



## Flowers of Persian Song and Music

### The Gulha Programmes

Produced by Davoud Pirnia

The Gulha weekly radio programmes were produced by Davoud Pirnia (1901-1971) and aired on Iranian radio between 1956 and 1979.

These programmes covered the entire history of classical as well as contemporary Persian poetry, giving marvellous expression to the whole gamut of traditional Persian music and poetry.

This CD provides a representative sampling of the programmes, and thereby aims to give an overview of the classical music of Persia.



*Davoud Pirnia*



*Husayn Qavtami*



*Midhi Khalidi*



*Seated, right to left: Adib Hunsari, Abol Hasan Saba, Mortza Majubi, Ahmad Ibadi.  
Standing, right to left: Hosain Hamadianian, Hasan Kasaie, Ali Tajvidi, Shanjarfi, Reza Varzandeh.*

## The Gulha Programmes

The *Gulha* programmes have been referred to by many scholars of Persian Studies as a veritable encyclopaedia of Persian music and poetry. These programmes are made up of literary commentary with the declamation of poetry, which is sung with musical accompaniment, interspersed with solo musical pieces. For the 23 years that these programmes were broadcast, the most eminent literary critics, famous radio announcers, singers, composers and musicians in Iran were all invited to participate in them. The foremost and best musicians, vocalists, literary critics, poets and announcers performed, so the programmes provide a unique—in fact still the best and most poetically diverse—recorded collection of the classical corpus of Persian music and poetry made in the twentieth century. The programmes were exemplars of excellence in the sphere of music and refined examples of literary expression, making use of a repertoire of over 500 classical and modern Persian poets, setting literary and musical standards that are still looked up to with admiration in Iran today. They marked a watershed in Persian culture, following which music and musicians gained respectability. Heretofore, due to the conservative anti-music bias of traditional Islamic Shi'ite thought which dominated the society, music had primarily been practised behind closed doors. Where performed in public spaces, its performers had been tarred with the same brush as popular street minstrels. Until the advent of the *Gulha* programmes, it had been taken for granted that any female performers and musicians were less than respectable. However, due to the high literary and musical quality of the programmes, the public perception of music and musicians in Iran shifted, and its participants came to be considered—virtually for the first time in Persian history of the Islamic period—as maestros, virtuosos, divas and adepts of a fine art, no longer looked down upon as cabaret singers or denigrated as street minstrels.

During the initial years of the Iranian Revolution, when the verse and song of the great Persian poets were considered to be counter-revolutionary, such that music was completely banned and recitation of classical Persian poetry frowned upon, the participants in the *Gulha* programmes sought refuge in the privacy of their homes. Since the Islamic Republic forced many of the great musicians to suppress their artistic inclinations and aspirations, many of them went into internal exile or fled abroad, and some were even executed. Today, many, particularly female artists, are still banned from performing in Iran. Although the *Gulha* programmes are surreptitiously collected, and coveted by Iranians both inside and outside Iran, the sublime artistry of most of these programmes has remained under lock and key since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. One reason for this is that all of the programmes feature either female singers or announcers which the current Iranian religious authorities prohibit from being broadcast in Iran—the female solo voice is still banned in mixed public audiences in Iran.

Thanks to a generous grant from the Endangered Archives Programme of the British Library, Jane Lewisohn has been able to collect and digitalize the complete archive of the *Gulha* programmes, so this veritable encyclopedia of Persian Music and literature which until now had been scattered in private archives in Iran and throughout the rest of the world, has been deposited in the World Music section of the British Library's Sound Archive, where they are available and accessible to scholars and musicians.

Comprising altogether 1778 programmes, the *Gulha* programmes are broken down into six different series:

- 1) 157 'Perennial Flowers [of Persian Poetry and Song]'  
(*Gulha-yi javidan*)
- 2) 581 'Multicoloured Flowers [of Persian Poetry and Song]'  
(*Gulha-yi rangarang*)
- 3) 312 'A Green Leaf [of Song and Verse]'  
(*Barg-i sabz*)
- 4) 465 'A Bouquet of Roses [of Song and Verse]'  
(*Yik shakh-i gul*)
- 5) 63 'Desert Flowers [of Song and Verse]'  
(*Gulha-yi sahra'i*)
- 6) 201 'Fresh Flowers [of Song and Verse]'  
(*Gulha-yi taza*).

