

Hidden Words and Sounds: Tracing Iranian Legacies and Traumas in the Music of the Bahá'ís of  
North America

by

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## Abstract

This dissertation examines music in North American Bahá'í communities and artistic contexts by focusing on the Faith's legacy of Persian culture, aesthetics, and history of religious persecution. As such, it provides a reinvigorated look into the development of Bahá'í devotional life from its emergence in mid-nineteenth century Persia to early twentieth-century expansions in the West, as well as more recent developments following the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Through incorporating a mix of ethnographic, historical, and analytical approaches to key Holy Texts, Bahá'í scholarly literature, and select musical case studies (including pop, rock, hip-hop, and classical compositions, as well as the development of a music program at the *Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education*), I explore how Bahá'ís navigate the Faith's world-unifying message and administrative processes amid greater diversification of membership, patterns of devotional localization, and ongoing struggles in the Islamic Republic of Iran. It traces a history of religious oppression and considers how narratives of persecution and martyrdom throughout the Faith's succession prophetic revelation (the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh) and leadership ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice) has shaped global Bahá'í identity formation, as well as inspired forms of aesthetic worship. At the same time, it will contribute new perspectives on research in the Iranian diaspora, transnational music-making, and musical cosmopolitanism through a 'Bahá'í inspired' theological approach, which emphasizes Bahá'í literatures, utterances, worldviews, and scholarly conventions.

## **Preface**

This thesis is an original work by Daniel Akira Stadnicki. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name “Hidden Words and Sounds,” No. Pro00039589, May 10, 2016.

## **Dedication**

For Michelle, Oscar, Arlo, and Jane: you are my heart, my joy, my home. For my parents, ‘Papa G,’ and Kirk Ellard (1970-2009): my earliest supporters and champions of my work. This dissertation is dedicated to the Bahá’ís of Iran and to the Edmonton Bahá’í community, with whom our little family grew, loved, and celebrated together.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge and thank my doctoral examination committee members: Dr. Michael Frishkopf, Dr. Regula Burckhardt-Qureshi, Dr. David Gramit, Dr. Mary Ingraham, and Dr. Farzaneh Hemmasi. Special thanks goes to Dr. Federico Spinetti, whose comments and suggestions during the dissertation proposal phase radically changed the direction of this research. I would also like to acknowledge Michelle Stadnicki for her heroic support, stimulating debates, and critical insights throughout the course of this project (*we did it!*). Generous funding was provided by a SSHRC Vanier Canada Graduate Scholarship, the University of Alberta's Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, and the Department of Music.

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**Introduction:**  
***Setting the Stage for ‘Bahá’í Music,’ Iranian Legacies, and Traumas***

This dissertation will explore the aesthetic and theological dimensions of Bahá’í musical expression by focusing on the legacy of Persian culture and discourse in the Faith, particularly in North America. While there are no definitive forms of ‘Bahá’í music’ or art today, I claim that an exploration of the Faith’s history, its Westward expansion, and ongoing struggles in the Islamic Republic of Iran provide a critical starting point for understanding the global development of Bahá’í musicking and devotional aesthetics. As such, this project will concentrate on three main areas of inquiry: 1) investigating the role and status of music in the Faith’s Holy Writings; 2) studying how Bahá’í musicians (Iranian and non-Iranian) connect their music to their religious, ethno-cultural, and diasporic identities; and 3) exploring oral histories and musical representations (popular, folk, and classical) of Iranian Bahá’í religious persecution through select musical examples and case studies.

While the breadth and diversity of music in the Faith cannot be adequately addressed in the space of this dissertation, each chapter will attempt to provide a window into the musical world of Bahá’ism and Persian elements in the Faith.<sup>1</sup> Chapter One surveys how leaders of the Bahá’í Faith discussed music, focusing on discourses of permissibility, beauty, and the aesthetic

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this dissertation, I will be referencing Bahá’ism as *the Faith* (with capitalized ‘f’) in accordance with conventional use in Bahá’í documents. I also move between using the terms ‘Persian’ and ‘Iranian’ in specific ways: that is, ‘Persian’ often denotes a field of historical, cultural, and aesthetic practice, whereas ‘Iranian’ confers two key dynamics: 1) discussing more recent discourses and topics following the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran; and 2) Bahá’ís that have subsequently emigrated to North America post-1979. Of course, ‘Iran’ itself is also a very old term and encompasses more than the Persian ethnolinguistic group. These conventions are common in Bahá’í documents and guidance, though I do problematize some of these discourses in Chapter Two. Here, I discuss the Faith’s Persian cultural and aesthetic holdovers, as well as notions of an ‘Iranian Bahá’í’ diaspora. I admit that these distinctions are often messy and, in many ways, reflect a performative dimension: articulating a sense of Bahá’í identity that embraces and moves towards a historical Persia (where Bahá’u’lláh lived), but distances itself from today’s heated political landscape of Iran.

lineage of Islam. Chapter Two provides an in-depth look into the dimensions of Persian culture, aesthetics, and discourse in the Faith, including how Iranians have been perceived within North American Bahá'í communities and is addressed in select Holy Writings and letters of guidance. Chapters Three and Four both examine musical case studies in a more interpretive manner: the former discussing musical significations of cultural diversity as a reflection of a key Bahá'í tenet ('unity in diversity'), with the latter providing an examination of a more specific musical topic, that of Iranian Bahá'í persecution, analyzing a selection of work by Iranian and non-Iranian Bahá'í artists. Finally, Chapter Five aims to coalesce the previous two interpretive chapters by focusing on the experiences of music faculty, alumni, and administrators at the *Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education* (BIHE) in Tehran: an 'unofficial,' grassroots and volunteer-run university that serves the Bahá'í community, who are denied access to post-secondary education in the country. As such, this dissertation will contribute new research regarding music in the Iranian diaspora and will be the first major ethnomusicological project to address contemporary music in the Bahá'í Faith and interrogate the unique dynamic of Persian culture in global Bahá'í devotionalism.

*A. An Introduction to the Bahá'í Faith and the Narrative of Religious Persecution:*

This section cannot provide an exhaustive introduction to Bahá'ism, its history, and teachings, though each chapter of the dissertation will review critical aspects about the Faith (often with reference to the Holy Writings) by addressing dimensions of Bahá'í aesthetics, devotional practice, and the role of arts and music.<sup>2</sup> The Bahá'í Faith is a relatively new religion,

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<sup>2</sup> However, there are several introductory texts on the Bahá'í Faith that outline many of its core tenets, including Martin and Hatcher (1985), Smith (2008), Momen (1997), and Stockman (2013).

founded in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Iran and attracting its first North American converts in the late 1800s, growing to a present day global membership of around 5 million (“Media Information: Statistics” n.d.).<sup>3</sup> It emerged out of two religious contexts: that of the messianic return of a mythical ‘Twelfth Imam’ in the tradition of Twelver Shiism (Garlington 2005, 3) and the Bábí religious movement of the 1860s—a precursor religion to the Bahá’í Faith where the first Bahá’í ‘manifestation of God’ came in the form of a young merchant in Shiraz named Sayyid ‘Ali Muhammad Shirazi (the Báb, meaning ‘the Gate’). The Báb’s mission was to prepare the way for the coming of Mírzá Hussein-‘Alí Núrí (Lepard 2008, 17) (later to be known as Bahá’u’lláh, meaning *the Glory of God*). Once a follower of the Báb, Bahá’u’lláh would establish the Bahá’í Faith, teaching that each Abrahamic religion reflects the existence of one true God through ‘progressive revelation’ and claimed that “the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures is the privilege of prophets and none other, thereby implying that he, the Bahá’u’lláh, was a prophet [...] [and] that the prophets were not presently being heard because the believers were too attentive to the clergy who were distorting the scriptures in order to tighten their hold on the believers” (Cohen 2013, 56). It is in this sense that Bahá’u’lláh is viewed as a ‘Manifestation of God’ whose words reflected the word of God, akin to a ‘divine mirror’ “who reflect[s] God’s glory and reveal[s] his attributes” (Smith 2008, 107). Accordingly, each prophet embodies the values and goals of humanity at distinct historical periods, meaning that Bahá’u’lláh’s religious message addresses the needs of today. Drawing from dimensions of Christianity and Islam, Hatcher and Martin (1985, 3) note that several Islamic dimensions of the Faith are important to

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<sup>3</sup> Note that Hatcher and Martin’s text (1998, 170) also cites the same figure, indicating either a stagnation of conversions, or the need to update demographic information for the official Bahá’í administrative websites.

consider, including the belief that “God is One and utterly transcendent in his essence. He ‘manifests’ his will to humanity through the series of messengers whom Bahá’ís call ‘Manifestations of God.’” A key difference, however, is that Bahá’ís also believe in the prophetic message of Zoroaster, Krishna, and Buddha, but maintain a monotheistic vision of God, “who is unknowable and exalted above human attributes and understanding” (Smith 2008, 106). Far from being a syncretic religion, Michael McMullen (2000, 109) writes that “Bahá’ís conceive their religious ideas to be *more* relevant than others for today’s world; they believe Bahá’u’lláh’s World Order is the *only* salvation for a wayward humanity.”

Following Bahá’u’lláh’s death in 1892, his son ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was named as the successor and interpreter of the Faith’s teachings, helping propagate the Bahá’í Faith to Europe and North America at the turn of the twentieth century. Shoghi Effendi (Bahá’u’lláh’s grandson) was named as *The Guardian of the Faith* after Abdu’l-Bahá’s death in 1921—an era of Bahá’í expansion and global administrative development, including the founding of the *Bahá’í World Centre* in what is now Haifa, Israel. Effendi would offer interpretation and guidance on issues for the global Bahá’í community, serving as principal translator of the writings from Persian and Arabic to English (Hatcher and Martin 1998, 65). However, Effendi would die of the flu in 1957 before choosing a successor, who would have been yet another descendant of Bahá’u’lláh. Instead, Effendi established Bahá’u’lláh’s desire of creating a democratically elected, multi-ethnic, global Bahá’í administrative centre (the Universal House of Justice)—a process that was accelerated in the wake of his death. Today, Bahá’ís hold democratic elections for their respective Spiritual Assemblies that serve in a range of administrative capacities. This includes Local Spiritual Assemblies (which often form into several sub-committees and working groups, such as teaching

projects or youth activities in a given municipal region), National Spiritual Assemblies (which handle the domestic affairs of Bahá'ís in each country), and the Universal House of Justice (herein the UHJ)—the global administrative centre of the Faith, based in Haifa. Furthermore, on each continent sits a Bahá'í House of Worship (*Mashriqu'l-Adhkar*), which serves as a holy site for Bahá'ís and members of any religious denomination to express their religiosity. Eventually, these sites are meant to house educational institutions, hospitals, and other resources, serving as hubs for faith-based community engagement.

Organized around the principles of unity and the ‘oneness of humanity,’ the Bahá'í Faith extends this belief to other realms of intercultural and interfaith understanding, such as: the oneness of religion, the independent investigation of truth, the abandonment of prejudice and superstition, the unity of religion and science, the equality of men and women, and universal access to education (see Hatcher and Martin 1985, 74-99). Bahá'ís believe in a monotheistic God through the sequence of Divine Manifestations, built around the premise of a Covenant that calls upon believers to recognize the authority of prophetic succession when another Manifestation (eventually) emerges (Smith 2008, 106-110). Relatedly, this Covenant outlines “no theologian or prominent Bahá'í can ever become a part of the authoritative texts [...] even oral transmissions of words attributed to the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi can never be added to the authoritative texts, unless they were approved by one of them” (Stockman 2013, 4). Notions of ‘heaven’ and ‘hell’ are clarified for not being physical places, but states of the soul and nearness to God (or, distance from God due to an attachment to the material world) (Smith 2008, 119-120). For Peter Smith (99-100), it is a religion of ‘the Word’<sup>4</sup>—unique in its

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Smith’s portrayal of Bahá’ism in this manner aptly describes how music would later develop in the Faith globally: prioritizing the text above all other elements (see Chapter One).

dispensation for how its' canonical texts were written by the hands of its founders, or directly transcribed by secretaries. As such, the Faith instituted a succession of guidance from the *Divine Words* of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, to the *Authoritative Interpretations* of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, and the *Authoritative Legislation* of the UHJ.

In contrast with other world religions, Bahá'ís do not gather at a 'church,' per se, but regularly host devotionals, 'firesides' (informal spiritual gatherings with non-Bahá'ís), Feasts and Holy Day celebrations in private homes, local community centres, or—depending on the location—designated Bahá'í Centres (such as the one located in the North End of downtown Edmonton). Here, music is often performed in a range of formats, genres, and styles though it is often set to the Holy Writings. This includes listening or singing along to pre-recorded tracks, performing on acoustic guitar or piano, gathering for a concert on Persian *santour* or classical guitar recital, live recitation of the Bahá'í Writings in Farsi or Arabic, and a range of other musical styles, genres, and instrumentation. This is because *there exist no distinct forms of music or art in the Bahá'í Faith*—a dynamic that, as I will discuss further in Chapter One, was instituted under the auspices of Shoghi Effendi's leadership to ensure the natural development of a new 'Bahá'í culture' as the Faith matures and expands. In this sense, what might appear as 'Bahá'í music' today is more a reflection of current musical trends and already-existing cultural and devotional practices that are brought into Bahá'í communities and expressed through the art of its' followers. This can include the widespread popularity of Bahá'í choirs performing African-American gospel hymns in North America, or the ubiquity of Bahá'í prayer chanting in Arabic or Farsi (especially in countries with high rates of Iranian immigrant populations).



But given the importance placed upon lyrics, factors such as instrumental accompaniment, genre, and style have historically been mired in ambiguity and generally approached with trepidation among many practicing Bahá'ís. These dynamics have often been arbitrarily limited to subjective aesthetic evaluations about music's 'appropriateness,' 'reverence,' or permissibility despite the vaulted status of music in the Faith's Writings, or even following letters of clarification to individual Bahá'ís from 'Abdu'l-Bahá or Shoghi Effendi.<sup>5</sup> Consequentially, the actual *music* heard in Bahá'í songs often has very few identifiable characteristics that distinguish it from other religions.<sup>6</sup> The predominance of Western popular musical styles and genres in the Faith also connects global Bahá'í musicianship with broader trends that exist across faith traditions and denominations, including rock, pop, and country in contemporary evangelical Christian music.

The Faith, however, is also marked by a profound and traumatic legacy of religious oppression in Iran, as the lives of both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh—including many early followers—were indelibly shaped by instances of state-sanctioned persecution, torture, isolationism, murder, and imprisonment in the country. The roots of persecutory discourse remains essential for identify-formation among Bahá'ís globally and, as I will explore in Chapter Four, has inspired what is perhaps the most identifiable musical discourse that openly celebrates the Faith's

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<sup>5</sup> See Chapter One to study debates surrounding the use of music in early American Bahá'í communities and devotions.

<sup>6</sup> In Chapter Three, however, I will address how the Bahá'í tenet of 'unity in diversity' provides a loose aesthetic structure for some Bahá'í songwriters—many of whom play with the Faith's Persian historical/cultural milieu as a musical topic (especially when detailing a historical narrative about a Bahá'í martyr); often borrowing musical elements from other cultures and traditions around the world to convey a sense of global Bahá'í unity. While lyrics still form the primary basis for these compositions, there are identifiable features in the instrumentation and harmonic content that attempt to sonically represent Iran, or celebrate the ethnic diversity of Bahá'í global membership (sometimes in problematic ways).

Persian roots. After declaring His prophetic station in 1844 as both the Hidden Imam and “a Messenger of God, in the line of Jesus, Muhammad, and those who had preceded them” (Hatcher and Martin 1985, 7), the Báb provided the basis of heretical indictments against the Faith by the Islamic elite, as it broke with the notion that Muhammad was the ‘final Seal of the Prophets.’ This critique against the Faith remains today in the current Islamic Republic of Iran. The earliest Bábí followers, known as the Letters of the Living, spread across Iran and shared the Báb’s earliest works: the *Commentary on the Súrih of Joseph* (the Qayyúmu’l-Asmá’) and the *Hidden Treasured Epistle* (Sahífiy-i-Makhzúnih) (Saiedi 2008, 20). Many aspects of the Báb’s message were profoundly controversial, as were some of His methods of spreading the religion: for instance, declaring His station in Mecca to Muslims present before the Kaaba (20). He would later be tried in Tabriz in 1848 and was subject to corporeal punishment and held in prison in northern Iran, while His followers experienced waves of increased public attacks (13). However, interest in the Faith grew, culminating in large meetings, such as the ‘conference of Badasht’ (which discussed how to free the Báb from the prison in Chirag), as well as a series of coordinated attacks by the Bábís (i.e. the battle of Fort Tabarsi in 1848, as well as in Nayriz and Zanjan)—many of which are memorialized in Bahá’í history and song (see Chapter Four). Eventually, on July 9, 1850, the Báb was to be publicly executed in Tabriz by firing squad—an event that remains surrounded in mysticism and intrigue. The Báb initially disappeared in the mist of smoke at the first round of shooting by 750 Armenian riflemen, only to be found in his chamber finishing paperwork for his secretary. A second wave of firing was then ordered after the regiment refused to participate once again—the Báb and his companion Anís were then killed

by a separate regiment (see Hatcher and Martin 1985, 18-20), providing the first instance of religious oppression in the Faith at the hands of government officials.

Following the death of the Báb, the Bábi movement required a new leader and found it in Mírzá Hussein-'Alí Núrí (Bahá'u'lláh). However, Bahá'u'lláh's life was also marked by considerable trauma and persecution: He received knowledge of His divine station as a Bábi heretic in the 'Black Pit' of Siyah-Chal prison in Tehran (1852) and was later to be exiled to Baghdad, Constantinople, Adrianople, and Acre. Similarly, stories of other early Bahá'í followers became important for Western converts, such as that of fellow Siyah-Chal prisoner Sulayman Khan, whose grotesque public execution was paraded throughout the streets as he received multiple stab wounds, each inserted with a candle (Hatcher and Martin 1985, 31). In short, the narrative of religious persecution is powerfully attached to the Faith's history and its emergence as an independent religion. Immortalized in books such as *The Dawn-Breakers* (Effendi 1932), which detailed the lives of early Bábi and Bahá'í martyrs, Bahá'í persecution remains a key aesthetic resource for Bahá'í artists to use in their compositional practice.

Several Bahá'í academics have also been touched by experiences of religious persecution, including Dr. Nader Saiedi, whose research on Bábism was, in part, inspired by the martyrdom of a close Bahá'í friend from his hometown of Shiraz (Saiedi 2008, vii). In fact, the topic of Iranian Bahá'í persecution is a primary area of work in the social sciences and humanities (often among practicing Bahá'í academics), culminating in edited collections dedicated to the Bahá'ís of Iran (Brookshaw and Fazel, 2010), special editions of the *Bahá'í Studies Journal* devoted to the topic (Martin 1984), and several articles that explore the history of Bahá'í religious oppression, including contemporary accounts, many of which discuss the

ongoing denial of access to university education in Iran (Akhavi 1980; Allen 1987; Chehabi, 2011; Momen 2005, 2012a, 2012b; Affolter 2005, 2007; Kazemzadeh, 2000; Ghanea-Hercock, 2002; Haghani 2014; Handal, 2007; Zabihi-Moghaddam 2016; and Yazdani 2015). Each year, the UHJ circulates a number of internal letters and messages to worldwide Spiritual Assemblies about the current situation for Bahá'í in Iran, while the work of the *Bahá'í International Community* (BIC)—an UN-registered NGO—has helped galvanize global awareness about ongoing persecution in Iran through disseminating media information, reports, and launching arts-based campaigns (see “Situation of Bahá'ís in Iran” n.d.). In recent years, greater international attention about Iranian Bahá'í issues have been bolstered by a number of recent award-winning feature-films (*The Gardener*, 2012), documentaries (*To Light A Candle*, 2014), social media campaigns (*Education is Not a Crime*), and well-publicized political controversies in Iran, including the recent visitation of a prominent incarcerated Bahá'í by a Shi'a cleric's daughter (Erdrink 2016). The realities of Iranian religious persecution continue to significantly galvanize the Bahá'í community in ways that help teach the Faith, while also opening areas for intellectual inquiry and research development.

### *B. On Bahá'í Scholarship*

The Bahá'í Faith remains an underrepresented research topic across religious studies, Iranian diaspora studies, and Persian music scholarship. The Bahá'ís are a marginalized and persecuted religious community in Iran, but represent the country's largest minority religious population (Kazemzadeh 2000, 537). Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the situation has worsened considerably for the Bahá'ís: they are prohibited from attending university in Iran; face

numerous barriers for employment and travel in the country; often receive lengthy prison sentences for practicing their religious beliefs and for organizing community activities; and since 1979, over 200 Bahá'ís have been executed, killed, or have died in prison (Milani 2016, 137). What was initially a “brutal and partly chaotic” campaign against the Bahá'ís would later “become institutionalized and has since proceeded according to well-defined policies” by the 1990s (Zabihi-Moghaddam 2016, 126). This includes the continued use of execution as a “tool for intimidation, but official executions are avoided because of their repercussions in the international community” (139).

Thousands have since fled Iran—often via India, Pakistan, Armenia, or Turkey—to resettle in Canada and the USA, but only a handful of scholars have focused on the North American migrant experiences of Iranian Bahá'ís (Dossa, 2003 and 2004; van den Hoonard and van den Hoonard, 2006 and 2010; Talebi and Dejardins, 2012). Currently, there has been little to no research conducted on the *music* of Iranian Bahá'ís—either within Iran or in the diaspora—or of the musical phenomenon of global Bahá'í artists composing songs that engage with ‘Persian’ sounds, or are explicitly about Iranian persecutory topics. This project is particularly interested in the latter two subjects, providing a unique vantage point from which to examine Persian popular and classical music cultures—their relationships to politics, religion (Nooshin, 2005; Robertson, 2012; and Hemmasi, 2013) and political dissent (Allahyar, 1994; Johnston, 2008; Toynebee and Sreberny-Mohammadi, 2012).

Overall, the study of music in the Faith is considerably underdeveloped, found only in the work of a few scholars—most notably Margret L. Caton (1984), R. Jackson Armstrong-Ingram (1988), and E. Taylor Atkins (2006). In contrast, there is ample literature on the state of musical

ensorship regarding popular, folk, and classical musicians in both pre- and post-1979 Iran (see Nettl, 1972; Hanson, 1983; During, 1992; Shay, 2001; DeBano, 2005; Hemmasi, 2013); Iran’s ‘unofficial’ rock music scenes (Robertson, 2012); political subversion and youth cultures in contemporary Iranian pop, rock, and hip hop (Nooshin 2005, 2007, 2009, and 2011); as well as the arts and cultural ministries that were established throughout the country’s political history (Klitz and Cherlin, 1971; Youssefzadeh, 2000). However, the question of Bahá’í marginalization and persecution is often missing from these broader studies. This is an interesting gap in research, considering that there are several fascinating dimensions that can invite a range of interpretive and historical work. For instance, many Bahá’í viewpoints on music reaffirm Sufi-Islamic spiritual concepts. As E. Taylor Atkins writes, Bahá’u’lláh claimed “listening to music could lead to ecstasy (*hal*) through which ultimate truth might be achieved” (Atkins 2006, 415)—a stream of thought that derived from the Islamic tradition of *sama`* (a kind of heightened, sacred form of listening).<sup>7</sup> There are also historical precedents for scholars of Persian music, as the ‘grandfather’ of modern Iranian *radif*, Mirza Abdullah—mentor to Iranian modernist Ali Naqi Vaziri, among others—was thought to have been a Bahá’í (Caton 1984, 54). The work of Mirza Abdullah has been the subject of many foundational ethnomusicological studies on Persian music and repertoire (see Zonis, 1973; During, 1991), but this aspect of his life has not been examined outside of Caton’s book chapter (1984). Here, Caton describes how Mirza Abdullah attended Bahá’í meetings and gatherings, receiving correspondence by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, who offered the musician encouragement to “elevate and transform classical music” (59); urging Abdullah to “try, if thou canst, to use spiritual melodies, songs and tunes, and to bring the earthly

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<sup>7</sup> See Gribetz (1991), Lewisohn (1997), and Shiloah (1997) (especially “The Mystical Dimension” of music in Islam [Shiloah 149-150]).

music into harmony with the celestial melody” (61). The narrative of Mirza Abdullah’s faith and relationship with the Bahá’ís had profound significance for some of my interview participants—especially among Western and Persian classical musicians. One interviewee claimed to be directly related to Mirza Abdullah, while another referenced Abdullah’s faith as a reason for why Bahá’ís have received little recognition in scholarship on Persian classical music. For a young *kamancheh* performer and current Berklee College of Music student Farzin Dehghan, learning about Abdullah’s interactions with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá inspired him to continue developing his craft: “This story was very powerful for me, always, even when I didn’t hear the story I knew they are connected. Even in the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh and Abdu’l-Bahá, the importance of music and art was always encouraging [...] this music is making me closer to that source” (Farzin Dehghan, interview). In these respects, Bahá’í narratives about Mirza Abdullah may help legitimate the efforts of Iranian Bahá’í musicians, espousing notions that Abdullah’s *radif* was somehow shaped by the Faith, thus enlivening (perhaps even sacralizing) Persian art music from a Bahá’í perspective.

Bahá’í scholarship itself remains a relatively marginal field of research, existing on “the periphery of academic discourse” (Velasco 2001, 188) across Middle Eastern and Persian studies. Most work is published by Bahá’í academics in Bahá’í journals and primarily presented at Bahá’í conferences (which are mostly attended by adherents of the Faith). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, however, conflicts and internal disagreements between Bahá’í scholars delayed growth in research. During this time, a number of scholars abandoned the Faith or published scathing indictments of Bahá’í administrations in more widely circulated academic journals (MacEoin 1986; Cole 1998b, 2000, and 2002), prompting polemical and often problematic

responses from senior Bahá'í academics that labelled some scholars as apostates (Momen 2007; Stausberg et al., 2008). There are also specific conventions in Bahá'í scholarship that have prompted considerable debate and criticism, such as the process of editorial/pre-publication review for Bahá'í research on the Faith. If quoting from the Holy Writings, Bahá'í musicians must also submit compositions (often as a simple demo recording that feature the basic melody, as well as lyrics) to a committee of reviewers under the auspices of a National Spiritual Assembly. Both processes developed in the interest of protecting the Faith in its nascent stage of development. Shoghi Effendi's statements on the matter date back to 1922, citing how 'Abdu'l-Bahá once requested that a translation of Bahá'u'lláh's "Effulgences" Tablet (the *Ishráqát*) be reviewed by the Spiritual Assembly of Cairo:

This is indeed a clear indication of the Master's express desire that nothing whatever should be given to the public by any individual among the friends, unless fully considered and approved by the Spiritual Assembly in his locality; and if this (as is undoubtedly the case) is a matter that pertains to the general interest of the Cause in that land, then it is incumbent upon the Spiritual Assembly to submit it to the consideration and approval of the national body representing all the various local assemblies. (Effendi 1981, 8)

In 1938, *The Guardian* insisted that "the present restrictions imposed on the publication of Bahá'í literature will be definitely abolished" (Effendi 1991, 9)—an ordinance later reiterated by the UHJ in 1991, noting that the "requirement is temporary and is meant to protect the interests of the Faith at the early stages of its development" (UHJ 1991). While the 1991 letter acknowledges the process of scholarly review has, at times, been "irksome, frequently takes far too long and is subject to many problems in implementation," the UHJ believed it was important to preserve the practice, clarifying that:



Bahá'í review is not an exercise in censorship; it is in large measure a benefit offered to an author by the Bahá'í institutions, which are, in fact, the major repositories of the source materials that ordinarily constitute the wellspring of the author's work and are for other reasons the channels of elucidation for a wide range of obscure questions relating to the Faith. Certainly, a dispassionate exploration by Bahá'í scholars of the issues concerning both the academic community and the Bahá'í institutions in this matter could result in the formulation of a rationale appropriate to aiding understanding in academic circles as to the nature and necessity of Bahá'í review. Bahá'í academics, after all, are, first and foremost, believers in the Cause of God and upholders of divine law. (UHJ 1991)

With regard to music, details about pre-publication review can be found throughout the *Bahá'í Canada* website, which states:

All works by Bahá'ís containing any Bahá'í content, whether in the form of books, commentaries, texts, histories, book reviews, and audio-visual materials, must be submitted to the National Spiritual Assembly for review before publication by Bahá'í or non-Bahá'í publishers or self-publishing. Submissions are to be sent by email to [secretariat@Bahá'í.ca](mailto:secretariat@Bahá'í.ca), in as complete and final a form as possible, including illustrations, recordings, liner notes, cover design, etc. Because this time-consuming work is done on a voluntary basis, the review process can take 12 weeks or more, depending on the complexity of the work. The criteria for Bahá'í review – still required, but which the Universal House of Justice calls a “temporary measure” – are ***dignity, accuracy, and conformity with the Teachings.***” (“FAQs” n.d.; emphasis mine)

In a selection of hyperlinked documents, other details about musical review are provided through the website and are further supplemented with guidance from the Writings. Here, it explains the length of time the review process may take (“From a few weeks to several months, depending on the complexity of the material and the time taken by reviewers”); the review committee itself (consisting of members from the National Spiritual Assembly's National Review Committee, as well as “deepened, experienced believers [with varying specialties]”); and administrative procedures for handling materials according to their anticipated circulation. For instance, materials for local distribution only are managed under the Local Spiritual Assemblies; regional teaching materials are reviewed by the Bahá'í Council; French materials are sent to *le Comité*

*bahá'í de littérature et de productions françaises*; and all other new materials for domestic and international distribution (in English or Persian) are reviewed through the National Spiritual Assembly where it is first published/produced (Bahá'í Canada 2005; via “FAQs” n.d.).

However, some Bahá'í academics, bloggers, and creatives have expressed deep concern over pre-publication review. For Barney Leith, the above mentioned criteria (i.e. “dignity, accuracy, and conformity with the Teachings”) is problematically vague, as there are “[n]o definitions or criteria [...] prescribed for these key terms and it is left to the reviewing body to judge what constitutes ‘accuracy’ and dignity” (Leith 1995). Such loose criteria could unnecessarily stifle Bahá'í submissions on the basis of personal taste among the committee membership. Here, Leith describes how a Bahá'í rap album was once “turned down” by a UK review panel—a decision that was later appealed to the UK NSA, “which overturned the decision on the grounds that the presentation would be regarded as dignified by the audience for which it was intended, even if not by the middle-aged, middle-class reviewers” (Leith 1995). Bahá'í review also adds an additional hurdle for academics who wish to publish in non-Bahá'í outlets. In contrast, Bahá'í journals and publishing houses “may not publish any work about the Faith until it has been approved by the National Spiritual Assembly of the country where it is to be published” (NSA USA 1983, 1). Here, Bahá'í scholar and psychiatrist Seena Fazel describes the review process as

problematic in academic terms because it constitutes a third-party intervention between the author (the truth-seeker) and the academic publisher (which will have the work refereed in any case, but solely for intellectual cogency and soundness of sources). While some publishers may accept it (Cambridge did, for Peter Smith's book), it is not the sort of thing other academics would approve of. Nor, in my view, should they. If it is the same as academic refereeing, it is redundant, since the press has referees. If it is not the

same, then it is adding some criterion on to the publication process beyond simple intellectual cogency and accuracy, which is academically unacceptable. (Leith 1995)

For others, the review process has been a key reason why they left the Faith (MacEoin in Strausberg et al. 2008, 386), claiming that it has resulted in “a state of fear [...] [where] academics, authors and all creatives begin to self-censor themselves much more readily and to a deeper extent simply because they don’t quite know where the lines are” (Baquia 2007). Here, blogger ‘Baquia’ specifically refers to the controversies surrounding the expulsion of Bahá’í scholar Senn McGlinn following the self-publication of his MA thesis *Church and State: A Postmodern Political Theology* (2005).

Interestingly, the mechanism of pre-publication review is also instituted through *unofficial* Bahá’í services, including the Bahá’í music distribution website *9 Star Media*. On the artist “Invite Request Form,” a mandatory field indicates whether a recording passed review by a National Assembly, as well as if “it is not overtly Bahá’í and doesn’t contain any quotation from the writings so review is not needed,” or if the recording “has not been reviewed” (“Invite Request Form” n.d.). For a fee of \$19.95, one of *9 Star’s* services includes helping Bahá’í artists get their music reviewed by an NSA committee (“Submit Your Media to Review” n.d.). Despite *9 Star Media* being an independent media company (that is, it does not operate under the auspices of an official Bahá’í institution or committee), it states that it must adhere to these guidelines, given that pre-publication review

is a requirement of so many of the Bahá’í bookstores and distribution services around the world that *9 Star* has to require it as well if you wish for us to distribute your media wholesale. (It is not required for use to sell your media from our site). (“Submit Your Media to Review” n.d.)

Furthermore, there exists a standard of academic values, conventions, and expectations for Bahá'í scholars that stand in contrast with Western 'materialistic' approaches (more on this later). In a UHJ article on the subject of Bahá'í scholarship (1993), it cites a letter from Shoghi Effendi (dated 21 October 1943)<sup>8</sup> as "a definition of the attributes toward which a Bahá'í scholar should aspire," leading to a description of an 'ideal' Bahá'í scholar as one who

places emphasis upon belief, devotion to the Faith, a profound understanding of the Teachings and a strong desire to share them with others. A distinctive feature of such Bahá'í scholarship, which is also reiterated in other passages of the writings of the Guardian, is that of relating the Bahá'í teachings to the present-day concerns and thought of the people around us. (UHJ 1993)

Viewed as a form of service, scholars could "present the Teachings in a way that demonstrates the profundity and efficacy of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh," as well as strive to "strengthen the core of the believer's faith." Referencing an earlier letter from the UHJ (among other sources of guidance), the article clarifies: "the Revelation of the Manifestation of God is the standard for all knowledge, and scientific statements and theories, no matter how close they may come to the eternal principles proclaimed by God's Messenger, are in their very nature ephemeral and limited" (1993). It is in this sense that "problems will arise, rather, if an attempt is made to *impose* on the Bahá'í community's own study of the Revelation, *materialistic methodologies and attitudes antithetical to its very nature*" (Cole 2002, 206; citing UHJ 1998a, emphasis mine). In order to demonstrate the gravity of these critiques against 'materialist' approaches and traditions of scholarship, Juan R. I. Cole cites the dissolution of a *Bahá'í Encyclopedia* project in the

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<sup>8</sup> "The Cause needs more Bahá'í scholars, people who not only are devoted to it and believe in it and are anxious to tell others about it, but also who have a deep grasp of the Teachings and their significance, and who can correlate its beliefs with the current thoughts and problems of the people of the world" (Effendi in UHJ 1993).

1990s, which had the full support of the NSA in the United States. Here, Cole includes extracts from letters written by the UHJ that he claims reacted against the encyclopedia project, which

condemned the then editors and their authors as scholars who ‘cast the Faith into a mould which is essentially foreign to its nature, taking no account of the spiritual forces which Bahá’ís see as its foundation ... In other words, we are presented in such articles with the spectacle of Bahá’ís trying to write as if they were non-Bahá’í. (Cole 2002, 206; citing UHJ 1995, 26)

For the Bahá’í academic, then, participating in the broader discourses of academia requires adherence to the authority of the Faith’s institutions and guidance on publication matters (again, pre-publication review does not include *every* project conducted by a Bahá’í scholar, but only for topics that discuss the Faith, its history, figures, teachings, or if it wishes to appear in a Bahá’í publication). But what constitutes a ‘materialist’ approach to Bahá’í scholarship? According to Cole: “for a Bahá’í simply to write about the religion using academic tools is seen as an act of aggression, an attempt to ‘impose’ methodologies and attitudes” (206).

One area in need of further development concerns the relative absence of ethnographic work in Bahá’í scholarship, as the majority of research tends to focus on theological and comparative analyses of Bahá’í religious texts, or historical surveys and accounts about the development of the Faith and its key members. Following the invitation proposed by Bahá’í scholar and sociologist Will C. van den Hoonaard, what is necessary for furthering Bahá’í studies is the integration of ‘new ethnographic’ and inductive research, which

attempts to understand cultures in a more delicate and theoretically complex way [...] [that] underscore[es] the pervasive and inalienable influence of the researcher’s own culture when he or she explores other cultural settings. More importantly, the “new ethnographies” spell an end to the author-evacuated and passive style of writing, which we have come to associate with “objective” or “realist” research. Contemporary ethnographers who advocate the “new ethnography” would convey all the elements involved in writing ethnographies, especially the role of the researcher, in the construction of other peoples’ cultures, or even his or her

own culture or community. The researcher's own experience in the field is relevant to the nature of his or her results. (van den Hoonaard 2001)

As a Bahá'í himself and a leading scholar on research ethics, Will C. van den Hoonaard believes that ethnographic work can straddle the divide between 'humanistic' and 'materialistic' scholarly approaches to the study of religion (van den Hoonaard, 2001), bridging a Bahá'í tenet that tries to marry science with religion.

This project, then, seeks to provide such a study through working within the conventions and expectations of Bahá'í scholarship; incorporating ethnographic, historical, and analytical research methods, primarily drawing from Bahá'í academic literature, secondary religious texts, excerpts from the Holy Writings, and popular resources (i.e. blogs, Bahá'í websites). This choice is inspired by efforts in collaborative ethnography (Lassiter 2005) that prioritizes the narratives, languages, terms, and ontological world views of research participants in order to appropriately represent their voice in the work. According to Luke Eric Lassiter (2005, 4), the collaborative model attempts to bridge the gap between "academically-positioned and community-positioned narratives" through critically engaging with issues of representation, scholar/subject hierarchies, and questioning the ways in which discourses are privileged in the ethnographic text. For instance, in his work on Kiowa First Nations song, faith, and story-telling, Lassiter (1998; 2002) actively questioned his position of academic 'disbelief,' which 'writes away' notions of spirit from the text's narrative that discounts sacred discourses (Lassiter 1998, 7-8). For Lassiter, academic disbelief is an approach that more often than not imparts "deeper understandings of culture and meaning for the ethnographer's colleagues, not for his or her consultants" (Lassiter 2005, 11). Mirroring some of the goals of Applied Ethnomusicology (see Harrison, et. al 2010),

collaborative ethnography seeks to find ways that foster dialogue and generate community-driven research. Similarly, for Jon Michael Spencer (1991), a theologically-informed musicological analysis (termed *theomusicology*) is distinguished by “the presupposition that the religious symbols, myths, and canon of the culture being studied are the theomusicologist’s authoritative/normative sources [...] [allowing] for scientific analysis, but primarily within the limits of what is normative in the ethics, religion, or mythology of the community of believers being studied” (Spencer 1991, 3–4). Here, what is at stake is the representation of research participants and the values and belief systems of their community in the act of ethnography.

### C. The Bahá’í Faith in North America

The majority of musical acts and research participants that are featured in this study reside in Canada and the USA, including several Iranian Bahá’ís who emigrated to North America following the 1979 Revolution. There are sizeable Iranian Bahá’í memberships in the more established Persian communities across Canada and the United States, including Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal, Los Angeles, New York City, and Chicago. There are approximately 33000 Bahá’ís registered in Canada today (Martin and Yazdani 2015),<sup>9</sup> but the community has been the focus of only a small number of academic studies. Furthermore, Bahá’í membership statistics are not typically published for each country (Warburg 2015, 77), generating gaps in trying to document an exact number of registered Bahá’ís. Bahá’í populations can be found in smaller urban areas and rural locales across North America, but undue historical focus has been placed

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<sup>9</sup> Bahá’í membership registration occurs through a self-directed system of signing and submitting Bahá’í membership cards that assign designated membership numbers. These cards are both provided by and submitted to Bahá’í Local Spiritual Assemblies and membership numbers are then collected through National Spiritual Assemblies in each country.

on Bahá'ís in major urban centres. In Canada, this emphasis has overlooked the significance of early communities throughout New Brunswick and Atlantic Canada (van den Hoonard, 1996; van den Hoonard and van den Hoonard, 2006 and 2010) and cities, such as London, Ontario, and Calgary, Alberta.

