



Polyphony in Iranian Music

MOHAMMAD TAGHI MASSOUDIEH

Originally published as “Čand Sedā-i dar Musiqi-ye Iran (چند صدایی در موسیقی ایران).” *Honarhāye Zibā* 3, 1998, 95-104.

Draft translation: Abdolmohammad Movahhed, copy-editing: Jessica Sloan-Leitner, with advice on transliteration by Babak Nikzat.

Abstract

Although Iranian regional music, like Iranian traditional* music, is basically monophonic and follows the rules of heterophony, we occasionally run across polyphonic pieces, although most have been unwittingly formed as such. This study shows that these polyphonic pieces could be found in the following forms:

1. The meeting of two vocal parts, where the second singer starts singing before the melody is completed by the first.

2. Imitations, as a result of singing the same melody by a few singers who consecutively start singing with some delay between their parts.

3. Simultaneous playing of variants of the same melody by two players (variant heterophony).

4. Changing between the soloist and the chorus (in the responsorial form) or between one chorus and another (in an antiphoner**) where a chorus begins the next part of the lyrics before the soloist or the other chorus is finished with their own part.

5. Polyphony resulting from the playing of a melody by a few singers where each singer sings the melody based on their own voice register depending on their physiological features.

6. Accompanying the first singer using alternate changes to the drone note or following the up-going or down-going movement of the melody in playing the *tamira* (in Lorestan), the *dotār* (in Khorasan) and *tamderā* (in Turkman) leads to the conscious parallelism of two voices.

The *radif* of traditional music and the Iranian regional music, like those of other Middle East countries, is monophonic and follows the forms of heterophony; that is, the same melody is played and changed by two or more players. The change of a specific melody by two players, or a player and a singer,

* [Editors' note: "Traditional" denotes "classical" or "art" music.]

** [Editors' note: This term from Western music history (church music) is used in the original.]

sometimes leads to the simultaneous playing of two different notes. Such an interference or combination of two sounds is a matter of heterophony, and by no means of harmony or accord. Interference of notes or combinations of notes in heterophony are not predictable. Since the melody is played extempore, the aforementioned combinations happen accidentally and thus cannot exemplify polyphony.¹ Even though Iranian regional and traditional music are predominantly heterophonic, we come across instances of mostly unwittingly created polyphony.

The various forms of polyphony in Iranian music discussed in this article are introduced as a result of my research on Iranian music, especially that of Iranian regional music of various districts. Almost all of the following transcriptions have been already published in my previous publications. Here I will analyze one example for the study of each form of polyphony. The forms of polyphony [in Iranian music] will be discussed below.

1. The simultaneous production of two sounds as a result of two singers' consecutive parts

This happens when the second singer starts singing before the melody is completed by the first. This form of polyphony, as revealed in the transcriptions, is specially found in *ta'ziye*.

Transcription 1:

Transcription 1 concerns the *ta'ziye* of "The Martyrdom of the 72 People," which I recorded in Dehabad of Meybod (near the city of Yazd) on September 14, 1980.²

The song of Imam Hossain (Transcription 1, b, staff 5) starts before the melody of Gabriel (a3, staff 4) ends. The song of Imam Hossain takes a definite meter from staff 6 onward (Transcription 1), which consists of an irregular succession of asymmetric metric-rhythmic units of $\frac{5+7+3+4}{16}$. This asymmetric metric-rhythmic succession of the song is not unrelated to the syllabic combination of the poem and the melody, and this combination, above all, helps to create a better understanding of the lyric and to make for a stronger effect on the audience. The questioning or memorable content of the second half-line (*magar ke*

¹ For a definition of heterophony, see Massoudieh, M. Taghi: *Mabani-e Etnomuzikolozhi: Moosiqishenasi Tatbiqi [The Fundamentals of Ethnomusicology: Comparative Musicology]*. Soroush - I.R.I.B. Publications. Tehran 1986, pp. 139-141.

