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Kayhan Kalhor

Simon Broughton examines the remarkable career of the Iranian *kamancheh* player

By happy coincidence in the first issue of *Songlines* in 1999 we reviewed the debut album of Iranian *kamancheh* player Kayhan Kalhor. Not surprisingly, it was a Top of the World selection. Here was a magnificent new player on an instrument little known in the West, but reaching deeply back into Persian culture. It's often called a 'spike fiddle,' but the name doesn't do it justice. It's the ancestor of the violin that

has a penetrating, sinewy tone with a touch of desert-like sandpaper. Kalhor insists on playing the instrument kneeling down in the traditional playing position. "It's like riding a wild horse, you can't let your concentration wander even for a second," he says. He's probably had more Top of the World albums in *Songlines* than any other musician.

Kalhor was born in Kermanshah in Iranian Kurdistan, but grew up in Tehran. He first

studied violin (and the plucked *setar*, lute), before being inspired by the great *kamancheh* player Asghar Bahari – who basically kept the tradition alive during the years of heavy Westernisation. "By the time I was 15-16 years old, I was practicing 18 hours a day," Kalhor recalls. He also studied in Italy and Canada and has since spent his life living in both North America and Iran.

Although that first album, *Scattering Stars Like Dust*, showcased Kalhor as a solo artist, it's been with a whole variety of collaborations that he's made his name. He was a founder member of both the Dastan Ensemble, one of the best classical Iranian groups, and the Masters of Persian Music, featured on several recordings for Harmonia Mundi. He worked with Iran's best-known vocalists, Shahram

Nazeri and Mohammad Reza Shajarian. But it's his work across cultures that has brought him to a wider audience. He's played with Yo-Yo Ma, Kronos Quartet and countless other musicians from India, Turkey, Mali and beyond. Kalhor is always incredibly choosy about who he collaborates with and it is clear that he always puts musical compatibility above any commercial success.

The first of his many duo projects was with *sitar* player Shujaat Husain Khan. Of course Indian music and Persian music have a lot in common. They both require a seriously deep knowledge of the tradition and then the imagination to improvise. What made the Ghazal project, as it was called, so successful, wasn't just the meeting of traditions, but simply the way the two soloists could let rip with their improvisations. They recorded four brilliant albums together, three for Shanachie and the final one, *The Rain*, for ECM.

Another beautiful collaboration, but much closer to home, was with Kurdish *tanbur* player, Ali Akbar Moradi.

This project was dear to Kalhor because of his Kurdish roots and it was also a way to make one of Iran's brilliant folk musicians better known.

In the US, Kalhor was invited to work with Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble. The idea was to create music across borders and particularly the religious and cultural divides between West and East. Kalhor has done many concert tours with the ensemble and contributed to all six of their albums, including the Grammy-winning *Sing Me Home*, which was released last year.

Kayhan Kalhor also composed 'Gallop of a Thousand Horses' for Kronos Quartet, a piece inspired by Turkoman folk music that was included on their album *Caravan* in 2000. More ambitiously he worked with New York string quartet Brooklyn Rider on their searing album *Silent City*. The title-track is a powerful lament for the Iraqi Kurdish city of Halabja, which in 1988 suffered a chemical attack that was ordered by Saddam Hussein and killed up to 5,000 people. The music is influenced by Kurdish melodies while other tracks, such as 'Ascending Bird' and 'Parvaz', are inspired by Sufi themes. Although much of the music on the album is pre-composed, it involves all the players in improvised sections.

Other musical partners have been found in Iran and nearby countries of the Middle East. He has recorded two duo albums with Turkish

saz player Erdal Erzincan and another with Iranian *santur* (zither) player Ali Bahrami Fard. The latter album, *I Will Not Stand Alone*, was a powerful meditation after the protests and killings on the streets of Tehran as a result of the contested 2009 election, keeping hardline president Ahmadinejad in power.

