

ROUND TABLE

Women Reclaiming Their Voices for Life and Freedom: Music and the 2022 Uprising in Iran

Nahid Siamdoust

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One of the most prominent features of Iran's 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom uprising has been the diverse profusion of songs created in its wake. Music has played an important role in Iran's social and political movements at least since the Constitutional Revolution when the poet and musical bard Abolqasem Aref Qazvini (d. 1934) effectively transformed the musical concert into a political congregation.¹ Since then, musicians have given rhythm and rhyme to contentious movements all through modern Iranian history, most prominently during the 1979 revolution and again for the 2009 Green Uprising. Considering the important role of music in Iran's political movements, scholarship on music remains surprisingly marginal in Iranian studies.²

Some of the most memorable songs of this protest repertoire, such as Aref Qazvini's "Az Khun-e Javānān" (From the blood of youth), hail from the early twentieth century but were equally potent in their 1979 and 2009 circulations, as they are once again today. It is through music that we can see clearly the century-long arc of the struggle for freedom that Iranians have been waging. And yet, even in light of this illustrious musical heritage, the current period marks a watershed moment of music-making both in volume and form. This flourishing of music is no doubt due to the revolutionary character of this movement and the spirited sentiments arising from it. In addition, the global nature of this moment—given the Iranian diaspora, a "collective of people separated by geography but very much together in feelings, in concerns and in dreams"—has further contributed to the prolific production of music.³

Considering the breadth of the subject matter and the shortness of space here, I will only be able to attend to the two most prominent features of this powerful musical oeuvre, namely how women have claimed their voices through music and the rhetorical strategies musicians have employed to demarcate the state as the enemy of life and the people.⁴

¹ See Amir-Ashraf Aryanpur, *Musiqi-ye Irān az Enqelāb-e Mashrutiyat tā Enqelāb-e Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi-ye Irān* (Tehran: Farhangestān-e Honar, 1393 [2014–15]); Masoud Kuestāni-Nejād, *Musiqi dar 'Asr-e Mashruteh* (Tehran: Mehrnāmag, 1384 [2005–6]); and Nahid Siamdoust, *Soundtrack of the Revolution: The Politics of Music in Iran* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).

² Although there is more scholarship on music in Persian, the focus tends to be musicological rather than sociological or political. This tendency is reflected in English-language scholarship, although a younger generation of scholars is increasingly giving import to the sociopolitical dimensions of music. See, for example, the forthcoming volume, *Music and Society in Modern Iran*, ed. Nahid Siamdoust and Houchang Chehabi (Cambridge, MA: Ilex, 2023).

³ Asef Bayat, "A New Iran Has Been Born: A Global Iran," *New Lines Magazine*, October 26, 2022, <https://newlinesmag.com/argument/a-new-iran-has-been-born-a-global-iran>.

⁴ For an early piece on the significance of women singers, see Houchang Chehabi's "Voices Unveiled: Women Singers in Iran," in *Iran and Beyond: Essays in Middle Eastern History in Honor of Nikki R. Keddie*, ed. Rudi Matthee

Perhaps the most outstanding feature of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement's musical expression has been its female character; by this, I mean the proliferation of women's voices claiming musical and rhetorical spaces. For anyone who has been engaged in Iranian social media over recent years, this avalanche of women's voices will not have come as a surprise. Perhaps one could have seen this movement coming. After all, women's voices—literally and figuratively—were on the rise.

Although the Islamic Republic has shown flexibility in its music policy over the decades, departing from Ayatollah Khomeini's outright ban on music soon after the revolution and easing restrictions on musical tempo and nearly all musical genres, it has maintained its archaic ban on solo female vocals.⁵ Regardless, Iranian girls and women have shown tenacity and continued to train their voices despite the fact that there were no opportunities for them to perform publicly. The Islamic Republic never gave them that chance, but women created that space for themselves online.⁶ Over the last decade we have seen a wide range of women vocalists present their work on social media, from highly trained singers of Persian classical music to talented amateur vocalists singing to their hearts' desire.⁷ The master vocalist Maliheh Moradi (b. 1984), a student of Ostad Mohammad Reza Shajarian (d. 2020), released a short clip soon after the uprising began, singing Shajarian's famous 1979 revolutionary anthem "Shabnavard" (Night traveler), altering the lyrics to declare the adolescent sister's rightful place in the struggle:

*It's night and the homeland's visage is dark
Sitting in darkness is a sin
Give me my gun so I can get going
Because every lover is on the move
...*

