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CHAPTER **13**
**Subversion and Countersubversion:
Power, Control, and Meaning
in the New Iranian Pop Music**

Laudan Nooshin

INTRODUCTION

On May 23, 1997, a few weeks after Labour's historic election victory in Britain, another historic election—presidential this time—took place in Iran just as the country's Revolution was coming of age. Standing on a platform of greater openness internally and reestablishing Iran's international relations, Hojjatoleslam Mohammad Khatami was swept to power with an overwhelming mandate that gave a real indication of the extent of public support for change.¹ Since 1997, Khatami has initiated a number of reforms in which the most far-reaching have been in the cultural domain. One of the most remarkable developments is that after almost twenty years in which all pop music was officially banned in Iran, there has been a gradual relaxing of government policy in this area, and certain types of pop music have now become legal again.² As one of the most prominent signifiers of modernity, the reemergence of pop music into the public domain has sparked a complex and highly emotive debate over Iran's future in an increasingly global world, a debate that draws on a range of discourses, including the role of tradition in modernity and local resistance to global hegemony. This chapter traces the shifting meanings and significance of pop music in Iran over the last twenty-five years, focusing in particular on the implications of the post-1997 changes and the ways in which music and the discourses around music have served as an arena for playing out some of the most contested issues of nationhood, identity, and power. In exploring the various attempts to control pop music and its meanings, the chapter considers the articulation of such meanings through expressions of power and asks how particular types of music acquire

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subversive potential. In particular, I am interested in what happens when a form of cultural resistance is appropriated by those against whom the resistance was originally directed.³

Although never subject to direct colonial rule, from the late nineteenth century onward, Iran experienced repeated intervention from Western powers seeking to secure their own political and economic interests, often with the complicity of the ruling elite.⁴ As Ang points out, “The cultural constitution of national identity, as articulated in both official policies and informal popular practices, is a precarious project that can never be isolated from the global, transnational relations in which it takes shape.” (1996: 249); in the case of Iran, the deep-rooted legacy of political, economic, and cultural neocolonial influence—and the various forms of resistance to it—has long permeated discourses of national identity. Indeed, as discussed below, the 1979 Iranian Revolution was itself primarily an assertion of national identity and self-determination, and the period that followed was marked by an intense anxiety over questions of nationhood and self-definition symptomatic of people emerging from and coming to terms with the colonial encounter. As such, questions of identity became inextricably bound up with issues of self-determination and empowerment. The post-1979 rejection of Western cultural hegemony led to a decade of partially self-imposed isolation, most notably from the countries of Europe and North America, a period in which Iran attempted to disentangle itself from the web of neocolonial influence and cultural dependency. While many consider the relative isolation of the 1980s to have been a historical necessity, such a position was bound to be untenable in the long-term, and particularly in the global context of the twenty-first century. The gradual process of reestablishing international relations from the early 1990s (which gained momentum after 1997) has sparked an intense debate that draws on contesting visions of nationhood and of Iran’s future in the “global village.” At the heart of this debate is the central question of how to reestablish international relations without becoming dominated by an outside power, as had been the case for at least a century before the Revolution. Music has provided a public space for playing out such issues. In order to explore the significance of music in the current context, to understand why pop music was banned after 1979 and why certain kinds of pop are now legal again, let us consider the historical context before moving on to more recent events.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The history of Iran’s political relationship with the countries of Western Europe and the United States is well documented elsewhere, but a brief

summary is relevant to the following discussion. Like a number of other countries in the Middle East, it was initially Iran's strategic geographical position and later the discovery of oil that made it a focus of interest for Western countries (Halliday 1996: 22–23; Wright 1991: 22–24). For much of the nineteenth century, Britain and Russia were locked in a power struggle over control of Iranian territories. The legacy of foreign involvement continued through the twentieth century, gradually shifting to encompass cultural as well as political and economic spheres. It was against this backdrop that Reza Shah Pahlavi, and later his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, pursued a policy of rapid modernization and Westernization, heavily supported by Western countries for whom Iran represented a ripe market as well as a supplier of oil and a military policeman for the region.⁵ The headlong rush toward Westernization, industrialization, and the formation of a largely urban, secular, and capitalist nation state intensified during the 1960s and '70s at a time when any debate concerning the many genuine and urgent issues of development was suppressed in favor of a largely glossy and superficial imitation of the West.⁶

Not only did the processes of modernization take little account of traditional values and ways of life in a country that was still very traditional, but in fact government policies promoted the idea that such traditions were in themselves an obstacle to Iran's development.⁷ Nowhere was this more apparent than on the radio and television. Aware of the powerful potential of the broadcast media as a tool in his modernization project, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi brought about a rapid expansion of broadcasting from the late 1950s. Following the so-called "Communications and Development" model put forward by writers such as Daniel Lerner (Sreberny-Mohammadi 1991: 178–79), television in particular became a vehicle for promoting modernization, broadcasting a high percentage of imported (particularly American) programs that were disconnected from the reality of most people's lives (Mohammadi 1995: 371–75). Thus, the idea widely promoted in the 1970s that a single model of development, including the rejection of tradition in favor of modernization, could be applied to all "third world" countries, only served to undermine "the very basis of cultural identity and the traditional values of Iranian society" (Mohammadi 1995, 376). Modernization and Westernization thus became inextricably linked, creating a polarization with repercussions that can still be felt today. By insisting on the incompatibility of modernity and tradition, the Shah foreclosed any avenue of open debate on an issue so fundamental to Iran's future: How to modernize and develop without losing important aspects of national and cultural identity. Many of those with whom I have discussed this issue refer to the 1970s as a period of crisis in Iranian identity, and a number of authors have written about the

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“intoxication” with the West, which characterized the decade (the most well-known being the essay *Gharbzadegi* by Jalal Al-e Ahmad).⁸ Youssefzadeh notes that as far back as 1964: “Ayatollah Khomeini himself had already criticized this Westernization . . . [and] denounced the Radio and Television programmes as issuing ‘from a colonized culture’ (*este’ māri*) and producing ‘a colonized youth’”(2000: 37).

The whole social arena was dominated by “West is best” discourses strongly supported by the government that allowed little space for cultural or political resistance. The aspirational value that Western products and lifestyle acquired at this time derived from (and further deepened) existing imbalances of power between “first” and “third” worlds, and perpetuated an already deep-rooted colonial mindset in Iran (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1991a: 55). In considering the impact of global forces in Iran at a time when the country was becoming increasingly cosmopolitan, it’s important to bear in mind the complex interweaving of power, and acknowledge the extent to which the discourses that promoted Westernization to the exclusion of tradition were not simply an imposition from above (or from outside), but depended on a certain level of acceptance and complicity. In the words of Martin-Barbero, “We need to recognize that the hegemonic does not [just] dominate us from without but rather penetrates us, and therefore it is not just against it but from within it that we are waging war.” (1988, 462, quoted in Ang 1996: 244)

This “westoxication” (Kamrava 2001, 177) had a profound impact on all areas of musical life. Alizadeh, for example, discusses the long-term effects on music education of the uncritical imitation of Western models because of their “prestige by association” rather than their relevance or usefulness in the context of Iran (1998: 76–77).⁹ As part of Iran’s trajectory toward modernization, Western music of various kinds became available from the early 1960s, including a wide range of popular music styles. From the mid-1960s, a new kind of commercial Iranian pop music emerged for the first time, with singers promoted by the government-controlled broadcasting organization. This music was partly rooted in existing urban popular styles and used Persian lyrics and Iranian melodies and rhythms, but also drew heavily on conventions of Western pop music images, fashion, and instruments. Some of the best known singers, including Googoosh, Haydeh, Mahasti, Ebi, and Dariush, attained “pop star” status, and their music was regularly broadcast on radio and television and available through a flourishing commercial recording market.¹⁰ As in many other parts of the “non-western” world:

Popular music has special importance as a socio-cultural phenomenon, for it embodies and expresses the new social identities which

emerge as products of urbanization and modernization throughout the world. . . . [M]ost of these [new non-western pop genres], while borrowing Western elements, in their own way affirm modernity and express the contradictions and complexities of modern culture. In doing so, they perform a social function that traditional musics can no longer fulfill. (Manuel 1988: v-vi)

And indeed, it was this music more than any other cultural form that came to represent the modern face of Iran in the 1960s and '70s. In stark contrast to this, and partly in reaction to the fast-growing popularity of pop music, many traditional musicians retrenched into an increasing preoccupation with issues of "preservation" and "authenticity" quite new to this music.¹¹ Although traditional music was broadcast on radio and television, and recordings were also commercially available, the growing polarization between tradition and modernity meant that this music became more and more removed from the reality of social change in Iran and was increasingly regarded as irrelevant to people's lives.¹²

With the boom in oil prices in the early 1970s, the Shah was encouraged by the United States to increase Iran's military budget (including substantial spending on foreign military advisers). Together with uneven economic development, resentment at decades of external political interference, lack of political freedoms, and a growing gulf between a new elite—reaping the benefits of oil wealth, often educated in the West and aspiring to a Western lifestyle and values—and the majority of the population for whom basic social needs were still not met, this generated the underlying tensions and social unrest that eventually led to the Shah's overthrow in February 1979.¹³

1979 AND ITS AFTERMATH: THE PLAY OF IDENTITIES

One of the most important aspects of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, then, was an assertion of national identity in reaction to the perceived loss of identity during the preceding decades. Brought about by an extraordinary coalition, which included a broad spectrum of political and religious organizations, the Revolution might be regarded as one of the earliest expressions of local resistance against the increasingly global nature of Western cultural, political, and economic hegemony. As such, it shared a great deal with national independence movements in countries emerging from direct colonial rule (Halliday 1996: 73). One of the priorities of the post-1979 revolutionary government was to develop policies that would allow cultural activities to take place within an Islamic framework. However, formulating such policies proved difficult for a number of reasons, particularly because

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of underlying tensions between religious identity on the one hand and national identity on the other. Iran has been an Islamic country since the 7th century AD, and Islam clearly plays a very important role in Iranian culture and society. At the same time, there is a deep consciousness of a much older national identity that predates Islam by at least a thousand years and to which music and poetry are central. Indeed, it is music and poetry that are often credited with maintaining national identity through a long and turbulent history of invasion and occupation. The profound contradictions in cultural policy during the 1980s were partly the result of a government trying to impose a hegemonic Islamic identity on a people intensely aware of, and unwilling to forfeit, their pre-Islamic heritage.¹⁴

While national and religious identities are clearly not inherently antithetical—indeed, such multiple identities are a normal part of people's lived experiences—where such identities take on particular significance is in relation to issues of power. What is particularly interesting in the case of Iran is the way in which those in power have appealed to one or another of these identities at various times, even setting them off against each other to suit their own political agenda. For example, in trying to build a secular state and at the same time disempower the clergy, whom he regarded as a threat, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi very much played down religious identity, largely misjudging the strength of public feeling on this.¹⁵ At the same time, he sought to validate his own position and legitimize his claim to royalty by appealing to symbols of pre-Islamic power and the ancient Iranian Empire. The lavish celebrations surrounding the Shah's re-coronation in 1972 at the ancient Iranian capital of Persepolis (60 kilometers northeast of Shiraz), attended by dignitaries and heads of state from around the world, were intended to mark 2,500 years of Iranian monarchy, and thereby create a symbolic link between himself and the pre-Islamic kings of Iran.¹⁶ In fact, the Shah was ultimately unable to resolve the inherent contradictions in his own position: On the one hand, he drew on discourses of ancient tradition to counter the power of the clergy; on the other, he undermined the very same discourses when it served the purpose of promoting Westernization and modernization over tradition.