"What is the role of music when bullets are fired, people are arrested, tortured and beaten?" Kalhor said to *Songlines*. "There is sadness in the beginning and depth, which turns into hope in the end. There is energy and life goes on." After the protests had quietened down, the duo gave nine sold-out concerts in one of Tehran's main halls followed by 21 concerts around the country.

Kalhor has built up an ongoing relationship with the Morgenland Festival in Osnabrück Germany. He first performed there in 2012 and has since done special concerts with Alim Qasimov (Azerbaijan), Kurdish singer Aynur (Turkey) and *kora* player Toumani Diabaté (Mali). Kayhan and Diabaté will tour the UK in

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November (see below). He brings a more unusual project to the Barbican's Transcender Festival in September. This is with the Rembrandt Frerichs Trio from the Netherlands with whom he has recorded an album – an intriguing mixture of jazz, classical and world music. Jazz pianist

Frerichs is a lover of Persian music and plays it on a 1790-style fortepiano, which can be re-tuned to Iranian scales. He and Kalhor are accompanied by Baroque bass *viol* and percussion, including Baroque, Chinese and Indian instruments. "The fortepiano sounds a bit like Persian santur but it's not played with the same technique or ideas," explains Kalhor. "Rembrandt is a jazz player and we started thinking about the sound more than the content. It's totally loose and totally open, more about improvisation and sound rather than content, which is interesting for me because I'm a content-minded person. There's a lot of space in the music which is what I really like." ♦

+ DATES *Kayhan Kalhor and the Rembrandt Frerichs Trio perform as part of Transcender Festival at the Barbican on September 29. Kalhor and Toumani Diabaté will perform at NCEM, York on November 3; RNCM, Manchester on November 4; Lakeside Arts, Nottingham on November 8; Colston Hall, Bristol on November 20 and Turner Sims, Southampton on November 21*

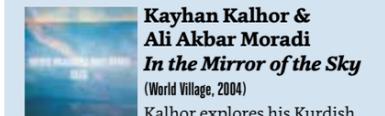
BEST ALBUMS



Kayhan Kalhor
Scattering Stars Like Dust
(Traditional Crossroads, 1998)
Kayhan Kalhor's international solo debut, which compellingly reveals his prowess. 'A mesmerising feast of colours and timbres,' said *Songlines* in #1.



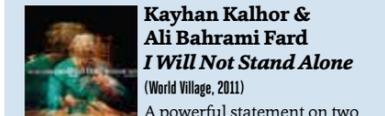
Ghazal
The Rain
(ECM, 2003)
Kalhor's Ghazal collaboration with *sitar* player Shujaat Husain Khan was a meeting of minds. This album was recorded live in Bern in 2001. 'The music is rich in ornament and detail, but sustained by arch-like structures.' A Top of the World in #19.



Kayhan Kalhor & Ali Akbar Moradi
In the Mirror of the Sky
(World Village, 2004)
Kalhor explores his Kurdish roots with *tanbur* player Moradi. It demonstrates 'Kalhor's great talent of wrapping hot, intimate warmth around his interpretations of historic music forms.' A Top of the World in #26.



Kayhan Kalhor & Brooklyn Rider
Silent City
(World Village, 2008)
'This is outstanding, unforgettable music, overlapping East and Western classical and folk modes in a wonder of world fusion,' with New York's superb string quartet. A Top of the World in #55.



Kayhan Kalhor & Ali Bahrami Fard
I Will Not Stand Alone
(World Village, 2011)
A powerful statement on two specially created instruments, the *shah kaman* and the bass *santur*. "The process of making this music and letting it be heard allowed me to realise that I will not stand alone," said Kalhor. A Top of the World in #82.

IF YOU LIKE KAYHAN KALHOR... TRY

Stelios Petrakis

Orion
(Buda Musique, 2009)
Like the *kamancheh*, the Cretan *lyra* is another instrument that has been brought back into the limelight by musicians like Ross Daly, Sokratis Sinopoulos and Stelios Petrakis. This album, featuring a handful of international musicians, is a landmark recording. A Top of the World in #60.