*The sister is an adolescent
The sister is drowning in blood
The brother's forelock is fireworks⁸*

In doing so, Moradi was not just claiming her voice and the voices of adolescent girls in the revolution, she was also engaging an iterative citation to one of the modern era's greatest successful revolutions, opening vistas onto the possibility of victory.⁹

One of the most popular songs of the uprising, perhaps only second to Shervin Hajipour's "Barāye" (For), has been "Sorud-e Āzādi" (The freedom anthem) also known as "Barpākhiz barā-ye zan, zendegi, āzādi" (Rise for Woman, Life, Freedom), created by an anonymous group of students at Tehran's University of Art.¹⁰ It is a rendition of the Chilean protest

and Beth Baron (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2000). There are several other musical and rhetorical features to highlight and discuss, which I will tend to in a longer piece elsewhere.

⁵ For a discussion of this ban and the gradual easing of some restrictions, see Siamdoust, *Soundtrack*.

⁶ See Parmis Mozafari, "Carving a Space for Female Solo Singing in Post-Revolution Iran," in *Resistance in Contemporary Middle Eastern Cultures*, ed. Karima Laachir and Saeed Talajooy (London: Routledge, 2013); and the documentary by Ayat Najafi et al., *No Land's Song*, Torero Film, 2014.

⁷ Among the actual—versus virtual—events that have showcased some of these voices are the "Let Her Sing" concert series of Diaspora Arts Connection in California, held every year since 2017, and the "Female Voice of Iran" concert series at the Zeitgenössische Oper in Berlin in 2018.

⁸ All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

⁹ See Maliheh Moradi's feminist turn on Shajarian's "Shabnavard": Nahid Siamdoust (@nahid8), "Beautiful rendition of Ostad Shajarian's 'Shabnavard' by virtuosa singer @MalihehMoradi first sung for Iran's 1979 revolution," Twitter, October 3, 2022, https://twitter.com/nahid8/status/1577031719244660737?s=42&t=_EJoZl2U5sOYfAffJG1w. On remixing the past, see Shervin Malekzadeh, "Remastering the Past for the Present in Iran," *American Prospect*, January 4, 2023, <https://prospect.org/world/2023-01-04-remastering-past-for-present-iran-revolution>.

¹⁰ For "Sorud-e Āzādi" by music students at Tehran University of Art, released on October 29, 2022, see "Freedom Anthem Live performance (College of Music, University of Art)," YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3vsV3GoL1Uw>.

song “El Pueblo Unido” (A united people) by the folk music group Quilapayún, with the lyrics adapted to Iran’s feminist uprising and sung with a resolute female voice. This song has been translated into different languages and sung around the world to protest dictatorships, including during Iran’s 1979 revolution, with choral vocals that then were entirely male. Women may have been strong participants in the 1979 revolution, but their voices were missing in most of the revolutionary music. The 2022 rendition of “Barpākhiz,” on the other hand, is a prime example of how women have finally reclaimed their voices during the Woman, Life, Freedom movement. With a defiant tone, the majority female choir—although backed and supported by male voices, not unlike the uprising itself—transforms the lyrics to speak to this revolutionary moment:

*Rise! For Woman, Life, Freedom
In the name of woman, in the name of life
Rip the chains of servitude
Our dark night will become dawn
All the whips will turn to axes
So that our blossoms turn into voices
Me, You, and Others become Us again*

This was the first of a series of videos that have now been produced by anonymous student choirs with a predominantly female voice. There are common musical and visual elements that mark these videos as constituting a sort of genre. The blurry videos showcase unrecognizable bodies representing the body politic of Iran, led by female voices, all dressed in black, with close-ups of shoes and boots stomping rhythmically to the song. They call forth the antidictatorial, leftist music of the 1970s, with a marchlike rhythm and collective vocals. If leading up to the 1979 revolution the underground music group Chavosh, led by Hushang Ebtehaj (d. 2022) and Mohammad Reza Lotfi (d. 2014) and voiced by Mohammad Reza Shajarian and Shahram Nazeri (b. 1950), revolutionized traditional Iranian music to rise to the occasion of the people’s uprising, it is now these anonymous students who offer a musical body that is both masterful and infused with urgency and moral rectitude.¹¹

Another notable female-voiced song of this uprising has been the Bolouri sisters’ version of the Italian antifascist song “Bella Ciao,” another protest song that is known globally.¹² Due to its familiarity and explicit revolutionary nature, the song was instantly embraced by Iranians as well as others who sought to express international solidarity with the movement. Even before the women of Iran rose up, the two sisters Samin and Behin had gained a following by taking well-known songs, rewriting them in Persian and singing them bivocally. They had sung it with tight headscarves at first, but a few months before the 2022 uprising sang it with their heads uncovered, sampling the latter part of their initial track with greater revolutionary affect in both the musical composition as well as diction:¹³

