

Ep03_BetweenAcrossThrough_FarziErnia

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[music]

00:04 Iane Romero: You're listening to Between, Across, and Through.

[music]

00:21 IR: Have you ever found yourself at the edge of a heated debate? Something somewhere has suddenly sparked fierce discussion and you start seeing posts everywhere, hearing arguments everywhere, and you think to yourself, "I just don't get it." In 2013, a young Muslim Iranian woman walked onto the stage of a singing competition similar to American Idol, but as soon as she opened her mouth to sing, she became the subject of a furious controversy. At times, the discussion was hopeful, but at others it was downright hateful. Why? She was veiled.

00:58 IR: Today, Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neill, Director of the Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies sits down with Professor Farzaneh Hemmasi from the University of Toronto in a conversation that dives into the heated debate triggered by the appearance of Ernia on the Persian television show Googosh Music Academy. We will discuss the history and the political conditions that divide Iranians living in Iran and the Iranian diaspora. We will discover how the seemingly innocent act of singing was interpreted as anything but innocent and the reasons why the female singing voice sparked such controversy. Please join us as we travel Between, Across, and Through.

[music]

01:45 Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neill: Hello, thank you for joining us. I'm Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neill and I'm speaking with Professor Farzaneh Hemmasi. Farzi, the example of Ernia, that you write so well about, exists in a very deep historical, political, and religious context that makes singing and veiling incompatible. Can you give us some background on that?

02:02 Professor Farzaneh Hemmasi: Sure. If you go back to the 19th century, it wasn't particularly common in urban areas in Iran for music to have this public presence nor was it very common for women to have a public presence. There wasn't a ton of public performance of music in part because music was a bit like a vice. So it's not until the early 20th century that, in Tehran, that we have our first public concerts, and this kind of occurs simultaneously with the opening of a public sphere. Around that same time period, women started entering into public space a little bit more, and then in 1924 we have this really important event, which is the first female singer to take to the public stage.

02:46 PH: The woman's name was Qamar and she was trained in religious singing, but made the transition to singing secular and politically-inflected texts before male audiences. And not only did Qamar have this sort of groundbreaking first performance at Tehran's Grand Hotel, she also performed unveiled and singing a song about unveiling.

03:10 PO: Wow.

03:11 PH: So this really combined so many different of the sort of trajectories of early 20th century Iranian modernity and political development into one event, right?

03:21 PO: And so that has a political momentum that then contrasts dramatically after the revolution.

03:26 PH: Yeah, exactly. So if you look at Qamar's performance as this moment of opening up, opening up problematically for some people, right? It was public immorality for many people. You can see in the revolution that exactly the opposite movement happens, veiling becomes compulsory with the revolution as a way of creating a modest public space, and women's voices are also hidden, pushed back into private space, and this is imagined as a way of both protecting women and protecting the society at large.

03:58 PO: And so the public singing of women becomes outlawed or heavily regulated?

04:04 PH: Yeah, right, heavily regulated. I have never seen any law that says that women can't sing in public, but there are laws on the books in the Islamic penal code about public immorality that specifically talk about women veiling. So in the way that these things are extrapolated and sort of applied selectively, even creatively in policy, that has meant women haven't been permitted to sing.

04:31 PO: The voice of a man does not have the same kind of charge or possibility?

04:36 PH: Apparently not.

04:37 PO: Apparently not. That's been my experience, too.

[chuckle]

04:40 PO: But then why not just eliminate music altogether?

04:42 PH: Oh, music is much too useful for that. [chuckle] So when the revolution came, that's exactly what people thought was going to happen, especially because Ayatollah Khomeini made a very famous statement in which he said, "Music should be eliminated." He likened music to opium, he said that it distracted people from the realities of the world and that we should eliminate it completely, but...

05:05 PO: It doesn't seem practical.

05:06 PH: Well, it just didn't work, really, and I think, it wasn't that then there was this groundswell and popular rebellion where everybody played instruments in the street, you know.

05:13 PO: [chuckle] Yeah, right.

05:14 PH: In fact, quite the opposite. After he said that, you know, there's lots of reports of people rounding up cassette tapes and burning them. So despite this completely unambiguous pronouncement, pretty soon after the revolution, some composers began writing revolutionary anthems and music in support of the revolution.

05:33 PO: Of course. It almost seems impossible to think about a revolution or even a nationalism without a soundtrack, without an anthem.

05:40 PH: Yeah, and I think another important part of that is how music is defined. In Persian, mausiqui means music with instruments, but it's separate from the great many varieties of Shiite vocal arts, that include Roze and Nohe which are both lamentations and they are extremely sad. They're part of Shiite ritual and they're meant to elicit strong feelings. Those were really, really common and became a genre of their own, a recorded genre of their own. So that's separate, right? And it's sung by men.

