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THE SPECIFICS OF ORCHESTRATION IN THE COMPOSITION  
 “TOWARD THAT ENDLESS PLAIN”, CONCERTO FOR PERSIAN NEY  
 AND ORCHESTRA BY REZA VALI

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**Tavakkol E.** The specifics of orchestration in the composition *Toward That Endless Plain, Concerto for Persian Ney and Orchestra by Reza Vali*. This article explores the interaction of ancient tradition and modern innovation found in the orchestration of *Toward That Endless Plain*, a concerto for Persian Ney and orchestra composed by Iranian-American composer Reza Vali. The article discusses the details of traditional Persian classical music (known as *Dástgâh/Mâghâm*), the explanatory notes placed in the score by the composer, the methods of orchestration, the regulation of the orchestration in performance using the composer's *coordination points*, the density and contour of the orchestral texture and color, the semantics of the timbral qualities of the Persian Ney, the originality of the grouped string solo material, types of mutes used in the brass section, so-called *grotesque* and *come forward* techniques.

**Keywords:** Reza Vali, Concerto, orchestra, orchestration, orchestral texture, instruments, Ney, quarter tones, *Dástgâh/Mâghâm*.

**Таваккол Е.** Специфіка оркестровки в Концерті для перського нея з оркестром «На шляху до цієї нескінченної рівнини» Р. Валі. У даній статті розглянуто своєрідність складу симфонічного оркестру і особливості оркестровки в їх зв'язку з програмою в Концерті для перського нея з оркестром «На шляху до цієї нескінченної рівнини» ірансько-американського композитора зламу ХХ–ХХІ століть Рези Валі в аспекті взаємодії традицій і новацій. Розглядаються особливості перської музичної системи *Dástgâh/Mâghâm*, авторські пояснювальні замітки, що містяться в партитурі, регуляція оркестровки й виконання за допомогою *координаційних пунктів*, щільність оркестрової тканини, склад оркестрової фактури, колористичність, семантика тембру нея, самобутність партій солістів струнної групи, види застосовуваних сурдин для інструментів мідної групи, прийоми *grotesque* і *come forward*, виражені оркестровими засобами.

**Ключові слова:** Р. Валі, концерт, оркестр, оркестровка, оркестрова фактура, інструменти, ней, чвертьтони, *Dástgâh/Mâghâm*.

**Таваккол Э.** Специфика оркестровки в Концерте для персидского нея с оркестром «На пути к этой бесконечной равнине» Р. Вали. В данной статье исследованы своеобразие состава симфонического оркестра и особенности оркестровки в связи с программой в Концерте для персидского нея с оркестром «На пути к этой бесконечной равнине» иранско-американского композитора рубежа ХХ–ХХІ веков Резы Вали в аспекте взаимодействия традиций и новаций. Рассматриваются особенности персидской музыкальной системы *Dástgâh/Mâghâm*, авторские пояснительные заметки, помещенные в партитуре, регуляция оркестровки и исполнение с помощью *координационных пунктов*, плотность оркестровой ткани, склад оркестровой фактуры, колористичность, семантика тембра нея, самобытность партий солистов струнной группы, виды применяемых сурдин для инструментов медной

группы, приемы *grotesque* и *come forward*, выраженные оркестровыми средствами.

**Ключевые слова:** Реза Вали, концерт, оркестр, оркестровка, оркестровая фактура, инструменты, ней, четверти тона, *Dástgâh/Mâghâm*.

**Background.** Jointly commissioned by the Boston Modern Orchestra Project and Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, *Toward That Endless Plain* was written in 2003 by Iranian-American composer Reza Vali, during the mature period of the composer's output. In addition to this work, Vali has written two other concertos: *Concerto for Flute and Orchestra* (1992) and *Double Concerto for Persian Ney, Kamanche and Orchestra* (2009).

**Review of studies.** To-date there have been no in-depth analyses of Vali's work for the Persian Ney from the musicological perspective. Four existing publications may be found in non-scientific periodicals, all by American authors; musicologists Brent Reidy and Ellen Moysan, writer Marakay Rogers and journalist Lee Passarella. Both Reidy and Passarella's pieces were written in connection with the release of Vali's album *Toward That Endless Plain* (2013). Rogers' article covers the premiere of the work, including only a brief overview of the material and expressing the author's positive impressions. Moysan's interview with Vali includes a discussion of the composer's use of the Persian *Dástgâh/Mâghâm* system in the concerto.

