

Reconstructing Central Asian Imaginaries: Wedding Music in Iranian Migrant Communities¹

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Sugar, honey, mirrors and candles are significant features of wedding ceremonies in the Persianate cultural world (which encompasses much of the ethnically diverse states of Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan, their neighbours in Central and South Asia, and the Persian-speaking diaspora in North America, Europe and Australasia). Sugar and honey represent the desire for sweetness in married life, while the mirror and candles symbolise light, which is traditionally linked with knowledge, love, fate and fire. Rituals involving the symbols of sweetness and light are maintained in the wedding ceremonies of twenty-first-century migrants from Central Asia to Australia. ‘Sweetness and light’ also characterise the music performed at such weddings. Alongside the rituals, this dance music with Persian-language lyrics bears traces of Central Asian histories and assists in the reconstruction of old and new dreams and hopes. However, the most popular form of music performed at Persian-Australian weddings arrives here via Los Angeles, arguably the Persianate world’s current pop cultural capital. This so-called *losanjelesi* element – bringing sounds as sweet as crystallised sugar and as light as the wedding candle’s flame – complicates the reconstruction of Persian-Australian communities’ cultural memories. As it combines the ‘old’ and ‘new’ arts of Persian lyricism and pop formulae, the music provides an aural backdrop to the ceremony of transition – of separation (from aspects of the ‘parental’ culture) and union – that is the traditional wedding. This paper examines the layers of meaning around Persian-Australian wedding music, especially the music’s role in migrant communities’ reconstructions of Central Asian imaginaries.

The paper begins with a little background on Iran and Iranian migration to Australia. I will then turn to Iranian wedding practices and address some of the ways wedding music changed during the twentieth century – in Iran, with the political and social changes there, and in the Iranian diaspora. An important aspect of these changes in the Iranian context is the shifting status of various musical styles and the status of the musicians who perform them.

Iran was known in English as Persia until 1935, when Reza Shah Pahlavi requested that the international community use the name Iran. It is now regarded internationally as part of both the Middle East and Central Asia. Iran shares its eastern border with Afghanistan and Pakistan, its western border with Iraq and Turkey, and its northern border with Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, formerly the Soviet Union. 2 500 years ago, the Persian Empire extended from Egypt to India. The Empire's first dynasty (the Achaemenid) originated in Fars, the central southern province of Iran. In the standard language spoken in Iran, the Persian language is called 'Farsi', referring to that province. However, Persian is spoken across a much broader area. Australia's diverse Persian-speaking communities consist predominantly of migrants from all parts of Iran, from Afghanistan and from Tajikistan in the former Soviet Union.

Migration from Iran to Australia was minimal for most of the twentieth century, as the Immigration Restriction Act was in force from 1901 to 1973. This Act implemented the 'White Australia Policy' and effectively excluded potential immigrants whose ancestry was not wholly European. Relatively small numbers of refugees from Afghanistan and Iran have been accepted in Australia since the wars of the late twentieth century. While the current Australian government remains reluctant to increase its granting of humanitarian visas to Central Asians, it has accepted limited numbers of skilled migrants from the region and a considerable proportion of these has come from Iran. In the thirty years from July 1975 to June 2005, the number of Iranian-born migrants to settle officially in Australia was just under 20 000.² Very few of these migrants work primarily as professional musicians. Most commercially successful musicians who left Iran after the 1979 Islamic revolution moved to Los Angeles, home to the largest Iranian community outside Iran, estimated at 600 000. The majority of migrants to Australia have faced the demands of establishing financially and socially secure lives in the new, small communities there, and have not been in a position to consider a potentially insecure career in music.