Canada and the USA hold prominent positions in early Bahá'í writings as beacons of modernity, religious tolerance, and democratic principles (Effendi 1991, 75). Some of the earliest converts in North America were Canadians, dating back to the 1898 *World's Parliament of Religions* in Chicago, where a number of Canadians were thought to have first come in contact with the Faith (van den Hoonard 1996, 1). The City of Montréal also welcomed the second Bahá'í leader 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1912, and the home he visited—owned by early converts, May and William Sutherland Maxwell—remains a holy shrine for Bahá'ís globally (“Canadian Origins.” n.d.). In many ways, several of the core messages of the Faith—such as the independent investigation of truth, the abandonment of prejudice and superstition, the unity of religion and science, the equality of men and women, and universal access to education (Hatcher and Martin 1985, 74–99)—strongly resonate with ideas about an ideal, equitable, modern liberal democracy. It is in this vein where historian Juan R. I. Cole has proposed that Bahá'ís should be considered ‘modernists’ in both their political ideology and suggestive Western orientations, due to their transformative religious beliefs in the context of nineteenth century Persia (Cole 1998a, 13).

The demographics of North American Bahá'í communities profoundly changed after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The establishment of the Iranian Islamic State caused thousands of Bahá'ís to flee to Canada and the United States—Canada being the first country in the world to



welcome Bahá'í refugees from religious persecution in Iran (van den Hoonaard 2008, 104). This turning point in the political and religious trajectory of Iran directly impacted the lives of Iranian Bahá'ís in their country, leading to socio-economic hardships, wrongful imprisonment and torture. Hundreds of Iranian Bahá'ís have disappeared, presumably murdered at the hands of the Iranian government. But, as William Garlington notes (2005, 141–43), Iranian Bahá'í immigration also dramatically changed the ethnic makeup of Bahá'í communities in North America. In the USA, Garlington writes how American Bahá'ís were presented with a range of new issues: language barriers, providing financial assistance, problems with Iranian Bahá'í membership documentation, as well as more serious social concerns surrounding class in Persian culture, race and cultural difference between Western Bahá'ís and Iranians, and tensions between Persian and African American Bahá'ís. While Garlington's work sheds light on circumstances that affected one Bahá'í community in Southern California, it speaks to the traumatic impact and cultural shock that faced Iranian Bahá'í refugees and the communities that welcomed them. Moreover, this research articulates how cultural difference and ethnic diversity are negotiated and realized in Bahá'í communities.

However, some scholars have argued that the Faith was essentially transformed and 'Americanized' from the outset of its spread to North America, owing to the diffusion of an 'American religious zeitgeist' that coloured religious expression in the country (Rager 2012, 20). Here, Joshua Rager points to the life and controversies surrounding the earliest missionary of the Faith in America: a Syrian-born Christian convert named Ibrahim George Kheiralla (1849-1929). Kheiralla's original interpretations of the Faith drew upon his schooling in the Western evangelical tradition at the Syrian Protestant College (now the American University of Beirut),

integrating biblical study and diverse spiritualist practices of the day, which, according to Linda K. Jacobs, included “laying on of hands, medicinal herbs smoked through a water pipe, and the recitation of Bible passages” (Jacobs 2015). Kheiralla offered these services and teach a curriculum (for a small fee) that introduced elements of Bahá’ism to Americans, but he alone would determine if a ‘graduate’ was a Bahá’í or not. Eventually, Kheiralla defected from the Bahá’í Faith and establish a separate, though short-lived sect of Bahá’ism (called the “Society of Behaists” in Kenosha, Wisconsin), but his activities greatly increased the number of early American Bahá’ís across parts of the Northeastern and Mid-Western United States. During Kheiralla’s period of missionary work in the USA, it is believed that adherents of the Faith exploded from thirty registered believers (1896) to an estimated 1467 (1899)—a testament, Rager claims, to Kheiralla’s ‘American’ “ability to ‘advertise’ and ‘sell’ the Faith” (Rager 2012, 31); presenting a form of Bahá’ism that seemed more palatable and relatable for converts. Continuing, Rager theorizes how the American dynamic in the Faith developed, owing perhaps to limited access to English translations of Bahá’í Holy Texts, as well as an undercurrent of Protestantism to help ‘fill in the gaps’ for Bahá’í topics that were not well understood (35).

While Rager’s claims for Bahá’í Americanization are somewhat ambiguous in scope, his general thesis that the Faith began to take an American (or, Westernized) quality raises a number of valid points—particularly in the realm of Bahá’í-inspired arts, music, and cultural discourses surrounding the Faith’s Persian history.<sup>10</sup> From a musical standpoint, Bahá’ís globally participate in what many outside observers would consider as a Western, or culturally American milieu:

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<sup>10</sup> See Chapter One for discussions concerning early American Bahá’í debates about music’s permissibility in the Faith; Chapter Two for an examination of how Persian culture, aesthetics, and American diaspora were addressed by the Faith’s leaders and administrative institutions

some of the most well-known and celebrated Bahá'í artists reside and produce music in the United States, Canada, Australia, or the UK, performing largely in the styles of folk, hip-hop, and pop (as well as singing in English). As I will discuss in Chapter Three, Western classical music and Christian hymnody also formed an important part in 'elevating' the global development of Bahá'í musical practice, especially following the 1992 *Second Bahá'í World Congress* in New York City. Popular Bahá'í blogs, including *Bahá'í Teachings.org* and *Bahá'í Blog*, are also based out of the USA and Australia, respectively, as is the largest online Bahá'í music distribution hub (*9 Star Media*, USA). In truth, the Faith has been actively seeking the coalescence of both 'East' and 'West' since the religion expanded beyond the Middle East and into Europe and North America; articulating a hybrid discourse of Westernization, universalization, and, at times, Iranian contextualization (see Chapter Two).

#### *D. Personal Relationships with the Faith: A Methodological Preamble*

My own relationship with the Faith as a recent convert significantly shaped how I pursued and developed this research. I became a Bahá'í about three years prior to engaging this topic in a serious manner—a process that accelerated considerably after I was notified that the project would be supported by a Vanier Canada Graduate Scholarship. I did not anticipate how difficult it would be to conduct this work as a relatively new research 'insider': I was still very much learning about the Faith's teachings, its institutions, practices, and broader discourses. An atheist before declaring myself as a Bahá'í, I felt like an imposter. The thought of embarking on a study of Bahá'í musical aesthetics and Persian legacies seemed overwhelming, but at the time of applying to various scholarships, I knew (perhaps cynically) that it 'ticked off' all the right boxes

for a fundable research project. Maybe my success in securing funding was a reflection of Bahá'u'lláh's humour; a path towards understanding the weight of my scholarly decisions, to not be flippant about the work I do, or the communities I choose to study. It has been humbling, to say the least. It took a while for me to come to terms with the idea that I—an admittedly 'green' Bahá'í—would somehow be a specialist in a Faith tradition I hardly knew. At the same time, I was learning how to raise a Bahá'í family and participate in a very active community in Edmonton with my wife, who grew up as a Bahá'í in Southern Ontario. To my surprise, I came to know and understand my religion and our new community through an incredibly loving and intellectual environment in Edmonton. My faith only strengthened during the course of this work (touché, Bahá'u'lláh).

But given the above-mentioned dialogues and issues surrounding Bahá'í scholarship, I admit that I was unsure of how far I should (or could) go with critique in this dissertation—that vestige of 'materialism' that, apparently, does not resonate with a Bahá'í scholarly approach (but, something I enjoy and wholeheartedly apply in my other projects). At times, this had an almost debilitating effect in my work that impacted my openness to discuss it with others in my community, as well as with my supervisors and fellow colleagues. This was a mistake. At present, I am still figuring out how to navigate what I acknowledge as a split between my 'Bahá'í scholarship' and 'non-Bahá'í scholarship': a false dichotomy, according to a Bahá'í conception of the world in which all facets of life are imbued with the sacred. I anticipate that readers may notice a certain reticence or limitation of critique in parts of this dissertation, or wonder why so much emphasis was given to Bahá'í sources (this was certainly the case for my defence committee!). This was not completely intentional on my part, but partly a manifestation of my

fears and anxiety about publishing. As such, I was motivated to highlight Bahá'í Holy Texts, as well as scholarly, primary, and popular sources (supplemented with fieldwork data) to show how Bahá'í ideas and concepts about music are represented—essentially, presenting a ‘Bahá'í-derived’ scholarly perspective on the subject of music, aesthetics, the Faith’s Persian legacy in North America. This approach also includes citing work by controversial ex-Bahá'í academics, a move that I realize may not fit with Bahá'í scholarly expectations, or the expectations of Bahá'í readers.

Instead of acting upon the impulse to re-write the entire dissertation, I believe that this work provides an accurate representation of my current thinking and struggles with scholarship as a Bahá'í writing about Bahá'í topics. Still, I remain unsure about what constitutes as ‘critique’ from a Bahá'í perspective: is it even a trait or goal of Bahá'í scholarship? How can a Bahá'í-inspired approach positively (no: *comprehensibly*) contribute to the academic expectations of ethnomusicology, my academic specialization for this degree? Though I do not have a definitive answer, I recognize that I can draw from the fine work of other ethnomusicologists that engage with their own faith traditions, including Jonathan Dueck’s research on Mennonite musicianship (2013, 2011, 2003). Here, I would like to refer to Wendy Brown’s writing on Marx and the subject of ‘secular’ critique as inferring *criticism* of religion, which can help provide a way forward for navigating this aspect of my work on the Faith:

For Marx, then, there was a great difference between criticism of religion as illusory and a critique of the conditions that produce religious consciousness and that religion can be seen to express. Mere criticism marks religion as false...[but] critique discerns in religion the desire for a different world, one in which we all are “equal in the eyes of god,” in which “the meek shall inherit the earth,” or in which the powers and virtues previously conferred to a divinity are finally known and lived as human powers. So

critique not only links religion to historical conditions of unfreedom but also reads religion as indirectly [or directly!] harboring the wishes and aspirations of humanity against its suffering in the present. Religion is both ‘the expression of ...suffering and a protest against it.’ (Brown 2009, 12)<sup>11</sup>

### E. Research Methodologies

The topic of Iranian persecution is a sensitive, perhaps over-exposed narrative that already dominates the relatively small niche of Bahá’í scholarship. In many ways, beginning from an analysis of Iranian persecutory music and aesthetics was necessary, allowing for future work to develop beyond the most tragic and, in some respects, contentious subject in the religion’s history. Since my earliest days meeting with and participating in Bahá’í devotional life in Ontario and Alberta, I became fascinated by the Faith’s many Iranian undercurrents, histories, ongoing cultural practices, and seemingly taboo discourse with members in my community: *‘it did come from Iran, but now it is a global religion.’* For instance, when I have helped organize live music for Holy Day celebrations and large devotional gatherings, my choice to include Iranian classical music (primarily instrumental compositions) would often receive questions and concerns: *‘don’t you think this puts too much emphasis on the Persian aspects of the Faith?’* *‘Shouldn’t we have something more fun and uplifting? Persian music sounds so sad...maybe an African dance ensemble?’* In cases where I hired more diverse ‘cultural’ programming outside the community—including at a recent Naw Ruz celebration, which featured a local Brazilian ensemble with female dancers in full carnival regalia—some members of the community were upset about the performance’s ‘sensual’ undertones. Through these experiences, I was reminded that devotional life in the Faith is very new. Our community *is* extremely diverse, trying to enact

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<sup>11</sup> Special thanks to Dr. Farzaneh Hemmasi for sharing this quotation with me.

principles and ideals that see beyond ‘surface-level’ differences (which are, obviously, not benign, but complex dynamics around race, culture, ethnicity, nationality, and gender that contribute to identity-formation and often remain essential in contemporary musicological analysis). It is difficult to realize universal themes like ‘unity in diversity’ or the ‘oneness of humanity’ through music programming, especially when utilizing existing cultural practices and traditions that already carry their own genre codes, conventions, and listening expectations. But through the process of Bahá’í consultation within our committees and with Local Spiritual Assembly members, we still endeavour to achieve such lofty goals.

In keeping with my personal involvement in the Faith and interest in contributing to the goals of Bahá’í scholarship, more generally, I approach the use of primary, secondary, and popular Bahá’í resources as representative of ‘indigenously-derived’ theological knowledge and musical understanding (often categorized as ‘emic’). I examine these materials and extract information about how musical concepts, practices, and topics are addressed by Bahá’ís, for a largely Bahá’í audience. Against this backdrop I provide my own interpretations and readings, supplemented with scholarly support from Bahá’í and non-Bahá’í writers.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, I treat Bahá’í ideas and concepts about music as foundational and authoritative, forming a crucial basis for my future research. I believe that this approach respectfully prioritized Bahá’í scholarly expectations, while also provided non-Bahá’í readers with an introductory look into the religion’s teachings and worldview.

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<sup>12</sup> A note regarding the many online resources in this dissertation: access to Bahá’í resources is often quite limiting, as some journals (such as the *Bahá’í Studies Review*) have ceased publication. Gaining access to their back-issues can also be difficult, including through an institutional login. Instead, online Bahá’í resources like *Bahá’í Library Online* or the *Bahá’í Reference Library* provide considerable access to digitized articles, editorials, compilations, and reviews of scholarly work from a number of out-of-print newsletters, magazines, books, and scholarly journals.

For these reasons, I consider my approach as primarily *theomusicological*, which, according to Jon Michael Spencer, “is most comfortably within its element, namely, the explicitly religious” (Spencer 1991, 49). Though I do not employ key aspects of Spencer’s theory—in particular, his ‘trinary domain’ of analysis, which focuses on the relationships between the Sacred, Secular, and Profane (see 3-17)—the overall ‘spirit’ of Spencer’s project strongly resonates with this work. For instance, I engage in considerable background and historical analysis to help contextualize the development of Bahá’í communities and aesthetics, either through the Holy Writings, or other Bahá’í sources—an approach that aligns with “the nature of theomusicology to hew out spaces in nonmusical discourse to bid these texts sing” (79). In my readings of select musical recordings, discourses surrounding Bahá’í compositional strategies (Chapter Three), and musical representations of Iranian persecution (Chapter Four), I begin from a Bahá’í-centred approach and draw from other resources, where applicable. In the case of Chapter Four, I also prioritize the role of lyrics, given the status of the Word and Holy Text in Bahá’í theology. As Spencer notes, the theomusicologist asks questions that “are not central to the approach of the historical musicologist or the ethnomusicologist” (161), but they “must add theological context, even though it is (from the purview of theomusicology) implied in the political, the historical, and the cultural” (80). Elsewhere, Spencer describes how his work on the African American blues tradition differentiated from other forms of conventional/traditional music analysis:

The questions and concerns arising from my study of the blues were not historical-musicological questions about style periods, or ethnomusicological concerns about human behavior or musical skill in performance. In other words, those questions and concerns, to which I gave priority in the development of theory, were not historical or



social scientific, but rather indigenous religious questions and concerns—vital questions and ultimate concerns coming directly from the ‘soul community.’ (Spencer 2005, 51)

In this sense, a theomusicological study works within a faith tradition and prioritizes its worldview, teachings, and values as the basis for analytical material and exposition. However, I do not believe that a musicological or ethnomusicological approach necessarily stands in opposition to theomusicology (though, my following study may perpetuate this idea). Other ethnomusicologists (including my supervisor, Michael Frishkopf) have critically reflected upon their ‘outsider’ status and “philosophical elaborations” about the sacred music of their research participants: how their thoughts and concepts “permeate” the analyst’s when engaged in the field, generating a dialog along a continuum of musical-religious theory and discourse (Frishkopf 2001, 240-241). In the future, I hope to develop a more refined ‘Bahá’í-inspired’ theomusicology that builds upon other areas of research: one that accounts for the Faith’s distinct expectations and visions of scholarship, complimentary forms of work across the musicologies (including applied ethnomusicological approaches), and my own self-reflexive position as an adherent of the Faith.

For this project, I conducted one-on-one, in-person, phone, and Skype-based interviews with both Iranian and non-Iranian Bahá’ís who perform across the spectrum of amateur/professional and devotional/secular musicianship. The recruitment process occurred through a variety of channels, including personal email requests, word-of-mouth recommendations provided through Bahá’í musicians, consulting with the Bahá’í National Spiritual Assembly (based in Toronto and Chicago, accordingly). In our interviews, I was interested in documenting narratives about family histories of music making, present-day performance practices, and modes

of listening, use, and consumption of music for devotional purposes. Perhaps, broadly conceived, these practices constitute as ‘Bahá’í musicking,’ which include overt references to the Bahá’í Writings and themes, as well as non-denominational, popular, and classical music with no explicit connection to the Faith, but used and valued for worship purposes. However, the data I collected in these interviews covered a very broad spectrum of topics, requiring further editing and refining of the dissertation thesis. As the project became more specifically directed at the topic of Persian cultural heritage in the Faith, as well as Iranian Bahá’í persecution, my interviews then focused on understanding compositional strategies used to narrate this discourse. This allowed me to interview more non-Iranian Bahá’í musicians that incorporated these elements in their work, as well as reinvigorated my interviews with BIHE alumni and faculty.

The Toronto Iranian-Bahá’í community was a key fieldwork site for this project, as it functioned as both the key administrative hub for Bahá’ís across the country and possesses the largest Iranian Bahá’í population in Canada. However, I also conducted interviews with Bahá’ís in Edmonton, Calgary; Saskatoon and Regina, Saskatchewan; Winnipeg, Manitoba; Vancouver, British Columbia; London and Ottawa, Ontario; and Montreal, Quebec. These cities have substantial Bahá’í populations with active communities, many of which were Skype-based interviews. I also had a chance to speak with Bahá’ís residing in the United States (Boston, San Francisco, Chicago, West Virginia) as well as Italy (Milan). Where applicable, some the names and personal details are modified, given the sensitive nature for the Iranian Bahá’í informants I interviewed who wish to remain anonymous.

## Chapter 1

### *An Overview of Writings and Interpretations of Music in the Bahá'í Faith*

This section will continue with an examination of the Bahá'í Holy Writings, shifting focus to address direct statements and discourses about music. It will outline what changed under each Bahá'í leader and considers what constitutes 'music' from a Bahá'í theological perspective. In so doing, I will draw primarily from the Holy Texts, music compilations and reports by The Universal House of Justice (herein the UHJ), and secondary sources published by Bahá'í scholars—most notably, R. Jackson Armstrong-Ingram's expansive study of music at the Bahá'í House of Worship in Wilmette, Illinois (1988).

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Discourses surrounding the arts and music progressed throughout the sequence of Bahá'í leadership as the Faith endeavoured to spread its message and establish its administrative centres on a global scale. Initially drawing from many devotional and aesthetic practices that were indigenous to its Iranian context—including poetry, calligraphy, and Qur'anic cantillation—early Bahá'í worship essentially mirrored their Muslim and Bábi counterparts. For instance, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá both regularly attended Friday devotional prayers at mosques during their lifetimes (a practice that Shoghi Effendi would later discontinue as a formal, or necessary aspect of daily Bahá'í life). Early Bahá'ís would chant and incorporate prayers from the Qur'an and the Báb, as well as observe the fast during Ramadan. Once the first North American Bahá'í converts emerged in the late nineteenth century, however, these 'Eastern' elements and practices would become addressed at the level of leadership to meet the needs of a more Westernized faithful. As Iranian Bahá'í performative contexts became more familiar and, at

times, be a source of anxiety among early Western Bahá'í converts, a complex translation of theological concepts and aesthetic practices occurred in the USA, shaping how music and the arts developed worldwide.

While Bahá'u'lláh (*The Blessed Beauty*) and 'Abdu'l-Bahá (*The Master*) wrote about the value and sacredness of both music and recitation, letters from *The Guardian* (Shoghi Effendi) and the Universal House of Justice (UHJ) focused on how to interpret the Holy Writings and considered their application for Bahá'í devotional activity. This is because Shoghi Effendi helped move the Faith from its 'apostolic era' to its 'formative age' (Hatcher and Martin 1985, 12), an era that was characterized by a greater push to establish global Bahá'í administrative entities from 1921 to his death in 1957. Emerging as the global administrative body of the Faith in 1963, the UHJ provided a framework for what Michael McMullen calls a "Bahá'í-Timeline perspective:" a way of thought in which Bahá'ís "see the world unfolding, their place in history, and how their individual lives fit into a larger theological drama;" a time "during which the Bahá'í cultural tool kit was being supplemented by the newly elected Universal House of Justice to help Bahá'ís achieve their goals" (McMullen 2015, 5-6). As such, the UHJ releases letters to the National Spiritual Assemblies around the world, drawing from the writings of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi—including those devoted to the arts and music—but they do not produce new Holy Writings that would override earlier declarations.

The Bahá'í stance on music recognizes and problematizes distinctly Persian and Shi'a Islamic contexts from which the Faith arose, while at the same time promoting ideals of cultural and ethnic diversity and discouraging 'ritualistic' practices (more on this later). From the earliest days of the Faith, music held a vaulted station in the Holy Writings and received early

acclamations from Bahá'u'lláh in His Most Holy Book, the *Kitabi-Aqdas*. Here, Bahá'u'lláh calls upon the faithful to recite or chant the verses with 'melodious tones' (Bahá'u'lláh 1992, 74), praising music for its spiritual effects, while expressing concern over its use and enjoyment:

We have made it lawful for you to listen to music and singing. Take heed, however, lest listening thereto should cause you to overstep the bounds of propriety and dignity. Let your joy be the joy born of My Most Great Name, a Name that bringeth rapture to the heart, and filleth with ecstasy the minds of all who have drawn nigh unto God. We, verily, have made music as a ladder for your souls, a means whereby they may be lifted up unto the realm on high; make it not, therefore, as wings to self and passion. Truly, We are loath to see you numbered with the foolish. (38)

Most Bahá'ís would find the above quotation familiar—it is perhaps the most well-known quote about music in the Faith, often appearing in several Bahá'í blog titles (Gyulay 2015; Curtotti 2017; Palus 2017), websites, and concert promotions. At the time of writing, one 'provisional'<sup>13</sup> translation found in the *Bahá'í Library* archive is featured on the homepage for The Bahá'í House of Worship Choir in Wilmette, Illinois, highlighting the line: "We have made music a ladder by which souls may ascend to the realm on high" ("Home" n.d.). As indicated in this quotation, however, Bahá'u'lláh is chiefly concerned with music being potentially harmful for humankind's status as dignified, respectful, and noble beings. Music can lead people astray from their elevated status by amplifying that which is already stirring in their hearts, imparting "life to an attracted heart but lureth toward lust those souls who are engulfed in passion and desire" ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1909, 687). In many respects, Bahá'u'lláh's thoughts on music continued a legacy of *sama`* literature in Islam, particularly the work of Sufi mystic and Islamic revivalist Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali (1058-1111). al-Ghazali's thoughts and defence of *sama`*

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<sup>13</sup> Many of Bahá'u'lláh's tablets and writings have not undergone the process of official translation under the purview of the UHJ. 'Provisional,' in the Bahá'í sense, typically refers to a translation provided by a scholar or theologian studying the Writings and sharing the translation with the caveat that it is the work of one individual, not one approved by the global administrative body of the Faith.

—“an attitude of reverently listening to music and/or the singing of mystical poetry with the intent of increasing awareness and understanding of the divine object described” (Lewisohn 1997, 4)—focused on certain conditions for musical reverence, such as understanding the ‘right time,’ the ‘right place,’ and ‘right company’ for *sama`* to occur (8-10), as well as separating the role of sensual pleasure from spiritual ecstasy in these performative contexts (27). According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: “In man there are two natures; his spiritual or higher nature and his material or lower nature. In one he approaches God, in the other he lives for the world alone.” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1972, 60) Elsewhere, *The Master* continues:

Whatever is in the heart of man, melody moves and awakens. If a heart full of good feelings and a pure voice are joined together, a great effect is produced. For instance: if there be love in the heart, through melody, it will increase until its intensity can scarcely be borne; but if bad thoughts are in the heart, such as hatred, it will increase and multiply. For instance: the music used in war awakens the desire for bloodshed. The meaning is that melody causes whatever feeling is in the heart to increase (Lucas 1905, 13).

In this regard, music can enhance or tarnish the station of humanity, presenting a challenge for Bahá’ís to exercise self-discipline and moderation. Consequently, considerations about what music is deemed ‘appropriate’ for worship are often made on the basis of personal taste and self-restraint. There are no definitive traditions of music, style, or prescribed musical activities outlined in the Bahá’í Writings, only suggestions about how music can enhance a spiritual experience. Perhaps this is why only the most affirmative sections from the Holy Writings tend to appear in Bahá’í promotional materials. But the roots of this thought are far more ancient, articulating a long-standing concern over music and its harmful effects on the body and promise of the divine. In addition to reaffirming aspects of Islamic *sama`* discourse, Bahá’í conceptions of music also resonate with Christian traditions. Here, St. Augustine of Hippo

(354-430) warned “excessive musical development was to be avoided,” that “Christians had no need for the instruments used in Jewish (or pagan) worship like the drum and the psaltery,” and “instructed psalmists to chant the psalms in a manner ‘closer to speaking than singing’” (McKinnon and Dyer 2018). Still, Augustine also confessed “that in loving music he wavered between the dangers of aural gratification and the benefits of sacred song” (Hicks 1989, ix). Instead, the saint and scholar argued:

Plainchant is music of the spirit. Plainchant offers a glimpse of ‘angelic life,’ enables us briefly to forget we live on the earth, that we have bodies, that we are of the flesh. Yet Augustine expressed concern that even plainchant offers sensuous pleasure, and cautions worshippers to focus on the message and not the music. (Cox 1990, 399)

#### *A. From East to West: Translating a Devotional Culture*

By the early twentieth century, most Bahá’í aesthetic practices drew from the cultural and artistic traditions of Iran, “descending directly from the Islamic tradition of chant known as *tilawat* or *tartil*” (Knopf 2000, 42) and producing “what Western Bahá’ís today refer to as ‘chanting’” (Armstrong-Ingram 1988, 4). At devotional gatherings and meetings in the USA, Iranian Bahá’ís would sing “Persian and Arabic originals of [their] sacred text and an associated body of devotional poems and songs” (4), as well as original poems written by both Bábis and early Bahá’ís, including those of Tahirih (1817-1852). According to Armstrong-Ingram (24), the term ‘chanting’ was most often applied to the devotional practices of ‘Eastern Bahá’ís,’ as they have been historically described, though “occasionally used to denote improvised singing of sacred text in English.”<sup>14</sup> Early records of Bahá’í gatherings indicate that they “beg[an] and

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<sup>14</sup> I have not, however, come across this particular usage of the term in my personal interactions with the Bahá’í communities of Edmonton, Calgary, Vancouver, Toronto, Newmarket, St. Thomas, or London, Ontario.

ended with singing by one ‘who has a good voice,’” though “it is not clear whether this refers to chanting of prayers or singing of poems” (9). Furthermore, the author found a document about one of Bahá’u’lláh’s earliest disciples, Haji Mirza Haydar-Ali, who “interpolat[ed] verses written by the Báb into his reading of the Qur’an in morning devotional meetings of opponents of the Faith”; noting that Haydar-Ali witnessed “Bahá’ís engaging in devotional song that [were] presumed by non-Bahá’í listeners to be Sufi” (4). These chants and the ‘Eastern style’ in general were well-known in several American Bahá’í communities, prompting readers of the American Bahá’í magazine *Children of the Kingdom* to request “Oriental chanting to modern piano arrangement,” even inspiring English-speaking Bahá’ís like Edward Kinney to chant in English to his own piano accompaniment (23). Persian chanting in the Faith is often considered to be a “Bahá’í practice” in of itself and continues today, but it has “occasionally been a source of tension for both individuals and communities, as disliking or not wishing to use them may be seen as an attempt to avoid something which is part of a Bahá’í identity” (24). As I will describe later in the musical writings of both ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, the formation of a distinct Bahá’í identity was of utmost importance for the early American Bahá’í community. In fact, American Bahá’í concerns over the permissibility of ‘Eastern’ or ‘Western’ traditions (i.e. Christian hymnody) would form a major part of letters written from both leaders, which have subsequently become authoritative statements on music in the Faith.

The apparent extension, or continuation of Sufi-Islamic devotional practice is a common theme in many academic studies of the Faith. In a public talk, senior Bahá’í scholar and UK-based physician Moojan Momen claims that mysticism plays a “central role in the religion,” citing Effendi’s statement ““that mystical feeling which unites man with God’ as ‘the core of



religious faith” (Momen 2002, 107). For Momen, the Bahá’í Faith provides a communal, institutionalized mysticism that challenges the emergence of religious sects and offshoots that may focus more on personal spiritual growth. However, Bahá’u’lláh knew many Sufis during his lifetime and was even considered a Sufi *shaykh* while living in Iraq. He wrote poems in the style of other Sufi masters, continued ties with Kurdish Sufis of the Naqshbandiyyah and Qadiriyyah Orders across Baghdad and Kurdistan, and seemed to engage in a campaign to attract Arab, Turkish and Indian Sunnis through the influence of travelling Bahá’í converts (Momen 2002, 108). Elsewhere, Juan Cole notes that:

While in Kurdistan Bahá’u’lláh wrote his ‘Ode of the Nightingale,’ an Arabic poem in classical Sufi style that mentions his ‘mission’ for the first time. Bahá’u’lláh subsequently kept up good contacts with the Kurds, who most often knew Persian, and may in fact have been attempting to widen the base of the Bábi movement away from Iranian Shi`ites by attracting the Sunni, Sufi, Kurds into the faith (Cole 1995).

Bahá’u’lláh was also said to have been heavily influenced by major Persian poets. According to Franklin Lewis (1999), Bahá’u’lláh quoted “from many poets, including Sanâ’i, ‘Attâr, Hâfez, and especially Rumi”, as well as “other poets thought to be Sufis, such as Hafez and Sa’di” in His early Writings (Lewis 1999). Among several other examples, Lewis found that Bahá’u’lláh’s prayers and tablets used a “rhymed but unmetred prose” known as *nasr-e mosajja’*, which was “a literary device relying upon parallel cadenced phrasing and homophony, much used in the early suras of the Koran” (Lewis 1999).

At the same time, Bahá’u’lláh critiqued the fraternal orders Sufism and certain intellectual traditions, including oral transmission, gnosticism, monasticism, asceticism, and practices that could lead to altered states of consciousness (Momen 2002, 110-113). This final

point is reaffirmed in a note by E. Taylor Atkins, who writes that by “endorsing music, Bahá’u’lláh was reaffirming Sufi ideas and practices, which taught that listening to music could lead to ecstasy (*hal*) through which ultimate truth might be achieved.” However, citing Margaret Caton, Atkins notes ““The Sufis themselves were concerned that music should only excite spiritual sensibilities, rather than carnal ones ...”” (Atkins 2006, 415 note 14; citing Caton 1982, 50-51) The Sufi-esque dimensions of Bahá’u’lláh’s thought, as well as His more ‘mystical’ poetic lineage, will be addressed in a dedicated section below on His musical Writings. However, much more explicit pronouncements on music would emerge in the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

### *B. The Question of Prohibition: Music in Houses of Worship*

Some spaces in which Bahá’í devotions occur are marked by unique boundaries and performative contexts. For instance, music within the Houses of Worship is limited to vocal performance, as the use of musical instruments is prohibited (however, Robert H. Stockman indicates that a separate space adjacent to the auditorium in Wilmette allows for a variety of musical styles, talks, audio-visual presentations, and other activities to occur) (Stockman 2013, 58). Such prohibitions do not exist for private Bahá’í devotions, special Holy Day celebrations, or large Bahá’í gatherings—the use of music in these circumstances is entirely up to individual Bahá’ís. According to the *Bahá’í Encyclopedia*, this decision was meant as a reflection of the emphasis on universality: the space is to be kept simple without images and pictures; there are no altars or pulpits, sermons, or elaborate ceremonies; no one person leads the devotions; invited readers of any faith can recite or chant the holy scriptures; and only music based on words of holy scripture and sung a cappella by a choir or soloists is used in the auditorium (Badiee 2009).

These points are reiterated in a recent compilation on “The Institution of the Mashriqu’l-Adhkar” (Universal House of Justice 2017) and the format for religious services:

Such worship may also include vocal music. In letters written on its behalf, the House of Justice clarifies that lyrics sung in the House of Worship should be ‘based upon Bahá’í or other sacred writings’, including the Writings and talks of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, should ‘contain Bahá’í themes’, may involve ‘the repetition of verses from prayers or selections from the Writings’, and may allow for “slight alterations in the text ... to conform with musical requirements’. ‘The musical style of the piece can be determined by the composer, provided that he or she bears in mind the spiritual obligation to treat the Sacred Texts with the propriety, dignity and reverence due them.’ (5)<sup>15</sup>

However, it is difficult to find the original source of this prohibition. Neither the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh nor ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explicitly prohibit the use of musical instruments in Houses of Worship, though American Bahá’í hymnodist Louise Waite wrote that in her correspondence with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Master* stated: “in the Mashriqu’l-Adhkar itself there would be only voices heard” (Armstrong-Ingram 1988, 243). On the contrary, there are instances that show evidence for the permitted use of instrumental and pre-recorded music at the American House of Worship, specifically. For instance, at the dedication of the site of the Temple (22 May 1944), a recording of Richard Wagner’s “Parsifal” was performed as attendees viewed a rare portrait of

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<sup>15</sup> It is unclear where the quoted sections in this paragraph are originating from, but they appear as citations to earlier letters written by the UHJ (however, the sources are listed numerically as different ‘extracts’).

the Báb (278).<sup>16</sup> In a book titled *Mahmoud's Diary*, which provides a believer's account of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's travels to the United States, it includes a reflection from *The Master* on the construction of the House of Justice:

The Mashriqu'l-Adhkar is circular in shape. It has nine paths, nine gardens, nine pools with fountains and nine gates. Each path will lead to a center such as an orphanage, a hospital, a school, a university and other buildings that are dependencies of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar. In the building there will be an organ, balconies and a rostrum especially for prayers and devotional programs but addresses may be given there as well. ('Abdu'l-Bahá and Zarqani 1998, 371)

Relatedly, in an issue of the Bahá'í magazine *Star of the West* (1920, 15-19), it focused on the topic of Houses of Worship (likely in anticipation of the one being built in the United States).

Here, the article included a diary entry from Shoghi Effendi (named here Shoghi Rabbani) dated 8 June 1919, where it quotes 'Abdu'l-Bahá's thoughts on music at the first House of Worship, which was built in Ashgabat in 1908 (what is now the capital of Turkmenistan):

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<sup>16</sup> While no additional description or reason for the use of the recording is given in Armstrong-Ingram's account, Wagner's *Parsifal* was an immensely popular opera steeped in Christian mythology, sacramental imagery, and references to existing hymns (such as "Dresden Amen" through a parallel sixth Grail Motive) (Kienzle 2005, 113). Several scholars have interrogated the Christian symbolism and discourses of consecration found in *Parsifal* (see Mark 1987 and Minor 2005), as well as a distinctly American propensity to sacralize classical music (and Wagnerian opera, in particular) since the 19th century, "dei[fy]ing] its exponents" (Horowitz 1998, 312). In this manner, *Parsifal's* use in the Wilmette House of Worship is likely a testament to the religious and musical background of American Bahá'ís at the time—most of whom were Protestant converts, many from middle to upper-middle class backgrounds, and, for Joshua Rager, a community that "was permeable to the American spirit of the times around it" (Rager 2012, 1). According to Will C. van den Hoonaard, 80-93% of members in the Canadian Bahá'í community converted from Protestantism between 1921-1947, with smaller populations coming from 'new age' religions (Theosophy, Rosicrucianism), Catholicism, and Judaism (van den Hoonaard 1996, 232). It could be reasonably inferred that similar trends occurred in the USA. There are, however, more explicit connections between *Parsifal* and the early American Bahá'í community, including noted Bahá'í and New York Metropolitan opera singer Walter Olitzki (1899-1949), who specialized in Wagnerian opera and performed as Klingsor in *Parsifal* (Gail 1981, 472). The Green Acre Bahá'í school in Eliot, Maine—founded in 1890 by former Transcendentalist Sarah Jane Farmer—also hosted the Monsalvat School for the Comparative Study of Religion, which was "named after the sacred mountain in Wagner's *Parsifal*, where the Holy Grail was kept" (Richards 2016). Noted Californian philanthropist, patron of the arts, and sponsor of a trip to Acre to visit 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1898-1899 (with Ibrahim Kheiralla, among others) (Jacobs 2015), Phoebe Apperson Hearst (1842-1919) also witnessed several Wagnerian performances, including *Parsifal* in 1889 (Miller 2016, 392) and, in 1901, hosted an operatic program of the music drama in Berkley (400).

Then referring to the Mashrekol Azkar, Abdul-Bahá said: ‘The Temple of Ishkabad is unique in that it is the first temple of the kind that has been erected. Many such temples shall be constructed in the future, but this one will ever enjoy this unique privilege and preference. When its accessories are completed and its full machinery starts running, when the melody of vocal and instrumental music arises and bursts upon the air with its joyous trends, when the prayers and supplications addressed at dawn and at sunrise ascend to the Throne of the Almighty, then will the effect of the Mashrekol-Azkar be made evident and manifest.’ (Effendi 1920, 15-19)

On the one hand, these examples may have reflected ‘growing pains’ in the community, where (initially) a wide range of musical formats were used. However, it appears that the issue of instrumental prohibition largely arose during Effendi’s tenure as leader and immediately followed the completion of the House of Worship in the USA. These writings are predominately found in letters written to individual believers and assemblies on Effendi’s behalf.<sup>17</sup> In one such letter dated 26 July 1946, it read:

As regards the whole question of the Temple and services held in it: [Shoghi Effendi] wishes to emphasize that he is very anxious, now that this first and greatest Temple of the West has been built, and will, within a few years, be used for worship and regular services by the Bahá’ís, that no forms, no rituals, no set customs be introduced over and above the bare minimum outlined in the teachings [...] Vocal music alone may be used and the position of the singers, or singer, is also a matter for your Assembly to decide; but again, there should be no fixed point, no architectural details marking a special spot. Acoustics should certainly be the main consideration in placing the singers. (UHJ 1985a)

In another letter written on Effendi’s behalf (dated 3 July 1949), it stated:

[Shoghi Effendi] is not sufficiently informed about western musical composition to give you any guidance on this subject; all he can tell you is that from the Master's instructions

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<sup>17</sup> The practice of having letters written on behalf of Effendi has been raised by believers in the past, particularly regarding their degree of authority (UHJ 2007). In response to this issue, the UHJ provided the only information found on this topic from a letter written on behalf of Effendi, dated December 7, 1930, stating: “In a postscript appended to a letter dated 7 December 1930, written on his behalf to an individual believer, Shoghi Effendi described the normal procedure he followed in dealing with correspondence written on his behalf: I wish to add and say that whatever letters are sent in my behalf from Haifa are all read and approved by me before mailing. There is no exception whatever to this rule” (UHJ 2007, 397). The bulk of Effendi’s writings on music are, in fact, mostly correspondences to individual Bahá’ís and Assemblies written on his behalf.

it seems there will be no use of any kind of musical instruments in the Bahá'í Temples. Chanting or singing will be the only sound (aside from reading) and what forms this will take must depend on the artists who create the music itself. (UHJ 2000)

These sentiments would later be reiterated in letters from the UHJ, including one to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, dated 13 March 1964. (Again, guidance provided under the UHJ would involve referencing earlier letters from Effendi, as well as those written on his behalf.) It stated:

Music in the House of Worship is to be vocal only, whether by singers or a singer. It does not matter if a guest a cappella choir, or soloist is used, provided such use is not made the occasion to publicize services of Worship and the precautions you mention are taken. No doubt the excellent recordings available today would assure the highest quality of performance at low cost, but all references to vocal music in the central Edifice imply the physical presence of the singers. (UHJ 2000)

Today, Bahá'ís consider the prohibition of instruments in Houses of Worship as a matter of simplifying devotions and placing importance on the Holy Words, helping “prevent distractions to any worshipper intent on praying, reflecting and meditating, thereby minimising the barriers between the individual and the word of God as found in the sacred scriptures [...] When the choir sings from the scriptures, there are no instruments distracting from the holy words” (Day 2011). However, Armstrong-Ingram argues that Western Bahá'í understandings of music created confusion about what is considered ‘sacred’ or ‘secular,’ particularly when considering the original forms of Bahá'í aesthetic practice:

In Islamic cultures, the religious use of music and music as such are seen as totally different. However much a kind of music it may seem to Western ears, the chanting of the Qur'an and prayers, and other devotional practices are not considered to be ‘music’ in Islam. They are conceptualised as essentially different from secular song and identified by different terms [...] In the various cultures in which Bahá'u'lláh resided throughout his life to ‘read’ scripture was, in Western terms, to sing the text and it was

taken for granted that on most occasions devotional ‘reading’ involved singing. (Armstrong-Ingram 1996)

As such, Western Bahá’í interpretations of ‘music’ would later inform how devotional programming would be organized in the House of Worship. Armstrong-Ingram cites a 1968 letter written from a former member and Secretary of the Assembly that believed the artistry of a vocal ensemble known as The Swingle Sisters—who excelled at creating “human voice renditions of orchestral music”—as “one of the Bahá’í answers to the required use of the human voice only in our houses of worship;” thus articulating how the prohibition on instruments was viewed by Western Bahá’ís as “a handicap to the development of Bahá’í devotional music that must be overcome” (Armstrong-Ingram 1988, 335).

