



Listening: the fourth string

Raheleh Filsoofi / Reza Filsoofi

GALLERY GUIDE

with exhibition essay by:
Jordan Amirkhani



The New Gallery acknowledges the traditional, ancestral, and un-ceded territory of the Yuchi, Shawnee, and Cherokee First Nations on which we organize, exhibit, listen and learn.

Listening: The Fourth String

An Artistic Collaboration: Artist + Musician + Community = SOCIAL AWARENESS + SOCIAL CHANGE

Listening: The Fourth String is a series of interactive multimedia installations and public performances that re-imagine the silenced existence of the Iranian musician, Moshtagh Ali Shah, and emphasizes his historic contributions to music. The project addresses the concept of sound, suggesting the act of listening can power community engagement, promote social change, and foster a better future. The exhibition will be staged via various events between Feb. 21-March 25 in The New Gallery at Austin Peay State University.

The Fourth String is a reference to the traditional Iranian instrument, the *setar*. Literally translated from the Persian Farsi language, *setar* means three (*se*) strings (*tar*), and the Iranian *setar* is a three-stringed instrument. However, centuries ago, the Iranian Sufi musician, Moshtagh Ali Shah, added a fourth string. This dramatically changed the instrument from its original configuration, enhancing the sound and allowing musicians to explore more complex compositional and performance possibilities while retaining the traditional capabilities of the three-stringed instrument.

There are three components in this exhibition:

1) Installation and Performance

A Kermani rug that traditionally serves as a gathering place is transformed into a four-string instrument where artists and community members can experience sound and music together. In addition to community participation, local musicians have been invited to collaborate in an experimental performance with this instrument.

2) An Installation – Artists as Witnesses

In a multi-channel video, this installation provides an opportunity for underrepresented artists to collectively come together as witnesses and participants of social change in action. Close-ups of over 30 Middle Eastern musicians peer back at exhibition viewers.

3) Installation as a Platform for Learning and Engagement

This is an educational and interactive installation that allows individuals to sit and play the *setar*. Three video monitors will provide step-by-step instruction on a few basic strumming and picking techniques.

The installations, performances, and artists' lectures intend to broaden participants' knowledge and understanding of Middle Eastern music and its ethos. It provides unique educational and performance opportunities for the community. The exhibit showcases the dynamic aspects of Middle Eastern music, its capacity to integrate with other musical genres, and the potency of its contribution to the soundscape of the United States.

Exhibition Essay

“Iranians take poetry and music quite seriously—a habit that tends to lend a certain poetic diction to our historical recollections, the way we remember ourselves.”¹

“By plucking the neck bowl of the setar, Maryam moved closer to her father, the sounds vibrating inside the strings, running in a parallel plane to the table they had sat at so many times, and would sit at no more.”²

“Long-necked, and sometimes idle, like a pear/beautiful/unassuming in appearance, so much more than her three strings.”³

It is difficult to exaggerate the significance of music and poetry in Iranian culture. If we take Hamid Dabashi’s statement about Iranian and cultural forms to its logical conclusion, particularly in the context of the Iranian diaspora in North America, we can see why poetry and music remain crucial in expressing some of the collective experiences and sentiments Iranian Americans (like myself) who immigrated, were raised in, or were forced to flee to North America in the three decades following the Revolution of 1979. Poetry and music thus stand as important sources of continuity, connecting many Iranians to the voices and sounds of their past and to the country and culture dramatically altered by geopolitical interruption, violence, and an abrupt shift in cultural normativities. They are both the rhyme and rhythm of our collective memories.

As a second-generation Iranian American growing up in the United States, Iranian music and poetry found space to settle and grow in the seams between two very different generational experiences. Even today, I continue to laugh at the way my parents and grandparents scoffed at the homework I brought home from school, demanding to know where my “recitation” lessons were and why I was not learning to memorize by heart the great Iranian and American poets—Robert Frost, Walt Whitman, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, beloved poets in Iran—as my parents had done. To accompany my traditional middle-class piano lessons beginning in the first grade, my father insisted that I spend hours with him over the weekend listening to bootleg tapes of classical Persian music in the car or our shared backyard as a way of balancing my American musical education. I can still hear the intertwined sounds, the hiss of the weary tape copied for friends too often, and the plucks of the strings exiting the stereo with graceful force. Across my childhood, I can recall few dinner parties or events that did not finish with my grandfather, grandmother, and uncles seated around a table, exchanging lines of Hafez, Saadi, or Rumi between each other between sips of vodka. The

1 Quote taken from scholar Hamid Dabashi’s book *Iran—A People Interrupted*, New York: The New Press, 2008, p. 13.

2 Taken from Maryam Hooleh’s book of poems about the death of her father, written in the third person, *The Sticky Dreams of a Banished Butterfly*, Stockholm: Maniha Publishing/Davat Publishing, 2015, p. 5.