06:13 PO: So the solitary women's voice couldn't be reconciled with this new understanding of music?

06:17 PH: Right, that's right, yes.

06:20 PO: Interesting.

06:20 PH: Yeah. It can't be by themselves.

06:22 PO: If I think about the regulation of music, it seems like a difficult task to maintain, given that the borders certainly have to be porous, that things have to be coming in in ways that can't be regulated, especially music.

06:37 PH: Absolutely, and after the revolution, you see the development of entire arms of the government devoted to preserving and propagating culture.

06:47 PO: And what could be more uncontrollable than voice and song and that really difficult distinction between the two?

06:52 PH: Right. Also, you can shut your eyes, but you can't shut your ears. [chuckle]

06:55 PO: You cannot shut your ears, that's right, and so people couldn't shut their ears and then cassette economies entered the country.

07:04 PH: Sure. One of the main things that I work on outside of this particular article is what's called the Tehrangeles Music Industry. So this is the expatriate music industry in Southern California that was created by professional musicians who fled Iran after Khomeini's pronouncement. So in Southern California was the beginning of what is now a truly transnational musical and media production world. So this is like one of the unintended and unforeseen consequences of the revolution.

07:33 PO: So what happens?

07:35 PH: Well, a lot happens. All those people who moved to Los Angeles, which is maybe 30, 40 really prominent musicians, songwriters, lyricists, move to Los Angeles. Other people remain in Iran for a little while, start to trickle out and head to Los Angeles, where this music industry comes into being. And for the folks in Tehrangeles, they have this kind of unbelievable situation, where there's no popular music being produced in their homeland and so they get to have a monopoly on Persian popular music across the world.

08:10 PO: And is Iran the principal audience for this music, or in Los Angeles is there also a budding audience?

08:14 PH: Yeah, so that's an interesting, really interesting question. So Los Angeles currently has the largest concentration of Iranians in the world outside of Iran, and that's grown and grown and grown. After the revolution, tons of Iranians moved to North America, Western Europe, Pakistan, Turkey, either as refugees or economic migrants. Since around the 2000s, one of the ways that Tehrangeles-based artists have made a lot of money, is to perform live at concerts in large venues, in countries right outside of Iran where Iranians don't have to have visas to travel.

08:53 PO: Interesting.

08:54 PH: So The United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and these are annual or semi-annual events, they incorporate say, the Persian New Year vacations with some shopping in Dubai and you take in a few shows and you go home.

09:10 PO: That sounds great.

09:10 PH: Yeah, it's great.

09:11 PO: But is it at all an act of rebellion?

09:14 PH: Well, I think...

09:15 PO: It sounds superfun, and a great weekend.

09:17 PH: I think that question is one of the most difficult ones to answer for a few reasons. One, because of course, we can't get into anybody's head, but secondly, because it's really common to ascribe any type of activity that contravenes official policy as an act of rebellion. And sometimes it might just be an accidental or happenstance intersection of your desire with the states, you know?

09:45 PO: Yes.

09:45 PH: Yeah. So some people say, "Me and my music have saved joy from being killed in the dour Shiite government that privileges weeping over happiness." Other people say, "You think I'm

political? I'm a wedding entertainer."

10:02 PO: Right, right! [chuckle]

10:04 PH: "I'm not qualified to make comments on Iranian politics, I'm up here singing." [chuckle]

10:08 PO: But tell me about the joy. So pop music, when I think about pop music, at least in the North American context, I think that it generates at the very least, pleasure and joy.

10:18 PH: Right, yeah.

10:19 PO: What is that moment or the role of pleasure after the revolution?

10:24 PH: That is a really interesting question. Let me back up and tell you that one of the terms for a professional entertainer in the 19th and the early 20th century, and still today, is Mochreb. Mochreb means somebody who creates joy or ecstasy. In Arabic, these are positive terms. In Persian, Mochreb is an insult.

10:44 PO: Oh, wow.

10:44 PH: Let's also just say that in Shiite Islam, sorrow and weeping out of your identification with and sympathy with the martyred Imams, is crucial. It's not like optional, it's not like just something to the side, it's actually part of ritual activity. Weeping is a good thing, right?

11:01 PO: Yes.

11:02 PH: So especially after the revolution, when revolutionaries were trying to Shiite-Islamize Iranian culture, and coincidentally with the Iran-Iraq War, in which millions of Iranians died, or were served in the front, underwent just terrible experiences, joy was very inappropriate. The nation is mourning, the nation is mourning. So at that moment, there isn't room for joy in post-revolutionary popular culture.