On this CD, for obvious reasons of space, we have only been able to provide two programmes. We have featured one complete 'A Green Leaf [of Song and Verse]' and one 'Perennial Flowers [of Persian Poetry and Song]' programme, both produced and broadcast during the mid-1950s, each of which we consider to be one the best of its kind.



TRACK 1: 44:49

## “Perrenial Flowers of Persian Song and Verse” (*Gulha-yi Javidan* 132)

Musical Mode (*Dastgah*): *Shur, Dashti* and *Sigah*

Commentary: Davoud Pirnia

Recitation: Rushanak

Clarinet: (*qara-ney*): Muhammad Shir-Khuda'i

Long-necked Lute (*sitar*): Ahmad 'Ibadi

Violin: Mihdi Khalidi, Ali Tajvidi

Goblet Drum (*tumbak*): Amir Nasir Iftitah

Singing (*avaz*): Husayn Qavami (Fakhta'i), Ghulum Husayn Banan

*Santur*: Riza Varzandih

The programme begins with the signature tune of the *Gulha-yi Javidan* played by Muhammad Shir-Khuda'i on the clarinet (*qara-ney*) in the melody of *Masnavi-yi mukhalif-i sigah*, in the sub-mode (*gusha*) of *Hudi va Pahlavi*. Rushanak, the most famous female announcer of the *Gulha* programmes, who is accompanied by Shir-Khuda'i's clarinet, recites these verses from Sa'di's *Rose Garden (Gulistan)* which inaugurate and set the mood for all the *Gulha-yi Javidan* programmes:

*Bi-chih kar ayadat ze gul tabaqi?*  
*Az gulistan-i man bibar varaqi.*  
*Gul hamin panj ruz u shish bashad*  
*V'in gulistan hamisha khush bashad.*

*What use are trays of flowers?*  
*Take a petal or two from my rose garden.*  
*Roses last but a few days, yet this rose garden*  
*Of mine will stay perpetually in bloom.*

This particular programme is devoted to the life and poetry of an early eleventh-century Persian poet known as Baba Tahir. The commentary on his life and work has been composed by Davoud Pirnia, who supervised the production of all the *Gulha* programmes. The poet's full name is Baba Tahir 'Uryan (the 'Naked One'). Although legend has it that he was an illiterate woodcutter who experienced a mystical enlightenment, he was considered by his contemporaries as one of the most eminent, erudite mystics of his time. All of Tahir's poetry was written in two-lined rhyming couplets known as *du-bayti* in the local Persian dialect of Luristan (Western Iran), where he was born, the meters of which are said to reflect the Pre-Islamic poetic traditions of southeastern and central Kurdistan. His poems are characterized by their erotic imagery, amorous longing, mournful lamentation and intense Sufi mysticism.

The programme begins with Rushanak reciting a couplet from Baba Tahir with the gentle murmur in the background of Ahmad 'Ibadi's *sitar* (long necked lute), a quiet mystical instrument that came into its own with the playing of 'Ibadi. This is followed by 'Ibadi's accompaniment of Mihdi Khalidi on the violin and Amir Nasir Iftitah with the goblet drum (*tumbak*), who play an improvisational piece in the modes of *Shur* and *Dashti*. The phrases that Khalidi plays are typical of his method of interpreting the melody and the rhythm. His delicate bowing blends perfectly with the sound of 'Ibadi's *sitar* and Iftitah's *tumbak*. The *tumbak*, rather than standing out as a separate instrument, serves to subtly blend with the other two instruments, although without it the other two instruments would sound naked and alone.

