

MUSICultures

The Journal of the Canadian Society for Traditional Music
La revue de la Société canadienne pour les traditions musicales

Rochholl, Andreas, dir. 2020. The Female Voice of Iran

Nasim Ahmadian

Volume 50, 2023

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1110030ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1110030ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Canadian Society for Traditional Music / La Société canadienne pour les traditions musicales

ISSN

1920-4213 (imprimé)

1920-4221 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Ahmadian, N. (2023). Compte rendu de [Rochholl, Andreas, dir. 2020. The Female Voice of Iran]. *MUSICultures*, 50, 322–326.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1110030ar>

FILM REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS DE FILMS

Rochholl, Andreas, dir. 2020. *The Female Voice of Iran*. Yalda Yazdani and Sebastian Leitner, associate producers. Produced by Zeitgenössische Oper Berlin. 1:15:24. <https://youtu.be/sQD3Mav3vas>.

NASIM AHMADIAN
University of Alberta

The Female Voice of Iran is an independent feature documentary directed by Andreas Rochholl that narrates the musical and social lives of several female vocalists under long-term censorship and restrictions in contemporary Iran. Filmmakers and co-writers Andreas Rochholl and Yalda Yazdani report that the film is the result of five years of research and meetings with numerous Iranian musicians, artists, and locals in various regions of Iran. Produced by Zeitgenössische Oper Berlin, the documentary accompanies a series of concerts and music festivals held in Europe in 2017–18 under the same title that featured Iranian female vocalists (Zeitgenössische Oper Berlin, n.d.). Released at the end of 2020, the film and its complementary components including a behind-the-scenes video (Rochholl 2020) were made freely accessible on YouTube due to the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the filmmakers emphasize in their opening remarks, this documentary aims not only to present the unheard voices of the women of Iran to the world but also to share a “signal of hope” during the pandemic crisis. In the context of the 2022 emergence of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement in Iran,

the film takes on additional meanings and importance.

Organized around three key themes — women, censorship, and ethnic diversity in music in Iran — the film centres the stories of several female vocalists representing diverse genres (i.e., classical, folk, pop) and urban and rural locales in Iran. They also range widely in age, and some are professional musicians while others are non-professionals. In addition to the exuberant group of vocalists, the film’s inclusive theme and expansive focus draw viewers’ attention to the vast landscapes, cultural colours, ethnicities, languages, histories, and regional musical traditions in Iran.

These vocalists’ stories, each a representation of their region, are connected through a unifying symbolic narrative object: Negar (*Negār*), a miniature camel crafted out of brass. In Persian, *Negār* is a female name meaning “image — often of delicacy and beauty.” Negar has an important “dream” to fulfil, an *odyssey* to find women singers from the various regions of Iran and unite their stories via *the path to the Garden*, a symbol of the film’s narrative destination: a gathering at the heart of Iran, the historical garden of Isfahan,¹ where they can all sing together.

The film benefits from interviews and personal narrations by the musicians as well as conversations, friendly meetings, mobility, and memory sharing between them. In an ethnographic sense, the film is enriched by engaging not only the variety of regions, languages, and cultural lifestyles among the performers but also the relationships and emotional bonds

between women from various regions of Iran. Despite the risk of being identified and recorded on camera, the women musicians share many aspects of Iranian identity, friendship, interaction, emotional expression, the collective memory of the war and its resultant traumas, and most of all, the regrets and sorrows of being the marginalized voice of music after the 1979 revolution under the Islamic Republic.

