

CEC Communauté électroacoustique canadienne Canadian Electroacoustic Community

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SOURCE

Interview with Shahrokh Yadegari

by Bijan Zelli

Shahrokh Yadegari (PhD) was born in Tehran. In 1979, he went to America in order to get his BS in Electrical Engineering from Purdue University. He continued his Master's studies in Media Arts and Sciences at MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) and finally received his PhD in music from University of California, San Diego. Mr. Yadegari has taken part in many projects, such as founding Kereshmeh Records and the Persian Art Society. His collaboration with different theater groups paved the way for his teaching at University of California, San Diego. He has worked at UCSD since 2004 as a professor in the fields of composing and sound design. The following is an interview with Mr. Yadegari that took place in his office on the 13th of August, 2009.

[Bijan Zelli] Mr. Yadegari, as a composer, you have often made use of Iranian music and poetry in your works. Is it because of your Iranian background or is it due to the fact that you have found something very special in Iranian music that does not exist in the music of other cultures?

[Shahrokh Yadegari] Perhaps both of them. A person will eventually return to his roots. I've had the experience of working with European music as well as other types of music, such as Indian music and Turkish music, but I find it very distinctive when I'm working with Iranian music, you know. For instance, consider the two musical instruments piano and santur, which have a very similar structure. Compared to the piano, the santur displays a whirlwind of emotions for me. The explanation that I can think of is that I've been brought up with the sounds of the santur or tar, and consequently I have a different feeling towards them. But regarding poetry, your second point is correct. In other words, I believe that Iranian poetry is a progressive piece of art, and in comparison with other cultures' poetry, it has some prevalent elements and can be applied as a considerable source in inspiring other works.



Shahrokh Yadegari

Your works have often been developed with dance, theater or similar projects in mind. Is the combination of music with other arts a product of your job at the university, or does this combination hold a particular place for you?

Let me start again with the relation between music and poetry, for it demands a lot of discussion. In my culture, the relation between music and poetry is of a particular kind. On the one hand, music has been deliberately weakened in my culture due to some historical and cultural reasons. On the other hand, the poetry of Iran has been so powerful that it rules over other arts in general and music in particular. It leads to the conclusion that the relation between music and poetry in Iran is nothing but the dominance of poetry. This raises the following question for me as a composer, "Then, what is the position and rank of music?"

Have you accepted the dominance of poetry over music in your works?

No, I haven't accepted it and I feel no necessity to observe it. However, I like the profound relation between these two arts that has been existed during the long history of Iranian culture. Regarding the experience of working with other arts, I would like to mention dance and theater. I have great experiences working with these two arts, and I think that electroacoustic music definitely offers many great abilities in combination with them. This is due to the fact that both dance and music deal with spatialization and spatialization is one of the prominent features of electroacoustic music. However, it does not attract the attention of the audience so much as disturb their concentration on dance and theater. Above all, like Kandinsky, I believe that the arts are interwoven and they have a common root. Consider the fact that I'm a composer and music is my language. Most of the people that come to my room ask why my room is so empty and why it does not have any pictures. My language is the language of music and sounds, so I speak through this language. Furthermore, I must say that from my perspective, no one art has priority over another one and I believe in the equality of their value. Let's get back to your question of combining different arts. It is the result of my profession of course, but I am also interested in these kinds of combinations.

Another point to mention regarding your works is that their content seems to be influenced by symbolism and imaginary spaces. Is this the case in your works?

That's true. But if I elaborate more on that, it would lead to several other aspects as well: in the first place, just when we suppose that we are applying the maximum logic, in fact we reach an imaginary space; in other words, applying logical tools in producing art does not necessarily lead to the creation of logical spaces. In the second place, the language of music is an abstract language and it is different from the language of theater and painting with regard to their ways of expression. The third aspect involves me as a composer and that, as you have mentioned so far, I am interested in these spaces. In order to achieve a particular musical expression of my own, I've always tried to alter the sounds as far as I could in my works and to make use of them in ways that are different than their normal usage. The fourth aspect deals with the synthesis method that I apply in my works which extends this abstract space. As a conclusion I can say that abstract spaces play a dominant role in my compositions.

Isn't your tendency towards imaginary spaces in contrast with other aspects of your activities, such as engineering and mathematics? Are they supposed to complete each other in your personality?

