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Concert Preview

The way of the ney: Musician pursues passion for Persian music

By Paul de Barros

Seattle Times jazz critic

"Now listen to the reed as it is grieving," sang Hossein

Omoumi, sitting cross-legged on a carpet at Meany Hall, dressed in white, loose-fitting pants and shirt.

"Since they cut me from the bed of reeds/Both men and women have grieved at my flute's wailing."

Positioning a reed flute called the ney into a crook in the right side of his mouth, Omoumi blew ecstatic, passionate melodies that floated up like smoke.

Omoumi is a visiting artist in the ethnomusicology division at the University of Washington. Though his two-year term is just about over, he is offering another performance tonight at Town Hall.

One of the world's most respected masters of the ney, and an innovator on the instrument, Omoumi just bought a home in Seattle and has started a foundation to promote Persian music and poetry in North America. He has had a distinguished dual career as both a musician and an architect.

Born and raised in Isfahan, Iran, one of two centers of Persian classical music (the other is Tehran), Omoumi, 61, studied with Hassan Kassa'i, the world's greatest ney player, and wound up teaching at Iran's National Conservatory himself. He also earned a doctorate in architecture, in 1972, from the University of Florence.

In 1984, after the Islamic revolution, Omoumi moved to Paris, not only because the Iranian government was unfriendly to music, but because there were better educational opportunities in Europe for his two children. In Paris, he taught at the Sorbonne and maintained an office as an architect.



Omoumi has recorded widely, recently releasing "Sarmast: Live in Paris." He also played on the soundtrack of the film, "The Sweet Hereafter." Initially invited to teach at UW in 1987, Hossein finally accepted in 2003, after his children grew up.

Speaking last week in his sub-basement office in the university music building, Omoumi talked about his work, as well as a couple of major decisions he has made in his life.

"I have sacrificed architecture for music," he said. "You can earn a lot more money from that than playing the ney. But my wife knows that when I play music I am happy. That is what I live for."

Though he has decided to abandon architecture, he is still a designer at heart. Decades ago, he added a key mechanism to the traditionally open-holed ney, which allows the instrument to sound a note that wasn't playable before. Such changes can be looked on with suspicion by traditional musicians, so Omoumi did not tell his master at first.

"Then I played a piece on the radio and I went to see him," he recalled, in a gentle voice with a slightly French accent. "I was living in Tehran and he was living in Isfahan. The first question he asked was, 'How did you play that piece?' So I told him, 'You know, I have added a key.' 'Why didn't you show me?' 'I was afraid of you!' 'No,' he said. 'Show me!' I had the flute in the car because I knew he would ask."

Years later, when Omoumi needed a letter of introduction for a world music competition in Paris, Kassa'i wrote that Omoumi had "developed" the instrument.

"It was a very important confirmation of what I had done," he said.

Omoumi also has designed ingenious tuning attachments for Iranian drums, including the goblet-shaped tombak, and the daf, a taut frame drum.

Persian classical music is organized into seven systems, called *dastgah*, within which there are 150 melodic patterns, with different "atmospheres." Performers memorize melodies and scales, but improvise their own variations.

The ney is a particularly expressive instrument, with a whooshing, airy lower register — quite eerie in "The Sweet Hereafter" — and an upper register that rings with placid clarity. Unlike their Turkish neighbors, who also play the ney, Iranians achieve their low-register sound by placing the end of the flute directly into the mouth.

Omoumi demonstrated this technique, pointing to a cross-section picture of a human jaw on his chalkboard.

"I control the air with my tongue," he explained, playing the same phrase with four or five different atmospheres, from sunny to stormy. He makes it all look easy, but one of his best students, Heather Carman, says some players struggle for weeks just to get a sound out of the instrument, much less a coherent phrase.

"It's not an instrument for the faint of heart," agrees Daniel Atkinson, another student.

But it is the voice, said Omoumi, not the flute, that reigns supreme in Persian classical music.

"The most important thing is the meaning of the poem," he explained. "Even today, if you want to get the attention of the people, you start with one line of a poem. There are statues of the poets — Rumi, Sa'adie, Hafez — in the public square. This is very normal."

For Rumi, the music of the ney was like a metaphor for human life, ripped from its roots at birth, trying to find its way back. Though Rumi and the other 13th- and 14th-century poets of the classical era adhered to the Islamic tradition, Omoumi says these Sufi mystics saw music as a vehicle for achieving a state of spiritual transcendence.

At tonight's concert, the program includes Rumi's "Trance of Devotion," as well as works by Hafez, Sa'adie and 20th-century poet Fereyduun Moshiri.

Earlier this year, Omoumi and one of his students, Behruz Alavi, an engineer, founded the Haft Dastgah Association, a nonprofit organization to promote Persian classical poetry and music. Haft Dastgah offers private and group instruction, lectures and workshops. Omoumi also is developing a DVD to explain the complexities of Persian music, drawing on architectural analogies, such as comparing musical intervals to the heights of buildings.

Home base for Haft Dastgah is Seattle, where Omoumi just bought a house in the Maple Leaf neighborhood, near Sand Point

"Nature in this city is really fantastic," he said. "I live on Capitol Hill now and you see a small house where the owner is not very rich, but there are flowers in front. Architecture is not only buildings. Environment is architecture and the culture of people make the architecture of the city."