The extremes of gender, politics, and social life in Iran under the Islamic Republic, including compulsory hijab and the impermissibility of religious criticism and direct political speech in opposition to the Islamic regime, also put pressure on the film in terms of the artists' safety and filmmakers' permitted presence in Iran. This chain of struggles is intelligently encapsulated in the camera movements and angles evoking Negar's many stumbles through constant shakes and bumps during the journey as if being tormented on a stormy sea. Later, Negar is held and addressed by the female vocalists: she listens to their stories, hopes, and dreams of the future. The filmmaking team consisting of the Iranian female artist Yalda Yazdani and her European colleague Andreas Rochholl begin metaphoric dialogues and transitions that take the film into a conversational intimacy and fortitude, as if the whole of Iran is telling their stories and hopes to the outside world. Through these stories, the film also vitalizes a self-referential relationship with both Iranian and non-Iranian audiences: "This [dream] needs hope and patience to become a reality. Just for a moment, ignore what you *think* you know. Let old views go and take the time to listen to us. Lend us your ear. You do not need to understand, *just see the world through our eyes!*" says Negar in a gracious and pleading voice, as

she starts the journey with the director in Berlin, Germany.

The film introduces the musicians through their social media profiles; this is by no means a random choice, nor is it a simple transitional production technique. Instead, it uncovers a larger issue, a deeper regret for the muted voices who have no formal or legitimate musical identity under the Islamic Republic except a virtual existence. Their virtual pages are also considered "unauthorized"² and monitored under the ruling system. Thus, inscribing these female vocalists' names and virtual profiles in the film is an attempt, albeit in an intangible and virtual way, to bring honour and global recognition to these women through a subtle yet boundless medium, just as their subtle musical lives have been pursued in the shadows. It is often surprising to non-Iranian audiences that even non-political music and vocal-ity in Iran is intensely interwoven with politics, propaganda, and discriminative regulations. Accordingly, being a woman musician, even if not as a professional occupation, is to automatically engage in a daily resistance against oppression of music, women, and independent ideologies.

The Female Voice of Iran refuses to essentialize the systems of patriarchy and hierarchy that structure theocracy and social and civil life in many Middle Eastern and Islamic countries, including Iran. Instead, it finds more complexity in the lives of Iran's women musicians or in their personal understandings of their identities or their senses of religion and morality. The film presents several examples of the musicians' fathers, male partners, and husbands in various urban and rural areas of Iran who encourage and support women's

voices and art. The gender gap and discrimination in music are not supported by the general moral values of Iranians: Baraan Mozafari shares intimate moments with her husband, who accompanies her voice on percussion instruments at a folk music gathering in the Persian Gulf region; Mina Deris walks with her father, remembering the trauma of the 1980s Iran-Iraq war in southern Iran that embodies the Iranian sentiments and forbearance as she sings with an impressive expression of sorrow and tears later in the film; Jamileh Amaniyan, an ethnic Turkeman, shares how her husband enthusiastically supported her singing regardless of her shyness, even learning a musical instrument to accompany her when she sings. The film narrates the human story of a nation that speaks of music as a “primordial power” and an undeniable need, through emotion, passion, and admiration for beauty, far from the politics, social stigmas, or religious frames that have long conditioned its existence.

The film establishes the socio-political context of female music-making in Iran both visually and textually. Accompanying a statement summarizing the Islamic Republic’s harsh regulation of cultural life and female singing in public after the 1979 revolution (which failed to stop women from engaging with music through private classes or publishing on social media), is a visually powerful, if subtle, opening. We see a young Iranian woman dressed in traditional clothes, the wind connecting her solemn gaze to the refined mountainous curves of the vast Iranian plateau, an iconic panorama of the ancient land of Persia; she slowly lowers a shade that had covered her face and mouth, as if she is ready to open up. Her lips are tightly sealed and no

sound, save that of the wind, accompanies her. Yet her confident and constant far-reaching gaze is set to share a story calmly and patiently.

The ending is as touching as the beginning. As the vocalists gather in the garden of Isfahan, boundaries of ethnicity, musical genre, or individual voice are dissolved as they sing with their “now unified voice.” Modulation to the vocal arrangement of the theme, for instrumental ensemble, which was performed later alongside male colleagues in the European international festivals, suggests a *borderless world* in and out of Iran; camera shots of both contexts enhance the sense of unification. The filmmakers then pivot to shots of them holding and discussing Negar in a vast ancient rural cemetery over the hills, which echo the mountainous curves, fading into consciousness of the past as well as the ultimate eternity. The end credits feature many still photos of the women musicians holding “Negar” in their hands. Negar, “the voice,” is finally circulated among the storytellers to carry their story through this narrative journey. The opening and closing are both crucial to delivering the aim, drama, and message of the film, future horizons, and defining a shared language between local and global audiences. The mission is now accomplished in the centre of Iran, *the garden of Isfahan*, by uniting the isolated individual Iranian voices in one inclusive voice, and giving symbolic voice to the controversies of gender, ethnicity, and censorship in Iran.