That's a good question to raise. Let me put it this way: my tendency towards imaginary spaces in my composing method is not to compensate for the realities of engineering. On the other hand, it is engineering and other objective works that have led me to imaginary spaces. The relation between these two is linear and not of an action and reaction nature.

It is interesting to know that your former activities in engineering have not led you to algorithmic music, for instance, and your works are much more similar to those of musique acousmatique composers.

In fact my music is a kind of algorithmic music but the thing that you hear is much more similar to musique acousmatique rather than famous algorithmic works.

Does making use of these spaces prompt you to use electronic sounds?

I think the opposite is true. Let me provide you with a philosophical answer. As electronic music developed and composers used it as a kind of tool, it provided some facilities that were quite new at that time. Music in Europe has sought autonomy for a long period of time and it has constantly gained more and more freedom through eliminating other constraints. This has happened during the last century and has promoted music to the autonomous position that is known in electronic music. Since autonomy and independence were and still are European notions, it made everything possible in electronic music. In electronic music, you can define and perform every pervasive element as musical structure, tones, tone colors, and different types of sound combinations. Here, music loses its cultural dependence, or in other words a symphony does not remind us of eighteenth-century classical music, and playing the electric guitar does not immediately echo American rock music. While performing a symphonic orchestra, you use the interval of a third and follow European

music, so which part of this music is Iranian? All these issues can be changed in electronic music and they can be redefined from the basis.

As I began to work with electronic music, I felt its independence from cultural identity. I must add the point that electronic music was initially independent but today we distinguish between the Canadian, French and English electronic musics, and these distinctions can be heard as well. In other words, electronic music today has a cultural identity. As I mentioned before, at first it was not like this and I sensed this gap.

I had both types of music at my disposal. On the one hand, I was familiar with Iranian music and on the other hand I got to know the tools of electronic music. For a long time, I did not want to combine them and never thought of using my santur in this field. I preferred to wait for the right moment and find an internal relation between the two. Finally, it occurred and I bridged this gap that I felt between electronic music and Iranian music. Their combination paved the way for me for creating imaginary spaces.

You have also made use of other elements, such as improvisation, instrumental use of the human voice, and live sound processing. Do you consider yourself a postmodernist composer?

I must say that I am quite familiar with Cage and he had a great influence on me; however, it is interesting to know that I borrow these techniques from Iranian music rather than European postmodernism. Since, as you know, postmodernists have borrowed these concepts from the East and have used them in their music. So as an Iranian, I have been inspired by the Iranian music that is my cultural music, for I knew it beforehand. Most of the things that have been taken into account in modern European music happen to exist in Iranian music as well. For instance, improvisation in European classic music today is a recent phenomenon.

Sorry to interrupt you, but improvisational elements exist in eighteenth-century European baroque music.

That's true. What I meant is that improvisation is a fundamental element in Iranian music, but it has been only occasionally used in European music before it was used again in the twentieth century.

In Iranian music we even have improvised tuning, or in other words, the musician can change the tune of the musical instrument as required. I remember my santur instructor, Mr. Tehrani, who sometimes tuned his santur the way he liked, and some notes were a little bit lower or higher than usual. Therefore, the taste of the musician was a defining factor in tuning and this is absent in European music. However, consider the fact that it is only possible while playing solo, and definitely not while playing in a group. To get to the point, I must declare that in my opinion, improvisation plays an important role. Especially since I'm working with live electronic music, I must say that live music changing is of great significance. You've mentioned something about the instrumental use of the human voice. What do you mean by that?

You have made use of several layers of human voice in reading the poems that reminds me of the motets of European music. This way of using human voice is copied from composing, since instruments can still keep their identity in a polyphonic combination. However when several people read a piece of poem in a polyphonic form, it becomes difficult to understand.

That's right. Many have also criticized me for that. Let me go a little bit beyond this and say that I also want to make an instrumental use of the concepts. I do not see a problem in combining different concepts and exposing them simultaneously.

Don't you think that this way of working is in contrast with Iranian music culture? I mean the music that is at the service of totally presenting the poem and the one which avoids confusing its message by musical tools.

Of course. And that's why a singer in Iranian culture is more dominant than the composer and I want to reverse this relation.

In your works, you make use of an instrument called Lila. Could you explain it?

Lila is the instrument that I've used constantly during the last ten or eleven years. This instrument is in fact a computer that has a simple idea in it. This computer gets the sounds, processes them and replays them.

