Under the Radar: Ambient Music and/in the Iranian State

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0. What is ambient music?

Ambient music can be defined in contrast with highly gestural music. It offers an airy or ambient sonic experience. The use of stretched sonic forms known as drones, slow and gradual changes is central to this style. Brian Eno is largely credited with coining the term in the mid 1970’s. The first explicit reference to the term in the context of a musical album is known to be Eno’s Ambient 1: Music for Airports (published in 1978). Eno himself traced the use of this phrase back to 1917 and Erik Satie’s idea of furniture music or background music. The World Soundscape Project, a research and educational endeavour founded in 1969 by composer R. Murray Schafer at Simon Fraser University, the work of field recordists such as Irv Teibel’s Environments series, and a surge in the market of sound production devices including commercial synthesisers in 1960s are thought to be influential in the emergence of this musical genre.

1. Introduction

In the last 10 years, a new wave of experimental digital arts and music practices has emerged from Iran: a small scene is now recognised beyond Iranian geopolitical borders and is represented in public venues across the country. The public aspect is crucial as a large portion of the music produced stays underground due to an ongoing tension between the political system’s ideological censorship machine and cultural producers’ practice. Without the system of permit’s approval, any public presentation and/or dissemination of a cultural product is banned by law. In this text, I will investigate how the younger generation of Iranian electronic/ambient music producers have managed to negotiate a space for their practice in the society transforming and/or transcending the inherited conflicts beyond their customary forms into a constructively dynamic dialogue with the system.

As an artist who has lived and worked in Iran, I struggled first-hand with the systemic control and social dogmas. I am now unable to go back to the country as a political refugee. Hence, in my research I have used a combination of online ethnography, interview, field recording, and collaborative composition as a methodology affording me a position as ‘participant-experiencer’ (Walstorm 2004) in relation to the field: the digital arts and experimental electronic music ‘scene’ in Iran. Being actively engaged with the practices of my interlocutors, I investigate, drawing on Waters (2015), how music can comment on and analyse or critique itself—through its own agency as music—bringing composition and ethnography in a fruitful collision (Waters 2015). Apart from an experimental methodology with the potential to offer a useful context for my interdisciplinary and practice-based research, this approach was also adopted as a pragmatic method in furthering a productive dialogue.
with my ‘subjects’ whose politically cautious disposition might have hindered the process of a critical conversation.

To position the areas of conflict between cultural producers—particularly between musical practitioners—and the political system’s controlling mechanisms in perspective, I will firstly provide a historical context.

2. Creative practice, religious narratives, and politics in Iranian plateau

Islamic texts are highly ambiguous about the religion’s position vis-a-vis music. The commentary regarding this subject is split between proscription and justification within the Islamic literature. The latter (justification), however, trying to point out the compatibilities, inevitably, was more aligned with people’s need, thus became qualified (Nieuwkerk, Levine, and Stokes 2016:10).

Al-Ghazali, a well-known Iranian Sufi philosopher, was among the theologians who considered the music in spiritual pursuit to be conditionally permitted. In his famous book, written in 11th century, called Ihia Ulum al-Din (الدين علوم الحياة), he argues that music had to be regulated by constraints of time, space and community (ikhwan: الإخوان), meaning that the more precise conditions upon which the legitimacy of musical activity depended were to be defined by the current custom, which presents ruling on musical matter as a fluid, time-dependent context, releasing it to a considerable extent from religious fundamentalism. This is the kind of approach which is still largely shared among Ulama (Islamic scholars) including Ali Khamenei: the current supreme leader of Iran. In Khamenei’s view (extracted from his web site): ‘any music that is suitable for gatherings of merry making in common view is forbidden by the Islamic law or shari’a [...] To distinguish the subject of a ruling depends on the view of the responsible adult. There is no objection to other kinds of music in itself.’

Talal Asad’s classic essay The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam (1986) describes Islam as a discursive tradition. He argues that a ‘discursive tradition’ is not historically static or rigid but constantly in motion, even as it claims to be situated external to time and history. A more detailed analysis regarding the relationship of ruling powers and music in the post-Islamic society is outside the scope and focus of this paper. Nevertheless, what is clear is that music has been a contested site for conflicting identities in the Iranian plateau for a long time. It is also clear that regardless of the pressures exerted against it by ruling powers of different times, music remained a central element of the Iranian culture along with poetry and literature.