² Massoudieh, M. Taghi: *Moosiqi-e Mazhabi-e Iran [Iranian Religious Music]*. Volume 1. *Moosiqi-e Ta'ziye [Ta'ziye Music]*. Soroush - I.R.I.B. Publications. Transcription 152.

va'de-ye ruz-e alast beraft az yād) requires that its melodic figures end on E and make for uncertainty (Transcription 1, a2, a3, staves 3 and 4). The four repetitions of "ey zol-faqār" in the song of Imam Hossain require that the relevant sentence (b1, staff 6) start with four short figure changes (b1, staff 6) and that variations of this figure up to the middle of sentence b1 (staff 6) be clearly separated by an eighth rest. As the next two half-lines begin with "yādegār-e heydari" and "yādegār-e dast dast-e kerdegār," a starting figure (b2, staff 7; b3, staff 8) is added to the two figure types of b1 (staff 6). The repeated melodic figure is deleted in the middle of period b3 (staff 8) because "ey zol-faqār" is played only once at the end of the half-line. The up-going movement of the melody at the beginning of the Gabriel song (a, staff 1) and specially the production of a long G along with increasingly frequent movements towards F+ (a, staff 1) definitely prove that the first section, which addresses Imam Hossain as "nur-e dide-ye Zahrā," belongs to the song of Imam Hossain.

2. Imitation

Alternate or delayed playing of the same melody by a few players or singers makes for imitations. An example of imitation can be discerned in the "Sultan Qays" episode of the "Imam Hossain Martyrdom" *ta'ziye*, which was recorded in Iran's Broadcasting 14 tracks Studio on March 1, 1984. The story has it that Qays, Sultan of India, and his chief minister go hunting on the day of Ashura and are attacked by a lion. They immediately ask Imam Hossain for help, but since they have killed the lion, which is not supposed to be killed even though it is a deadly beast, their request for help is rejected by the Imam. The rejection of the request convinces them to convert to Islam.³

Transcription 2:

As explained earlier, delay in the alternate play of the melody by Sultan Qays, his chief minister and Imam Hossain leads to the formation of an imitation or canon (Transcription 2, staff 2). The ending half-line of the sultan and his chief solely consists of the repetition of "aqa, ya Hossain!" (staff 2). When Imam sings the half-line beginning with "ey Asad!" the words cross the abovementioned repetition, which together make for the formation of an imitation or canon. The announcement-like litany of "yā Hossain!" is repeated by a single voice (Transcription 2, staff 2).

³ Massoudieh, M. Taghi: *Ibid*, pp. 75, 97.

3. Variant heterophony

In variant heterophony, the same melody is played and changed simultaneously by two players. This simultaneous performance leads to the crossing of different notes.

Transcription 3:

The *ta'ziye* of "Imam Hossain's Martyrdom" ends with a performance of two trumpets accompanied by a small and a big drum (Transcription 3).⁴ The crossing of the notes due to the changes made to the same melody by the first and second trumpets is clearly shown in staves 5 and 6 (Transcription 3). The second trumpet plays the first trumpet's part with a delay and makes a little change to it. Thus the notes resulting from the variant heterophony cross each other (Transcription 3, d, staff 5; a2, staff 6).

Polyphonic forms are found not only in *ta'ziye* but also in Iranian regional music. In the Iranian region of Baluchistan there is a special wedding song called "Lāru," usually sung after the bridegroom's bath and return to his special seat.

"Lāru" is also performed on the sixth night into the pregnancy and is thus also named "*sheshgani*." The song is called "Lāru" since it has a refrain consisting of nonsense syllables "*lāru li, lāru, lāru*."

Transcription 4 (Armān Golāra):

Translation of the lyrics: "*lāru, lāru, lāru!* Armān Golāra! Take off your cover, the Kuwaiti one! Maybe, he doesn't want that. Take off your headscarf!"^{1***}

The song of Armān Golāra is exchanged between a soloist singer and a chorus in a responsorial form; as a result, two different voices meet at the fifth and third (Transcription 4, staves 2, 5, 7) because the chorus starts singing the next part before the soloist completes his part. Each part of the song is composed of a period consisting of four melodic figures (staff 2, a + b + c + d).

Of these, the first and third figures (a and c) are to some extent similar, while the second figure (b) seems to be in contrast to the rest. The last figure (d) consists of the repetition of the ending A note.

⁴ Massoudieh, M. Taqi: *Ibid*, Transcriptions 63-66.

*** [Editors' note: Most likely this number refers to endnote 1 of the original text again.]

Transcription 5 (Waš Tawarna):

Translation of the lyrics: "li lāru, lāru! The bridegroom's shoes make a good sound. The man's shoes make a good sound. The man is sitting for a perfect life. The man is sitting."⁵

The song of Wash Tawarna (Transcription 5) is alternately performed by two choruses in the shape of an antiphoner. Before the first chorus finishes its part, the second chorus starts singing the same part, resulting in the crossing of two different voices (Transcription 5, staves 2 and 5).

