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Nahid Siamdoust, *Soundtrack of the Revolution: The Politics of Music in Iran*, Stanford University Press, 2017, 353 pp., \$29.95 US (pbk), ISBN: 9781503600324.

Musicians in Iran, particularly since the 1979 revolution and the advent of the Islamic Republic, have often found themselves engaging in carefully studied balancing acts. They have striven to navigate shifting state regulations; a changing, increasingly globalized media landscape; a rich, if at times overbearing, musical heritage; and their own contemporary creative inspirations and aspirations. Not unlike her musical protagonists, Nahid Siamdoust—whose main research interests are in Middle Eastern popular culture and media studies—attempts a careful balancing act in *Soundtrack of the Revolution*. Based on her award-winning dissertation, this book combines biographical and artistic sketches of several prominent Iranian musicians alongside a political and institutional study of the Islamic Republic's approach to music. It touches upon theoretical concepts such as performativity, the emergence of counterpublics, the public sphere, orality, and the politics of emotions and embodiment, while attempting to reach an audience beyond academic specialists.

The book moves along two main axes. It explores, first, the history of the Iranian state's attitudes towards music and its attempts to regulate its production and consumption; and, second, the experiences of artists, and to an extent also audiences, who have navigated the institutions, restrictions, and at times also the opportunities put in place by state policy. Bookended by introductory and concluding chapters, the author organizes the body of her text around four chronologically ordered pairs of chapters, which also mirror shifts in popular musical tastes. The first chapter of each pair is intended to provide the "necessary historical, political and social context," while the second "[delves] deeper into a discussion of the music and...the work of [a] highlighted musician" (25).

Chapter 1, an introduction of sorts, opens with Siamdoust's own recollections of attending two musical concerts in Iran. First, she recalls a hotel piano concert which she attended in the mid-1990s when she was a teenager visiting home from studies abroad. Here, she suggests, the regime's attitude towards the appropriate manner of musical consumption dictated the audience's avoidance of clapping. Second, she recalls a heavily attended pop concert in 2011, by "teen-idol crooner" Benjamin, which she attended as a researcher. While the differences between the two concerts were stark, in both cases the regime regulated music consumption, by regulating the audience's bodies. So, whereas in the first, decidedly more somber concert, no one clapped, in the pop concert, guards actively monitored and admonished members of the audience to "lower their arms or stop dancing with their upper bodies" (2).

These attention-grabbing vignettes reveal something about both Siamdoust's argument and her method. She considers concerts to be a site where music's capacity to engender the formation of counterpublics is most pronounced. In the case of the Islamic Republic, she argues, counterpublics challenged and subverted the regime by partaking public collective enjoyment in settings outside those prescribed as permissible by the state (15). Concerts thus constitute a primary research location for the book, whether Siamdoust accessed them through historical video footage or participated and attended herself. Where available, Siamdoust also directs her readers to online clips of performances, primarily on YouTube. These clips support her analyses, as, for example, in her discussion of "Khomeini's nightingale," the singer Sadeq Ahangaran who soundtracked much of the Iran-Iraq war (95-96).

Successive chapters consider more closely the connection between politics in music since the 1979 revolution. The Islamic Republic's attitude towards music, Siamdoust argues, has been characterized by multiple, at times contradictory, about-faces and by considerable ambiguity and arbitrariness. The revolution that eventually brought Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to power was accompanied by a historically resonant musical repertoire that often drew upon an older revolutionary musical tradition dating back to Iran's 1905-1911 Constitutional Revolution. Indeed, the soundtrack of this early twentieth-century revolution came into play alongside some of the "original" songs from the 1979 revolution, during the Green Movement of 2009.

The regime's "somewhat ambiguous project not merely to regulate the public aspects of its citizens' lives, but also to enforce correct Islamic behavior in the private sphere" (4), its emphasis on the need for a "cultural revolution," and its insistence, upon Khomeini's urging, that music *as* sound could dangerously drive youth towards "uselessness and futility" (7), led to an almost immediate prohibition of most kinds of music from radio and television when the 1979 revolution occurred. However, several months after it took power, the Islamic Republic's leadership realized the political potential of state-sanctioned music and loosened some restrictions, setting the stage for patriotic musical genres that would go on to soundtrack the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). In other ways, however, tight control and regulation over musical consumption and production remained largely in place until the mid-1990s. For example, the Islamic republic banned the solo female voice, a mainstay of Pahlavi-era Iranian musical culture, and it has indeed remained officially forbidden. Gender, therefore, has continued to play a salient role in the relationship between music and politics, although Siamdoust explores this issue too briefly.

