

SHAHRAM NAZERI

Laudan Nooshin on the extraordinary spirituality of the Iranian Sufi musician

NEED A GUIDE?

Songlines has over 30 Beginner's Guides archived on our site. Check out www.songlines.co.uk

Since the late 1970s, Iranian classical music has been dominated by the voices of two singers who, each in their own way, have become living legends. Of these, Mohammad Reza Shajarian is perhaps the best known outside Iran. But equally significant, and just as popular in Iran, is Shahram Nazeri, who has performed widely across Europe, North America and the Middle East, and produced many albums over the last 30 years, working with some of the most prominent Iranian musicians. Iranian classical vocal music isn't always the most accessible of styles for Western audiences, but Nazeri is one of those musicians who seems truly able to transcend cultural and linguistic barriers and transport his listeners to a higher level of emotional and spiritual consciousness, no matter what their background. Those lucky enough to hear him perform live will be struck by the calmness which his presence evokes, and by the extraordinary virtuosity and range of his voice, from the softest sounds to the most powerful.

But Nazeri is much more than just a singer, and his music goes beyond the sounds themselves to encompass a whole way of life. Musician, poet and philosopher, Nazeri's work is deeply imbued with centuries of Iranian history and poetry, as well as his personal outlook on life which is strongly influenced by mystical Sufism. When I first met and talked with the musician at his home in Tehran a few years ago, I was most struck by the modesty and humility of this gentle giant of Iranian music. When he talks, he draws on the most beautiful metaphors to make his points. For instance, describing the resurgence of interest in all things traditional in Iran after the 1979 revolution, he used the analogy of a reed-bed on fire: "It was as if a nation which had been asleep for centuries had woken... as if a fire had suddenly been lit in a reed-bed. And each of these reeds, since they are burning, was obliged to think about itself, about its society, about its history... people gradually became interested in their own culture, because in reality for many years in Iran there was a long period of loss of identity."

Born into a musical family in Kermanshah (in Iranian Kurdistan) in 1950, Nazeri was exposed to Kurdish and Sufi music from a young age and first sang on Iranian television at the age of 11. He later went on to study traditional Iranian classical music (a repertoire known as *radif*) and became proficient on *setar* (long-necked lute) alongside his vocal studies. His teachers

What makes Nazeri's music so special is his immersion in tradition on the one hand, and on the other, his pushing at boundaries

included some of the most respected musicians of mid-20th century Iran: Nour Ali Boroumand, Abdollah Davami and Mahmud Karimi. Nazeri first came to prominence as a vocalist during the return to roots 'revival' of the early 80s, when he worked with several groups, including the leading Aref and Sheyda ensembles. His landmark 1985 album, *Gol-e Sad Barg*, sparked a mini revolution of its own in setar playing as literally thousands of people were inspired to take up the instrument. At this time, Nazeri was one of a number of classically-trained Kurdish Iranian musicians (others included Kayhan Kalhor and members of the Kamkar family) who introduced elements of Kurdish regional music into the classical tradition,

including folk rhythms and instruments such as the *daf* frame drum.

But Nazeri's most enduring legacy has been his long-term work on the medieval mystic poet Rumi, known in Iran as Mowlana, whose 800th birthday is being celebrated this year. Despite centuries of popularity, surprisingly few classical singers chose to set Rumi's poetry to music prior to the 80s. Talking to Nazeri about this, he pointed out that unlike other medieval poets such as Sa'di and Hafez, Rumi's poetry doesn't sit easily with the metrical structures of the *radif*. He suggested that only by becoming totally immersed in Rumi's poetry and by changing one's mindset could one discover the key to setting his lyrics. In Nazeri's case, this included experimenting with new rhythmic structures, now something of a feature of his music. Nazeri's work over the last 30 years has played an important role in popularising Rumi's poetry among musicians. Today, Rumi is one of the most widely set poets, both within classical music and other genres – particularly popular music.

What makes Nazeri's music so special is his deeply rooted immersion in tradition on the one hand, and on the other, his pushing at boundaries and experimenting with new modes of expression. For instance, he has recently explored various kinds of vocal production and expression, which can be heard on the wonderful 1999 album *Through Eternity*. This album begins with solo unaccompanied voice, something previously unheard of in Iranian classical music; Nazeri's voice emerges softly, almost eerily, from nothingness and builds up as the instruments gradually join in. Talking about his relationship with tradition, Nazeri stresses how important it is for musicians to be fully grounded in the classical tradition, but that ultimately the role of this training is, in his words, "to prepare musicians to fly". And when Nazeri flies, he certainly takes his audience with him. Whether on CD or live, a performance by Nazeri is an intensely moving experience – at once poetic, virtuosic, powerful and inspirational. ●

The Passion of Rumi will be performed by Shahram Nazeri and the Rumi Ensemble on October 15 as part of the Barbican's Ramadan Nights festival

www.barbican.org.uk



Shahram Nazeri with his son Hafez who wrote the music for *The Passion of Rumi*

BEST...

Most of Nazeri's albums are published in Iran, but many of these are also available abroad through the online Amazon stores, as well as through Iranian websites such as www.iranmelody.com and iranianmovies.com. Some of his earlier recordings have also been re-released outside Iran by companies such as Caltex Records (www.caltexrecords.com).

...ALBUMS

***Gol-e Sad Barg (Flower with a Hundred Petals)*, Khosh Nava, 1985**



A landmark album, in collaboration with Jalal Zolfonoun; poetry by Rumi, Hafez and Attar. Re-released for the 800th anniversary of Rumi's birth.

***Through Eternity: Persian Devotional Music: Homage to Molavi* Sounds True, 1999**



One of the few Nazeri albums originally released outside Iran (and therefore with liner notes in English), this is a collaboration with the innovative Dastan

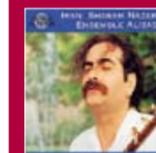
Ensemble in their original line-up with Kayhan Kalhor on *kamancheh* (bowed spike fiddle). The album is a homage to Rumi and highly recommended.

***Dar Golestaneh (In the Rose Garden)*, Caltex, 1996**



A tribute to contemporary Iranian poet, Sohrab Sepehri. This CD is a collaboration between Nazeri and members of the Kamkar family.

***Nowruz: Traditional & Classical Music*, Network Medien, 1999**



This album with the Ensemble Alizadeh is mainly Persian classical music along with a few Kurdish tunes and folksongs from Nazeri's native region.

IF YOU LIKE NAZERI, THEN TRY: ROZANEH

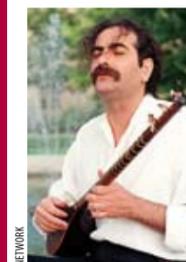
***Rozaneh* (Erato, 2001)**



This wonderful CD features two of Nazeri's pupils, Parvin Javdan and Zohreh Bayat, singing with an all-

female instrumental ensemble.

The music is steeped in Sufi mysticism and includes settings of Rumi.



Nazeri playing the setar, a Persian lute

