

Tiré à part

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Dire les autres

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From Ghorband to Oakland

A Taymuree musical odyssey

To place the current contribution in perspective, a brief note on the study of the musics of the peoples of Afghanistan might be helpful. This was not begun seriously until 1966, when Hiromi Lorraine Sakata arrived from the United States. She was followed by a small but dedicated group of researchers, mostly American but also German and French, who collectively shaped a decade of intensive fieldwork and subsequent publications. The calamity that overtook Afghanistan made further study *in situ* impossible. Attention shifted to some extent to music among refugees in Pakistan, but the conditions there have been favorable neither for music nor for research. Another avenue is the study of the musical life of emigrant Afghans who have resettled in Europe and the United States, an approach only recently begun. The present article is a cameo of a single emigrant family who are not themselves musicians. The subject who speaks below is a non-musician I have known for a very long time who is unusually articulate about the importance of music in his life and his culture. In talking to him about his life, I found that several social and cultural domains overlapped in his thinking about the situation of his generation and peer group. It struck me in preparing a small tribute to Pierre Centlivres that I learned a great deal from him about intense local ethnography and the importance of overlapping cultural categories.

During my fieldwork days in Afghanistan (1967-1972), the Taymuree family provided invaluable information, hospitality and technical assistance in the crucial automotive area. Eventually, the entire extended family moved to the Oakland, California area, making a successful transition to American life through the same automotive know-how. Today, they own a large-scale auto repair complex in which three brothers and some old colleagues from Afghanistan work jointly¹. Talking to them now and under-

¹ GS Taymuree was honored in 1997 as recipient of the Global Award of the San Francisco Bay Area International Institute as outstanding immigrant businessman of the year.

My colleagues and I contributed to this a little bit. In the case of Madadi [later a major singing star and director of music at Radio Afghanistan], he was a good student. He wanted to go to the radio. Myself and Mr. Attiqi [a fellow American-trained technician], we tried to convince the principal. We tried to scare him that if Madadi couldn't go, we wouldn't teach. These people who came to the west to study, they had some hand in this. We would gather, and dance, and listen to music. Because we had a little position in society, people could not object to what we were doing. All of a sudden it blossomed in the sixties. People were saying: «this is hippy, it's sufism».

In the light of this memory of modernization, GS reassesses music in his village, now seeing it as an act of rebellion against male authority by youth and women:

Charbaitis were sung at any occasion by younger folks, when they would casually work, daily chores, or just getting together in the evening and start singing. There was music in the event of circumcision, male birth, engagement-events were invented to find some excuse: the coming of flowers, the returning of the fruit. If there was no occasion, people [youth and women] would find the occasion.

It is this philosophy of modernity that informs GS's account both of music and of his life as a member of a transitional generation. Perhaps it is not surprising that he chose an unusual kind of music to become attached to when he first came to America:

Here in America, the ironic thing is, the first thing I heard was classical music. The composition of classical music, the undercurrent, is very similar to some sort of Indian tone, eastern tone, the instruments like the violin. Whenever I studied, I would listen to classical music and I still enjoy it. Now, I only listen to that. When I listen to music, everyone leaves the room. Nobody else in the family likes it.

This devotion to classical music, with its mythology of the heroic composer organizing the sonic universe, perfectly suits GS's understanding not only of his own position as Afghan modernizer, but his general outlook on life:

This was interesting, being in the process and trying to speed the process, feeling you were the one to make the change. To me, human beings try to find some order out of chaos, rules laws, a pattern you could understand that would be consistent. Music to me is between science and art. This is a rule in music and there's a consistency... music is the first window through which we see order out of chaos, order out of order, then the second stage of order. Starting with the first sound, a *dambura*, or listening to the whole orchestra... you get the hope unconsciously that order exists in diversity, that there's a unity that's attainable.

For GS, music in particular and the arts in general make a necessary connection between nature and man's emergent role as dominator of nature, ultimately coming down to his own role as master of technology:

standing the family's history over several decades provides a perspective on a path from their home area of Ghorband in Central Afghanistan to their suburban lifestyle in California. Music, surprisingly, interweaves throughout the narrative of the oldest brother and architect of the family's master plan, Ghulam Sakhi, known as GS. The present short contribution draws on recent interviews with GS (born 1934) and the youngest brother, Kabir (born ca. 1945).

The Taymurees' home was in Chardeh Ghorband, a sizable village of some 200 families divided among Tajik, Hazara, Pashtoon and Qizilbash (their own family heritage). Their father had served as a secretary to government officials under King Amanullah in the 1920s and had retired to his home region with the collapse of that reign. He seemed to have tacitly passed on to his oldest son the notion that education and travel could bring improvement in standard of living and breadth of outlook. GS, born in 1934, was sent to Kabul to school in 1948. He quickly moved into the first available technology training programs and by 1954 was selected for the first group of USAID-sponsored students sent to the United States for education as part of the plan that resulted in the establishment of the American-built Afghan Institute of Technology, which rivaled the Soviet Polytechnic in Kabul. After two years in Los Angeles, GS was recalled to Kabul, but won two more trips to the US, ending in a Master's degree in automotive engineering in 1967. He worked in many influential technology positions as Afghanistan modernized, including faculty status at the AIT and head of the workshop of Sherkat Servis, the national bus company.

Slowly transferring the family from Chardeh Ghorband to the capital and setting up private auto repair shops, GS concentrated on training his two younger brothers, Attiq and Kabir, in programs abroad. Kabir came to the US in 1972, thus becoming the family's anchor in America, so that when the situation in Afghanistan became untenable, the entire family was slowly able to shift to California as a base after many adventures and hair-breadth escapes. Being closely tied to Americans and the foreign community in general, the Taymurees were a prime target of the communist-era regimes. Yet even without the turbulence and urgency of this move, GS would have followed through on this family master plan in any case.