Davoud Pirnia's commentary at this juncture explains that Baba Tahir had experienced such a deep state of mystical absorption and was so transported by rapture for God that he was unaware of and unaffected by his surroundings. Pirnia's commentary is interspersed with Rushanak's recitation from Tahir's *du-baytis* and accompanied by 'Ibadi's *sitar*, Khalidi's violin and Iftitah's *tumbak* in

the background. The commentary continues to explain that even though Baba Tahir's poetry is written in a simple language understandable to all and sundry, it is steeped in a sophisticated Sufi philosophy of mystical love.

This commentary on and recitation from Tahir's poetry continues down into the last section of his commentary. About halfway through the programme, the mood changes and Khalidi's violin is replaced by the violin of 'Ali Tajvidi, who continues in the musical mode (*dastgah*) of *Dashti*. The contrast between the colourful brilliance of Tajvidi's violin and the relatively muted and gentle sound of Khaleidi's violin is quite evident. The phrases that Tajvidi plays are a loyal reflection of his teachers, Abu'l-Hasan Saba and Husayn Yahaqqi. While demonstrating his mastery of musical phrases, Tajvidi also shows the strength of his bowing and his ability to impart his own individual emotional expression to the melody.

After this rhythmic piece, the classical singing (*avaz*) section of the programme commences, sung in the smooth voice of Husayn Qavami (Fakhta'i) accompanied by Tajvidi's violin. Qavami sings three of Baba Tahir's two-line couplets (*du-baytis*), followed by a recitation of a fourth *du-bayti* by Rushanak. Then, the mood changes and Riza Varzandih begins playing the *santur* in the musical mode (*dastgah*) of *Sigah*, but, in contrast to his usual practice of beginning with strong rhythmic phrases, he performs more gentle phrases.

At this juncture, Ghulum Husayn Banan begins singing Baba Tahir's poems in the modal system of *Sigah*, using his celebrated powers of vocal ornamentation that feature the formidable cracking falsetto break of the voice (*tahrir*). His method of expressing the poetry of Baba Tahir in this programme is more romantic than mystical. Varzandih's fine tuning of the *santur* is complemented by Banan's astute attentiveness during his execution of the various scales (*parda*), and together they make this programme a very good example of the

vocal performance (*avaz*) with instrumental accompaniment in classical Persian music. It seems that Banan was trying to fit each of the two-lined couplets of Baba Tahir's into one of the traditional melodic segments (*gusha*) of the modal system of *Sigah* but due to time constraints, was obliged to descend back into the overture (*daramad*) of *Sigah* and conclude his song prematurely. Despite this, his adept vocal abilities are demonstrated by the masterful way that he has executed this cadential formula (*furud*) without the listener even noticing and without it even being sensed that the singer had omitted the famous melodic segment of *Mukhalif* (the central section of *Sigah*), so that in the end, the listener to the programme is left with a sense of complete satisfaction and content with his performance.



TRACK 2: 26.22

## “A Green Leaf”

(*Barg-i sabz* 83)

Musical Mode (*dastgah*): *Sigah*

Recitation: Rushanak

Piano: Murtaza Mahjubi

Violin: ‘Ali Tajvidi

Tar: Farhang Sharif

Santur: Jahangir Shanjarfi

Singing: Ghulum Husayn Banan

Poetry: Mawlana Rumi, Farid al-Din ‘Attar, Fakhr al-Din ‘Iraqi

This programme, like all the other ‘Green Leaf’ (*Barg-i sabz*) programmes, opens with the declamation of these mystical verses attributed to Farid al-Din ‘Attar (d. 1221):

*Chish bugsha ki jilva-yi dildar dar tajalli’st az dar u divar.  
In tamasha, chu bingari, gu’i: laysa fi’l-dar ghayrahu dayyar*

*Open your eyes so you may see the epiphany of the Beloved  
displayed upon each wall and door.*

*When you behold this vision, you will declare:  
‘He alone is Lord in all the land.’*

These introductory verses are followed by a rhythmic instrumental piece resembling a formal orchestral overture (*pishdaramad*), the gravitas of which prepares the listener for the classical singing later on in the programme. Rushanak then recites verses ascribed to Mawlana Rumi (d. 1273) in separate sequences, one after the other. Rumi’s poem is a powerful theoerotic lyric (*ghazal*) written in the contemptus mundi or *zuhdiyya* genre. This poem, which is not found in any published critical collections of his mystical lyrics (Divan-i Shams-i Tabriz), is a passionate declamation of detachment from the world

and mystical abandonment to the Divine Beloved, and belongs to the singing repertoire of the Qadiri Sufis of Iran who still use the poem in the prelude to their mystical sessions of music and dance (*Sama*). Rushanak’s recitation here beautifully evokes the spiritual intensity of Rumi’s verses.

