

# THE MUSIC OF NOUR ALI ELAHI IN EXILE

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*Abstract: Nour Ali Elahi (1895–1974) was a mystic, lawyer and master of the tanbur in Iran. He was a member of “Ahl-e Haqq,” a small group of Persian Kurds. As a regional celebrity he was admired as a master (Ostad) in questions of ethics and law but also as a master of the Kurdish tanbur. After his death his reputation also grew in Europe and the USA. In 1985 the “Ostad Elahi Foundation” was established in New York and in 2000 in Paris, followed by a similar society in Vienna. The groups of his admirers are diverse, but are dominated by exiles from Iran, especially in Vienna. Because Elahi is seen as a famous musician by the foundation, his art has a high standing for them and there is a great interest in propagating his interpretations. This paper argues that Elahi’s music not only became a symbol for his mystical and ethical thinking but also formed a part of the new identity in exile, although it differs strongly from “traditional” Persian music. There is also a special interest in the connection between Elahi’s music and other forms of European music as an example of the respectful encounter of different cultures. Concerts in Paris and an exhibition about Elahi in the Metropolitan Museum in New York are successful signs of such efforts.*

It was at one of the yearly birthday celebrations for Nour Ali Elahi in Vienna that I first heard music in the tradition of the man being celebrated.<sup>1</sup> I was quite astonished that this city should be one of the meeting points of admirers of this extraordinary person, who never left his homeland of Iran. Born in 1895, he grew up in Jeyhunabad in the very traditional surroundings of the Kurdish Province of Kermanshah. His family played a leading role in one of the groups of Ahl-e Haqq, a religious community in Kurdish regions primarily in Iran but also in Iraq and in south-eastern Kurdish parts of Turkey.<sup>2</sup> Ahl-e Haqq can be traced back to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and shows traces of the influence of Islam, Yazidis, Alivi, and Sufism.<sup>3</sup>

1 The Viennese Society of Ethics organizes this annual event with great effort.

2 See Algar and Elahi.

3 Heinz Halm: “AHL-E HAQQ,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, I/6 (1982), 635–37; online: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ahl-e-haqq-people> (accessed 14 March 2019); Christine Allison, Anke Joisten-Pruschke and Antje Wendtland (eds.): *From Daēnā to Dīn. Religion, Kultur und Sprache in der iranischen Welt. Festschrift für Philip Kreyenbroek zum 60. Geburtstag*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrasowitz 2009, 263–377; and Jean During: *A Critical Survey on Ahi-e Haqq Studies in Europe and Iran*, in: *Alevi Identity. Cultural, Religious and Social Perspectives. Papers Read at a Conference Held at the Swedish*

It is not easy to form an idea of the meaning of Nour Ali Elahi during his lifetime. Most descriptions date from after his death and came exclusively from close friends and members of his family. As usual for a respected person in that cultural sphere, they contain many phrases of civility and mystification. It is said that as a child of nine years Elahi retired into a contemplative life for twelve years, with periods of strict fasting and meditation under the guidance of his father Hadj Nematollah, who also was a leading figure of their branch of Ahl-e Haqq. The legend tells us that on a pilgrimage Elahi suddenly fell ill and died, but returned back to life, infused with a new soul.<sup>4</sup> A story like this enforced at least his fame and mystification. It is also said that when Islamic fanatics destroyed the structure over his tomb in Hashtgerd in 1982, the aggressors found the tomb empty.<sup>5</sup> His admirers explained this fact as a proof of the outstanding position of a spiritual person.

Elahi is not just known as a leading spiritual person but also as a model judge. In 1917 he decided to finish his time of seclusion in order to participate actively in social life. After studying law he started his career as a legal magistrate and was involved in reforms which were meant to replace the clergy's jurisdiction. The mid-twenties of the twentieth century were times of political change, with the putsch against the Kadscharen dynasty in 1925 and the installation of Reza Shah Pahlawi.

Elahi is also known as an extraordinary musician. His main instrument, the tanbour, a long-necked lute, is important to this day in the religious rites of Ahl-e Haqq, where it is considered as a medium for meditation or spiritual experiences.<sup>6</sup> Even in this activity Elahi is described as exceptional. The legend says that he was already a virtuoso on the tanbour at the age of nine.<sup>7</sup>

Although Elahi never played in public – only for private pleasure and meditation, alone or with friends and family – he seemed to have a great reputation in this profession. It is said that he impressed some of the celebrated Iranian musicians like Darvish Khan (1872–1926) and later Abol-Hasan Saba (1902–1957) in playing the tanbour, which differs from “classical” Persian music as well as their radif-repertoire.<sup>8</sup> Dariush Savfat, the later director of the Centre for Preservation and Propagation of Iranian Music and a master of setar and pupil of Abol-Hassan

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*Research Institute in Istanbul, November 25–27, 1996*, ed. by Tord Olsson, Elisabeth Özdalga, and Catherina Raudvere (Richmond: Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul 1996), 105–25.

