music with debauchery, so that musical professions are accorded a low status, especially dancing. Women as listeners had to deal with certain constraints at the time, too. As women couldn't take advantage of musical performances in the same way as men could, they only listened to music in certain circles. We should note that contemporary descriptions often pertained to courtly and upper class parties, and due to this, the extant resources from the period paid less attention to domestic circles, and tell us even less about the culture of villages and common people.

References

Chardin, Jean-Baptiste-Siméon. 1993. *Safarnameh Chardin (Travels in Persia)*. Translated by Eghbal Yaghmai. Tehran: Tous Publication.

Della Valle, Pietro. 2001. *Safarnameh Della Valle (Cose e parole neiviaggi di Pietro Della Valle)*. Translated by Mahmoud Behfrozi. Tehran: Ghatreh publication.

Fatemi, Sasan. 2001. "Motreb ha az safavieh ta mashrutiat (Musicians from Safavid to the Constitution)". Mahoor Music Quarterly 12: 27-39.

Falsafi, Nasrollah. 1954. *Zendegi nameh Shah Abbas I (Biography of Shah Abbas I*). Tehran: Tehran university publications.

Figueroa, Garcia de Silva. 1984. *Safarnameh Figueroa (Travel literature of Figueroa, Spanish ambassador at the court of Shah Abbas I)*. Translated by Gholam Reza Samii. Tehran: Namelees Publication.

Kaempfer, Engelbert. 1981. *Safarnameh Kaempfer (Travel literature of Kaempfer)*. Translated by Kaikavous Jahandari. Tehran: Kharazmi Publishing.

Katof, F. A. 1977. *Safarnameh Katof (Travel literature of Katof)*. Translated by Mohammad Sadiq Homayounfard. Tehran: Ministry of Culture, Art, and National Library.

Mashhoon, Hassan. 2001. *Music history of Iran*. Tehran: culture of new publication.

Meysami, Seyyed Hossein. 2010. *Safavid Music*. Tehran:"Matn" authorship, translating and publishing of arts opuses institute.

Olearius, Adam. 1984. *Safarnameh Olearrius (Travel literature of Adam Olearius)*.Translated from German text and Margins: Ahmad Behpour, Tehran: Ebtekar Publishing and Cultural Organization.

Rahbar, Ilnaz, and Asadi, Hooman, 2012, "position of musician women in Safavi ages, looking at paintings", musical and dramatic arts letter: 115-132.

Sanson. 1967. *Safarnameh Sanson (Travel literature of Sanson: Estat present du Royaume de Perse: Situation of Imperial in Iran at the Safavid Shah Suleiman, detailed study on manners and morals of Iranian regime*.Translated by Taghi Tafazoli, Tehran: unknown publishe.

Smith. 1977. *First ambassadors of Iran and Netherlands, trip description of «Moosa Beyg» ambassador of Shah Abbas to Netherlands and «Jan Smith» itinerary, ambassador of Netherlands in Iran*. translation and composition: Dr. Flore Wilma,.Tehran: Tahori library..

Tavernier, Jean-Baptiste. 2003. *Safarnameh Tavernier (Tavernier Itinerary)*. translated by Hamid Arbab Shirvani. Tehran: Niloufar publications.