11:31 PO: But the cassettes continued to circulate.

11:33 PH: And in fact that may have helped them tremendously, because they filled a niche.

11:38 PO: Absolutely.

11:38 PH: They filled a niche.

11:39 PO: So then the circulation of the cassettes and of the music, the government office you referenced earlier must know that there is... This must be some kind of public secret that the music is out there.

11:49 PH: Oh sure, and in fact by 1997 two things happened. The first is that, Khomeini officially

softens his position on music at the end of his life. He makes a fatwa, a declaration, a binding declaration saying that music is allowable as long as it's used for ethical purposes. This is, to my knowledge, the first time that a Shiite jurist has made an affirmative comment about music's permissibility for certain activities and this opens up the floodgates. Music schools opened, people start learning instruments. In some ways, it's a positive development, similarly to the way that compulsory veiling is a positive development for women, because it can allow otherwise religious women who may have been hesitant to enter gender-mixed spaces, they now have a way of doing it, that's licit, that's ethical. And then by the late 1990s, there's so much Tehrangeles pop in Iran that the government can't control and can't profit from, and the government starts allowing popular music to be domestically approved. And one of my favorite things I've ever found in my research was an article saying that, "Since local popular music has been approved, sales of Los Angelesi have gone down 30%."

12:24 PO: Is that right?

12:24 PH: Yeah, which, you know, makes you wonder, "Who's keeping the stats?"

[laughter]

13:07 PO: Right, right.

13:08 PH: Like, "What's happening?"

13:10 PO: That's fantastic.

13:11 PH: Yeah. So one of the interesting things about the early popular music that was produced within Iran is that, after the revolution, is that it sounds so similar to the pop that's produced in LA, to the extent that there are singers whose voices are almost indistinguishable from musicians in Tehrangeles.

13:30 PO: So we've talked about some of the history of Iran. Let's talk about what happened next. Googoosh is an iconic figure, she's the main sponsor of the show where Ernia appeared, but she's also central to this music industry.

13:42 PH: Yeah, so Googoosh was the biggest celebrity of Iranian popular music prior to the revolution. She was a fashion plate, very lovely, a fantastic dancer, an actress and beloved by many, perhaps because she had been in the public eye for so long, and she'd also had a really difficult childhood, married several times and was known to be sort of victim of her circumstances. It can't have been pleasant to take to the stage when she was two years old and then be her family's primary breadwinner by around seven. So, when Googoosh disappeared, that kind of left a vacuum.

14:17 PO: And when you say Googoosh disappeared, the circumstances of the revolution eviscerated any kind of public space or opportunity for her to be present.

14:25 PH: She needed to keep a low profile.

14:27 PO: I see.

14:27 PH: That was required. Her passport was rescinded, she couldn't actually leave the country. So she was in Iran, but "silent." But in 2000, much to many people's surprise, she got her passport reinstated and got permission to leave the country as long as she agreed to come back, so...

14:46 PO: She never returned.

14:47 PH: No, no. No, no. So she never returned to Iran after she left.

14:51 PO: They gave her the passport.

14:52 PH: They gave her the passport.

14:52 PO: She had this principle of commitment, "I will never leave until I have a passport."

14:56 PH: And she didn't.

14:57 PO: And she didn't. [laughter] That's right.

14:57 PH: She left once she had the passport. Yeah.

15:00 PO: That's right.

15:00 PH: And with her she took a bunch of musical collaborators and arranged, I guess without the Iranian government's representative's knowledge, a series of tours and performances outside of Iran and restarted her career in exile.

15:17 PO: So then the Googoosh becomes one of the judges for the show, Googoosh Music Academy, which has many Iranian contestants from the diaspora, and yet Ernia, in particular, provoked a really divisive response to viewers. Why?

15:28 PH: Ernia is the stage name of an Iranian-German female who wore the veil out of religious observance. So Ernia's mere presence on the show was shocking to a lot of people. Expatriate television and expatriate culture generally devotes very little space to observant Muslims and to Islam generally, unless it's being denigrated. It really is unusual to see even the contemporary Iranian flag of the Islamic Republic on many expatriate television channels. You'll see the pre-revolutionary flag, for instance. It's almost as if this parallel world exists outside of Iran in media where Islam plays a very small role, except as say, a bogeyman or something to be contested.

16:16 PO: So your article, "One can veil and be a singer," argues that reality television is not just programming, it's also kind of soft power in a war for hearts and minds. How does the show function in this political context?