*C. Bahá’u’lláh: Eastern Foundations, Universal Message*

While imprisoned in the Sihah Chal (The Black Pit) in 1852—a former public bath-turned dungeon in Tehran—Bahá’u’lláh was shackled with several other Bábi prisoners for four months, living in filthy vermin-infested conditions. Throughout the ordeal, Bahá’u’lláh wore a heavy steel chain around his neck that left scars on his body for the rest of his life. Interestingly, stories of these events spoke of a cacophony of sound—in many cases, arising from the mouths of prisoners singing Bábi prayers:

We had taught them [the other prisoners] to repeat certain verses which, every night, they chanted with extreme fervour. ‘God is sufficient unto me; He verily is the All-sufficing!’ one row would intone, while the other would reply: ‘In Him let the trusting trust.’ The chorus of these gladsome voices would continue to peal out until the early hours of the morning. Their reverberation would fill the dungeon, and, piercing its massive walls, would reach the ears of Násiri’ d-Dín Sháh, whose palace was not far distant from the place where we were imprisoned. ‘What means this sound?’ he was reported to have exclaimed. ‘It is the anthem the Bábis are intoning in their prison,’ they replied. (Nabil-i-‘Azam 1932, 632)

It was here, in the darkness and bleakness of the Siyah-Chal, where Bahá'u'lláh received a message from the voice of an angel, known as the Handmaiden of Heaven. Here, Bahá'u'lláh (2002, 5-6) recounts the mystical experience of hearing the call of the Handmaiden, which would later produce “an irresistible ‘fire of love’ that He sang in those poems” (Savi 2012, 317):

While engulfed in tribulations I heard a most wondrous, a most sweet voice, calling above My head. Turning My face, I beheld a Maiden—the embodiment of the remembrance of the name of My Lord—suspended in the air before Me. So rejoiced was she in her very soul that her countenance shone with the ornament of the good pleasure of God, and her cheeks glowed with the brightness of the All-Merciful. Betwixt earth and heaven she was raising a call which captivated the hearts and minds of men. She was imparting to both My inward and outer being tidings which rejoiced My soul, and the souls of God’s honoured servants.

Pointing with her finger unto My head, she addressed all who are in heaven and all who are on earth, saying: By God! This is the Best-Beloved of the worlds, and yet ye comprehend not. This is the Beauty of God amongst you, and the power of His sovereignty within you, could ye but understand. This is the Mystery of God and His Treasure, the Cause of God and His glory unto all who are in the kingdoms of Revelation and of creation, if ye be of them that perceive. This is He Whose Presence is the ardent desire of the denizens of the Realm of eternity, and of them that dwell within the Tabernacle of glory, and yet from His Beauty do ye turn aside. (Bahá'u'lláh 2002, 5-6)

According to Terry Culhane, Bahá'ullah would later refer to the Handmaiden using avian symbolism, often as a warbling dove or a nightingale (Culhane 2001, 11-13). This emphasis on a sacred aurally—embodied in the avian sound-image—would be found throughout Bahá'u'lláh's Writings, including an oft-recited prayer I have heard at several Bahá'í children's classes:

O FRIEND! In the garden of thy heart plant naught but the rose of love, and from the nightingale of affection and desire loosen not thy hold. Treasure the companionship of the righteous and eschew all fellowship with the ungodly. (Bahá'u'lláh 1985, 23)

Rhett Diessner notes, however, that “the original Persian the metaphor is more complex, as it literally states not to loosen your hold on the “hem” of the nightingale, thus bringing within it



another metaphor – that of the servant of the Beloved, clinging to the hem of the garment of the Beloved” (Diessner 2013). According to Christopher Buck, Bahá’u’lláh’s references to avian symbolism, especially “‘rose and nightingale’ imagery [are] suffused with Sufi symbolism,” noting that “Sufi mysticism was a major stream that fed into Bahá’u’lláh’s expressive style and evolving program of reform” (Buck 1998, 15). For instance, in a narrative surrounding Bahá’u’lláh’s declaration in 1863 in Baghdad (known as the Garden of Ridvan), the singing of nightingales was said to have been so loud

that only those who were near Him could hear distinctly His voice. He continued to walk until, pausing in the midst of one of these avenues, He observed: ‘Consider these nightingales. So great is their love for these roses, that sleepless from dusk till dawn, they warble their melodies and commune with burning passion with the object of their adoration. How then can those who claim to be afire with the rose-like beauty of the Beloved choose to sleep?’ (Effendi 1979, 153)

In each of the above examples, Bahá’u’lláh use of Sufi poetic tropes and concepts helped articulate a sacred sound-world that derived from the Faith’s original Iranian context. However, any specific reflections on ‘music’ would be rather limited. I would argue that given Bahá’u’lláh’s style of poetic prose, any quasi-musical reference in His Writings would be interpreted as such, shaping how Bahá’í musical aesthetics would develop in later Writings and letters of guidance.

Most of Bahá’u’lláh’s writings on music focus on the unaccompanied recitation of prayers, most notably at the holiest of sites for Bahá’ís: the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár. Theoretically, a Mashriqu’l-Adhkar could be any space where Bahá’ís gather in prayer and worship, but it would take on a more place-specific meaning as continental Houses of Worship were constructed around the world. Bahá’u’lláh entreats parents to “Teach your children the verses revealed from

the heaven of majesty and power, so that, in most melodious tones, they may recite the Tablets of the All-Merciful in the alcoves within the Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs” (Bahá'u'lláh 1992, 150). Like its Abrahamic antecedents, the Faith places upmost importance on the Holy Writings and their intelligibility when used in musical contexts (and, considering the performed act of recitation, favours their auralty). Accordingly, most genres of music that thrive in the Faith are structured around prioritizing the text, including choral, folk/singer-songwriter genres, and hip-hop. As indicated in compilations on music organized by the UHJ and the national administrative bodies of the Faith, Bahá'u'lláh's observations on 'melodious' recitation are codified as musical, merging sacred/secular divides that often regulate and demarcate forms of religious music in previous dispensations. In one such compilation of musical writings, it is highlighted:

Intone, O My servant, the verses of God that have been received by thee, as intoned by them who have drawn nigh unto Him, that the sweetness of thy melody may kindle thine own soul, and attract the hearts of all men. (Bahá'u'lláh 1983, 295)

They who recite the verses of the All-Merciful in the most melodious of tones will perceive in them that with which the sovereignty of earth and heaven can never be compared [...] Say: These verses draw hearts that are pure unto those spiritual worlds that can neither be expressed in words nor intimated by allusion. Blessed be those who hearken. (Bahá'u'lláh 1992, 115-116)

Here, recitation can be understood as a form of devotional music-making, though as a whole, most of Bahá'u'lláh's statements were never specific about any particular style or genre of music (in fact, most of His 'musical' statements were interpreted as such by the UHJ, but they appear to be almost exclusively about recitation). In specific instances where He did discuss music, Bahá'u'lláh considered it to be part of a broader understanding of human creativity and its relationship to divine inspiration, where artistic creation and craftsmanship reflect the “evidences of the devotion and love” for God (Bahá'u'lláh 1995, 175-176) who animates the production of

works of art (Bahá'u'lláh 1983, 141-142) among those who have “quaffed the choice wine of utterance and partaken of the soft flowing stream of true knowledge” (Bahá'u'lláh 1995, 175-176). He writes that:

The Sun of Truth is the Word of God upon which dependeth the education of those who are endowed with the power of understanding and of utterance. It is the true spirit and the heavenly water, through whose aid and gracious providence all things have been and will be quickened. Its appearance in every mirror is conditioned by the colour of that mirror. For instance, when its light is cast upon the mirrors of the hearts of the wise, it bringeth forth wisdom. *In like manner when it manifesteth itself in the mirrors of the hearts of craftsmen, it unfoldeth new and unique arts, and when reflected in the hearts of those that apprehend the truth it revealeth wondrous tokens of true knowledge and discloseth the verities of God's utterance.* (UHJ 2000, 18; my emphasis)

Fulfilling a lineage of prophetic revelation in the Abrahamic tradition that follows from hearing the voice of a divine mediator, Bahá'u'lláh's writing—as well as ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's—imparted a sonic landscape from which to discern His message. In a poem titled “The Nightingale and the Owl,” which was likely written in response to having broken relations with his brother Mirza Yahya between 1863-1868 (Marshall and Cole 2014), Bahá'u'lláh refers to Himself as a rose and his followers as nightingales drawn towards Him: “The rose says, ‘Nightingales: I am your beloved, and have appeared with perfect color, fragrance and delicacy, and with unparalleled freshness. Come mingle with your friend and do not fly away’ (Marshall and Cole 2014).

The rather limited selection of musical writings by Bahá'u'lláh were considerably developed under the leadership of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, who often wrote explicitly about music and was also close to several notable musical masters in Iran, including the celebrated ‘father of modern Persian music’ Mirza Abdullah Farahani (1843-1918).<sup>18</sup> In some cases, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá

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<sup>18</sup> Both Margaret Caton (1983) and others (Mossafá'i 2017) suggest that Mirza Abdullah was likely a Bahá'í, receiving several tablets and letters from Abdul-Bahá, who considered Abdullah to be a ‘The Divine Musician.’ However, there is no record that the musician ever declared himself to be a Bahá'í.

provides additional background information about Bahá'u'lláh's experience in the Siyah-Chal prison and the desire to hear music as a way to endure the difficulties of incarceration:

*In this Cause the art of music is of paramount importance.* The Blessed Perfection [Bahá'u'lláh], when He first came to the barracks (Acca) repeated this statement: "If among the immediate followers there had been those who could have played some musical instrument, i.e., flute or harp, or could have sung, it would have charmed everyone." In short, musical melodies form an important role in the associations, or outward and inward characteristics, or qualities of man, for it is the inspirer or motive power of both the material and spiritual susceptibilities. What a motive power it is in all feelings of love! When man is attached to the Love of God, music has a great effect upon him. (UHJ 1996, 4)

*D. 'Abdu'l-Bahá: Western Conversations and Translations*

A marked shift in musical discourse occurred under 'Abdu'l-Bahá's leadership, whose writings took on a more 'aesthetically-focused' turn. According to E. Taylor Atkins, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was concerned with aspects of "purity,' 'symmetry,' 'perfection,' 'dignity,' and 'harmony' as desirable aesthetic criteria [...] [and implied] that music's value was contingent on spiritual intent" (Atkins 2006, 387).<sup>19</sup> Each form of art is thus reflective of this relationship with God, as "all Art is a gift of the Holy Spirit. When this light shines through the mind of a musician, it manifests itself in beautiful harmonies" (Blomfield 1940, 167). 'Abdu'l-Bahá was far more specific, addressing aspects of the voice, certain musical instruments, and activities that were beyond the practice of recitation (including the performance of violin, 'mandoline,' and hymns) ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1909, 101).<sup>20</sup> During His tenure as leader, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was also the first to

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<sup>19</sup> Atkins, however, would argue that each of the leaders preceding the establishment of the UHJ "presented aesthetic merit and spiritual intent as mutually contingent" and "shared a conviction that some music is aesthetically better and more spiritually beneficial than other music" (Atkins, 387).

<sup>20</sup> This can be seen in a tablet He wrote in response to a celebration in honour of The Báb among the Chicago Bahá'ís, hoping that the coming Ridwan celebration on April 21 1909 would feature the use of these instruments.

actively introduce the Faith to a wider audience, leading to a growing Western interests and increased contact between Him, Western converts, and ‘seekers’ (individuals with a curiosity about the Faith). This crucial dynamic between ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ contact contextualizes many of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s pronouncements on music in the early twentieth century—most of which were, in fact, written responses to Bahá’ís around the world, or were transcripts from His lectures across Europe and the USA.

The most profound example of Abdu’l-Bahá’s musical correspondence is revealed in 41 letters<sup>21</sup> written between Him and early American Bahá’í hymnodist, Louise R. Spencer Waite (1867-1939) (given the name ‘Shahnaz’ by *The Master* himself). In these letters, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá speaks directly about Waite’s hymns and poetry, offering support, praise, and advocating in several instances that Bahá’ís should sing and perform them at their gatherings. In particular, He celebrates Waite’s choral piece “Benediction,” which bore the inscription in its first sheet music printing: “Sing this melody in all gatherings of Love and Harmony of the beloved of God – ‘Abdu’l-Bahá” (Armstrong-Ingram 1988, 76). Subsequently, many of these letters are included in ‘official’ Bahá’í arts and music compilations that were disseminated by the UHJ, including the following:

O! Thou bird of pleasing tones! Thy little book of poems which are very sweet was received. It was a source of joy for it was a spiritual anthem and a melody of the love of God. Continue as long as thou canst this melody in the gatherings of the beloved of God. Thus may the minds find rest and become in tune with the love of God. When eloquence of expression, beauty of sense, and sweetness of composition unite with new melodies the effect is ever great, especially if it be the anthem of the verse of oneness and the songs of praise to the Lord of Glory. Endeavor your utmost to compose beautiful poems to be

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<sup>21</sup> These letters appear throughout Armstrong-Ingram’s monograph (1988), though several provisional translations also appear in Saffa (1999).

chanted with heavenly music. Thus may their beauty affect the minds and impress the hearts of those who listen. (UHJ 2000, 21)<sup>22</sup>

While the above quotation can be read as a general reinforcement for the use of music in devotional settings, other writings provide a complex window into debates about the permissibility of music as the Faith spread westward. For instance, one particular quote is noted for how ‘Abdu’l-Bahá interrogates the status of music in ‘previous dispensations’ from the East, contrasting Bahá’í attitudes with the often-problematic discourse surrounding music and Islamic law (see al-Faruqi, 1985; Shiloah 1995, 31-43; Lewisohn, 1997; and Nelson 2001, 32-100). He writes:

This wonderful age has rent asunder the veils of superstition and has condemned the prejudice of the people of the East. Among some of the nations of the Orient, music and harmony was not approved of, but the Manifested Light, Bahá’u’lláh, in this glorious period has revealed in Holy Tablets that singing and music are the spiritual food of the hearts and souls. In this dispensation, music is one of the arts that is highly approved and is considered to be the cause of the exaltation of sad and desponding hearts. Therefore ... set to music the verses and the divine words so that they may be sung with soul-stirring melody in the Assemblies and gatherings, and that the hearts of the listeners may become tumultuous and rise towards the Kingdom of Abha in supplication and prayer. (UHJ 1996)

In an earlier translation, however, it is revealed that this tablet is actually a response to a letter from Waite in 1912, who is identified in the original with the title “Wherefore, O thou Shahnaz...” (Abdul-Bahá 1982a, 112). A separate translation can be found in an arts-based compilation, which also includes the reference to Shahnaz, but with the following footnote: “Shahnaz, the name given to the recipient of this Tablet, is also the name of a musical mode” (UHJ 2000, 20).

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<sup>22</sup> This was included in the ‘provisional’ document, edited and digitized by Star Saffa (1999), which also notes that it was dictated to Dr. Ameen Fareed in Chicago 1904. However, it also appears in an official compilation text (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1909, 59).

The most striking development, however, is found in R. Jackson Armstrong-Ingram's study (1988) which claims that what pre-empted Waite's letter stemmed from a conflict with Harry Thompson, a new Bahá'í convert who objected to singing songs at devotionals (including Waite's compositions). Armstrong-Ingram argues that Thompson "maintained that the day for hymn singing was over and cited the objectionable nature of music to 'Orientals'. Although Waite did not agree with him, she wrote to 'Abdu'l-Bahá to get an authoritative answer to the points rather than argue" (Armstrong-Ingram 1988, 90-91). Moreover, the author provided yet another translation, as seen in the final line: "...the hearts of listeners *may become free from the bond of sorrow and sadness*, the soul and the spirit may become tumultuous and rise towards the Kingdom of Abha in supplication and prayer" (90-91).

These details reveal a profoundly different kind of musical discourse that emerged during 'Abdu'l-Bahá's leadership, as well as speaking to a long and difficult history of translating the writings from Arabic and Farsi. It is a particularly salient point, given that American Bahá'ís would progressively object to the use of Louise Waite's music at feasts and devotions throughout the 1920s, despite unwavering support of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and later, Shoghi Effendi. The details behind Waite's letter-writing are not purposely hidden from official Bahá'í record—it was at the request of 'Abdu'l-Bahá to remove the personalized aspects (names, dates, and in some cases, locations) when these tablets were published.<sup>23</sup> But the details surrounding musical controversies

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<sup>23</sup> From *The Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, it states in the introduction that: "We believe the Friends everywhere will be further interested in knowing that at that time a draft of the Tablets was made by the Librarian of the House of Spirituality for the Bahá'í Publishing Society (who contemplated issuing same in book form), with all references to personalities eliminated, and said compilation was taken by Mr. Agnew to the presence of Abdul-Bahá, who inquired especially as to elimination of all names of persons and everything of a clearly personal nature, and as to whether the recipients of the Tablets had consented to publication of them, etc.—to all of which he gave approval and instructed the Publishing Society to proceed with the work" ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1909, 1).

within the American Bahá'í community are primarily found in Armstrong-Ingram's study. By attending to contextual factors that surrounded certain musical writings, what is revealed is that interest in music coincided with the Faith's globalized expansion, leading to a process of the Bahá'ís 'unbecoming' a 'Persian religion'—first provided through 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Western tour and lecture circuit to propagate the Faith in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as under the Oxford-educated Shoghi Effendi's efforts to 'de-Persianize' the Faith (see Chapter 2).

In a discussion about the enjoyment of music, 'Abdu'l-Bahá defines it as “a combination of harmonious sounds” that is analogous to poetry (“a symmetrical collection of words”)—both of which are “pleasing through harmony and rhythm” (Lucas 1905, 12). In the same discussion, He states that

It is natural for the heart and spirit to take pleasure and enjoyment in all things that show forth symmetry, harmony, and perfection. For instance: a beautiful house, a well designed garden, a symmetrical line, a graceful motion, a well written book, pleasing garments — in fact, all things that have in themselves grace or beauty are pleasing to the heart and spirit — therefore, it is most certain that a true voice causes deep pleasure. (11)

In several instances, 'Abdul-Bahá spoke of a 'good' voice, framing its effect as a matter of purity and perfection. Such a voice is acknowledged for its positive impact on the faithful, while an 'impure' voice (whether it be 'tainted' by intent, or through poor execution) could produce an opposite reaction. Not only this, but the melodies of the voice (and music, more generally) can greatly impact the spirit, making it “happy,” while “another kind makes it sad [and] another excites it to action” ('Abdu'l-Bahá in Lucas 1905, 12). Elsewhere, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes (1909, 512):

O thou honorable one! Thank thou God that thou art instructed in music and melody, *singing with pleasant voice* the glorification and praise of the Eternal, the Living. I pray to God that thou mayest employ this talent in prayer and supplication, in order that the



souls may become quickened, the hearts may become attracted and all may become inflamed with the fire of the love of God! (emphasis mine)

Evidence of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s understanding of music can be found in a memoir published by Mary L. Lucas, a soprano and early Bahá’í who met with Him in Acre in 1905. Lucas asked ‘Abdu’l-Bahá specifically about music and why it affected her so deeply. Over the course of two days, He provided a detailed explanation about music, which was apparently spoken to her in Farsi.<sup>24</sup> One facet of the discussion concerned the ‘voice itself,’ supported with observations about the acoustical properties of sound and its relationship to the ear. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá would then situate this phenomenon in an aesthetic context, connecting the enjoyment of beautiful music to spiritual ideals:

Voice is the vibration of the air, and is like the waves of the sea. The voice is produced through the instrumentality of the lips, throat, teeth, tongue, etc. These cause a wave in the air, and this wave reaches the nerve of the ear, which is thereby affected. This is the voice. All pure things are acceptable. For example: water — pure — is acceptable; fresh air is most acceptable. As all pure things are acceptable and pleasing, therefore a pure voice is most acceptable, and causes great enjoyment. There are two kinds of voices. One when the complete instrument is perfect, then the emission of sound is perfect. The second is when the instrument is imperfect, it affects the voice in such a way that it is far from pleasing. What we have just said refers to the voice itself. (Lucas 1905, 11)

It is unclear if a ‘perfect’ voice emerges out of one’s spiritual intention, or if it is indeed a ‘good’ (perhaps trained?) voice that creates the overall effect. Technical proficiency is certainly one facet that The Master considered to be important for the development of music in the Faith, noting “it is highly essential to gain its mastery” and that each musician “endeavour to attain the degree of artistic perfection and not be like those who leave matters unfinished” (UHJ 2000, 20).

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<sup>24</sup> Lucas indicates that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s responses were translated, but there is no record of who provided this service. Instead, Lucas admits: “I realized how much was denied me by not knowing the Persian language in which he spoke, for how glorious is that eloquent tongue, and the words necessarily lose many shades of meaning through translation” (Lucas 1905, 11).

Similarly, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá proclaims that all Bahá’ís teach their children “to sing with excellence and effect,” as “It is incumbent upon each child to know something of music, for without knowledge of this art the melodies of instrument and voice cannot be rightly enjoyed” (Abdul-Bahá 1982b, 56-57). In both instances, the honing of musical skill contributes to spiritual affect and connection with the ‘divine melodies,’ providing a bridge—or, what Philip V. Bohlman and Jeffers Engelhardt eloquently termed as a ‘transition’—between the material and spiritual realms, where (well-executed) music(king) “realizes the sacred by invoking it [...] as process and passage” (Bohlman and Engelhardt 2016, 16).

In a similar vein, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá considered the physical relationships between sound and spiritual affect, even referring to music as “a praiseworthy science at the Threshold of the Almighty” (UHJ 2000, 20). In His discussion with Lucas, He made references to the physical and “spiritual realities,” to which he cites the voice as capable of uplifting the spirit and “constructed on natural law.” This is despite the voice being “a physical thing, it is one of the material, natural organizations” (Lucas 1905, 12). At the same time, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá makes an analogy for what could be a more direct statement about intention, using the image of a goblet of water:

All forms when understood aright gladden the spirit. Melodies are like water. The voice is like a goblet. The pure water in a pure glass is pleasing. Therefore, it is acceptable. But even though the water be pure, if it be in a goblet which is not so, this receptacle will make it unacceptable. Therefore, a faulty voice even though the music be good, is unpleasing. (Lucas, 12)

The conflation between purity and cleanliness (of body and spirit) with the voice prolonged Bahá’u’lláh’s concerns with “the power of music to influence the spirit and affirms that it must be used with wisdom” (Caton 1984, 53). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá continues:

External cleanliness, although it is but a physical thing, hath a great influence upon spirituality. For example, although sound is but the vibrations of the air which affect the tympanum of the ear, and vibrations of the air are but an accident among the accidents which depend upon the air, consider how much marvelous notes or a charming song influence the spirits! A wonderful song giveth wings to the spirit and filleth the heart with exaltation. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1976, 334; as seen in Caton 1984, 53)

Here, the body is again positioned in relation to a ‘divine aurality,’ conferring an aesthetic and spiritually attuned relationship between body and sound that mirrors a broader call to exercise prayerful attitudes and actions in every aspect of life. Music, then, provides a bridge to the divine, as these “earthly” melodies, songs and tunes can be used in harmony with “the *celestial* melody” (UHJ 2000, 20; emphasis mine). The affect produced by the voice is indeed physical phenomena achieving a sense of ‘transitory gladness’ that “will be forgotten within a short time,” whereas the promise of the Abha Kingdom “wilt impart solace to the world of the spirit and wilt everlastingly stimulate spiritual feelings” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá in UHJ 2000, 20). Nevertheless, the more cautious view of music and its affective power found in Bahá’u’lláh’s writings remained in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s thought.

It is remarkable to note how in some instances ‘Abdu’l-Bahá uses descriptions of sound that often evoke scientific understandings held by European Enlightenment philosophers (see, Dolan 2013, Erlmann 2010). For instance, He references the physiology of the ear and makes a distinction between the sacred ‘voice’ of the maid-servant of God—the Handmaiden (or angel) that revealed to Bahá’u’lláh’s His station in the Siyah-Chal—and the material, physical voice:

There are two kinds of voices. One is the physical voice and it is expressed by atmospheric vibrations which affect the nerves of the ear; the other is the breath of the Merciful, and this is a call which is continually heard from the Supreme Concourse and cheereth the pure and holy souls. May it be beneficial to those who have heard the Call! (Abdul-Bahá 1909, 611-612)

...although sound is but the vibrations of the air which affect the tympanum of the ear, and vibrations of the air are but an accident among the accidents which depend upon the air, consider how much marvelous notes or a charming song influence the spirits! A wonderful song giveth wings to the spirit and filleth the heart with exaltation....  
(‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1976, 334)

Judging from these pronouncements, some scholars may conclude that *The Master* read scientific studies of music and acoustics that were available during His lifetimes. However, these insinuations may pose a theological problem for Bahá’ís and notions about the innate spiritual knowledge of the Faith’s leaders. Such a dilemma manifested in drawn-out arguments between former Bahá’í scholar Juan R. I. Cole and other Bahá’í academics, who took issue with Cole’s description of Bahá’u’lláh’s prophetic thought as being shaped by intellectual trends and Modernist forces at work in the mid-to-late 19<sup>th</sup> century. While ‘Abdu’l-Bahá does not occupy the same kind of prophetic station as Bahá’u’lláh, His writings are of an elevated status and form part of a ‘trinity’ of revelation that comprise the Bahá’í *Covenant*.<sup>25</sup> Suggesting that His writings were informed by secular thought may, in some respects, ‘de-sacralize’ His thinking, even though the notion of ‘harmony between science and religion’ is a central tenet of the faith. As a corrective, Mary Lucas provides a caveat to remind Bahá’í readers about ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s innate (divinely-inspired) intelligence when considering His knowledge of Western music:

When we consider that he has never been enrolled in any school, has always been an exile and a prisoner, has had no access to books, that in spite of all this, his knowledge is unbounded! [...] when I asked the Master some special questions in regard to [...]

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<sup>25</sup> Effendi cites ‘Abdu’l-Bahá thoughts about His role as successor: “This is,” He declares, “my firm, my unshakable conviction, the essence of my unconcealed and explicit belief—a conviction and belief which the denizens of the Abhá Kingdom fully share: The Blessed Beauty is the Sun of Truth, and His light the light of truth. The Báb is likewise the Sun of Truth, and His light the light of truth... My station is the station of servitude—a servitude which is complete, pure and real, firmly established, enduring, obvious, explicitly revealed and subject to no interpretation whatever... I am the Interpreter of the Word of God; such is my interpretation” (Effendi 1991, 133).

[music], I was amazed in one sense at his familiarity with it. He has never heard any music such as we are accustomed to, having been a prisoner all his life, and yet his knowledge far exceeds that of people who have had great advantages. This fact not only applies to music, but to all things. (Lucas 1905, 11)

Still, many of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s views on music are also closely aligned with Western ideas, including understandings of harmony. In one instance, He uses the analogy of a chord to support the value for interracial marriage as an aid to end racism and ethnic conflict:

The diversity in the human family should be the cause of love and harmony, as it is in music where many different notes blend together in the making of a perfect chord. If you meet those of different race and colour from yourself, do not mistrust them and withdraw yourself into your shell of conventionality, but rather be glad and show them kindness. Think of them as different coloured roses growing in the beautiful garden of humanity, and rejoice to be among them. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1972, 53)

This conception of harmony is arguably very different from the Persian classical music system (*dastgah*) where no such designation exists, particularly in a ‘chord’ configuration. Elsewhere, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá discusses Western and Persian music, detailing how the spread of the Faith would initiate a fusion of musical and artistic expressions, referencing historical figures in Islamic and Persian history:

I earnestly hope that thou wilt memorize all the Persian poems revealed by the Blessed Beauty and wilt sing them in a voice of incomparable sweetness at Bahá’í meetings and gatherings. The day is not far distant when these poems will be set to Western music and the sweet accents of these songs will reach the Abhá Kingdom with exceeding joy and gladness. (UHJ 2000, 20)

O musician of God!... The songsters of fellowship that abide in the gardens of holiness must pour forth such a triumphant burst of songs in this age that the birds in the fields may wing their flight in a transport of delight; and in this divine festival, this heavenly banquet, they should play the lute and the harp, and the viol and the lyre in such wise that the people of east and west may be filled with exceeding joy and gladness, and be carried away with exultation and happiness. Now it behoveth thee to raise the melody of that heavenly lyre and to perform music on that celestial lute, thus causing Barbud to return to life and Rudaki to be solaced and Farabi to become restless and Ibn-i-Sina to be guided to the Sinai of God. Upon thee be salutation and praise. (20)

One potential explanation for this dimension of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s thought can be attributed to issues of translation. The above quotation is an excerpt taken from the text *Paris Talks*, a compilation of lectures that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá gave in France and England between 1911 and 1913. The Master mostly spoke in Farsi and had an entourage of translators with them throughout His travels. Although it is not entirely clear, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s translators may have used musical terms that were more familiar to a Western audience. In an online archival project spurred by the UHJ called *The Journey West (1911-1913)*, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is documented as having delivered dynamic sermons in his native tongue, moving across the stage and speaking in a highly ornamented style. The archive cites an excerpt from Stanwood Cobb, who witnessed ‘Abdu’l-Bahá speak in New York City, April 11, 1912. Here, Cobb found no issue with the use of a translator:

I felt that the general atmosphere and the effect of His words were enhanced rather than diminished by the presence of a translator. For the techniques of translation gave ‘Abdu’l-Bahá certain spiritual dignity, such as could not have been attained by a straight address in the language of His hearers. (Sonjel 2011 citing Cobb 1962, 12-13)

Cobb also described how ‘Abdu’l-Bahá would first speak and then wait for the translator to finish, “nod[ding] his head to affirm important points.” He would continue His sermons in Farsi with a ‘booming’ voice that was “almost as musical [...] as in operatic recitatives.” (Cobb 1962, 11) The foreignness of The Master’s dress, language, and manner of ‘Oriental’ thought is also noted; the author preferring it over the influence of overly rational ‘Greek’ thinking and philosophy in the West (11). However, the author also believed that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá adapted his message and mode of presentation to suit American, British, and French audiences:

All Oriental seers and prophets speak oracularly. One sentence, one paragraph will contain a wealth which a lifetime of thought cannot exhaust. Christ spoke this way.

Bahá'u'lláh spoke this way. But 'Abdu'l-Bahá, for the sake of the Western world, adopted the Greek mode of presentation, carefully elaborating His theses and developing them from known and admissible premises. In no place is 'Abdu'l-Bahá ever obscure or recondite. If He wishes to present a great spiritual truth, He takes it up at an initial point where its truth will be acknowledged by all, and then develops it into a larger presentation such as can expand our very minds and souls. And so, whatever else 'Abdu'l-Bahá was and in the future will be realized to be, it is recognizable even today that He was God's special gift to the Occident. He translated the oracular teachings of Bahá'u'lláh into a language and form easily comprehensible to the West. (14)

These considerations for translation do not infer that 'Abdu'l-Bahá only spoke Farsi, as Juliet Thompson's account from her pilgrimage to 'Acre in 1909 notes: "His words in English sink into your very soul. What I lose by not understanding Persian!" (Sonjel 2011) But in other tablets and writings where The Master is not in dialogue with a Western audience, a more poetic language prevails:

Try, if thou canst, to use spiritual melodies, songs and tunes, and to bring the earthly music into harmony with the celestial melody. Then thou wilt notice what a great influence music hath and what heavenly joy and life it conferreth. Strike up such a melody and tune as to cause the nightingales of divine mysteries to be filled with joy and ecstasy. ('Abdu'l-Bahá in UHJ 1991, 75)

While the esoteric dimensions of Bahá'í thought did not end with Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's tablets were overtly directed at a broader (i.e. Western) audience, bridging the poetic traditions and the prophetic thought of The Blessed Beauty with adapted language and terminology, perhaps at the bidding of translators. However, the fact that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's musical writings were stimulated by Western contact and correspondence demonstrates a profoundly dialogic character that marked His tenure as leader for a new, independent world religion.

E. Shoghi Effendi: Navigating 'Set Forms' and Becoming a New Culture

In Shoghi Effendi's earliest references to music, he frames its use within the bounds of moderation, 'clean-mindedness,' 'purity,' and 'temperance,' identifying the "prostitution of art and literature" as condemnable in the Faith (a phrase that in 1972, the UHJ clarified to an individual that it meant "using art and literature for debased ends") (UHJ 2000, 21). Similar views were also shared about the dramatization of Bahá'u'lláh, The Báb, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá in theatrical performances, which Effendi also discouraged because of their exalted station (21). However, in a series of letters written on behalf of the Effendi, several indications about how the future of Bahá'í art and music would develop became central to these correspondences, indicating that a more fully realized incarnation would *eventually* be established with the full glory and inspiration of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings (all emphases mine):

Every religion has brought with it some form of art—let us see what wonders this Cause is going to bring along. Such a glorious spirit should also give vent to a glorious art. The Temple with all its beauty is only the first ray of an early dawn; even more wondrous things are *to be achieved in the future*. (23)

The day will come when the Cause will spread like wildfire when its spirit and teachings will be presented on the stage or in art and literature as a whole. Art can better awaken such noble sentiments than cold rationalizing, especially among the mass of the people. We have to wait only a few years to see how the spirit breathed by Bahá'u'lláh will find expression in the work of the artists. *What you and some other Bahá'ís are attempting are only faint rays that precede the effulgent light of a glorious morn. We cannot yet value the part the Cause is destined to play in the life of society. We have to give it time.* The material this spirit has to mould is too crude and unworthy, but it will at last give way and the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh will reveal itself in its full splendour. (23)

This idea of a future Bahá'í devotional culture would be fully addressed in a letter to a National Spiritual Assembly in 1946, which was published in a text compiled by the Universal House of



Justice titled *Directives of the Guardian* (1973). Here, Effendi's guidance on music presented a vital moment in the history of Bahá'í aesthetics:

Music, as one of the arts, is a natural cultural development, and the Guardian [Effendi] does not feel that there should be any cultivation of 'Bahá'í Music' any more than we are trying to develop a Bahá'í school of painting or writing. The believers are free to paint, write or compose as their talents guide them. If music is written incorporating the Sacred Writings, the friends are free to make use of it, but it should never be considered a requirement at Bahá'í meetings to have such music. The farther away the friends keep from any set forms, the better, for they must realize that the Cause is absolutely universal, and what might seem a beautiful addition to their mode of celebrating a Feast, etc., would perhaps fall on the ears of people of another country as unpleasant sounds—and vice versa. As long as they have music for its own sake it is all right, but they should not consider it 'Bahá'í Music.' (Effendi 1973, 49-50)

In this somewhat peculiar view of music and its role in Bahá'í devotional life, 'set forms,' or the drive to establish set musical practices, styles, and traditions must be avoided to ensure the universality of the Faith's message. Note above how 'unpleasant' sounds are undesirable for the Cause—conveying an aesthetic valuation of music that, on the one hand, maintains 'Abdu'l-Bahá's concern with 'good' voices—while also recognizing that potential cultural differences among Bahá'ís may arise when faced with exotic/other musical sounds. But how can Bahá'ís put this vision into practice? What kinds of music and arts would be deemed 'appropriate' in this context?

In order to unpack some of Effendi's thoughts in the above quotation, we need to examine the Bahá'í notion of 'progressive revelation.' Bahá'u'lláh asserted that Muhammad was indeed the final Seal of the Prophets—part of what He termed as the end of the *Adamic Cycle*, or the 'Cycle of Prophecy' (Momen 1995a). This concluded a process of divine revelation throughout the Abrahamic tradition. Bahá'u'lláh's dispensation, then, marked the beginning of a

new cycle—known as the ‘Cycle of Fulfillment’—from which all messengers would later follow. Subsequently, an entirely new ‘Bahá’í culture’ and World Order would emerge in the ‘Cycle of Fulfillment’ in what is often referred to as the Bahá’í *Golden Age*; signifying a radical, conceptual break from the behaviours, customs, and religious systems of the past. As Bahá’í author and composer Ludwig Tuman writes,

According to [...] Shoghi Effendi, “the Faith will pass through three stages: the Heroic Age, the Formative Age, and the Golden Age – though we are still in the formative age of development. Due to this, “there can be no distinctively Bahá’í art during the formative age of transition, for such art cannot emerge as a natural outgrowth of the civilization to be established in the future Golden Age of the Faith.” (Tuman 1993, 97-98)

In the process, Bahá’ís engage in a kind of ‘post-ritual’ praxis—a process of *becoming* through a simultaneous engagement, and shedding of culture and traditions. This paradigmatic change necessitated the breaking away from some of the laws of past religions, which, as Margit Warburg writes, included Bahá’u’lláh’s abrogation of “the prohibition of music, the destruction of certain books and the harsh treatment of non-believers, and [...] the waging of jihad [as well as] The Shi’ite and Bábi concepts of ritual uncleanness of people and objects” (Warburg 2006, 178). The Bahá’í abrogation of certain rituals was meant to promote greater unity and realize the oneness of humanity. Bahá’u’lláh limited communal rituals, though some ritual-like behaviours would remain in private, including daily obligatory prayers. There are no set group or congregational prayers in the Faith, or a ritual ‘communion,’ for instance. There is, however, the Bahá’í Prayer for the Departed—“the only Bahá’í obligatory prayer which is to be recited in congregation” (Bahá’u’lláh et al. 1991, 40)—and the Wedding Prayer, which is uttered by both parties to a group of witnesses: *We will all, verily, abide by the Will of God*. The planning and format for annual Holy Day activities (such as the Birth of the Báb, the Ascension of

Bahá'u'lláh, or Bahá'í Naw Ruz), as well as private devotional gatherings are entirely up to individuals. This allows for a variety of celebration formats to occur, even in a single Bahá'í community. The act of Bahá'í pilgrimage to Haifa, Israel—the site of the Bahá'í World Centre and the UHJ—is also completely voluntary with no set actions prescribed during visitation (see Momen 2013).