3 Excerpt from a poem written by my grandfather, Reza Morteza Amirkhani (1909-1989) about my grandmother, Lahleh, which makes reference to the form of the setar. (The misogyny is not lost on me.) I found in his notebook on a trip to my family’s home in Rasht, Iran in 2006, and strangely, carry a piece of paper with this written on it in my wallet.

atmosphere is run thru with a strange masculine bravado, there are minor humiliations and teasing for those who skip lines or fumble the texts, and arguments for those who “remember the lines differently.” The same goes for evenings ending with the wavy, soft sounds of the *setar* leaking into our living room by way of my father’s Radio Shack stereo system. The style and improvisational virtuosity of great masters such as Nur-Ali Borumand or Mohammed Reza Lofti would be hotly debated; late in the evening, the sounds of the *setar* would find partnership with the elastic stretch of the beloved Iranian singer, Mohammad-Reza Shajarian (at least in our house...other Iranian families might listen to someone else). Groups would gather around, drinks in hand (tea, or otherwise), to listen and sing along, one hand on their heart, the other extended, eyes always closed. All these experiences felt shot with a unique kind of emotional openness—a strange sight to behold for a young girl used to the adults in the house evading emotions as opposed to embodying them, escaping hard conversations as opposed to inviting them.

Stories swirled in the atmosphere during these late-night events, passed down as a way of “teaching” those who did not grow up in Iran lessons that textbooks might not hold. One of them was the genesis of the *setar*, a fretted, stringed instrument close to the tanbur family of long-necked, pear-shaped lutes original to Iran and central to Iranian classical music and performance.⁴ Made from thin strips of mulberry or walnut wood glued or carved, the instrument’s original form included three strings strummed and plucked with a fingernail. Similar to the ways in which the banjo in American music or the mandolin in the European tradition have come to signify the relationship between folklore and storytelling, singer and his instrument, the *setar* remains the instrument most associated with the voice, whether sung or manifested in the vocalise of an instrument’s capacities. In the mid-eighteenth century, it was determined by Iranian mathematicians and intellectuals that a fourth string was needed due to advances in musical theory. The Sufi mystic and musician Mushtaq Ali Shah (D. 1206, Hijiri), is credited with adding and playing with a fourth string on his *setar* before his death, often called the “Mushtaq string.”⁵ A member of the Nimatullahi Order of Sufis, Mushtaq Ali Shah was a *majdhoub*, attracting men of faith with his voice and musical gifts.⁶ His disregard for conventions around the playing of music (the *setar*, specifically) and religious Islamic law caught up with him, as he was accused of reciting from the Qu’ran while singing and playing his *setar* during the call to prayer on Ramadan and was ordered to be stoned to death by order of the Shah in 1792.⁷ His martyrdom for playing and making music referred to as “Divine intoxication,” at the hands of the State remains bound up with the instrument’s history and for all those who play it and stands as an allegory for Iranian artists singing and playing in spite of their circumstances.⁸ Dissent is encoded in its very existence.

These sounds and stories, the way my family members engaged with them, spread wide in the rooms of our house and in the memory palace of my own mind. Tinged with sentimentality at times, what is clear to me now is the ways in which these cultural texts (sonic, spoken) were used as a vehicle for community building as a way of keeping Iranian life and experience attached to

4 Although native to Iran, setars can be found in some form or fashion in musical cultures across the Mediterranean, the Middle East, North Africa, and the Subcontinent.

5 See Link: <https://bit.ly/3p3eUrQ>

6 A *majdhoub* is a spiritual man whose mental faculties and ability to reason were often spoiled or interfered with by the playing of music, the recitation of poetry, the drinking of decadent foods and wines, the pleasures of the body, etc.

7 See John Eberly’s book *Al-Kimia: The Mystical Islamic Essence of the Sacred Art of Alchemy*, New York: Sophia Perennis, 2004, p. 40.