Secular Persian music has three general forms: [1] classical music, as developed in the courts and aristocratic circles over the centuries of dynastic rule, [2] regional or folk music, as developed among Iran's diverse ethnic groups and clans, and [3] urban popular or light music, as performed at community events, especially weddings. Each of these genres has traditionally been linked with the singing of poetry. In medieval times, especially, music was

influenced by the prominence of poets, many of whom followed mystical sects of Islam, or Sufism. While Sufism itself is no longer practised widely in Iran or the diaspora, the effects of a Sufi-influenced heritage are evident in Persian music. One effect is the prominence of symbolism and metaphor in texts and rituals.³

Weddings are traditionally central events in the lives of Iranians and in Persian-speaking communities. As well as constituting the most significant turning point in the lives of the bride and groom, the wedding is an opportunity for the rest of the community to ‘network’, matchmake, plan future weddings and show off the success of previous ones. The theme of the wedding ceremony – the transition from separation to unity – is also a central theme of Sufi poetry. Razia Sultanova suggests that the structure of the wedding ceremony in Central Asia reflects that of a Sufi ritual. She explains:

As in a Sufi rite, *zikr* [the reciting of God’s name] is a mystical way for a person to unify with God, so the structure and the stations or stages of the wedding develop as a process of the unifying of two separate parts into one, of two separate lives merged into another new life. As the culmination of Sufi *zikr* is *sama’* or ecstasy, when all participants fall into trance, in the case of the wedding, the same role belongs to the *bazm* [the feasting and final dancing stage of the reception], which is the culmination of the wedding.⁴

While Iranian-Australian wedding receptions do not usually culminate in ecstatic trance, the extended communal celebrations and music-making do combine to make weddings perhaps the most memorable events in community calendars. While Sufi rites serve to unify the individual with the divine, the wedding serves not only to unite the bride and groom and their families, but also disparate members of migrant communities. People of all generations and sometimes of various religious beliefs and different social classes join each other on the wedding dance floor in ways they might not do elsewhere.⁵

Iranian communities are predominantly Islamic, but most middle-class and diasporic Iranians are relatively secular. Many are proud of Iran’s pre-Islamic heritage, dominated by Zoroastrian practices, which is imagined as culturally and spiritually rich. As Laudan Nooshin points out:

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 [when much music was effectively banned] 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.⁶

Many symbolic aspects of the wedding ceremony, in Iran and in Australia's Iranian communities, are believed to have been maintained or adapted from pre-Islamic practices. An important part of the initial ceremony is a cloth, often a hand-embroidered heirloom, laid in front of the bride and groom and set with symbolic items. The largest item is a mirror in an ornamental frame, positioned so that when the bride sits next to the groom, the couple's faces are reflected. Traditionally, this moment would be the first time the two sat together and their reflection would be the first image of them together. (Today, in Iran and the diaspora, this is seldom the case.) To enhance the light around this image, two candles are lit on either side of the mirror. The mirror symbolises spiritual connections, as well as qualities such as honesty. The flame, and light more generally, represent purification, wisdom, love and fate. Also on the cloth is a large range of foodstuffs, each item bringing good to the marriage or warding off evil. Among these items are two cone-shaped loaves of crystallised sugar, wrapped in silk or lace. During the formal ceremony, a happily married woman rubs these loaves together above the couple's heads, symbolically raining sweetness on the new married life. Also representing sweetness is a container of honey. After the pronouncement of marriage, the bride and groom each dip a finger into the container and place some honey in each other's mouth. This ceremony is still practised at most weddings in Australia's Iranian communities.

Modern Iranian life has accommodated a range of traditions, with little change, over many centuries. Some aspects of the wedding's musical traditions have also survived a long time. The traditional wedding song, *Mobarak Bad* or 'Congratulations', is still played to welcome the bride and groom to their ceremony. One version of *Mobarak Bad* reads:

What a night! Tonight is the night of fulfilled desire
 Wherever you go there are candles and light (Congratulations!)
 This courtyard and that courtyard [referring to the family homes of the bride and groom]
 are spread with sweets
 Come with me and leave this area
 You hold my hand and I'll hold your skirt
 She is my spouse; don't touch her
 The alley is narrow; the bride is beautiful (Congratulations!)
 Look at the beautiful bride; the groom king is happy
 The bride is emerging after her bath; let's spend 100 000 lira
 The flower is emerging from the shower; make shade to protect the bride and groom
 The groom is so kind and good; he has a sense of humour (Congratulations!).