Here, too, each period consists of four melodic figures (Transcription 5, staff 1, a + b + c + d) and the last figure (staff 1, d) is only a repetition of the ending A note.

With regard to the above two songs (Transcriptions 4 and 5, Armān Golāra and Waš Tawarna), it would be helpful to point out two theories concerning the evolution of polyphonic forms. The first theory is that of Fritz Bose,⁶ who argues that polyphonic forms have followed three old routes in the alternation of songs between the singer and the chorus. The three forms are as follows:

1. The chorus repeats the whole part vocalized by the soloist singer.
2. The chorus repeats the refrain only.
3. Half of the part is sung by the soloist singer while the other half is performed by the chorus.

The interference of sounds in these old forms of alternation has led to the evolution of polyphonic forms. The drone and even ostinato are advanced shapes of these old forms.

The second theory comes from Marius Schneider,⁷ who takes the perfection of polyphonic music to be a result of heterophonic changes appearing in the performance of melodies by a few singers, a theory which is not supported nowadays. There are also other theories regarding the appearance of polyphonic music.⁸

For the drone, the Bahraini divers' song will be discussed here since it seems to be partly connected to the music of south Iran. The diving season in Bahrain is divided into two periods: "ġows ul-kabir" and "ġows ul-bard". The former period [roughly] covers mid-May to mid-

⁵ Massoudieh, M. Taghi: "Hochzeitslieder aus Balūčestān." *Jahrbuch für musikalische Volks- und Völkerkunde*, Vol. 7, 1973, pp. 58-69. Also: Massoudieh, M. Taghi: *Mabani-e Etnomuzikolozi* [*The Fundamentals of Ethnomusicology*], pp. 128-129.

⁶ Bose, Fritz: *Musikalische Völkerkunde*. Freiburg i. Br. 1953, pp. 68, 69, 88, 89.

⁷ Schneider, Marius: *Geschichte der Mehrstimmigkeit*. Tutzing 1969, pp. 43, 32, 51, 93, 94.

⁸ Massoudieh, M. Taghi: *Mabani-e Etnomuzikolozi* [*The Fundamentals of Ethnomusicology*], pp. 124-129.

November and the latter covers the previous months. The fishermen consist of the captain, the divers, the divers' helpers and *naham* [i.e., the encouragers].⁹

Transcription 6:

The *naham* (Transcription 6, staves 1-3), with their song, accompany the divers when they are deep down in the sea. This song is followed by that of the helpers who accompany the *naham's* song in a drone form. This drone-like chorus part (staves 2 and 3) is composed of the three bass notes of B^b, D and B^b. The second note of D moves towards E^b and returns to D. The movement towards E^b and return to D is performed along with the *naham's* production of long G and F (staves 1 and 2).

In addition to the forms mentioned above, polyphony is also created when the same melody is performed by a few singers, each performing the melody using their own voice register and based on their own physiological capabilities. An example of such polyphony can be found in Mahabad's Qāderi dervishes' religious ritual ceremony held in their monastery which includes singing and dancing.¹⁰ The continuous repetition of a melody or motif, which is comparable to hypnosis, leads to the monotony of the dancing movements and ultimately results in a state of trance. Thus, the trance is a metaphysical state, a borderline condition between life and death.¹¹ It is perhaps for this reason that in the ceremonies performed in Sanandaj's Qāderia monastery, such extraordinary and excruciating acts such as inserting razors or daggers into their bodies are considered as pleasing activities. Thus, the trance consists in complete unconsciousness, so much so that the dancer falls down lifeless at the end, and his return to the material world is accompanied with screaming.¹²

The polyphonic forms introduced above are not created deliberately, contrary to other forms of polyphony in Iranian music which are produced wittingly. The deliberately created forms are often performed by instruments, usually *dotars*. I will try to introduce a selection of such forms below.

⁹ Olsen, Poul Rovsing: EPL 4177.

¹⁰ Recorded from the television show "Farhang-e Iran Zamin" [Iranian Culture] on December 15, 1975.

¹¹ Bose, Fritz: "Musik und Musiker in außereuropäischen Kulturen." *Humanismus und Technik* 14, Heft 1, 1970, pp. 1-8.

