Rising Voices in Ethnomusicology Volume 21, Number 2, Fall/Winter 2025
Published by the Society for Ethnomusicology
Stable URL: https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.ethnomusicology.org/resource/group/dc75b7e7-47d7-4d59-a660-19c3e0f7c83e/publications/21_2ethnomusicologynow/Fakharinia_rv_21-2.pdf
ISSN: 2578-4242

From Silence to Sound: Iranian Women Musicking under Suppression and after Migration

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, women's public performances throughout Iran have faced severe restrictions, with solo female singing banned in mixed-gender settings due to conservative interpretations of Islamic law. As a result, women are only allowed to sing in choirs with male voices or as backing vocalists. Those who disobey the law face imprisonment. In this paper, I examine the artistic journeys of three Iranian female performers from different generations—two who came of age after the 1979 Revolution, and one who grew up before it, with all three eventually immigrating to the United States. Kimia, a professional pianist born in the 1990s, is an active performer and music educator in the U.S. Hamta, also from the 1990s, is a non-professional singer who occasionally performs at Iranian community events. Mimi, born in the 1940s, has long been active as a singer in the diaspora.[1] For the past decade, Mimi has hosted a biweekly singing club at her home in St. Louis, which serves as the main site of my research.

[1] During the consent process for the interviews conducted in fall 2024, as well as prior to publication in fall 2025, I asked each interlocutor whether she preferred to have her real name used or to remain anonymous through a pseudonym. Two interlocutors chose to use their real names, while one preferred to be identified by her nickname. This choice is reflected in the manuscript.

To understand their musical lives in the diaspora, I first explore the personal and artistic challenges these women faced as performers in Iran, including restrictions imposed by the government. While such restrictions are often attributed to post-revolutionary policies, my findings reveal that social norms and cultural expectations also constrained women's artistic freedom before the revolution. Drawing on one-on-one, in-depth interviews and participant observation at musicking gatherings in the Iranian diaspora of St. Louis, I then explore how their post-migration experiences have led to substantial changes in the way they navigate their identities as performers in the diaspora. Indeed, by building on musicological studies of nostalgia (Garrido and Davidson 2019), I argue that for these performers, music becomes a vehicle for reconnecting with their roots, expressing their culture, and reinforcing community bonds. I approach nostalgia not simply as a longing for the past, but as a process through which music creates a sense of belonging by connecting individuals with their past and with others who share it. Furthermore, I demonstrate how it can serve as a psychological buffer, helping to regulate emotions during times of distress in the diaspora (Garrido and Davidson 2019; Peters et al. 2024). By bringing forth these diverse stories, this research enriches our understanding of how Iranian women navigate the complex intersection of artistic expression, societal constraints, and immigration. Ultimately, this study highlights broader themes of cultural continuity and transformation in the Iranian diaspora.

FEMALE MUSICIANSHIP IN IRAN

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, women have been banned from singing in public.[2] In some cities, these restrictions are intensified, which have further marginalized women's performance by limiting instrumental music. For instance, in 2018, female members of the Isfahan National Orchestra were prohibited from performing in their own city. In Tehran, the capital, the rules for women's performances are somewhat less strict, but this flexibility applies only to instrumentalists, not to singers, and even then, the regulations are highly unstable, fluctuating based on "daily policies, propagandas, and legalities by both political and religious authorities" (Ahmadian 2023, 226).

In academic settings, although women can study music at universities and are permitted to perform there, these programs are limited to instrumental music. There are no vocal studies available for them. Those interested in voice lessons must pursue them through private music institutions. Kimia, who studied piano performance at the University of Tehran before emigrating, shared the challenges she faced as a female musician there. During my Zoom interview with Kimia, when I asked about gender-based restrictions she faced as a performer in Iran, she explained:

[2] The 1979 revolution in Iran, also known as the Islamic Revolution of 1979, was a series of events that culminated in the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty. The revolution led to the replacement of the Imperial State of Iran by the present-day Islamic Republic of Iran (Afary 2024).