The original Persian text features heavy use of rhyme. Like *Mobarak Bad*, other popular wedding songs continue to have as their major theme the beauty of the bride. This theme represents not only a compliment to the bride herself, but also a boast on the part of her family and a compliment to the groom's family on its good taste. Another song includes the lines 'Our daughter is the most beautiful girl / Not even the Shah has such a daughter'.⁷ The hyperbole of such lyrics provokes pleasure and laughter, as perhaps illustrated by the line on the groom's sense of humour in *Mobarak Bad*. Today's weddings still conclude with hours of communal dancing. However, *Mobarak Bad* as it is usually performed today would be unrecognisable to those who composed it centuries ago, and the dance music played at weddings has also changed significantly.

The music typically played at an Iranian wedding today is a mixture of the requisite Persian pop from Los Angeles, a little Western pop (usually for the 'slow dance'), perhaps some pre-revolutionary Tehran pop on vinyl and often some regional or folk music played live. Pop music produced by members of the Los Angeles Iranian community is by far the most popular style for Iranian weddings in both Australia and Iran (where it is officially banned, but ubiquitous). In Iran there is great diversity in musical practice from region to region. As migrants to Australia come from all regions, the wedding music they might have known in Iran in the past will vary from person to person.⁸ However, some practices are shared throughout the country. For example, the female wedding guests would traditionally meet at the bride's home and walk together to the ceremony and reception, playing music as they went. Dancing and therefore rhythm were of prime importance, as they are at today's Iranian weddings. While drum machines mark rhythm in most Los Angeles Persian pop, the frame drum (*ghaval*, *dayereh* or *daf*) and hand clapping are crucial for traditional women's music, as are the women's voices.

The greatest changes in popular music in Iran, which have been transferred to diasporic communities, occurred in the mid to late twentieth century, firstly with the last Shah's attempts at rapid Westernisation and then, after the revolution, the government's attempts to reverse the process of Westernisation.⁹ Jean During suggests that the tools of musical transformation, which all carry 'symbols of national identity', are: 'a song's tune and its words; rhythm and intervals; the question of language; the reconstruction of musical instruments; the transformation of the image of the performer; and forms of ensemble and group performance, following social and political change'.¹⁰ Of these, only language may be seen as unchanged in the Iranian-Australian context, in that the songs sung or played at weddings there are generally in Persian (although the ways Australian and Los Angeles-based songwriters use the Persian language sometimes differ from the ways it is currently used in Iran). Other aspects mentioned by During, which have changed, did not undergo

transformation in Australia. Those changes – in tunes, the nature of lyrics, rhythm, instruments, the performer’s image and group formations – occurred initially in Iran and most were consolidated in Los Angeles in the last twenty-five years.

Today, while Iranian-Australian wedding musicians often perform songs drawn from the ethnic traditions that are significant to the celebrating families, these will usually be adapted to the Los Angeles pop style of the professional performers. This style typically involves two people, usually male. The front person is the singer, who also banter with the guests. The other musician typically plays electronic keyboards and drum machine. Among this style’s influences are Persian melodic structures with Arab-derived flourishes and 1970s Western disco. In the words of one Iranian-Australian musician, who probably speaks for the majority, the Los Angeles style is the ‘hottest’ musical form and anything more traditional than it is ‘boring’. However, there are also prejudices against the Los Angeles style. Iranian-Australian musicians who avoid it at all costs are equally proud of what they do and of their distance from the Los Angeles-style musicians. When I told an Iranian-born violinist in Melbourne that I had heard that he played at weddings and I was interested in that, he was offended and said he never played at weddings. Later, he told me that he played on request for particular friends, implying that those friends were people of taste. His style draws on European traditions, as well as Persian classical music. The divergent musical practices and attitudes of these two musicians – the pop singer who looks to the USA and the violinist who looks to Europe – reflect Iran’s history and the nature of its diaspora.

The largest Iranian migrant communities are in the USA and Europe. To generalise, businesspeople and royalists tended to flee to the United States in the 1980s, while some leftists and intellectuals tended to prefer Europe. Australia did not become fashionable as a destination until the 1990s. That was relatively short-lived and not helped by aspects of the immigration system there. Australia’s position in the world, in some ways distant from the USA and Europe, but sociopolitically and culturally situated between the two, contributes to the migrants’ continued reference to those two powers that have influenced Iran’s history and culture over the last century. Some Iranian migrants see Australia as culturally inferior to Europe, if their tastes lie in that direction, or as less successful and exciting than the USA, if they aspire to the economic success of the Los Angeles community, which they see reflected in its musical style.

