

# The Sound of *Silence*

**Simon Broughton** talks to sisters Mahsa and Marjan Vahdat about living in Iran and coping with the country's music censorship

**I**f you ban someone from singing, it's like telling them not to smile or cry. Or like telling the sun or moon not to shine," says Mahsa Vahdat, with a smile. "The reason for censorship is fear," adds her sister Marjan. "If they don't understand something, they censor it. But they can never stop the truth."

The two softly-spoken sisters aren't talking about defiant, challenging lyrics. They are not talking about protest songs. They are just talking about the right to simply open their mouths and sing, which they can't do at home in Iran, except for a female-only audience.

"*Oh crane, I hope your wings will never be tied...*" goes their signature song 'Dorna' (Crane). It's based on an old folk song, but with words adapted by contemporary Persian poet Mohammad Ebrahim Jafari. "The bird is in a cage but she's a free spirit longing for freedom," says Mahsa. "The poetry is painful, full of images. Nobody can take your freedom, even if you're in prison." *'Looking forward to the flight of light/In the shadow of the cloud and moon...'*

The two women's voices seem vulnerable, but are perfectly matched. As they intertwine, Marjan picks up the phrase from Mahsa and vice versa, and they weave it into a texture with a resilient strength. It's like spinning silk. Accompanying themselves on plucked *setar* and *daf* (drum), their voices soar over the hubbub at last year's WOMAD Charlton Park festival. And the crowd keeps growing and growing as the prehensile grip of their vocal lines engage and captivate the audience. After the performance, the queue for their CDs far exceeds the number available. The WOMAD effect and much, much more is visible in a documentary directed by Andrew Smith, called *Sisters*, which tells their inspirational story.

At the beginning, it was Marjan, the younger sister by three years, who first started singing at family gatherings at the age of six or seven. "Mahsa was a little bit shy," she laughs, "but when they asked me to sing, I sang straight away." Marjan, it seems, was popular, irrepressible and ready for anything.

They learned songs first from their grandmother, a strong woman from the region of Semnan, in the foothills of the Alborz mountains to the east of Tehran. She loved and sang the songs of Qamar, famous for being the first woman to sing unveiled in Iran in the 1920s.

Around 1990, both sisters started taking singing lessons from Pari Maleki, the mother of a schoolfriend. "We certainly didn't regard it as our career," explains Mahsa. "At that time we didn't know the path was so difficult. It was when we did our first private concert that we understood how challenging it is." That concert, in 1994, was with their teacher in a basement in Tehran, for a mixed audience. "We also did one or two concerts for women-only audiences. At that time female concerts were very exciting. It was the beginning of a movement. Before that, there were no concerts by female artists at all. We were all silent. Then women got permission to sing just for female audiences and we wanted to take part in this movement. But we didn't have a good feeling about it, although we knew it was a good start."

"After one or two concerts we understood it was not natural," adds Marjan. "For us it didn't seem a nice process. And by taking part in this kind of a concert we justify the discrimination the government is imposing." Mahsa takes over from her sister, just like the way they sing, reinforcing each other's vocal line and message. "It's better that this possibility exists, of course. If there

was no stage at all for women, it would be worse, but we like to be loyal to the art."

To do any public concert in Iran men and women have to submit the material in advance to Ershad (The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance) and get official approval. Many of Mahsa and Marjan's songs are based on folk songs or the lyrics of great Persian poets like Rumi (13th century) and Hafez (14th century). Like using the words of Milton or Shakespeare, these are acknowledged geniuses of Persian literature whose words can hardly be rejected by the authorities. The problem for the Vahdats is simply that they are women who want to sing, which is prohibited under Iran's interpretation of Islamic law. There are no authorised public performances (except for female audiences) and no female singers on radio or TV.