4 During, *The Spirit of Sounds. The Unique Art of OstadElahi (1895–1974)*. (New York: Cornwall Books, 2003), 30–31.

5 Algar, Hamid and Morris, James Winston and During, Jean: “Elāhī, Hājī Nūr Alī,” in: *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/elahi> (accessed 13 March 2019).

6 Navid Fozī: “The Hallowed Summoning of Tradition: Body Techniques in Construction of the Sacred Tanbur of Western Iran,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 80:1 (2007), 107.

7 Jean During, *The Spirit of Sounds. The Unique Art of OstadElahi (1895–1974)*, 26–32.

8 *Ibid.*, 35.

Saba, described Elahi as an important Iranian musician in the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> So Elahi has become part of the canon of the Iranian music.

In his local sphere of influence Elahi was certainly well known: in his homeland Kermanshah, where his family had a high status, and in other Iranian districts to which he was sent as a magistrate, as well as in Teheran, where he lived as a spiritual teacher after his retirement. The attribute “Ostad” (master) shows that he was respected both as an extraordinary musician and as an advisor in spiritual and ethical questions. In all the descriptions of his music both the spiritual meaning and his virtuoso techniques are stressed.

### THE SHIRAZ FESTIVAL OF ART AS A MEETING POINT OF EAST AND WEST

His first encounter with representatives of “western music culture” – and the only one in Elahi’s lifetime – was apparently during the Shiraz Festival of Arts, which took place from 1967 to 1977 as part of the cultural politics of the Pahlawi Regime. One of the major goals of this project was to bring together artists representing the “western” and “eastern” worlds of art. It was meant to be a meeting point of different cultures and of traditional and contemporary music from around the world.<sup>10</sup> To call attention to the long tradition of Persian culture (and doubtless also to advertise touristic destinations), these events took place in front of the ruins of Persepolis or the gardens of Hafezieh. Young Iranian artists sought contact with composers like Iannis Xenakis, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and John Cage.<sup>11</sup> The music department of Tehran University was also involved with the festival. At the same time, the visiting musicians and artists found inspiration in the landscape, architecture, and traditional art of the host country.

It seemed that Elahi – who would never have performed at an event like this – was invited there at the recommendation of insiders. Pupils of Abol-Hasan Saba who participated in the festival, and of course Dariush Savfat, who was there as a popular advisor, could have been intermediaries.<sup>12</sup> Two representatives of “western” culture met Elahi for sure: the dancer and choreographer Maurice Béjart and

9 Dariush Savfat: “Musique Iranienne et Mystique” (translated and with annotations by Jean During), *Etudes Traditionelle*. 483 (1984): 42–54, and 484 (1984): 94–109.

10 Robert Gluck: *The Shiraz Art Festival: Western Avant-Garde Arts in the 1970s Iran, 2006*. <https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/leon.2007.40.1.20>; and Mahasti Afshar, Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis 1967–1977. [http://www.academia.edu/12568899/Festival\\_of\\_Arts\\_Shiraz-Persepolis\\_1967-1977\\_updated\\_May\\_2015](http://www.academia.edu/12568899/Festival_of_Arts_Shiraz-Persepolis_1967-1977_updated_May_2015) (accessed 20 March 2019).

11 Gluck, *The Shiraz Art Festival*.

12 Afshar, *Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis*, 5.

the violinist Yehudi Menuhin. They seemed to have been fascinated by him. Béjart, who converted to Shiite Islam after his participation in the Shiraz Festivals, and who was always looking for new inspiration, spoke about a spiritual experience that changed his life.<sup>13</sup> Maybe he saw in Elahi's art a spiritual relationship. Elahi described his own musical practice as a "link to the Source," and at times he compared it with spiritual dancing.<sup>14</sup> Béjart explained one year after his visit in Shiraz that dance is connected to the divine.<sup>15</sup> The fact that Elahi and Béjart were not able to communicate in words (they had no shared language) implies that maybe Béjart recognized what he was looking for. He kept in touch with Elahi's family, and Nour Ali's younger son Chahrokh was invited to Béjart's seventieth birthday in 1997 as a special guest.<sup>16</sup> More down to earth, Yehudi Menuhin spoke about the fascination in Elahi's improvisations of the musical variety possible from limited audio material. Their statements about these meetings were cited in later publications and on websites about Elahi as an important proof of the extraordinary effect of his performance.