In contrast, and partly in reaction to the situation before 1979, the post-1979 regime initially attempted to play down aspects of national identity, appealing instead to a pan-Islamic identity: "Khomeini's relation to nationalism was ambiguous, because in the first period of his rule he virtually never mentioned the word Iran at all, laying stress instead on Islam and on the need to recreate the Islamic 'Universal State'.... The war with Iraq that began in September 1980 forced Khomeini to lay greater explicit stress on nationalist themes" (Halliday 1996: 62–63).¹⁷

An example of this downplaying of national identity were the initial

and unsuccessful attempts by the government to discourage celebration of the Iranian New Year, *no ruz*, an ancient pre-Islamic Zoroastrian tradition that falls on the spring equinox and is the main national holiday in Iran. More recently, Samii refers to an article in the national Iranian press in which the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, criticized Ayatollah Mohajerani (culture minister at the time) for plans to hold *no ruz* celebrations at Persepolis, with all the associations of pre-Islamic heritage (Samii 1999).¹⁸ In fact, as events before and after 1979 have shown, any position that fails to take account of both national and religious identities—or seeks to promote one at the expense of the other—is likely to meet with resistance.

Given the situation in the 1970s, it is hardly surprising that the Revolution itself involved a complex play of identities that in turn reflected contesting visions of what it means to be Iranian. The particular significance of music in this context was that it provided a forum for playing out such visions, most notably because music embodies some of the tensions underlying the political discourses: between national and religious identities, for example, and between tradition and modernity. Although music has long played a central role in Iranian national identity, its status within Islam has been highly ambiguous. The extensive theological debate on the legality of particular kinds of music and musical activities and on the general role of music in an Islamic society is well-documented in the literature, and it is clear that much of this debate rests on a recognition of the power of music on people and the perceived need to control this power.¹⁹ As a result of its ambiguous position in the eyes of the religious authorities, music has rarely occupied an ideologically neutral space in Iran, and has been censored and restricted in various ways over many centuries.²⁰ In the context of this chapter, it is particularly important to note that both in the symbolic domain and in the domain of practice, such controls have transformed what may originally have been primarily issues of religious doctrine into questions of social and political control. As discussed below, in contemporary Iran at least, what is argued in the name of doctrine is often a facade for specific political positions. Long regarded as somewhat subversive in itself, attempts to control music's power have, ironically, increased its subversive potential and thereby empowered it further. In the post-1979 play of identities, therefore, music occupied an interesting position in relation to a national identity to which music is absolutely central on the one hand, and a religious identity in which its status is highly problematic on the other. In other words, one of the most potent symbols of national consciousness in the 1980s was also one of the most proscribed cultural expressions in Islam, and it was this that precluded the government from appropriating what might have served as a powerful symbol of anti-

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Westernization. In the 1980s, then, music became a highly contested issue and presented the government with a dilemma: Aware of the potent force represented by music, and that any government that called itself Islamic must exercise control over it, policy makers were also unable to ignore the strength of popular support for music.

1979 AND ITS AFTERMATH: ON THE GROUND

In seeking to establish control through promoting Islamic values, the theocracy that assumed power in 1979 began life by legislating against a wide range of musical activities, from public concerts to music classes. Certain types of music were officially tolerated: religious music, of course, Iranian “classical” music (known as *musiqi-e assil* or *musiqi-e sonnati*), and regional folk musics. Any music that suggested dance movement or included solo female singing was prohibited.²¹ Western popular music in the broadest sense and Iranian pop were also targeted and banned outright immediately after the Revolution, partly because of their associations with the previous regime, but also because of the sensuous dance movements associated with the music and the song lyrics, which the government regarded as crude and explicit. Deemed un-Islamic and potentially corrupting to young people, this music was branded as *musiqi-e mobtazal* (“cheap” or “decadent” music). In short, what had been one of the most prominent symbols of the Shah’s modernization project was transformed into the symbol of Western cultural hegemony (which later became labeled as *tahājom-e farhangi*: “cultural imperialism” or “cultural invasion”), and the focus of vitriolic rhetoric from the new government. Many of the best-known Iranian pop musicians left Iran after 1979 and Los Angeles eventually became the focal point for an expatriate Iranian pop music industry, the products of which served not only the large market of Iranians outside Iran, but also found their way back to Iran via the black market and later satellite channels.²²

In order to understand why pop music was banned in 1979, we have to look at what this music had come to mean during the preceding two decades. As Peter Manuel explains:

In most of the developing world, popular musics cannot be fully understood independent of the legacy of the colonial past and the imperialist present. On the one hand, Western musical styles are often identified, explicitly or not, with progress, technology, modernity, and power. National musics, by contrast, are often seen as quaint and backward [as in 1970s Iran]. . . . On the other hand, a nationalist may well regard the imitation or borrowing of Western

musical features as an illustration of Western hegemony, in the form of an obsequious (and often inept) aping of one's former colonial masters. . . . [T]he problem of reconciling national and Western cultures can be particularly acute and difficult for the educated middle classes—especially those who have been trained in the West and yet remain loyal to their homelands. (1988: 22)

In the case of Iran, we have seen that the emergence of pop music in the 1960s was closely bound up with the processes of modernization and the values that, through the dominant discourses, came to be associated with them. On the one hand, traditional music was no longer able to meet the needs of an increasingly urbanized and cosmopolitan youth. On the other, Iranian pop (as well as various types of imported Western popular music) became attractive through the aspirational value associated with Western culture. As long as the dominant discourses gave the processes of Westernization positive valence, pop music remained relatively uncontested. But with the reaction against the Shah's policies after 1979, pop music took on the symbolic burden of Western cultural imperialism and became entangled in a web of discourses that impacted significantly on the music's meanings. The post-1979 regime replaced one set of polarized discourses (Westernization at the expense of tradition) with another, which depended on "a growing dislocation" between modernity and tradition (Halliday 1996: 73). Indeed, it is important to note the extent to which the post-1979 period was shaped by, and represented a reaction against, the uncompromising absolutes that had preceded, such that anything supported by the previous regime was dammed by association. And because pop music had been heavily promoted as a (positive) symbol of modernization and Westernization, it was this aspect of the music that eclipsed all other meanings after 1979. Thus, just as Rice (2001) describes the shifting meanings of Bulgarian wedding music during the final years of communism in the late 1980s, so official discourses in Iran after 1979 focused on pop music as a political symbol to the exclusion of other possible meanings such as pop music as entertainment, as aesthetic experience, as commodity or as social behavior, the latter particularly relevant in the context of an emerging youth culture.²³ In failing to take account (or control) of a wide range of meanings, the government was later unable to stop them being used to subvert the dominant discourses.

Of course, Iran is not the only Islamic country in which modernity and Westernization have been contested through the symbolic control of popular music. In the case of Algeria, for example: "Rai has been a particularly problematic idiom for Islamists and secularists alike. Both groups nurture distinct views of the place of Algeria, and Algerians in the world, and the

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role of Islam and liberal secularism in Algeria. Rai music constructs its own distinct trajectories linking local and global, 'East' and 'West,' and, in this way, constitutes a distinct problem for Algerians, and indeed other North Africans today" (Langlois 1996: 259).

Where the Algerian situation differs from that of Iran is first that *rai* has gained an international audience that has had significant repercussions for the music's meanings "back home."²⁴ Second, in taking on a more overtly political role (through its lyrics, for example) than has hitherto been the case with Iranian pop, *rai* has faced a more intense (and at times violent) reaction from its opponents. Nevertheless, there are important parallels in terms of what these musics represent with regard to questions of national identity and each country's relationship with the outside world, particularly with the West.

The 1980s was an extraordinary period with many apparent contradictions. For example, at the same time that the new government was trying to control music making in various ways, the rejection of Western values after 1979 led to a remarkable resurgence of national consciousness and a reclaiming of tradition after decades in which official discourses had presented Iranian culture as the antiquated and backward "other" to the progressive culture of the West, and as having little relevance to modernity. According to Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi, "the particularly rapid, skewed and over-Westernized pattern of dependent development followed by the Pahlavis provoked the revalidation of a collective identity that had been challenged by the regime-directed path of modernization" (1991b: 217).

Just as "the reaffirmation of cultural 'roots' and the return to orthodoxy has long been one of the most powerful sources of counter-identification amongst many Third World and post-colonial societies and regions" (Hall 1992, 313) where people have felt themselves to be disempowered in some way, so the postrevolutionary period in Iran was marked by "a strengthening of cultural identity and fostering of a positive self-image" (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1991b: 220). According to prominent musician, Shahram Nazeri: "It was as if a nation which had been asleep for centuries had been woken . . . as if a fire had suddenly been lit in a reed-bed. And each of these reeds, since they are burning, was obliged to think about itself, about its society, about its history. . . . [P]eople gradually became interested in their own culture, because the reality is that for many years in Iran, really there was a long period of loss of identity (*bihoveiat*) (interview August 21, 1999).²⁵

One of the most remarkable manifestations of this heightened awareness of national identity after 1979 was a renaissance of *musiqi-e assil* such as had never been seen before, spearheaded by a new generation of musi-

cians including many of the first generation of university-educated musicians in Iran.²⁶ Recordings by musicians such as Mohammad Reza Shajarian, Shahram Nazeri, and Mohammad Reza Lotfi provided an emotive focal point for the new mood of political and national consciousness and, most significantly, *musiqi-e assil* started to attract a mass audience for the very first time. As such, discourses about music and national identity became inextricably bound together during this period. The piece *Sepideh* (“dawn”),²⁷ performed by Shajarian and the Sheyda Ensemble at one of the first concerts permitted after the Revolution (in December 1979), became an unofficial national anthem, particularly after the Iraqi invasion of Iran in September 1980. While detailed discussion of the social history of *musiqi-e assil* during the 1980s lies outside the remit of this chapter, it is important to note that despite severe government restrictions on music making—public concerts were not permitted for many years, for example, and there was little music on radio and television other than revolutionary anthems and military music—unprecedented numbers of people started to learn traditional instruments (Meshkatian 1991: 38). As discussed below, this is something which has proved particularly important in the post-1997 period. Indeed, it was partly because of these restrictions that “Playing and teaching music itself became a kind of resistance and a way of maintaining identity” (Alizadeh 1998: 79), through music’s simultaneous affirmation of national belonging and its ambiguous status in the eyes of the religious authorities. Describing the resurgence of interest in *musiqi-e assil*, Alizadeh explains how much music making went underground during this period: “Concerts in homes and private teaching at home became common” (Alizadeh 1998: 79) and Youssefzadeh cites the case of an instrument maker unable to keep up with the demand for new instruments (2000:39). Many musicians I talked to described the early 1980s as a very exciting period for *musiqi-e assil*, the full potential of which, however, was never realized. Shahram Nazeri suggests that one of the most important cultural achievements of the Revolution was that music making (and music as a professional activity) gained much wider social acceptance than before:

[After the Revolution] people gained a sense of confidence with regard to music. This sense of confidence was never there before, because of our culture, because of religion, since religion never made its position clear with respect to music and regarded it as *haram* [“forbidden”] and consequently this also had an effect on society. Society couldn’t decide whether music is *haram* or *halal* [“allowed”], whether it is good or bad, but now this confidence came about and this was a very significant development. (Interview August 21, 1999)