Ritual actions, then, became associated with the cultures, worship practices, and religious institutions of previous prophetic cycles, including interpretations of music. Ritual conflicted with core principles of the Bahá'í faith: it was a relic of past behaviours, the basis for social, ethnic, inter-religious conflict; it was a motive for the division of religions into sects. Rituals encouraged superstition and represented uncritical thought, serving as a barrier for the Bahá'í 'independent investigation of truth.' For instance, highly ornamented ritual music often provided the grounds to establish a professional class of interpreters and musical leaders, contradicting the absence of a specialist elite or clergy within the Faith. As such, using existing forms of music or art is permissible, as long as it refrains from defining set traditions, customs, or practices in Bahá'í devotional life.

However, adapting to this new model of religious activity would prove difficult, as indicated in Armstrong-Ingram's study of the early American Bahá'í community. In an effort to enact the teachings of the Faith, it appeared that Bahá'ís in the USA were quite anxious about establishing set musical repertoire in their devotional activities, often writing to Effendi on the subject. As was the case during 'Abdu'l-Bahá's leadership, these debates centred around Louise Waite's music and members of the early American Bahá'í community—many of whom were concerned over the frequent performance of her compositions (thus, articulating a sense of

confusion whether her music was being used in a ‘ritualistic’ manner). Effendi’s letters on the subject often reassured Waite that her musical contributions were indeed enjoyable and permissible in the Faith. In personal messages, Effendi celebrated how much he enjoyed her work: praising that her “name will ever live in the annals of the Cause as the first to extol and celebrate in the western world the glory and virtues of the Cause of God”; or that her “Benediction” would be included in a new ‘music section’ of the American Bahá’í magazine *Bahá’í World* (1931) (Armstrong-Ingram 1988, 110). However, these sentiments and letters of support would go unheeded by American Bahá’í converts.

Waite’s “Benediction” and other compositions were “performed more than any other at Bahá’í meetings during the era of Bahá’í hymnody [...] assuming almost a folk quality to their ubiquity” (55). However, some Bahá’ís took issue with the composition being somehow mandatory for meetings, as it was often used to open and close Bahá’í gatherings. Others requested that her songs be less ‘explicitly-Bahá’í,’ suggesting that she change the words so they would be ‘more universal’. This is indicated in the alteration of the title for her hymn book *Bahá’í Hymnals of Peace and Praise* to *Songs of Peace and Praise*, as well as replacing the names of ‘Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá with ‘the loving father,’ or reference to ‘Him’ (91). By the 1930s, these concerns intensified. In 1935, the Los Angeles Spiritual Assembly notified Waite that they ruled “in the future the *Benediction* be eliminated from all programs, save [Bahá’í] Feasts, and that at these it be *optional* as to whether it be called for by the chairman of the program or not” (102). The Los Angeles Spiritual Assembly also issued a statement in their newsletter: “[we] have been conscious for some time that in this Community there has been a tendency for rigidity to creep into our meetings, specifically with regard to the playing of the

Benediction [...] In any case the spiritual assembly is not in favor of making any particular song or prayer an essential part of *every meeting*” (104). At the beginning of this statement, the Los Angeles LSA included a section from a letter written on Effendi’s behalf from a *Bahá’í News* article dated July 1935, which read: “As regards the chanting of Tablets in the Temple [i.e. the House of Worship in Illinois], Shoghi Effendi wishes in this connection to urge the friends to avoid all forms of rigidity and uniformity in matters of worship.” However, the full letter—later published in a separate compilation (UHJ 1973, 78)—provides additional context and suggests a general openness for a myriad of performance styles in devotional settings:

As regard the chanting of Tablets in the Temple, Shoghi Effendi wishes in this connection to urge the friends to avoid all forms of rigidity and uniformity in matters of worship. There is no objection to the recital or chanting of prayers in the Oriental language, but there is also no obligation whatsoever of adopting such a form of prayer at any devotional service in the auditorium of the Temple. It should neither be required nor prohibited. The important thing that should always be borne in mind is that with the exception of certain specific obligatory prayers, Bahá’u’lláh has given us no strict or special rulings in matters of worship, whether in the Temple or elsewhere. Prayer is essentially a communion between man and God, and as such transcends all ritualistic forms and formulae.

In this case, the Los Angeles LSA used the letter to legitimize their concerns with the ‘rigid’ use of Waite’s hymn, even though its context was quite different from the matter at hand. Amid the confusion, other American Bahá’í communities were under the impression that they were somehow “disobeying the Guardian by using the ‘Benediction,’” prompting letters to the National Spiritual Assembly, who clarified: “as far as our records go, there has never been any ruling one way or the other about the use of Bahá’í Benediction. No Assembly has ever been ordered to use it nor ordered to not use it” (Armstrong-Ingram 1988, 104-105). These apprehensions remained for years within the community, relegating the “Benediction” to private

devotional use. Community members seemed puzzled as to why hymnal singing just seemed to end all of a sudden (113) and, despite growing demand for Waite's hymn book, Armstrong-Ingram insinuates that it would not be published again due to ongoing confusion about music's permissibility in the Faith (though financial constraints were seen as an "acceptable excuse") (107).

Effendi would write to Waite during this difficult period, explicitly addressing the subject of hymn singing and its permissibility in a letter that would later be recirculated in the UHJ music compilation:

In regard to the main question you have raised in connection with the singing of hymns at Bahá'í meetings: He wishes me to assure you that he sees no objection to it whatsoever. The element of music is, no doubt, an important feature of all Bahá'í gatherings. The Master Himself has emphasized its importance. But the friends should in this, as well as in all other things, not pass beyond the limits of moderation, and should take great care to maintain the strict spiritual character of all their gatherings. Music should lead to spirituality, and provided it creates such an atmosphere there can be no objection against it. *A distinction of vital importance should, however, be clearly established between the singing of hymns composed by the believers and the chanting of the Holy Utterances.* (UHJ 1991, 77; emphasis mine)<sup>26</sup>

Up until the late 1950s, Effendi would continue to receive apprehensive requests from assembly members about publishing Waite's book or other collections of Bahá'í musical compositions—a topic that The Guardian always seemed to approve (see Armstrong-Ingram 1988, 115-116).

Ultimately, the debates surrounding Waite's choral compositions in the USA and their apparent controversies helped lead to the eventual 'falling out of fashion' of hymn singing by the 1940s

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<sup>26</sup> The letter also appears in Armstrong-Ingram's text (1988, 69; 369 note 39), but the quotation is missing the above italicized text.

(Hutchinson and Hollinger 1984, 784—though these particular authors provide little explanation for the reasons behind this occurrence) and creating a “devotional life largely devoid of musical content” and “almost totally barren of communal song” (Armstrong-Ingram 1988, 117).

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As indicated in the above historical case, the process of ‘becoming’ a new devotional culture remains somewhat confusing since Bahá’ís tend to draw *directly* from their ethnic and cultural traditions, including music. In many ways, Bahá’ís are even encouraged to do so by utilizing familiar cultural resources. For example, in addressing the creation of music that was more familiar to Western Bahá’í converts, Effendi encouraged Bahá’ís to develop their own forms of practice in the 1930s. As E. Taylor Atkins writes, citing Effendi’s writings:

Qur’anic cantillation and Sufi songs in Persian and Arabic provided the basis for the earliest Bahá’í devotional music [but] the Oxford-educated Shoghi Effendi urged European and North American Bahá’ís not to ‘pattern their [devotional] music after the beautiful Eastern way of chanting,’ but rather to cultivate their ‘own natural gifts of expression,’ since ‘imitations were never spontaneous and therefore not acceptable.’” (Atkins 2006, 387)

The optics and overarching narrative of the Faith being a ‘world religion’ navigates these realms of transnationalism and globalization, as seen in several promotional pictures and images from ‘official’ Bahá’í websites, blogs, and magazines that emphasize the ethnic diversity of the Bahá’í community (see figures 1-2 below). This online dissemination of an inherently diverse Bahá’í membership—through the semiotic codes of dress, languages, the arts, and visible ethnic difference—signifies the Faith’s embrace of its ‘unity in diversity’ principle. For Piff and Warburg, the official Bahá’í.org website adopts many strategies of what Christopher Helland

describes as an attempt to maintain “institutional control and structure on-line,” providing a cyberspace experience that is “professionally designed [...] [and] the information presented and the environments created are controlled spaces where nothing is left to chance” (Piff and Warburg 2005, 88). Here, users can find an array of images that show Bahá’ís of all ethnic and cultural backgrounds interacting, celebrating, and praying together in harmony. This includes images of ‘Bahá’í musicking,’ which includes large-scale choir formations, indigenous dress and instruments, chamber music orchestras, and individual singer-songwriters.

Under Effendi’s leadership, uncertainties about how to use music in devotional settings seemed to have been attributed to an open-ended responsibility of believers to use whatever music they wish, creating what Atkins calls a “context of uncertainty as to how to interpret the teachings on music with respect to specific musical genres, and of discomfort with the license to create a new devotional culture” (Atkins 2006, 390). In his letters, Effendi would try and relieve the anxieties of early converts, but often without giving a direct and authoritative order—thus placing the responsibility back in the hands of individual believers and assemblies. Bahá’í concerns and ambiguities about music would continue following the establishment of the UHJ in 1963, especially when the Faith continued to grow and expand to new corners of the globe—each with their own traditions, aesthetic practices, and religious contexts. While the following section will conclude with an examination of musical guidance under the UHJ, much of this discussion will continue in later chapters of the dissertation since the UHJ continues as the administrative authority of the Bahá’í Faith and utilizes the Writings of the Báb, Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and Effendi as the source of its guidance.





Figure 1: Image from the official Bahai.org site (“What Bahá’ís Believe...” n.d.)  
Copyright © Bahá’í International Community.



Figure 2: YouTube screen shot from a Maori performance at The Bahá’í World Congress in New York City (1992). (Bahá’í Vision 2014a)

*F. The Universal House of Justice (UHJ): The Music of a Global Faith*

Musical guidance under the UHJ similarly addressed dilemmas facing Bahá’ís who were interested in using music at their feasts and devotions. Many of these letters have been directed to assemblies and individuals around the world, tackling site-specific issues and cultural artistic practices through reiterating the teachings and guidance of the Báb, Bahá’u’lláh, Abdul-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi. In some instances, the UHJ re-emphasized notions of artistic proficiency and musical professionalism to indicate spiritual intention; maintaining a consistent narrative thread throughout the sequence of Bahá’í leadership. Of course, this outlook is not limited to music, but

includes other forms of art, as demonstrated in a policy to restrict widespread photographic reproduction and distribution of paintings of ‘Abdul-Bahá, which “ensure[d] that appropriate respect is accorded to representations of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and that there is no distribution of photographic reproductions of those paintings which are of poor quality” (UHJ 2000, 42).<sup>27</sup> The emphasis on refining one’s craft can be directly tied to the Bahá’í belief that ‘work is service,’ as the Holy Writings conferred that any vocation can be viewed as a service to humanity and the Kingdom of God. Citing the following quotation from ‘Abdu’l Bahá, Tuman writes:

In the Bahá’í Cause arts, sciences and all crafts are (counted as) worship.... Briefly, all effort and exertion put forth by man from the fullness of his heart is worship, if it is prompted by the highest motives and the will to do service to humanity. (Tuman 1989, 105; from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1972, 176)

In this manner, the benefits of specialization in the arts can help connect individual believers with their creator and inspire their congregants, while at the same time help further the development of Bahá’í art and music to achieve a vaulted (perhaps, ‘professional’) status or quality.

For the most part, the UHJ helps clarify specific Holy Writings or principles in the Faith. For instance, letters remind individual believers that it is forbidden to portray the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh in works of art (UHJ 2000, 26),<sup>28</sup> or that it is too early to claim that such a thing as ‘Bahá’í art’ exists (39).<sup>29</sup> Some letters are directed to all Bahá’ís of the world, which are quickly distributed through the necessary administrative channels (i.e. the Spiritual Assemblies) in each country. Such was the case in a letter dated April 22, 1996 that, in addition to outlining a Four-

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<sup>27</sup> In a letter dated 24 September 1987, on behalf of the UHJ to an individual.

<sup>28</sup> In a letter dated 3 December 1972 by the UHJ to an individual.

<sup>29</sup> In a letter dated 17 January 1973, by the UHJ to a National Spiritual Assembly.

Year Plan to help further the goals of the Cause, recommended that each Bahá'í community “give greater attention to the use of the arts, not only for proclamation, but also for the work in expansion and consolidation” (45).<sup>30</sup> However, some of these letters give customized advice to individual artists about how to elevate a project, such as providing a “description of the art piece as it relates to the Writings [as a way to] provide the viewer with an understanding of the source of this spiritual attraction and lead him to further study of the Faith” (40);<sup>31</sup> or, to ensure that if Holy Writings are altered in a musical rendition, to “bear in mind that such music may carry with it associations of the original piece, either in lyrics or in mood, and may not meet the requirement to treat the Sacred Texts with dignity and reverence” (43).<sup>32</sup> As demonstrated in the latter instance, the UHJ regularly maintains the same degree of caution found in earlier Writings about the potential dangers surrounding music:

Even music, art, and literature, which are to represent and inspire the noblest sentiments and highest aspirations and should be a source of comfort and tranquility for troubled souls, have strayed from the straight path and are now the mirrors of the soiled hearts of this confused, unprincipled, and disordered age. (UHJ 1980)

In a manner reminiscent of Effendi's statements on music (that is, concerning the lack of any distinct style or artistic tradition in the Faith), the UHJ often helped guide Bahá'ís to consider cross-cultural issues, aesthetic ideals, and stylistic differences when performing music for their community. Here, the UHJ outlined what forms of Bahá'í songs are common to devotional gatherings, listing ‘Persian chanting’ among them—noting, however, that chanting emerges “out of a different tradition; they are a way of giving music to the holy Word, and each

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<sup>30</sup> In a letter dated 21 April 1996, by the UHJ to the Bahá'ís of the World.

<sup>31</sup> In a letter dated 21 July 1982, on behalf of the UHJ to an individual.

<sup>32</sup> In a letter dated 6 December 1989, on behalf of the UHJ to an individual.

person who chants does it in a way which mirrors his feeling and expression of the Words he is uttering” (UHJ 2000, 26).<sup>33</sup> One particular letter addressed to the Spiritual Assembly of Cote D’Ivoire identifies certain culturally specific artistic practices that have been accompanying Bahá’ís devotionals in the region. The letter addresses how the integration of local (‘tribal’) creative practices must consider that they are not initiated in a manner that promotes ritualistic action; articulating the practical complications of encouraging the use of local cultural practices, while advocating for a lack of ‘set forms’ or traditions that evoke the previous prophetic cycle:

As you may know, in many parts of the world there are certain tribal and traditional dances which are performed in glorification of God, and it is perfectly acceptable for a prayer to be interpreted in the form of movement or dance. However, to avoid that such expressions of prayer become gradually ritualized, or that certain gestures and movements become habitual accompaniments to prayers, it is preferable that they not accompany the reciting of words of the prayers. Through the revealed prayers, we seek communion with God, hence they must be offered with the utmost reverence and dignity. Each individual Bahá’í should be free to pray as he wishes, for there is no set form for prayer except for those few which have special instructions for observance upon their recitation. (UHJ 1997a)

A key issue resides in the absence of set criteria or official guidelines that could help readily identify ‘appropriate’ devotional activities. Judging from the responses of the UHJ, several Bahá’ís continue to worry about how to incorporate music into their devotional activities. This factor is further problematized with the above-mentioned concerns over maintaining a degree of ‘reverence’ and ‘dignity’ that befits the faith’s teachings. How does one celebrate cultural differences and diversities of religious expression of the faith—a religion that exists without a formal clergy or set ritual activities, relying on grassroots organizing and planning—while advocating that these practices retain a sense of ‘universality’? What styles or genres of music,

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<sup>33</sup> In a letter dated 22 February 1971, by the UHJ to a National Spiritual Assembly.

then, develop as predominate forms in a culture that seeks to discover what its artistic output will eventually become?

These kinds of questions will be the focus of Chapter Three, which will examine themes of globalization in select pop and world Bahá'í musical compositions, followed by an analysis of persecutory narratives in several Bahá'í compositions (Chapter Four). The following chapter, however, will further delve into the Faith's Persian lineages, legacies, and topics, as well as how this dynamic shaped perceptions of the Faith within Bahá'í communities outside Iran. Moreover, it critically examines how distinctly-Bahá'í conceptions of culture and ethnicity problematize how the Iranian diaspora is conventionally theorized in scholarship.

## Chapter 2

### *From 'Persian' to 'Global:' Navigating Persianness in the Bahá'í Faith*

... wherever you may encounter the Bahá'í Faith, sooner or later you're bound to encounter Bahá'ís from a Persian background. They will vary in their relative 'Persianness'. Some will be second or third generation immigrants with a strong cultural foundation in their new country, such as my husband who is more Australian than he is Persian. Others will be much more culturally Persian and might *tarof* with you every chance they get. You'll also find people like me, who are a good old mix of a lot of different things. (I am one quarter Persian, although most people wouldn't know it, and often assume my last name is taken from my husband.) There are also those who have no ethnic links to Persia or Iran, but may have Persian names after early heroes of the Faith's history, like Vahid or Tahirih. (Kathryn 2012)

Many Bahá'ís would likely acknowledge a number of distinctly Persian elements in the Faith, whether it is regularly eating Persian food at devotionals, hearing or participating in the chanting of prayers (in either Arabic or Farsi), wearing jewelry with stylized Bahá'í symbols (see figure 3), or dancing to *Losangelesi* music at the end of a Bahá'í Holy Day celebration. While some of these aspects may initially appear to be superficial, there are also deeper connections, as several Bahá'í scholars have reiterated the Islamic and/or Persianate dimensions of the Faith. This includes John Wallbridge (2002), who writes that “the Báb, Bahauallah, `Abd al-Bahá [sic], and Shoghi Effendi were all profoundly Iranian figures, though each in different ways, and can really only be fully understood in their Iranian contexts” (Walbridge 2002). Deborah K. and Will C. van den Hoonaard also note that “Persia as the birthplace of the Bahá'í faith holds a unique place in the heart of Bahá'ís around the world, including Canada” (van den Hoonaard and van den Hoonaard 2010, 145)—a point that may ring true for Bahá'ís, but Iran is not identified in the Faith or celebrated as an 'official' Holy Land. Accordingly, this chapter will focus on several dimensions of Persian culture in Bahá'í literatures, select communities, and varied artistic contexts. While departing from a specifically musical dialogue or analysis, I argue that outlining

these dynamics in the Faith not only helps contextualize certain artistic developments (including musical representations of religious persecution in Iran), but it also provides a critical backdrop for understanding how the Faith’s global theology interacts with a progressively internationalized membership and devotional culture.



Figure 3: The invocation of The Greatest Name (above left); the Bahá’í Ring Symbol (above middle), designed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá; and the sacred Nine-Pointed Star (right). (“Principles and History” n.d.)

In the opening quotation for this chapter, taken from a blog post titled “The Bahá’í Faith and Persian Culture” (Kathryn 2012), the author touches upon some commonly shared experiences that Bahá’ís the world over may recognize. These underlying traits of ‘Persianness’ that Kathryn describes are remarkable, given that only 6% of the world Bahá’í population were ethnically Iranian in 1988—a number that has since shrunk to 1% today (Fieldhouse 2017 56; 2002, 83).<sup>34</sup> Of course, not every Bahá’í community has a prominent Iranian population—in some regions, indigenous groups form the majority, as is the case throughout the Pacific Islands (see Hassall 1992). In many respects, the phenomenon of Persianness in the Faith can be somewhat geographically limited to countries that boast the largest Iranian diasporic populations (USA, Canada, UK, Australia, France), whereas the situation on the African continent, throughout East Asia, and South America would be markedly different. But, as the author of the

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<sup>34</sup> However, it is very difficult to find statistical resources on the exact demographics of the Bahá’í population. The official Bahá’í.org website provides a breakdown of membership according to geographic location, rather than by ethnicity (see Bahá’í World News Service, n.d.).

blog post also points out, several Bahá'ís (including herself) are of mixed Iranian ethnicity. Though Interracial marriage is not unique to *Iranian* Bahá'ís, specifically, it is a fairly common familial dynamic in Bahá'í communities worldwide. In her studies of Danish Bahá'í communities, Warburg found “*one-third* of [Bahá'í relationships in Denmark], which seems extremely high, husband and wife had different nationalities” (Warburg 1999, 51).<sup>35</sup> Addressing the Faith's recurrent links with Iranian culture and customs, Kathryn notes that Shoghi Effendi “personally emphasised that the Bahá'í Faith has a destiny beyond its origins,” breaking away from the Islamic and Persian cultural customs that were observed by Bahá'u'lláh and ‘Abdu'l-Bahá. She writes:

At the behest of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi was both Eastern and Western educated. He attended Oxford University for his studies, where he mastered and became fluent in the English language. He adopted western-style clothing, shaved daily, and did not visit the local mosque on Fridays. He translated and made available many important texts and historical writings of the Faith into English and also French, which set the standard for all other translations of Bahá'í literature. He also prepared the Bahá'í community for the world's first, truly global democratic election in the founding of the Universal House of Justice, the governing body of the Bahá'í Faith, in 1963. Far from promoting Persian culture, a new distinct Bahá'í culture is in development – even if it has yet to fully distinguish itself from the diverse ethnic backgrounds of its members. As Bahá'ís, we look to the principles of the Bahá'í Faith and its vision for humanity, which celebrates all the wonderfully diverse and rich ethnic and cultural backgrounds of its adherents. (Kathryn 2012)

Commenters on Kathryn's post (2012) seemed to appreciate her frank exploration of this oft-ignored topic, sharing their own experiences with Persian culture in the Faith and supporting core underlying theological ideas:

- As a Canadian who first came in contact with the Bahá'í Faith in 1953, and who joined it in 1959, I enjoyed reading this excellent overview of the connection between

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<sup>35</sup> On a personal note, I also know many non-Iranian Bahá'ís named Tahirih, Roshan, and Kazim just in Alberta, alone.



the Bahá'í Faith and its Iranian origins [...] I am not a Persian, an Iranian; I live in a Bahá'í community in another small town, this time in Tasmania where I took a sea-change in 1999 and retired early at the age of 55. We have no Iranians in our group and I miss the Iranian hospitality, especially their food (Ron Price)

- Persian culture, as nice as it may be, is not synonymous with Bahá'í culture (Martin)
- This religion was meant for all peoples of the world, the Bahá'í faith is not wanting to assimilate people into a homogeneous Persian and Arabic culture but rather encourage different cultures to the circular table of oneness (Paul Aziz)

However, some Persian links may appear so closely related to the Faith that it generates confusion among seekers and believers alike. On the popular online resource the *Bahá'í Blog*, some 'frequently asked questions' about the Faith are addressed, including how Bahá'í Naw Ruz differs from Persian Naw Ruz. The editor of the blog Naysir Naraqí outlines some of the history and significance of the Bahá'í holiday, which follows the 19-day Bahá'í fast. Describing the roots of the celebration among Zoroastrian, Muslim, and secular Iranians today, Naraqí delves into the infusion of cultural elements by Iranian Bahá'ís, such as the practice of *haft-sin*, where seven objects starting with the letter 's' are decoratively displayed on a table. Naraqí discusses how the recognition of cultural and expressive diversity in the Faith speaks to a 'template-based' approach, where ceremonies and devotional activities are given very loose guidelines that any practicing Bahá'í could inflect with their own background and interpretation:

As with most Bahá'í Holy Days, there are no particular fixed rituals or practices associated with the holiday. With adherents from so many parts of the world, *the Bahá'í Faith makes careful attention not to impose one cultural tradition upon other traditions but rather to encourage an organic international Bahá'í culture that emerges based on the Holy Texts and not on personal or cultural traditions*. So, on an international level, the celebration is generally observed with a meeting consisting of prayers, feasting and joyful celebration open to all. What that actually looks like from one place to another largely depends on the way in which a Bahá'í family or community chooses to celebrate the Holy Day. (Naraqí 2011; emphasis mine)

Naraqi's portrayal of the diversity of Bahá'í devotional life celebrates cultural difference and reiterates how this difference is understood from the perspective of the Faith's teachings. As such, the Bahá'í negotiation with its Middle Eastern, Islamic, and Persian lineages has often been a chief concern at the upper echelons of Bahá'í leadership (namely, Effendi) and administration. To some degree, this sentiment has extended to reflect the personal convictions and outlooks among Bahá'ís globally, many of whom identify with a sense of being 'global citizens' rather than tied to any particular country, culture, ethnicity, or political party (more on this later). For some scholars, Bahá'ís are said to be "probably less bound to a particular culture" (Warburg 1999, 49) and more attached to the Bahá'í community of Iran (rather than the geographical place, itself) (Williams 2009, 8). Moreover, they should not be considered part of a 'diasporic' community—one of many factors that make it "quite unlike that of other religious communities" in Canada (van den Hoonaard and van den Hoonaard 2010, 144). Continuing, Deborah K and Will C van den Hoonaard write that the Iranian Bahá'ís are

not an immigrant religious community (such as the Sikh community) and is not a diasporic community. Its boundaries are porous as it intersects (individually and collectively) and engages with the wider society. Its diversity prevents observers from easily identifying it with a particular ethnic, cultural, or occupational group. It has a high rate of civic participation, including the exercise of voting in municipal, provincial, and federal elections, despite its being apolitical. Yet, it has a distinctive history, teachings, administration, and practices that give the Bahá'í community its form and purpose." (144)

As I will discuss later on, Bahá'í scholarly interpretations of diaspora and the Faith's cultural milieu relate to its theological concepts and visions of nation, ethnicity, and race. Similar arguments for the existence of a diverse yet unified global Bahá'í community is identified elsewhere in Margit Warburg's research, who found that there are several qualities of a "salient

international Bahá'í culture” (a “distinct Bahá'í-ness,” as she describes it) that exists regardless of one's nationality, including the practice of group discussion known as Bahá'í ‘consultation,’ which she writes is “an important part of the culture of Bahá'í management [...] in all situations of decision-making, also in family matters” (Warburg 2006, 353). Other shared aspects include how Bahá'í Centres are often

well-kept, neat houses or flats, often situated in middle-class or even more affluent neighbourhoods. Inside, there are the same pictures of the characteristic nine-angled Bahá'í temples, the same calligraphy, the same literature, and the same way of arranging flowers on a lace doily situated below a picture of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, showing him as a white-bearded man wearing a white turban and long mantle.” (11)

Here, Warburg's attention to these rather banal and general details reflects how Bahá'í ideas about domestic life and decor have become conventionalized across cultural, geographic, and economic lines, articulating a potentially overlooked dynamic in expressions of global Bahá'í identity.

Interestingly, Warburg's work also documented how some Bahá'ís viewed cultural dynamics in their own community, focusing on differences in responses between Iranian and non-Iranian Bahá'í research participants in Denmark. In her interviews with so-called ‘elite/high’ Bahá'ís—who she defines as “highly educated, often hold[ing] good positions in society or hold high administrative posts in the Bahá'í community, have been on mission in other countries or have worked at the Bahá'í World Centre [...] [or] com[ing] from established Bahá'í families”—Warburg details certain characteristics of what some respondents thought would best describe a ‘prominent Iranian Bahá'í.’ This was someone who was “well-educated [...] related to some of the early Bábis, there is unity in their families (no divorces), they have made sacrifices, they are humble (but in a very self-confident way), and they are well versed in the Bahá'í faith and its

scriptures” (Warburg 2006, 351-352). Her research also found that some practices in the Faith were expressed differently among Bahá’í members, including how ethnically-Danish Bahá’ís abstained from fasting to avoid awkward discussions with their work colleagues (343)—a finding that prompted Ruth Williams to suggest “Bahá’í identity may be stronger for some Iranian refugees” (Williams 2009, 13). Most interestingly, Warburg implied that core defining features of what constitutes as *being* a Bahá’í may find its root in Iranian culture, including notions of ‘politeness,’ ‘social competence,’ and other value-laden variables. In her framing of the discussion “Iranian Virtues—Bahá’í Virtues—Cream of Society,” Warburg compares interview responses about shared Bahá’í virtues, citing a “difference between Iranian and non-Iranian Bahá’ís concerning self-definition.” Here, she indicates that ‘politeness’ is “highly valued among Iranians in general, and it therefore is not unexpected that Iranian Bahá’ís stress this virtue” (Warburg 2006, 351).<sup>36</sup> Warburg also shares that she became aware of the practice of Persian *tarof* at the Bahá’í World Centre in Israel, which “refers to a specific type of polite behaviour that in the eyes of many Westerners is described as (over-) flattery, complimentary, or even fishing for compliments” (352). Thus, the results of her qualitative and quantitative analysis found:

in general, the Iranian Bahá’ís put more weight on personal conduct and social competence than do the non-Iranians, who instead emphasise their own personal development. Elite Bahá’ís, both Iranians and non-Iranians, however, seem to agree that Bahá’ís should conduct themselves according to the highest standards. (354)

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<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, Talebi and Dejardins (2012, 299) write that some Saskatoon-based Iranian Bahá’ís they interviewed “spoke of how characteristics such as their level of politeness, patience, respect, and humbleness separated them from their counterparts [in Iran] and raised suspicion that they are indeed Bahá’í.” In this case, the attribution of these social codes as being culturally Persian takes on a distinctly-Bahá’í (and hence risky) dimension for those living in Iran.

While Warburg's research helps provide a diversity of opinions on Bahá'í cultural dynamics and practices, her work risks perpetuating a discourse of systemic difference between the ways in which Iranian and non-Iranian Bahá'ís participate in their communities. Other scholars have similarly set-up this dichotomy in their own analyses of differences in values and beliefs between Iranian-Bahá'ís and non-Iranian Bahá'ís in Australia (See Feather et. al 1992).

Many of Warburg's conclusions are reinforced in Bahá'í scholarship, with some scholars claiming that Bahá'ís operate more like “a group of loosely associated individuals” than as organized ‘communities’ (Smith and Momen 1989, 86-87). Variances in devotional expression, then, are understandable, given both the cultural and ethnic diversity of membership, as well as how each community may operate or conduct administrative business. Smith and Momen (1989, 86-87) write that “Bahá'í involvement often resembles that of other voluntary associations, and despite the existence of often high levels of commitment, the construction and maintenance of a shared Bahá'í culture and consciousness remains problematic;” that many of the Bahá'í norms such as “the equality of the sexes, the abolition of caste prejudices or democratic consultation between community members, remain goals to be achieved rather than present realities.” As was the case for the opposition of Louise Waite's hymns in the previous chapter, Western Bahá'í perceptions about what practices are considered ‘acceptable’ or not were profoundly shaped by how one Bahá'í group may perceive the practice of another as being too ‘specific’ (hence, exclusive), or potentially ritualistic. In Morlock's study (2015), one interview participant named Shahnaz describes the importance for Iranian Bahá'ís to recite the Tablet of Visitation in commemoration of the martyrdom of the Báb. Not only is this practice absent from Shahnaz's

devotional experience in the USA, but it is interpreted as ‘ritualistic’ by her American colleagues and, thus, subject to scrutiny:

we say the tablet of visitation which is something that they always did in...in Iran and at the shrines they do that. I think a lot of Bahá’í groups do that. So when someone [in the American community] says we don’t have to say it; it’s not an obligatory prayer or why do we have to stand up, you know... that that’s a ritual, I understand that it’s not an obligatory prayer because it really wasn’t listed amongst obligatory prayers. But... it is something very little that we give up if we stand up for three or four minutes in discomfort, I mean you even see old, old people stand up in Iran because that’s all they can give right now. So that kind of disappoints me. (Morlock 2015, 134-135)

Here, Shahnaz’s description indicates how some Iranian Bahá’í devotional practices may risk becoming ‘culturalized,’ or coded as ‘Persian’ by Western Bahá’ís, who may not understand the significance of why certain observances are initiated among a particular group in their community.

Confronting the Faith’s diverse membership and underlying Persian roots, especially in any contemporary context, remains a somewhat sensitive and underdeveloped topic in Bahá’í scholarly literature. This is in stark contrast from the rich and varied research on the Iranian diaspora, which interrogates how multi-generational Iranians perceive themselves, their faith, and sense of identity(ies) across a range of geographic and nationalistic contexts. There are also some unique difficulties that face Iranian-Bahá’í academics. For example, the relatively marginal realm of Bahá’í scholarship has been subject to unfair critiques against their Iranian-born scholars in the area of Persian history, as some Persian scholars have argued that one’s adherence to the Faith is “tantamount to hatred against Iran” (Vahman 2005, 111). According to Fereyduun Vahman, beliefs about Bahá’í anti-patriotism and anti-Iranianism were often (mis)attributed to a quote from Bahá’u’lláh (Vahman, 109), which appears in the *Lawh-i-Maqsud* (the “Tablet of

Maqsud”). Here, it states: “It is not for him to pride himself who loveth his own country, but rather for him who loveth the whole world. The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens” (Bahá’u’lláh 1988, 167). Vahman’s research also cites a critique in the 1970s by Dr. Fereydun Adamiyy concerning Dr. Firuz Kazemzadeh’s work on Iranian Constitutionalism, which focuses less on Kazemzadeh’s “qualifications as a historian,” but for his adherence to the Faith. Here, Adamiyy accused Kazemzadeh of

being weak in evaluating historical documents, lacking the technique of writing history and absolutely devoid of historical perceptions. He then adds: ‘Moreover he [Kazemzadeh] is filled with a bigoted hatred (*kine-ye ta’assob amiz*) against Iran and the Iranians. His hatred against Iran stems from his belief in the Bahá’í creed.’ (Vahman, 111)

The apparent lack of patriotism among Iranian Bahá’ís can also be attributed to EG Browne’s early works on the history of the Bábi and Bahá’í Faiths, but which extended to several treatises and histories of Iranian politics that (incorrectly) credited the rise of the Bábis and the Bahá’ís to the expansion of British colonialism in Iran (See Vahman 2006 and Cole 2005). These kinds of academic spats between Bahá’í and non-Bahá’í Iranians are uncommon, but address yet another complex association between Bahá’ís and Iranians, more generally. In short, Bahá’ís have become quite cognizant of the myriad political and theological dissonances that are generated in several Iranian/Bahá’í contexts, both within the Faith itself, and in broader discursive arenas. In this intellectual and religious environment, addressing topics such as ‘Persianness’ in the Bahá’í Faith may be an awkward or difficult proposition—especially given the ongoing persecution of Bahá’ís in Iran, the Faith’s teachings and values about ‘unity in diversity,’ and the history of Bahá’í expansionism and global conversions that spread beyond Iran’s borders.

Far from advocating a deterministic view of any underlying ‘Persian-Bahá’í’ tropes—problematically (and incorrectly) reasserting that the Faith is indeed a ‘Persian religion,’ a sect of

Islam, or a syncretic religion (Stockman 1997)—I argue that Bahá'ís participate in a hybridized and ever-evolving Persian milieu that is shaped by the Faith's *aspirational theology*. Drawing inspiration from Leslie Houlden's elegant description of the process, she writes that an aspirational theology “prefers *what could be* to what already is; faith to sight; hope perhaps even to faith [...] It is not a mere courting of novelty for novelty's sake, nor an escapist restlessness, but a trust that ‘it does not yet appear what we shall be’-or what we shall see and think and understand” (Houlden 1991, 404; emphasis mine). This perspective, which similarly articulates Bahá'í understandings of the coming ‘Golden Age,’ can productively address scholarly criticisms against Bahá'ism and any supposedly problematic connections with various Islamic and/or Persianate contexts. This is particularly the case in the work of Dennis MacEoin, who writes that the Faith is so “rich in Islamic cultural referents” (MacEoin 2005, 291) that it generates a sense of confusion or alienation for culturally unaccustomed converts. MacEoin claims that new members of the Faith become “assimilated to a half-Iranian, half-Western Bahá'í culture (with its many deficits in respect of literature, art, music and drama)” (MacEoin 2013, 167) and are “asked to take on board a host of ideas and acts of worship or personal routine saturated with Iranian, Arab, Sufi, Shi‘i, Islamo-Christian and related norms” (293-294). Not only this, but the author finds that there is “an overwhelming sense of the abiding presence of Persian influence,” listing off many of the above-mentioned stereotypes about Persian-Bahá'í devotionism, as well as “the physical and psychological presence of Iranian Bahá'ís in most Bahá'í communities” (294). Due to these seemingly incongruous problems of unifying both ‘East and West,’ MacEoin problematizes the very idea that the Faith can truly be a ‘globalizing’ world religion.



In response to MacEoin's critiques, my aim is to locate 'Bahá'í Persianness' as an object of discourse that acknowledges historical, dialogic, and present-day manifestations of Persian expressive and devotional culture in the Faith; to *explore* (not impose an oppositional scholarly paradigm)<sup>37</sup> issues concerning the negotiation of cultural difference in Bahá'í communities (including Persian aspects), without insinuating that the existence of such paradoxes is equivalent to discovering a systematic flaw in the religion itself. For some, locating issues or controversies in the Faith has often been perceived as an affront to the 'utopian' outlook of Bahá'ism, who "often wish to present the inner workings of their community life as perfect" (Cole 2000a, 141). However, since the Faith is constantly undergoing a process of transformation and change, it is integral to document how this change manifests and become realized; analyzing the Bahá'í desire to move 'beyond culture' in order to pave the way for its Golden Age. As Will C. van den Hoonard writes:

Bahá'ís see the world, respectively, as a place where the Bahá'í community is an embryo of the future society, where the Bahá'í community and the world are converging, where the Bahá'í community is a refuge from a declining civilization, or where the needs of the Bahá'í community and those of the wider society are intertwined. (van den Hoonard 1996, 287)

This process of 'convergence' has led to three inter-related (and often messy) strategies:

1) the disavowal of Persianness, 2) interrogating cultural specificity (in devotional contexts), and paradoxically, 3) the celebration of global Bahá'í cultural diversity through its devotional

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<sup>37</sup> Or, what Michael Karlberg has identified as a systemic 'culture of contest' in several facets of society (economics, politics, law), to which I would also include academic discourse, since it is often premised upon a competing battleground of conflicting ideas. Instead, Karlberg insists that a different and more productive vision would be from the perspective of 'cultural games;' a theory that "suggests that the nonadversarial strategies of construction, attraction, and attrition are the most effective means of creating a more peaceful, just, and sustainable social order;" (Karlberg 2003, 329-330) where one may "recognize the hegemonic nature of the old competitive and adversarial games, that we withdraw our time and energy from them, and that we invest that time and energy in the construction of new ones" (Karlberg, 342).

practices. Identifiable examples of ‘Persianness,’ then, can perhaps be described as remnants (or remainders) of the previous Prophetic Cycle: ethno-cultural artefacts that will *eventually* fall away as the Faith progresses ever onward as it “organis[es] the emerging globalised world” (Warburg 2006, 192). Instead, MacEoin views Bahá’í attempts to re-direct cultural and Islamic narratives as being somewhat insincere, deriding Bahá’ís for “exaggerate[ing] the originality of everything from laws to common practices” by emphasizing the ‘innate knowledge’ (‘ilm-i laduni) of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh (MacEoin 2005, 291); disparaging ‘culture-free,’ universal, or ‘objective’ theological underpinnings of the Faith, since “Western Bahá’ís find long Persian names, or historical accounts set in the alien world of 19th-century Iran, or even Shoghi Effendi’s impossibly long periods difficult to read and digest” (295). By setting-up a scenario of inherent conflict between the originating Persian believers and the subsequent expansion of global converts, MacEoin’s argument forestalls any possibility for transformation. This is odd, given that some of the core theological underpinnings of Bahá’ism (i.e. progressive revelation) articulate a vision of humanity as ever-evolving and advancing with each religious dispensation. Furthermore, the Faith’s discourse surrounding cultural difference has been historically and profoundly shaped by interests in cultural sensitivity and accommodation—precursory procedures that were required for the Faith to grow and expand to the West. Reflecting Bahá’í aspirational theology, the process-of-becoming is ongoing and unfinished, as notions of culture are unceasingly reflected upon and subject to consultation, both at the individual and institutional levels. This negotiation of culture, then, poses unique questions about how Bahá’ís celebrate the global diversity of their membership while navigating entrenched Persian connections. Exploring how Persianness is envisaged and confronted from a

Bahá'í perspective can help inform later understandings about music, ethnicity, and cultural difference in the Faith: ranging from musical representations of Iranian Bahá'í persecution (Chapter Four) to the multitude of music-cultural styles, genres, languages, and traditions that comprise the devotional culture of Bahá'ís on a global scale (Chapter Three).