### TRANSFER INTO WESTERN CULTURE

In spite of such prominent visitors, Elahi's overall fame as musician may have been limited to his homeland in an early phase, traditionally cultivated by his people. For them his spiritual heritage became very important, and his book *Borhan ol-Haqq* (Demonstration of the Truth, 1963) seems to have been used as a kind of religious guide.<sup>17</sup> His music was seen as an expression of his meditative spirituality. But after the establishment of the Islamic regime, his philosophy and his music were regarded as a danger, and in 1982 Islamic fanatics destroyed his tomb in Hashtgerd, which had meanwhile become a site of pilgrimage. Members of his family and other members of Ahl-e Haqq left the country, and they took the memory of Ostad Elahi with them into exile. There they tried to spread their philosophy and with it his music; his second son, Bahram Elahi, works on the dissemination of his father's spiritual thinking, and has published several articles and books in French, English, German, Polish, and Greek.<sup>18</sup> The Nour Foundation,

13 During, *The Spirit of Sounds*, 122–23.

14 Jean During records the anecdote of a vision in which Elahi asked Rumi: "Tell me, what is the secret of your dancing, for you to jump and move the way you do at eighty years old?" Rumi replied: "Play your tanbour and you will see how I can dance." During, *The Spirit of Sounds*, 111.

15 Maurice Béjart, *L'autre chant de la danse: ce que la nuit me dit* (Paris: Flammarion, 1974).

16 Ariane Dollfus: *Béjart Le Démoniste* (Paris: Flammarion, 2017).

17 During, *A Critical Survey on Ahi-e Haqq Studies in Europe and Iran* 106 and 107.

18 Bahram Elahi, *La Voie de la Perfection* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2002).

founded in 1985 in New York, continues to disseminate the ethical and spiritual principles of Elahi, as does the “Ostad Elahi Foundation” in Paris, founded in 2000 by Bahram Elahi. Many members of the family transferred their main residence to France, which has become a kind of centre for Elahi adoration in exile. They even found there a site of pilgrimage: the tomb of Elahi’s sister Malek Jan in Baillou, in the region of Perche.

The breakthrough to reach a larger audience occurred in 1995, when an exhibition was organized at the Chapelle de la Sorbonne in Paris for the centennial of Elahi’s birthday.<sup>19</sup> The exhibition was accompanied by presentations and conferences at the Sorbonne, in London, and at some Universities in the USA (New York University and the University of California in Los Angeles). Since 1995 twelve albums have been published with allegedly original recordings of Nour Ali Elahi produced by the family in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>20</sup> In 2014–15 a special exhibition was organized about Elahi as a musician, again accompanied by lectures and performances.<sup>21</sup> Soon several instruments of Elahi will be part of the permanent collection of the André Mertens Galleries for Musical Instruments at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. In April 2019 there will be the celebration of the handover.<sup>22</sup>

For Elahi’s widespread fans the internet has played an important role in dissemination: along with Elahi websites, one can also find the so-called Ostad Elahi Radio, where his recordings are presented, and where every piece is introduced with an explanation in the form of a dialogue.<sup>23</sup>

The undisputed authority on Elahi’s music is his youngest son, Chahrokh Elahi, who is himself a recognized master at the tanbour. To propagate his father’s music and spirituality, he gives lectures and “master classes” like the one during the exhibition in the Metropolitan Museum on 15 November 2014.<sup>24</sup> All over the world one can now watch and listen to Chahrokh’s way of playing his father’s music on YouTube.

19 “Symposium on Spirituality Celebrates the Centennial of Ostad Elahi,” *UNESCO News* 2/6, (10 November 1995).

20 Maybe the reference to “the recordings” means that they are played in a style based on the recordings. At least on the booklet of the double-CD “Destination” one can read that Elahi’s son is performing. The recording quality also suggests professional standards in recent times.

21 *The Sacred Lute: The Art of Ostad Elahi*, 5 August – 1 November 2015. <https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2014/sacred-lute> (accessed 20 March 2019).