Her declamation is interspersed with and ornamented by instrumental duets played by ‘Ali Tajvidi (violin) and Farhang Sharif (tar) in the modal system of *Sigah*, one of the most characteristic modes of Persian music. As with the previous track, in Tajvidi’s violin playing the influences of his teachers, Abu’l-Hasan Saba and Husayn Yahaqqi, are clearly audible. Farhang Sharif’s tar playing represents an excellent example of his own unique style developed during the 1950s. ‘Ali Tajvidi and Farhang Sharif together engage in an intimate dialogue of free improvisation with their respective instruments. Improvisation is, and has been, one of the pillars of Persian instrumental music, but up to Davoud Pirnia’s time, under whose direction this programme was designed, orchestrated and aired, it was seldom, if ever, heard on the radio in Iran. This sequencing of poetic recitation and instrumental performance was one of the unique innovations of Davoud Pirnia.

At this juncture, Rushanak’s recitation terminates and the second half of the programme commences. Murtaza Mahjubi plays a rhythmic piece on the piano in the mode of *Sigah*, the tonality of which is slightly different from previous duet by the ‘Ali Tajvidi and Farhang Sharif, which was also played in *Sigah*. Mahjubi’s piano performance in its overall plan has been adopted from a piece composed by one of his teachers, Habib Sama’i (1902–1946), one of the greatest Santur (Iranian hammer–dulcimer) players of Iran. Mahjubi’s rhythmic piano, combined with the beat of the goblet–drum (*tumbak*) that accompanies him, creates a beautiful contrast.



The musical interlude of Mahjubi's piano is followed by Ghulum Husayn Banan's highly moving singing of four mystical verses from a ghazal by 'Attar. The verses enjoin patience before adversity, preaching the theomonist notion that since all calamities ultimately come from God, the lover should see God in all phenomena whether good or ill, joyfully resigned to His Will. Despite their brevity, Banan's rendition of these few lines from this ghazal remains today one of the supreme interpretations of 'Attar's poetry. Rather than his more complex and ornamental form of classical singing (Avaz), Banan has wisely chosen a simple and clear form of expression to convey these mystical sentiments, using the introductory melodies from the mode of Sigah. He is mainly accompanied by Tajvidi on the violin with a supporting role given to Jahangir Shanjarafi's playing of the santur.

As soon as Banan ceases his song, Roshanak recites the renowned signature line taken from a couplet in a ghazal by 'Iraqi, the same verse finale with which the other *Barg-i sabz* programme conclude:

*It's well no one is ever turned away hopeless from your court  
For the one who in despair casts himself down on your doorstep.*

This is followed by a final duet by Tajvidi on the violin and Shanjarafi on the santur in the mode of Sigah, following which Roshanak recites the traditional sign-off for all the *Barg-i sabz* programmes: "This then was a green leaf, a humble dervish's gift. May the Most High ('Ali) watch over you." (*In ham barg-e sabzi bud, tohfa-e darvish. 'Ali negahdar-e shoma*).

## Biographies

**GHULUM HUSAYN BANAN** (1911-1986) was born into an aristocratic Qajar family. Banan was brought up in a family that knew classical poetry well and could recite it properly. He studied both traditional classical singing (*avaz*) with masters like Ziya Zakirin, Nasir Sayf and Hosayn Tahirzadieh (1882-1995). Banan is a singer who had mastered the traditional Qajar style of singing as well as the newer Pahlavi style. In 1955 he was invited by Davoud Pirnia to join the *Gulha* programmes and, until his retirement in 1966, he recorded many programmes in the *Gulha-yi Javidan*, *Gulha-yi Rangarang*, *Barg-i Sabz*, and *Yik Shakh-i Gul* series. His voice has a soft velvet-like quality and he is considered one of the greatest singers of classical Persian music.