Alongside the regulation of performances and broadcasting, the Islamic republic heavily regulated the importation of musical instruments (and their depiction), too. In Chapter 6, Siamdoust provides a wonderful anecdote about a Yamaha piano importer's appeal to ease such restrictions as an example of the increased openness under President Mohammad Khatami at the turn of the century (168-171). Similarly, the import of various media formats, such as audiocassettes, VHS, and recorders, understood as potentially introducing corrupting Western influences, was entirely prohibited—no doubt because revolutionaries like Khomeini were fully aware of the way such technologies had enabled their own rise to power at the expense of the Pahlavi regime.

While Siamdoust traces several sources of theoretical inspiration in her first chapter—which provides a condensed but quite lucid explanation of sources ranging from Judith Butler and Pierre Bourdieu to others—theory falls out of the rest of the book. Some readers may appreciate the loss of theory, but others (myself included) may find themselves wishing that Siamdoust had maintained the threads of these discussions throughout the rest of the

book. The one notable exception which does resurface relates to al-Ghazali's and Farabi's Islamic theories of music and listening—rendered germane to the narrative since leading figures in the Islamic Republic from Khomeini onwards themselves consistently referred to them (290-291, fn. 20).

That said, what Siamdoust does cover in the body of *Soundtrack of the Revolution* sheds new light on the inner workings of cultural politics in the Islamic Republic. The “contextual” chapters (2, 4, 6, and 8) are characterized by careful attention to the intricacies and contradictions of the Islamic Republic's cultural institutions and its largely unwritten corpus of undocumented music-related policies. That they have remained largely unwritten means that while Siamdoust has made great efforts to access any existing written sources, such as the 2011 Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) requisites document (92-94), she culled much of her institutional and political history from interviews. The more artist and artistry driven chapters (3, 5, 7, and 9) are, in turn, at least equally sensitive to the ways musicians have negotiated state policies and positioned themselves in relation to both contemporary and historical Iranian politics, society, and musical traditions, both in Iran itself and in relation to the Iranian diaspora. For their sources, both kinds of chapters rely on a combination of academic literature, periodicals, memoirs, official publications and statements, video and audio recordings, and websites. However, it is the interviews which Siamdoust appropriately describes as the “central pillar” of the book's methodology (34). Accordingly, these furnish *Soundtrack of the Revolution* with its most compelling and important contributions.

Chapter 2 is primarily dedicated to the history of the relationship between music and politics in Iran leading up to the 1979 revolution, serving as a background of sorts for the bulk of Siamdoust's study. Chapter 4 then lays the groundwork for an important part of one of the book's key arguments. Here, Siamdoust engages with the writings of Ayatollah Khomeini on music and listening, which defined music's permissibility both considering the feelings it inspires in listeners and the context of its production and consumption (90-91). Such criteria permitted the ambiguity and arbitrariness which have governed the Republic's approach to music and have provided state institutions and individuals within them immense power over Iran's musical soundscape (a term Siamdoust employs strictly in relation to music, rather than referencing R. Murray Schafer's pioneering, and significantly broader definition).<sup>1</sup> Rendering legible the institutional maze that emerged of this ambiguity and arbitrariness is one of the book's more significant challenges, and Siamdoust does this remarkably well.

The institutional emphasis continues in chapter 6. Here, the focus is on the relative laxity of the Khatami era (1997-2005) which led to what Siamdoust refers to as “the rebirth of independent music,” including the rise of “underground” (*zirzami*) rock and metal.<sup>2</sup> Far from portraying the Khatami years uncritically, however, Siamdoust documents how despite its relative openness, many artists still found themselves applying time and time again for permits to have their music published, never fully understanding why their requests were denied (175-176). Chapter 8 depicts the move from rock music to rap as the underground's leading genre against the backdrop of the conservative backlash under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Iranian rap, or Rap-e Farsi, is described as having risen to prominence

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<sup>1</sup> R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester: Destiny Books, 1994 [1977]).

