

Ostâd Morteżâ Varzi

30 December 1922 – 3 January 2004

It is with great sadness that I note the death of Ostâd (master) Morteżâ Varzi, Iranian musician extraordinaire. He was 81 years old. Morteżâ Varzi was born in Tehran, Iran, on 30 December 1922.

Mr. Varzi started his music lessons on the violin at age 15 with the Ney-Dâvoud brothers, two of the greatest Persian instrumentalists of the twentieth century. After his father advised him to play music on a traditional Persian instrument, he began studying *setâr* with master Nasratollâh Zarrin-Panjeh, and *kemenche* with master Ali-Asghâr Bahâri.

After finishing college with a degree in economics, Mr. Varzi was employed by the Iranian government, traveling throughout the world, conducting official business in Japan, the Philippines, India, China, the UK, and the United States. During his official duties, he represented the Iranian government at forums such as the CENTO Symposium on Decentralization of Government. He undertook post-graduate studies in Finance and Personnel Management in the United States, and in Public Administration in the UK.



Morteżâ Varzi, 1922 – 2004.

Later, after attaining high office at the Iranian State Railroad and at the Iranian Ministry of the Interior (where his posts included Governor of the Province of Sari, Director of Planning and Studies, Director General of Plans and Studies, Director General of Organization and Method, Consultant to the Minister of the Interior, and Executive Director of the Iran Municipal Association), he spent his free time collecting Iranian musical recordings, and researching Persian classical and folkloric music.

In 1970, Mr. Varzi took up residence in the United States, promoting Persian music and culture, and instructing both Iranians and Americans in the Persian classical musical repertoire. To this end, he founded the non-profit Institute of Persian Performing Arts in 1985, which he directed until his death. He was also the founder of the *Bahâri* (with Peggy Caton, Robyn Friend, Massoud Modirian, and Neil Siegel) and *Oshâgh* (with Kâzem Âlemi, Mr. Tehrâni, and Rezâ Torshizi) musical ensembles. In 1986, he was recognized by the United States National Endowment for the Arts as a master teacher and performer.

He performed with all of the greats of recent and contemporary Persian classical music – Banân, Majd, Shahnâz, Shahnâzi, Bahâri, Tehrâni, Shajâriân, Pâivar, Sâdeghi, Tâkestâni, and many others. We performed with him a hundreds of times, in forums ranging from huge concert halls to private homes.

He had hundreds of students, of all ages, Iranian and non-Iranian – learning violin, *kemenche*, *setâr*, *târ*, *radif* (Persian repertoire), Persian singing, Persian classical poetry – who came to study with him from all over the world. He also provided many opportunities for his students to meet and work with other masters of Persian music.

He collaborated on translations of several books; at the time of his death, he was working on projects as diverse as a new translation of Hâfez, and translations of works on Iranian folk music.

He kept an open house for musicians, scholars, poets, and interesting people of all sorts. He was seldom alone when we came by for lessons. He cooked for everyone who visited. He was interested in everything – modern topics as well as traditional; one never knew what the conversation over the meal would encompass.

Despite his huge knowledge of Persian music and poetry, he was non-dogmatic, always ready to listen to other views, and capable of being swayed to other points of view. He was always respectful of people's feelings, going out of his way never to embarrass someone. Disagreements were usually expressed privately.

He brought, however, great energy to all of his personal relationships, and was perfectly capable of quarrelling, especially with long-time friends. These quarrels were always, however, eventually patched-up.

Mr. Varzi held long-time friendships – ours of 25 years was a mere nothing. His friendship and collaboration with the *târ* player Mehdi Tâkestâni and the poet Dr. Shahpar extended over 60 or 70 years. We met dozens of people over the years that had known him, studied with him, played music with him, for decades.