¹² Qaderi dervishes' ceremony in Sanandaj, led by Towfiq Moqaddam, was recorded by the author.

Transcription 7 (Farangi Rezāqoli):

Farangi Rezāqoli is a common *maqām* in the province of Lorestan (Transcription 6). The word "Farangi" denotes that the melody has been adapted from a foreign source, and the name "Rezāqoli" refers to the person who has adapted the melody, or to the person from whom the melody has been acquired.¹³ In Lorestan, a *dotār* is called a *tamira*. Farangi Rezāqoli (Transcription 7) has been performed by Imāmqli Imāmi, the famous *tamira* player of Lorestan.

The melodic figures of the Farangi Rezāqoli *maqām* are accompanied by a second voice like a drone. The drone continuously follows the up-going or down-going movement of the melody. The movement of the drone in this way produces a sort of parallelism or a sequence of two notes. The *maqām* of Farangi Rezāqoli consists of three melodic figures (Transcription 7, staves 1, 6, 14, a + b + c). Of these, the first figure (a) changes most. The succession of two voices due to the drone's following of the movement of the melody or the movement of the drone is similarly found in other *maqāms* of Lorestan, including "Farangi Khān Mirzā," "Māla Žeyri" and "Āwāzand Be Puva Muri." I have restricted myself to one example here.

The crossing of two voices in a parallel way due to the movement of the drone is also seen in the instrumental pieces of Khorasan and Turkman. Two examples will be given here: one is "Torqa" of north and northwest Khorasan and the other is "Kačfalak" of Turkman music.

Transcription 8 (Torqa):

"Torqa" is another name for the bird "Jal." In other words, the *maqām* of Jal, which is common to Esfarayen and Bojnurd, is called Torqa. This *maqām*, which was previously played by Bakhshis, is now rarely performed. The *maqām* of Torqa describes the flight of the *torqa* in the sky. The bird flies so high in the sky that it goes out of sight but then returns and sits on the ground. The *torqa* once again repeats the high flight, and this variety of flight is described in music. The *maqām* of Torqa (Transcription 8) has been performed by famous Zambil Bāf Bakhshi.

The melody of Torqa is composed of repetitions of a cliché melodic figure which is moved into various tonalities. This modulation is accompanied by a change of the drone. When the drone moves along with the melodic figure in different tonalities, two [different] notes are played in a parallel way. The *maqām* of Torqa, due to its metric-rhythmic symmetry, enjoys a motor movement. The frequent repetition of the cliché

¹³ According to Mr. Hamid Izadpanah.

melodic figure, together with the metric-rhythmic symmetry, describes the monotony of the *torqa*'s flight.¹⁴

This type of polyphonic instrumental form is also very common in Turkman music. I will explain one melody titled "Kačfalak" here.

Transcription 9 (Kačfalak):

Melodies in the *maqām* of Kačfalak, as the name suggests, express the sorrow of an evil fate and are thus preformed in the *dastgāh* of "Qaraqar."

In Turkman music, *maqāms* which have a sad tone or describe sorrowful conditions are performed in this *dastgāh*.¹⁵ The *maqām* of Kačfalak (Transcription 9) has been played with a "*tamderā*," the Turkman name for a *dotār*.

The beginning figure (Transcription 9, staff 1, a), as an intermediary part, appears throughout the piece in the form of melodic periods. The period types of staff 2 (b) have either a definite meter or a free meter, or else start with a definite meter and end in a free meter. Almost all of these types continuously end in a short cliché figure (staves 3, 4, 7, 8, 11-15). In Kačfalak (Transcription 9), as in the transcription of Farangi Rezāqoli *maqām* (Transcription 7), the second accompanying voice always follows in the direction of the melody's movement and leads to the succession of two voices in a parallel form.

Apart from the examples given above, there are other forms of polyphony in Turkman music which consist of a succession or change of two combinations of notes. A succession or change of sounds is usually performed at the beginning of the parts and is generally dependent on the change of the drone. Such a change is definitely not based on a harmonic sequence or a sequence of chords. Another common form of polyphony in Turkman music is an ostinato. Usually the figure which appears in the form of an ostinato in the piece is introduced individually at the beginning.¹⁶

The polyphonic forms of Iranian music discussed here were described on the basis of a selection of the most distinguished Iranian melodies. These forms are also found in many other instrumental and

¹⁴ Massoudieh, Mohammad Taghi: "Der Begriff des maqām in der persischen Volksmusik". In *Von der Vielfalt musikalischer Kultur. Festschrift für Josef Kuckertz*. Anif/Salzburg 1992, pp. 311-334.