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Despite the high level of public support for music, and the fact that *musiqi-e assil* was still legal, the 1980s was a difficult time for musicians, who faced many pressures and were heavily restricted and censored. The government itself was deeply divided on cultural policy generally and many would have liked a complete ban on music making. In the 1980s, music provided a stark forum for the government to impose ideas about permissible (represented as Islamic) and impermissible (represented as un-Islamic) behavior, and as if doctrinal issues were not enough, the war with Iraq (1980–1988) provided yet another pretext to restrict music making. Public musical activity of any kind had to be authorized by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (*Vezerat-e Farhang va Ershad-e Eslami*), as it still has to be, and official discourses treated music not as an aesthetic reality, but as a social factor that needed to be controlled. In order to represent themselves as upholders of Islamic values, government officials and clerics would make periodic pronouncements on the Islamic propriety of a particular type of music or music-related activity (making and selling instruments, for instance), such that music became a kind of “political football,” a way of scoring points.²⁸ In fact, there was a great deal of ambiguity, and positions clarified by one religious authority were often overruled by another, creating a situation in which music existed in a liminal space and people were often unsure exactly what was allowed at any particular time. This ambiguity served a purpose for the government, allowing it to change the rules at will or clamp down whenever it was politically expedient to do so; but it made the position of musicians precarious and subject to the vagaries of any religious leader or individual interpretation of Islamic law.²⁹ At the same time, the lack of clarity created crevices—opportunities for resistance—particularly since many of the laws were effectively unenforceable in the private domain. And it was in the private domain that Iranians, very adept at resistance after centuries of one form of oppression or another, had the greatest opportunity for subversion.³⁰

Examining official government policy toward music during the 1980s is important for what it tells us about the political climate of the period, but it should also be understood that this reveals only part of what was happening in Iran at the time. A number of writers have noted the gap between dominant ideologies as expressed through official government policy and the complex reality of people’s lives (Youssefzadeh 2000: 38; Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1991a: 34) and this was particularly apparent with pop music. Although officially banned, many people, particularly in the more cosmopolitan and urban areas such as the suburbs of North Tehran,³¹ continued to listen to pop music in private. This included a wide range of Western popular music styles, Iranian pop music from before 1979, and imported *los angelesi* pop, all of which were readily available through a flourishing black market that the government was ultimately

unable to control (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1991a: 47–8; during 1992: 140).³² During the 1980s, revolutionary guards regularly arrested people caught with cassettes of pop music in their cars, or raided homes if they suspected a party was being held. Those arrested were usually brushed up a little and released the next day with a warning or a fine. But it seemed to be a price worth paying. For young people in particular, listening to pop music became a form of resistance—a snub at the government—and the danger a bit of excitement. For example, one young woman to whom I talked about attending mixed-sex parties with pop music, and the risk of being arrested, responded by asking “What’s the fun of it without the danger?” Alongside the vibrant resurgence of national consciousness after 1979, then, the deep-rooted cultural legacy of neocolonialism continued to play its part and Western cultural products retained their attraction. Indeed, as in the case of pop music, while the government promoted discourses of local resistance against Western global hegemony, certain aspects of Western culture were used as a means of resisting the government-imposed hegemony.

So how did pop music’s meanings change in the 1980s? As we have seen, pop music became illegal after 1979 because of what the musical style as a whole had come to represent before the Revolution. The songs themselves were not particularly subversive or challenging, but by banning this music, the post-1979 government effectively gave pop music its subversive power. By the mid-1980s, pop music had become a symbol of resistance by virtue of being banned: young people wanted to listen to it *because* it was prohibited. Although many people had ambivalent feelings toward pop music—and particularly *los angelesi* pop and the distance of its messages from the reality of life in Iran—to the extent of privately agreeing with at least some of the meanings that the government attempted to assign to it (symbol of cultural dependence, Western decadence, cultural imperialism, and so on), such meanings were simply unable to compete with the quite different meanings many young people in particular assigned to this music: pop as a symbol of social freedoms, of defiance, of youth, and of the outside world. In this way, pop’s meanings in the 1980s were largely defined through competing discourses of national belonging versus internationalism on the one hand, and central control versus individual freedom on the other.

In a situation not unlike that described by Rice for wedding music in Bulgaria, so pop music in 1980s Iran became a sign of resistance, of “freedom from totalitarian control, and the state was powerless to control them [it] and their [its] meanings” (Rice 2001: 36). The fact that this was largely a symbolism “by default,” following a logic that equated anything that the state opposed as automatically representing freedom, did not diminish its significance. However, what emerged at this time was almost exclusively resistance “by consumption” rather than by creation, in the sense that all

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of the pop music available either dated from before 1979 or was created outside Iran in very different social and cultural contexts and imported into Iran through the black market.³³ In other words, unlike the case of *rai* or Bulgarian wedding music, there was no active voice of resistance through the *creation* of a local contemporary popular music at grassroots level in Iran itself. As such, any expression of active resistance through music at this time came from *musiqi-e assil*. Indeed, even in the 1960s and '70s when an independent, grassroots popular music might have emerged, most pop music production was centrally controlled, and the music provided little in the way of social comment. Returning to the 1980s, it is interesting to note that this kind of “resistance by dissemblance” has in fact been an important aspect of Iranian culture for centuries, something particularly evident in Persian poetry in which messages are often subtly conveyed using hidden inferences and double meanings.³⁴ In the same way, the use of pop music created in another time or place—speaking in someone else’s voice, as it were—very much followed in this same tradition.

During the 1980s, then, music—and pop music in particular—was a highly contested domain. Used as part of the discourse of social control by official institutions and the government on the one hand, at the same time for many people music came to signify a reclaiming of national culture (through *musiqi-e assil* and regional musics) and of wider social freedoms (through *musiqi-e assil* in the public domain and pop music in the private). While political resistance through cultural expression has a long history in Iranian literature (and particularly poetry), this was the first time that music had taken on this role in such a prominent way.³⁵ Indeed, what was so interesting about this period was not only that such resistance shifted into a primarily performative and collective mode of cultural expression, providing a potentially more immediate, public, and hard-hitting social impact than previous cultural resistance, but that it involved one of the most religiously contested cultural forms.³⁶

Beyond its subversive role, pop music was also important in other ways during the 1980s. For example, it provided a space for celebration (in the private domain) and the expression of happiness, something for which the generally rather austere *musiqi-e assil* was unsuited. Traditionally censured as a sign of disrespect (as well as a sure way to attract the evil eye), the public expression of happiness became even more problematic during the middle and later stages of the war with Iraq, a period of great austerity and perpetual public mourning. Nevertheless, pop music continued to be used for celebrations such as weddings, usually in secure locations such as sound-proof basements. And for many young people—particularly those from the urban middle classes—pop music provided a link with the outside world, a challenge to the isolationist policies of the government and a

means of forefronting conflicting visions of Iranian identity and Iran's place in a global environment.

CULTURAL THAW

During the 1980s, the government was able to avoid dealing with fundamental social issues by appealing to national unity against an external aggressor. However, after the ceasefire with Iraq in August 1988 and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in June the following year, the new president, Hashemi Rafsanjani, began the slow and much-debated process of social reform and reestablishing Iran's international relations.³⁷ Fully aware of the mood of a nation tired of austerity, Rafsanjani promoted a more open political and cultural atmosphere. As far as music is concerned, a timely statement made by Ayatollah Khomeini soon after the UN ceasefire, sanctioning the use of musical instruments, was used to advantage after his death by those arguing for the legality of music (During 1992: 164; Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1991a: 50; Youssefzadeh 2000: 39).³⁸ In line with other changes, the 1990s saw an easing of controls on music making as music classes were permitted again (and the Music Department at Tehran University was reopened) and restrictions were gradually lifted on other musical activities.³⁹

However, it was the election of President Khatami in May 1997 and the changes in cultural policy that followed that represented the real watershed. A pivotal figure in these changes was the much respected and liberal-minded head of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Ayatollah Mohajerani, who promoted a new mood of tolerance and open debate, and under whose leadership publishing flourished, with many new books, newspapers, and journals representing a wide range of political views.⁴⁰ Music has been an important part of the more liberal atmosphere, and in some respects the changes have been quite dramatic: There is more music on radio and television than before and even a dedicated music channel on radio for the first time in Iran (*Radio Payam*), a flourishing market for cassettes and CDs, and an increasing number of public concerts.⁴¹ Eight *farhangsarā* cultural centers, established by the municipal authority of Tehran and situated in different parts of the city, have been particularly active in promoting concerts and lectures, running music lessons, organizing instrumental and choral groups, and generally providing a focus for cultural activities. News of musical events, articles on music, and reviews of concerts are regularly featured in the national press, and since 1998 there have been three regular publications dedicated to music: *Honar-e Musiqi* ("The Art of Music"), a monthly magazine aimed at the lay reader and readily available in bookshops and even on street newspaper stalls, and two scholarly journals published quarterly: *Faslnameh-*

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ye Musiqi-e Mahoor (“Mahoor Musical Quarterly”) and *Faslnameh-ye Musiqi-e Maqam*, the latter published by the government organization, Sooreh.⁴² Everywhere in Tehran there are posters advertising concerts and music lessons, and the number of young people attending such lessons has increased dramatically in the post-1997 period (Alizadeh 1998: 81). Indeed, despite concerns over the quality of some teaching, many regard this as one of the most positive aspects of music in Iran today and a source of hope for the future: “The limitations which were placed on learning music increased the number of people wanting to learn. When the municipal authorities of Tehran opened cultural centers (*farhangsarā*) all over the city, they started music classes. Now it is really not an exaggeration to say that in every family someone plays an instrument” (Alizadeh 1998: 81). In short, music in Iran is gaining a presence in the public domain never experienced before, not even before 1979.

While support for the more open political and cultural atmosphere is overwhelming,⁴³ such changes are being contested by a small but powerful conservative clerical lobby, and music continues to provide an emotive arena for this ideological tug of war. Many of the proscriptions put in place in the 1980s still apply: solo female singing is forbidden to male listeners; musical instruments are not shown on television; dancing of any kind is forbidden in public; and on holy days, only religious music is broadcast or allowed in public places. However, inconsistent easing of restrictions on public performance has generated some blatant contradictions and some interesting opportunities for subversion. For example, although musical instruments are still not shown on television, they can be seen quite legally in many other contexts, including live concerts, music lessons, or music shops, a situation that has invited ridicule in articles in the national and music press (for example, see Eftekhari 1999: 8). Similarly, while solo female singing is still prohibited to male audiences, choral singing is not and a number of recent recordings have used this “loophole” to advantage, incorporating a “chorus” of two or three female singers whose solo voices are also heard briefly.⁴⁴ In fact, musicians have become skillful at finding creative ways of working around restrictions, subtly pushing at boundaries without appearing to contest them openly and thus averting a reaction from the authorities. In large part, this is made possible by the cleavages opened up by contradictions in cultural policy, which are in turn symptomatic of deep divisions within the government itself.

THE NEW POP . . . ⁴⁵

One of the most unexpected changes to have come about since 1997 has been a relaxation in government restrictions on certain type of popular music in the public domain for the first time since 1979. The first indica-

tion of this came in 1998 when *Seda o Sima* (the government-controlled national radio and television organization) quite unexpectedly started broadcasting a rebranded style of Iranian pop, which soon became known as *pop-e jadid* (“new pop”). Within a short space of time, this music was being broadcast regularly on radio and television, and cassettes and CDs were also freely available on the open market. Mohammad Esfahani, Ali Reza Assar, and Khashayar Etemadi were among the first crop of hitherto unknown singers who were heavily promoted by *Seda o Sima*⁴⁶ and who rapidly became household names. Stylistically, this new pop shared a great deal with other kinds of Iranian pop, which were still officially illegal:⁴⁷ the formulaic nature of the music, the setting of sentimental love poetry, the dominance of a solo singer (in preference to a group ethos) and an instrumental line-up, usually comprising piano or electronic keyboard(s), acoustic and/or electric guitar(s), and drum kit, and at times other instruments such as saxophone, flute, clarinet, bass guitar, a bowed string section, and Iranian percussion instruments such as *tombak* or *daff*. Moreover, some singers even modeled their vocal style on specific prerevolutionary pop musicians. But there were also important differences: first, the absence of any solo female singers; second, the lyrics and subject matter; and finally, as dancing in public is illegal, the new pop was generally at a moderate speed and never fast enough to imply dance (or any erotically suggestive) movement.⁴⁸ Indeed, when broadcast on television, singers were required to use minimal body movement.