<sup>2</sup> Mark LeVine's, *Heavy Metal Islam* is an important touchstone for Siamdoust in this chapter. Mark LeVine, *Heavy Metal Islam: Rock, Resistance, and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2008).

primarily by way of the creation of new forms of public spaces, bolstered by the immense popularity of Internet websites dedicated to the genre and increased access to Iranian émigré operated satellite channels (214-222). Online, the competition between musicians (and music consumers) and the state became considerably more visible, as the latter attempted to increase its control of the Internet in Iran, while users found ways to circumvent its restrictions.

The other half of *Soundtrack of the Revolution's* paired chapters feature detailed portraits of four male Iranian artists. Chapter 3, centers on the figure of singer and musician Mohammad Reza Shajarian, whose career extends across the revolutionary divide. Shajarian's classical Iranian musical training and provincial origins relegated him to the sidelines of the late-Pahlavi era musical scene. However, the 1979 revolution's nativist tendencies rendered him and the Chavosh musical group he participated in, into a musical embodiment of the revolution and its ideals, for precisely the same characteristics. Shajarian himself refuses to be described as "revolutionary" (*enqelabi*) or even "political" (*siasi*), opting instead to style himself as *mardomi* ("popular"), a term which Siamdoust points out resonates with democratic politics. This indicates not only his pronounced resistance to subjecting music to political factionalism, but also the growing distance between him and the regime which came to power through the revolution his voice embodied (66-70), a distance which since 2009 devolved into crisis.

Chapter 5 follows the intriguing Alirezza Assar, who became Iran's biggest pop star as newly permitted state-sanctioned pop music became popular at the turn of millennium. Whereas the reintroduction of pop music has often been cast as a government orchestrated effort to direct attention away from growing, pernicious foreign cultural influence, Siamdoust seeks to analyze Assar's work, and that of others, to highlight how they also challenged the regime. Assar, for example, carefully cultivated an affinity to mysticism in his artistic persona (127-128) which has allowed him to embody a popular "honest Islam," in contrast to what is at times perceived as the regime's corrupt and rigid approach to religion. Such careful cultivation characterizes his entire public image. While he too has grown more critical of the regime, particularly since the mid-2000s, his criticism has remained balanced, "on a tightrope" (135), as Siamdoust describes it.

Chapters 7 and 9, which deal with the figures of rebel rocker, Mohsen Namjoo, and Rap-e Farsi pioneer, Hichkas, respectively, offer some of the book's most interesting and most frustrating moments. The highly self-conscious Namjoo, a marvelous story-teller and capable provocateur, sports a material attitude to the voice and to sound and a clear conception of his art's goals. His vocal performance, and the subversive qualities of his music, are based upon combining lyrics with noises and animal sounds, or merging together Quranic text with rock music. Siamdoust's ability to let her interlocutor shine here is remarkable. However, it also highlights some of the problems of *Soundtrack of the Revolution's* relative interpretative conservatism when it comes to artists less explicitly philosophical than Namjoo.

This interpretative conservatism is especially pronounced in Chapter 9's discussion of Iranian hip-hop. Here, Siamdoust's interlocutors are no less challenging and provocative than Namjoo, but something in the communication with them simply does not work as well. For example, in a fascinating segment, Iranian rapper Yas responds to another interviewer's suggestion that subdued lyrics led to one of his songs finally receiving ministry approval, by insisting, "For God's sake, don't think that way. Rap's beat is seen as illicit and criminal by the authorities... They're bothered by the beat." Siamdoust understands Yas's statements as demonstrating his uncertainty as to why his music is consistently censored. However, a similar mode of engagement with Yas's expression as that which was accorded to Mohsen

Namjoo's in the previous chapter, would possibly have led Siamdoust to the conclusion that Yas is in fact, quite certain as to why his music is being censored: "it's the beat."