> I remember we were preparing for a recital where we had female vocalists. According to the graduate chair, this was the first time since the revolution that we had a solo female vocalist without a backing choir at the university—just a pianist accompanying her. It was a big deal. But we were constantly reminded to be extra cautious about our appearance and dress modestly since we were being granted this special permission. So, there was some pushback there (Author interview, October 5, 2024).

Based on Kimia's reflection, the fact that a simple recital with a solo female vocalist was treated as a "special permission" points to the extent to which women's performances remain regulated, even in an academic concert setting at the university. When I asked if attending university makes it easier to navigate the restrictions in Iran, she responded:

> If you're a female singer, you can perform in music institutions or in smaller private venues, but there are restrictions on larger stages. So if you want a regular professional performance, like the ones men can have, even if you're affiliated with a university, I don't think you'd be able to go to a big stage and perform as a female solo singer, whether you're a student or not. There are still places where it doesn't matter whether you have a degree or not—you'll eventually hit a dead end. The only way out would be if you lower your standards and expectations, like saying, I'm okay with performing in private venues, and I'm not looking for big stages (Author interview, October 5, 2024).

According to Kimia, institutional affiliations, while providing some opportunities, still come with restrictions that influence the career paths of many Iranian women in music. These restrictions force them to navigate between limited public visibility and the safe spaces of private venues. During my in-person interview with Hamta, she described similar challenges related to public visibility. Her first performance experiences were at private music institutes in Iran. In her hometown, Amol, she performed only in small private halls—not in public or government venues. These were always group performances with men, since women were not permitted to sing solo in official settings. Solo singing, she explained, "was limited to private gatherings among friends or family" (Author interview, October 5, 2024).

Another restriction that female performers face is performing with a mandatory hijab. The issue of hijab during performances is a significant concern for many female musicians. When I asked Kimia about that, she explained:

> Honestly, part of my performance anxiety came from constantly worrying about this damn headscarf staying fixed on my head. Imagine being on stage, and it feels as stressful as if your zipper suddenly opened or your clothing tore. It's the same level of stress because it's part of your appearance, but the difference is that it's not your personal choice—it's imposed by the government, and you have to obey or face repercussions (Author interview, October 5, 2024).

Kimia's explanation shows how the mandatory hijab becomes an extra burden for the performer, forcing her to worry about something she never chose in the first place. Kimia also reflected on the impact of clothing restrictions on her sense of self-expression:

> I believe the outfit you wear for your recital is part of your personality. In Iran, you don't have that option. You're completely limited. You have to wear a long, black, long-sleeved outfit, and your legs shouldn't be visible. It's like they're asking an office worker to come perform with a uniform, stripping away the artistic side of you. Maybe a part of my artistic expression is in my clothing, and I want to show that (Author interview, October 5, 2024).

Kimia's words emphasize that female musicians' self-expression is constrained not only by strict dress codes but also by the constant need to prioritize modesty over artistic expression.

Apart from governmental constraints, societal norms and cultural expectations greatly influence how Iranian women navigate the pursuit of music and performance. In my in-person interview with Mimi, for instance, she shared memories of her life in Iran before moving abroad at the age of 19. When I asked her about performing in Iran, she recalled: "I constantly performed in concerts at high school" (Author interview, October 6, 2024). Curious, I asked about the atmosphere in schools before the revolution—was there freedom for performances? She replied, "Yes, a lot. There were no restrictions on this matter. We could freely sing" (Author interview, October 6, 2024). However, she remembered that at age 17, her voice teacher recognized her talent and encouraged her to move to Tehran to pursue a professional singing career. Family expectations and societal norms played a role in her decision:

> When I brought this up with my family, they said I could either pursue my studies in Europe or stay here to focus on singing. I preferred the first option, with plans to continue music alongside my studies later.... There was a general perspective at the time that looked down on female singers, with assumptions that they had to engage in things like prostitution to succeed. I didn't think the environment would be healthy for me, so I chose to focus on my studies and go abroad (Author interview, October 6, 2024).