22 “The Musical Art of Ostad Elahi,” Saturday 6 April 2019. <https://www.metmuseum.org/events/programs/met-speaks/ticketed-talks/the-musical-art-of-ostad-elahi> (accessed 20 March 2019).

23 On the welcome page one can see the covers of all the recordings. Ostad Elahi Radio: <http://www.ostadradio.com/> (accessed 20 March 2019).

24 *Tanbur Masterclass*, Uris Center for Education Art Room, 15 November 2014. <http://ostadelahi.com/life/exhibitions/events-around-the-sacred-lute/>

Along with him and some other members of his family there are also Kurdish-Iranian ensembles like Razbar which play an important role for the spreading of Elahi's music.<sup>25</sup> Razbar was founded in Bonn in 1997, mainly by Kurdish People from Hashtgerd, near Teheran. Their main interest is to introduce the culture of Ahl-e Haqq into Europe and the United States, where the J-Hoon ensemble (deeply connected with the German Razbar-group – they even had until recently the same pictures and texts on their websites) was founded some years later in New York.<sup>26</sup> Both of them do not just give concerts but also organize lectures for music and dancing. Their performances are designed to present the spirituality of the Ahl-e Haqq group of Nour Ali Elahi to people in Europe and USA, and certainly for the dancers and musicians it could be a kind of home in exile. On their homepage they stress the ritual character of their musical practise and explain that they want “*to share their spiritual music, not to stage a performance.*” This is certainly not an easy task, so they try to seek new ways like inventing the audience to participate or to reproduce a ritual situation. But it is evident that the concert situation has not been without consequences. Meanwhile some elements of entertainment have entered their performances, for the pleasure of the audience and obviously also for the musicians, as a video of a percussion performance shows.<sup>27</sup>

### THE TRANSLATION OF OSTAD ELAHI'S MUSIC INTO THE WESTERN TRADITION

For the last twenty years Elahi's meditative music has attracted interest from several musicians in Europe who are fond of so-called “world music,” but also from musicians coming from the “old-music scene” who are looking for new inspirations. At the presentation “Sunday at the Met” at the exhibition in the Metropolitan Museum in 2014 there were two musical groups presenting “crossover music” in different ways.

The famous Iranian singer Parissa and her ensemble integrated tanbour into traditional Persian music.<sup>28</sup> Elahi's grandson Shahab Elahi played the tanbour, and Parissa sang the poems of Hafiz and Rumi. This performance was introduced as a

25 The name “Razbar” refers to Kathun-e Razbar, the mother of Sholtan Sahak, who is seen as the founder of Ahl-e Haqq.

26 Razbar Website: <https://www.razbar.de/>; J-Hoon Website: <https://www.j-hoon.com/> (accessed 20 March 2018).

27 Video of a percussion performance on the website of Razbar; <https://www.razbar.de/gallery/#RazbarEnsemble> (accessed 20 March 2019).

28 On her website Parissa stressed the importance of Elahi's spiritual approach to music as model for her interpretations. Parissa, biography: [http://parissamusic.org/05\\_biography/tenet.htm](http://parissamusic.org/05_biography/tenet.htm) (accessed 20 March 2019).

symbol of Elahi's experiences with traditional Persian music. He learned the Persian instruments tar and setar and widened the technique and interpretation of his tanbour playing.

The second ensemble was the Garcia-Fons Quartett, with a mixture of heterogeneous instruments: (jazz) double bass, lute, violin and frame drum. It was a crossover of jazz, old music, classical western music and traditional (Iranian) Kurdish music. The lute player Claire Antonini is specialized in French music of the seventeenth century but also came into contact with Persian music with Taiush Talai. The French Jazz double bass player Renaud Garcia-Fons is well known for his interest in different musical styles, times, and cultures. His teacher for double bass, Francois Rabbath from Syria, awakened his interest in music of the Middle East, and so Elahi's music is just one of many influences on Garcia-Fons repertoire. Already in 2012 he played in a concert in Paris, "Voyage à Jeyhounabad," as an *homage* à *Ostad Elahi* in which he tried to replicate the meditative character as well as Ostad Elahi's playing technique on the tanbour.<sup>29</sup> Watching Chahrokh Elahi playing the tanbour, one can see that his fast strumming is comparable to the *rasgueado* style used by flamenco guitarists.<sup>30</sup> The strokes up and down have to be very precise and steady to get this kind of rhythmic structure. The movement of the right hand looks like a wave movement, as if the tanbour player were stirring the strings. When Renaud Garcia-Fons translates this technique it seems as if his bow is dancing on the strings.<sup>31</sup> His *sautillé* is also rhythmically absolutely precise. Overtones and flageolets evoke the impression of the chordal play of the tanbour. Like Chahrokh Elahi on the tanbour, Garcia-Fons's left hand produces melodic ornaments in hammer-ons and pull-offs or in a combination of both. The inspirations of plucked instruments, string instruments of different cultures and times, were important for his style, as Garcia-Fons explained in an interview. For him the double bass is an instrument "between the lute/guitar and the viola da gamba."<sup>32</sup>