It strikes me that being a rural Qizilbash, he understood that technology was the one path to upward mobility. My impression is that the ruling classes of Afghanistan, particularly the Pashtoons, were willing to concentrate on the *zar, zan, zamin* (gold, women, land) trinity of wealth and power, leaving the newfangled technologies open to minority groups as a quick path to the possible perks of modernization: education, travel, contact with foreign patronage and new job possibilities. In any case, it worked for this family.

In my interviews, I found GS Taymuree to be a philosopher as well as a strategist and that his attitudes about music, my own special interest, dovetailed with his overall approach to life. I will begin with the brothers' recol-

lection of music in Chardeh Ghorband in the 1940s, which follows a pattern familiar to ethnomusicologists who have worked in Afghanistan:

The earliest music I recall was the folk song, *charbaiti*, and some flute and once and a while maybe the *dambura* [the two-stringed lute of central and northern Afghanistan], the *zirbaghali* [single-headed, vase-shaped drum], and for the ladies, the *darya* [usually pronounced *dayera*, tambourine].

The flute, the shepherds, or there were one or two *showqis* [amateurs], they would play *dambura* or flute when people were not around or sit along the riverbanks when people were not noticing. In my time it was only the barber; otherwise, music was completely prohibited in the so-called middle or upper classes, people who owned land... music wasn't considered quite a sin, but not the right thing to do.

This situation began to change in the late 1940s, «when the traffic came from Kabul, '45, '46, '47» after wartime gas rationing ended:

Life became a bit livelier, more shops, they expanded the school and students could go to Kabul to study. Music became a bit tolerated. From *zirbaghali* and *dambura* we progressed to *tanbur* [an urban, complex lute-type]; it came from Kabul. People who went to Kabul were influenced by some of the music there. My father was the first one who brought a spring-loaded record player, probably in 1948 or '49. The records were by Afghan musicians who went to India and recorded their music over there.

Both GS and Kabir describe how struck they were upon arriving in Kabul by the «modern» amenities and the new music. Kabir would spend all his free time in the heart of downtown, listening to music, which began to be broadcast over public loudspeakers. Both of them cite the particular importance of Ahmad Zahir, member of the ruling class, son of a Prime Minister, becoming a radio singing star. For GS, Zahir's untimely death and funeral served as a watershed in Afghan culture:

You could see them cry, reach for his coffin. That's when it began, the hero worship of a musician. You could see the whole thing with Ahmad Zahir: the breaking of the ice, the idea of music as beautiful and acceptable behavior, becoming a myth, for the first time in the history of Afghanistan outside of religious leaders and so-called kings, the only real legendary myth is Ahmad Zahir.

The Taymurees' strong identification with Ahmad Zahir seems to embody a generational pull towards the modern, towards the expression of long-repressed sensibilities:

He gave to the youth of Afghanistan what all the previous generations had suppressed, this potential, the thirst and longing of all the generations that had accumulated. It's a very good example about the real and natural need of human beings; you cannot deny it, you can only dam it. The minute it finds a gateway, you lose control.

GS's account of music as emblem of generational change becomes quite concrete when he talks about his own workplace, the Afghan Institute of Technology, where he had a musically gifted student:

My colleagues and I contributed to this a little bit. In the case of Madadi [later a major singing star and director of music at Radio Afghanistan], he was a good student. He wanted to go to the radio. Myself and Mr. Attiqi [a fellow American-trained technician], we tried to convince the principal. We tried to scare him that if Madadi couldn't go, we wouldn't teach. These people who came to the west to study, they had some hand in this. We would gather, and dance, and listen to music. Because we had a little position in society, people could not object to what we were doing. All of a sudden it blossomed in the sixties. People were saying: «this is hippy, it's sufism».

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Painting, music, sculpture, physical laws, formulas, contrast, innovation: this has to be taken from nature. Art is the bridge; you take it from nature and nature gives it back to you. Unless you're versed in the arts, it becomes very stale. In Afghans, there's a lack; these things should have been developed.

For the next generation of the Taymuree family, growing up or being born in the United States, music figures differently. GS's son, who was an adolescent when he left Afghanistan, has tried with a few friends to learn a bit of Afghan music, largely as a «roots» search. They too esteem Ahmad Zahir particularly highly. Characteristically, GS sees his son's interest from the perspective of his own approach:

It's great that my son sings and plays different Afghan instruments. It's great for their growth, for their outlook. They see the patterns between music and mathematics, music and physics. Once you see the patterns, they're very similar.

In fact, the son, Jan (usually pronounced John these days), majored in math and is going into computer work. The other side of the younger generation's musical tie, however, is more social: all Californian Afghan engagement, wedding and holiday parties – which can be very lavish – feature Afghan music, which seems rather stuck in the groove of the 1970s, the last moment of national stability. Kabir's kids have even performed Afghan music and dance for non-Afghans as part of the American «multiculturalism» move in which you represent your «heritage». There is a huge gulf between this notion of «minority», based in suburban cultural representation, and that of being a Qizilbash from Ghorband. The «heritage» and social bonding contexts music has for the younger generation seem far removed from the chain of associations GS and Kabir offer about their path from village to Kabul to America. They see shifts in Afghan musical sensibilities as a barometer of modernity. GS in particular has evolved a very comprehensive philosophy which grants a certain primacy to music in the development of his life, work and intellect, partly based on his ongoing readings in Western philosophy. His dialogue with me gave me a lively sense of the complexity and wealth of possibilities available in trying to understand the continuing role that Afghan music has in the lives of émigrés.