Afghanistan: Music

Afghanistan lies in Central and South Asia, between Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and China. In ancient times, its strategic geographic location along the Silk Road meant that anyone who lived in Afghanistan or controlled its politics benefited from the lucrative trade flow between the East and the West. It is not therefore surprising that the country saw wave upon wave of invasions and immigrations, and these gave rise to a vivid mosaic of ethnic cultures—Aimaq, Arab, Baluch, Brahui, Gujjar, Hazara, Kizilbash, Kazakh, Kirghiz, Nuristani, Pashtai, Pashtun, Pamiri, Tajik, Turkmen, and Uzbek—that have, over the centuries, enriched Afghanistan with their diversity.

A majority of Afghans are Sunni Muslims, while the rest are mostly Shi’a Muslim, with sprinklings of Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians; the main languages are Dari, Pashto, Tajik, and Uzbek, with many ethnic and regional dialects. While the different groups have distinct social identities, intercultural influences run across regions, and also across borders from Pakistan, India, and Iran. This is evident in the music of Afghanistan, from the classical art music of Herat, Kabul, Kandahar, and Mazar-i-Sharif, to the religious recitation chants and zikr, naat, and tatti forms of Sufi music, to the regional folk music styles, to modern genres of film music, popular music, and Westernized pop and hip-hop. These dissimilar music forms often make use of similar instruments—the national instruments of Afghanistan, rubab and zirbaghali, to mention two.

A TURBULENT LAND

Some of the earliest mentions of Afghanistan occur in ancient treatises like Hudud al-Alam (The Limits of The World), and in the narratives of travelers like Al-Biruni, Ibn Battuta, and Muhammad Qasim Hindu Shah; the latter reports the following comment by some soldiers about Afghanistan: “There is nothing there but Afghans and disturbances.” Disturbances have been the recurring theme throughout the regional history, and Afghanistan has hosted great conquerors—Alexander, Chandragupta Maurya, Genghis Khan, and Timur; great dynasties—Greco-Bactrians, Kushans, Timurids, and Mughals; and, in modern times, the British, the Russians, the US-led coalition, the Taliban, and the Mujahideen.

The music of Afghanistan and its continuing legacy is a magnificent testament to the courage and endurance of its people; in spite of the almost unending strife, chaos, and suppression, for all the loss and despair, they have managed to retain an essential faith in the nobility of creation.

Traditional Forms

Afghanistan’s status as an Islamic country has, to a considerable extent, determined the public attitude toward music. The Afghans differentiate between religious music, which is unaccompanied by instruments and therefore not really music, and showqin (fanciful) music, which is accompanied by musical instruments. Some parties, like the Taliban, view the latter as a corrupt element that needs to be forcibly rooted out from society; they have been notorious for harassing musicians and music lovers, and destroying music stores and musical instruments. Others, like the Sufis, consider music an acceptable, essential part of Afghan and Muslim culture.

For centuries, music was a regular feature at public and private festivities. From the shepherds, who filled their lonely vigils with music, to the royal court, which patronized musicians, there was an enthusiasm for music.
making, albeit one marked by social constraints. Women, for instance, were permitted limited scope as musicians, and professional musicians from hereditary music clans had lower social status than the non-professional connoisseurs. Social lines were also drawn between the folk musicians and the ustads (masters) of classical tradition.

KLASIK

The classical form of Afghan music began in the royal court of Kabul in the 1860s. The Afghan King Amir Sher Ali Khan invited North Indian musicians to settle in Afghanistan, and they combined the theoretical and structural elements of Indian music with Pashto traditions. Klasik music has two main styles, the instrumental raga or naghmeh (melody), and the vocal tarana and ghazal. The Afghan ragas are more rhythm-based than the Indian ragas, and are played with percussion instruments such as zerbaghali, dairah, dohol, or tabla.