*A. Contextualizing Bahá'í Understandings of Culture, Difference, and Iranian Believers*

Bahá'í approaches to culture are intimately tied to a core theological premise that promotes the 'oneness of humanity' (cited as *the* underlying Bahá'í principle through which all teachings follow).<sup>38</sup> Achieving this ultimate objective is no small feat, as it “implies an organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced” (Effendi 1991, 41-43). Moving beyond religious, ethnic, nationalistic, and other sources of partisanship,<sup>39</sup> which have long-generated schisms between groups of people, the Bahá'í dispensation entreats humankind from all faiths and backgrounds to recognize their fellow man as inherently good;<sup>40</sup> reaffirming the place of religion at “the very basis and root-

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<sup>38</sup> The global Bahá'í website indicates this on their page titled “One Human Family,” stating: “The conviction that we belong to one human family is at the heart of the Bahá'í Faith. The principle of the oneness of humankind is “the pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve” (“What Bahá'ís Believe: Essential Relationships: One Human Family” n.d.).

<sup>39</sup> As Stockman writes in his introductory text on the Bahá'í Faith: “A distinctive aspect of the Bahá'í concept of unity is the rejection of partisanship. Partisanship implies loyalty to an idea or ideology, a political party or faction or a national, ethnic or racial identity that overrides one's loyalty to humanity or to the totality of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation. Partisanship is unity with strings attached, for it exalts loyalty to one group over others. Partisanship is a roadblock to the spiritual unity that is the ultimate goal of Bahá'í social and spiritual processes” (Stockman 2013, 17-18).

<sup>40</sup> As 'Abdu'l-Bahá states: “The only difference between members of the human family is that of degree. Some are like children who are ignorant, and must be educated until they arrive at maturity, some are like the sick and must be treated with tenderness and care. None are bad or evil! We must not feel repelled by these poor children. We must treat them with great kindness, teaching the ignorant and tenderly nursing the sick” (Abdul-Bahá 1972, 138-139).

principle of culture and civilization” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1990a, 75) by confronting the realities of post-modern society. As Moojan Momen writes,

For Bahá’ís, the meaning that is imposed upon the world consists of a belief that, in the present state of the world, the only salvation for humanity is to move on to the next stage of its social development, the unity of humankind and the emergence of a single global order: ‘The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens’ (Bahá’u’lláh, 1983, p. 250). For this order to emerge, an individual’s source of identity has to change from a solely national, racial, religious or ethnic one to a global one. Hence the strong impulse in the Bahá’í community towards unity. A religion that claims to be trying to unite the world cannot be effective or credible if it is not itself united. (Momen 2007, 190)

David Piff and Margit Warburg have also indicated that post-modernist secularism and pluralism have led all religions “to compete not only with one another but also with the reality-defining agencies of society at large—government, the media, the scientific establishment, and so forth” (Piff and Warburg 2005, 87). To counter these oppositional “plausibility structures,” (87) Bahá’ís advocate that the future of humanity is grounded in religion and encourages empathy and collaboration, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states: “it is incumbent upon everyone to show the utmost love, rectitude of conduct, straightforwardness and sincere kindness unto all the peoples of the world, be they friends or strangers” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1990b, 13).

These principles for cultural accommodation made it necessary for the earliest Bahá’í converts to be hyper-vigilant about the difficulties of navigating difference, which was first articulated as the unification of ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ values. In John Ferraby’s *All Things Made New* (1987), the Bahá’í scholar discusses that differences can be resolved by “learn[ing] from the other’s virtues” in order to “guard against misunderstanding”; these are identified as cultural differences regarding hospitality, formal courtesy, and ‘reverent behaviour’ (Ferraby 1987, 79). Ferraby cites a passage from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s *Paris Talks*, which addressed how

Western converts may achieve greater understanding of their Eastern counterparts through mindful interaction:

Oh, you of the Western nations, be kind to those who come from the Eastern world to sojourn among you. Forget your conventionality when you speak with them; they are not accustomed to it. To Eastern peoples this demeanour seems cold, unfriendly. Rather let your manner be sympathetic. Let it be seen that you are filled with universal love. When you meet a Persian, or any other stranger, speak to him as to a friend; if he seems lonely, try to help him, give him of your willing service; if he be sad, console him, if poor succour him, if oppressed rescue him, if in misery comfort him. In doing so you will manifest that not in words only, but in deed and in truth, you think of all men as your brothers. (Abdul-Bahá, 1972, 16; cited in Ferraby 1987, 79)

In this passage, not only can we see that a Bahá'í approach to engaging with difference in their community is through active praxis,<sup>41</sup> but at the very least, that an ethos of Bahá'í cultural accommodation emerged from its' East-East/Persian-Western conversion context. From its earliest beginnings, then, Bahá'ís have steadfastly and consciously addressed ways of fulfilling Bahá'u'lláh's world-unifying message in practical terms, outlining a legacy of Bahá'í inter-cultural dialogue and critical reflection when encountering 'the Other:' that relic of "ancient prejudice" (75) that has led the world of humanity to countless conflicts and requires ongoing treatment and care.

As indicated in the first chapter, much of Shoghi Effendi's mandate was to help spread and propagate the Faith through establishing its administrative institutions on a global scale.

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<sup>41</sup> As stated on the official Bahá'í.org website: "Expressions of belief alone, however, are not sufficient for building a better world—focused action is also needed. Bahá'u'lláh writes: "*It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action*". Therefore, Bahá'ís strive to participate fully in the life of society, working shoulder to shoulder with divers [sic] groups in a wide variety of settings to contribute to the social, material, and spiritual advancement of civilization. Whatever the particular form that these efforts take, the participation of Bahá'ís is motivated by concern for the common good and a spirit of disinterested and humble service to humanity" ("Sharing Bahá'í Beliefs" n.d.).

Doing so, however, required a number of radical changes to the ‘culture of Bahá’í activity,’ which, according to Moojan Momen, was previously

run much like a large family [...] Most things were done on a person-to-person basis. For example, when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wanted to implement an initiative, he would ask an individual to do this. Examples of such initiatives include ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s instructions to Agnes Parsons to organize the Race Amity Conferences in the United States; his encouraging Corinne True to lead the work on the American temple; and his direction to John Esslemont to restart the Bahá’í Council in England. (Momen 2011, 2)

During this era of administrative development and radical change—which included the formalization of membership registration, Bahá’í election procedures, and methods of consultation—Momen suggests some Bahá’ís ‘drifted away’ from the Faith, contributing to an overall decline in membership among both Iranian and American communities during the 1920s (3). Beginning in 1922, Effendi would help establish “the formation of elected local and national Bahá’í councils — ‘spiritual assemblies’ — as the directive agencies for organised Bahá’í activities worldwide. Then, from 1937 onwards, [Effendi] started to give the various national Bahá’í communities specific expansion goals” (Smith 2016, 232). These goals included Bahá’í teaching activities, ‘pioneering’ (resettlement, both domestically and internationally), acquisition of properties, and the translation of Bahá’í literature in multiple languages.

At the same time, Effendi’s efforts would focus on thwarting the development of Persian Bahá’í enclaves, advocating that Local Spiritual Assemblies try to reflect the population in which they are established. This was reiterated in a letter dated February 17, 1957, written on Effendi’s behalf:<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> As indicated in the letter, individual names are removed in archived letters of correspondence between Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Effendi, and the UHJ.

The Beloved Guardian [Effendi] has directed me to write to your Assembly, concerning the settlement of Persian Bahá'ís in Germany and Austria. He has discussed the matter in some detail with ... when they were here, and asked them to review the matter with your Assembly. It is artificial to build up communities or Assemblies with Persians, or for that matter, any Bahá'ís from other countries. The Communities and Assemblies should be made up of local people. Thus in any of the Centers where a large number of Persian Bahá'ís have settled, your Assembly should discuss the subject with them, and urge them to move to goal cities, where there are no Bahá'ís, or groups, in order to assist in the teaching work. Thus, the artificial Assemblies will necessarily have to be constituted of local Bahá'ís, and many new centers will be opened. Thus the Persian Bahá'ís will become pioneers and greatly aid the teaching work. At the same time, it will mean that the German Bahá'ís will have to redouble their efforts and win many converts to the Faith, in the cities from which the Persians move, and which are now artificial. (Effendi 1982a, 288-289)

The relatively vigorous growth of Bahá'í communities throughout the 1960s and early 70s posed similar issues for the 'artificial' establishment of culturally/ethnically-distinct Bahá'í communities worldwide, as indicated in a letter by the UHJ. Here, the UHJ acknowledges difficulties that emerged following many years of rapid expansion, which 'reproduced' certain 'cultural challenges' that existed among early Persian believers in the West:

At the immediate level, the resources of Bahá'í communities engaged in the work were soon overwhelmed by the task of providing the sustained deepening the masses of new believers needed and the consolidation of the resulting communities and Spiritual Assemblies. Beyond that, cultural challenges like those encountered by the early Persian believers who had first sought to introduce the Faith in Western lands now replicated themselves throughout the world. Theological and administrative principles that might be of consuming interest to pioneers and teachers were seldom those that were central to the concern of new declarants from very different social and cultural backgrounds. Often, differences of view about even such elementary matters as the use of time or simple social conventions created gaps of understanding that made communication extremely difficult. (UHJ 2001, 101)

As such, the Bahá'í Faith's process of reconciling cultural-specificity (primarily through identifying traces of its Persian/Middle Eastern identity) needed to strike a balance between: 1) recognizing the Faith's Iranian roots with 2) a desire to attract a globalized citizenry to a religion

with distinguishable Persianate undertones. However, these efforts would sometimes manifest into surprising areas of discourse, disavowing Persian signifiers in favour of perpetuating the image of a Bahá'í 'world citizenry.' For instance, Effendi (and in letters written on his behalf) would often take a rather critical perspective of Iranians, referring to them as those "Near Eastern races of Islamic extraction" (NSAUK 1950, 21). Effendi would highlight certain practices of the Faith that were considered potentially alienating to Westerners and non-Bahá'ís, including the typical Bahá'í greeting *Allah-u-Abha* that, if used among strangers, might give "a very peculiar impression of us, and makes us seem like some strange Oriental sect" (16). These and other recommendations were outlined in a text concerning principles of Bahá'í administration, contrasting from the language 'Abdu'l-Bahá used during His Western lecture circuit in hopes of internationalizing the Faith. In the text—published under the auspices of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United Kingdom (NSAUK)—it identifies both Persians and "the Moslems of India" (21-22) as groups for which Bahá'í communities should exercise caution, particularly if they declare themselves as registered Bahá'ís to a new community. Effendi reiterates: "no Persian, student or otherwise, must be admitted into the community under any circumstances unless provided with full credentials. Exception and compromise would be detrimental to the vital interests of the Faith at the present juncture. The utmost caution and vigilance are imperative" (21). A chief concern was that some individuals may actively try to destroy the Faith (i.e. Islamic fundamentalists), potentially infiltrating Western communities to monitor Bahá'í administrative activities, such as processes of voting and consultation that occurs during Feasts. It was also suggested that some of these individuals may have been engaged in activities 'back home' were "actively against the Cause" and "who have been most persistently



exposed to the propaganda and bad example of the Covenant-breakers, old and new” (21). It is very likely that these more assertive positions emerged out of a disintegrating situation for Bahá’ís in Iran during the Pahlavi era, where anti-Bahá’í rhetoric and violence instigated by the clerical establishment (via radio programs and other means) was overlooked by the Shah in order to gain mass support and return to power after the coup against him in 1953 (Momen 2005, 224). These activities increased by 1955, following an outbreak of persecution “in which Bahá’í properties were confiscated, and the community’s activities were curtailed,” but, as Hassall writes, Effendi advised for quite some time that Bahá’ís should consider leaving Iran (Hassall 1989, 60).

For the uninitiated, anxieties about anti-Bahá’í community infiltration in the West may seem overly cautious, perhaps even paranoid. However, there is precedent for why Bahá’ís have historically employed (and currently exert) a certain degree of caution. This was especially the case following the 1979 Revolution in Iran, which produced an increase in violence, arrests, and widespread condemnation of Bahá’í activities in the Islamic Republic that, in many respects, continues to exist today, providing the most salient discursive context for ongoing relations between the Bahá’í Faith and anything remotely ‘Iranian.’ For instance, a bomb threat was issued in 1980 at a Persian-language Bahá’í conference in Los Angeles, leading to the circulation of a letter by the National Spiritual Assembly of American Bahá’ís on April 11 of that year:

The situation which has arisen as a result of the difficulties between Iran and the United States makes it unwise for Persian believers to congregate in large gatherings at present... And while we encourage local initiative in assisting the Persian believers to become fully integrated into the American Bahá’í community, we do not wish Local Assemblies to sponsor regional conferences for Persians. Certain segments of the American public and the media have long thought that the Bahá’í community in the United States is simply a collection of Iranian transplants. We have been combatting this misconception ever since

the crisis began more than a year ago. Therefore, it does us no good whatever, on the one hand, to endeavor to impress upon the public the broad-based American membership of the Bahá'í community in the United States and, on the other, to hold so many Persian events as to lend credence to this misconception. (McMullen 2015, 174-175)

Fears of state-sanctioned Iranian retaliation abroad were heightened during this period as Iranian Bahá'í communities experienced an increase in arrests and executions between 1980-1984 (see Martin 1984), reproducing similar periods of political upheaval against the Bahá'ís that would have contextualized Shoghi Effendi's earlier warnings in the 1950s. There was widespread concern in the USA that Iranian agents would attempt to infiltrate diasporic Iranian Bahá'í communities, leading to the institution of a vetting process in the mid-eighties where refugees were required to document their faith or provide two Bahá'í references who could vouch for a third (Kelley, Friedlander, and Colby 1993, 130). Such activities were handled under the 'Persian Affairs Committee' "to issue credentials, assist with housing or jobs, and help refugees out with their immigration status, among other things" (McMullen 2015, 175).

To mediate any homegrown anxieties about their new Iranian neighbours, the American National Spiritual Assembly circulated pamphlets about Iranian customs and potential cultural differences, establishing special committees to address the changing demographic landscape of the Bahá'í community in handbooks like *Iranian Refugees in America: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Lewis and Stevens 1986). Published under the auspices of the US Bahá'í Refugee Office of the NSA, this text provided some historical background and general observations that "should be remembered in interactions with Iranians," including differences with Iranian perceptions of time (i.e. often arriving late for appointments), dress, cleanliness, or the 'ritual

courtesy of hospitality' (known as *tarof*)" (Lewis and Stevens 1986, 11-21). However, one particular section concerned aspects of 'social prejudice,' which stated that

there is typically a strong sense of social prejudice among Iranians that separates people by social class and religious affiliation. Middle East and Upper Middle-Class Iranians in this country often feel a social prejudice against poor minorities such as blacks or Latinos. This prejudice usually stems from differences in culture and lifestyle rather than from race or nationality. (19)

Such characterizations of Iranian cultural differences, class-based attitudes, and American refugee initiatives would be highlighted in other studies, particularly about Bahá'í communities in Southern California. The most critical evaluation of Californian Bahá'í communities is found in Juan R. I. Cole's work on the dissolution of the Los Angeles Local Spiritual Assembly (2000b). This study included several interviews with former LSA members in the 1980s that are quoted from a defunct Bahá'í magazine titled *Dialogue*, offering rare insight into contemporary Iranian-Bahá'í discourse. One of Cole's interview participants discussed how the Los Angeles LSA "started (assimilation) programs around 1980-1981, and the assembly was very careful to appoint mixed committees" with both Persians and Americans (Cole 2000b, 116). Here, Cole outlines how the need for this type of programming was seen as necessary, given that "the Iranian population of Los Angeles increased sixfold in that decade," as many having moved to Los Angeles to be closer to relatives and to pursue greater economic opportunity (118). However, the interview participant (identified as Manila Lee) admits that this initiative became sidetracked in 1983 when the community was moving to a new Bahá'í Centre (117). Throughout this period, the American Bahá'í community tried to carefully frame their discourse by appealing to the non-Bahá'í public through avoiding Iranian signifiers. For instance, the American NSA held a

National Prayer Meeting with Bahá'í sympathizers on March 27, 1982, which adhered to the following guidelines:

choosing a neutral location, beginning and ending on time, dressing appropriately, and requiring that the majority of Bahá'í speakers speak English without a foreign accent; under no circumstances should a majority of the speakers be Persian; avoid “Bahá'í jargon such as ‘Manifestations,’ ‘Hands of the Cause,’ ‘Alláh-u-Abhá’; and only one prayer chanted in Persian or Arabic. (McMullen 2015, 178)

It is likely that American Bahá'ís may have needed to respond to broader, negative international media exposure about the Islamic Republic of Iran in the 1980s, especially following the country's deteriorated relations with the United States. Nevertheless, the American Bahá'í community felt it was necessary to be explicit about the Faith's relationship with Iran, breaking away from previously held beliefs among many Western Bahá'ís who valorized Iranians for their ethnic and historical connections to the Faith's ‘homeland.’ For instance, in the early twentieth century, most Bahá'í converts in the USA did not read or speak Arabic or Farsi, making it necessary to enlist the help of a few capable Bahá'ís in the early 1900s who could translate the correspondences of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá and key religious texts. These duties made many of them “nationally prominent in the Bahá'í community and [possessing] considerable influence” (Armstrong-Ingram 1983, 19). A similar idealization of Iranians existed among Westerners in the 1980s, but Iranian Bahá'ís also developed their own impressions of their co-religionists, sensing that American Bahá'ís “tended to be activists” and possessed a certain religious zeal, whereas Persians were socialized against religious proselytizing (Kelley, Friedlander, and Colby 1993, 130-131). These cultural differences, perceptions, and expectations in the Los Angeles Bahá'í community were outlined further:

When the Iranians first began arriving, many local Bahá'ís expected these newcomers from the birthplace of the faith to be tempered experts with keen insights into the Bahá'í religion. In this regard, the Americans were sometimes sorely disappointed. Most Iranians were Bahá'ís by birth and did not exhibit the zeal of the American converts. Some Persians were more lax than Americans in observing prohibitions against alcohol and formal marriage regulations.<sup>43</sup> Those from Iran were mostly second-, third-, and fourth-generation Bahá'ís. They were part of extended Bahá'í families, and much of their interest in the Los Angeles Bahá'í Center related to the opportunities it afforded for socializing with other Bahá'ís from Iran—much to the chagrin of non-Iranian Bahá'ís.” (131)

The difficulties that Southern Californians experienced in the 1980s points to a number of issues that emerged in response to the waves of Iranian mass-immigration and the radical demographic changes that it made in the USA—some of which were painted as less than ideal in the scholarly literature.<sup>44</sup> Some Bahá'í scholars acknowledge that the Faith's history and importance placed upon achieving greater ethnic, religious, and class-based diversity in their membership has resulted “in numerous situations in which tests and conflicts can arise owing to a clash of opinions or of cultures,” as it is common that “Bahá'ís report that their greatest tests come from their fellow-believers” (Momen and Momen 2005, 16). In Juan Cole's research on such conflicts in American Bahá'í communities—which were mired in academic (Momen 2007,

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<sup>43</sup> The notion that Iranian Bahá'ís were more lax, however, differs from other studies that suggested otherwise: that Iranians were far stricter and perceived themselves as “more devout, educated in the religious teachings, and in many ways closer to the religion when compared to their host communities” (Morlock 2015, 136). Here, Morlock's interviews with Iranian Bahá'ís in the USA found it difficult to understand why “In the United States, children often were not expected to participate in prayers or other religious programming, instead they were entertained with arts and crafts or other play. For the Iranian Bahá'í refugees this was very surprising, as even small children in Iran learned to sit still and participate in all of the activities” (133). Furthermore, many of the respondents in the author's study believed that their experience of persecution in Iran made them more devout than their American counterparts (140-141).

<sup>44</sup> It is important to note, however, that not only Bahá'ís experienced a sense of American hostility, as some Iranians “opted to disassociate themselves from their nationality, contrary to the theory that host hostility creates ethnic solidarity.” Referring to Bozorgmehr (1997), Ruth Williams found “that this is especially the case for persecuted religious minorities such as Christian Armenians, Bahá'ís and Jews, who identify more with their religious backgrounds than with their nation of origin” (Williams 2009, 11).

Stausberg et al., 2008) and administrative disputes with Bahá'ís at the American National Spiritual Assembly (perhaps even at the level of the UHJ)<sup>45</sup>—he documents how major internal issues in Los Angeles stemmed from the growth of Iranian members in the USA, despite how “[the] Los Angeles [Bahá'í community] was special in having whites, African–Americans and Iranians in roughly similar proportions and in retaining all three groups” (Cole 2000a, 143). According to Cole, there were significant divisions along issues of class and cultural differences between Iranian and non-Iranian Bahá'ís, leading to a decline in conversions in Southern California, as well as a decrease in participation among new converts due to “an overwhelming predominance” of Iranian members. In his interviews with former LSA members, Cole (presaging MacEoin’s observations) found that white Bahá'ís in LA felt ‘alienated’ when accommodating Farsi translations of meetings;<sup>46</sup> that Iranian Bahá'ís were ‘cliqish,’ complaining “that the many wealthy among them tended to overdress and to introduce class distinctions into Bahá'í social relations;” as well as how Iranian Bahá'ís “point[ed] out, in an equally patronizing way, the faults of Western Bahá'í practices, such as the “inconsistencies in the observance of the Bahá'í calendar and the omissions in Bahá'í laws of marriage and

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<sup>45</sup> Cole (a former Bahá'í) alludes to his work being sanctioned by members of the NSA, as well as those in the UHJ—many of whom were conflicted about: Cole’s depiction of events that unfolded in Los Angeles in the 1980s (where he was a practicing member); his identification of both ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ Bahá'ís; and other controversial suggestions in his paper (2000b), as well as a number of other works that, quite dramatically, condemn the Faith for its ‘fundamentalist’ leanings (date) and ‘panopticon-like’ structure of governance (1998b) (all of which were published following a very public fallout between Cole and the Bahá'í Faith in the late 1990s).

<sup>46</sup> This experience of ‘alienation’ among English-speaking Bahá'ís was echoed in Margaret Bluett’s dissertation (2005) on Iranian Bahá'ís in Australia. As cited in Williams (2009): “many Iranian newcomers chose to retain their language and often spoke Persian when in large groups of predominantly Iranians. However, this behaviour of maintaining cultural communication, especially in large groups, had the adverse effect of making other Australians feel isolated and created conflict within the Bahá'í communities ‘causing many Australians to absent themselves from meetings dominated by Iranians, particularly in city centres where the largest number of the Iranian Bahá'ís have settled’” (Williams 2009, 15; citing Bluett 2005, 185).

burial” (Cole 2000b, 116). At the same time, Iranian Bahá’ís were apparently advised against organizing their own events and were “instructed to follow American Bahá’í practices, such as not rising to their feet for certain kinds of prayer. For their part, many Iranian Bahá’ís felt a certain superiority to American converts, convinced that they knew better what the Bahá’í faith was, though in fact many of them confused their folk customs with the high scriptural tradition” (116). More controversially, Cole insinuates that the American National Spiritual Assembly purposefully (and undemocratically) blocked the election of Iranian members to the NSA by “clos[ing] down regular scripture study sessions hosted by popular Iranian immigrant lay preachers, who were becoming prominent and therefore had a chance of being elected to the NSA” (118). Interestingly, Cole also noted that the influx of Iranian Bahá’ís to major metropolitan centres like Los Angeles was frowned upon by National and Local Assembly members in the USA. This was found in a talk given by the Hand of the Cause and wife of Shoghi Effendi, Ruhíyyih Khanum Rabbani, who “spoke to members of the community harshly, upbraiding them for settling in a such a decadent urban centre, implying they should never have left Iran or should at least have had the decency to settle as missionaries in some remote village of the global South” (117).

For Cole, such indicators of class-based ‘decadence’ were tied to a predominately Tehranian-Bahá’í business class, many of whom were both successful and well-connected to the Shah (118). Within Muhammad Reza Shah’s government, Bahá’ís formed a disproportionate majority of bureaucratic workers, angering both secularists and hard-lined Muslim fundamentalists alike and contributing to the rise of anti-Bahá’í sentiment with the Khomeini-led Revolution (see Cole 2005). As such, Bahá’ís were seen as monarchists and part of a wealthy

elite—a fact that is further supported in Parin Dossa’s ethnographic research on Iranian migrant women in Canada, indicating “that wealthier Bahá’ís, who were the main target of the uprising, left Iran” in the months leading up to the Revolution (Dossa 2003, 64). Critiques of the establishment of Iranian Bahá’í enclaves—a blend of wealthier families pre-Revolution and traumatized, destitute refugees post-Revolution—translated into what Cole claimed were punitive measures established by the Spiritual Assemblies, noting how Iranian Bahá’í refugees who flew to Los Angeles via Tehran in 1983 were ‘disfellowed’ from the Bahá’í community for at least year because they would have had to claim they were Muslim to board the plane (Cole 2000b, 118). These and other

‘repeated admonitions from Bahá’í leaders and institutions about the dire consequences of living in Los Angeles has led to considerable confusion, thus making assimilation seem even less desirable to them’, and added that ‘their choice of domicile has become a religious question’ which led to a ‘strong sense of guilt associated with their settling in Los Angeles.’ (118; citing former American Bahá’í NSA member, Henry Thompson)

Elsewhere, Iranian Bahá’ís would emigrate to other corners of the world following the Revolution, populating other large diasporic Iranian enclaves such as Australia and the UK. Within Los Angeles, a so-called Iranian ‘ethnic economy’ developed—defined as “Iranian self-employed plus their Iranian employees”—which led a “complexly federated” economy of Armenian, Muslim, Jewish, and Bahá’í Iranians in the city where “economic organization centres around four internal ethnic economies [...] which are ethno-religious rather than broadly Iranian in character” (Light et al. 1993, 587). In general, demographic data on Bahá’í membership (especially *Iranian*-Bahá’í statistics) is difficult to source, often presented in wide timeline gaps. Citing Smith and Momen, Seena Fazel observes: “In 1954, Bahá’ís in Iran composed 94% of the total worldwide Bahá’í population. In 1968 this figure had dropped to 22%, and to 6% in 1988.



In contrast, the numerical dominance of the Third World is now clear, with 91% of Bahá'ís living in these areas in 1988" (Fazel 1994, 17). Farida Fozdar also explores the issue of uncovering demographic data, providing a range of statistics that do not seem to bear any clear original sources. She writes,

There are no figures on the number of Iranian Bahá'ís worldwide. 4–5 million Iranians have emigrated, the vast majority (90–95%) since 1979. Seven times as many Bahá'ís migrated as the general population (8% of the Iranian population migrated, compared with 40% of the Iranian Bahá'í population). The people who migrated were descendants of earlier generations of Iranian Bahá'ís, and knew little about their religion, which was more like an ethnic identity for many, simply differentiating them from Muslims. They are known as *Bahá'í-zadih* (*zadih* meaning born of) for that reason. They spread throughout the world, between 500,000 and a million to the United States, and tens to hundreds of thousands to Canada, Turkey, UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Israel, Germany, Malaysia, Britain, Sweden, Russia, the Netherlands and Australia. In many of these countries Iranian Bahá'ís now make up a significant majority of the Bahá'í population. (Fozdar 2015, 289)

In the UK, the vast majority of Iranians that fled there followed the 1979 Revolution and a more recent census survey in the UK estimated "16 per cent of the 82,000 Iranian-born residents in 2011 arrived in the 1970s" (Smith 2011, 14); presumably, a significant portion of these refugees would have been Bahá'í, as well. Following the 1979 Revolution religious intolerance increased, particularly among ethno-religious minorities in the country. In the work of Light et al. (1993) on the Iranian diaspora in Los Angeles, they note how "minorities were overrepresented among those who fled the Islamic Republic. Armenians, Bahais [sic], and Jews are much more numerous among Iranians in Los Angeles than they were in Iran's population" (586). It appears that research on Australian Bahá'í communities presents the greatest survey of demographic data, as Ruth William's study (2009) found that Iranian Bahá'ís in Melbourne (largely concentrated in the eastern metropolitan region) and the surrounding Local Government Areas

“constitute approximately 65-75 per cent of the Bahá’í populations” in neighbouring Manningham and Whitehorse (8). In the 1980s, Iranians represented the majority of Bahá’í members in 59 of 169 Australian Bahá’í communities that had Local Assemblies (Hassall 1989, 62) and, in the city of Melbourne alone, a 2001 census figure found that 52% of Bahá’ís living in the state of Victoria were “Iranian-born and almost all of them (95%) entered Australia as part of the Humanitarian Entry Program” that welcomed them as religious refugees post-1979 (Williams 2009, 4). Continuing, Williams found “Despite the explicit encouragement by the governing international Bahá’í body, the Universal House of Justice, and the Bahá’í writings, many Iranian-born Bahá’ís have not actively dispersed amongst the population and appear to be following the patterns of forming ethnic enclaves” (5).

The need to assist and support new Iranian migrants developed similarly in Australia, who instituted their own Persian Affairs Committee as a way of helping Iranian Bahá’ís feel ‘less homesick’ in their host community. In Possamai and Possamai-Inesedy’s research, an Iranian-Australian Bahá’í respondent described the process and how it took shape following the wave of migrants post-1979:

they called it [the] Persian Affairs Committee, but effectively it was a migrants’ affairs committee, to be honest. It provided initial support in terms of, if families who had nobody, in terms of not knowing anyone, there was immediate family that was in charge of you. That was a point of contact, assisting you with basics of getting initial things organized, like registering kids with schools, and applying for your Medicare cards and insurance and anything else. To rent a place. Because you have no idea where you are, which suburbs you want to live in. So that was that initial support, and of course they kept contact and once you get involved with your own community, because wherever you are there was a local assembly, then local assembly looks after you afterwards. So it was the first few weeks that are normally the hardest. But that committee looked after us very well. And then I ended up getting on that committee myself ... helping others. (Possamai and Possamai-Inesedy 2007, 305)

Hassall also echoes Cole's observations how, within Persian diasporic communities, there were major class-based differences between those who arrived before or *after* the 1979 Revolution, stating

Whereas Persians who migrated prior to the revolution transferred much of their wealth to Australia, Persian refugees invariably escaped with no more than the clothes they wore, across the borders to either Turkey or Pakistan; and whereas some Persians had migrated at an earlier date to Europe, Britain, or North America, gained a Western education, and acquired Western cultural values, refugees invariably spent some time in squalid camps (some even in jail) and learnt basic English, before arriving in Australia. (Hassall 1989, 62)

As a consequence, Iranian Bahá'í refugees may experience a heightened sense of cultural shock in their host country if they fled after the Revolution, as evidenced in Naghme Naseri Morlock's research on Iranian Bahá'ís in the United States (2015). The author cites how these individuals "lived in Iran during a time where the culture had shifted dramatically from a fairly liberal and worldly place to a very conservative, religiously controlled, and traditional society that became isolated from the rest of the world" (98-99). As such, Iranian Bahá'ís had profoundly differing experiences whether they escaped before or after the Revolution occurred in the country, shaping their journey and subsequent resettlement in host countries (very often within other predominately-Iranian communities).

*B. 'There is No Iranian Bahá'í Diaspora: Theorizing Identity at Home and Abroad*

In many ways, the immigration experiences of Iranian Bahá'ís in the USA and other locales follow similar narratives as other Iranian groups and non-Bahá'ís. In well-populated centres, such as Los Angeles, Bahá'ís certainly form a key demographic and are often assimilated into a more general 'Iranian-American diaspora'. However, Bahá'í conceptions of

diaspora are distinct, reflecting theological attitudes towards nationalistic and culturalist dimensions of identification. As indicated in Will C. van den Hoonaard's earlier pronouncement that Iranian Bahá'ís refugees (or any Bahá'ís, for that matter) should not be considered part of a 'diaspora,' this notion generates yet another complicated discourse that re-frames Iranian-Bahá'í cultural, theological, and political dynamics. This is also problematized in Smith and Momen's earlier statements (1989, 86-87) about how the Faith operates on a more individualistic level, rather than as a community. Attending to these dynamics can also productively contribute to studies of an imagined, homogenous 'Iranian diaspora,' which often achieves an *a priori* status of being 'diasporic' through a range of arbitrary and over-generalized variables. As Nilou Mostofi writes about the diversity of the 'Iranian diaspora:'

Iranian immigrants range from all sectors, ages, and walks of society. They came from radical political backgrounds, working-class traditional families, and Westernized bourgeoisie and elite classes. They came as persecuted intellectuals, oppressed minorities, rich professionals, and educated workers. There are religious and ethnolinguistic differences among the Muslim, Jewish, Bahá'í, Zoroastrian, Christian, Turkish, Armenian, Azerbaijani, Kurdish, and Assyrian groups. They came as refugees, asylum-seekers, expatriates, immigrants, students, families, and individuals. In simple terms, these immigrants are a heterogeneous group who lived very different lives in Iran and endured extremely distinct experiences during the revolution. How then has this group of religiously, ethnically, and linguistically diverse people with different pasts constructed an Iranian identity in diaspora? Why is Iranian immigration even termed a diaspora? (Mostofi 2003, 685)

In order to address some of Mostofi's questions, this section will outline how a distinctly-Bahá'í understanding of culture and nation problematizes conceptions of the 'Iranian diaspora,' as well as how ethnically-specific Bahá'í populations situate themselves according to nationality and Faith. In the process, Iranian Bahá'ism complicates simplified understandings about expressive

devotionalism in different global contexts—a theme that raises interesting questions when localized expressions of devotional practice are employed in Bahá'í communities.

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While there may be a desire to frame Iranian Bahá'ís in a 'diasporic' context, certain aspects about the Faith and the experiences of its Iranian members contradict some of the term's core theoretical principles. On the one hand, classical diasporic theory is tied to the notion of "forced movement, exile and a consequent sense of loss derived from an inability to return" (Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk 2005, 10); conditions that certainly resonate with the religious persecution and subsequent immigration of the Iranian Bahá'ís. In a concise distillation of the concept, Kokot et. al write: "all accepted working definitions of diaspora seem to point to the connection between diaspora and locality: diaspora 'is about not being there'" (Kokot, Tölölyan, and Alfonso 2004, 5). However, diasporic subjects are often "constructed as *different* from all sides [...] [as] questions of identity are inextricable from the past and from his/her relationship to a former homeland, whether or not that home is several times removed through generations" (Ramnarine 2007, 3; emphasis mine). Not only is there an alleged difference associated with one's diasporic condition, but the idea of 'moving away' regularly signifies a sense of loss or generates an inherent bias towards the experiences and interactions that diasporic groups have (11). Citing a common analytical mistake, Carol Silverman finds "the bare fact of movement or displacement [is] often assumed a priori to entail not a transformation but a loss of culture and/or identity" (Silverman 2012, 41). Subsequently, questions about religion have 'faded into the background' of diasporic research, prompting greater calls for scholars to consider "the

meaning of religion both as a factor in forming diasporic social organization, as well as in shaping and maintaining diasporic identities” (Kokot, Tölölyan, and Alfonso 2004, 6-7).

Exploring Iranian Bahá’ís from the lens of diaspora, then, risks presuming a sense of difference or otherness, both from outside and within. The categorization of so-called diasporic musics can also raise ethical questions for scholars. For Kofi Agawu, this can include categorizing diasporic musicians according to a sense of multicultural difference, where such framing can problematically inform scholarship about whether or not a musical culture is “‘sufficiently different’ for a study, a judgement which must be made in relation to ‘a prior set of analytical acts’” (Agawu 2003, 232-233; cited in Ramnarine 2007, 2). As such, a diasporic theoretical perspective risks compartmentalizing migrant and displaced communities into a one-dimensional mode of being, where the pressures to return or re-make their ‘homes’ elsewhere takes on a perpetual sense of grief, stagnation, a lack of authenticity, and resists the possibility for autonomy and change. When subjects *do* exert their autonomy in these new lands, a hyphenating of difference can occur: “obscuring singular sensibilities,” blurring lines between an ‘ethnic self’ and one’s ‘national status’ by discursively conflating ethnicity with ‘race’ when “‘borders of ethnic belonging are mapped onto images on the body” (10). Depending on relations between home- and host-lands in question, acts of artistic performance in the diaspora are sometimes interpreted as being inherently political. Such is the case for many Western studies and the reception of Iranian music in the Islamic Republic, which Laudan Nooshin has found to reflect a certain ‘fetishization of resistance’ in the available scholarly literature (Nooshin 2017).<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Relatedly, Bronwen Robertson (2012) clarifies that her study of Iranian rock music scenes examines their ‘unofficial’ (Persian: *gheir-e rasmi*) status, rather than imposing the more subversive and politically-charged academic notion of ‘underground’ (*gheir-e ghanooni*) (xii).

A similar issue revolves around the essentialization of homelands—the “equating [of] all diasporic subjects merely because they are related to a positioned homeland,” diluting the diasporic concept to “equate it with all migration” (Silverman 2012, 40)—or of ‘diversity’ itself, which can over-emphasize differences between cultural expressions and groups, homogenizing them in the process (Ramnarine 2003, 7). In short, framing Iranian Bahá’ís (or any musical culture) into a generalized ‘diaspora’ oversimplifies complex social and cultural differences, potentially racializing ideas associated with “dispersion, exile, ethnicity, nationalism, transnationalism, postcolonialism, and globalization” (Monson 2003, 1).