The **relevance** of the study is therefore illustrated by the present lack of formal analyses and by the high artistic accomplishment of Vali's concerto.

The **objective** of the article is to provide an in-depth overview of the orchestrational and compositional techniques employed by Vali in the development and completion of this work.

**Discussion.** In Reza Vali's concerto *Toward That Endless Plain*, the composer establishes a symbolic paradigm rooted in the aesthetics of Sufism. The epigraph of the score contains a fragment of the poem *The Call of the Beginning* by 20<sup>th</sup> century Iranian mystic poet and symbolist Sohrab Sepehri [6, p. 241–242]. In this poem, Sepehri discusses the relationship between Man and God, and Man's ongoing search for the divine principle. Sepehri views liberation in one's spiri-

tual journey as finally submitting to the persistent attraction of the human soul to the essence of the absolute. In addition to this mystical concept, Vali also explores prescient themes of conflict between humanity and society, and the tragic, universal events of our era.

Vali's orchestration builds upon the standard complement of the Western Symphony Orchestra by doubling flute, oboe, clarinet and bassoon with piccolo, English Horn, bass clarinet and contrabassoon. The orchestra additionally calls for piano, harp and an expanded group of percussion instruments including timpani, tam-tams, cymbals, gong, bass drum, snare drum, drum kit, bongos, vibraphone, xylophone, tubular bells, glockenspiel, wood blocks, crotales, congas, shakers, güiro and wooden mallets. The composer also utilizes large and small electronic sirens within the performance space in the *Prelude* and *Interlude* sections.

The string section calls for 10 first and 8 second violins, 6 violas, 4 cellos and 2 double-basses. This limited number was chosen intentionally in order to accommodate the dark, muffled sound of the soloing Ney, which would otherwise be difficult to balance against larger numbers of strings.

In order to portray a more Iranian character Vali employs further quirky orchestrations by introducing traditional Iranian musical instruments into the mix. In addition to the Ney as the featured soloist, Vali calls for the *Daf* and *darbuk* or goblet drum, which are used mainly in Part II as the basis of the traditional dance form, *Sama*. The composer convincingly demonstrates the expressive and technical capabilities of these instruments by broadly exploiting the timbres they provide.

Vali's choice of traditional Iranian instruments – unusual for Western listeners to hear – in combination within the traditional, European orchestral idiom results in new, distinct and colorful sounds. The synthesis of sound images that emerges from this mixture of Western and Iranian musical forms gives rise to a new timbral-acoustic phenomenon peculiar to Vali's work.

With regard to the development of orchestral thinking in the music of the 21st century, this phenomenon is the composer's unique innovation. Marakay Roger's comments on Vali's work are particularly noteworthy in this context [5], "Reza Vali...is one of the finer preservers and expositors of Persian traditional music, while still being a Western orchestral innovator."

In line with his special, innovative approach, Vali relies heavily on the Iranian modal systems of *Dástgâh/Mâghâm*, and particularly in his Concerto for Persian Ney and Orchestra. According to the composer [9, p. 5], "the entire musical material of the concerto is derived from the *Dástghâh/Mâghâm* system, including the western-sounding sections, as well as the violent and atonal beginning of the piece."

In the score, Vali provides seven detailed explanatory notes [8, p. 2] the necessity of which the composer felt was critical to bring to the attention of the conductor and musicians of the orchestra. These notes provide required guidelines to ensure the execution of a high-quality, professional performance that most accurately reflects the composer's intentions.

These notes expound upon the following details: 1) Notes outlining the required instrumentation; 2) Instructions on the interpretation of the score and performance of the Concerto; 3) Notes on the ney; 4) Notes on the percussion instruments; 5) Instructions on playing the *Daf* and goblet drum; 6) Notes on tuning the orchestra; 7) Detailed notes on the traditional Persian modal and tuning systems.