Ghazals, which often make use of spiritual and romantic Persian lyrics by classical poets like Abdul-Qader Bedil, Daagh Dehlvi, Hafez, Mirza Ghalib, Muhammad Ibrahim Zauq, and Sa’adi, are based on ragas and taals (rhythmic patterns). The ghazal instrumental sections are fast and repetitive, performed usually on rubab, dilruba, sarangi, tabla, tanpura, and harmonium. The Urdu poet Amir Khusrau invented tarana, and it is usually the last feature in a concert. It contains soft Persian syllables that are sung and played in a medium to fast rhythm. Afghanistan’s klasik musicians include the famous rubab players Ustad Mohammad Omar, Ustad Rahim Khushnawaz, and Homayun Sakhi. Ustad Rahim Bakhsh, Ustad Qasim, and Ustad Mohammad Hussain Sarahang are some of the leading vocalists.

RELIGIOUS MUSIC

In addition to the non-instrumental Quranic recitation chants, Afghan religious music includes the naat devotional songs in the Sufi zikr (remembrance) ritual. These songs extol Prophet Muhammad and are performed on special religious days by solo or group vocalists. The mystic Chishti Sufi ghazals, known as qaza-yeh ruh or tatti (food for spiritual enrichment), are the only religious songs accompanied by musical instruments, usually rubab, tabla, and harmonium. The Afghan Shias, during Muharram, perform marsiya (honoring Imam Hussain’s martyrdom), manqabat (praising Sufi saints), and rowzeh (honoring Imam Ali’s martyrdom).

REGIONAL FOLK MUSIC

Afghan folk music is performed at weddings, holidays, and public gatherings. The songs are mainly concerned with human dramas (ecstasy or despair over love), legendary romances (Laila and Majnoo), tragedies (Durkhanai and Adam Khan), and ethnic folklore. Teahouses are popular venues for solo and group performances, and the now-destroyed Kucheh Kharabat (musicians’ quarter) in Kabul was once much patronized. The performers are all men, although the Pashtun nomadic women are known for their landai poetic songs. Generally, Afghan women are not encouraged to perform in public, and their private performances, if allowed, are restricted to their quarters at weddings, where they play the dairah; playing other instruments is also frowned upon.

AFGHAN DANCES

Attans are fast-paced, rhythmic Pashtun dances performed to the accompaniment of dhol, tabla, rubab, sorna, or tuladuring various public celebrations. Several hundred male dancers can participate, moving in a large circle, following the movements of a lead dancer. The dancers often carry loaded guns that are fired at intervals. The dance may be of a specific
duration or may continue until the exhausted dancers give up. There are many regional variations—Kabuli, Herati, Nuristani, Wardaki, Kochyano, Logari, Khosti, and Pashayl among them.

Instrumentation

RUBAB
This “lion of instruments” is the precursor of the Indian sarod. It is a short-necked string instrument with a narrow, double-chambered body, made from a single mulberry trunk. The neck has four adjustable nylon frets and a bent-back headstock with six tuning pegs. The hollow lower sound chamber has a bridge fitted over its taut goatskin membrane, and the upper chamber has a fingerboard with 9 to 15 tuning pegs set along the edge. The three melody strings—of gut or nylon—are attached to the three right-hand tuning pegs at the headstock, while the three metal drone strings run to the left-hand pegs; these strings pass over the bridge to a tailpiece at the bottom. The 9 to 15 metal sympathetic strings, which give the rubab its special resonance, run to the side pegs, and pass under the bridge to another tailpiece at the bottom. The instrument is played in rhythmic up and down strokes with a shahbaz (plectrum). Most rubabs have beautiful carvings and inlay decorations.

DILRUBA
The 10th Sikh leader, Guru Gobind Singh (1666–1708), invented this instrument as a lighter alternative to the mayur vina. The dilruba has a rectangular, membrane-covered resonator, with curved sides, and a long neck. The four metal main strings are located above the 20 metal frets, and the 12 to 15 metal sympathetic strings pass under the frets. The main strings are played with a gaz (bow) held in the right hand, while the left-hand fingers press the strings or skim along the neck. Played in a seated position, the dilruba may be held horizontally on the lap, or vertically between the knees or against the shoulder.