At least, this is how the new pop started off. Once the processes of change were set in motion, however, the momentum has been hard for the government to control and the centrally promoted singers have been joined by a series of independent singers and groups, some of whom are pushing at the existing boundaries through their music. In particular, the new pop has become increasingly upbeat to the extent that some of the more recent songs are almost indistinguishable from the *los angelesi* pop that is still technically illegal. For example, the 1999 album by new pop singer Shadmehr Aghili—*Dehati*—was authorized for publication despite the speed and dance-like nature of several of the tracks.⁴⁹ Also significant is the growing presence of women, initially as backing singers and instrumentalists, but gradually taking on a more prominent role.⁵⁰

Live concerts have presented a particularly important opportunity for musicians to claim greater license in performance. On my first fieldtrip in the summer of 1999, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance had started to give limited authorization for pop concerts, but these were still infrequent.⁵¹ By the time of my second visit the following year, such concerts had become a fairly regular feature of life in Tehran. As a public expression of the post-1997 changes, and one that symbolically dominates the social space through its volume, these pop concerts have provided a focal

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point for accusations that moderate factions within the government have sold out to the original aims of the Revolution. In the summer of 2000, the ongoing power struggle over this issue was played out most vividly in the physical disruption of public concerts by the voluntary militia known as *basij*.⁵² Even concerts that had official authorization from the Ministry of Culture were often prevented from taking place by key individuals at local level.⁵³ By the same token, and because they faced such opposition, concerts that did take place became symbolic events and were often used as an arena for challenging imposed limits in a way not always possible on commercial recordings. In order to gain authorization for a concert, musicians were (and still are) required to submit song texts and a concert program in advance of the performance. Unlike a recording, therefore, for which authorization is granted *after* the event (in the sense that the musical product is already complete), in the case of live performance, permission is given *beforehand*, offering musicians the possibility of subsequently altering the agreed program at the actual event—for example, by changing song lyrics or by playing pieces at a faster speed. I heard about several concerts where this had happened. Indeed it was not only musicians who were taking risks. At every pop concert I attended, audience members were visibly moving in their seats and clearly eager to dance as they would in private. On one occasion, some young women got up to dance, but were asked to stop by the event organizers (they could easily have been arrested instead). A similar experience, described by Sohrabi less than two years later, indicates that maintaining central control over such events is proving increasingly problematic. In her review of a concert by the group *Raaz-e Shab* in January 2002, she reports that during the encore “People began standing up, hands clapping towards the stage, singing with the band and moving their bodies. Security people tried to make two screaming girls in the front row sit. But it was no longer orderly as the hall was big, people were coming in, going out, and the band was really rocking” (Sohrabi 2002).

This pushing at boundaries, whether by musicians or by audiences, is part of a wider feeling of empowerment associated with the post-1997 reforms. Pop music in Iran has once again taken on a symbolic role, and for many people this music has become *the* symbol of recent changes. Above all, after so many years of austerity and relative isolation, this music has come to signify a kind of liberation, offering music that is at once contemporary and rooted “at home,” and also provides a direct connection with the outside world.⁵⁴

It is difficult to convey quite what an effect the emergence of the new pop music into the public domain has had. Coinciding as it has with so many other reforms, it is not difficult to understand why this music has generally been received with enthusiasm, particularly by young people.

After so many years of pop music being underground, many see the changes as an indication that the government is at last addressing the needs of young people.⁵⁵ I talked to a large number of teenagers and young people in their twenties, mainly (but not exclusively) from the middle class suburbs of North Tehran, most of whom still listened to illegal imports of Western popular music (techno and heavy metal appeared to be particularly popular) as well as *los angelesi* pop, and even prerevolutionary pop singers such as Dariush and Ebi. However, many said that they prefer the new local pop to other types of Iranian pop, not so much for dancing as for listening to, and one of the principal reasons that they gave was that the lyrics are more cultured, particularly in comparison with *los angelesi* pop. For example, some of the new pop singers have set the words of medieval mystic poets (such as Mowlana⁵⁶) more usually associated with *musiqi-e assil*. Many of those with whom I talked described the lyrics of imported pop as “cheap” and out of touch with the reality of life in Iran. In short, the young people that I spoke to really saw the new pop as a music with which they could identify. Moreover, alongside the new music, there are signs that a fledgling youth culture is emerging, something that has been given impetus by magazines for young people, such as the weekly *Iran Javan*,⁵⁷ and by new television programs aimed at teenagers, including phone-in music request programs such as *Roozha-ye Shafahi*.

Given the backgrounds of the young people that I spoke to, the fairly positive response to the new music was perhaps not unexpected, but Iran is far from a homogenous society and there are significant disparities in income and lifestyle. While the extent to which the responses above might also be found amongst young people of a less affluent and cosmopolitan background isn't clear, anecdotal information, reports in the national and musical press, discussion with a wide range of people, and visits to provincial and rural areas suggest that this music has in fact made significant inroads, particularly through its crucial presence on *Radio Payam*. In the context of the current discussion, what is interesting is the way in which the sanctioning of new pop has served to validate pop music in some of the more traditional areas where this music would previously have met with a great deal of resistance. In a sense, then, the new pop, and its promotion through the national media, is serving as a catalyst for a more unified youth culture, providing a common experience for young people from very different backgrounds.

So how should the change in government policy toward pop music be interpreted? And what impact has this change had on the meanings of pop music itself? The emergence of the new pop, along with the limited legalization of certain other popular music genres, seems to fly in the face of everything that the Islamic Republic has stood for since 1979. Those who

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spoke out so strongly against cultural invasion and the corruption of the young are now apparently endorsing the very music that once represented the epitome of Western decadence. The decision to ease restrictions on pop music is clearly part of the post-1997 cultural thaw and the more liberal policy toward music generally. Moreover, coming at a time when Iran was in the process of reestablishing diplomatic links with countries such as Britain, with whom normal relations had been suspended since 1979, this might be regarded as being part of a wider indication to the outside world of Iran's readiness to move away from the isolationist policies of the 1980s and to rebuild its international relations: as a way of flagging an emergent liberalism in government policy. The government itself is deeply divided on this issue, and there is little official information on the reasoning behind the decision to sanction pop music. A rare official view on the new pop (and one that presents a very different position with regard to private listening in comparison with government policy in the 1980s) is quoted by Youssefzadeh from a personal interview with Ali Moradkhani, Head of Music at the Ministry of Culture (February 2000): This kind of music nowadays exists in Iran. It caters to the needs of young people, but does not require our financial or economic aid (*hemāyat*). We have to let it exist, while at the same time preventing it from becoming too repetitive. . . . As for what people do in private, we are not responsible for it; it's for them to decide what they want to hear" (2000: 40). As Youssefzadeh observes, "Such speeches are a great novelty" (2000: 40).

In direct contrast to government sources, I found a great deal of speculation in my discussions with musicians and others, as well as in the national and music press.⁵⁸ Many of those with whom I spoke saw the sanctioning of pop as evidence that after almost two decades of trying unsuccessfully to control the black market in *los angelesi* and other types of pop music, the government had adopted more subtle tactics (more subtle, that is, than simply banning, which rarely proved effective in any case). Certainly, with the increasingly global nature of markets and communications, the government seems to have realized that the cultural imperialism that they are now dealing with is much more complex than the simple "unambiguous domination of one dependent culture by a clearly demarcated other" (Ang 1996: 247), involving more porous and arguably more insidious configurations of power that offer myriad ways of subverting central control. For one thing, many people in Iran now have access to the Internet and can obtain music online from all over the world. If the government was unable to prevent people from listening to pop music, they could at least bring it (or some of it) under their own control. In other words, by creating a local alternative, it seems that the government hoped to attract audiences away from other kinds of pop music and thereby reestablish

control over areas that it had relinquished in the 1980s and early 1990s: pop music as entertainment, as commodity, and as social behavior. And to some extent, they are succeeding. The new pop is proving very popular with young people thirsty for a pop music with which they can identify, and Pearl cites the case of one black market cassette dealer whose business has slumped since the emergence of the new pop (2000). Others that I spoke to suggested that there were financial reasons for the changes in government policy, and that the government had finally realized the economic potential of so-called “degenerate” music.

Whether the sanctioning of the new pop was a genuine attempt at liberalization or a cynical gesture aimed at building support (or even simply saving face), something very interesting is happening. For almost twenty years, the government effectively *empowered* pop music—made it subversive—by banning it. Now, by legalizing certain types of pop music, not only has the government blunted the subversive potential of imported pop, but it has done so by appropriating the very form of cultural resistance used against it in the 1980s as its weapon of countersubversion. Moreover, *los angelesi* and pre-1979 pop have perhaps been all the more easy to appropriate because the songs are not directly politically challenging. In extending its control over this music, the government has also changed the meaning of Iranian pop music from a statement of resistance in the 1980s to a symbol of post-1997 liberalism, no longer a subversive threat, but domesticated and rendered safe. As part of this controlling process, the government has sought to insert pop music into an official establishment framework, as seen, for example, in the inclusion of a pop music section⁵⁹ as part of the Fajr festival, from 2000 onward. Once again, there are interesting parallels with the situation of Bulgarian wedding music in the 1980s, as described by Rice, when “The state tried to control these new musics and meanings through state-sponsored festivals of wedding music” (2001: 36).⁶⁰ This “domestication” clearly strips pop music of its power to question and challenge.

What is also interesting is that while the new pop singers are readily distinguished from pre-1979 and *los angelesi* singers, as discussed earlier, the musical style has become increasingly similar to these other kinds of Iranian pop, which are still officially illegal. In other words, while the text itself has not changed greatly, its meanings have. As mentioned above, the most significant differences are in the song lyrics and subject matter, with new pop composers often choosing to set mystical poetry or use religious symbolism (which a number of my informants suggested was a means of avoiding censorship). An example of this can be seen on Ali Reza Assar’s first album, *Kooch-e Asheqaneh* (1999), in which the tracks “Ghodsian-e Aseman, Ensanam Orezoost” and “Koo-ye Esgq” are all set to the poetry of Mowlana. The first track of the album, “Ghodsian-e Aseman,” in partic-

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ular was heavily promoted and regularly aired by *Radio Payam* in the summer of 1999.⁶¹ The religious and mystical ambience of this album is further reinforced by the use of the *daff* frame drum (which originates in the Sufi *khanegah* of Iranian Kurdistan), and also by the cover, which presents the bearded profile of Assar thrown into partial silhouette by a distant light toward which he is looking. In contrast, the cover of Shadmehr Aghili's album *Dehati* (1999; referred to earlier), presents a very different image. (See these images on the book's website.) Also looking to the side (and thereby avoiding direct eye contact with the viewer), Aghili's clean shaven face, prominent bare arms, and slicked-back hair present an image of modern, urban youth, publicly challenging the accepted dress code for men, which includes covered arms and legs, but which has been relaxed somewhat since 1997.⁶² Even before the listener gets to the music, then, the visual message represents a challenge in a way that is not the case on *Kooche Asheqaneh*. While a detailed analysis of album covers lies outside the remit of this chapter, it is important to recognize their semiotic significance and note that such images are subject to as much government scrutiny as the music itself. What is also noticeable about the new pop is that musicians now have access to a much broader range of musical styles than previously and are drawing on these in their compositions. One example of this is the clear South African influence that can be heard in the song "Delkhoshi" on Aghili's album *Dehati*.⁶³

It is worth noting that this is not the first time that the government has employed a strategy of offering a local alternative to imported Western cultural products. As discussed earlier, Iranian cinema (like pop music) also became a target of anti-Western feeling at the time of the Revolution. However, from 1983 on there was a drive to encourage domestic filmmaking, which had a profound impact at home, providing a local alternative to the Hollywood blockbusters available through the black market. Although initially aimed at a domestic market, the ensuing international success of Iranian filmmakers from the early 1990s clearly highlighted the potential influence of such cultural products abroad. A growing awareness of this influence is revealed in the following extraordinary statement by Hashemi Rafsanjani, the then Speaker of the Parliament (and who later became president) at the Fifth Islamic Film Festival in Tehran (date not stated): "In order to export the Islamic Revolution, we have to make effective films and not let Hollywood be the dominant influence. We have to change the attitudes of people. Instead of giving grants for building mosques, they should give grants for building cinemas and making films!" (quoted in Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1991a: 46).