**HUSAYN QAVAMI** (1905-1991) learned to sing from 'Abdu'llah Hijazi and worked with other old masters as well. For years, due to military service and other engagements, he could not find work as a professional singer. Finally, in 1947 he was invited by the great musicologist Ruhullah Khaliqi (1906-1965) to work for the Iranian National Radio in Tehran. In 1955 he was invited by Davud Pirnia to perform on the *Gulha* programmes and he continued singing for the radio until 1975. His voice has been recorded in the *Gulha-yi Javidan*, *Gulha-yi Rangarang*, and *Barg-i Sabz* programmes. His voice is mellow with a clear timbre, and his musical sense precise and reliable. Amongst the classical Iranian artists, he was especially renowned for his high ethical and mystical values. In the *Gulha-yi Javidan* series, his style tended to be more that of singers who performed in religious circles. He was rigorously correct and clear in his pronunciation of the words in classical lyrics. At the same time he refrained from making the more complex of the voice-breaking cadenza flourishes (*tahrir*). He did, however, observe stirring pauses in the caesuras between phrases. His harmonics with the violinist's phrasing count amongst the most beautiful features of his performance in these programmes.

**MURTAZA MAHJUBI** (1900-1965) was considered the greatest pianist amongst classical Iranian musicians, setting the standard for piano technique in the classical genre. His genius was such that he originally learned the piano completely by ear. By the age of 20 he was the most famous professional pianist in all Iran. For twenty-three years (1940-1963) he performed for orchestras broadcast by Radio Tehran. From 1955 on, he was a regular performer for the *Gulha* series, for which he not only played the piano but was also wrote some of its most beautiful compositions and memorable songs. His piano technique and special sonority were readily recognized by fans of the *Gulha*. In addition, his compositions count amongst the great contemporary pieces in the repertoire of Iranian classical music, performed as they were by the *Gulha* orchestra conducted by Ruhu'llah Khaliqi.

**MIHDI KHALIDI** (1919-1990) was one of the most distinguished violinists in Iranian classical music between the years 1940 and 1960. His teacher was the great Abu'l-Hasan Saba (1902-1957). He had a particular violin technique of his own which can be detected in some of the performances of two other famous artists, 'Ali Tajvidi and Parviz Yahaqqi (1935-2006) who he influenced. He performed with the *Gulha* programmes for four years (1955-1959), though unfortunately many of his finest works have not been recorded in these programmes. What has survived has great beauty with an air of nostalgia. A number of his melodies count amongst the most important works in the genre of Iranian classical music performed in the *Gulha*.

'**ALI TAJVIDI** (1919-2006) was considered one of the greatest of the classical artists who was among the most important performers in the *Gulha*, on the same plane with Murtaza Mahjubi. His principal teacher was Abu'l-Hasan Saba, though he studied with many other distinguished masters. He worked with Radio Tehran for some thirty years (1949-1979). He played the violin and composed some of the finest pieces for a large number of the *Gulha* programmes. Hundreds of programmes in which he has participated as both composer and performer have been recorded. The works which he has composed under the inspiration of the compositions of Mahjubi and Husayn Yahaqqi (1905-1968) are amongst the most treasured in the classical repertoire of Persian music. In the particular programme contained on this CD he provides a timbre more gentle and mellow than may be heard in other *Gulha* programmes. Furthermore, he presents a performance art of his own, which is simplified in such a way as to give backing so the singer can shine, whereby the subtle nuances of the mystical poetry can stand out clearly without having to compete with complexities of instrumentation.

**AHMAD 'IBADI** (1901-1992) was one of the greatest of the masters of the *sitar* in the Iranian classical tradition. He was the son of one of the most distinguished singers of the Qajar era, while he himself enjoyed a long career spanning the years from 1921 to 1978 in different venues featuring classical performance. In the period 1955-1978 he worked with the *Gulha* series, recording hundreds of programmes illuminated by his brilliant *sitar* technique.