That this explanation is perhaps not taken very seriously points to the first of two problems in *Soundtrack of the Revolution*, which I would like to highlight. First, in the absence of an interlocutor like Namjoo who specifically emphasizes the aural dimensions of his politics, the politics of music in much of the book is found first and foremost in the lyrical register, or at the level of artists' self-styling. While these are of course crucial components of the politics of music anywhere, scholars such as John Street have increasingly been calling attention to the ways in which "sound itself communicates politically," in contrast to the "tendency to reduce the politics of music to words and lyrics."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, sound studies, increasingly being discussed also in the context of Middle Eastern studies, has been making the case for scholars across the disciplines to take sound, in all its variety (music, noise, speech, etc.), seriously.<sup>4</sup>

A more direct engagement with the politics of music as sound would also have allowed Siamdoust to analyze in greater depth other important events her study illuminates. For example, the regime's 2009 removal of Shajarian's rendition of the *Rabbana* prayer from the airwaves, which had been aired every day of Ramadan since 1979, practically begs for a material approach to the cultural politics of music and voice. It would have been fascinating to explore how the intense 30-year identification of a specific, material voice and rendition of a prayer with the holy month of Ramadan and the regime, was experienced by people in Iran. Further, it seems crucial to understand how Iranians perceived and were affected by that voice's "loss" at a moment otherwise characterized by general crisis and upheaval.

The second issue is directly tied to Chapter 9's content and to the global politics of race and music. Siamdoust is clearly interested in the politics of hip-hop in Iran and considers the importance of hip-hop being a global musical style. However, hip-hop's intensely political, at times revolutionary roots in the politics of race-relations in the United States, and its resonances in relation to global conceptions of race,<sup>5</sup> go oddly unmentioned, even as some of its more vocally political artists, such as Immortal Technique, are referenced by the author's Iranian interlocutors (256). Given that in 2015, Hichkas himself released a song that fiercely critiqued Iranian attitudes to race and the obliviousness to the painful and violent history behind the figure of Haji Firuz—the Norooz icon based on the figure of an African slave—and found himself the target of attacks as a result, it is clear that this obliviousness to race and racism is not shared by at least some Iranian rappers.<sup>6</sup> This omission is made all the more crucial, seeing as despite the publication of several important works beginning in the early 2000s, race still remains one of Middle East Studies' most glaring blind spots.

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<sup>3</sup> John Street, *Music and Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 42.

<sup>4</sup> "Roundtable: Bringing Sound into Middle East Studies," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (2016): 113-155.

<sup>5</sup> For the political potency of hip-hop as a genre directly linked to racial injustice, see, for example: Nitasha Tamar Sharma, *Hip Hop Desis: South Asian Americans, Blackness, and a Global Race Consciousness* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> I thank Beeta Baghoolizadeh for bringing Hichkas's "Firooz" to my attention. Hichkas, "Firooz," Lyrics: Hichkas, Music: Mahdyar Aghajani, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HxkncQCpzzc>>, (last accessed: March 28, 2017). For a concise but informative discussion of race in Iran, see: Beeta Baghoolizadeh, "The Afro-Iranian Community: Beyond Haji Firuz Blackface, the Slave Trade, & Bandari Music," *Ajam Media Collective*, June 20, 2012, <<https://ajammc.com/2012/06/20/the-afro-iranian-community-beyond-haji-firuz-blackface-slavery-bandari-music/>>, (last accessed: March 28, 2017).

These criticisms aside, Nahid Siamdoust's *Soundtrack of the Revolution* is an important, often captivating book. Alongside other recent work such as Blake Atwood's, *Reform Cinema in Iran*,<sup>7</sup> it promises to enrich our thinking about culture in the Islamic Republic, and cultural production and politics in the Middle East in general. Siamdoust's experience as a leading journalist for publications such as the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Time*, and her mastery of the form of the interview, clearly come through in her ability to make use of oral sources to do two seemingly very different things: to reconstruct the workings of entire institutions on the one hand, and to paint vivid pictures of artistic ambition and creation, on the other. Her writing remains lucid and engaging throughout. Indeed, a key selling point of *Soundtrack of the Revolution* is its accessibility and coherence. At a time when historians increasingly seem closed out of Middle Eastern archives, and when American media attention to Iran is dangerously limited, lop-sided, and flawed, Siamdoust illuminates a fascinating story about music and politics, art and popular culture, in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

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<sup>7</sup> Blake Atwood, *Reform Cinema in Iran: Film and Political Change in the Islamic Republic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

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