Before playing, the sounds go under a processing procedure, processes such as delay, loop, or things similar to what is performed in analogue systems. Let me tell the story of what led me to the creation of this instrument. When I was living in Los Angeles, there lived a mockingbird behind my apartment. There was also a night smell with fragrant flowers. The scent of this flower was quite overpowering in the whole street and as one of my friends said, when you were walking through the street, you would have fallen in love. And the bird that nested there used to sing from night to day, and it sang very beautifully. I really liked it but I couldn't sleep with its sound. One night, I decided to record its sound. Then I thought of playing its sound back using a monitor. When I did so, something strange happened. The bird began to sing with quite a distinctive power, more excited and more intensive. I thought that it was thinking it had found a new mate or maybe a new rival. I continued the task for hours and repeated it several times, I mean I recorded its sound and played it back. Sometimes, I felt that it got angry and didn't get the expected reflection from its sound. After a long time, I came to build Lila and finally I could play the recorded sound with some suitable changes. So to cut a long story short, the main idea came from this mockingbird. As I mentioned before, this technique has been used before in analogue systems and is not something totally new. The difference is that previously it had been done in recording studios but now I make use of it in live performances. I've been the one to use this instrument so far but I intend to share it with other people soon.

I find a lot of similarity between your works and those of musique acousmatique composers. Is there a relation between you and these composers?

It is quite possible that I've been influenced by musique acousmatique works. Looking back through history, I came to realize that I've been working for some time in IRCAM (Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique), in which I got to know these composers. In my opinion, Francis Dhomont is one of the most prominent composers in the field of electronic music and undoubtedly I've learned a lot from him. But despite all that I said, I don't consider myself a musique acousmatique composer. I think that the resemblance between our works is more due to some similar elements that we use rather than having a similar style.

You combine two different cultures of music together, electronic music on the one hand and Iranian music on the other. I'm curious to know about the reaction of American audiences to this music combination.

I've witnessed some good and positive reactions. Actually, the American audience pays attention to different types of melodies drawn from Iranian music and notices this distinction.

As far as I know, you apply a particular method of synthesizing for your sound. Could you elaborate on that?

Yes, I use a particular method of synthesizing, which I refer to as Recursive Granular Synthesis. Without going through the details in this brief interview, I'll just point out that the main idea, in fact, goes back to Karlheinz Stockhausen, who was the first one to suggest this idea. Stockhausen's idea is based upon the unity between micro- and macro-structures of music. Combining this idea on the one hand with the similar philosophical theories of Omar Khayam, the Iranian philosopher, concerning the equality of the essences of everything in nature on the other hand, led me to this new method. The whole story concerns the fact that the structure of the sound in specific, and the structure of the music in general, are similar. Despite those people who try to make a distinction between these two regarding their effect on our soul, I believe that the form of a sound can be made with the same algorithms which are the basis for composing melody and harmony in music.

As a sound designer, you have participated in many projects. What is the major difference when you are working as a sound designer rather than as a composer?

As a sound designer, you should always deal with spaces, and in this task you are somehow dependent on some other elements. I felt this difference even more since the time I've started to work in theater. You do not have all the components necessary for sound designing at your disposal, and this is the time when you should act in harmony with some external factors, and for the purpose of providing a suitable space, you should act as a part of a whole. Sometimes, the type of sound is imposed both on you and on the audience. In

order to overemphasize, I make the example of a laugh track that directly makes the listener or viewer laugh. In sound designing you are not dealing directly with the audience, but you are dealing with their unconscious. In this field, I've been quite influenced by Brian Eno's works. In composing, your material consists of sounds and ideas and you are not dependent on other elements. The kind of activity is totally different here.

Thanks for taking part in this interview.

Thank you.

Biography

Bijan Zelli was born in Teheran, Iran in 1960. After completing his studies in electrical engineering at Sharif University of Technology in Teheran, he immigrated to Sweden, where he changed his career from engineering to music. He received his Master's in Music Education in 1996 and then moved to Berlin for further studies in Musicology. He started his doctoral degree under Professor Helga de la Motte-Haber's supervision and took his PhD degree in 2001. His dissertation, "Real and Virtual Spaces in the Computer Music," is an exclusive and analytical approach to how spatialization works in electroacoustic compositions. Bijan Zelli has performed many music lectures in different countries including, Sweden, Germany, Iran and the USA. His field of research is focused on western classical music, mostly concentrated on different aspects of modernism. He moved to the United States in 2007 and currently works as music educator and independent researcher in San Diego, California.



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