Coming from a senior cleric, this bold suggestion highlights the remarkable transformation of cinema from a symbol of foreign cultural

domination to one of resistance against Western cultural hegemony. In fact, Iranian cinema has proved to be a double-edged sword for the government in the international arena. On the one hand, the success enjoyed by Iranian filmmakers brings with it a certain prestige and a positive image for Iran on the world stage; on the other, film is often used as an avenue for social and political critique, which the government is unable to control outside Iran. While filmmakers inside Iran continue to face restrictions, they are able to make direct social comment in a way that was previously unthinkable. What is particularly interesting is the extent to which film as a cultural medium has shed its previous associations with Western culture and come to be regarded as a local cultural expression. Whether Iranian pop music can achieve the same remains to be seen.⁶⁴ Certainly, as will be discussed below, music continues to engender quasi-moralistic discourses of authenticity, high and low culture, and national belonging, all of which film is relatively unfettered by.

... AND BEYOND

In fact, the new pop music is just one aspect of the changing public “soundscapes” of Iran, as a wider range of musics have become permitted in public and indeed, certain (limited) kinds of Western popular music now receive government authorization. Perusing commercially available recordings in the summer of 2002, a range of musical styles was available, including jazz, flamenco, certain kinds of rock,⁶⁵ and Latin music, and musicians such as Kenny G. and the Gypsy Kings appeared to be particularly popular. Sheet music of a few Western popular “classics”—for example, Pink Floyd’s “The Wall”—was also on sale in several bookshops. Moreover, beyond the still fairly limited public presence of Western popular music itself, upbeat music composed in the style of Western pop was used regularly on television commercials and program credits, as well as in other public spaces. For example, the open-air children’s skating rink in *park-e qeytarieh* (a regularly frequented park in North Tehran), regularly broadcast techno-style music from its loudspeakers. Ironically, although dancing to this music would not be permitted in public, skating to it is legal. Particularly significant in this respect is *Radio Payam*, the first (and so far only) radio channel in Iran specifically dedicated to music. *Radio Payam* was established two years before Khatami’s presidential election victory, indicating the extent to which the events of 1997 represented something akin to an avalanche following a long period of thaw. Essentially an easy listening channel, *Radio Payam* broadcasts an eclectic mix of new pop, *musiqi-e assil*, Western classical, rather bland “ambient” arrangements of tunes, and even instrumental arrangements of Western pop music, including songs by Madonna, Rod

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Stewart, and the Rolling Stones, none of whose original songs are authorized for commercial sale in Iran.⁶⁶ As on all other channels, the *azan* (call to prayer) is broadcast three times a day: at dawn, at midday, and at dusk. The music is interspersed with the recitation of poetry and philosophical reflections, and none of the music is identified unless a particularly well-known musician (usually a singer) is featured. There is a strong tradition of listening to the radio in Iran, and the immense audience that *Radio Payam* has attracted points to its significance in filling a vacuum in music broadcasting.⁶⁷ Even so, *Seda o Sima* is still going to great lengths to promote this radio station, and one of the few advertising hoardings to be seen alongside the ubiquitous murals of religious figures and martyrs of the Iran–Iraq war on the recently built by-pass highways of Tehran is for *Radio Payam*. Like the new pop music, *Radio Payam* has for many people also become a symbol of the changing cultural climate.

Perhaps the government thought that such concessions might be enough to satisfy demands for greater openness. But by the summer of 2000, it was quite clear that having tasted freedom, many (particularly young) people were testing the water to see how far they could go. In a myriad of ways, and taking cues from one another, people pushed at the boundaries, for example, by playing loud Western pop music (still banned) while driving or even from parked cars. One could hear loud rock music coming from apartment blocks (something that would have been inconceivable even a year before) and people no longer made much effort to hide satellite dishes, which were still officially banned (but unofficially tolerated; people previously went to elaborate lengths to hide or camouflage dishes).⁶⁸ And in the communal taxis that provide such a rich source of information in Tehran, drivers openly played cassettes of the popular pre-revolutionary female singer, Googoosh. Despite increasing skepticism over Khatami's power to effect genuine reform in other spheres—the government has even been accused of using the cultural changes as a facade to mask the country's serious economic and social problems—people were still seizing the opportunity offered by changes in the cultural domain, and there was a mood of optimism, even courage. Everywhere, music was used as an avenue for exploring how far the boundaries of the permissible could be pushed.

One thing seems fairly certain in the current climate: The tide of change will be hard to reverse. For one thing, music is finally emerging from its liminal position and assuming a more central and active role in Iranian society. One indicator of this is the extent to which the debate over music's legality has lost much of its potency over the last two decades (and particularly since 1997). Although music continues to be used as part of the rhetoric of Islamic propriety, particularly by those opposed to the recent changes, the evidence suggests that for most people this issue is more or

less resolved. A new organization, *Khaneh-ye Musiqi-e Iran*, combining the roles of professional body, trade union, and a public voice for music and musicians, was established in 1999, following the formation of similar organizations in other artistic fields and very much in accordance with the emergence of a Civil Society discourse in Iran.⁶⁹ More recently, the government has made moves toward reintroducing music and other creative arts subjects into the school curriculum.⁷⁰ Each of these ostensibly minor changes forms part of a larger picture in which the significance of music's new-found position has yet to be fully realized.

THE DEBATE: NEW POP AS CULTURAL IMPERIALISM OR EMPOWERMENT?

Beyond the predictable objections of traditionalists, what is most interesting is that, of all the changes to have come about since 1997, none has provoked such an intense and public debate as the emergence of the new pop music. Lines clearly demarcated since the Revolution have been thrown into disarray, and musicians who worked together for many years toward a common aim of establishing an unambiguous position for music in Iranian society now find themselves divided on this issue. The debate focuses on questions of national identity—about what is and isn't Iranian and who holds the franchise on Iran's future—and what the role of pop music should be in contemporary Iran. Of particular interest is the way in which this debate brings together two sets of dualistic discourses, which have become inextricably linked. On the hand, there is what might loosely be called the “popular music as hegemony versus popular music as empowerment” debate: To what extent is the new pop truly an expression of the people as opposed to a tool of hegemonic control imposed from above? On the other, there is the long-standing debate over questions of Western global hegemony versus national identity: Is the new pop truly “Iranian” or simply an imitation of the West, using the language of the oppressor, so to speak? And if so, does it matter?

This is an issue that has polarized feelings, and many of the musicians and others I talked to had strong views on the subject. Much of this debate has been aired in public, particularly in the national and musical press, where a plethora of articles have been published since 1998 defending or criticizing first the legalization of the new pop and other kinds of popular music, and second the new pop as a musical genre. Most criticism has come from the musical establishment: both from traditional musicians and also from those trained as Western classical musicians (composers, conductors, and performers). While many welcome music's greater public presence, they criticize *Seda o Sima* in particular for promoting new pop almost to

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the exclusion of other musical styles, and for supporting pop musicians, whom they largely regard as opportunists with little musical skill or training, in preference to traditional musicians. Among the latter, the legalization of pop and its promotion by *Seda o Sima* are generally viewed as a “dumbing down” of the culture, and they claim that the recent changes are ideologically and populist driven (and also possibly commercially driven) rather than being based on aesthetic values. In other words, critics of the new pop counter the newly ascribed meanings of pop music as entertainment and commodity (alongside the continuing pop music as political symbol) by appealing to music as art and to discourses of high and low culture in which the new pop is definitely low. At the same time, critics validate their position by warning against the dangers of slipping back to the identity crisis of the 1970s and drawing on discourses of national identity and cultural imperialism in which the new pop lies firmly with the latter. For example, the following quotation from an article by prominent musician Kambeez Roshanravan is fairly typical: “Not only is this music not based on the *radif* but it is solely a simplistic imitation of music from outside this country without maintaining any of its cultural identity” (2000: 5).⁷¹ Another musician, Dariush Pirniakan, also focuses on national identity in an article titled “The Current Pop Music Has No Identity” (2000), in which he claims that a few untalented musicians have taken advantage of the absence of any coherent cultural planning on the part of the government. Similarly, “Pop Music Is Not the People’s Music” is the title of an article by well-known traditional singer Mohammad Noori (1999), in which he argues that the new pop has neither artistic value, nor is it truly “popular” in the sense of being “of the people.” These are just a few of the many hundreds of articles that have been published on this topic.⁷²

What is significant for the purposes of this discussion is the way in which critics focus on questions of national identity in order to validate what are largely aesthetic objections. This is particularly revealing, given that some of the most outspoken critics are themselves trained primarily as Western classical musicians: For these musicians, it seems, Western classical music doesn’t represent a threat to notions of identity in the way that pop music does.⁷³ Moreover, in a rather odd twist, those musicians who oppose the new pop music find themselves in an awkward position. Having worked throughout the difficult period of the 1980s to establish a secure position for music in Iranian society—at a time when their very right to make music was in question—they now find themselves on the same side of the battle-lines, even using some of the same arguments and appealing to the same discourses, as those who oppose music altogether. Inadvertently or otherwise, this has been a clear case of divide and rule.

In response to such criticisms, a great deal has been published in defense

of the recent changes. Commentators argue that the emergence of the new pop was inevitable and that traditional music is no longer able to fulfill the needs of young people increasingly in touch with the outside world.⁷⁴ “You Can’t Stop This Type of Music” (author unknown, 2000a) is a review of one of the earliest pop and rock concerts held at the Andisheh Cultural Centre in Tehran and asserts the right of young people to listen to popular music as well as arguing for a more realistic view that doesn’t automatically reject everything that comes from the West. Similar articles include “Pop Music, A Necessity” (Javidfar 1999) and “The Guitar Is Not Western, Honest!,” an interview with two pop musicians, the brothers Dariush and Mohammad Ali Khajenoori, which challenges critics to define exactly what is and isn’t Iranian in the contemporary context (author unknown, 2000b). These and many other articles point out that pop music is a reality of the modern world and the global environment, from which Iran can no longer afford to be isolated. In particular, the monthly magazine, *Honar-e Musiqi*, promotes pop music, profiling musicians, reporting on concerts and new recordings, and even including posters of both Iranian and Western pop musicians (two issues have featured pictures of Eric Clapton on the back cover).⁷⁵ Then there are those who support the spirit of the changes, but who are concerned about how they have been implemented and about the lack of clear government policy on cultural matters generally. Above all, *Seda o Sima* is criticized for abandoning the best traditional musicians and for failing, with all its resources, to play a positive educational role.

Significantly, those writing in support of the changes have drawn on similar kinds of discourses as those used by Khatami in his time as president. First, such writers invoke notions of civil liberty that resonate strongly with current debates on the role of Civil Society in Iran. Second, these articles appeal less to discourses of national identity and more to a new kind of internationalism, also a central pillar of Khatami’s 1997 election campaign that he has continued to use as a hallmark of his vision for Iran’s future. Central to this has been the replacement of discourses of “cultural invasion” with talk of “dialogue between civilizations.”⁷⁶ What I found particularly interesting was the stark contrast between concerns about national identity raised in the press and by the (mainly) older traditional musicians who I spoke to, and the ways in which others spoke about the new pop. While many of the latter complained about issues such as poor facilities for music performance or the growing vested financial interests of those promoters involved,⁷⁷ most were simply pleased that pop music was legal again and few regarded it as a threat to their national identity. As Alizadeh observes, people have been denied music for so long that they will welcome almost anything: “Maybe we can assess this general tendency to support any kind of music as a form of resistance against those who

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oppose music altogether” (1998, 80). Moreover, because music itself came to represent a kind of resistance during the 1980s and '90s, opposing any kind of music now becomes problematic. Whilst identity—*hoveiat*—is still an important issue (and people talk about it a great deal), so is normalizing relations with the outside world, and many therefore welcome the new pop as a music that symbolizes such relations, but which is at the same time controlled from inside Iran, not from outside.