He introduced us to many of the great names of contemporary Persian music (most of those listed above, plus Alâheh, Samandar, Nâzeri, Sousan, and many others), and – unlike some teachers – he was always happy for us to learn a bit from them, too; for example, his late older brother, Abol-Hassan Varzi, judge and poet. As children, at the same time Morteżâ studied violin with the great Jewish Persian musician Morteżâ Ney-Dâvoud, Abol-Hassan had studied the *târ*. So I had the opportunity to study *târ* with Abol-Hassan, and Robyn had the opportunity to learn some of Abol-Hassan's most famous poems directly from him, and have him supervise her rendition of those poems into music.



Abol-Hassan & Morteżâ Varzi – 1986.
Photo by Neil Siegel.



Shâhrâm Nâzeri, Robyn, Ali Asghâr Bâhâri, Mr. Varzi, the author.

He balanced the old and the new – he himself originally learned to read music, and to play from notation . . . and then started all over again, learning by ear from a traditional master. He understood the value of both approaches, and the strength derivable from making use of both.

Mr. Varzi had a broad-minded view of dancing; whereas dancing is generally considered “low class” in Iran and amongst Iranian musicians, he was willing to distinguish, on the one hand, between performers who “just moved” but had “nothing spiritual to say” through their dancing, and on the other hand, those – who by drawing upon the poetic and spiritual traditions of Iran (much of which

have been suppressed by the Shi'a since the coming of the Safavid dynasty) – could bring true feeling, power, and art to bear through dancing. He collaborated at finding and translating books that described these “lost” aspects of Iranian spirituality – connections between music modes and aspects of love, the spiritual potential of movement and effective forms for realizing it, the “complete” performer who is

able to “prescribe” a performance for an audience (poetry, musical mode, dance forms, etc.) to correct the audience’s spiritual “ailments”, just as a physician prescribes medicines to correct physical ailments. This was his great quest – to use art to improve society, one person and one performance at a time.



Massoud Modiriân and Morteżâ Varzi, in performance, Pasadena, 1988.
Photo by Barbara Racy.

I, of course, treasure his great fondness and respect for my wife’s performing, and the endless amount of time he spent with us growing us into such “prescribers for the audience”. Robyn studied music and *radif* with him, of course, but also poetry, and spent hours discussing dance and its role in the “prescriptive performance”. He took a talented singer and dancer, and turned her into a great artist with deep spiritual roots.

His *radif* was individualistic; he was willing to acknowledge that large portions of the *radif* were best left for training, not necessarily performing, and preferred to concentrate his performances (and hence, ours) into smaller, “golden nuggets”. He played with great complexity, technique, and virtuosity in the rarest way – making it seem simple, elegant, effortless, and a clear carrier of the “message” intended for that performance. He could learn and perform long and complex composed pieces, and would do so to satisfy his fellow performers, but one sensed that his heart was in the shorter, sharper pieces and most especially, in his (improvised) accompaniment to singing. Having the opportunity over many years to hear him repeatedly accompany a given singer or a given poem taught one reams about the method, the goals, and the “boundary” of traditional Persian music.

He was modest and “*darvish*”. He would play with and for anyone. He would teach anyone, finding something that they could learn at their state and level. He would defer to those who knew less than he did. And he lived

often in appalling poverty, seeming hardly to notice, unaffected, serene, and endlessly optimistic. Everyone liked him, spoke of him always as a “nice man”. Artists are not always respectful of each other; such universal respect and liking was a sign of someone special.

He took great joy in the accomplishments of his students, with particular pride in Robyn.

Ostâd Varzi died in Tehran, Iran, on 3 January 2004 (13th of Dey Maahe 1382), shortly after his 81st birthday.

Let us remember our artistic father, Morteżâ Varzi.

– Neil Siegel

Neil Siegel is a musician and scientist who lives near Los Angeles. His wife, Robyn Friend, is a singer, dancer, and scholar . . . and a frequent contributor to *Habibi*. They studied Persian music and poetry with Morteżâ Varzi from 1979 until shortly before his death.