The travelogue approach of the film is highly effective. It enriches many ethnographic aspects while the incorporation of many individual stories and characterizations into the film’s storyline

maintains viewers' interest. Iran's diverse ethnic makeup and interpretive aesthetics have not been overlooked or simplified; the film capitalizes on the cultural contrasts both narratively and visually. Using a touristic tone and reflective travelogue approach to Iran, a familiar way for non-Iranians to experience the country, elevates a presumed cliché into a unique style. The filmmakers take advantage of the long-standing European-Iranian relationship to invite a curious and empathetic West to discover Iran/Persia and its many "hidden voices and contrasts."

The techniques, symbolism, and aesthetics of the locations, narrations, ethnic costumes, cinematography, set design, and special effects work impressively with the content and structure of the film. The song selection, instrumental music arrangement, timbre, and development of the structure complete this formidable film. The notable regret for the non-Persian audience, however, is the lack of English translation of the lyrics and vocal parts in the subtitles. Additionally, the choice of a camel for the figure of Negar as a talking voice of Iran/Persia has discontented some Iranian viewers because it is mostly known as an Arab symbol. While a camel in general is not far from the West's epitomized idea of the Middle East, it is possible that the symbol is more of an avant grade touch than one that expands on Iranian cultural ideas.

The Female Voice of Iran is an impressive and sublime documentary on the music of the women in Iran. Moreover, it approaches its topic through the genuine portrayal of contemporary Iranians' thoughts, emotions, dreams and hopes, promises, oral histories, and performing affect and poetics in a certain socio-political

era. In addition to providing a substantial resource for the fields of gender, politics, Iranology, and music, it is a documentary for the audience mostly to "feel" and find *the silent voice and sentiments* that had been yearning under the ashes. Not only does it share the voice of an underrepresented or misrepresented nation, but also suggests a way of deriving the approach of artistic, aesthetic, and narrative research genuinely from that nations' views, connection, and beliefs toward life, identity, and music. The film echoes "numerous voices" of women from various ethnicities, genres, and professional or amateur levels while it delivers "the unified voice of women of Iran" who share the same passion and pain for music. 🌸

NOTES

This article has accompanying videos on our YouTube channel. You can find them on the playlist for MUSICultures volume 50, available here: http://bit.ly/MUSICultures_50. With the ephemerality of web-based media in mind, our online content may not always be accessible. We apologize for any inconvenience.

1. Also known as Esfahan. The possible metaphoric relevance of *The Garden* (referring to ancient Persian Gardens of Paradise) to the symbolic meaning of *Naqsh-e Jahan Square* (literally "Image of the World/Universe Square") as one of the artistic and cultural masterpieces in Isfahan — a medieval capital of Iranian art and power — is notable. This architectural complex consisting of mosques, bazaars, art and craft educational centres, palaces, courts, and public events' grounds was

constructed between 1598 and 1629 also at the centre of Isfahan during the Safavid era. In addition to its global artistic fame, it still holds a high national and social value for Iranians, especially artists.

2. Many virtual platforms and social media including YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and more recently, Instagram are filtered or blocked in Iran. Producing and/or broadcasting “unauthorized” content (shared through anti-filtering software) may result in legal consequences for the musicians.

VIDEOGRAPHY

Rochholl, Andreas. 2020. Behind the Scenes: The Female Voice of Iran. Prods. Yalda Yazdani and Sebastian Leitner. *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31pQnqWVhlc> (accessed November 1, 2022).

Zeitgenössische Oper Berlin. n.d. The Female Voice of Iran. <https://zeitgenoessische-oper.de/FVOI/> (accessed November 1, 2022).