¹¹ Two other outstanding productions are the songs “Irān gharq-e enqelāb ast” (Iran is drowning in revolution), YouTube video, accessed February 24, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hUtW7sb8pcM>; and “Sogand beh khun-e hamrāhānam” (Oath to the blood of my companions), “Revolutionary Song of Iranian Students for the Freedom of Iran,” YouTube video, accessed February 24, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RIAbVO32408>.

¹² The song’s origin dates to the late nineteenth century, when paddy fieldworkers known as the “mondina women” sang it to protest harsh working conditions in northern Italy. The song has become much better known since World War II, when the Italian partisans reframed it as an antifascist song.

¹³ Behin and Samin Bolouri, “Bella Ciao,” version 1, released March 16, 2021, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MhMJZ1B6-E&list=OLAK5uy_kUg4JslLencqIveMhkX0V26FCq7T6UMM; [the sisters seem to have removed all videos in which they wore headscarves]. Behin and Samin Bolouri, “Bella Ciao,” version 2, released June 26, 2022, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wBMcUvWffMk>.

*The soil of this wheat is on the streets
The cluster of our anger is thirsty for rain
...*

*A new world, this is to a new beginning
The window is open all the way to the dream
...*

*Bella ciao, bella ciao
Bella ciao, ciao, ciao
We will stir from sleep one moonlit night
We will be awake until tomorrow
In the end, this chain, this world-swallowing oppression
Will be broken by our own hands.*

As the Woman, Life, Freedom movement ignited, this track was instantly adopted and went viral. What is of note is that the virtual environment facilitated this revolutionary presentation of the song (including the casting off of headscarves) months before the actual uprising.¹⁴

There are at least three other outstanding pieces that mark the female voice of this uprising that need to be mentioned here. They speak to the diversity of musical productions that sprouted for the movement. One of them is the song “Dobāreh” (Again), the collaboration between the pop diva Googoosh (b. 1950) and an intergenerational cast of some of Iran’s best-known female performers, including Leila Forouhar (b. 1959), Darya Dadvar (b. 1971), Shohreh Aghdashloo (b. 1952), Shahrzad Sepanlou (b. 1974), and Sogand (b. 1987). Another is a short track that went viral on social media in early October, with a drumbeat native to the Afro-Iranian music of the South and piercing vocals:

*You’ve spilled blood, you’ve spilled blood
I won’t let it go anymore
You are not the same people as me or us
My homeland has become bloody
My hair like fire to your mantle
My voice like a dagger
Has struck your oppression
Woman, Life, Freedom
The whole world knows it now
Woman, Life, Freedom
The whole world knows it now¹⁵*

Soon after, the accomplished young musician Mahya Hamedī (b. 1999) performed an unplugged version of the same track, preceded by a well-known song from the 1920s titled “Daughters of Cyrus” that one hundred years ago had already called on Iran’s women to rise up for revolution.¹⁶ The song’s makers remained anonymous then due to the sensitivity of

¹⁴ This revision of the video and its popularity led some observers to assume that the sisters had taken off their headscarves in support of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, when in fact they had preceded it. See for example the Middle East Media Research Institute’s description on their video posting of 16 Nov 2022, “Iranian Sisters’ Persian Version of ‘Bella Ciao’ Gains Popularity with Backdrop of Protests in Iran,” YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q6pGa44oCEw>.

¹⁵ See Reza Shokrollahi’s Twitter account: (@khabgard), Twitter, October 4, 2022, https://twitter.com/khabgard/status/1577246475829923840?s=46&t=jH_MNp38_PfvXuD2nw5Vfw.

¹⁶ See “Mahya Hamedī: Berkeley Two Track, Transformation,” October 26, 2022, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=oofaWtxGjI0.ss>

the subject matter, but it is believed that the feminist icon Qamar ol-Moluk Vaziri (d. 1959) sang it for the first time. In singing these two historically and musically divergent yet ideologically congruent, feminist pieces, Hamed, too, points to the more than century-long women's struggle for liberation in Iran.

