

KAYHAN KALHOR AND HIS INFLUENCE ON IRANIAN KAMANCHEH PLAYERS

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Abstract

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Kayhan Kalhor (1964, from Kermanshah in Iran) is one of the masters of the kamanche both in Iran and in the world. His style of playing, composing and cooperating with famous and master musicians and leading bands such as YoYo Ma, Brooklyn Rider, Coronus Quartet, Shojaat Hussein Khan, Erdal Erzincan and Mohamad Reza Shajarian made him very special in his work. His style of playing and composing has influenced many Iranian kamanche players and also composers. There are several different factors to explain his great musical achievement, yet three leading factors that contributed to his brilliant career and fame will be considered in this paper. 1. Freedom in using musical themes. Most of Iranian kamanche players or composers play or work on traditional Iranian music, known as *radif*. Kalhor has not limited himself to traditional ways. He makes use of Iranian folk music, traditional music, and also Middle Eastern folk music as the basis of his creation, but as a flexible musician he is open to different kinds of music including the western classical music. Expanding and exploring the potentials of his instrument and using different parts of the kamanche, he introduces more capabilities of it to audiences in the world. 2. Creativity in using different styles. Kayhan Kalhor not only uses Iranian traditional style of playing the kamanche, but also profits from many other styles. One may sometimes feel that he is playing the harp and sometimes hear the sound of the cello, or that of the *tombak*, an Iranian drum-like percussion instrument. The capability of using all parts of the kamanche and combining different styles is the chief characteristics of his music. 3. Transforming a traditional instrument to a global (orchestral) musical instrument: By using the whole capacity and ability of the kamanche, Kaldor has introduced it as a great, unusual stringed instrument offering oriental taste, which can now be used in classical orchestras. His cooperating with great musicians from different countries demonstrates his achievement.

Introduction

Kayhan Kalhor (1964-Iran-Tehran) of Kurdish descent is one of the masters of the *kamancheh* playing in Iran and elsewhere in the world. His style of playing, composing and cooperating with famous and virtuosos and bands such as Yo Yo Ma, Brooklyn Rider, Coronus quartet, Shojaat Hussein Khan, Erdal Erzencan, Mohamad Reza Shajarian, and made him very special in his work. In 2004, 2006 and 2011 four of his works were nominated for Grammy Awards. (Anonymous 2009)

Kayhan Kalhor began his musical career under the teaching of Master Ahmad Mohajer at the age of seven. A child prodigy on the *kamancheh*, at the age of thirteen he was invited to work

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with the National Orchestra of Radio and Television of Iran, where he performed for five years. Kalhor was seventeen when he began working with the Shayda Ensemble of the Chavosh Cultural Center, the most prestigious arts organization in Iran at that time.

While performing with Shayda he continued studying the Iranian classical repertoire (*radif*)¹ with different masters. In addition, he spent much time in different regions of Iran, including Khorasan in the northeast and Kurdistan in the west, listening to and learning from the musicians of the regions. Kalhor then spent time in Rome and Ottawa where he studied Western classical music (Khaleghi 1998: 80).

He has spent much time traveling throughout Iran, studying the music of many regions. Kalhor has composed works for Iran's most renowned vocalists, Mohammed Reza Shajarian and Shahram Nazeri, and has performed with Iran's greatest masters. He toured the world as a soloist and with his ensembles performing Persian and Turkish and Indian improvisations. Although Kalhor may be labeled as an artist who received a classical training he has a radical approach to music making. On albums such as *Night Silence Desert* and *Without You* he spreads an extraordinarily wide net over Iran's musical traditions, drawing together instruments, modes, and styles long since divided by cultural and generational change. On *Night Silence Moon* his eloquent, classical *kamancheh* playing blends with the traditional folk style of eighty-year-old dotar master Hadj Ghorban Soleimani and the older, established vocal style of Mohammad Reza Shajarian. Kalhor consciously pins Persian classical music structures to the rich folk modes and melodies of Northern Khorasan, the cultural heart of historic Persia and a bridge to Central Asia. Kayhan Kalhor's music speaks from an ancient Persian tradition while sounding timeless and spiritually invigorating today. The following are some of his works: *Scattering Stars Like Dust*, 1998, *Night Silence Desert*, 2000, *In the Mirror of the Sky*, 2004, *The Wind*, 2006, *Ghazal: Lost Songs of the Silk Road*, 1997, *Ghazal: As Night Falls on the Silk Road*, 1998, *Ghazal: Moon Rise over the Silk Road*, 2000, *Ghazal: The Rain*, 2003, *Silent City* 2006. During these years, his style of playing and composing has made an impact on many Iranian *kamancheh* players and also composers.

For a better assessment of his work and his influence I need to mention other *kamancheh* players, flourished before and after him to show differences and influences. In this paper I have chosen only five musicians. Another thing is about the visual material that I had during the presentation of my paper in this symposium. I think it would be very suitable if a DVD or CD was added to the book of the papers to show differences between different styles of *the kamancheh* playing to music lovers, as I did while I presented my paper. However, because I do not have the opportunity to show you videos, let us hope that the readers will eagerly find them on websites or other places.