¹⁵ According to Tajvardi Paykar.

¹⁶ Massoudieh, Mohammad Taghi: *Moosiqi-e Turkman [Turkman Music]* (under preparation).

non-instrumental melodies of Iranian music. Obviously, further recordings could provide us with other conclusions regarding Iranian polyphonic music or the presence of other polyphonic forms in Iranian music.

Transcription 1

Gabriel: Identical to original

Avâ Hossain-e Ali, nur-e diâde-ye Zahra, magar ke va de-ye niz-e alast berâft az vâd?

Gabriel

Imam Hossain (Peace Be upon Him) speaking:

Ima lillah wa imna ilanhi rai'um
[Indeed we belong to Allah, and indeed to Him we will return. The Quran 2:156]

Zul-faqâr! ey Zul-faqâr! ey Zul-faqâr! ey Zul-faqâr!
yâdegâr-e Heydâr! ey Zul-faqâr! ey Zul-faqâr! ey Zul-faqâr!
yâdegâr-e dast dast-e kerîdegâr, ey Zul-faqâr!

[Zul-faqâr! Oh, Zul-faqâr! Oh, Zul-faqâr!
Memento of Heydâr, Oh, Zul-faqâr! Oh, Zul-faqâr!
Memento of God, passed to us, Oh, Zul-faqâr!]

The original is one octave lower

Imam

Transcription 3

Identical to original

The score consists of ten staves, each representing a different instrument. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The instruments are labeled as follows:

- Staff 1: Trumpet (marked *ca. 72*)
- Staff 2: Small drum
- Staff 3: Trumpet
- Staff 4: Big drum
- Staff 5: Trumpet (marked *ca. 72*)
- Staff 6: Small drum
- Staff 7: Trumpet 2
- Staff 8: Trumpet 1
- Staff 9: Small drum
- Staff 10: Trumpet 2

The score is divided into sections by double bar lines with repeat signs. Circled numbers 1 through 6 are placed at the beginning of various staves to indicate specific measures or phrases. The notation is dense, with many notes and rests, and includes some complex rhythmic patterns.

Transcription:
Mohammad Taghi Massoudich

Transcription 6

Divers' song

record *Ocoxa* EPL 4177

The musical score is written on five staves. The first staff is labeled 'Vocal solo' and contains a melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes marked 'Ca 84' and a '3' above it. The second staff is also labeled 'Vocal solo' and continues the melodic line. The third staff is labeled 'Vocal choir' and features a complex polyphonic texture with multiple voices. The fourth and fifth staves continue the polyphonic texture. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

The image displays a musical score for a polyphonic piece in Iranian music, consisting of ten staves of music. The notation is written on a five-line staff with a treble clef. The music features a complex rhythmic structure, with many notes beamed together and some notes marked with a '3' in a circle, indicating a triplet. The score is annotated with various symbols and markings:

- Star symbols (*) are placed above or below notes, often indicating specific rhythmic or melodic features.
- Arrows above the staves indicate the direction of the melodic line or the flow of the piece.
- Measure numbers are circled and placed below the staves, starting from 112 and ending at 121.
- Some notes are circled, possibly highlighting important melodic motifs or specific intervals.
- The notation includes various note values, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests.

Transcription 8 Torqa
Dotarah: Zambil Baf

Identical to original

1 CA 66-69

14

6

5

4

3

2

1

13

12

11

10

9

8

7

6

5

4

3

2

1

Dastgah: Qaraqalr

Transcription 9 Kaçfalak

The original is a minor third higher

1) 2/4 F\#

2) p

3) p

4) p

5) p

6) p

7) p

8) p

9) p

10) p

11) p

13) $\sharp = \flat$, $\frac{4}{16}$ $\frac{6}{16}$

14) $\sharp = \flat$, $\frac{4}{16}$ $\frac{6}{16}$

15) $\flat \sharp$, $\frac{4}{16}$ $\frac{6}{16}$

16) $\frac{4}{16}$ $\frac{6}{16}$

17) $\frac{4}{16}$ $\frac{6}{16}$

18) $\sharp = \flat$, $\frac{4}{16}$ $\frac{6}{16}$

19) $\frac{4}{16}$ $\frac{6}{16}$