### *C. Transnational instead of Diasporic? Musicological Considerations*

Bahá’ís indeed fled Iran following decades of harassment, imprisonment, and a lack of opportunity, though much of the literature suggests that Iranian Bahá’ís hold divergent attitudes toward the country than do many of their non-Bahá’í counterparts (see Possamai and Possamai-Inesedy 2007, 312-314; Warburg 1999 and 2005b; MacAuliffe 2007a and 2008). Even the very notion of an ‘Iranian Bahá’í diaspora’ must be contextually limited to a specific set of countries around the world (predominately found in Canada, the USA, UK, and Australia), whereas other places with significant Bahá’í populations (India; throughout Latin [Panama] and South America [Colombia, Chile], Africa [Uganda, South Africa], and Southeast Asia) may not possess the same degree of Iranian migrant populations, thus presenting their own unique set of issues and questions of cultural expression in the Bahá’í Faith. At the same time, Bahá’í scholarly literature and official resources may promote visions of the Faith as ‘globally unified,’ but it should not be overstated that Iranian Bahá’ís also identify with their ethnic homeland (that is, whether or not

they have ‘shed’ all Persian cultural and traditional values in their host countries). Nevertheless, critical evaluation about Iranian Bahá’í diasporic identity is required from a Bahá’í musicological perspective, for the label of diaspora has been utilized and “stretched to cover almost any ethnic or religious minority that is dispersed physically from its original homeland, regardless of the conditions leading to the dispersion, and regardless of whether, and to what extent, physical, cultural, or emotional links exist between the community and home country” (Safran 2004, 9).

For Faist, the term ‘diaspora’ is “not an innocuous analytical concept,” but a problematic and often heavily politicized theoretical term: it is used by nationalists “to pursue agendas of nation-state building or controlling populations abroad [...] [or] invoked to mobilise support for a group identity or some political project, sometimes in the service of an external homeland,” as well as “source countries of migration [...] [who used] ‘diaspora’ to encourage financial investments and promote political loyalty among economically successful expatriates” (Faist 2010, 11). In contrast, ‘transnationalism’ has come to invoke an alternative vision of migrancy and culturally-, ethnically-, racially-, and/or religiously-connected international communities—typically focusing on the role of ‘non-state agents,’ such as migrants and their ‘triangular’ movement between “country of origin, country of destination [...] [and] countries of onward migration” (14). Very often, transnationalism “refers to *processes* that transcend international borders and therefore appear to describe more abstract phenomena in a social science language,” though both terms continue to “emphasise intense connections to national or local territories, especially in the case for migrants” (13-14). Much of this focus has turned to examining economic ‘flows’ and trends among migrant workers, as well as multinational corporations and



contemporary capitalism (Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk 2005, 34-35). However, as Su Zheng outlines, there are a number of problems with utilizing the term in the field of ethnomusicology, which she claims has been long dependent upon “the static of culture and population,” rather than a view towards the complexities of migration, resulting in “discussions of music and ethnicity often show[ing] ‘a tendency toward simplicity’” (Zheng 2010, 15; citing Seeger 1994, 3). For Zheng, a more transnational perspective offers “particularly important implications for ethnomusicology, since the field has historically embedded its knowledge in an assumed coherence of culture, people, and place” (28). These divergent visions have generated a rift between what Zheng identifies as the intellectual tradition of cultural globalization, “which until recently has been characteristically critical, suspicious, or pessimistic [and] the discourse on diasporic transnationalism [which] has been mostly celebratory, positive, and enthusiastic, albeit with an inherent ambivalence.” In order to weigh celebratory readings with critical assessments, Zheng suggests that we need to “detect and reveal the complicated and ambiguous ‘meaning of the transnational cultural flow’ (Hannerz 1989: 72), as well as the intervention of such a flow—or, rather flows—in old and new tensions and aspirations” (28).

Accordingly, the study of music, diaspora, and transnationalism often situates music and other aesthetic practices as *processes* that exist on the border of nationalistic, geographic, ethnic, religious, and political divides. Here, scholars address more abstracted relations between groups of people across borders, such as creating diasporic ‘spaces’ (Gilroy 1993); studying the global economic realities of late capitalism and an American-centric popular music industry (Simonett 2008); exploring the relationships between economic terms and cultural processes such as ‘glocalization’ with “postnational modes of production” (Party 2008); and critiquing the

disruptive use of ever-evolving digital media Internet technologies among musicians. Thomas Burkhalter's study (2013) of music and transnationalism in Beirut, for example, is largely explored through the Internet and digital media platforms that musicians use to circulate recordings (blogs, SoundCloud, MP3, WAV, YouTube, etc.) (14-15), framing the city of Beirut as a 'hub' of musical production (63) to indicate grassroots, contemporary Lebanese music-making, recording; theorizing the music scene as an analogue for a number of infrastructural, cultural, and economic issues in the country. Citing the work of Jocelyn Guilbault (1993) and Kiwan and Meinhof (2011) for similarly focusing on the "local, regional, and international networks" (18-19) of diverse music genres, scenes, and performers, Burkhalter challenges the 'bi-focal' study of "ethnically and spatially defined communities [...] [to emphasize] the more complex and fluid flows and networking of individuals" (19; citing Kiwan and Meinhof 2011, 1), namely through forms of social media and internet technologies. In a vein akin to Burkhalter (that is, through de-emphasizing discourses of ethnic and/or cultural difference), Tina K. Ramnarine advocates for a study of diasporic music-making through the "ordinariness of creative production, as musicians working as individual agents in their everyday environments, making musical choices that suit them and their audiences" (Ramnarine 2003, 7). Other musicologists have utilized music as a vehicle to explore nation-state and borderland relations between countries. For instance, Alejandro L. Madrid's study of music and transnationalism between Mexico and the USA allows for the "reconceptualization of border studies" through "the idea that individual and even communal experience takes place within imagined communities that transcend the nation-state as a unit of identification;" where "the lifestyles and experiences of migrants under globalization who live across national boundaries and whose lives are

simultaneously defined by conditions in their host country as well as their place of origin” (Madrid 2011, 8; citing Inda and Rosaldo 2008). For Madrid, “expressive culture [is taken] as a fundamental element in trying to understand border life” (1).

*D. Global Bahá’í Identity: Navigating Difference, Practice, and Persian Lineages*

In seeking to problematize an ‘Iranian Bahá’í diaspora,’ more general concepts about Bahá’í identity needs to be explored. Some Bahá’í scholars have focused on more ‘objective’ criteria to help define universal aspects that would (theoretically) be shared globally in each Bahá’í community. Most acknowledge that there is room for variation, however, according to where Bahá’ís live and practice, as Michael McMullen writes that a Bahá’í “universal ideology must be lived out in the local community in which the individual Bahá’í finds her- or himself situated” (McMullen 2000, 176). For McMullen, Bahá’í global identity can be located at the level of belief and within the tenets of the Faith, which allows one to categorize Bahá’ís as ‘situated universalists’ due to their ‘reflexive’ interaction with and ecclesiastical structure of the Bahá’í Administrative Order (177). There are also ways that Bahá’ís may define themselves from non-Bahá’ís at the level of discourse, such as dividing between ‘old’ and ‘new world’ thinking (112-113), or reflected in the community-led activities that Bahá’ís engage in, such as the decades-long efforts of anti-racism and race-unity projects in Atlanta since 1909 (see McMullen 2000, especially Chapter 8). While there may be great variation about who constitutes a Bahá’í according to each individual believer, McMullen highlights the existence of implied community engagement through describing a ‘basic three-step process’: belief in Bahá’u’lláh, declaring

oneself as a Bahá'í (and *receiving an identity card*), and a “lifelong journey [...] [of] personal transformation and socialization according to Bahá'í principles” (110-111).

McMullen dedicates considerable attention to race-relations in the Faith, as well as the dynamics of ethnicity and culture. In somewhat ambiguous terms, he writes that a “Bahá'í viewpoint on the intersection of religion and culture” is articulated through an interest in the development of a “future ‘world culture’ and ‘global civilization’—which they believe will be based on Bahá'í principles and institutions.” Not only this, but this new civilization “will be a *fusion of the best in all existing cultures*” (173; emphasis mine). From this perspective, these ‘best cultural practices’ (for lack of a better term) reflect not only a process of becoming-in-perpetuity, but an idealized vision of cultural change where potentially factitious, conflicting, or harmful cultural practices will eventually ‘fall away,’ leaving behind the most desirable aspects to help foster and herald the coming Golden Age. In principle, Bahá'í theological visions of a future Golden Age prioritize the shedding of ethnic, cultural, gendered, and racial identifications, necessitating a greater conviction for and identification with the Faith’s teachings. Idealistic in its vision, this principle disrupts more conventional dynamics for understanding diasporic identification (i.e. nationalistic, religious, ethnic, racial) as being somehow ‘rooted’ in place, implying “a decline of locality as a point of reference for collective identities” (Kokot, Tölölyan, and Alfonso 2004, 1) when groups of people are on the move elsewhere. To realize Bahá'u'lláh's vision of “The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens” (Bahá'u'lláh 1983, 250), Moojan Momen notes that an individual's source of identity has to change from a solely national, racial, religious or ethnic one to a global one (Momen 2007, 190).

Striking a balance between acknowledging the ‘traditional’ pull of identification with ethnicity, politics, etc., and the idealist message of the Faith to move ‘beyond’ these resources, remains difficult, generating a broad spectrum of possible ways to consider what a ‘Bahá’í identity’ could be. In some cases, academic attempts at providing a working definition of Bahá’í identity have fallen into the trap of its’ broadly inclusive and non-specific character—raising the question, what *isn’t* Bahá’í? As Ruth Williams (2009) writes:

Bahá’í culture and identity may be characterized through aspects such as people, places, administration, language, celebrations, observances and ceremonies, symbols and tenets. Central people such as the founders of the faith and early believers are collectively known and recognized by adherents of the faith, as are certain places revered for their importance because of historical events [...] Bahá’í identity is also derived from other formations such as a familiar administrative structure, the ‘*Allahu Abha*’ or ‘God is most glorious’ greeting, various celebrations such as *Naw Ruz* or Bahá’í New Year and *Ayyamiha* or intercalary days devoted to spiritual preparation for the fast, hospitality and gift giving; particular observances surrounding the fast, prayer, burial, marriage, divorce, teaching, deepening or studying the faith, the nineteen day feast, the *huququ’llah* or right of God (monetary payments to the faith); the Bahá’í calendar; symbols such as the five- and nine-pointed stars, the ringstone symbol and the well-known calligraphic representation of the Greatest Name; and, of course, the central tenets of the Bahá’í Faith which all Bahá’ís refer to regarding the conduct of their daily lives. (13)

In lieu of these all-inclusive and somewhat vague dynamics in the Faith, core administrative and theological functions are often cited as the crux of global Bahá’í identity, as the “importance of the doctrine of the covenant can be seen in the fact that the very identity of a Bahá’í is linked to it: to be a Bahá’í means to turn to the Universal House of Justice as the ultimate source of authority in the Bahá’í Faith” (Momen and Momen 2006, 108).

Regarding Iranian Bahá’ís migrants in Atlanta, however, Michael McMullen found a number of interesting dynamics at play. One Iranian interview participant proclaimed: “if you want to know what the Bahá’í Faith means, you better leave your country, and go to another

country” (McMullen 2000, 172), citing the breadth of ethnic and cultural differences in the Faith as reflective of the religion’s global appeal. On the other hand, Persians (specifically, those who immigrated to Atlanta post-1979) “taught Atlanta Bahá’ís a lot about their faith” and were more “educated on the nuances on the laws of Fasting and the prescribed way of doing certain prayers.” They were also said to possess a “greater grasp of certain facets of [the] faith” (171), leading to a process of mythologizing in the community that considered Iranians to be “more ‘spiritual,’ while Americans are better ‘administrators’ (173). Echoing earlier sections of this chapter, McMullen’s work also found that ‘cultural differences’ or ‘cultural unfamiliarity’ were at the heart of perceived tensions between Iranians and non-Iranians in the Atlanta Bahá’í community, citing language barriers, class-based differences (i.e. attitudes among older Iranian Bahá’í migrants who migrated before the Revolution and, hence, brought along their wealth) (227 note 47), or individual concerns about how prayer books were handled and valued among non-Iranian Bahá’ís (172). And yet, a sense of difference was also attributed to the experience of trauma among Iranian Bahá’ís, as a ‘white Bahá’í’ interview participant noted that the Iranian Bahá’ís in Atlanta were “very welcoming of us [American converts] expressing our Bahá’í religion through our own culture and our own individual paths,” considering that “their faith is so valuable to them, that they lost their lives and left their homes [in Iran] and all their wealth, and started over here” (171). Here, Iranian Bahá’ís are recognized for their sense of religious dedication, which came at a great price—a dynamic that is often central to how Bahá’ís and scholars have studied this particular religious group.

In the case of Iranian Bahá’í refugees, scholarly questions about identity are often framed according to their *resilience*, maintaining or ‘preserving’ a sense of religious identity in their host

countries (presupposing, at least partially, a distinctive set of identifiable characteristics in need of preservation). However, determining ‘what is Bahá’í identity’ raises a number of interesting issues that further problematize more specific questions about the *Iranian*-Bahá’í diaspora. Due to its global spread, the Faith ‘lost’ much of its Islamic identity as it evolved from its theological roots in Shi’a Islam, or what Effendi himself wrote as having transformed “from a heterodox and seemingly negligible offshoot of the Shaykhi school of the Ithna-Ashariya sect of Shi’a Islam into a world religion” (Lawson 2005, 37; citing Effendi 1979, xii). As a faith with a global outlook, Bahá’í theology essentially “foreshadowed globalization, with its emphasis on the interdependence of all peoples and the need for international institutions of peace, justice and good governance” (Warburg 2005a, 8; citing Beckford 2000, 175); where the narrative of ‘progressive revelation’ “serves as a meta-narrative [for Bahá’ís] through which to view humanity’s history and evolving religious and global identity” (Echevarria 2005, 225). Of course, theorists of globalization, such as Roland Robertson, utilize similar criteria in more general terms for globalized processes, some of which resonate strongly with Bahá’í conceptions of ‘world unification.’ As Warburg writes, Robertson’s theory of globalization found “the identity of individuals is no longer exclusively tied to the national society. They increasingly tend to draw cultural inspiration from other societies or identify themselves with humankind as a universal concept” (Warburg 2005b, 157). Furthermore, the concept of world unification is perceived by Bahá’ís as a precursor for present-day, taken-for-granted understandings about globalization, as “the Bahá’ís see themselves as a vanguard of globalization. In their view, however, globalization is not primarily an economy-driven process but one driven by divine purpose” (Warburg 1999, 50). As such, “The current cosmopolitan and global outlook of Bahá’ís promotes the inevitability

that globalization and transglobal movements are influencing change in national exclusivity, challenging patriotism and promoting transnationalism” (Williams 2009, 16). Similarly utilizing Robertson’s globalization theory as a launching pad to study the faith, McMullen finds that the Bahá’í case study offers a different vision of religious globalization in lieu of managing “the tensions between the global and local.” The religion does not resort to a ‘fundamentalist (re)appropriation’ of “core elements of a religious tradition as the ‘fundamentals’ or essence of their worldview,’ identity, and way of life”; actions that would foster a ‘tribal identity’ “because it delineates a pure ‘us’ versus an impure ‘them’” (McMullen 2000, 175). Bahá’ís achieve this, according to McMullen, through a ‘universal religious response’ by “establishing explicit links between the global and the local and creating a distinct social identity” (176), primarily through identifying with and engaging in devotional activities, firesides, Holy Day celebrations, administrative activities and duties wherever they reside. These core activities help define a sense of Bahá’í identity on a global scale.

Other scholars have focused on the *lack* of a distinctive Bahá’í culture as a way to address questions of identity, as Wendi and Moojan Momen write that the Faith is bereft of any significant “concentrat[ion] in any part of the world and so it has not built up a culture that can be described” (Momen and Momen 2005, vii). This critique is found in many of MacEoin’s assessments of the Faith, preferring that it be categorized as a New Religious Movement, rather than a ‘world religion’—a move that reaffirms Bahá’í marginality and situates it as a religion more associated with a particular group, rather than one that allows for conversion and expression in multiple geographic and socio-cultural contexts. Here, MacEoin writes that



The Bahá'í religion cannot compete in terms of history, culture, numbers, multiplicity of adherents in at least one nation state, literature, sacred places, and so on with any of the faiths routinely described as world religions. The present writer prefers to call Bahá'ism a New Religious Movement, placing the faith closer to the Unification Church or Scientology. It is clearly not in any real sense a world religion, whatever it may become in future. But it is not a church nor a denomination nor a sect. In respect of more modern studies, it does not qualify as a cult. That leaves us with few choices, of which the best is that of NRM, with respect to its age, its limited membership, its mixture of Eastern and Western themes, and its lack of a serious presence in any one country or culture. (MacEoin 2013, 170)

MacEoin's suggestions indicate an absence of theological and cultural synergy among the Bahá'ís, resulting in a sense of disunity that is due, in part, to what he perceives as a synthetic blend of Eastern and Western aspects. But if any religion is to be considered as a 'world faith,' it must meet a set of criteria for the possibility of new expressions of the Faith to take hold in disparate parts of the world: a universal and non-culturally-specific theological message of salvation. For Seena Fazel, 'one crucial qualification' is needed: a religion "must develop a universal message, a doctrine of salvation that is sufficiently transparent to be potentially available to adherents in a variety of cultural contexts" (Fazel 1994, 3; citing Timothy Fitzgerald 1990, 104). And yet this theological dynamic is found precisely in the Faith's Writings and has been documented in cross-cultural studies of Bahá'í communities. For instance, Anthony Lee describes the European Bahá'ís as having explicitly articulated "Bahá'í beliefs in terms of Christian themes, using Christian terminology, and with reference to Christian scriptures" (Lee 2011, 7). Lee contends that not only did a distinct 'Western Bahá'í' outlook emerge in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries with its own social agenda—seeing themselves as "a liberal, though non-political, voluntary association" with a strong "position on racial equality"

(8)—but questions about what it means to be a Bahá'í transformed dramatically throughout the Faith's history and global spread to Africa:

Beginning as what many regarded as a purely personal (and often secretly held) theological conviction, Bahá'í identity moved to an open identification with a distinct confessional community within the context of Islam; later to a balance of negotiated multiple identities; then further, to a rejection (or at least a partial repudiation) of previous religious identifications. Later, being a Bahá'í implied an acceptance of a new religious organization and structure with all of its myriad institutions, laws, principles, leaders, officials, and policies. Similarly, in the West, the meaning of what it meant to be a Bahá'í evolved from its nineteenth century beginnings. I suggest that the meaning of Bahá'í identity continued to evolve in the locus of Uganda in the early 1950s. That is, a new definition of Bahá'í membership and identity was created. (152-153)

This dual positioning of the Faith as both culturally-specific *and* universalist presents a number of questions about discourses in Bahá'í scholarship. It is important to note that a considerable body of work on the Faith has focused exclusively on the experiences of Iranian Bahá'ís, problematically generating a discourse of Iranian otherness that, admittedly, risks being perpetuated in this very dissertation. Nevertheless, much of this scholarship has been interested in how cultural values and theological principles of the Faith are negotiated and expressed among Iranian Bahá'ís in the diaspora, providing a loose set of criteria for how Bahá'ís view themselves and their Faith in new lands and different socio-cultural contexts.

However, there are some activities and dynamics found in the Iranian Bahá'í context that distinguish them from their non-Bahá'í counterparts, presenting an alternative reading of existing theories of diasporic scholarship. Persian-centric visions of Bahá'ism are problematized at the level of language, as 'official' Bahá'í texts— including the works of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá—are not released as 'authoritative texts' in their original Arabic or Farsi, but in English (very often as translations by Shoghi Effendi). As Margit Warburg indicates,

All manuscripts are carefully edited and translated into English before they are endorsed by the Universal House of Justice as authoritative texts and published by acknowledged Bahá'í publishers. These authorised English translations of the sacred texts are the basis for further translations into other languages, even including sometimes texts translated into Arabic itself. The consequence of this policy is that the authorised English editions of the sacred Bahá'í texts, and not the original texts written in Arabic or Persian, provide the relevant doctrinal basis for the beliefs and practices of Western Bahá'ís today. (Warburg 2006, 26-27)

Subsequently, Bahá'ís operate from a uniquely Western linguistic and globalized framework where English is the primary administrative language through which all other translations follow, where “unlike the Muslim view of Arabic [...] Bahá'ís do not consider Arabic and Persian holy languages” (13). There has also been prolonged interest in the Bahá'í community since ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's tenure surrounding the development of the Esperanto language (Esslemont 1980, 163-166) in accordance with the Faith's intent to establish an auxiliary ‘universal language’ (see Bahá'u'lláh 1992, 31).

#### *E. Iranian Persecution as a Factor in Bahá'í Identity Formation*

A large number of studies have focused on the difficulties that Iranian migrants faced in their new host countries, including instances of discrimination, cultural shock, racism, employment barriers, loneliness, and memories of trauma (see Morlock 2015; Dossa 2003 and 2004; van den Hoonaard and van den Hoonaard 2010; Talebi and Desjardins 2012; MacAuliffe 2007a, 2007b, and 2008). However, in an unpublished article by Stephen Licata, the author interviewed Bahá'í families of Iranian decent in the Los Angeles area and compiled data about how parents and children viewed their Iranian ethnicity and reflected upon their status in the United States. Licata found that due to the group's religious background, acculturation was ‘successful’ and directly attributed to the Faith's theological values:

With regard to cultural values in the home and expectations for marriage, the children and parents are in remarkably close agreement. The parents have made significant efforts to inculcate an appreciation for Persian heritage into their children and can claim some success in this matter. There is no evidence of the extreme cultural reactions sometimes seen in refugee families: total abandonment of the home culture by children ashamed of their parents' heritage (Cummins 1986) or the formation of xenophobic enclaves with a very limited circles of associates. A combination of factors such as a generally high level of parental education, a relatively adequate economic condition, and regular access to non-Persians through the American Bahá'í community all seem to have mitigated the social and psychological pressured normally experienced by refugees. (Licata 1997)

From the perspective of Iranian Bahá'í history and persecution, Peter Smith (2008) contends that a strong sense of religious identity was formed among the Iranian Bahá'ís since Effendi's death through “a tremendous sense of sacrificial dedication [...] [which] increased by the intermittent outbreaks of persecution and martyrdom” (Smith 2008, 84). Here, Smith indicates that multiple generations of Bahá'ís in Iran developed a “distinctive sense of communal identity, supported by the development of a variety of Bahá'í social, educational, and administrative bodies and by the tendency of Iranian Bahá'ís to marry their co-religionists and bring up their children as Bahá'ís” (84). According to Talebi and Dejardins, Bahá'ís are ‘doubly-marginalized,’ living on the margins of Iranian society *and* in the host countries where they reside (Talebi and Dejardins 2012, 296); informing how they (and the wider Bahá'í community) may perceive themselves as a persecuted Faith, providing the means to galvanize support and generate global community solidarity. A sense of pride and dedication to the Faith can also be detected in its' aesthetic practices, including how many Arab and Iranian Bahá'ís continue to preserve practices that were “particularly valued by the Central Figures of the Faith and remain a strong part of Bábi-Iranian Bahá'í tradition [...] and everyday life,” such as chanting, poetry, and calligraphy, “with children being taught to chant by their parents and many ‘performances’ being rendered of great beauty

and strength” (Smith 2008, 195). In this way, multi-generational Bahá’ís from Iran can pull from several aesthetic, cultural, and devotional resources that, at once, signify the ‘homeland,’ while demonstrating to a broader expressive culture that many Bahá’ís (Iranian and non-Iranian alike) would be familiar with at their local devotional gatherings. Citing Gilad’s work on the integration of Iranian Bahá’ís in Newfoundland (1990), Deborah K. and Will C van den Hoonard describe how Bahá’ís, wherever they reside, attempt to recreate a religious communal life despite broader difficulties they face as refugees in Canada:

[Iranian Bahá’ís] have an immediate claim to belonging to the Bahá’í community on arrival in St. John’s. Their resolve to survive is appreciated locally, and their co-religionists are relatively well informed about the reasons for Bahá’í flight from Iran. The Bahá’í. . . , knowing nothing about their rights and privileges as new immigrants, knew the least about what would greet them in Canada. But their life skills as community-oriented people help them to find their niche soon after arrival. (van den Hoonard and van den Hoonard 2010, 146; citing Gilad 1990, 121)

Moreover, the van den Hoonard’s found that because Iranian Bahá’ís were “deprived of any opportunity in Iran to attract others to the Bahá’í community, the Persian newcomers avail themselves of the freedom of religion to acquaint others with the Bahá’í teachings, however indirectly and discreetly” (150). This point is also echoed in Williams’ work, where her informants felt “they felt freer to express their individual Bahá’í identity in Australia” (Williams 2009, 12).

In relation to the ways in which Iranian Bahá’ís ‘creatively integrate’ (van den Hoonard and van den Hoonard 2010) into their new host-lands, much of the Bahá’í literature has explored how the Faith’s conceptions about the ‘oneness of humanity’ or ‘unity in diversity’ has informed such behaviours and the ability to relocate, adapt, and integrate into other locales, leading to a common scholarly theme of Bahá’í *resilience* (see van den Hoonard and van den

Hoonard 2010; Karlberg 2010; Williams 2009; and Bluett 2006). For instance, Siew Sim Chin's study of Bahá'í converts in the USA—though not specifically focused on Iranians—highlighted how the principle of the 'oneness of humanity' allowed female Bahá'ís to live and adapt in different parts of the world as an "incoming Other." In particular, Chin spoke with American Bahá'ís of colour who lived abroad, demonstrating in their responses that "their social identity as Bahá'ís provided the space for them to find commonalities across cultures and places that enabled them to counter [...] otherness" (Chin 2006, 36). As one respondent concurred,

I met many Bahá'ís who came from backgrounds very different from mine and we had this connection and an understanding of a common goal. Whether I was in Massachusetts or Hong Kong, we were all moving together towards a common goal. (34)

Focusing on themes of relocation and adaptation, Chin's research highlighted how these Bahá'í women attempted to forge relationships in their new homelands by "setting aside [their] traditions and try to understand other traditions;" framing a vision of one common humanity as the "lowest common denominator" as a means of relating to people from other cultures (38-39). Chin describes such notions of 'global citizenship' as articulating a "discourse of cultivating a collective consciousness, a way of being in the world that recognizes our inevitable interrelatedness and connectedness" (35). Other scholars have noted how Iranian Bahá'ís similarly adapt to an 'incoming otherness,' as Ruth Williams writes that Iranian Bahá'í refugees in Australia "used the Bahá'í Faith, with its focus on the 'oneness of humankind' and 'unity in diversity,' the global administrative structure and the international community, to facilitate their notion of a universal home, sense of belonging and the construction of a cosmopolitan and hybrid identity in a new land" (Williams 2009, 4). As such, Iranian Bahá'ís are positioned as capable (or, 'more successful') at becoming integrated into their new host country due to their

religious beliefs. At the same time, the ‘outsider’ status of the Bahá’ís of Iran is cited as yet another dimension for their apparent adaptability, unable to have ever truly been ‘totally inside’ Iran and experiencing a greater sense of safety and belonging after leaving the country (6). Here, the van den Hoonaard’s (2010) similarly document how one method of integration into Atlantic Canada occurred through participating in the administrative affairs of the Bahá’ís, allowing them to resume their spiritual lives, establish roots in the community, and inform native-born New Brunswick Bahá’ís about the persecution of Iranians ‘far more intensely’ (145).

From the outset, however, some researchers continue to position the Faith as inherently ethnic (‘a Persian group’) (Possamai and Possamai-Inesedy 2007, 304), hence framing its transnational movement as that of a religion emerging out of a predominately Iranian context to other sectors of the world. This is exemplified in Possamai and Possamai-Inesedy’s work (2007), which re-inserts Bahá’ism into a Shi’a/Persianate context, simultaneously noting how its universal teachings can explain why Bahá’ís are capable of “celebrat[ing] and maintain[ing] a way of life and a religious culture from elsewhere” *and* seem to integrate well in Australian society (303).<sup>48</sup> Possamai and Possamai-Inesedy found that Bahá’ís form part of a growing trend in Australia where

Religious groups that are part of new immigrant and ethnic communities are landing in a pluralistic social context and very often take on new forms in order to develop the

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<sup>48</sup> The author’s framing of Bahá’ism in this way is interesting, given how they compare its’ universalist message and ethnic origins with Caodism from Vietnam, but also note that their respondents varied greatly in their ethnic homogeneity (i.e. 100% of their Caodist interviewees in Australia were of Vietnamese ethnic origin, while only half of their 30 interviews with Bahá’ís were of Iranian origin) (see 304 and 307). Part of the author’s reasoning to compare the two is due to factors of integration in Australia and similarities they experienced prior to their resettlement, including religious persecution ‘back home’ (308).

capacity to survive in the new land. They are thus reaching beyond traditional ethnic and religious boundaries to include other people, such as seekers. (302-303)

While much of their argument is forestalled by Australian Bahá'í demographics—where half of all Bahá'ís in the country are of Iranian ethnic background (304)—Bahá'ís are disproportionately coded as Iranian, presenting issues for the study of the Faith as yet another diasporic religion removed from its native homeland and perpetuating the “essentialisation and ethnicisation of Islam at the expense of ethnic and sociocultural difference” (Hopkins and MacAuliffe 2010, 39). As such, viewing the Faith in this way presumes that the phenomenon of Bahá'í expansion and religious conversion in countries like Australia reflect broader trends and processes of ‘de-secularization’ in society, which the authors do in explaining why non-Iranian Australians would become engaged in such an ethnically coded religion. At the same time, cultural (as well as scholarly) norms in the West may well prioritize the importance of national or geographical heritage rather than religious community, as Morlock found in her research, (Morlock 2015, 110) where exaggerations of such distinctions tended to occur when studying Bahá'ism and any ethnic or cultural group belonging to the Faith.

#### *F. Transnational Bahá'ism: A Bridge Between East and West*

As indicated earlier in this chapter, ethnographic studies of the Iranian diaspora across Europe, North America, and Australia have found that Bahá'ís often strongly identify with their Faith more than any ethnic or nationalistic connections. This sense of ‘global citizenship’ occurs through enacting some of the core principles of the Faith, as Bahá'ís form “hybrid and transnational identities” through a process of “reject[ing]/retain[ing] customs from their culture



of origin while simultaneously rejecting/adopting aspects from their new culture of settlement” (Williams 2009, 5). Bahá’ís also appear to adopt a divergent sense of place-based identity formation and attachment following instances of migrancy, as some of William’s Iranian interview participants “stated that they were no ‘strangers to strangeness’ as they expressed feeling alienation in their country of origin before arriving in Australia,” citing their faith and persecuted status in Iran as the basis for their ability to adapt to a new host country (4). This sense of continual international movement, resettlement, and connectivity is regularly mentioned as a chief distinguishing factor. As Possamai and Possamai-Inesedy write, Bahá’ís “do not necessarily migrate from one country to another one and then fully settle down,” but maintain international contacts and re-settle in multiple countries around the world (Possamai and Possamai-Inesedy 2007, 305; citing Warburg 1999, 50-51). Farida Fozdar similarly found that

Bahá’ís maintain translocal connections, particularly the Iranian diaspora whose connections tend to be less oriented to the homeland, from which they are refugees, and directed more towards wider connections globally. Bahá’ís see themselves as ‘self-confessed cosmopolitan global citizens.’ (Fozdar 2015, 276)

On an international level, Bahá’í administrative channels provide considerable resources and support for Iranian Bahá’ís to relocate to new communities around the world (Possamai and Possamai-Inesedy 2007, 308). In some cases, Iranian Bahá’ís may need to lean on the support of their host communities to help them adjust to the cultural shock and (in many cases) discrimination. This was documented in Morlock’s study, which found some American refugee case workers perceived the cultural traditions of Iranians as “maladjusted and problematic,” adding dimensions of tension and anxiety for Bahá’ís migrating to the USA (Morlock 2015, 100-101). There are also broader economic behaviours among Iranian Bahá’ís that seem to

conflict with activities in the Iranian diaspora. In the Iranian immigrant ‘ethnic economy’ of Los Angeles, for instance (where clusters of Persian migrants developed complex economies of labour). Here, Bahá’ís were found to be less likely to hire an Iranian co-religionist, perhaps owing to notions of the “faith’s well known universalism which requires its devotees to seek social association with non-Bahá’ís” (Light et al 1993, 592-593).

Many of these points are explored in the work of Cameron MacAuliffe, who focuses on diasporic and transnational theories of religious groups. For MacAuliffe, Bahá’ís “remain peripheral in discussions of Iranian-ness” (MacAuliffe 2007a, 321); a phenomenon that can be extended to Bahá’í scholarship, in general, as it remains a marginalized field of research on “the periphery of academic discourse” (Velasco 2001, 188) across Middle Eastern, Islamic, and Persian Studies. This is because Iranians are often viewed as ‘homogenously Muslim’ through decades of misunderstanding and stereotypes, as well as due to their status within the Islamic Republic:

Bahá’ís of an Iranian background are double minorities not only because of their demographic status as a minority in both the homeland and in the diaspora, but also because of their relationship with the central locus of power of the Shi’i Muslim majority (see also Al-Rasheed 1994). As a double minority they remain marginalized in the diaspora as they were in Iran, giving Bahá’ís a diminished position with regards to influencing the discourse of what is the legitimate ‘Iranian community’, particularly when it comes to questions of community representation. (MacAuliffe 2007a, 321-322)

However, much of the discourse surrounding Iranian Bahá’ís and diasporic communities, in general, are inundated with generalities and the intellectual limitations of a theoretical concept too attached to notions of the nation state. MacAuliffe writes that discourses of “diasporic belonging [...] [are] dominated by the nation and national identities. Thus, diasporas are often signified by essential national characteristics at the expense of other possible modes of

communal affiliation [...] [that] tends to preclude internal difference” (307-308). This is particularly the case with the study of second-generation Iranian migrants, who “find themselves living in a society where they are increasingly expected to explain their identity relative to dominant national and emergent religious communal affiliations” (Hopkins and MacAuliffe 2010, 39). MacAuliffe argues that scholars who have posited an ‘Iranian diaspora’ risk imposing an oversimplified master narrative, “assuming the existence of internally coherent religious communities whose power to inform identity uniformly replaces the nation in the lives of individuals” (MacAuliffe 2007a, 313). But the author also found that Iranian Bahá’ís interact and identify with the ‘homeland’ quite differently from ‘nation-based’ modes of understanding and the sentiments shared among second-generation Iranian Muslims. Here, Muslim interview participants were found to be “more likely to initiate and maintain lines of electronic communication with people in Iran,” whereas the Bahá’ís “showed far less interest in maintaining email links [...] expressed a reluctance to return to Iran in the near future because of the risks involved, both real and imagined” (316); focusing “less upon Iran and more upon global transnational connections, as self-confessed cosmopolitan global citizens” (MacAuliffe 2008, 66). Furthermore,

Despite not seeking to engender transnational relations with the homeland, the Bahá’ís were generally very active in transnational social fields being very much involved in international movements and interactions with other Bahá’ís, whether ‘Iranian’ or not. For the Muslim cohort, transnational relations appeared tied less to religion than to connections with family and friends from an Iranian background living in other parts of the ‘Iranian diaspora.’ (MacAuliffe 2007a, 317)

Interestingly, MacAuliffe also found that “despite Iran’s centrality to the demographic and figurative history of the Bahá’í Faith, the children of Iranian migrants felt an ambivalent

attachment to Iran as the homeland” (319). While this view was informed by the fact that many of the respondent’s relatives already left Iran for other countries, Morlock’s research challenges MacAuliffe’s (and other Bahá’í scholarly readings of the Faith) as being inherently and essentially transnational. This is because “the vast majority of [Morlock’s] respondents communicated a deep love for and connection to Iran as their homeland and the birthplace of their religion. This was not only true for the older refugees, but also those who came to the United States at a very young age” (Morlock 2015, 147-148).

However, other discursive strategies are employed by Iranian Bahá’ís, including the practice of continuing to refer to the country as ‘Persia’—something that is certainly not unique to Iranian *Bahá’ís*, as several Iranians employ this subtle framing practice as subverting the administrative power of the Islamic Republic over their lives. As Hopkins and MacAuliffe found (2010), “the children of Iranian migrants from a Muslim heritage, cultural traditions are often most easily understood as Persian rather than Muslim, even when there is some syncretic overlap” (52). By identifying as Persian, these individuals distance “themselves from negative stereotypes and signalled national pride in a pre-Islamic dynasty associated with a Zoroastrian past” (Dennis and Warin 2007, 2). Elsewhere, however, MacAuliffe believed that this practice of framing occurred with greater frequency among Bahá’ís:

This general tendency of Bahá’ís to use Persia and Persian as the signifier for the nation of origin of the Bahá’í Faith conveniently allows Bahá’ís to distance themselves from the contemporary Iranian theocracy as well as producing a more ambivalent relationship with the Iranian nation as a modern twentieth-century nationalist construct. Reference to Persia in the Bahá’í Faith is rooted in the actual sacred writings of the Bahá’í, most of which were produced prior to the official ascension of the modern Iranian state in the 1930s. At the same time, the use of the term Persian instead of Iranian by the children of Iranian migrants also plays a wider role as a coping strategy in the face of the problematic

status of Iran in the contemporary politics of the nations of the West. While individuals in the Muslim cohorts also referred to the Iranian nation as Persia, they did so in an inconsistent manner compared to the Bahá'ís. (MacAuliffe 2007a, 321)

Following the Revolution, Iran (which already transformed from its historical designation as Persia in the early twentieth century) transformed once again into an Islamic Republic; a context where Bahá'ís were not recognized as a 'real religion,' but whose status became "anti-Islamic and therefore anti-Iranian" (Morlock 2015, 126). This problematic and complex relationship between nation and religion in the country extends to discourses of migration. For Iranian Bahá'ís in the USA, Morlock found that several informants utilized a well-rehearsed narrative when describing their ethnic and religious background to native-born Americans, fearful of being othered, discriminated against, or becoming labelled as a Muslim in a post-9/11 context: "respondents explained that they would call themselves Persian, because many people did not associate Persia with Iran. If they were asked to clarify and had to identify as Iranian, they would then immediately follow up with a disclosure of their Bahá'í identity [...] [using] the strategy of leading with their Bahá'í identity as a way to minimize prejudicial treatment towards them" (108-109). In this instance, Iranian Bahá'ís relied upon the ignorance of their American colleagues about the history of their Faith when contextualizing their ethnic background to address the culture of Islamophobia in the country. The interchangeability among Iranian Bahá'ís who label themselves both Persian and Iranian stems, according to Morlock, from their initial exclusion from social life in Iran (126).

These shared experiences among Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í are further connected though many of the cultural and domestic practices that many Iranian migrant families would share. For

instance, through the lens of domestic life, which helps create new spaces that demarcate from Homelife ‘back home,’ articulated through “the relatively more impermanent sounds, smells, tastes and touches of the domestic environment, that have embedded in them memories of the habitual and corporeal activity of Persian domesticity,” as there are the Muslim and Bahá’í celebrations of Naw Ruz, the *haft seen* tradition, reciprocal family visits (*mehmuni*), all of which are interpreted as ‘culturally Persian,’ rather than ‘religious’ (Dennis and Warin 2007, 3-5). Such similarities between Muslim and Bahá’í Iranians problematize notions of the homogenized, predominately Shi’a Australian-Iranian population, as perpetuated in Western news media. In Dennis and Warin’s investigation of migratory experiences of Iranian Bahá’í women in Western Australia (2007), nearly all of the participants “self-identified as Persian,” where one participant stated: “I am proud to be Persian. I was born in Persia. . . . Persia is an historic name, it is a very cultural thing to call yourself Persian, it detaches us from ‘that name’” (2). This observation was similarly echoed in Maryam Daha’s work with Iranian Bahá’ís, where 95% of her respondents (which included Iranian Jews, Muslims, and Bahá’ís) defined themselves in this manner (Daha 2011, 554-555). What these studies have found is that through engaging in shared expressive practices, domestic activities, language use, and strategies for self-identification, a sense of Persianness is achieved across faiths and generations of Iranians living abroad. In this sense, what may inform discourses about an ‘Iranian Bahá’í diaspora’ actually speaks to the possibility of countless shared experiences of trauma, migrancy, and self-fashioning among Iranians, in general—many of whom position themselves against to the current state of politics and leadership in the Islamic Republic. Acknowledging these similarities does not constitute a sense of sameness or a uniformity of experience, but recognizes that so-called ‘creative strategies’ for

integration find commonality among many Iranians who left their country to seek new and better lives abroad.