DOMBURA AND DUTAR
Both these stringed instruments are pear-shaped, with patterned sound-holes and long necks. The dombura, however, is fretless, and has two gut or nylon strings; these connect to two flat pegs at the headstock and, passing over the bridge, to a tailpiece at the bottom end. Depending on whether it is of Tajik or Uzbek make, it is constructed of one or three sections of apricot or mulberry wood. The dombura is played by plucking, with some drumming on the wood soundbox for extra effect.

The dutar (though its name literally means “two-string”) has 14 metal strings—four main (one melody and three drones) and 10 sympathetic—and 13 adjustable nylon frets. The main strings go to two front pegs and two side pegs on the upper neck, while the sympathetic strings run to 10 side pegs on the lower neck; all strings pass over the bridge to holders at the bottom. The dutar body is carved from a single mulberry-wood section, with a neck of apricot or walnut wood. The instrument, which is very popular with the Hazaras, is played by plucking with a plectrum held in the right hand, while the left hand skims along the neck.
PERCUSSION
A clay goblet drum with a tuning-paste-covered membrane, the zerbaghali is held in the lap or underarm, and played with both hands to produce low and high tones. The single-headed frame drum, daira, has attached jingles. The player shakes and holds it in the left hand, drumming the edges of the goatskin membrane with the left-hand fingers, and beating the center with the right palm. The large cylindrical, two-headed dohol is hung around the neck with a strap, and is played barehanded or with drumsticks.

SORNA AND OTHER INSTRUMENTS
Similar to the Indian shehnai, the sorna is played in pairs at weddings and other celebrations. It has a double-reed construction that is credited to the mythical Persian King Jamshed. Other popular instruments include the ghichak, a spike fiddle essentially identical to the gidjak of Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan, and to the Persian kemenche; the badakhshani endblown flute (known as ney in much of Central and West Asia); and the tula transverse flute, very similar to Indian bansuri; together with many Indian and Western instruments.

Contemporary Currents

POPULAR MUSIC
Since their establishment, Radio Kabul (1940) and Afghan TV (1974) have been very influential in popularizing klasik, regional, and modern music throughout Afghanistan and beyond. In the 1950s, when radio sets were relatively rare in the country, loudspeakers relayed the music in public areas. Radio Kabul featured music by the National Orchestra, under the directorship of Ustad Mohammad Omar, and, in the 1970s and 1980s, along with Afghan TV, regularly featured the klasik ustad as well as pop singers like Ahmad Zahir, Haidar Salim, Farhad Darya, Rahim Mehryar, Kamal Dost, and Salma Jahani. Radio Kabul built up a considerable music archive, and its dedicated staff managed to preserve it through the Soviet invasion, the Taliban years, and the NATO strikes.

MUSIC CENSORSHIP IN AFGHANISTAN
During the years of Soviet occupation, Radio Kabul and Afghan TV had to toe a pro-Soviet line, and the anti-Communist views of Ahmad Zahir probably led to his assassination in 1979. It took the puritanical Taliban, though, with their "Ministry for the Prevention of Vice and Promotion of Virtue" to systematically destroy the country's musical heritage. They banned music broadcasts and public performances, forbade the making and selling of musical instruments and music recordings, and harassed, humiliated, imprisoned, and killed musicians. Those who could manage it fled the country, seeking refuge in India, Pakistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, the USA, the UK, Canada, Europe, and Australia.

CURRENT SITUATION
The exiled ustad kept the tradition of Afghan music alive. Apart from performing and recording their music, they took the lead in training new generations of Afghan musicians. Exposed too to Western music genres, the young Afghans added Afghan rock and Afghan hip-hop, rendered in English, Pashto, and Dari, to the country's repertoire; the rock band Kabul Dreams and DJ Besho are two popular examples.

Since the Taliban rule ended in 2001, Afghanistan has seen a music revival, with the resumption of music broadcasts, performances, and sales; Afghan music is also flourishing online. While the situation remains fraught, with fundamentalism still an active force and the economic and security realities still difficult at best, there have been two promising developments that hold hope for the future—the Ustad-Shagird Music Training Programme, initiated in 2003.
in Kabul and Herat by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), and the Afghanistan National Institute of Music, founded in 2010 in Kabul by the musicologist Dr. Ahmad Sarmast.

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