16:26 PH: A reality television talent competition, this one followed largely the same format that say American Idol does. There are a number of contestants that are chosen who are supposedly ordinary, regular people, they're selected to be somewhat diverse, in this case ethno-linguistically diverse. So we have this sort of "representative population."

16:50 PO: Representative in the sense that each of the participants are archetypes of larger, kind of everyday populations?

16:56 PH: I guess that's the question. So maybe ideally. I think what reality television programmers want is for audiences to identify with or have a strong reaction to whoever they're seeing. So it's either, "That person is just like me," or, "I can't believe that person exists."

17:12 PO: Right. Right, exactly.

17:12 PH: Right? So it's one or the other, like antipathy or love, it's one of those two options. So okay, so there's the representation aspect of it. Then there's the idea that we should be able to vote in a transparent process, have our votes counted accurately, and have that result in the best, most appropriate contestant rising to the top. Now, the televised talent competition format has been really popular and really heavily promoted even by American governments in the Middle East, because of this ideal of free and fair elections and representative government that can be performed through talent competitions.

17:50 PO: Of course.

17:50 PH: Yeah. So the Googoosh Music Academy has to be seen in light of the 2009 Iranian presidential elections, in which then president Ahmadinejad won again in a very highly-contested election, which most everybody seemed to think was rigged.

18:06 PO: Okay.

18:08 PH: So one of the main slogans in the massive protests accompanying that election was, "Where is my vote?"

18:15 PO: Yes.

18:15 PH: So the idea that you can't get real democracy or real democratic process within Iran, but you can get it on expatriate television... [chuckle]

18:24 PO: You can get the sensation...

18:25 PH: You can have the feeling.

18:26 PO: Of participation, absolutely.

18:28 PH: That democratic feeling.

18:29 PO: That makes sense.

18:30 PH: Yeah, yeah. So you can get that feeling through TV, is a seductive idea, right?

18:34 PO: Yes.

18:35 PH: And it's one that the creators and participants in Googoosh Music Academy seem to be very aware of.

18:41 PO: What's the Iranian government's reaction to this kind of expat media?

18:45 PH: It hasn't been accepting. [chuckle]

18:49 PO: I'm sure.

18:49 PH: Yeah, there are several reactions. One is for official Iranian government press and semi-official state-sponsored news outlets to discuss these satellite stations, to acknowledge their existence, but to also, to call them instruments in a soft war, jang-e narm, and to say that expatriates in partnership with monarchists, Baha'is, and Western governments are attempting a Velvet Revolution by media within the country.

19:21 PO: How could they be read as propaganda?

19:24 PH: What's so interesting is how much power this grants mere entertainment, right?

19:28 PO: Yes, yes.

19:29 PH: It's similar, actually, to the power granted to a woman's body or a woman's voice by the restrictions. It highlights them as something that can influence people.

19:39 PO: Yes.

19:40 PH: Also you have to think about how much the Islamic Republic and the revolution unfolded through remaking Iranian culture. It saw culture as the problem, and a problem to be solved and to be engineered. We're engineering it over here, they're engineering it over there, on the other side of the world, and the two, these are all sort of competing with each other in space. There's a big competition for the hearts and minds. The third thing is that it's not just Iranian expatriates who are engaged in this, it's Western governments. The American government and the British government have been very, very active in creating Persian language media news, entertainment, cooking shows, variety shows, call-in shows, all of these offerings have been a part of the Iranian mediascape for a long time.

20:24 PO: But then I assume with how porous the borders are, that music videos from the West that show scantily-clad women, is not unfamiliar, or at least...

20:33 PH: Absolutely. Some of the girls on these programs wore mini-dresses, sang and danced very comfortably. That is very obviously contravening laws about comportment within the Iranian state, but it's very easy to know where to place them. They are immoral, end of story. Now with a veiled woman who doesn't sing, we also know where to place her, she's modest, she's acting appropriately. But when somebody plays with the boundaries as Ermia did, by singing and veiling, by singing and then saying on TV that she felt a little bit bad because she shook her shoulders a tiny bit during one section, and that felt immodest to her, while she had just sung a whole song, that was confusing, that was very confusing for people.

21:16 PO: So in that context, Ermia's performance as a veiled woman can't be interpreted as just singing.

21:22 PH: She is just singing, but she's singing with covering on that indicates that she's pious, and since the example of Qamar, public singing for women has been directly at odds with veiling and with modesty. So during the entire period from 1924 until 1979 there were very many, many, many women who sang unveiled. There were not any women who sang while veiled. [chuckle]

21:50 PO: Wow.