- 1979 Revolution

The 1979 Revolution itself involved a complex play of identities that reflected contesting visions of what it meant to be Iranian. Areas of disagreement among the elites were largely defined based on their positions in relation to the debates regarding “national” versus “religious” identities or “tradition” versus “modernity”. These areas of debates, rather saturated dichotomies that dominated the atmosphere of pre-revolutionary discussions, emerged as a result of the Shah’s (last Iranian monarch’s) rushed modernisation projects, a bitter history of Western intervention and exploitation in Iran, and the Shah’s association to these powers. Hence, the 1979 revolution is partly
regarded as the rejection of Western cultural hegemony, which led to a decade of partially self-imposed isolation, most notably from the countries of Western Europe, North America and their allies, a period in which the settling regime attempted to disentangle itself from the web of neo-colonial influence, interventions and cultural dependency. In such an environment, the paranoid system attempted to limit cultural activities that regarded as agents of cultural imperialism to a great extent. Music was at the top of the list. Extensive bans and controlling measures were applied on a range of musical activities from teaching to performing and even selling musical instruments.

Any analysis of cultural transformations in Iran should take the political changes and the processes through which they crystallise equally seriously. One of these processes is elections. As such we can define the Iranian regime as a democratic theocracy. No matter how odd this compound accommodating notions of democracy and theocracy side by side sounds to the “modern ear”, one should not be immediately blinded by the theocratic aspect and recognise the democratic property as well. Democratic processes, albeit limited and filtered, still provide substantial channels for an effective expression of discontent. These processes and other means by which the society connects to the ruling power, creates a feedback loop of affects: one changes with, through or as the other. Sote’s comment demonstrates this in relation to electronic music. Sote is Ata Ebtekar’s electronic music project. He is the best known Iranian electronic music composer by far and quite an exception in the context of this paper: his music is actually very gestural and bold with a strong beat-oriented approach. He says:

About 12 years ago I came back to Iran wanting to make people aware of experimental electronic music, but then the presidential government was different and there was no scene at all. […] But when I came back 8 years later things had changed dramatically. There were a 20-something artist starting out doing that kind of stuff. I became friends with about 10 of them and we started our own festival.

Ata Ebtekar aka Sote interview with Oli Warwick, published on the FACT online magazine, Sep 2017.

3. Locating the “Ambient scene” in the post-2007 society

A knowledge of the given context provides a valuable standpoint for an investigation into the electronic/ambient scene only when it is combined with an awareness of the ways ideas—including musical ideas, imaginaries and aesthetics—travel in our world. These continuous and asymmetrical flows, as identified by Appadurai (for instance 1990, 1996) and Hannerz (1992:217-63), provide contexts for the development of new forms that are fluid and composite in nature. The electronic/ambient scene in Iran, albeit diverse and not uniform within itself, is one of these forms with aesthetics that draw on a variety of diverse practices.

In a broader attempt to contextualize the scene, I would draw on concepts such as “cosmopolitan subjectivities” as laid out by Thomas Turino in his ethnomusicological work Nationalism and Latin American Music (2003) as well as Martin Stokes’ conception of “cosmopolitanism” as an analytical tool in his seminal work On Musical Cosmopolitanism (2007). My participants’ comments about the ingredients in the melting pot of their influences resonate well with Tina Ramnarine’s (1996, 2001,
2007a, 2007b) suggestion that people are making an active search for an expressive “home” rejecting
the commonly used term “hybridity” in addressing the composite musical practices.

Mark Slobin’s notion of “affinity interculture” (1993), Benedict Anderson’s elaboration on the
concept of ‘imagination as a constitutive force for communities’ (1983), and Tsioulakis’ proposal
(2011) about the relevance of “social imaginary” in the description of music networks that
incorporate global/cosmopolitan aesthetics and ideologies are also useful frameworks that I have
incorporated in a chapter of my thesis to contextualise the scene at hand and its practices within a
broader transnational context. In the following parts, to keep a better ‘ethnographic present’, I will
draw on a few recurrent themes in relation to the scene’s position in a negotiation with the system.

- **Moderate politics, pragmatic strategies**

It seems true that the current government has more tolerant policies towards art and music than
the previous government. The change was particularly felt when Tehran’s streets turned into a lively
but weird museum covered by billboards putting on display artworks from all around the world with
captions from the artists’ biographies. This happened in 2015 and was viewed as the City Hall’s
attempt to charm the Tehran’s middle class, as its chair, a right-wing politician, was preparing to run
for presidency. It is just an example, quite a significant one, among many, that supports my earlier
argument about the fact that power struggles in Iran have been increasingly based on political
strategies as opposed to religious ideologies. And, in a political game public opinion matters.

It is, however, important not to exaggerate about the extent of such changes and their meanings.
It is also crucial not to forget the regime’s iron hand and its function in suppressing opposition voices,
with the aftermath of the Green Movement’s attempts to establish itself as the most recent example
of systemic intolerance and repressive behaviour. Convoluted regional transformations have also
played a part in rendering the hard-core Iranian left and right more ‘moderate’.