TOWARD EMPOWERMENT?

This brings us back to the central underlying questions regarding Iran's future, as set out at the opening: How to forge that future in the global environment without subsuming its identity, as happened in the 1970s; how to accommodate modernity without losing its traditions; and how to move beyond the neocolonial inheritance and two decades of relative isolation in order to normalize relations. As we have seen, the extreme reaction against decades of external influence resulted in post-1979 official discourses that rejected much of Western culture and which made little distinction between the remnants of cultural imperialism and what Ahdaf Soueif calls “the legitimate commerce of humanity” (1999: 484). At the same time, there remains a persistent colonial mentality that has survived the period of isolation and militates against a normalized relationship. While the 1980s was in many ways a difficult decade, it was at least marked by a pride in self-determination and independence. The anxiety over pop music's recent legalization, as illustrated above, suggests that issues of cultural dependency are far from resolved in Iran, and there are genuine concerns about a possible return to the situation of the 1960s and '70s. As Khatami himself suggests, this is something that can only be changed from within, as a more mature understanding of the West develops: “One of the biggest intellectual problems that societies like ours face . . . is lack of adequate understanding of Western political thought, which is itself a result of our historical ignorance . . . getting to know the culture and society of the West is an intellectual and historical necessity . . . (Khatami 1997: 14, quoted in Kamrava 2001: 177).

Khatami warns against “either complete avoidance or uncritical admiration [of the West] (Kamrava 2001: 177), something which certainly continues to characterize the ways in which many Iranian musicians approach Western music and which itself perpetuates the colonial mindset.⁷⁸ In order to transcend this, musicians need to develop an understanding of Western music as one musical system among many. While Kamrava suggests that the profound current cultural crisis in Iran is partly rooted in “a chronic stalemate between traditional and Western values” (2001: 182), he also

shows that as the mood of anti-Westernism in the country has subsided, people have become more willing to examine Western concepts such as modernity (and even postmodernity).

To the extent that the new pop is an important symbol of the post-1997 changes, it is widely seen as a sign of empowerment, particularly for Iran's youth. At the same time, as much of the music is still centrally controlled, it could be argued (and many do) that the new pop simply represents cultural hegemony in a new guise. By the time of my third visit in 2002, it was clear that the initial shock and excitement at the changes had become somewhat subdued, partly because of what many perceived to be Khatami's lack of power to make real changes in areas outside the cultural domain. The changes had become an accepted part of life in Iran, and the number of pop musicians producing commercial recordings had soared since my visit in 2000. Underneath the apparent calm, however, something very interesting was happening. The new pop, it seems, has acted as a catalyst for the emergence of a grassroots popular music for the very first time in Iran, where pop has generally either been produced centrally or outside the country. Now, alongside the centrally promoted new pop music, a growing number of young people have become involved in creating and performing their own music, drawing on a range of influences and popular styles that they have hitherto only been consumers of. I had initially become aware of this during my first visit in 1999. Many of the young people I spoke to at that time had formed their own bands, were writing their own music, and rehearsing in private. A few had even performed in public.⁷⁹ By 2002, the number of independent bands has risen and many have been given permission to perform in public and to release albums.⁸⁰ While some bands perform cover versions of pieces in a variety of Western popular styles, others perform original compositions, both in a broadly "pop" idiom and incorporating ideas from a wide range of styles such as jazz, progressive rock, heavy metal, and other experimental and avant-garde idioms.⁷⁸ For example, a concert by the group Imaj, which I attended in July 2000 at the Ebn Sina Cultural Centre in West Tehran, was billed as a "jazz" concert but the group performed instrumental arrangements of pieces by Paul Simon, John Lennon (including "Imagine"), and Kenny G., all under the watchful eyes of authority symbolized by the photographs of Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei above the stage. The audience of young people was ecstatically enthusiastic. Kasraie recently reported on what he claimed to be the "first state-authorized Rock concert" in Iran (in May 2002) by the group Pedjvak, whose music he describes as "Sometimes jazz, sometimes Frank Zappa, sometimes Dream Theater, their music was a mix of their inspirations and creations. Their talent was unquestionable." (2002) "New age music" is how Pedjvak describe their first album *Bar Bastar*

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Laghzan Zaman (On the Slippery Shores of Time), which was released in the United States in 1999 and has only recently received authorization for sale in Iran itself, even though this is where the band is based.⁸² By the summer of 2002, bands such as Raaz-e Shab, Arian, and O-Hum had started to make a name for themselves, even though gaining authorization for public performance and for releasing commercial recordings was still problematic. For example, O-Hum (formed in 1998) was refused official authorization three times for the release of its 1999 debut album *Nahal'e-Heirat* ("Sapling of Wonder"), and the group has been unable to secure government authorization for public performance.⁸³

What has come to be known as "underground rock" or "alternative music" is characterized by a group ethos that contrasts strongly with the solo singer "star" cult of the centrally promoted pop (and other kinds of Iranian pop). Something else that is quite new is the prominence of instruments in a musical culture that has hitherto been largely dominated by the voice. Like the centrally promoted new pop, underground rock has so far received little scholarly attention, partly because the phenomenon is so new. In contrast, Iranian magazines, newspapers, and websites are full of debate, commentary, and reports on these groups, their recordings, and their concerts. One of the best sources of information on current developments in this area is the website www.tehranavenue.com, which promotes the music of independent bands and includes interviews with musicians and reports on their activities. This website hosted the first online festival of underground Iranian rock music in the autumn of 2002, when bands were invited to submit recordings, of which nineteen were selected for the festival competition and available online for listeners to access and vote.⁸⁴ The UMC (Underground Music Competition) clearly demonstrates the opportunities that global technologies offer musicians to enable them to circumvent government censorship and control. I was able to listen to and discuss a number of the pieces submitted for the competition when I visited the studio of one of competition organizers in August 2002. A number of these songs highlighted what appears to be a trend toward increasingly socially engaged subject matter, either using modern lyrics or drawing on the hidden and double meanings of medieval mystic poets (already seen in the context of the new pop). For example, all of the songs on the O-Hum album *Nahal'e-Heirat* are set to words by Hafez and a new album entitled *Zibazi* with music by Ramin Behna includes a number of tracks that use the poetry of Mowlana.⁸⁵ Another group that has recently received a great deal of public attention is Arian, a pop band of eleven musicians, eight men and three women, that was formed in 1999. Arian has published two albums to date: *Gol-e Aftabgardoon* ("The Sunflower," 1999) and *Arian II—Va Amma Eshgh . . .* ("Arian II—And Now Love" 2001).⁸⁶ While their

music is somewhat less experimental and challenging than some of the groups mentioned above, “Arian” is interesting for a number of reasons, including the role of the three women musicians in the group and the large following the group has attracted. According to Taqizadeh (2002), a week of concert performances (with two performances each night) in Tehran in October and November 2002 were sold out within hours of tickets going on sale. While none of the lyrics are overtly political, a number of Arian’s songs contain veiled references to current social issues and the final track of the 1999 album—*Farda Mal-e Mast* (“Tomorrow is Ours”)—is an optimistic statement of youth power.⁸⁷

While it is still too soon to draw conclusions about the long-term implications of the most recent changes, one thing is clear: For the very first time in Iran, young people are creating a grassroots popular music through which they can address current social issues, speaking with their own voice rather than using someone else’s music as an indirect statement of resistance. Ironically, this growth in grassroots popular music would not have been possible had the initial legalization of new pop not paved the way. Nor would it have been possible without the 1980s renaissance in *musiqi-e assil* and the resulting widespread culture of music making, as well as the availability of music education. In seeking to appropriate and take control of the pop music market by legalizing it and thereby blunting its symbolic subversive potential, it seems that the government has inadvertently opened the way for this new kind of actively engaged popular music. While detailed discussion of the new underground rock music lies outside the scope of this chapter, such recent developments have clear implications for musical meaning. By taking control of the music, musicians have once again transformed the meaning of popular music in Iran, or at least added another layer of meaning: music as active engagement. What we see now is perhaps the beginning of a process described back in 1991 by Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi in which the creation of a “more diverse and less controlled cultural space . . . offers the possibility for the articulation of other identities and other ideas, which might eventually be translated into more specifically political discourses, demands, and organizational structures (1991a: 57).

Moreover, much of the music that is emerging clearly goes beyond a mere imitation of Western models, but represents a fusion of styles based both on a greater understanding of those styles and clearer reasons for choosing to use them. While the West still holds a powerful fascination for many people, what is interesting is the way in which many bands are transcending what might be regarded as the “aping of one’s former colonial masters” (Manuel 1988: 22) and developing a new sound in which Iranian melodies and rhythms meet the sounds of jazz, progressive rock, heavy

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metal, and so on. In this way, the emergence of a grassroots popular music in Iran relates directly to current debates both about notions of Civil Society (through a diverse cultural space) and universalism. The direct involvement of young people in music making is one of the most exciting consequences of the post-1997 changes and indeed, it seems likely that the long-term consequences of this development will prove to be more significant and far-reaching than the emergence of new pop itself. Certainly, talking to young people, particularly young musicians, one gets an overwhelming sense of confidence. This, I believe, is where the real empowerment will lie.

CONCLUSION

In exploring the changing meanings of Iranian popular music since 1979, this chapter has sought to illustrate the extent to which music and its discourses are intimately bound up with notions of national belonging in Iran. From the banning of pop music in 1979 through to its legalization in 1998, the use of this music as a form of subversion and later counter-subversion is indicative of a struggle to control both the music and its meanings. Popular music's affirmation of modernity serves to position music at the center of debates concerning the place of tradition in modernity and the assertion of national identity in an increasingly global environment. What makes this such a fascinating area of study is music's semiotic complexity and semantic richness, its capacity to simultaneously symbolize many things and to embody different meanings. This mercurial quality clearly enables musicians and others to choose between a wide range of possible meanings; by the same token, the fluidity of those meanings militates against any attempt to fix and thereby control them. The recent emergence of local grassroots popular music in Iran has provided a space for the creation of music that is rooted at home, but also engages with modernity and the outside world. Not only does this allow for the symbolic expression of a particular vision of and claim on Iran's future, but through the act of performance, such a vision becomes a possible reality.

Notes

[See website for audio files and photos to accompany this chapter.]

1. An estimated 20 million people (70 percent of the electorate) voted for Khatami (Kamrava 2001: 170).
2. The term "pop," when applied to Iranian music in this chapter, refers to the Western-style genre that emerged in 1960s Iran and the production of which continued outside Iran after 1979. Previous local popular musical styles were partly eclipsed by the arrival of Westernized pop, but such styles did survive and are still performed. In this chapter, I use the broader

term “popular” to refer to a range of musical styles that go beyond “pop” in its restricted sense, including jazz, rock, heavy metal, and so on. It should be noted that in Iran itself, while such categories are recognized and distinguished, the term “pop” is in fact used in an analogous way to “popular” in the West, as a broad term to refer to popular music in the widest sense.

3. Much of the discussion in this chapter is based on material collected during three periods of fieldwork in Iran in the summers of 1999, 2000, and 2002, when I interviewed and talked informally with a great many people, including musicians and others, attended concerts, and followed what was happening on the broadcast media and in relevant debates in the national and musical press. I took every opportunity to observe and discuss these issues with people. My thanks are due to the many individuals who gave freely of their time to talk to me and to help me in countless ways during my visits to Iran. I also acknowledge support for these trips provided by Brunel University and by the British Institute of Persian Studies (Travel Fellowship Scheme).

