3. The modal system.

Persian classical music is represented by a corpus of amorphous pieces that are subject to extemporized renditions. They adhere to a modal principle that is defined by a set of pitches (maqam) and a certain melodic contour (mayeh). The pieces are collectively known as the radif (‘row’, ‘line-up’). 19th-century performing practices have tended to place these pieces into 12 groups, known as the 12 dastgahs (a large unit with inner components; ex.1). The pieces within each dastgah are generically called gusheh, and they carry their own individual names. Some of the dastgahs contain large numbers of gushehs, which represent numerous maqamat, while others are composed of only a few gushehs. The 12 dastgahs are: shur, abu ata, dashti, bayat-e tork (or bayat-e zand), afshari, segah, chahargah, homayun, bayat-e esfahan, nava, mahur and rast (or rast-panigah). Five of the 12 are commonly considered as subordinate dastgahs (avaz). Four of these, abu ata, dashti, bayat-e tork and afshari, are taken to be related to shur; bayat-e esfahan is considered as a derivative of homayun. This classification, however, is poorly reasoned as it is merely based on a measure of relationship in the pitch material of these dastgahs and not on their melodic content, which is far more axiomatic to their identity.

The performance of a dastgah usually begins with one or more sections called daramad (introduction). It is in the daramad that the mode (maqam) and the melodic character (mayeh) of the dastgah are revealed. After the daramad, selections from the gushehs that are constituent parts of the dastgah are presented. They differ from the daramad in their mayeh, and they may also present, through modulation, different maqamat.

Some gushehs belong exclusively to the repertory of one dastgah; others may be found within the structure of more than one dastgah. In the latter category, there are those gushehs that preserve both their modal and melodic identity and those that maintain only their mayeh but yield to the set of pitches (maqam) of the dastgah where they are placed. Notable in this type are gushehs belonging to dastgah segah, all of which can also be performed in dastgah chahargah.

It is common to begin the performance of a dastgah in a relatively low register of the instrument or voice. The gushehs that follow the daramad section are usually chosen to give a gradual ascent to higher sound registers. This systematic rise in pitch level was more binding in 19th-century practices; it is not always maintained in more modern performance styles.

Given the fact that a dastgah is comprised of pieces in different modes, a measure of organizational unity is achieved through periodic reference back to the opening mode of the daramad, which properly identifies the dastgah. This is done by a concluding melodic cadence, placed at the end of each gusheh, which has presented a distinct maqam of its own. This melodic cadence, which may be brief or lengthy, is called forud.
(‘descent’), since it requires a modulation to the lower sound register of the daramad section.

The entire performance process of a dastgah is carried out, in the main, through extemporization. This occurs on the skeletal melodic material inherent to the mode of the dastgah, as represented by the daramad section, and extends to the various gushehs within the dastgah. These melody models (mayeh) are not clearly defined, and no performer is able to isolate and tangibly represent them; nevertheless, they act as nebulous themes for an infinite number of variations. A broad understanding of the constituency of these mayehs is attained through years of training and immersion in a musical tradition that remains intriguingly arcane and non-specific. It is no wonder that many of the governing principles of Persian music remain controversial. A rendition of a dastgah can vary greatly depending on the number of gushehs included and the degree of improvisatory freedom taken, and it may last just a few minutes or well over an hour.

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