From 1997 the sisters started performing abroad, first for the ex-pat Iranian community in Cologne and in concert for WDR radio in Germany. There were then a few tours, one of which brought Mahsa to the Rhythm Sticks Festival in London. But their break came when they were introduced to Erik Hillestad of Norwegian label KKV. At the

time of George W Bush's 'War on Terror' campaign, Hillestad decided to make a recording called *Lullabies from the Axis of Evil*, featuring women singers from Iran, Iraq, Palestine, Syria, Afghanistan, North Korea and Cuba (reviewed in #28). It was launched with a concert in Oslo with Kari Bremnes from Norway, Rim Banna from Palestine, Halla Balsam from Iraq and

the Vahdat sisters. "As soon as I saw them on stage, I realised we had to continue working together," says Hillestad. "There are very few countries that have kept an unbroken tradition in poetry and music this long. Their art and what they bring to the world tells another story about Iran and gradually people will understand the greatness of Persian art and history." ▶

Marjan (left) and Mahsa pictured in Tehran



Mahsa (left) & Marjan performing at WOMAD

Philipp Steinhilber

They've now performed at big festivals like WOMAD and Førde Traditional and World Music Festival in Norway and been deeply involved with collaborators from Anatolia and Poland in a powerful theatre piece about the Armenian genocide called *Armine, Sister*. They've made eight albums for KKV, with their duo album *Twinklings of Hope* in 2012 being a Top of the World in #86. Marjan released a solo album, *Blue Fields* (reviewed in #103) and Mahsa has just released *Traces of an Old Vineyard* (a Top of the World review in this issue, see p77), both of them feature Iranian and Norwegian musicians.

"For this album I wanted to work with pianist Tord Gustavsen" says Mahsa. "We'd played some concerts and he brought the spirituality of the two cultures together in a wonderful way."

"In Iran there is a tradition of vines and in Persian poetry wine has many meanings. It can be drinkable, metaphorical or symbolic, and the ambiguity makes it beautiful and complex. Wine and the tavern have become positive symbols of liberation. After Iran became Muslim, wine, music and art were restricted, but for centuries poets like Hafez, Rumi and Khayyam kept the idea of wine in our literature and they are so alive in modern Iran. These poets are so dynamic that their heritage makes us fresh and give us rays of hope."

While the sisters share a love and knowledge of Persian literature and

classical music, Marjan's interest is towards Iran's rich folk and regional traditions, particularly those of Kurdistan in the west and Khorasan in the north-east of the country. She took classes with celebrated folk singer Sima Bina from whom they first learned 'Dorna' (Crane), before Bina left Iran.

'Rooted in You', the opening track on Marjan's solo album *Blue Fields* is soft, sultry and gorgeous with a whispering *ney* (flute) and *kamancheh* (fiddle). It's dedicated to Tehran, although this romantic sound is not exactly what the concrete apartment blocks and traffic-choked streets would suggest. *'I am a plant rooted in your soil/You are the passion of patience'* says the poem, again by Mohammad Ebrahim Jafari. "He's writing the lyrics specially for me," Marjan explains, "creating the words from our personal feelings and emotions." Mahsa continues: "I really like his craziness. Our work with him is very special."

As they are unable to practice their art at home in Iran, it's perhaps surprising the sisters choose to stay in Tehran. Marjan, who has lived abroad, explains: "You need to be inspired by the people to give back to the people. You receive the sorrow and joy from them and you reflect it back, so you need to live amongst them." As Jafari writes, *'I am a plant rooted in your soil...'*

In Tehran, Mahsa works as a singing teacher, seeing it as a crucial vocation

connecting a new generation of women to the long tradition of Persian music. "It's wonderful that in a city like Tehran where there is traffic and stress, they come and spend a lot of time and dedication with no hope of official presentation. In Iran there is no support of music on radio or TV – just to show Iranian instruments on TV is banned – so how can people learn these things? They are in a chain of music preservers from the past. It's very important to do this." Mahsa pauses for a moment, and then asks a difficult question: "We have a culture of praising beauty. But if they ban the female voice, what does that say about the society we have?"

"I remember the home of our music teacher," adds Marjan, "it became a place of joy, a meeting place and as we couldn't express ourselves outside, there was a sort of liberation there."

What's remarkable about the sisters is not just their quiet resilience, but the fact that they can bring that sense of liberation, transcendence and beauty, to another audience entirely. ♦

**+ DATES** Mahsa & Marjan Vahdat will perform at Songlines Encounters Festival on June 5, plus four other regional dates. See p22 for details of these concerts, as well as details about the screening of the documentary film, *Sisters*

**+ ALBUM** *Traces of an Old Vineyard* is a Top of the World review, track 8 on the CD