The prejudices and tastes in musical style that are now evident in the diaspora are very similar to those observed in pre-revolutionary Iran. In 1978, the revolution was already brewing, but many Iranians dancing in nightclubs and Western researchers apparently took little notice of the revolutionary movement. That year, musicologist Bruno Nettl identified ‘mainstream popular’ as the central and most widespread musical style in Iran.¹¹ A version of this is still

the most popular style for weddings and parties, in Iran and ‘Iranian’ Australia. Nettl notes the influences of Western and non-Western classical music, regional (or ‘folk and tribal musics’, as he puts it), Western and non-Western popular and, more distantly, of religious music on the ‘mainstream popular’ style. In Iran, the status and sociopolitical associations of the various styles identified by Nettl have shifted since 1978, but in Los Angeles, along with many of the 1970s pop stars themselves, they have largely been preserved.

While some Iranian diasporic musicians, such as the pop singer and the violinist I mentioned, may emphasise their links with Los Angeles or Europe, others prefer to stress the Persian or Central Asian heritage that informs those musical elements that are arguably most significant – the lyrics and the melodic structures. It is these aspects of the dance music played at Iranian-Australian weddings that enable an indulgence in the particular combination of simultaneous extravagant hyperbole and self-deprecating humour, of metaphorically-linked spiritual, material and physical unions, and a mixture of the grand and the everyday, that is claimed by many as ‘Persian’. The Los Angeles style foregrounds a form of Persian lyricism (albeit one that many see as diminished or ‘dumbed-down’) and an arguably ‘Western’ pop smoothness. These factors, combined with its suitability for dancing, make this style the ideal choice for weddings at which migrant families wish to assert certain sociopolitical and cultural affiliations and to set the marrying couple’s new life off to an auspicious start. The Los Angeles style is seen primarily as ‘Persian’ music, while its upbeat smoothness suggests notions of modernity and social ‘success’, as represented by some versions of ‘the Western lifestyle’. Like the symbols of goodness, of sweetness and light, laid on the wedding cloth, this sweet light music serves to send the marrying couple off to an anticipated life of ‘success’, comfort and prestige.

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² (19 728) Research and Statistics Section, Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA), Australian Government.

³ For a useful analysis of the roles of religious poetry in the musical traditions of Khorasan, see Stephen Blum, ‘Changing Roles of Performers in Meshhed and Bojnurd, Iran’ in Bruno Nettl, ed, *Eight Urban Musical Cultures*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978: 19-95.

⁴ Razia Sultanova, ‘Music and Identity in Central Asia: Introduction’ *Ethnomusicology Forum* 14.2 November 2005: 141.

⁵ This is, of course, a generalisation. Anecdotally, I have also heard of religious and cultural differences within Iranian families resulting in the opposite of unity, to the extent that two separate wedding ceremonies are held, to accommodate those differences.

⁶ Laudan Nooshin, ‘Subversion and Countersubversion: Power, Control, and Meaning in the New Iranian Pop Music’ in Annie J Randall, ed, *Music, Power, and Politics*, New York: Routledge, 2005: 236.

⁷ Amin Dallaali, personal communication, 2006.

⁸ For brief footage of live music and dancing at a rural Iranian wedding in the early 1960s, see Forough Farrokhzad's film 'The House is Black' (Facets, 2005). This was filmed in 1962 in a community of people with leprosy, in the Iranian province of Azerbaijan.

⁹ Western and other external influences on Iranian music began long before the mid-twentieth century, but the rate of change accelerated at this time.

¹⁰ Sultanova, 'Music and Identity in Central Asia: Introduction': 134, referring to Jean During, 'Power, Authority and Music in the Cultures of Inner Asia' *Ethnomusicology Forum* 14.2: 143-64.

¹¹ Bruno Nettl, *Fig. 1. Interrelationships of musical styles in Iran*, 'Persian Classical Music in Tehran: The Processes of Change' in Nettl, ed, *Eight Urban Musical Cultures*: 149.