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This chapter sought to explore how Persianness is navigated, discussed, and studied in the Bahá'í Faith, examining how an over-emphasis for the existence of an 'Iranian Bahá'í diaspora' may run counter to Bahá'í theology. It recognized that this type of academic focus may risk perpetuating ethnic or racial difference between the host nation and the community itself; where the faith's 'iconography'—the “material and symbolic condensation of the intricate web of linkages between the members of a community and their territory;” symbols that “singularises a people as different from its neighbours, who are attached to other symbols,” including “religious symbols” (such as the Greatest Name), “political pasts (memory) and social organization” (Bruneau 2010, 38)—can become too ethnically and culturally-associated with Iranian ethnicity, creating an overly-codified discourse of Bahá'ism as 'Persian' or 'Iranian.' Visions of a 'diasporic Iranian Bahá'í' community can presume a number of relations and dynamics *within* Iran prior to any post-1979 migration or dispersion, where the basis of identity in Iran shifted “from nation to Islam” following Khomeini's rise to power (Cole 2005, 137). This includes the perpetuation of all Iranians as homogenously Shi'a Muslim, lacking any consideration of periods involving widespread secularization, or of the ethnically-, religiously-, and linguistically-diverse populations that form the wide demographics of the country, both historically and contemporaneously. This is because “the national origin category 'Iranian'

conceals internal ethnicity of possible relevance to the functioning of the Iranian ethnic economy” (Light et al. 1993, 585).

As the following two chapters will move towards more musically-specific Bahá’í case studies and analyses, Carol Silverman’s examination of Eastern European Romani musicians offers a useful preface for the study of Persianness (including narratives of Iranian persecution), as well as ‘unity in diversity’ in Bahá’í music. For Silverman (2011), the Roma are “often assumed to have no culture (especially music) of their own and to be inveterate borrowers” (241-42), echoing analyses of Bahá’ism as a mere ‘syncretic’ religion without a distinct culture. This state of Bahá’í theological and cultural hybridity is similarly found in studies of the Roma, where valorizing and celebrating hybridity may “blur in the name of difference, significant distinctions between differences...as if the specific character of what is being mixed (from class to gender to ethnicity and race) did not matter” (43). Such issues will be addressed in the following chapter, where Bahá’í musical expressions of global diversity (often through the use and borrowing of various ‘wordly’ sounds) navigate the celebration of difference within the boundaries and laws of its monotheistic teachings. As a community on the margins of conventional understandings about ethnicity, race, and diaspora, musical discourses surrounding the Bahá’í Faith and its legacy of Persian cultural influence raise important questions about how to explore Bahá’í musicianship in a global context. Would Persian classical performances by Iranian Bahá’ís necessarily evoke Iran as *the* ‘place’—articulating difference and social boundaries by (sonically) “provid[ing] the means of by which the hierarchies of place are negotiated and transformed?” (Stokes 1994, 3) What of Bahá’í music that utilizes the sounds of multiple music traditions and cultures (including Iranian ones) to emphasize its ‘worldliness,’



thus “celebrat[ing] ethnic plurality in problematic ways”? (16) I do not pose these questions to oversimplify Martin Stokes’ words, or to reframe them in a deterministic and inflexible manner, but to recognize that the premise of music as a place- and boundary-making phenomena often relies upon a priori assumptions about nationalistic, ethnic, gendered, and diasporic visions of being-in-the-world; where *difference* is a sign of otherness to be contested and vied for in the projects of nation-building and identity politics, for instance.

### **Chapter 3** ***Signifying and Staging Bahá'í 'Unity in Diversity'***

This chapter will examine how cultural and ethnic diversity is represented in select Bahá'í musical examples, addressing compositional strategies used to articulate these topics, including sonic significations of Persia/Iran and other culturally-, ethnically-, or geographically-specific topics. Doing so will help provide additional context for the prevalence of Iranian persecutory topics among Bahá'í popular musicians (Chapter 4), situating the practice as a reflection of key teachings, values, and ideals in the Faith that emerge out of distinctive attitudes towards culture and ethnicity. Forming a core celebratory narrative in the Faith, 'unity in diversity' reflects the principles of anti-racist collaboration, the realities of Bahá'í cross-continental membership, the Oneness of Mankind, and the international implementation of Bahá'í institutional processes.

As stated in Chapter One, such values are further reiterated through the semiotic codes of dress, language, and the arts that feature prominently in photographs through official Bahá'í media outlets. However, the ways in which Bahá'í musicians confront the diversity topic can provide a window into analyzing how musical tradition, style, and musical/cultural borrowing are conceived from a Bahá'í perspective. There is often a difficult balance struck between recognizing (or, musically signifying) the diversity of Bahá'í membership, while using predominately Western sounds and styles, presenting a complex sacred music discourse that attempts to evade accusations of exoticism, tokenism, and misappropriation, all of which require an in-depth understanding of its premises and motivations. Here, I argue that the Bahá'í evocation of musical difference and diversity—often through reimagined traditions and sounds—

are intentional strategies that, on the one hand, reiterate the global message of the Faith's teachings and the promise of a unified world order, as well as address the Faith's Iranian heritage and the country's ongoing political traumas. To further elaborate on these claims, I will examine how Bahá'í musicians approach methods of devotional composition (especially regarding instances of cultural appropriation, adaptation, and 'world music'), as well as analyze select musical case studies of well-known Bahá'í artists and friends of the Faith.

### *A. Navigating Difference, Celebrating Culture*

As the Faith's membership grows, the Bahá'í community becomes progressively diverse, leading to hybridized forms of devotional practice that (in time) will result in more variegated forms of congregational experience. The global expansion of the Faith amplifies the realities of cultural difference, particularly in developing countries, where, as Fazel writes:

Large numbers of tribal minorities and rural illiterates became Bahá'ís. [Peter] Smith argues that the expansion of the Bahá'í Faith into the Third World is one of the most important aspects of the religion's development, 'vastly changing the social composition of its adherents and realistically establishing its claims to be a world religion.' (Fazel 1994, 2)

This process of greater diversification is, on the one hand, rejoiced in the letters written by the UHJ, encouraging the integration of diverse religious and cultural practices. However, when distinct cultural expressions manifest into new (and recurring) devotional activities—particularly ones that are relatively new, or that present questions about their permissibility—certain protocols encourage Bahá'ís to engage in personal reflection, independent study, consultation, and, to some degree, exercising self-restraint.<sup>49</sup> The problem is that much of this process is left to

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<sup>49</sup> For Ludwig Tuman, the Faith is characterized by a particular degree of caution, in accordance with the "world-wide Administrative Order, which proceeds with either restraint or initiative as the occasion may demand" (Tuman 1993, 288 note 12).

personal interpretation, posing challenges for individual believers, who effectively operate as “his or her own priest”: performing active roles in their community, studying the scriptures, and “work[ing] out their own salvation” instead of passively relying on a figurehead to provide sermons, advice, and sacraments (Momen 2011). Ethnomusicologist and jazz musician Benjamin Koen similarly notes a relationship between a musician’s spiritual intention, future musical developments, and the growth of a new Bahá’í culture, stating in an interview:

The underlying importance is not so much in what kind of music is going to be made. ... There’s going to be just an explosion of diverse expressions musically. But the prerequisite to it should be, which is really where our focus is, on transforming our own selves as individuals. ... So it’s not so much that I’m sitting down and saying, “How can I make my music or my teaching reflect this or that principle?” Rather, if I transform myself, becoming more in tune with Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings, hopefully, this will be reflected in my music. (Atkins 2006, 411)

In this way, the emergence of a ‘new’ Bahá’í arts and culture revolves around how an individual’s perspective is guided by the Writings, if they engage in consultation, and other activities supported by Bahá’í institutions. The transformation of self as analogous to broader, more community-based changes in culture is not novel to the Faith, but it does present a nuanced understanding that invites a range of interpretations about how to implement this new culture, including when consulting the Guidance of Effendi and the UHJ. For instance, E. Taylor Atkins elaborates how the Bahá’í cultural vision has been interpreted differently by each of the Faith’s leaders, administrations, and musicians alike:

Shoghi Effendi spoke of a ‘culture of unity,’ a Bahá’í model of equality, thoughtful and respectful deliberation, and unity of purpose for the broader society to emulate. Others speak of a ‘culture of growth,’ by which they mean a continual effort by Bahá’ís to study the scriptures, deepen their faith, teach it to others, and foster ‘a natural expectation of growth, just like children.’ For artists, ‘new culture’ has additional connotations: the creation of artistic pursuits that reflect Bahá’í values while honoring the unity in diversity

principle, and that provide believers with alternatives to the materialistic and hedonistic cultural products available in the main stream media. (410)

But how can such lofty goals and approaches manifest into tangible practice? What resources can Bahá'ís use to help create this new devotional culture?

A compilation titled “Traditional Aspects of African Culture” (UHJ 1998b), published by the Research Department of the UHJ, details how cultural difference can be negotiated and defined within a Bahá'í theological paradigm. The collection emerged as a means of guiding counsellors, assemblies, and individual Bahá'ís on the continent by “aid[ing] the dear African believers to obtain a clearer understanding of the implications of the Bahá'í teachings and of the actions which should be taken when Bahá'ís are confronted with the traditional practices.” It addressed multiple facets of African religious tradition, such as the risks of continued practices of *ju-ju* among Bahá'í converts<sup>50</sup> and other ‘dark arts’ around the world, which can be overcome through deepening oneself “in the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh so that they will come to recognize the lack of any true reality to such negative forces.”<sup>51</sup> Opening the section on “Transforming Prevailing Social Practices: Fostering Cultural Diversity” is the following statement, couched in terms of fostering ‘unity in diversity’ among indigenous populations:

Bahá'ís are encouraged to preserve their inherited cultural identities and practices, so long as the activities involved do not contravene the principles of the Faith. Two extremes are to be avoided: needless disassociation from harmless cultural observances and continued practice of abrogated observances of previous dispensations which will undermine the independence of the Bahá'í Faith. A distinctively Bahá'í culture will welcome an infinite diversity in regard to secondary characteristics, but also firmly uphold unity in relation to fundamental principles. (UHJ 1998b)

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<sup>50</sup> From a letter dated 18 July 1972 to a National Spiritual Assembly in Africa.

<sup>51</sup> In a letter dated August 30, 1984, written on behalf of the UHJ to an individual believer.

The general advisory that any cultural practice is permissible ‘so long as it does not contravene principles of the Faith’ is repeated in several letters from the UHJ written to various National Spiritual Assemblies and, in some cases, to individual Bahá’ís. Members of the Faith accept that some communities will integrate various activities, traditions from other faiths, as well as local or regional customs, but with the caveat that these practices will inevitably “be merged with related ones from their societies.” Referring to the compilation under the heading “Guiding Social Transformation,” the UHJ writes: “Peoples in all societies have customs that require modification, and that, over time, many existing cultural practices will most likely disappear. The teachings of Bahá’u’lláh constitute a divine standard for determining what aspects of a particular culture are to be retained” (1998b). In other words, a Bahá’í-culture-in-the-making necessitates the use of existing practices and customs, but with the understanding that what will eventually become ‘Bahá’í culture’ is beyond the scope of present-day practice (perhaps, even our imagination). The role of Spiritual Assemblies, then, is to provide counsel and guidance about appropriate uses of traditional practices in a given region or locality, “exercis[ing] patience and wisdom in weaning the Bahá’ís away from certain long-held customs and traditions, and to educate the believers and encourage them to uphold Bahá’í laws, thereby preserving the integrity of the teachings and the independence of the Faith.”

In some sections of the 1998 compilation, ‘cultural practices’ are noted as being formerly religious celebrations that, over time, have taken on different secularized meanings. A letter dated 26 May 1982 provides the example of Bahá’í Naw Ruz, demonstrating how a religious celebration has evolved into a secularized practice among Iranians:

Naw-Rúz itself was originally a Zoroastrian religious festival, but gradually its Zoroastrian connotation has almost been forgotten. Iranians, even after their conversion to Islam, have been observing it as a national festival. Now Naw-Rúz has become a Bahá'í Holy Day and is being observed throughout the world, but, in addition to the Bahá'í observance, many Iranian Bahá'í continue to carry out their past cultural traditions in connection with this Feast. Similarly, there are a number of national customs in every part of the world which have cultural rather than religious connotations. (1998b)

Another letter dated 25 July 1988 cites the following writing from Shoghi Effendi that

interrogates the use of 'traditional practices of various peoples:'

Let there be no misgivings as to the animating purpose of the world-wide Law of Bahá'u'lláh.... It does not ignore, nor does it attempt to suppress, the diversity of ethnical origins, of climate, of history, of language and tradition, of thought and habit, that differentiate the peoples and nations of the world.... Its watchword is unity in diversity such as `Abdu'l-Bahá Himself has explained: "Consider the flowers of a garden.... Diversity of hues, form and shape enricheth and adorneth the garden, and heighteneth the effect thereof...." (1998b: citing Effendi 1991, 41-42)

But what practices would constitute being 'contrary to the Faith's teachings?' Bahá'í converts are encouraged to continue participating in the lives of family members and among non-Bahá'í friends and colleagues, disparaging the notion of isolating oneself from the rest of society. Members of the Faith can also engage in ceremonies and rituals from other traditions, but not customs that run counter to Bahá'í teachings, such as drinking alcohol—even if it is a venerated religious rite. It is also permissible to observe Christmas and other popular denominational holidays in the West, but the preferred route is to celebrate such "festal gatherings of this nature instead during the [Bahá'í] intercalary days and Naw-Rúz" (UHJ 1998b).<sup>52</sup> Some observances, however, are not so easily navigated, especially regarding music and the arts. Akin to the UHJ's statements on music in Cote D'Ivoire from the first chapter, the following quotations provide an assorted outlook on permissible uses of culturally specific music and traditions to accompany

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<sup>52</sup> From a letter dated 26 May 1982, written on behalf of the UHJ to a National Spiritual Assembly.

prayers and devotionals, limiting them if they move ‘beyond the bounds of dignity’ (all sources gathered from UHJ 1998b):

We are in agreement with the view that traditional dancing in Africa is permissible in Bahá’í Centres. It should be borne in mind, however, that traditional dancing usually has an underlying theme, or a story to tell. Consequently, care must be exercised to ensure that the themes of the dances are in harmony with the high ethical standards of the Cause and are not portrayals that will arouse base instincts and unworthy passions. Furthermore, ... Bahá’í principles call for the practice of “moderation in all that pertains to dress, language, amusements, and all artistic and literary avocations”. *In all such matters it is unwise to lay down hard and fast rules to cover all individual cases. Whenever the friends need specific guidance in the application of Bahá’í principles, the Spiritual Assemblies concerned should provide such guidance in the light of local conditions.* (Emphasis mine)<sup>53</sup>

As for choreographed dances whose purpose is to reinforce and proclaim Bahá’í principles, if they can be performed in a manner which portrays the nobility of such principles and invokes appropriate attitudes of respect or reverence, there is no objection to dances which are meant to interpret passages from the Writings; *however, it is preferable that the motions of a dance not be accompanied by the reading of the words.*” (Emphasis mine)<sup>54</sup>

With reference to the question concerning the clapping of hands in songs where the Greatest Name is used, the House of Justice does not want to draw hard and fast rules. Clearly such matters are secondary and subject to cultural considerations, customs, and the social conventions prevailing in a given society. *In some cultures, for example, clapping, as part of religious expression, is considered offensive; in other cultures, clapping is a means of keeping the rhythm of a hymn, especially in the absence of a musical instrument, and is integral to religious experience; among other peoples, clapping may constitute a demonstration of religious fervour.* Further, within any given country there may well be regional cultural differences. Therefore, it is left to the National Spiritual Assembly to weigh each case with care and sensitivity in light of the prevailing cultural milieu and, if necessary, provide guidance to the friends. (Emphasis mine)<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> 12 November 1986, from the UHJ to the International Teaching Centre

<sup>54</sup> 20 June 1991, written on behalf of the UHJ to a National Spiritual Assembly

<sup>55</sup> 1 October 1986, from the UHJ to the International Teaching Centre



These passages repeat core concerns about theatrically dramatizing Manifestations of God or creating a devotional experience that may be unsuitable for the occasion, but they also emphasize the role of Spiritual Assemblies to consult with local believers about how they may appropriately express their devotion through different forms of art. Most notably in the third quotation (regarding the ‘clapping of hands’), we can see traces of discourse concerning cultural sensitivity, reiterating, in some respects, Shoghi Effendi’s statements about why the Faith should avoid defining or conventionalizing “Bahá’í music” in order to avoid offending co-religionists from diverse cultural backgrounds (Effendi 1973, 49-50).<sup>56</sup> Regarding the second above quotation about dance, we can also see the continued importance placed upon the *text*, making sure that any form of performance-based accompaniment—musical or otherwise—does not interrupt or obscure the Writings.

Negotiating the use of already-existing musical and performative resources encourages Bahá’ís to be constantly self-critical about the art they make and the effect it has in shaping their devotional life. However, some Bahá’í artists may experience a sense of fatigue or creative debilitation, where concerns over whether a musical style or cultural practice is deemed appropriate or reverent enough for devotional use can impede the development of music in the Faith. Much of this was documented in Armstrong-Ingram’s work on music in the early American Bahá’í community (1988), as well as Atkins’ work on Bahá’í jazz musicians (2006), who were often dissatisfied with perceptions of their work within the community. Some of these musicians experienced push-back from Bahá’ís, as well as lamented about the lack of musical

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<sup>56</sup> Namely: “What might seem a beautiful addition to their mode of celebrating a Feast, etc., would perhaps fall on the ears of people of another country as unpleasant sounds—and vice versa” (Effendi 1973, 49-50).

professionalism, ‘mediocre’ musicianship, and a “domina[nce] of folk and New Age styles” in the Faith (Atkins 2006, 407-408). According to Atkins, jazz was initially criticized by Bahá’ís in the USA, citing its links to sensuality, immorality, and other sinful behaviours related to the genre (390-394). Over time, however, the genre “assumed such prominence in Bahá’í public culture” that it became ‘sacralized’ and given the “attribution of religious significance”—in part, due to the conversion of Dizzy Gillespie in the 1968 (384-385). Still, Atkins found that there was some “aesthetic ambivalence” towards jazz in the Faith (385), as well as an enduring, unresolved discourse of uncertainty about the “suitability and differences of aesthetic taste” (390). Citing the writings of Bahá’í convert and Harlem Renaissance intellectual Alain Leroy Locke, Atkins identifies how the author found some of the enduring elements of jazz ostensibly ‘fell away’ from its initial connections to debased sensuality. Writing in 1936, Locke states: “for better or worse, jazz is, however, the spiritual child of this age. Phases of it will disappear with the particular phase of civilization which gave birth to it; but some permanent contributions to music and art will have been made” (392). Subsequently, these contributions include jazz’s unrefined emotional energy, improvisation, an ethos of participation, and “a ‘site of interracial collaboration’” (392), presenting one perspective about how a musical practice can become integrated and, later, adapted to retain its ‘best’ aspects in Bahá’í devotional life.

### *B. Bahá’í Best Practices: Musicians’ Suggestions*

Accordingly, the criteria for producing ‘appropriate’ Bahá’í-inspired music is vast and, at times, quite difficult to navigate—guided by concerns over how to create an original interpretation of a select Writing, while making sure it also achieves a degree of reverence and

sacredness. As I discussed in the Introduction, these factors remain very important for Bahá'í musicians, especially for those who wish to publish work that uses quotations from the Holy Writings, as they are required to submit demo recordings and lyrics to the National Assembly in their given countries (Bahá'í Canada, n.d.). As such, some artists publish advice about how to compose devotional music, ranging from issues of musical borrowing, cultural sensitivity, singing the Holy Writings, or working within specific genre conventions. In recent years, the circulation of artistic resources has been considerably bolstered by the efforts of well-known blogs and websites, such as *Bahá'í Teachings.org* and *Bahá'í Blog*—both of which feature editorial posts, interviews with well-known artists, as well as segments produced by popular Bahá'í musicians (Shadi Toloui-Wallace on *Bahá'í Teachings.Org*) and Hollywood actors (Rainn Wilson for *Bahá'í Blog*). Through these resources, Bahá'ís are able to find out about the difficulties that others face in their work. In a *Bahá'í Blog* interview with Ramine Yazhari, for instance, the songwriter shared the experience of recording his recent album, “Rejoice” (2018), mentioning that it was hard “trying to harmonize a sense of reverence with music that is also interesting and compelling in and of itself; finding a way to create a spirit that transcends the particular and is accessible to the widest possible audience; staying true to the original sacred words while framing them in a musical interpretation” (Vreeland 2018). Peter Gyulay (2015) discusses a range of ways to compose music from a Bahá'í perspective, though many of his suggestions remain somewhat ambiguous. For instance, whenever Bahá'ís “take on the noble task of putting the words of God to music,” Gyulay writes that “we should try to harmonize the earthly with the celestial” (Gyulay 2015). At the same time, Bahá'ís should remember: “while music can act as a ladder for the soul and a bridge between the spiritual and material, it can also

function as a passage to our egos, our lower selves [...] But how do we know which music raises us up and which doesn't?" Here, Gyulay refers to a quote from 'Abdu'l-Bahá, which he attributes to a copy of the *Star of the West* Bahá'í magazine:

There are two kinds of music, divine and earthly music. Divine music exhilarates the spirit, while earthly music has an effect upon the body. Divine music belongs to the Kingdom of God, earthly music is of the mundane world. I hope you will be confirmed to study both kinds of music so that you may be able to sing the anthems of heaven and the songs of this world. (Gyulay 2015; citing Fadil 1923/1924, 177)

However, the article does not provide any clear answers and evokes the issue of cultural relativism for composers:

Music is not a generic thing: it varies greatly across and within cultures. This includes what we consider 'religious' or 'spiritual' music. In one culture, a piece or style of music may be considered spiritual, but in another it may actually be regarded as irreverent [...] Can I turn on my keyboard, choose a beat, create a catchy melody, and then put some sacred words to it and consider it spiritual music? Maybe not [...] So when it comes to making or listening to music, we should consider how it contributes to our spirituality [...] when we take on the noble task of putting the words of God to music, we should try to harmonize the earthly with the celestial. Similarly, we should take the same approach to the music we choose to listen to. (Gyulay 2015)

Spiritual intention is often central to discussions about composing appropriate Bahá'í music, guiding the artistic process and informing how a Bahá'í-inspired art interprets the world through Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. For Vancouver-based singer-songwriter Shadi Toloui-Wallace, this includes abandoning distinctions between notions of 'secular' and 'sacred' music, both of which represent a "false choice" and fragment the inherently spiritual connections that exist in all facets of human life (Toloui-Wallace 2016). There are also technical aspects to consider. One of the biggest challenges for singer/songwriters is to compose instrumental accompaniment for the Holy Writings—many of which were translated from Arabic or Farsi into a stylized form of old English. Given the difficulty of finding ways to sing these passages, some performers offer

strategies about how the melody or instrumental accompaniment should complement the natural flow of the prayer or Tablet. As Irish-Bahá'í songwriter Luke Slott describes in an interview: “Setting the Bahá'í Writings to music is a wonderful way to connect with the words. It's also an excellent exercise in song-writing because you have to try to create melodies that complement the natural rhythm and feeling of the words” (Preethi 2011). Some musicians designed creative limitations in their work in order to help inspire new ways of approaching the Writings. For instance, Portland, Oregon-based songwriter Ramine Yazhari challenged himself by using odd time signatures in order to “try new rhythms and word arrangements in the melody than what might have come naturally in 4/4 or 6/8 time” (Vreeland 2018). As well, Singaporean composer Michelle Koay focused on creating an appropriate ‘musical mood’ for a song by deciding upon an appropriate key whilst reciting the prayer. In a blog post, she reflects upon the meaning and emotional affect of the Writing with minor and major keys:

When I compose the music, the first thing I consider is whether it should be in major or minor key. Generally, I feel that most of the prayers are rather solemn in their tunes so I hoped to have a more balanced feel in the album. I realised that the best way to compose the music is to play the piano and chant the prayer at the same time. It seems to be the most natural way of fitting the music and the prayer together. However, I may go through a few iterations before a final melody emerges. When I am happy with the melody, I translate that to a music score. (Naraqí 2015a)

Several online resources have also developed around issues of accessibility and ease of use, primarily because the arts are touted as an ideal teaching tool and creative activity for Bahá'ís to engage with their communities (particularly among youth). For instance, the German-based *Bahá'í Song Project* focuses on teaching songs to perform on guitar at devotional gatherings, providing links to sheet music, lyrics, and multiple performance videos that highlight the chords on an acoustic guitar. According to one of the founders of the initiative, Nadine

Reyhani, the group decided that it was important to highlight the guitar, rather than individuals: “In order to learn a song, say accompanied by guitar, what you need is to see the guitar and hear the melody. We chose to not show people’s faces because what matters really are the words of God, although of course, the project wouldn’t exist were it not for all the people who sacrificed their time and musical skills” (Naraqí 2017). Other archives and sheet music repositories provide individual recordings for each part within an SATB choral arrangement (such as *Bahá’í Choral Music.com*), as well as resources for Bahá’ís to hone and improve their skills and familiarity with choral singing (*Manifold Melodies.com*). Bahá’í institutions often support such initiatives, hosting annual songwriting workshops for facilitators in Bahá’í-inspired educational contexts. This includes annual workshops in Latin America, most recently held in Chongon, Ecuador (BWNS 2016), as well as several across the USA and Canada in 2017, as facilitated by Shadi Toloui-Wallace (Toloui-Wallace 2017). There are also countless individual Bahá’í initiatives to create and/or collaborate with other emerging artists (as was the case with the American band *Badasht* and their 2014 release “Visionaries”), among other projects that merge the Faith’s interests in developing the arts for teaching purposes. In this regard, Bahá’ís are generally advised to learn and engage with the arts as a teaching method and tool to help enrich devotional activities, regardless of one’s background or instrumental proficiency.

### *C. Sacralizing World Music: Issues and Prospects*

However, there are a number of ways in which certain musical styles and genres can become sacralized and, thus, conventionalized in the Faith. This is particularly the case for ‘world music’ and other culturally-coded musical practices that evoke universal concepts and

teachings from the Faith and speak to the global unification of mankind, or the theme of ‘unity in diversity.’ Due to the breadth and reach of the Faith in each continent, it is unsurprising that many Bahá’í artists draw directly from the sounds and styles of music that are indigenous to their culture and geographic region. Ranging from traditional Bolivian music (*Luces de Guia*) (Naraqí 2018) to songs performed in the *tok pisin* language of Papua New Guinea (as heard in the music of Klare Kuoga) (Naraqí 2015b), to the contemporary Polynesian music of *MANA* (Naraqí 2012a)<sup>57</sup> and Lakotan/Anishinaabe hoop dancing (Kevin Locke) (Toloui-Wallace 2018a), Bahá’ís are just as likely to perform within established cultural traditions as they are adapting these aesthetic practices within pop and classical contexts.

In many respects, these musical projects mirror the more general expectations of worship at the Mashriqu’l-Adhkar (Bahá’í Houses of Worship), where the architecture, design, forms of community outreach, and choral repertoire are meant to somehow reflect the region. Relatedly, Bahá’í musicians are advised to perform “melodies uniquely relevant to that continent, capturing sounds, intonations, and styles specific to the regions, ethnic and indigenous groups that surrounded the Temple” (Toloui-Wallace, 2018b). These principles are further reiterated in a recent compilation from the UHJ that honoured a Cambodian House of Worship in Battambang, which was noted for reflecting “the grace and beauty of that nation’s culture; it uses innovative techniques but blends them with forms traditional to the region; it unquestionably belongs to the land from which it has risen” (UHJ 2017, 38). Elsewhere in the compilation, the UHJ described the goals of the architects for Houses of Worship as attempting to “harmonize naturally with the local culture and the daily lives of those who will gather to pray and meditate therein. The task

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<sup>57</sup> Interestingly, in the case of *MANA*, the band was created as a grassroots initiative borne out of the Ruhi book and study circle sequence, using passages from the Writings as they appear in the exercises.

calls for creativity and skill to combine beauty, grace, and dignity with modesty, functionality, and economy” (2017, 9).

R. Jackson Armstrong-Ingram’s writings on music at the Mashriqu’l-Adhkar also addressed how to compose contemporary works in the Houses of Worship, where the function of music is “to harness sensual means to assist understanding of text [...] [and] to make the text more accessible than if it were spoken” (Armstrong-Ingram 1996) (again, only a cappella vocal performances are permitted in the Mashriqu’l-Adhkar). Much of the discourse around music performed at the continental Houses of Worship can provide the basis for all other forms of devotional music-making in the earlier advice from contemporary artists, such as ensuring the repertoire is

based upon Bahá’í or other sacred writings,’ including the Writings and talks of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, should ‘contain Bahá’í themes,’ may involve ‘the repetition of verses from prayers or selections from the Writings,’ and may allow for “slight alterations in the text ... to conform with musical requirements.’ ‘The musical style of the piece can be determined by the composer, provided that he or she bears in mind the spiritual obligation to treat the Sacred Texts with the propriety, dignity and reverence due them.’ (UHJ 2017, 5)

A style or genre of music *may* be considered acceptable if it “provides a comprehensible vehicle for the sacred text and attracts the heart of at least its singer,” but failure to achieve this minimal requirement renders it unsuitable “no matter how many people find it beautiful or moving” (Armstrong-Ingram 1996). Armstrong-Ingram also makes distinctions between the recitation practices inherited from Islam that remain in Bahá’í chanting and recitation (*tilawat* or *tartil*) in Houses of Worship, stating that “Western music is essentially melogenic: its products derive from a concern with patterns of sound,” whereas music in the Mashriqu’l-Adhkar “should be essentially logogenic: its products should be derived from a concern with texts.” While this is



a very narrow definition of Western music and addresses a very particular form of Bahá'í devotional musicking—one that is place- and context-specific—the overall approach to music-making in the Faith should adhere to similar spiritual principals:

The distinctive feature of the Bahá'í writings on music is that they preserve the special character of musical devotion in a Mashriqu'l-Adhkar, or other devotional context, as something apart, while also exhorting that 'music' music should aim to achieve the same ends as this exclusively religious use. Thus, just as work done in the right spirit may be worship, so all music should be religious in intent.” (Armstrong-Ingram 1996)

Still, not all prayers are considered appropriate for this use, as stated in a letter dated 6 May 1966 from the UHJ to a National Spiritual Assembly member, which concerns the setting of the Bahá'í *obligatory* prayers to music. The quotation appears in a compilation of Writings, titled *Lights of Guidance*, edited by Helen Hornby: “We have not come across any instructions which would prohibit the setting of the obligatory prayers to music. However, because of their special nature, we do not consider it appropriate to do so” (Hornby 1988, 413).<sup>58</sup>

But what about Bahá'ís who borrow music from *other* cultures and traditions? For Peter Gyulay, ‘world music’ is capable of “earnestly express[ing] both the joy and pain of the human condition,” conferring that music is a ‘Ladder for the Soul’:

To me, the traditional melodies of the world’s cultures have a purity about them. Like stones polished over eons of weathering, these sounds have been refined over thousands of years, which makes them so closely tied to the human condition and our deepest yearnings. Contemporary music, on the other hand, can be very creative but is largely bound to current conventions, which will inevitably pass away.” (Gyulay 2015)

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<sup>58</sup> Obligatory prayers consist of a short, medium, and long form version, each to be recited at certain times of day and in accordance with their own particular actions (in the case of the ‘medium’ prayer, one may wash their hands while reciting, while the ‘short’ prayer only requires one to recite it once at noon within a 24 hour period). The short obligatory prayer is read as follows: “I bear witness, O my God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee. I testify, at this moment, to my powerlessness and to Thy might, to my poverty and to Thy wealth. There is none other God but Thee, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting” (“The Obligatory Prayers” n.d.).

Gyulay fully acknowledges that his musical tastes reflect a subjective interpretation of ‘spiritual music,’ but his perspective of world music is also shared by many Bahá’ís. Writer and musician Marvin Holladay even suggests that every Bahá’í should take at least one course in Ethnomusicology, since it provides “the most Bahá’í-like approach to the study of music and, as a result, it offers us the understanding that truly represents the phrase Bahá’ís constantly use: Unity in Diversity” (Holladay 2016). So too, for Christopher Buck, who writes that the phenomenon of world music presents an analogue for Bahá’í celebrations of cultural diversity:

There is yet another dimension to music, which goes beyond mere “music appreciation.” And that is the intercultural aspect of music. I’m not necessarily talking about “world music in the sense of fusion music,” but the simple pleasure of enjoying the music of diverse cultures. Its educational as well as entertaining. In this way, music functions as a “cultural ambassador.” The more we appreciate the music and arts of other cultures, the less inclined we are to continue harboring any lingering prejudices towards those cultures. (Buck, 2015)

The cross-cultural diffusions, borrowing, and musical hybridities that are inherent in the knotty concept of world music present interesting avenues for interpreting Bahá’í perspectives on ‘worldly,’ or culturally-diverse sounds and performance practices. On the one hand, it could be argued that the lack of any unified Bahá’í style or genre owes to the Faith’s ambivalence for defining one, or though the insistence of Bahá’í musicians, like Ludwig Tuman, for Bahá’í-*engendered* artistic practice, rather than ‘Bahá’í art,’ per se, thus creating an open and ever-changing space for creation, unbounded by style, genre, convention, or even culture. In Tuman’s surveys of musical developments in the Faith (1989 and 1993), the Western classical composer and music educator delves deeply into the ways that the Faith can inform musical practice, exploring strategies and approaches that composers can use, or at least consider if they are to embark on work that is meant to articulate a global vision of the Faith. Working from the premise

that a ‘Bahá’í artist’—“any person who is both a Bahá’í and an artist” (Tuman 1993, 6)—operates in the domain of an always-already spiritual existence, Tuman’s suggestions offer unique insights into the ways in which cultural difference, traditional music, and diversity can be understood from a Bahá’í perspective. His reflections on Bahá’í-inspired art—its spiritual utility, the role of art in society, and proposed intentions of artists themselves—are wide-reaching and covers a multitude of contexts, the majority of which I cannot address in this chapter (see Tuman 1993). Instead, I will focus attention to how Tuman perceives the use of diverse cultural resources, artistic practices, and musical styles from around the world, offering perhaps the most detailed account for cultural diversity and an unabashed appraisal for a Bahá’í-engendered world music.

Tuman lists a number of Bahá’í musical and creative projects to have emerged in several countries, including: Bahá’í arts festivals in the Netherlands; theatrical groups in Japan, India, Malaysia, Austria, St. Vincent, Canada, the United States, and Peru (including the establishment of a Peruvian Bahá’í radio station, *Radio Bahá’í*); conferences for Bahá’í musicians (Costa Rica), among other developments (Tuman 1989, 98-99). Collectively, he considers these examples as indicative of Bahá’í-engendered art, which refers to “any art inspired by the Faith and produced by Bahá’ís; and in particular, it refers to art designed for specific uses within the Faith” (99). There are three key issues that Bahá’í musicians need to consider: questioning if the utility of art is “beyond our personal satisfaction” and can be employed for the “service of mankind” (such as teaching children); if the work is “in some way representative of the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh”; and if it is responsible towards the Bahá’í institutions, especially “when it is under their auspices that he undertakes an artistic project” (100-101). These ideals articulate a ‘spiritual

distinction' inherent to Bahá'í life and music, where art should “‘show forth divine light,’ should manifest ‘the virtues of the human world,’ and be imbued with spiritual qualities” (102-103). It is possible for Bahá'í musicians to achieve these ideals by drawing from existing musical and cultural resources. In the concluding section of his article, he notes: “it appears likely that Bahá'í-engendered art, while it produces new approaches and concepts, will also manifest a broad-minded and receptive attitude toward the traditional art of the world's past and present civilizations, and a willingness to learn from and assimilate such of their stylistic elements as are compatible with Bahá'í teachings and standards” (116).

Tuman makes distinctions between *traditional*, *global*, and *modern* approaches to artistic creation and interrogates how Bahá'ís utilize aesthetic resources, traditions, and techniques from cultures outside their immediate geography or experience. Pointing to the realities of late global capitalism, mass communication, education, and information in the late 20th century—conditions that resonate with Bahá'í universalism and an attendant “sacralization of globalization” (Lawson 2005, 36)—Tuman writes that most Bahá'í artists

will be at least somewhat informed of the past artistic achievements of their own or of outlying civilizations, and will find it impossible to work in isolation from artistic influences coming from outside their immediate culture or continent. The context in which the artist works is no longer regional or national, but global. The consciousness of history, the intercontinental flow of ideas, the influence of styles, the location of the public—in sum, the matrix of artistic interaction—is extending to embrace the past and present of the entire planet. (Tuman 1993, 177)

The drive towards greater global unity thus sacralizes and celebrates more optimistic and constructive appraisals of globalization. If the earth is indeed ‘one country and mankind its citizens’ (Bahá'u'lláh 1990, 249-250), such developments are merely reflections of this holy premise. The subsequent blurring of distance, information, and history through globalization are

further reflected in contemporary book or record collections, as “with a few recordings and a record player one may listen in a single session to the pan flutes of Bolivia, the Turkish lute, the xylophone orchestras of Mozambique, the troubadour songs of medieval Europe, the choral chant of Polynesia, the Indian sitar, and New Orleans jazz” (Tuman 1993, 177). As such, Tuman asks “under such conditions, how can the artist draw a sharp line between contemporary art and a remote past [...] how can he subscribe to the traditional attitude which holds that the artistic culture one inherits by accident of birth is necessarily more worthy of one’s study and assimilation than are the arts of outlying cultures?” (177). Here, the author refers to the writings of Shoghi Effendi to articulate the notion of ‘cultural self-respect,’ which acknowledges that the “purpose of the Law of Bahá’u’lláh ‘is neither to stifle the flame of a sane and intelligent patriotism in men’s hearts,’ but His ‘vision of world unity [...] calls for a wider loyalty, which should not, and indeed does not, conflict with lesser loyalties. It instills a love which, in view of its scope, must include and not exclude that love of one’s own country’” (237).<sup>59</sup>

The vision of Bahá’ism reflecting a ‘global citizenry,’ then, places the Faith over other ‘lesser’ identifiers, and thereby supports the notions of borrowing from other arts and cultural practices. This includes ‘minority cultures,’ according to Tuman, as the obligation of the Bahá’í community is “to nurture, encourage, and safeguard every minority in order to stimulate it and afford it an opportunity to take an active part in the life of the community at large.” Not only this, but Bahá’í artists from minority backgrounds “will increasingly find their work supported by an attitude of respect and appreciation,” and “receive as well as impart artistic influences within a loving and united world community” (Tuman 1993, 240). Using the example of a Bahá’í artist

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<sup>59</sup> Here, Tuman is referring to a writing from Effendi, dated 8 December 1936 to an individual believer (UHJ 1985b, 10).

wanting to weave a traditional Oriental rug, create a new iteration of it, or an entirely new design for a ‘new mansion’ (a metaphor for a new ‘home’ of creativity), he writes:

the Bahá’í artist, in availing himself of a variety of styles, materials, or approaches to art, is not necessarily committing himself thereby to any one of them: he is simply taking part in the natural diversity that characterizes the world of Bahá’í-engendered art—a diversity that gradually embellishes the new mansion [...] In short, the Bahá’í artist is free to work within a tradition, or to modify it, or to invent an altogether new manner of expression. Likewise, he is as free to learn from the civilizations of other lands as he is to draw upon the heritage of his own national culture. From a Bahá’í viewpoint, all five of these alternatives are equally valid: neither stigma nor status attaches to any of them. (185)

Regarding style, Tuman indicates: “within the arena of the Bahá’í Faith there is ample room for a variety of artistic approaches to questions of style, tradition, and change; that such approaches can be reconciled and harmonized; and that the artist is entirely free to work with any of them, and even to shift at will from one to another” (4). In particular, he cites a letter to an individual believer from the UHJ (dated 22 February 1980) as a means of supporting his inclusive view of musical borrowing:

Bahá’í artists are entirely free in all these matters to pursue and develop their as their inspiration moves them, and it is from their desire to glorify God through their creative activities that new arts and sciences will gradually develop to enrich a new culture. (289)

#### *D. Towards a Bahá’í-Engendered Approach for the Cultural Study of Music*

Tuman’s arguments in support of musical borrowing posit that cultural exchange, the evolution of musical traditions, and musical hybridity all reflect Bahá’í visions of eventual world unification. In this context, each style or school of art is equally valued, open to musical borrowing and alteration, and whose cultural specificity or distinctiveness will inevitably ‘fall away’ (even if these artistic practices are presently influencing Bahá’í artists). However, this view does not propose a celebration of homogeneity or uniformity, but recognizes a transitional

moment in human history that praises the collective efforts of Bahá'í artists to enact the principle of 'unity in diversity.' According to Douglas Martin and William Hatcher, such unity can be realized through "*an increased awareness of and respect for the intrinsic value of each separate culture, and indeed, of each individual. It is not diversity itself, which is deemed the cause of conflict, but rather our immature attitude towards it, our intolerance and prejudice*" (Martin and Hatcher 1985, 78; emphasis mine). Empathetic engagements with diverse musical practices are not only encouraged, but they infer a holistic and naturalized process that reflect the ultimate goal of world unity. Bahá'í artists need only to refer to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's writings about the never-ending process of change that occurred with each of the world's religions to provide a useful analogue for the development of a future 'Bahá'í music': "Religion is the outer expression of the divine reality. Therefore, it must be living, vitalized, moving and progressive. If it be without motion and nonprogressive, it is without the divine life; it is dead" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, 1982b, 140). In this manner, the 'vitalization' of future musics cannot occur by maintaining (cultural, religious, gendered, ethnic) *differences* or *distinctions* as a means of emphasizing diversity—a move that risks segregating humanity even further—but precisely the opposite: by avoiding the desire to 'strategically essentialize' (Turino 2008, 104) musical difference as a means of *politicizing* and, subsequently, legitimizing diverse aesthetic practices.