8 See Nahid Siamdoust’s book *Soundtrack of the Revolution: The Politics of Music in Iran*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017, p. 313.

a present, contemporaneous with the continuous flow of culture in Iran and further afield, and is thus, deeply and inherently political. It seems to me, that the many interruptions Iran and Iranians have endured as a nation and a cohort are blunted when the cultural life of the Iranian people (past AND present) continues to be preserved and presented, dispelling the notion that Iranian live unproductively in the past, clutching to unproductive forms of nostalgia.⁹ This is not to say that the trauma and loss of one's home—something that many Iranians of the diaspora experience—is not at work in the sharing and caring for Iranian culture abroad and at home, but that these texts and the ways in which they are carried from one generation to another (orally, auratically, technologically) are catalysts for the reparative work necessary to render the past alive, awake, and alert to a future.

I am only now aware of how many mental notes I was taking, and how much these “notes on listening” would matter later on, as I would find my own way through my identity and my relationship to these cultural texts. What possibilities might these totems hold for a future, our future? What is possible when we are gifted space to come together to listen to these sounds and stories embedded in the setar? What is granted when we are able to remember together in community with one another? To hold space and listen alongside the reverberations of poetics, of dissent?

--Dr. Jordan Amirkhani
Los Angeles, CA/New Orleans, LA
February 14, 2022

9 See Rebecca Rahimi's thesis "Storytelling, Memory, and Nostalgia: The Identities of Iranian Revolutionary Migrants and First-Generation Persian Americans," Master's Thesis, Nashville: Vanderbilt University, 2019.



Jordan Amirkhani is Curator of Rivers Institute for Contemporary Art & Thought—a non-profit institute for research, publishing, and exhibitions of contemporary art based in New Orleans, Louisiana. Prior to taking on this role, Amirkhani was a Professorial Lecturer in Modern and Contemporary Art at American University in Washington, DC from 2018-2021. Amirkhani has published scholarship on the Dada painter and polemicist Francis Picabia, the British conceptual art collective Art & Language, Crow artist Wendy Red Star, and the Nashville-based photographer Vesna Pavlović. Recent curatorial projects include *Troy Montes-Michie: Rock of Eye* for the California African American Museum in Los Angeles, co-curated with Andrea Andersson and Taylor Renee Aldridge, *Yto Barrada: Ways to Baffle*

the Wind at MASS MoCA co-curated with Andrea Andersson, and the *2021 Atlanta Biennial: Of Care and Destruction* for the Atlanta Contemporary. Amirkhani's art criticism and writing has appeared in *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *Baltimore Arts*, *X-Tra*, and [Burnaway.org](https://www.burnaway.org). Her emphasis on contextualizing contemporary art and artists working in the American South garnered her a prestigious Creative Capital/Andy Warhol Foundation "Short-Form" Writing Grant in 2017 and three nominations for The Rabkin Prize in Arts Journalism in 2017, 2018, and 2019.

About the Artists

Bio

Raheleh Filsoofi is a multidisciplinary Iranian-American artist based in the United States. Her work synthesizes sociopolitical statements as a point of departure and further challenges these fundamental arguments by incorporating ancient and contemporary media such as ceramics, poetry, ambient sound, and video to create a holistic sensory experience. Her interdisciplinary practices examine the literal and figurative contexts of border, immigration, land, and ownership. Raheleh is an assistant professor in Ceramics at Vanderbilt University.

Reza Filsoofi is a multi-instrumentalist, singer, and composer born in Tehran, Iran. Reza's versatile musical styles combined with his expansive knowledge of different classical instruments have given him opportunities to collaborate with numerous artists and musicians in a variety of projects

For over six years Raheleh's and Reza Filsoofi's socially engaged practices as visual artist and musician have brought groups of people together from diverse cultural backgrounds in South Florida and South Texas. They currently live and practice in Nashville, Tennessee.

Exhibition Event Schedule

February 24:

- 12:30 p.m. - Gallery Talk/Performance by Raheleh and Reza Filsoofi, The New Gallery
- 6 p.m. - Artist Lecture by Raheleh Filsoofi, Sundquist 106. (Lecture will be livestreamed - visit website for details)

March 3:

- Noon – Performance by Reza Filsoofi and Michael Hix, The New Gallery
- 5-7:30 p.m. - Clarksville's First Thursday Art Walk.

March 19:

- 5:00 p.m. - Nowruz Celebration. Musical performance by Reza Filsoofi and Raheleh Filsoofi with special guests Charlie Gilbert and Carlos Duran. The New Gallery.

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