Mimi's experiences, living in the pre-revolution era, show that although singing was not banned at the time, it was still socially viewed as an inappropriate or undignified career choice for women. To better understand the social environment in which Mimi grew up, it is necessary to examine the broader social and political context of the Pahlavi era (1925-1979). During that time, Iran was undergoing modernization and secularization, adopting Western social and political values and achievements as a foundation for the country's progress. The idea of progress promoted reforms in areas such as gender equality, women's educational opportunities, and professional life. Some reforms, like Reza Shah's 1936 controversial unveiling law, were implemented by force (Sedghi 1999). In the music industry, women became increasingly involved, recording and performing at

concerts, especially in Tehran, although opportunities remained limited in smaller cities (Nekouei 2024, 566). As a result, many of Iran's famous pre-revolution singers were women such as Delkash, Marzieh, Hayedeh, Mahasti, Homeyra, and Googoosh (Seyedsayamdost 2017, 30–31). However, as Heris and Dadvar point out, these reforms did not reach all levels of society; religious norms continued to influence most families' lives, restricting women's public visibility. For example, by 1941, office jobs for women were still largely limited to those from upper-class families with open-minded attitudes (Heris and Dadvar 2025, 8). It was in this social and cultural environment that Mimi chose to pursue education abroad instead of a singing career in Iran.

AFTER IMMIGRATION

Based on individual interviews with each of my interlocutors about their experiences after immigration, Kimia described how moving to the U.S. reshaped her relationship with Iranian music and her identity, fostering a new appreciation for her heritage. She explained that in Iran, the academic environment imposed not only gender-based limitations but also a narrowly focused musical curriculum. Unlike in Iran, where she was expected to focus almost exclusively on the Western canon as a classical pianist, here in the U.S. her peers and professors encourage her to perform pieces with Middle Eastern themes (Author interview, October 5, 2024). Now she feels more connected to her Iranian roots than ever, proud to bring her unique identity and perspective to her artistry. The Persian rug and jacket she wore during the second half of her master's recital, dedicated to Middle Eastern repertoire, illustrate this choice.

Hamta reflected on how immigration had opened opportunities to share her voice in ways that had felt impossible back home. She explained, "In Iran, maybe only my family, relatives, and friends knew I sang. But here, everyone in the Iranian community knows and encourages me to sing in public events" (Author interview, October 5, 2024). When I asked why she thought the atmosphere in the U.S. felt more encouraging, Hamta responded:

> I think being away from home is part of it. These nostalgic songs help them feel connected to Iran, and they like hearing them. The Iranian community here is small, so there aren't many people involved in music. They want to have a band, practice, and perform. When someone who's even slightly into music joins the community, they're interested in connecting and performing together (Author interview, October 5, 2024).

Listening to Kimia's reflections on how immigration reshaped her relationship to Iranian music and to Hamta's account of singing for a community eager to hear familiar songs, one theme that stood out was nostalgia. Garrido and Davidson's research in *Music, Nostalgia, and Memory* (2019) underscores music's power to evoke vivid memories of past times and places, often more strongly than other stimuli, due to its deep connection with emotion. They explain that music-induced nostalgia helps people reinterpret past experiences and reinforce personal identities, while also fostering a sense of belonging by connecting individuals with their past and with others who share

it. Furthermore, "nostalgia appears to be a resource that is accessed as a psychological buffer in times of distress, and that can be associated with several positive coping strategies and increased positive affect in some people" (Garrido and Davidson 2019, 32-33). I especially noticed this dynamic at Mimi's biweekly singing club. Mimi brings together guests—mostly in their 60s and 70s—to sing Iranian songs in a supportive, informal setting. Some participants may have little to no musical background, which can cause them to sing out of tune. However, staying in tune is not a priority at the club. In activities in which there are no artist-audience distinctions, the primary goal is to involve more people to participate, and its value is not assessed by the musical sound quality, but by the degree of participation (Turino 2008, 26,33). Alongside singing, the gatherings include dancing, shared meals, and conversations about everyday life and memories of Iran. Every few sessions, the group focuses on one of the seven main modes (*dastgah*) in Persian traditional music. The songs they select to sing at each session are mainly from their generation, most of which were released over 50 years ago, highlighting the nostalgic nature of the gathering. When I asked Mimi about the decision process concerning the songs for each week's playlist, she explained:

> Some of them are my own preferences, but I always ask the participants—if they know a song in the *dastgah* we're focusing on, whether for this week or future weeks—they can send it to me and I'll add it to the playlist. Even if they don't know which *dastgah* the song belongs to, they can still send it to me, and I'll find out and add it to the appropriate list (Author interview, October 6, 2024).

Most of the resulting playlist consists of songs that were popular during the participants' youth, creating a shared musical memory bank that reinforces their generational identity. In their article "The Psychological Benefits of Music-Evoked Nostalgia," Sedikides et al. argue that "music popular during an individual's youth, and thus likely nostalgic, influences their lifelong musical preferences" (2022, 2047). This helps explain why the participants in the singing club are especially drawn to songs from their earlier years. However, their playlist does more than reflect personal preference; it also exemplifies the psychological and social functions of nostalgic music that Garrido and Davidson described, reinforcing a shared identity, reconnecting members with earlier memories, and creating new bonds through their common musical history.

Beyond the song choice, my fieldwork at the singing club revealed two key dimensions of the gathering: its educational purpose and its function as a site of emotional and social support. In my interview with Mimi, I learned that her primary goal in founding the club was pedagogical: helping participants train their ears to recognize different *dastgah*s. However, the educational aspect alone does not fully account for the regular and consistent attendance at the club. The sessions also act as an emotional refuge and a social anchor. This role became especially apparent during the 12-day war between Israel and the Islamic Republic in June 2025. Despite the emotional toll the conflict took on many Iranians in the diaspora, the session that occurred just one day after the war began was more crowded than any I had attended before. While participants were

physically far from the conflict, they were deeply affected by fear, uncertainty, and concern for loved ones back home. And yet, they chose to gather.

The structure of that session remained unchanged, but the emotional undercurrent was different. One participant broke down in tears during the dancing. I approached her, and through tears she told me, "I can't dance—I'm too worried about Iran." Others, though dancing and singing, were clearly not indifferent to the situation either. I sensed that the act of musicking (Small 1998) was itself a coping mechanism—a way to escape momentarily, to feel held in community, and to channel collective anxiety into shared presence. In other words, the music was serving as a vehicle for participants to improve their mood in that situation. Scholars describe this function of music as "affect regulation". Peters et al. (2024, 553) note that people use music for emotion regulation, self-expression, and social bonding, actively shaping mood and energy levels in daily life. DeNora (2000, 53) similarly argues that one of music's first effects is to help people shift mood or energy as part of "the care of self." By engaging in musicking and socializing, members of the singing club were effectively contributing to their self-care.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I explored the artistic experiences of three Iranian female musicians. The interviews revealed the restrictive environment for female performers, particularly singers, in Iran. Although formal bans were imposed after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Mimi's experiences show that social norms and cultural expectations had already constrained women. Focusing on their lives after immigration, this study highlighted how these artists use music to preserve cultural expression and foster community bonds. Their performances are often driven by nostalgia and a desire to reconnect with their heritage. For Hamta, the diaspora community provides a supportive environment where she can sing freely at events. Mimi has established a singing club that invites others to join her in collective musical activities, creating a space for learning music, strengthening cultural ties, and social bonding. Lastly, for Kimia, performing on stage in her chosen attire and presenting a diverse repertoire lets her express her identity and share her culture. Despite restrictions in Iran, they have continued their musical activities—or, in Hamta's case, even expanded them—after immigrating. For them, music serves as a way to reconnect with their roots, express their culture, and strengthen community bonds.

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