As it was not possible to undertake fieldwork in Iran during the 1980s, primary source information from this period is largely based on the many discussions I had with musicians and others visiting from Iran, as well as correspondence and relevant literature.
4. See Kazemzadeh (1968), Halliday (1979), Katouzian (1981, 2003a), Keddie (1981, 1995), Abrahamian (1982), Martin (1989, 2000), Hunter (1990), and Cronin (2003), among others, for further information on the history of Iran since the nineteenth century.
5. Reza Shah Pahlavi was an army general who led a coup d'état in 1921, became Prime Minister of Iran in 1923, and eventually Shah in December 1925, replacing the last of the Qajar monarchs. In 1941, he was forced by Allied Powers to abdicate in favor of his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who reigned until the 1979 Revolution. See Katouzian (2003b).
6. See Katouzian (1981) and Mohammadi (1995), among others. As a socio-political/geographical category that glosses over many differences and that depends on dualistic notions, the term “West” is problematic. At the same time, the countries usually included in this category share a recent history of colonial and neocolonial power that has served to link them, both in their own discourses and in the eyes of the countries that have come under their influence. As such, it is useful to retain the category (however provisionally) for the purposes of discussion at this particular historical juncture. Moreover, while not wishing to perpetuate categories that have become increasingly questioned in a globalizing world, the equivalent Persian term—*qarb*—is used regularly in Iran, particularly to refer to those countries whose involvement in Iran has been most marked. As such, this term has highly emotive associations of direct relevance to the current discussion.
7. As evidenced, for example, by the banning of the veil in 1936 (see Parsa [1989], 36 and Chehabi [2003]) and the gradual disempowering of the clergy between 1925 and 1979 (see Akhavi [1980], Fischer [1980], and Keddie [1980]).
8. Written in 1341 (1962), *Gharbzadegi* translates as “Westoxication” as “Fascination with the West.”
9. Another example is the common use of expressions such as *musiqi-e 'elmi* (“scientific music”) and *musiqi-e benolmelali* (“international music”) to refer to Western classical music. The first in particular rests on an implied dualistic division in which Iranian music was (and still is) often represented as the implied opposite or “other” of “scientific.” There are many examples of this terminology in the literature, for example see Alizadeh 1998, 76 and Eftekhari 2000: 5.
10. Relatively little has been published on Iranian pop music in the 1960s and '70s other than a brief article by Nettl 1972 and similarly brief references in Nettl (1987, 126–280 and Manuel (1988: 167–69). See also Shay (2000), who includes discussion of traditional styles of popular music.
11. Fayaz charts the growing concern with *essalat* (“authenticity”/“purity”) among traditional musicians in the 1960s and '70s and the role of Western musicologists in promoting such ideas (1998, 97–98). He describes how many musicians in the 1970s became more concerned with establishing a relationship with the past than with the present (1998: 105–6). Miller (1999: 29–46) discusses the crucial role of the Centre for the Preservation and Propagation of Iranian Music (*Markaz-e Hefz-o Eshaeh-ye Musiqi-e Irani*) in supporting the documentation and study of traditional music during the 1970s.
12. For further discussion of the impact of modernization/westernization on music in Iran, the reader is referred to Nettl (1978 and 1985: for example, pages 40–3, amongst numerous references to Iran in this book).

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13. For detailed information on the background, course of events, and the aftermath of the 1979 uprising, see (among others) Keddie (1981, 1995), Bakhash (1985), Parsa (1989), Farhi (1990), Wright (1991) and Halliday (1996: 42–75). Katouzian (1981, 2003a), Martin (2000).
14. It is necessary to clarify two points here. First, I use the term “cultural policy” to refer to decisions pertaining to cultural activities, particularly regarding what was permitted in the public domain, that were made and implemented by the government (and organizations attached to the government). It should be understood that there was little in the way of coherent forward planning, which the term might imply. Secondly, as discussed below, while I generally refer to the government as one body when discussing such policies, the government in fact comprised different factions with a range of viewpoints on cultural matters, including music.
15. As Hall observes, the Revolution was, in part “a reaction to the ‘forced’ character of Western modernization; certainly, Iranian fundamentalism was a direct response to the efforts of the Shah in the 1970s to adopt Western models and cultural values wholesale” (1992: 313).
16. Interestingly, this event was staged by a Hollywood film director (Shaw 2002).
17. At the same time, it should be noted that Shi’ism, the branch of Islam practiced in Iran, became established as the state religion as part of a nationalist movement in the sixteenth century (Halliday 1996: 59–60). Regarded with some suspicion by Sunni Muslims, Shi’ism thus serves a partly nationalist agenda in distinguishing between Islam as practiced predominantly in Iran with most of the rest of the Islamic world.
18. A similar situation in Egypt is reported in “*Musiqi va aqaz-e hezareh-ye sevmom*” (“Music and the Beginning of the Third Millenium”) in *Faslnameh-ye Musiqi-e Mahoor* 6 (Winter 2000): 193–97 (author not stated, but the article is reproduced from the newspaper *Asr-e Azadegan*, Dey 12, 14, and 21, 1378 (January 2000)), where fundamentalists opposed Jean Michel Jarre’s Millenium concert at the pyramids on the basis that celebration of the Pharonic past is incompatible with the Islamic present.
19. For further discussion of the theological debate surrounding music in Islamic societies, see al-Faruqi 1985, Shiloah 1995, Doubleday (1999: 111–13) and Youssefzadeh (2000, 40–41), among others.
20. Youssefzadeh presents a number of interesting recent quotations from religious and government officials that illustrate this ambiguity (2000: 40–42).
21. In the case of solo female singing, the prohibition applied to any contexts where the singing might be heard by men.
22. See Anquetil (1980), During (1984, 1992), Adelkhah (1991) and Youssefzadeh (2000: 38–39) for further discussion of the situation of music in Iran during the 1980s in writings published outside Iran. In Iran itself, relatively little was published until the following decade, when musicians and other commentators started to publish articles in the national press and in the growing number of cultural and artistic magazines and journals (see Meshkatian [1991] and Alizadeh [1998], for example). Relatively little has been written on what came to be known as *los angelesi* pop, but the reader is referred to a series of radio programmes written and presented by Niloofar Mina and available at www.radioazadi.org (accessed 16/3/2003). See also Mina (2001).
23. These metaphoric categories are also based on Rice’s work (see in particular 2001: 22–29).
24. As has also been the case with the Iranian film industry. See Shaw (2002) and Tapper (2002).
25. Unless stated otherwise, all translations from Persian in this chapter are by the author.
26. Iran’s first university Music Department, at the University of Tehran, was opened in 1969.
27. With music by Mohammad Reza Lotfi and words by the contemporary Iranian poet, H. A. Sayeh. *Sepideh* was first published on *Chavosh no. 6* (cassette) in 1980 by the Chavosh Cultural and Artistic Institute, Tehran, and later reissued on CD as *Sepideh, Concert-e Gorooh-e Shaida* (no date; Avaye Shaida Cultural and Artistic Institute, Tehran).
28. Something that continues today. Take the case of bagpipe music (found only in the Southern Gulf region of Iran), the religious legality of which has become strongly contested in recent years. Local bagpipe player Mohsen Sharifian describes how a former member of his own ensemble in the town of Bushehr was standing for election to parliament and sought to increase his vote by speaking out against this music, music that he himself used to perform (Moshtagh 1999: 172).

One could draw direct parallels with the ways in which issues such as Law and Order or asylum laws, for example, are currently used by politicians in the UK to gain votes by being seen to be “tough.” An analogy even closer to home might be the implications of the 1994

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- Criminal Justice and Public Order Act on certain kinds of music making in the UK. Available at www.hmso.gov.uk/acts/acts1994/Ukpga_19940033_en_6.htm#mdiv63 (accessed 6/29/2003).
29. Samii notes a similar situation more recently with press laws, under which journalists are censored for crossing the so-called “red line,” although this line remains largely undefined (1999: 5).
 30. The distinction between private and public domains remains an important one in Iranian society.
 31. And therefore continuing the association of pop music with privilege established before 1979.
 32. Or perhaps unwilling to control. A number of my interviewees suggested that the government was fully aware that music served as an outlet—a kind of safety valve—for social grievances and was therefore reluctant to control the black market. At the same time, they needed to be seen to be attempting to control it.
 33. Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi write about “passive resistance” (1991a: 47), but I prefer to avoid the implications of submission and acquiescence suggested by this expression.
 34. For example, see De Bruijn (1997).
 35. As far as popular music is concerned, with the exception of a few songs dating from the time of the 1906 Constitutional Revolution (particularly those of Aref Ghazvini, 1880–1933), there is little evidence of it being used as a form of active resistance (see Chehabi [1999]). During the 1970s, a handful of independent singers provided social commentary, but few of these gained wide popularity. The best-known was Farhad, whose song *Jomeh* (“Friday”) was a critique of the Shah’s repression of political opposition.
 36. Film is another example of a previously contested cultural form that has flourished since the mid-1980s and has in recent years served as a candid forum for social criticism. The comparison with music is particularly apt because, like pop music, film was also targeted as a symbol of Westernization after the Revolution. Indeed, the extent of religious and popular opposition to film was such that cinemas became the target for arson attacks in the immediate pre-Revolutionary period: a hundred and eighty cinemas were destroyed in Iran between August 1978 and February 1979 (Naficy 1999: 19). The gradual post-Revolutionary recovery and eventual transformation of the Iranian film industry is one of the most remarkable stories of recent cultural history in Iran. See Tapper (2002).
 37. For further information on this period, see Wells (1999: 31–4) and Ehteshami (1995).
 38. Throughout this chapter, the term “sanction” is used in a positive sense to indicate permission or approval (as opposed to indicating a threatened penalty).
 39. During, for example, notes the overwhelming demand for concert tickets when restrictions on public concerts eventually eased in the late 1980s (1992: 142–43).
 40. See Samii (1999), Wells (1999), and Kamrava (2001) for further details of changes that have come about under Khatami. Mohajerani was forced to resign by conservative elements in the government in December 2000, but his work has nevertheless been continued by his successor, Ahmad Masjed Jamei.
 41. A point of clarification regarding the term “liberal,” which is used in this chapter to refer both to government policies and to a social environment characterized by a willingness to tolerate difference, be open to new ideas, and accept freedom of choice for individuals.
 42. *Honar-e Musiqi*, ISSN 1560–196X; *Faslnameh-ye Musiqi-e Mahoor*, ISSN 1561–1469; *Faslnameh-ye Musiqi-e Maqam* (no ISSN number).
 43. As evidenced by the decisive majority gained by Khatami’s supporters in the parliamentary elections of February 1999 (Ehteshami 1999, 206) and by Khatami’s own reelection as president in June 2001.
 44. An example of this is *Razé No* (“A New Secret”), by Hossein Alizadeh, which includes a “chorus” of three singers: two women and one man. One musician with whom I discussed this piece described the male singer as being there “for decorative purposes only,” in other words, solely to legitimize the female singers. A commercial recording of *Razé No* was released in the summer of 1998, following public performances in Tehran’s Vahdat Hall in March of the same year (*Razé No*, music by Hossein Alizadeh, performed by the Hamavayan ensemble. Mahour Institute of Culture and Art. M.CD—38). More recently (January 2002), the Irani Ensemble has used a similarly strategy, performing in public with a chorus which included a prominent female vocalist (see Taqizadeh 2002b).