**AMIR NASIR IFTITAH** (1937-1988) was one of the most talented young performers on the *tumbak* from the 1950s onwards. Studying with Husayni Tehrani, he rapidly developed and mastered his own particular tone and style. He performed in some of the earliest *Gulha* programmes, recording numerous pieces in duet, as well as accompanying singers and orchestral performances. Experts have praised the smoothness, power and rhythmic subtlety of his performance technique enriched by his sense of the nuances of crescendo and diminuendo. This programme provides an excellent example of these features. The captivating nature of his performance is such that the listener is drawn in unawares. The effect is such that when his performance stops while the accompanying instrument carries on solo, the listener feels that the music has become stripped and is missing something.

**RIZA VARZANDIH** (1926-1976) was known as one of the greatest santur players of his time because of the romantic quality of his performance, radiating a free-flowing expression of imagination and boundless creativity. Born and bred in the provincial town of Kashan, his youth was spent there during the harsh years of World War II where he learned his instrument at the hand of his musical father. His talent was discovered by the famous radio singer of the time, Husayn Qavami, who invited him to Tehran, introducing him to the *Gulha* programmes, for which he became the leading santur performer for many years. He was known for his original style on the instrument, forged under the inspiration of two great masters, Habib Sama'i and Murtaza Mahjubi. The peak of his power is visible in the performance of rhythmic pieces involving rapid changes of pace and complexity of beat, which he mastered with precision tuning and the light touch of his sticks. In the performance of the musical mode of Sigah, accompanying the voice of Banan singing the poetry of Baba Tahir, he strives to provide the musical atmosphere harmonizing with the singer's tones in a way that evokes the mystical meaning of the lyrics with a clarity that moves the heart.

**FARHANG SHARIF** (b. 1932) was one of the handful of eminent tar players in the *Gulha* programmes, which include Lutfu'llah Majd (1918-1978) and Jalil Shahnaz (b. 1921). Born into a musical family which was a part of the early twentieth-century classical scene, he studied with the masters Abdu'l-Husayn Shahnazi (1900-1948), 'Ali-Akbar Shahnazi (1897-1984) and Murtaza Nay-Davud (1900-1990). However, his technique on the tar is like that of none of the classical masters. He has his own style, which is quite distinct, characterized by a particularly romantic manner of improvisation. His tone is mellow, yet vibrant. The mystical air of his performance strikes a special note with lovers of Iranian classical music. From 1955 to 1978 he participated in all the radio programmes of classical music, notably the *Gulha* series. The programme on this CD demonstrates his power in producing a sound that is delicate and subtle, with a tone that fires the imagination. The quality of his performance never varies, whether he is playing as a soloist or accompanying a singer or an ensemble. With a singer, his tar sounds like another voice, full of emotion, complementing the tones of the vocalist.

**MUHAMMAD SHIR-KHUDA'I** (1926-96) was a clarinetist who studied in military bands. For 15 years (1955-1970) he performed with the Iranian National Radio, participating in the *Gulha* programmes. He has recorded many radio performances including compositions of his own.

Programme Notes by Jane Lewisohn, 'Ali Reza Mir-'Ali-Naqi and Daryoush Pirnia.

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Recordings originally made by Davoud Pirnia between 1955 and 1957. The two programmes on this CD are taken from the Gulha digital archive assembled by Jane Lewisohn between 2006 and 2008 with a grant from the British Library's Endangered Archives Project. Mastered by Jeremy Glasgow at SOAS, August 2008.

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*Abu'l-Hasan Saba, Murtaza Majubi, Ali Tajvidi*



*Roshanak*



*Muhammad Shir-Khuda'i*



*Farhang Sharif*



**Flowers of Persian  
Song and Music**

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Track I: 44:49

**“Perennial Flowers of  
Persian Song and Verse”**

*(Gulha-yi Javidan 132)*

Track 2: 22.26

**“A Green Leaf”**

*(Barg-i sabz 83)*



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