21:51 PH: At least not secular popular music on the stage, and after the revolution we still don't have any veiled women who are singing. We either have veiled women who aren't singing, or we have unveiled women who are singing. So this, yes, these two activities in and of themselves, veiling or singing, are not remarkable, but when you combine them in the Iranian context, they were remarkable for many people.

22:15 PO: And then so how was she interpreted from a conservative perspective?

22:19 PH: On one hand they saw her as representative of something that they thought was real, which was American and British governments using her as a tool to reach Iranian audiences.

22:29 PO: Oh, wow.

22:30 PH: So...

22:31 PO: So, not conservative enough?

22:33 PH: Oh, absolutely not conservative enough, and they described her as promoting a British or American version of Islam, something foreign to how we do things here in Iran, which wasn't what Ermia herself was saying. She made statements during the program saying that, "There are many people, many women in Iran like me, I know them, and I'm hoping that my example can give them the courage and the strength to also express themselves." That was directly in contrast to what the conservatives were saying which is, "There's nobody like this in Iran, and that this is so out of character with what we know to be in the country that it has to be some kind of plot or fabrication."

23:13 PO: Was it a much more gentle or receiving message from the supposed secular perspective?

23:18 PH: It wasn't. Ernia really incited the passions of a lot of secularists also, who really didn't understand or appreciate what she was trying to do. It was as if she was dirtying their secular space with her Islam. One of the most violent reactions to Ernia was a post I found on Facebook from a man who said that, "She, like all other veiled woman, should be beheaded." Now that's a really extreme position that I didn't see echoed elsewhere, but it does reflect a larger trend of extreme anti-Islam sentiment that you sometimes see in diaspora.

23:53 PO: And yet... This is a spoiler alert for anyone watching Season Three right now, she wins.

24:00 PH: She wins, and so that indicates that tons of people... Unless the election was rigged, a distinct possibility...

24:05 PO: [chuckle] Right.

24:06 PH: [chuckle] Right, and which some people claim, it seemed that lots of people liked Ernia enough to vote for her, or at least wanted to see what would happen if she won.

24:16 PO: But your slippage is good, 'cause you just said, "The election." I mean, so this show as a reality television really parrots democratic participation in a way that the common language gets confused sometimes.

24:29 PH: Yeah, and I think I was anticipating talking about some of the more affirmative responses or, you know, positive responses to her winning, in which people really did compare the competition to a referendum on moderate Islam, for instance, or a substitute, showing us that we can have a fair and free election on TV when we can't have one in our own country.

24:53 PO: What's the advantage if we just go down the road of the rigged rumour, what would be the reason to rig this and have her win above another, every person?

25:02 PH: That was another set of conspiracy/unconfirmable explanations that I found in my research. Some people said, "Well, Ernia and Googoosh are working together and Googoosh has arranged for Ernia to win so that she can signal her ongoing support for the reformist government that allowed her to get her passport in the first place. Very long, drawn out..."

25:26 PO: That's a long walk. [laughter]

25:28 PH: Right, it's a very long walk, but it, I think it also shows people's need to link Ernia to something that they can understand, because she herself was something that they couldn't understand. They could not take her at face value, that she could be a reality and just sort of stand alone, this abstract figure, was impossible. It was impossible for the viewers who and audience members who took the time to express their thoughts online.

25:54 PO: So why is this research compelling to you?

25:55 PH: So, the Googoosh Music Academy got me really excited about how so many of the long-standing historical trajectories of Iranian national identity and Iranian national political movements and now transnational political movements came together in a very unlikely setting. This televised, talent, pop competition where people are being coached on how nasal their voices are.

26:18 PO: Yes.

26:19 PH: And then suddenly we're talking about Shiite jurisprudence and the lawfulness of female singing. It seems like a very unlikely combination, but on the other hand, I think that's one of the great things about popular culture. It takes you deep into these issues in a way that a lot of people find pleasurable and entertaining, which makes it both fun to research and fun to talk about.

26:40 PO: Wow, that was really fantastic. Thanks so much for sharing your research with us.

26:43 PH: Thank you.

26:45 IR: That was Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neill in conversation with Professor Farzaneh Hemmasi from the University of Toronto. On our next episode we'll talk to Professor Naor Ben-Yehoyada about how reshaping the conversation around hospitality can create a break in the storm for refugees in the Mediterranean Sea. This monthly podcast was brought to you by The Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies at the University of Toronto. Please subscribe on Stitcher, Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or your favorite app to Between, Across, and Through. I am Iane Romero. Thank you for listening and joining the conversation.

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