Before Kalhor

There were many great *kamancheh* players before he flourished, such as Ali Asghar Shekarchi, Ardeshir Kamkar, Ahmad Mohajer. They are all impressive artists. Among the members of the

1 *Radif*. The classical music of Iran is based on the *radif*, which is a collection of old melodies that have been handed down by the masters to the pupils through the generations. Over time, each master's own interpretation has shaped and added new melodies to this collection, which may bear the master's names. (Dejkm)

former generation of the Iranian *kamancheh* players I chose Bahari, not only because he was a great musician but also because of his impact on Kalhor.

Ali Asghar Bahari (1905 – June 10, 1995) He played with the most famous Iranian musician such as Hossein Tehrani, Ahmad Ebadi, and Abolhasan Saba. He also taught music in Tehran University for a few years. He toured France, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Britain and United States. He died in Tehran. (Husseini 2000) He was one of the best Iranian *kamancheh* players in the world. Kalhor always reveals his opinion that he is one of the greatest Iranian *kamancheh* players, but comparing with Kalhor, I believe he is playing tough and his music shows an old sense.

After Him

Actually none of the succeeding musicians that I will mention is Kalhor's pupil, because I thought that it would be better to choose some *kamancheh* players who were not directly in touch with Kayhan Kalhor or those who came indirectly under his influence.

Saeed Farajpour

The first *kamancheh* player that I want to consider his style is Saeed Farajpour. He is one of the members of Dastan music ensemble which is one of the most important Iranian traditional bands active in the USA. I should note that before Farajpour, Kalhor was the composer and player in Dastan band. When he quit working with them, Farajpour replaced him. Being a Kurdish musician he plays Kurdish music too. He plays the *kamancheh* very fluently but imitates Kalhor's style.

Sohrab Pournazeri

He is one of the youngest Iranian *kamancheh* players and Setaristlike Kalhor. Pournazeri is one of the members of the Shams ensemble which is the great family group of Iranian music. Pournazeri is not only under the influence of Kalhor in playing the *kamancheh* but also he is very interested in fusion music. His playing style is similar to Kalhor's. He was one of the students of Ardeshir Kamkar. He is, too, a Kurdish musician and has worked with Kalhor for many years.

Shervin Mohajer

He was born in 1980. Like Pournazeri he is a young player. Although he is not among the number one *kamancheh* players of Iran, he is good enough. He has worked with masters of Iranian music such as Shahram Nazeri and Ardeshir Kamkar. He has tried to play like Kalhor for many years although he is not as successful as others are. He tried to mix old Persian music with new styles. He has always followed Kalhor music. By virtue of Kayhan Kalhor's worldwide and local co-operations, and also due to his great influence in Iran he became a successful *kamancheh* player.

Certainly, there are several different factors that contributed to his achievement, but in this paper I will consider the three major ones having listened to Kalhor's albums, most of his concerts, and some of his singles.

Freedom in using musical themes

Most of Iranian *kamancheh* players, or composers play or work on Iranian traditional music known as *radif* (Iranian traditional system of playing) (Khaleghi 1998:76), but he is not limited himself only

to work on it. He mainly uses Iranian folk or traditional music, and also Middle Eastern folk music elements, as he is a flexible artist he is open to several different kinds of music, even to western classical music.

With expanding and exploring usability of different parts of the *kamancheh*, he introduces more capabilities of it to audiences in the world. Mr. Kalhor is well-versed in cross-cultural partnerships (Saket 2002: 109). His much successful musical collaboration including Ghazal, a duo with the Indian sitarist Shujaat Husain Khan or in the *Wind* album he has collaborated with Turkish master Erdal Erzincan. The sitar and *kamancheh* or baghlama and *kamancheh* work well together, Mr. Kalhor said, largely because of the 'affinity of the two cultures' and their many historical connections.

Creativity in using different styles

Kayhan Kalhor not only uses Iranian traditional style of playing the *kamancheh*, but also benefits from all kinds of styles. Sometimes his listeners feel that he is playing the harp, when using the instrument's top part without the bow, or sometimes, you hear the sounds of the cello, or even of the *tombak* (an Iranian percussion instrument) from his instrument, when beating on the body of it. The ability of using every part of the instrument and combining various styles is a crucial aspect of his performance. Due to his wide-ranged musical influence, Kalhor's style is sometimes regarded as radical in that it combines multiple elements from many different musical styles. Using different musical instruments he crosses cultural borders with his works and performance (Ghazizadeh)

Making Iranian traditional kamancheh as global orchestralmusical instrument

By using every capacity and ability of the *kamancheh*, he made and introduced it not only as Iranian traditional instrument but as a great, different stringed musical instrument bearing oriental taste, which can be used in classical orchestras. His cooperation with great musicians from different countries justifies his claim.

For example in his latest work *Silent City*, we see his stunning collaboration with the adventurous American string quartet Brooklyn Rider. This performance has been hailed by critics as 'challenging music (that is) a real thrill ride' (Eisler 2006). In *SilentCity*, a hypnotic work commemorating Halabjah, a Kurdish village annihilated by Saddam Hussein, the *kamancheh* breaks out in a lamenting wail based on a traditional Turkish melody. After his recent performance with Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble, Kalhor widely became recognized as a masterful and innovative instrumentalist and composer. Known for repeatedly forging new musical paths, Kalhor takes ancient Persian music to a new wavelength with New York's intrepid Brooklyn Rider, renowned for its fervently adventurous repertoire and edgy performance style. As one music critic said: "*SilentCity* is a true fusion. And it is not just a melding of cultures and genres but of the musical minds of the people making it."

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