Both the Parissa ensemble and the Garcia-Fons Quartett were introduced at their concert at the Metropolitan as a fusion of Western and Eastern musical practice and as a symbol of humility, tolerance, and interdisciplinarity in the spirit of Elahi.

29 Renaud Garcia-Fons, *Voyage à Jeyhounabad*, Live in Paris 2012: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pBOqXzYTLqA> (accessed 22 March 2019).

30 The Art of the Tanbour Part I: Exploring the Music of Ostad Elahi (1895–1974): [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AxCB923\\_QQY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AxCB923_QQY) (accessed 22 March 2019).

31 Like his teacher, he holds his bow like the cello players.

32 "Renaud Garcia-Fons in einem Interview mit Karl Lippegau." <https://treibhaus.at/kuenstler/72/renaud-garcia-fons> (accessed 22 March 2019).

VIENNESE EXPERIENCES:  
WATCHING A PROCESS OF CREATING IDENTITY?

Finally I want to return to where I began. How did Elahi's legacy come to Vienna? By accident, and with the help of some Iranians living in Vienna, the Society of Ethics was founded in 2000, the same year as the "Elahi Foundation" in Paris. According to its website and the statements of those responsible for the society, the idea of this association is the discussion of "Ethical Principles" according to Ostad Elahi's philosophy. His principals are explained in a very general manner: equality, tolerance, freedom of thought, respect and empathy for all cultures and religions. The reasons why people visit lectures (about ethical principles in medicine and law, as well as in questions of gender and other current topics) and the annual birthday celebration are diverse. Analysing some interviews of the audience, one can say that there is a very broad range: from the interest in some or just one of the lectures or in special subjects, which need not imply any relationship to Elahi, to a passionate interest in his philosophical maxims. To give a precise overview would require closer research. But there is one special aspect concerning the participants of Iranian origin, who are the majority in the society: the coordination of the events is in the hands of the family of my Iranian friend, the president is from Iran, and the general secretary is married to an Iranian. Many of the members of the society are Iranians in exile. They had different reasons to leave Iran: some are confirmed democrats, others are confirmed monarchists, but what they have in common is their rejection of the Mullah regime. In discussions they explain that Elahi's ethical principles, which are considered as open for different confessions, could point out a way to live in a good relationship with the inhabitants of the respective land of exile and could also serve as a possible model for an ideal social life in Iran. One example of this idea is the dissertation of Alaleh Fadai, "Inside / Outside: Geschlechtsspezifische Baustrukturen im Iran" (Gender Aspects of Building Structures in Iran)" which in 2011 was submitted to the Institute of History of Art, Building Archaeology, and Restoration in Vienna. She presented Elahi's ethical principles as a way to break down the gender segregation expressed in possibly new forms of Iranian architecture.

One can see the conscious seeking for community in some "intercultural" performances of Razbar or the Mojdeh Ensemble founded by Shahab Elahi, Nour Ali's grandson. In Vienna this kind of mixture can be seen in the musical programme of the events of the society. Especially the yearly commemorations present a musical mixture of tanbour performances and compositions, which are seen as typical of "classical European music." Of special interest is the background music at the beginning of some events that prepare the audience for what follows. Performances



by Ostad Elahi on the tanbour alternate with music considered typical of Austrian or Viennese culture: Mozart, the waltzes of Johann Strauss, or songs from *The Sound of Music*.<sup>33</sup>

The music of Ostad Elahi found a most fertile soil in exile. Symbolizing his spiritual philosophy, it is highly welcome as a meditative music that has become increasingly popular in recent years. It may also be an inspiration for musicians of trendy “world music.” It is a must for those who want to come in touch with Elahi’s philosophy. His music is attractive in winning people for his philosophy; at least it has become a symbol for some Iranian groups in their Austrian exile. Kurdish tanbour music is their Iranian part of Austrian culture.

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33 This mixture was chosen for the festival event celebrating the 120th birthday of Ostad Elah on 24 September 2015.