A third piece is a haunting rendition of the anthem of the Islamic Republic in which two anonymous young women who look like sisters rework the lyrics to hail Iran's "heroic girls," calling for an Iran for "man, woman, life, freedom," and eliminating Islamic signifiers from the piece. It's a short but mighty version wherein the two women rewrite and coopt the anthem of the sitting state, robbing it of its legitimacy.¹⁷

The second significant feature of the musical output is the prominent theme found in many songs of marking the Islamic Republic as an enemy of the people. Although this is similar to protest music in comparable contexts, such as the Tunisian or Egyptian revolutions, the discursive delegitimation is culturally specific. As many have observed, this uprising differs from previous periods of contention in that protestors are no longer demanding reforms but a wholesale dissolution of the regime. Given this political framework, different rhetorical strategies are employed to "other" the state, with two interlinked tropes that portray the Islamic Republic as inherently opposed to life itself as well as Persian culture.¹⁸ From these interlinked tropes a simile arises in which the Islamic Republic, and by extension even the religion of Islam (as defined by the state), are portrayed as the enemy of life and Iranian people. This is reflected in other ways by the fact that there are—to my knowledge—no Islamic signifiers in any of the songs produced for this movement.

As the movement's protest anthem, Shervin Hajipour's "Barāye," so delicately demonstrates, at the core this is an uprising for life. And the qualities of this life—full of joy, song, dance, and flowers—are often conjured as rooted in Persian culture and inherently inimical to the grim, joyless life imposed by the Islamic Republic. This discursive trope is prominent across the songs. "Barāye" starts with "For dancing in the streets," and another of Hajipour's songs, titled "Ba'd-e Mā" (After us), often soundtracking video collages of the young martyrs of the protests, proffers "a house full of dance, flowers, and joy" after the fight is over.¹⁹

It is not hard to argue that "Barāye" is the single most important cultural artifact of this movement. Given that Hajipour composed the lyrics for "Barāye" entirely from tweets to a hashtag eliciting users to spell out what this is all "for," the song was from the start perceived to embody a sort of authentic representation of the things Iranians long for.²⁰ It has now been sung all over Iran, and the world, in many different iterations and languages. The lyrics present a demand for life that is expressed on many levels, whether for Vali Asr Street's weary trees, the cheetah Piruz who's at risk of extinction, the innocent dogs that are banned, or tragically, the people killed when the Revolutionary Guard shot down the Ukrainian airliner in January 2020.

Another song that foregrounds the cruel and joyless character of the reigning regime is the one-minute piece by Saba Zamani, a composition consisting solely of vocals and a goblet drum. Dressed all in black, Zamani sings with visible and audible anger:

¹⁷ See Golshifteh Farahani, Instagram video, accessed February 24, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cn-CzU5sRjQ/?hl=en>.

¹⁸ What constitutes Persian culture is a matter of debate and contention, but in the context of this discussion it is broadly defined as the non-Islamic components of Iranian culture.

¹⁹ See Shervin Hajipour, "Ba'd-e Mā," released July 29, 2022, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LIH_D-o3FhM.

²⁰ See my piece "Why Is Iran's Regime So Afraid of This Song?" *Foreign Policy*, October 26, 2022, <https://foreign-policy.com/2022/10/26/ā-music-threatens-iran-regime>. See also Omid Khazani and Sarah Parvini, "How 'Baraye,' a Song about Iran's Protests, Became an Anthem for Women, Freedom and an Ordinary Life," *Los Angeles Times*, October 12, 2022, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2022-10-12/la-fg-how-baraye-a-song-about-irans-protests-became-an-anthem>.

*I hate your religion
 Curse your creed
 I hate the callus on your forehead [a sign of religiosity and prayer]
 And the heaviness of your hearts
 The homeland has lost its faith
 The people have become sorrowful
 A whole world has lost its trust
 Because of your disgraceful rule²¹*

The othering of the state as a foreign force is often articulated through the characterization of the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei as the Zahhak of our times. As is well known, Zahhak appears in Ferdowsi's mythological epic of the *Shahnameh* as the bloodsucking evil king, understood to be of foreign (Arab) origin. In contrast, the protest's martyrs are compared to the heroes of the *Shahnameh*. For example, Kaveh the blacksmith who leads a national uprising against the evil Zahhak is often cited, as is Arash the Archer, who in a modern telling of the legend liberates his country from foreign domination.²² In Masood's "Rastākhiz," for example, he sings:

*O the misery and lament this black-wearing tribe has brought us
 This tribe that worships strangers and wears their banner
 I am Arash and I will take this land from the foreigners²³
 And I'm also the blacksmith Kaveh full of anger and courage²⁴*