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45. Much of the information in this section is based on my three periods of fieldwork in the summers of 1999, 2000, and 2002, mainly in Tehran, but also in the provincial towns of Bandar, Anzali, and Saari (in the northern provinces of Gilan and Mazandaran, respectively). Primary source material includes interviews with musicians and others, the latter including a large number of teenagers and young people in their twenties. Most of my informants were middle class, educated, and urban and (to varying degrees) cosmopolitan in outlook. Musicians interviewed included Shahram Nazeri, Kayhan Kalhor, Ramin Behna, and Hamid Reza Dibazar. In addition, I was able to talk to a number of individuals involved in teaching music at higher education level and visit music studios, arts centers, and other establishments where music is taught. I also attended a number of concerts and rehearsals, including several pop concerts, both by established singers such as Khashayar Etemadi, and by less well-known musicians, such as the group Imaj, and followed the broadcast media and the national and musical press, the latter including reports and reviews of concerts, as well as relevant debates.
46. Particularly through the regular broadcasting of their songs on Radio Payam.
47. But were still available through the black market, satellite channels, and the Internet.
48. While I refer to some reference to aspects of musical style, the main aim of this chapter is not to present analytical discussion of specific new pop songs, but rather to explore the broader social implications of the emergence of this music and the impact of recent changes on the music's meanings.
49. Shadmehr Aghili, *Dehati* (Farsnava, 1999). During my summer 2000 trip, there was a great deal of speculation as to how this album had managed to gain authorization. According to Pearl, within a few months of its release, *Dehati* had sold more than a million copies (2000).
Unlike the broadcast media (where there are no independent radio or television channels), the commercial recording sector in Iran is not under direct government control. However, central control is maintained by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance that, since 1986, has been responsible for granting permits for recordings destined for sale (Youssefzadeh 2000: 44–7 provides a useful overview of this process) and for authorizing all public performance of music. No recordings can be published or public performances take place without permission from this ministry. In June 2000, the government published a list of musicians who no longer required a permit for performances or for recordings. This list comprised the most prominent classical and folk musicians in Iran, but no pop musicians were included.
50. See Sohrabi (2002), for discussion and images of female backing singers in a concert by the band Raaz-e Shab. It is important to note that the gradually increasing role of women in the new pop music is both a symbolic challenge to existing boundaries and an indication of further concessions to liberalization.
51. Even in the initial stages, such concerts were by no means limited to Tehran. I heard reports of a pop concert held in Saari, a provincial town in northern Iran, and I also attended a street theatre performance in Bandar Anzali (on the Caspian coast), which was preceded by a performance given by a local pop band.
52. This happened on several occasions during my summer 2000 trip.
53. One pop concert I tried to attend was cancelled without notice; obtaining tickets for another proved to be a bureaucratic obstacle course. This is not just the case with pop music; such disruptions and cancellations are often as much to do with local power struggles (for example, between local religious leaders and provincial representatives of the Ministry of Culture, representing central power) as between different factions of central government. Take the recent example of bagpipe music in Bushehr and other towns in the southern region of Iran (see note 28). Although technically legal, local opposition to this music, fuelled by statements by local religious leaders, have led in some cases to concerts being physically, even violently, disrupted (see Moshtagh 1999). This level of physical obstruction to music performance gives some indication of how emotive the issues are.
54. Relatively little has been written about the new pop in the scholarly literature, either in Iran or outside (Youssefzadeh mentions it briefly, 2000: 39–40). In contrast, there has been a great deal of journalistic attention and media-based debate in Iran on this issue, some of which I discuss below.
55. In a country where an estimated 70 percent of the population is under the age of thirty. According to the *Statistical Centre of Iran*, at the time of the last Iranian census in 1996, just

under 68 percent of the population was below the age of thirty (available at www.sci.org.ir/english/sel/f2/ [accessed 4/14/04]). The most recently available United Nations statistics (for 2000) give a figure of 36 percent of the population under the age of 15 (available at <http://cyberschoolbus.un.org/infonation3/basic.asp> [accessed 4/14/04]). This demographic imbalance, caused by official policy in the early years after the Revolution, is a serious issue for the country and is now being tackled by the government (see http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/1949068.stm).

56. Generally known in the West as Rumi (1207–73).
57. ISSN 1029–2586.
58. Most of the information in this section is based on the “demotic” (Baumann 1996) discourses gathered in the course of my research. I found a vacuum in official government discourses on this subject, but Pearl (2000) claims that even before 1997, Ayatollah Khamenei’s “cultural advisers convinced him that if Iran didn’t produce its own pop, music from abroad would corrupt Iran’s youth and undermine Islamic values.” However, neither the source of this statement, nor that of Pearl’s suggestion that much of the pop music is in fact being promoted by conservative factions within the government, are clear.
59. A major annual arts festival held in February of each year on the anniversary of the Revolution. For further information on this and other festivals, see Youssefzadeh (2000: 49–54).
60. Youssefzadeh discusses the impact of government-sponsored festivals—particularly those with a competitive element—in imposing central control and “standards” on regional musics (2000: 49–54).
61. Ali Reza Assar, *Kooch-e Asheqaneh* (Avay-e Barg, 1999). According to Pearl, this album exceeded all expectations by selling an estimated three hundred thousand copies (2000).
62. To quote from www.iranian.com/Music/AghiliS/index.html (accessed 7/15/2002), “If he sings like a Pop star, looks like a Pop star and has millions of teenage fans like a Pop star, he IS a Pop star.” Aghili left Iran in 2002 and soon after released his first album abroad Iran, *Khiali Nist* (2003, Nova Media Co., CD-126).
63. Music by Shadmehr Aghili, words by Mohammad Ali Bahmani.
64. See Naficy 2002.
65. For example, I purchased a compilation cassette titled “Asar-e Bargozideh-ye Rock” (“The Best of Rock”), published by Arqanoon (no catalogue number or date) and featuring tracks by musicians such as Carlos Santana, Joe Satriani, and Brian May, including a number of pieces with references to the “East,” such as Camel’s “Sahara.”
66. The removal of lyrics is important. Besides the obvious reduction of impact these songs can have without their (usually English) words, there is also a symbolic “disempowering” of the songs by removing the words and rearranging the music, particularly because words are perceived to have such power in Iran. Without their words, the songs become just another instrumental piece for Iranian audiences. Or, at least, that would seem to be the intention. In reality, many people do recognize the songs, even if they don’t know or remember the words.
67. The popularity of Radio Payam became very clear to me through my interviews, discussions, and observations.
68. On the issue of satellite broadcasting see Barraclough 2001 and Naficy 2002: 54–5.
69. *Fasnameh-ye Musiqi-e Mahoor* 9 (2000), 160–62 published a statement issued by the Management Committee of this organization on the first anniversary of its establishment and also reported on an event held to mark the anniversary. There is an increasing literature on the subject of Civil Society in Iran. See, for example, Banuazizi (1995), Amirahmadi (1996), Kamali (1998), Bashiriyeh (2001), Gheyntanchi (2001), Kamrava (2001), and Chaichian (2003). The question of Civil Society will be considered briefly below.
70. As reported in *Honar-e Musiqi* 33 (Dey and Bahman 1380/January and February 2002): 25.
71. The *radif* is the traditional canonic repertoire of *musiqi-e assil*.
72. The issues raised by my collection of some two hundred such articles will be discussed in greater detail at a later date.
73. Indeed, it is interesting to note that Western classical music has remained a relatively uncontested domain in the post-Revolutionary period, despite the connection with Western culture. This can be partly explained by its “high art” associations, which have served to ensure that the music’s meanings are defined primarily through discourses of “music as art”—perhaps partly drawing on the dominance of this discourse in the West—thereby overshadowing other possible meanings of Western classical music in Iran. Moreover, as the association

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- between music, movement, and the body are less explicit in Western classical music than in pop (particularly in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century mainstream which is the repertoire predominantly available in Iran), this music has generally been regarded as fairly innocuous by the government. As such, the exclusive focus on “music as art” has meant that Western classical music was never targeted in the way that pop music was. However, in attempting to apply the same discourses to pop music, many classically trained musicians have failed to understand the significance of other dimensions of meaning in this music.
74. Particularly as many traditional musicians have once again retrenched into notions of “purity” and “authenticity” in the face of the more recent changes.
 75. *Honar-e Musiqi* 14 (Azar and Dey 1378/December and January 1999–2000) and 25, Bahman 1379 (February 2001).
 76. See Ehteshami (1999: 216). Khatami’s inaugural speech of August 1997 is printed in *Civil Society* 6, 69 (1997): 7–9. Indeed, it was at the suggestion of President Khatami that 2001 was declared as the “United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations.” Available at www.unesco.org/dialogue2001/en/annan.htm (accessed 6/2/2002).
 77. See Sohrabi (2002) for an example of this.
 78. As seen, for example, in the continued use of the terms *musiqi-e ‘elmi* (“scientific music”) and *musiqi-e benolmelali* (“international music”) to refer to Western classical music. See note 9.
 79. *Avizheh*, a group that mixes Iranian music with elements of jazz and progressive rock, gave its first concert in November 1998 in the Arasbaran Culture Centre in Tehran. One young man that I spoke to in 2000 described how his band had been given permission to present a pop concert at school, but that a screen had been erected in front of the performers to hide the instruments from the audience, to the amusement of performers and audience alike. Friedman (2002) also writes about the emergence of grassroots pop music into the public domain: “When I was last here, six years ago, a friend took me to see an Iranian guitarist who had an electric guitar but could only play songs in his bedroom, because pop music had been banned. Today he is giving public concerts of Iranian pop songs and cutting CDs.” There is some evidence that a small number of grassroots bands did exist in the late 1980s and early to mid-1990s, but their activities were extremely limited and such bands certainly didn’t comprise a broad movement on a scale that one sees emerging today.
 80. Although not without the usual contestation, official difficulties, and constant threat of last minute cancellation. A series of concerts by the rock band, Meera, scheduled for the Simorgh Hall in Tehran in July 2002 was cancelled after “the band’s representative was politely asked by authorities in the Office of Leasehold (Amaken) not to perform music at this particular time and place. This in spite of the fact that Meera had full permission from the Ministry of Guidance.” Available at www.tehranavenue.com/bulletin_board.htm (accessed 2/12/2002).
 81. According to Shadi Vatanparast, “Alternative music has gained its ardent followers in the Islamic Republic and the summer time is high season for rock groups to reach out to their fans.” Available at www.tehranavenue.com/bulletin_board.htm (accessed 3/7/2002).
 In July 2000, I attended a concert by the Fouzhan Ensemble, performing *Jazireh-ye Parvaz* (“The Isle of Flight”) by composer Hamid Reza Dibazar, at the Niavaran Cultural Centre in North Tehran. Using both Iranian and Western instruments as well as a mixed choir, the music drew on a wide range of styles, including *musiqi-e assil* and Iranian folk musics, as well as progressive rock, jazz, and Western classical music. The highlight of the performance for me was what can only be described as a virtuosic rock *kamāncheh* (Iranian spike-fiddle) solo that received a rapturous response from the audience. *Jazireh-ye Parvaz* is published on CD by the Bonyaad-e Afarinesh-haye Honari-e Niavaran (2002).
 82. Published by Shahram Music Books, SITC-438.
 83. However, some of O-Hum’s music is available through their website www.o-hum.com (accessed 16/4/2002), and I had no difficulty in purchasing a copy of *Nahal’e-Heirat* from a music shop in Tehran, even without government authorization. O-Hum disbanded in 2001 when two members of the group emigrated to Canada. It seems unlikely that the group will reform, despite the return of one of these musicians to Iran.

In general, the current situation is very much one of flux and uncertainty. Many musicians are still cautiously “feeling their way,” and it is not uncommon for individuals to work with more than one group or for groups to form, disband, and reform on a regular basis, particularly as a result of musicians emigrating to the West.

84. Available at www.tehran360.com/ (accessed 11/11/2003). A second festival—Tehran Avenue Music Open (TAMO) — was held in the autumn of 2003.
85. See Vatanparast 2002.
86. Both published by Tarane Sharghee Cultural & Artistic Company.
87. For further information on this band, see www.arian.com (accessed Month day, year).

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