Vali recommends tuning the orchestra to align exactly with the pitch A4 on the Ney, exactly 440 hertz. The composer [8, p. 4] further includes a table outlining the range of pitches that the Ney and the orchestra must share with regard to tuning throughout each movement. Vali is specific in stating that the remaining pitches of the solo Ney should diverge from the orchestra due to differences in Traditional Persian tuning and Equal Temperament, and must not be forced to align.

The musical themes of the Concerto, based upon the *Dástgâh/Mâghâm* system, include quarter tones marked with special signs: *koron* (p) – a sign that indicates lowering the pitch by a quarter step, and *sori* (C) – a sign that indicates raising the pitch by a quarter step. Microintervals formed due to the use of quarter tones occur mainly in the material written for the Ney and in that of the solo strings (and additionally in the English Horn line in Part III, reh. mark (r. m.) 55 + bars 7–9).

In the performance notes, the composer includes a unique mark  $\ddagger$  called the *coordination point*. Vali uses this symbol in Parts I and III of the Concerto in order to draw the conductor's attention to key moments when the orchestra and soloist must synchronize after having been allowed to deviate. The composer explains this in the score in the following manner:

"A certain degree of 'out-of-phasesness' between the soloist and the orchestra has been calculated and incorporated into the score of the Concerto. The following situations may occur at the areas designated as the coordination point ( $\ddagger$ ):

a – The soloist may be ahead of the orchestra: in this case, the soloist should improvise and wait for the orchestra to catch up.

b – The orchestra may be ahead of the soloist: in this case, the orchestra should hold a note (through the conductor's signal) and wait for the soloist to catch up.

c – Most of the areas preceding the coordination points are indicated by the *ritardando* or the *sostenuto* signs."

The density of the orchestral textures in the Concerto are not uniform, changing throughout the composition. *Prelude* and *Interlude*, which are associated with images of the material world – aggression and war – exhibit the greatest orchestral density. They involve the double composition of the symphony orchestra, in which sharp timbres in the brass and percussion instruments become most prominent. Additionally, in *Prelude* the roar of electronic sirens bolsters the power of the sound.

In comparison with the saturated, solid sound of the *Prelude* and *Interlude*, the delicate sparsity of the three main parts of the cycle are meant to reveal the spiritual life of humanity. Part III, which primarily uses a group of stringed instruments, harp and vibraphone, is noted for the least density in orchestration. At the end of Part III the orchestra is reduced to a solo string quintet (r. m. 61).

In Part II, the orchestration is reduced to a trio (r. m. 41–42) and quartet (r. m. 35–36) of strings. Passages are additionally performed with the Ney and Daf exclusively (r. m. 15), the Ney without accompaniment (r. m. 24) and the Ney with the accompaniment of the Daf and conga (r. m. 34).

The orchestral textures in *Prelude*, Part II and *Interlude* are essentially homophonic in contour, with occasional fragments that utilize polyphonic techniques. In the first section of *Prelude* (from the beginning to r. m. 1), two characteristic elements are pitted against one another; a dissonant vertical harmonization including a series of stacked tritones, characterized by the composer as the *superimposition of tritones*, and the polyphonic presentation of an ascending call-and-response in bar 7 in the third section (r. m. 4). The underlying orchestration echoes this material with repeating dissonant chord *clusters* punctuated in *sfz*. In *Interlude*, a similar dissonant chord vertical is found in the third section (r. m. 46 + bar 9), which is based upon the thematic material of *Prelude*. In Part II, the homophonic contour is determined by the traditional Persian dance form that establishes the basis of the theme. Polyphony is used by the composer mainly in Parts I and III, with micropolyphonic horizontals reminiscent of melodious and melismatic forms found in Iranian folk tunes.

Vali's orchestration serves as a direct metaphor to the artistic concepts by which the work is inspired, and impressively expresses the figurative content. The composer convincingly illustrates the antagonistic imagery of the poem through his orchestrational techniques. According to the composer [7]: "Throughout the Concerto, the Ney solo shows the character of a lone wanderer (*sâlek* or *râhro* in Persian), who tries to find his way to God, while the orchestra embodies the environment (*vâdi* in Persian), alien and destructive to the wanderer."

