

A STUDY OF WOMEN'S VOCAL SONGS IN SHIRAZ, IRAN

Yalda Yazdani

Abstract

The motivation behind this research is to both recognize this valuable type of music and make a contribution in terms of keeping this old culture in ceremonies of Shiraz cities alive in Iran. These vocal songs called “*Vasunak*” were sung at weddings and some other celebrations. *Vasunak*-s are generally performed by Shirazian women, especially those who were immediate relatives of the bride and groom. In this article I explore what had been done before the fieldwork, and present my analysis of the audio recordings. This paper includes, the definition of *Vasunak*; the explanation of marriage in Shiraz and the *Vasunak*, which was related to it; performance situations of *Vasunak*; and analysis of the vocal samples of these types of music. The importance of this research lies in the explanation of marriage customs in Shiraz's culture in the past through expressing *Vasunak*-s, which used to be performed during a wedding; and the explanation of other ceremonies apart from weddings, in which *Vasunak* was performed. The most important reason in conducting this research is to collect and keep the vocal samples which are performed by the *Vasunak* singers who are still alive, and to assist in recognizing, appreciating, and maintaining this kind of music in the hope it could be an inspiration for researchers or other experts in music in future years.

Introduction

This type of music consisting of women's vocal songs originated from Shiraz (one of Iran's traditional cities, located in the southern part of Iran, with a population of 1,510,968), where I temporarily lived to conduct research under the title of “Shiraz women's vocal songs” called *Vasunak*.

Roughly 33 years ago, after the Iranian revolution, the government put a ban on women's singing and from that point on they couldn't participate in traditional ceremonies and sing as they used to. This cultural inheritance, which was given to us by our past generations, started to be forgotten and I myself decided to halt this trend through recording and sharing this information, allowing other people to embrace the tradition.

Vasunak was used to be sung during weddings, funerals and some other traditional ceremonies by women, and the songs are mainly similar in rhythm, melody, and lyrics for the various occasions, but there were still some differences in their performances depending on the occasion. These performances were sung individually or by a group accompanied by a musical instrument called *dayere* (a circular instrument with one side covered by lamb's skin) and also

during the performance other women would participate by singing in a question and answer style rhythm, repeating either the same or different sentences and also clapping throughout the ceremony.

This article comes in two related sections: 1. Performances and occasions of *Vasunak*-s, and 2. Analysis of melody, rhythms and lyrics of *Vasunak*-s. The two areas this article explores are the uses of *Vasunak*-s and identification of the occasions they would be performed, and an in-depth analysis of the melodies and rhythms used in *Vasunak*-s, as well as the relevance and power they carry.

Weddings

The songs mostly performed in weddings were lengthy and traditionally performed by the families of the bride and groom, who until the final part of the ceremony were unable to see each other. The wedding was comprised of different parts that I am going to briefly describe, such as *Baleboran*, where parents of both sides and grandparents have a gathering with the purpose of meeting the bride to be, and organizing the wedding. After a short period of time, they had a party, *Neshaneh*, in which only women were allowed to take part; and they used to bring a ring for the bride to wear in order to indicate that she would be married to the groom. The next ceremony was *Rakht boran*, when both immediate families would buy a suit and wedding dress for the groom and bride. Finally, it was *Aghd*, during which the engagement would be officially declared by a holy person; right after this they had a big celebration and would send the bride and groom to their own house and wish them a long and happy life (Homayouni, 2010).

Funerals

An example of this was when a grandson had died before getting married. The same lyrics were used but with different feelings of sadness, which could be felt in their voices, and listeners were entirely impressed by that. One of its special features is that the lyrics are the same for both funerals and weddings, but the performance differs according to its occasion, so the singer can make people both cheerful and depressed, depending on its intonation (Lotfollahi, 2010).

Bahar Narenj Ceremony

One of the famous citrus fruits which is very well known in Shiraz is called *Bahar Narenj*. It has a long history and you can see it in almost every house. People respect it and it is considered a holy tree; some people believe that the year it has no fruit on it they will not be lucky. To avoid this, they try to have some convention with other neighbors, especially women, and have a small wedding next to the tree by covering the tree with a white net to create the vision of a bride, and sing happy songs together in order to make the tree happy and make that tree bear fruit. This used to be one of the old traditions of Shiraz (Faghiri, 2010).

Lyrical Features

Lyrics contain singular stanza with a repetitive sentence at the end of all verses, called *Tarjiej Band*. As I explained, they cover different topics such as a mother's dream of her child's wedding or admiring the beauties of brides as well as admiring a brave groom and sometimes casting light on the importance of tolerance, in mutual relationships.

Analysis of *Vasunak* in Musical Terms

These songs are mostly in 6/8 and the melodic range of these songs can be demonstrated in *Dastgah Homayun* scale, which is one of the seven modes in Iranian music. The scale of this mode is usually written in G but due to the singer's intention, I transcribed it in C.

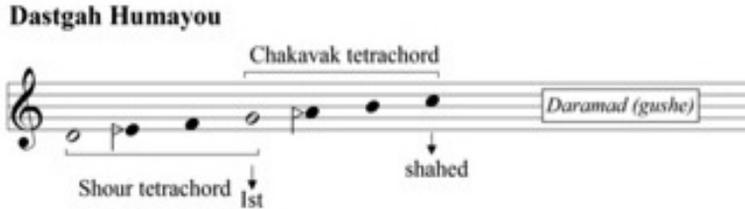


Figure 1. The standard *Homayun* Scale

As I explained, we use the same scale on C:

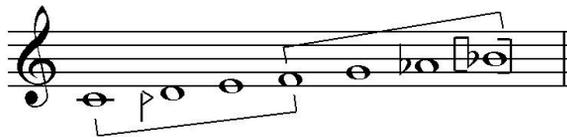


Figure 2. The same scale on C

These two tetrachords transcribed in this mode are:

1. Chakavak



2. Bidad



Figure 3.

Most of these songs as we noticed in the audio used the first tetrachord, (*Chakavak*). They also use the fifth but they do not pass to the next tetrachord. This example consists of two phrases, each one ends with a repeated sentence (*Mobarak bad*).

The first part of the A phrase starts on the third degree until the fifth and then descends on the same note E (the third). The second phrase repeats the same melody but descends on the first

degree. The B section starts on the second degree, then moves to the fourth and then descends on the first degree.

Figure 4. First Performance by Simin Skoorchi

The second and third examples also follow the same melodic trend. They use the first tetrachord (*Chakavak*).

Figure 5. Second Performance by Faezeh Ranaie

Figure 6. Third Performance by Akhtar Zare

Conclusion

Vasunak is a type of music, consisting of a single stanza, performed both individually or by a group at different occasions, such as weddings or funerals by women in Shiraz. The melodic scale of these songs can be demonstrated in *Dasgah Homayun* according to the Iranian modal system, and consists of two main tetrachords, *Bidad* and *Chakavak*, in the rhythmical structure of 6/8.

The most notable and unique aspect of the music is the similarities between the rhythm, melody and lyrics used in each song. Depending on the occasion for which the song is performed, the feelings expressed in the music vary drastically. The actual content of the music remains the same, and only the emotion of the singers change. This can make the same song fitting for a wedding or a funeral, purely depending on the emotion the performers put in to it. The expression is tightly linked to the female's character and makes this style of music a beautiful and artistic expression of emotion.

References

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Lotfollahi, Abdolreza. October, 2010. Shiraz. (Personal interview)