Although these tropes trade in Persian-centric, perhaps ethnonational attitudes, the overall references to Iran's various minorities and calls for national unity seem to counter that sentiment. Although scholars have illuminated the ways in which modern Iranian nationalism was conceived as one tied to a pre-Islamic "golden age" with some xenophobic, specifically anti-Arab, tendencies, one hopes that these allusions to Zahhak and other figures serve more as references to commonly known parables and moral points of reference, given the larger ethnoninclusive nature of today's protests.²⁵ Aside from the minority-affirming chants that we have seen in the protests, there are also numerous references to the great nation of Iran as a patchwork of different ethnicities and cultures. In the rapper Toomaj Salehi's track "Meydun-e Jang-e" (It's a battlefield), for example, he rhymes:

*Rebels is an understatement, we have a revolutionary bent
 We are the unity of rivers, we are the sea
 Arab, Assyrian, Armenian, Turkoman, Mazandarani
 Sistani, Baluchi, Taleshi, Tat, Azari
 Kurd, Gilaki, Lor, Persian and Qashqayi²⁶*

Altogether, these discursive threads position Iran's non-Islamic Persian heritage (however conceived) as one that champions a free, brave, and joyous life and is engaged in an epic battle against a foreign oppressor who propagates death.

²¹ Saba Zameni, "Bizaram az din-e shomā, nefrin be āyin-e shomā," YouTube video, accessed February 24, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c5GijSvt3XQ>.

²² See Siavash Kasra'i's poem "Arāsh-e Kamāngir" in Siyāvash Kasrā'i, *Beh sorkhi-ye ātash, beh ṭa'm-i-ye dud: majmu'eh-ye she'r* (Tehran: Ketāb-e Nāder, 2001).

²³ "Foreigners" implies the rulers of the Islamic Republic.

²⁴ Masood, "Rastākhiz," released November 4, 2022, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRW2PVrNqbl>.

²⁵ See Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism: Race and the Politics of Dislocation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); and Afshin Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran: Culture, Power, and the State, 1870-1940* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2008).

²⁶ Toomaj Salehi, "Meydun-e Jang-e," released October 6, 2022, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWAGZ2EqNLM>.

In its important role throughout modern Iranian history, most recently demonstrated in the 2022 uprising, Iranian music calls on researchers from a wide spectrum of disciplinary backgrounds to listen, and examine the insights it can offer into humanities and social science inquiries far beyond ethnomusicology. Although there has been a cultural turn in Middle Eastern studies over the last decade or more in which scholars have given greater import to cultural production and media studies, the examination of music as a significant political and social vector has lagged in Iranian studies. Would we have been better prepared for this moment had we had closer examinations of women's voluminous musical works in unofficial and online spaces over the last decade or so? Indeed, what has been the role of music on social media in offering a more democratic, alternative public space for Iranians to converse and discuss vital matters?²⁷ Can we understand the popularity of "Barāye" as being rooted not just in its content, but also in the democratic process through which the content was assembled, namely the threading of hashtag tweets? What do we learn about commonalities in youth culture among Iran's many ethnicities when we examine Rap-e Farsi, which has provided a musical home for different Iranian languages and dialects? How has the state-permitted pop music community responded to the protests, and what does that reveal about state-artist relations in Iran? Given that a lot of the music has been produced by Iranians living outside the country, how do we reconsider the role of the Iranian diaspora in Iranian publics and politics?²⁸ Importantly, as research inside Iran becomes increasingly more difficult for researchers abroad, how do we create greater networks of collaboration to include the wealth of insight from scholars in Iran?

As is readily evident even from this brief listing, scholars spanning gender, media, ethnic, and diaspora studies across area studies, anthropology, sociology, political science, comparative literature, and other fields can find much material to work with.²⁹ What I hope is that this piece shows in a small way that it is time for music to take on a more important space in Iranian studies, one that is commensurate with its role in social and political relations among Iranians.

²⁷ See, for example, Laudan Nooshin, "'Our Angel of Salvation': Toward an Understanding of Iranian Cyberspace as an Alternative Sphere of Musical Sociality," *Ethnomusicology* 62, no. 3 (2018): 341–74.

²⁸ See, for example, Farzaneh Hemmasi, *Tehrangenes Dreaming: Intimacy and Imagination in Southern California's Iranian Pop Music*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

²⁹ These and other pertinent topics are being explored by a newer generation of researchers; some of that work will soon be published in an interdisciplinary volume edited by Siamdoust and Chehabi (*Music and Society in Modern Iran*, Ilex, 2023).