The melancholy timbre of the Ney resembles the sound of a human voice, and at all times expresses the symbol of loneliness, separation and longing for the Motherland. While the Ney is absent from *Prelude* and *Interlude*, the soloist plays a significant role in Parts I, II and III, during which they are entrusted with themes reminiscent of Iranian folk song and dance melodies derived from the *Dâstgâh/Mâghâm* system.

Complex rhythmic figures (syncopation, triplets, quintuplets, septuplets, dotted rhythm, tied notes, short values of 16<sup>th</sup> and 32<sup>nd</sup> notes, melismatic figures – trills, *grupetti* and grace notes) and an abundance of accents over constant changes of time signature make the solo Ney material quite difficult to perform.

The range of the Ney in the Concerto is more than two and a half octaves – from G to E3. In Part I from G to D3; in Part II from F1 to D3; in Part III from G to E3. The lowest sounds are G and A of the small octave and are presented in the musical themes performed at the beginning of Part I (r. m. 5) and at the end of Part III (r. m. 58, 59, 60). These correspond to key dramatic points: the opening and the outcome of the work's loose narrative (the beginning and the end of the wanderer's path.) Some of the highest sounds (C3 and D3) are used during climactic moments such as the end of Part I (r. m. 14), the themes of the central sections of Part II (r. m. 19 + bars 2–7; 20 + bars 5–6, r. m. 21; r. m. 30 + bars 5–6, r. m. 31) and at the beginning of Part III (r. m. 51 + bars 2–5). The highest sound E3<sup>♯</sup> (*f*) is reached at the beginning of Part III (r. m. 51 + bars 3–4). In general, in the Ney line, the sounds of the middle register (the sounds of the 2-line octave) are most often used.

In Part I (Movement I) *Passage, Adagio* (r. m. 5–14), the primary image with which the Concerto is concerned is presented; the image of a lone wanderer (representative of all people) who has chosen the path of spiritual development. This theme-character plays an important dramatic role, uniting the work throughout the cycle.

The slow theme, performed in the Ney line, has characteristics reminiscent of a declamatory recitative (r. m. 5–11). The soft, warm timbre of the Ney resembles a sad folk melody and evokes a feeling of the peaceful, boundless expanse presumed at heavenly heights. The theme is characterized by a changing meter, whimsical rhythmic pattern and abundant microtonality. At the heart of the theme is *gusheh darâmad* (Iran. – beginning, discovery). The theme is intonated in *âvâz bayad-kord* (Iran. – Kurdish village) with the quasi dominant (*shâhed*) E and the sound of *h koron* (p – a quarter tone).

In Part I, the magical, coloristic sound of the harp (r. m. 6–14) and vibraphone (r. m. 8–14) is of great importance, creating a sonorous effect



implying a vibrating luminescence that embodies the image of a person's inner light; a figurative symbol of the Light of Consciousness, which allows the wanderer to move on to the next stage of the path. There is also an implication of the external radiance of the surrounding world, personifying a higher, unearthly beginning.

In Part II (Movement II) of the Concerto, entitled *Sama* in Iranian and *Ecstatic Dance* in English, *Allegro scherzando* (r. m. 15–43), the composer recreates the image of the *Sama* ritual dance of Sufis. This dance is traditionally accompanied by the peculiar sound of Iranian folk instruments, the Ney and the Daf in particular. Therefore, it is precisely the timbres of these folk instruments that Vali uses during the initial development of the theme of the *Sama* dance (r. m. 15). The composer's wish to evoke the sound of traditional Ney accompaniment to the Dervishes' dance is accomplished by the unaccompanied presentation of the Ney solo (r. m. 24), as well as the development of the Ney theme with Daf and conga accompaniment (r. m. 34).

In Part III (Movement III) *Foroud va Fana* in Iranian, *Descent and Dissolve* in English, *Largo* (r. m. 50–61), the music seems comes across as calm, idyllic and peaceful when compared to the previous material. The slow initial theme of the sequential material given to the Ney is based on *gusheh Deylaman* (Iran. – the name of the city) in *âvâz dašti*.