It is against this backdrop that the electronic/ambient scene has been establishing itself as one
of the narratives in Iranian art/music; a scene that is now recognised beyond the borders and is
represented via the most prestigious international platforms. The scene under scrutiny here is
characterized by a few key features. It is:

- Experimental and independent: due to the lack of governmental and institutional support for
music in Iran, apart from for specific kinds of Western and Persian classical music and a very
few courses in music technology (in Tehran Conservatory of Music for instance), most of the
works are based on the efforts of individuals.

- Reliant upon digital technology and the Internet: for the same reasons explained above, the
Internet operates as central means for self-education, communication with the outside world
(with other producers, fans, labels and so on), and commodification by releasing mainly
through ‘netlabels’ (The Future Sequence, Fleming Pines, Tympanic Audio and others).

- Presented predominantly in gallery and theatre settings: live performances, exhibitions,
workshops and recently festivals such as SET Experimental Art Events, TADAEX and Full Corn
Moon.

- Ambient in aesthetics

- Minimal or no use of vocals: it is safe to say that above 90% of the works are produced without
explicit reference to human voice.

The above characteristics can lead one to assume that the aesthetics, the scale of the events, the type of the audience these events attract, and the strategies of the scene in framing the performances as workshop or artistic event as opposed to musical gig, might also have contributed to a more tolerant behaviour on the system’s side. Before we explore that further, I quote Shahin regarding how this scene has learned from the experiences of previous ones. Shahin produces Ambient music under the alias Tegh. His view demonstrating a pragmatic, politically cautious approach to the rules and limitations is largely shared among other interviewees. Here is what he says:

We are pessimistic or realistic you could say. We have witnessed what factors went against previous movements. Take the hip-hop scene as an example. [The hip-hop scene was becoming widely popular between 2006-2009 but it was crashed by the system]

4. Aesthetics: background / foreground

After the first decade when the problem with musical practice was dominated by revolutionary ideas of self-determinacy and identity, the regimes’ approach changed for a more politically-determined policy. Under the new mechanism, which has remained more or less unchanged, any musical product (performance, album, etc.) falls under 3 loosely defined categories: Pop, Rock, Fusion. The looseness in definition is undoubtedly an echo of the vagueness ingrained in laws and unclear procedures regarding musical practice. This foggy situation leaves the hands of the system open in adjusting its behaviour depending on the contexts of the time. And, those contexts are more and more politically-determined as noted earlier. On the other hand, the same fog also offers cultural producers room for manoeuvring; creative ways to get around the limitations. Hesam’s comment affirms that the scenes’ aesthetics is a key. He is one of the artists who have frequently applied for and been granted many such permissions:

There are no specific rules for the type of electronic music we produce. Also, there have not been major obstacles, at least throughout the past 4 years. As a Rock band you’d still have problems to secure a permission unless you have connections. Even then you may not succeed. Even if you do, there is still the risk that they might cancel your concert, sometimes in the middle of the gig.

Hesam Ohadi aka Idelfon, Jun. 2017, interviewed on Skype

Aesthetics seems to play in favour of the ambient producers: the fact that there is no vocal in this music (except in a very few cases), there is no explicitly identifiable reference to pop music and its supposedly manipulative nature that positions it somehow on the category of cultural activism from the point of view of the permit system’s officials, and that there are no recognisable danceable beats that associate it with party music, which makes things complicated as explained in part 2 within a quote from the supreme leader. It is as if ambient music stays in the background in the Iranian society
of today, not only from the point of view of this genres’ aesthetic philosophy, but also from a socio-political perspective contributing to the formation of manageable, constructive relationship with the system.

5. Conclusion

As a new movement in the Iranian art and music, the scene’s challenges haven’t been limited to its relation with the political system and the audience. Simple matters of setting up and professional organisation of digital/multimedia performances have been challenging as well. In this context, it appears that a strong bond in the form of friendship among the artists have been key to the relative success and consistency of the scene. These relations have provided the young scene with strong support from the inside offering the producers opportunities to build a powerful DIY tradition, a sense of self-sufficiency, and to overcome stresses of dealing with the unknown. At the same time, this confidence has contributed to expanding the scene’s networks in working with artists and institutions outside Iran creating vibrant sets of collectives and collaborative practices.

A focus on historical-social-political contexts, however, should not distract us in our analysis of artistic/musical movements from paying attention to a perhaps more immediate perspective, a desire deeply ingrained in us humans: the element of play that Martin Stokes so beautifully identifies in his seminal work *On Musical Cosmopolitanism* (2007). The scene might never acquire the kind of popularity that many other genres could achieve, but this is not specifically an issue related to this scene in Iran. Ambient scene is arguably the only musical wave after the revolution that managed to establish a place for itself in the society, negotiate with the political power and consistently grow. After almost a decade since its ‘emergence’, it is now more powerful than ever with at least 2 major festivals and a good number of weekly gigs, workshops and gallery events. In the background, maybe! But far from being passive, the ‘ambient scene’ has already pushed many boundaries of control and managed to introduce wider communities to a new form of practice previously not known.