Later, for artistic purposes, the composer supplements the line of the soloing Ney with the warm, expressive sound of the English Horn solo (r. m. 53, 55, 57), and then the violin (r. m. 53, 54, 57), vibraphone (r. m. 56, 58, 60), cello (r. m. 57), harp (r. m. 59, 60). Vali emphasizes these characteristics by marking the score *molto espressivo et cantabile* for the solo of the English Horn (r. m. 53) and violin (r. m. 53, 54), as well as *molto espressivo* for the solo Ney, English Horn and bass clarinet (r. m. 55), and the further solo of bass clarinet (r. m. 57).

With the help of orchestral colors, specifically the resonant, bewitching sound of the vibraphone and the mysterious, magical, unearthly sound of the harp in Parts I and III, the coloristic effect of flickering light is achieved. On the one hand, this gives rise to an idea of heavenly radiance – the living space of God – and on the other, symbolizes the achievement of a state of enlightenment; the comprehension of truth by a person.

The interpretation of the brass instruments in the Concerto is distinctive. The composer uses two types of mutes for the brass (horns, trombones and trumpet): metal mutes and Whispa mutes (a special mute normally used for practicing). The composer's use of these mutes is consistent with the portrayal of various images throughout the

#### First Movement:



#### Second Movement:



#### Third Movement:



work's narrative, which are associated with the various timbres they produce.

For example, in the second section of *Prelude and Interlude* (r. m. 1 + bar 4 and on; r. m. 2; r. m. 46), Vali uses metal mutes for the horns and trombones (these are incidentally often used in jazz), which change the normal timbre of these instruments to a markedly sharp twang. In combination with the glissando technique and the forms of the 4/4 meter characteristic of the modern American rhythm and blues style, the effect of mockery, ridicule and cynicism is achieved. With the help of these techniques, the composer expressively depicts the image of aggressors, enslavers and strangers, emphasizing this passage in the score with the note *Grotesque*.

At the end of Part III, *Largo*, the brass are largely tacet with the exception of the trumpet modified by a Whispa mute (r. m. 60 + bar 3), as it intones the core of the theme from Part II (also in Part III). The use of this practice mute weakens and muffles the sound of the instrument, achieving the effect of a melting, dissolving and elusive tone.

In Parts I, II and III we find the composer's remark *come forward* written in the score. This draws the performers' attention to the importance of emphasizing a distinct brightness in timbre and the meaning of this brightness relative to the narrative of the work. This indication is used during key moments in the development of the plot.

For example, in the first section of Part II – *khane aval* (Iran. – the first house; r. m. 16 + bar 3), *come forward* is found in the lines of the first and second flutes, where the musical material is developed canonically in *forte*. This same material was previously the Ney's theme.

In the conclusion of Part III, *come forward* is repeated three times: it accompanies the doubled lines of the vibraphone and harp (p), completing the Ney line (r. m. 60 + bar 3) – symbolizing the

end of the final stage of the wanderer's spiritual path – and the piano line (mp, r. m. 60 + bar 4), in which we hear imitated the joyful call of a bird of paradise.

**Conclusions.** The study of the orchestrational and compositional techniques used in Reza Vali's *Concerto for Persian Ney and Orchestra* has showed the following:

1. Vali's distinctive synthesis of the Western European concerto genre combined with traditional Iranian folk music and tuning systems is uniquely innovative.

2. The peculiarity of the Concerto's orchestration was determined by the composer's interpretation of the primary poetic source, Sohrab Sepehri's poem *The Call of the Beginning* as well as Sufi philosophy. With the help of unusual orchestration, the author reveals the semantics of the Concerto's imagery.

3. In exploring various unique combinations of timbre and orchestral color, Vali has expanded the expressive and technical possibilities of the Persian Ney as a featured solo instrument.

4. In the Concerto, Reza Vali establishes the unusual sound of the orchestra as a result of combining the timbres of traditional European symphonic instruments and Iranian folk instruments.

5. The originality of the orchestral texture is also achieved thanks to the peculiarities of the *Dástgâh/Mâghâm* systems used in the Concerto, which are characteristic of ancient Iranian folk music. The Concerto uses ancient Iranian *dastgâhs* and *âvâzes* taken from the *radif* (repertoire of Iranian music).

The purpose of this research is to study the Concerto within the context of works of Reza Vali, in order to reveal the characteristics of a newly synthesized genre formed by the interaction between European and traditional Iranian systems of musical thinking.

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