Such attitudes also reflect an underlying discourse of *cosmopolitanism* in the Faith that presents Bahá'ism as "cosmopolitan by definition [...] [through] emphasiz[ing] their openness and inclusiveness as regards ethnic or national origins"—where the "diverse provenance of members is seen by Bahá'ís as representing the religion's cosmopolitan openness to various cultures" (Meintel and Mossière 2013, 65). According to Margit Warburg, Bahá'í

cosmopolitanism “is associated with high international mobility and transnational interactions” and reflects a “willingness to participate in a globalized world” (Warburg 1999, 51). These readings are supported by Deborah K van den Hoonaard, who describes the Faith as enacting a kind of ‘moral cosmopolitanism,’ which is “a constitutive component of belonging to a world community...a concept that embodies the notions of unity, diversity and the oneness of humanity, central teachings of the Bahá’í faith” (van den Hoonaard 2008, 105).

Several music scholars have recognized the interpretive benefits of analyzing music through the lens of a ‘new cosmopolitanism,’ which allows for the study of musical borrowing and dispersion to be understood beyond the markers of ethnicity, empire, colony, and the nation. The academic tradition of separating or categorizing musical developments according to national (and, hence, ethnic, colonialist, racist) discourses of power can hinder analysis in a number of ways. For instance, Collins and Gooley argue that “national frames, however enabling for certain purposes, can also be limiting, since the nation is only one among many possible entities or communities to which music can establish a sense of belonging” (Collins and Gooley 2017, 139). While noting both a problematic elitism associated with cosmopolitan analysis (145-146) and a potential over-use of the term in musicology to indicate “anything that lacks national singularity (141), the authors do agree that a project for a more critical cosmopolitan outlook has worthwhile benefits, particularly in light of “the resurgence of nationalisms in today’s political culture and the concomitant affirmation or normalization of political insularity” (141). Of particular value in this move toward a cosmopolitan analysis—in contrast with ‘international’ or ‘transnational’ perspectives—is that it articulates a more ‘ethical-political’ approach that “invests a certain virtue in belonging to, or striving to belong to, a ‘larger’ world as a way of keeping local and



parochial attachments in check” (141). Citing the work of Martin Stokes (2007), the authors agree with his criticism of a tendency in ethnomusicology to “read music’s sociality in terms of ‘distinction’ and particularized identities,” supporting his “provocative reclamation of a ‘human’ commonality that subtends cultural difference” (147; citing Stokes 2007, 14-15). It is in this sense that Bahá’í moral investment and engagements with ‘worldly’ sounds are intentional and reflect “certain kinds of intentionality and agency” (147), connecting their Faith with a distinctly cosmopolitan outlook that “invokes the ‘world’ not as a spatial or empirical reality but as an aspirational concept” (153) and “requires the individual to engage in practices of defamiliarization for the explicit purpose of engendering a change in the self, making cosmopolitanism a practice of self-cultivation and disciplined detachment” (154).

Supporting such idealistic visions can be jarring from an academic perspective, given the breadth of work in ethnomusicology that critiqued the often exploitative genre/category of world music, “where some of the most pernicious neoliberal myth-making may, indeed, be identified” (Stokes 2004, 51). But in many respects, re-reading critiques of the world music industry through a Bahá’í lens can help demonstrate the theological intentions behind the Faith’s ‘worldly’ aesthetics. Without irony or sarcasm, many of the pronouncements from world music critics (largely set-up as naive ideology) merely read as normative statements from a Bahá’í perspective. Take Steven Feld and Annemette Kirkegaard’s writings on ‘celebratory narratives’ in world music, where:

Celebratory narratives see ‘world music’ as indigeneity’s champion and best friend. Celebratory narratives see musical hybridity and fusion as cultural signs of unbounded and deterritorialized identities. Celebratory narratives see the production of both indigenous autonomy and cultural hybridity as unassailable global positives, moves that signify the desire for greater cultural respect and tolerance. Celebratory discourse

virtually proclaims “world music” synonymous with anti-essentialism, with the hope of greater cultural equilibrium amidst difference. (Feld and Kirkegaard, 2010)

While such critiques emerge out of Marxist, market-based assessments of the world music industry and its financialization of Otherness—addressing the “downplaying [of] hegemonic managerial and capital relations,” or how the industry “normalize[s] and naturalize[s] globalization, not unlike ways ‘modernization’ narratives once naturalized other grand and sweeping currents that transformed and refigured intercultural histories” (Feld 2000, 152)—the *ideals* behind the celebratory narratives of world music certainly fit within a Bahá’í theological paradigm, even resonating with the Faith’s attitudes towards globalization, in general. In fact, to understand globalization from a Bahá’í perspective is to challenge normative academic and economic definitions and recognize the more idealistic dimensions and ‘celebratory discourses’ of globalization. As Suheil Bushrui, Bahá’í scholar and Chair for World Peace at the University of Maryland, states:

For the Bahá’í international community, globalization is a vision of world unity in so deep and broad a sense as to embrace every aspect of human life. Such a vision of planetary unity and integration, however, bears no relation to the often bland, faceless, and amoral global marketplace that we see operating today. Instead, it recognizes and celebrates the rich diversity of creeds and cultures while at the same time affirming the fundamental oneness of the human race. The Bahá’í approach to globalization can be summed up as a commitment to the concept of ‘unity in diversity’ and what this practically entails in the life of the individual and society alike. (Bushrui 2003; cited in Badee 2015, 224)

From the outset, Bahá’u’lláh outlined a message of “meaningful and enlightened globalisation,” emerging out of a “firm belief in the principle of unity of humankind” and appearing in Bahá’í literature using a number of titles, including ‘world order’ (*Nazm-i- Jihání*), ‘human race’ (*Ahl-i-’álam*), ‘civilisation’ (*madaniyat*), and ‘universal’ (*Umúmi*) (Badee 2015, 221-222). For

Bahá'ís, the communicative and economic realities of present-day globalization—its “world-embracing means of communication, transportation, information technology and global financial interdependency”—are also viewed as positive “methods of unifying nations,” far greater than any previous period of dispensation (225).

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Bahá'í aesthetic visions of global unity—however underdeveloped, yet-to-be-realized, or ‘still in its infancy’—may require somewhat of an intellectual leap for music scholars, given that the Faith shares ideological and intellectual similarities associated with globalization, cosmopolitanism, and other categories deemed secular or humanist in tradition. The process of shedding the weight of the material world (race, ethnicity, folkloric traditions, customs, etc.) in order to usher in a new, sacralized ‘Golden Age’ can be interpreted as impossible, even undesirable. But undergirding a Bahá'í scholarly outlook—musicological or otherwise—is a need to thwart cynicism or perpetuating difference and division. Here, I refer once again to Collins and Gooley and the transformative power involved with adopting a more ‘cosmopolitical stance’ on music, which I believe resonates strongly with such an approach:

Cosmopolitical stances involve some kind of intellectual movement or cognitive tension of this kind [...] It may be better characterized as a moment of alterity, where a shifting horizon of thought jogs the mind out of an existing cognitive boundary, thus bringing that boundary forward in consciousness as something movable and moving. The agent of cognitive alterity can be a historical discovery, an ethical assertion, an aesthetic impulse, or an ethnographic interlocutor, but cosmopolitan consciousness nearly always arrives as a mental recontouring of the ‘world’ and of a sense of social affiliation. (Collins and Gooley 2017, 153)

### *A Study of Diversity: Musical Case Studies and Topics*

The following section will explore some of these issues and topics in greater detail, examining a selection of well-known Bahá'í recordings and compositions. Here, I aim to identify where cultural difference, ethnic diversity, and 'unity in diversity' is musically-signified from multiple perspectives, focusing particularly on the music programme at the *Second Bahá'í World Congress* (1992), as well as recordings by Buffy Sainte-Marie and Seals and Crofts.

#### *A. The Bahá'í World On Display: Staging Diversity at the 1992 World Congress*

Held at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Centre in New York City on November 23-26, 1992, the Second Bahá'í World Congress was a celebration commemorating the 100-year passing of Bahá'u'lláh. Close to 30,000 participants arrived to enjoy an unprecedented gathering of Bahá'ís, accompanied by talks, lectures, group sessions, and artistic presentations. The UHJ addressed the gathering via satellite and concurrent celebrations occurred around the world, including in Argentina, India, Australia, Kenya, Panama, Romania, Russia, Singapore, Western Samoa, as well as two additional concerts held at Carnegie Hall in tribute to the late Dizzy Gillespie. In Toronto, a special Bahá'í event titled *Live Unity: Toronto 1992* featured performances by Indigenous-Canadian icon Buffy Saint-Marie and Brazilian musicians Flora Purim and Aírto Moreira (Bahá'í World Centre 1993, 121). In a widely circulated text on the Bahá'í World Congress (1993), it explained that the conference included a 400-voice choir, 70-piece orchestra, and a "breathtaking oratorio celebrating the coming of Bahá'u'lláh especially written for the occasion." Not only this, but the book also noted "one of the most effective

features of the presentations made was their success in drawing on and integrating the music of many different cultures” (Bahá’í World Centre 1993, 99-100).<sup>60</sup>

The opening of each Congress day featured prayers in multiple languages, as well as Persian chanting; many of the participants on stage also dressed in traditional clothing (see figure 4) and individual groups from specific countries were featured, including an Aboriginal Australian ensemble.<sup>61</sup> Along with dramatic performances of early American Bahá’ís and their encounters with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the conference featured a screening of two documentary films on the Faith (including the premiere of a silent, archival film of Abdu’l-Bahá’s visit to New York City in 1912), as well as the first official presentation of ‘Bahá’í gospel music’ (Stockman 2013, 188)<sup>62</sup>—a “coming out party” of sorts, according to musical director Jack Lenz. There were a number of artistic collaborators, including Dash Crofts and Jimmy Seals (of *Seals and Crofts* fame), Australian songwriter Graham Major (for the composition “Maid of Heaven”), Kevan McKenzie (a Toronto session drummer who appeared on Doug Cameron’s album, *Mona With the Children*),<sup>63</sup> santour master Manoocher Sadeghi, and Dr. Ross Woodman (who wrote the monologues that dramatized Bahá’u’lláh’s journey, religious station, and life). For many Bahá’ís, the integration of music and dramatic arts at the Congress signalled “a new level of

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<sup>60</sup> In the online description of the *Bahá’í World Congress* album, it reads: “Representing the diversity of the global Bahá’í community, this choir comprised of Bahá’ís from around the world gathered in New York City for the Bahá’í World Congress in 1992 and performed what were to become some of the most cherished and beloved Bahá’í songs in the world” (“Bahá’í World Congress Choir” n.d.).

<sup>61</sup> From the *Bahá’í Arts Dialogue* website, it reads: “Aboriginal dancers on stage at one of the many New York hotel venues, where performances were hosted nightly. The simple banners were the identifying stage set for the various venues” (“John Kavelin” n.d.).

<sup>62</sup> In my interview with Jack Lenz, the composer established that in the 1970s, there was a significant choral movement in the southern United States (in particular in South Carolina). Russ Garcia, in particular, was named as an early progenitor of Bahá’í songs and his melody for “Blessed is the Spot” appeared in the World Congress programme.

<sup>63</sup> I will discuss these artists and the “Mona With the Children” album in greater detail in Chapter Four.

professionalism and raising the consciousness of the Bahá'í community as to their importance in the presentation of the Bahá'í Faith and its teachings” (Hutchinson and Hollinger 2006, 785).

With the support of a music committee that boasted a number of Canadian Bahá'ís (including former Canadian National Assembly and UHJ Member, Douglas Martin), the music was arranged by two prominent Bahá'í composers: Jack Lenz and Tom Price. Through their efforts and subsequent world music tours, ongoing choral projects led by Price (such as the *Global Choir and Orchestra Initiative*), and re-releases of the Congress' recordings (1995 and 2007), Bahá'í communities around the world revitalized their engagements with music.

Organized in two parts, the first half of the musical programme was titled “Oratorio for His Holiness, Bahá'u'lláh,” followed by “World Congress Music Days Two to Four.” All of the choir members were volunteers, receiving lyric sheets and recordings in the mail far in advance of the performance, but managed to rehearse for one intensive week in New York City leading up to the Congress. Most of the compositions were highly orchestrated pieces that integrated ‘Eastern’/Persian elements and presented in a Western classical context, featuring large string, brass, and percussion sections, as well as the choir. However, some aspects of the program were interspersed with various musi-cultural ‘featurettes.’ This was particularly the case on the third day of the Congress, which featured short performances of Bahá'í songs/prayers by separate ensembles: an all-Iranian group with Manoocher Sadeghi and vocalist Narges performing “Allahumma yá Subúhun,” a Chinese vocal group, Maori ensemble, a South American ensemble (with *cuatro* guitar and what appears to be an African talking drum as accompaniment), and an African American gospel choir (both in small and large-formats). Through the use of satellite technology, the fourth day of the Congress also highlighted Bahá'í communities in select

countries, showing world map snapshots, images of local devotional gatherings, and live feeds/‘call-ins’ from each featured country, including Romania, Argentina, Western Samoa, India, and Singapore.



Figure 4: YouTube screen-shots (from 7:00-25:30 timecode) of smaller musical ensembles from the third day of the Second Bahá’í World Congress video, arranged according to culture, ethnicity, and/or musical tradition. (Bahá’í Vision 2014a)

Several Congress performances have since become Bahá’í ‘standards,’ if you will—compositions that, in their broad range of stylistic and cultural diversity, evoked a sense of the Faith’s globalized reach. In particular, the pieces “God Is Sufficient Unto Me” and “Dastam Begir” (“Hold My Hand, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá”)—performed by vocalist Narges Noughnejad Fani—have become well-known throughout the global Bahá’í community and are often performed in Bahá’í

international choirs. This also includes the jubilant African American gospel-style song “In This Day, Bahá’u’lláh” (written by Frederick Ward) that was reprised as the second-last piece of the Congress, transitioning from a slow spiritual to an almost uptempo ‘shout.’ Following raucous applause and cheers from the attendees, the event concluded with a more formal, European-style piece: the choral composition “See The Light,” bookending the conference with its more prominent emphasis on Western classical style.

According to Jack Lenz, the themes and overall vision for the music programme came directly from the UHJ. As most of the compositions were done with extensive European-style orchestration and multi-part choral arrangements, Lenz described its application as the need to reflect the diversity of the Bahá’í community, while also presenting a performance that would ‘appropriately elevate’ the event to a certain level of reverence and sacredness:

They sort of set out this idea of establishing a journey [...] We were servants of their vision, that would be the best way to describe it. This was clearly a commissioned work where they set the standards and the tone. We obviously decided to do it in this choral and orchestral version because of how Shoghi Effendi describes the English language. The language of the sacred texts are in this kind of Shakespearean language, as you know, because the Guardian considered it the highest evolution of language extant in the world. Our goal was to essentially do the same with this music. Really, the highest evolution of music in the Western world, you might say, would be the orchestral music of Beethoven, Mozart, and the tradition of large choral works accompanied by orchestra. There was certainly a songwriting element and pop element to it as well because if you listen to a song like “In the Garden of Ridvan” has a very pop sensibility. Others were very abstract, and then there was “God is Sufficient Unto Me,” which was really a combination Persian influences and orchestral European, and North American influences as well. It’s terrible to say this about sacred music, but it really was a bit of a hodgepodge (laughs) [...] but there’s nothing like an orchestra and a choir to establish a sense of ‘this is important,’ (laughs) because it’s really big, it’s melodic, the harmonies are beautiful. It’s hard to lose when you use the tradition in a sense, right? Your music is going to make an emotional connection and when you combine that with the texts, we know it has an impact on people. (Jack Lenz, interview)



Here, the use of a Western musical approach was inspired by Effendi's thoughts on the Bahá'í sacred texts, which *The Guardian* himself translated into a formalized style of Shakespearean English. By virtue of this development, Lenz and his collaborators placed Western classical music as an appropriate and 'elevated' artistic parallel—a decision that would result in Western music being used as a base layer for various other elements and styles from around of the world. For example, on “Dastam Begir,” soloist Narges Noughnejad Fani opens with a haunting vocal performance, replete with characteristic melismatic flourishes common in the Persian classical tradition (see figure 5) and bolstered by rich choral and orchestral arrangements. Based on a poem by Habíb Mu'ayyid (1888-1971)—a medical doctor, former member of the Local Spiritual Assembly of Kermánsháhand, Iran, and frequent visitor of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Acre (Effendi 1982b, 97-98)—“Dastam Begir” was composed by Los Angeles songwriter Nikki Manevi (see figure 6) and arranged by Tom Price. The main melody is shared among the choir singers and recurs throughout the piece. Here, it is performed in Farsi, although other Bahá'í choirs have also performed English versions of the song.<sup>64</sup> Fani's recordings (often going by the stage name, Narges) are quite popular among Bahá'ís for use at devotional settings, often played alongside prayers, chanting, live songs with acoustic guitar, and other activities (McMullen 2000, 89). Both Lenz and Price also worked with the vocalist on a previously released choral album titled “Songs of the Ancient Beauty” with the *Toronto Bahá'í Chorale* (1991). At the time of the Congress, the song was already well-known within the Persian Bahá'í community and “reflected their adoration and love for the Master,” according to Lenz: “That piece already had a great deal of

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<sup>64</sup> However, lyrics and sheet music for “Dastam Begir” is very difficult to source. The below transliterated lyrics were gathered from a Bahá'í sheet music website (*Manifold Melodies*), though the second line in Narge's solo (“Eh ban iyeh bey tey kho da”) is my own English transliteration since it was missing in the *Manifold* handout.

resonance with the Persians, so for them to hear it with an orchestra and a big choir was really extraordinary [...] It's a blend [of musical traditions] because Narges singing it, you can hear the Persian quality, obviously, in her voice." This reflection of 'love and devotion' among Persian Bahá'ís is likely a reference to the lyrical content itself, which asks 'Abdu'l-Bahá for assistance, guidance, security: to hold their hand as they travel into the next world (see figure 6).

Continuing, Lenz stated that

It was that blend of West and East: you have that kind of plaintive quality. You get a sense that the scale is slightly different, but it still works; the quarter tones work with the way that the harmonies are constructed in both the a capella and orchestral versions. I can't say purely by accident, but it felt like an accident (laughs). How were these two worlds going to blend? I would dare any Persian, even if he hates the Bahá'í Faith, to listen to that and not be moved by it. (Lenz, interview)

Layered behind Narges' solo are soft pizzicato strings that maintain a waltz rhythmic figure, as well as a small (arco) violin section that performs the melody in unison with her vocals. The piece alternates between Narges' plaintive performance and the rich and full sound of the orchestra, perhaps as a means of further emphasizing the lyrical narrative: at first unaccompanied, alone, far from home, the protagonist calls out to 'Abdu'l-Bahá for support and guidance, to which the choir repeats in a strong and collective voice. At once reaffirming 'Abu'l-Bahá as the "perfect exemplar of the Faith's spirit and teachings" ("Abdu'l-Bahá — the Perfect Exemplar" n.d.), the song is also a testament to the life of the original poet Dr. Habib, who "was given the name Mu'ayyad (meaning 'confirmed') by 'Abdu'l-Bahá" and described the period of his life working in close proximity to *The Master* as "most precious segment of his life" (Effendi 1982b, 97-98).

The image displays a musical score for a soprano melody, consisting of six staves of music. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The melody is written in a single treble clef. The notes are as follows:

- Staff 1: G4, A4, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4.
- Staff 2: C4, D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4.
- Staff 3: C4, D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4.
- Staff 4: C4, D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4.
- Staff 5: C4, D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4.
- Staff 6: C4, D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4.

Figure 5: Transcription of the soprano melody for “Dastam Begir.”

<b>“Dastam begir” (Transliteration)</b>	<b>Hold Thou My Hand</b>
Eh haz ra teh Abdu’l-Bahá Eh bohneeyeh bayteh khoda Eh markazeh a hehbaha Dastam begir Abdu’l-Bahá	Hold Thou My Hand ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, I’m far from home The road is dark, I’m alone Hold thou my hand, Hold thou my hand
Abdu’l-Bahá eh son behcahw Joh neh ma raw corbon behcahw Ghorboneh gee su ahn beh cohn Dastam begir Abdu’l-Bahá	‘Abdu’l-Bahá, be Thou my guide When I am weak stay by my side Hold thou my hand, Hold thou my hand
Abu’l-Bahá ah varehah Dof toh deh ah bejoreh ah Choon te fie dargyah va re am Dastam Begir Abdu’l-Bahá	‘Abdu’l-Bahá, O dearest Friend Help me to reach my journey’s end Hold thou my hand, Hold thou my hand
Abdu’l-Bahá Tod ah gar hee Hamjon greson hamjon derhee Ham hawdi yeyhar gomra he Dastam begir Abdu’l-Bahá	‘Abdu’l-Bahá, hear me I pray O help me lest I go astray Hold thou my hand, Hold thou my hand
Garjeh zehah noh har ma Nut vehtehgar noh oh shoht va rah Ha soh heh beh har kaysh va naw Dastam begir Abdu’l-Bahá	‘Abdu’l-Bahá, O dearest Friend Help me to reach my journey’s end Hold thou my hand, Hold thou my hand ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Hold Thou my hand
Ay ya ho va ra behja nee Ay mon jehyeh kHHz ezbeh khanee Rachme be khun ba en bahd he Dastam begir Abdu’l-Bahá	

Figure 6: Lyrics for “Dastam Begir” (based on a poem by Habíb Mu’ayyid).

Another piece, “God Is Sufficient Unto Me” (performed in the original Arabic, “Qol Allah’u Yakfī”) is also unique for its integration of Western and Middle Eastern/Persian elements (see figure 7). The main melody for the prayer is commonly heard at Bahá’í devotionals, often sung both in Arabic and English. However, Lenz admits that he wasn’t sure if “we ever really

tracked down who wrote it. Narges knew it, but she wasn't sure where we came from; it was a bit of a mysterious process. But it was a great melody and it worked really well with the English version, the transition *into* the English version” (Lenz, interview). The piece was performed immediately after a monologue read by Australian actor Philip Hinton that dramatically described the conditions of Bahá'u'lláh's imprisonment and subsequent Revelation:

Oh Bahá'u'lláh, what have they done? You were confined in the darkest pit, chained among thieves and assassins. Your feet were placed in stocks; of chain encased your neck. Two rows of prisoners, appareled in what you taught them to sing: “God is sufficient unto me. He, verily, is the all-sufficing,” chanted the One. “In him let the trusting trust” came in the dungeon, the eager reply. (Bahá'í Vision 2014b)<sup>65</sup>

Manoocher Sadeghi opens the piece with a brief introductory solo over *dastgah Esfahan* in C harmonic minor, providing both a contextual and sonic bridge from the Siyah-Chal narrative (see figure 8). As the choir enters, the main melody is performed in Bb using an augmented scalar quality (F#), initially with sparse plucked strings, piano, and harp. However, the piece eventually transitions to English as the choral parts are arranged in rounds and more instruments are added. The male chorus is supported in unison with the low brass and full-orchestra, including timpani, strings, and marching snare drum. This blending of Persian and Western classical music—in particular, at the key moment of transition when the English prayer is sung as more Western compositional elements become integrated—reflects a unique trope in Bahá'í composition that intentionally signifies Iran as a device to dramatize the Faith's persecutory, cultural, and/or geographic contexts. This evocation of an Iranian Bahá'í auralty is often mired in a complex dialectic that, at once, celebrates Persian aesthetics in the Faith, but remains bracketed to offset any sense of greater legitimacy or ‘authenticity’ conferred to such compositions. As a composer,

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<sup>65</sup> Transcribed from the YouTube video, timecode 50:00-50:49min.

Lenz is capable of utilizing sounds and harmonic conventions that may signal as sense of ‘Persianness,’ or ‘Middle Eastern-ness,’ but admits that this is “more pretending than anything.” However, Lenz indicates that he was influenced by the prevalence of Persian aesthetics and musical practices he experienced at many Bahá’í devotionals and feasts, often finding himself humming along in solfeggio to figure out the melody of a chant, for instance, or having performed at many Bahá’í events that were attended entirely by Persians:

Persian music is sort of a mainstay in the Bahá’í community and even when we don’t think we’re hearing it, we’re hearing it, right? You know, you hear things from other cultures and you think, ‘wow, that’s interesting!’ And then you sit down and you sort of figure out how they’re constructing that [...] Being in a community like ours, which is pretty diverse but, as I say, it is ‘ruled by Farsi’ (laughs). (Lenz, interview)

Like many Bahá’ís, Lenz is well-attuned to the demographic and cultural makeup of Bahá’í communities and attempted to create music for the Congress to reflect these realities. For the most part, however, his integration of ‘Persian’ musical elements and sounds are the product of his professional background and training in composition, not necessarily a reflection of any considerable study of Iranian classical music.

<b>“Ghol Allah-o Yakfee”</b>
Ghol allah-o yakfee, an kol lay shayen. Ghol allah-o yakfee, an kol lay shayen. Va a la law hey fal, ya ta va kelo, Mo te vak ke loon, ya ta va kelo, Mo te vak ke loon. God is sufficient unto me, He is the all sufficing God is sufficient unto me, He is the all sufficing Let the trusting trust Him, Let the trusting trust! Let the trusting trust!

Figure 7: Transliteration of Arabic, as found on [www.Bahaiglory.com](http://www.Bahaiglory.com). (Bahá’í Glory 2010)



Figure 8: Transcription of soprano melody in “God Is Sufficient Unto Me” (“Qol Allah’u Yakfi”).

Interestingly, many of the songs for the Congress were re-recorded and released as *Music of The Bahá’í World Congress - New York 1992* (Live Unity, 2007). According to an archived page from the *Seals and Crofts* official website, a “tour of ten countries followed [the Congress] with a choir and orchestra, culminating in recordings with the Mila Moscow Orchestra, during civil unrest in Moscow in October of 1993” (Seals and Crofts 2013a). My interview with Lenz corroborated this point, as the composer discussed how the group travelled to then-Soviet Russia to re-record pieces from the Congress, initially for an album titled *Oratorio to Bahá’u’lláh: Glory of God* (1995) (however, the tracks would eventually become integrated into the *Music of The Bahá’í World Congress* re-release in 2007). Narges and all of the soloists from the Congress came to Moscow to re-record the album, followed by a three-week tour in Kiev, Moldova, and “what was left of the Soviet Union;” concluding with a final concert with the Rachmaninov Orchestra at the Tchaikovsky Concert Hall in Moscow “while the tanks were in the

streets” (Lenz, interview). Amidst growing unrest in the country, the ensemble was also invited to perform pieces from the World Congress at an informal event at the KGB headquarters.

In addition to the celebratory and festive nature of the Congress, the occasion was also marked by moments of reflection about the plight of Iranian Bahá’ís. Following a series of opening talks by celebrated Bahá’í leaders, such as Rúhíyyih Khánum (Shoghi Effendi’s wife), former chairman of the American NSA George James Nelson, as well as an opening address by former Mayor of New York City David Dinkins, flowers were brought to the front of the stage as a female moderator spoke. A lamenting piece titled “Ya Bahá'u'l-Abha Ya Ali'u'l-Ala” (see figure 9) was performed as the moderator read:

All of us in this gathering are poignantly aware that the achievements we celebrate have, in considerable part, been won by the sacrifices by our fellow believers in Iran: sacrifices of well-being, of opportunity, of education, of possessions, of life itself. If there is one unwavering message that has come out of Iran over the past terrible 13 years, it is this: that we must not for one minute allow any grief to shatter the Bahá’í world’s joy over the breathtaking victories that these sacrifices have purchased. Today, this message of loving contentment with the will of God comes to us in the form of a magnificent gift of flowers sent to the Congress from the friends in the Cradle of the Faith [...] These flowers will remain prominently on display throughout the World Congress. (Bahá’í Vision 2014b; timecode 1:19:52-1:21:15min)



Figure 9: Transcription of soprano melody for “Ya Bahá'u'l-Abha Ya Ali'u'l-Ala.”

Groups of men and women are seen bringing pots of ornate flower arrangements to the front of the stage as the camera pans to the faces in the crowd, many of whom are seen weeping. This



visual documentation and global staging of Bahá'í martyrdom lasted for several minutes (Bahá'í Vision 2014b; timecode 1:21:15-1:25:27min). Following a talk given by former UHJ member David Hofman, the orchestra re-tuned their instruments and the moderator returned to describe 'who the Bahá'ís are:'

Today, humanity in all its diversity is responding to the opportunity which the monarchs of the 19th century so tragically missed. The gathering in this room is really a window on that response. It is a window on a Bahá'í community that likely already represents the most diverse and widespread organized body of people on our planet. Who are we? We are members of over 2000 races, tribes, and nations of the earth. We are the people of the people, the people of Bahá (1:49:05—1:50:00min).

A triumphant orchestral piece emerged as a procession of Bahá'ís in traditional dress enter the hall as a recorded monologue with rotating female and male readers list the many peoples of the Faith, including the Zulu, Zapotec, Angolan, Algerian, Zambian, Colombian, French, Dutch, Inuit, Yoruba, Pakistanis, Maori, Apache, Swedes, and so on (1:50:16—1:57:30min). For Michael McMullen, this particular segment of the programme stood out as an integral moment in the Faith in his interviews with the Atlanta Bahá'í community, many of whom experienced a sense of pride and elation:

Many Bahá'ís indicated during interviews later that one of the most meaningful symbolic acts of the congress was a procession of Bahá'í representatives of the races and nations of the world to the center stage on the first day, setting the tone for the whole week. As stirring music played, each Bahá'í walked down the aisle arrayed in traditional native dress. The ceremony took more than half an hour to conclude, ending in a long standing ovation for this Bahá'í celebration of humanity that left many in the crowd in tears (McMullen 2000, 3)

These presentational dynamics spoke to how the Congress was an occasion of 'Bahá'í dramaturgy,' according to McMullen, emphasizing "the capacity of rituals, ideologies, and other symbolic acts to *dramatize* the nature of social relations" (McMullen 2000, 199 note 4).

Continuing, “the experience of the World Congress—the evident diversity of language, culture, and nationality, as well as the stories of Bahá’ís around the world facing opposition and discrimination—dramatized for participants the vision of global unity and peace outlined in Bahá’í scriptures” (4). The music for the Congress also prompted claps and swaying by participants “in the spirit of evangelical Christian revivals” (3), all of which was documented in the video recording. In a Portland Bahá’í blog entry by Sara DeHoff, the author describes her experience witnessing this particular scene:

Down every aisle they came. Faces shining with joy. One by one they came. Each in his native costume. Each with her head high, walking tall. From Papua New Guinea came a man in his skins. From Korea, a woman in her flowing gown. Over there a kimono, over here a Bolivian hat. A Tlingit woman in her red and black cape. A Nigerian in his loose cotton tunic. A tailor, a lawyer, a mother, a farmer. An Israeli, an Egyptian. A Bosnian, a Serb. A Rwandan. An Austrian. An Ethiopian. A Russian. A Texan. Each took his place on the stage—the place reserved for him—a place of dignity and honor. No one was left out. Suddenly the audience fell silent. There, before them stood the entire human race—every nation, every creed, every people, every tribe. Standing in peace. Standing tall. Standing as one—the full splendor and glory of the human family. Instinctively someone onstage grasped the hand of his neighbor and lifted it high. The entire assembled company clasped hands and raised them in triumph. A cheer erupted from the audience as they thundered to their feet in applause, weeping, cheering, moved beyond words. Humanity’s long-held dream is finally within grasp. (DeHoff 2007)

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The 1992 Bahá’í World Congress is a major point of pride in Bahá’í communities around the world, often serving (to the surprise of many Bahá’ís serving on music committees) as *the* template for large-scale Bahá’í events. In many respects, this sentiment rings true: Bahá’í feasts, Holy Days, and major celebrations (such as the Bicentenary Celebrations of the Birth of Bahá’u’lláh and the Báb) continue to incorporate drama, live music, visual arts, video, and dance—all of which were featured in the 1992 World Congress programme. Many Bahá’í events also

continue to emphasize the diversity of the world Bahá'í community through their arts programming, integrating culturally-specific performances and traditions, as well as inviting local dignitaries and members of government at major celebrations. However, the sheer magnitude, widespread media distribution, and religious significance of the 1992 Congress will ensure that its music and, at the time, innovative arts programming will continue to inspire Bahá'ís to strive for such excellence.

*B. Buffy Sainte-Marie: Indigeneity and the Faith*

Canadian Indigenous, Pop, and Rock icon Buffy Sainte-Marie has been associated with the Faith since the early 1970s. She continues to perform and release acclaimed recordings and garner countless music prizes, as well as participate in several Bahá'í activities. However, separate accounts and interviews by Sainte-Marie suggest conflicting details if she was indeed a Bahá'í, or simply a 'friend of the faith'; she has performed at many Bahá'í events and Holy Day celebrations, as well as collaborating with Bahá'í artists and composers. In an archived document from the now-defunct magazine *United States for Bahá'í News* (1924-1990), a November 1985 issue describes the activities for a *Bahá'í International Youth Conference-Australasia* in Hawaii, which included a one-hour performance by Buffy Sainte-Marie (indicating her as a 'friend of the Faith for many years') and the "Pacific area premiere of the music video 'Mona with the Children'" (a music video and song by Bahá'í musician Douglas Cameron that detailed the execution of several Bahá'í women in Shiraz in 1983) (Bahá'í News 1985, 14-15). Sainte-Marie is sometimes listed among other Bahá'í musical 'heroes' (Sheppherd 2013) and referenced in news stories about a growing Indigenous Bahá'í community (Todd 2018). However, it is difficult

to find reliable sources that detail Sainte-Marie's ties to the Faith, as several Wikis, blogs, and websites recirculate the same paragraphs, including an unverified 'quote' from Sainte-Marie herself:

Although not a Bahá'í herself, she became an active friend of the Bahá'í Faith by the mid-1970s when she is said to have appeared in the 1973 Third National Bahá'í Youth Conference at the Oklahoma State Fairgrounds, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and has continued to appear at concerts, conferences and conventions of that religion since then. In 1992, she appeared in the musical event prelude to the Bahá'í World Congress, a double concert "Live Unity: The Sound of the World" in 1992 with video broadcast and documentary. In the video documentary of the event Sainte-Marie is seen on the Dini Petty Show explaining the Bahá'í teaching of progressive revelation. She also appears in the 1985 video "Mona With The Children" by Douglas John Cameron. However, while she supports a universal sense of religion, she does not subscribe to any particular religion: "I gave a lot of support to Bahá'í people in the '80s and '90s ... Bahá'í people, as people of all religions, is something I'm attracted to ... I don't belong to any religion. ... I have a huge religious faith or spiritual faith but I feel as though religion ... is the first thing that racketeers exploit. ... But that doesn't turn me against religion." (Cashbox 2015)

Still, her influence remains strong within the Bahá'í community, listed (perhaps incorrectly) alongside other notable Bahá'í musicians like Dizzy Gillespie, Russell Garcia, Celeste Buckingham, Doug Cameron, Red Grammer, Grant Hindin Miller, and Seals and Crofts—all of whom were converts (Sheppherd 2013). In a recent CBC article on Sainte-Marie, it notes throughout her life, she had a "deep sense of meaning and belief in a Creator" and that "her Cree heritage and ties to the Bahá'í religion make for a fascinating take on spirituality" (Tapestry 2017). These enduring connections to the Faith in both Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í media platforms continues a legacy of collaboration and friendship between the artist and the religion.

Some of Buffy Sainte-Marie's work is now commonly heard at Bahá'í devotional gatherings, especially her song "My Heart Soars," which was a collaboration between herself and Jack Lenz. Not a widely known hit, the song was featured on an album compilation by Lenz

titled *Encore* (1995), though the chorus remains quite popular for Bahá'ís across Canada. Accompanied by a steady eighth-note beat on the drums with shaker percussion and a synthesizer drone, the song features a well-known prayer of the Báb: “O God, my God, my Beloved, my heart’s Desire” (see figure 10). Performed using a long descending line, the chorus begins with Sainte-Marie’s texturally-dense vocables, merging contemporary pop songwriting with Indigenous aspects—a hallmark of her sound. Other versions of the prayer within the Bahá'í community similarly evoke an ‘Indigenous’ vocal delivery, likely owing to the global influence of Sainte-Marie’s recording among Bahá'ís. This is particularly the case with a version that appears on the Germany-based *Bahá'í Song Project* website (“O God My God” n.d.). For a prayer titled “O God My God,” users are taught to begin the prayer with a sequence of beats that accent beat one (see figure 11), emulating a generalized ‘First Nations’-style, pulsating drum rhythm.<sup>66</sup>

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66 More specifically, I am referring here to a steady, repetitive quarter note pattern heard on the drums in “My Heart Soars” that evoke powwow drumming styles, including an “even drum beat,” or a “long-short (or ‘heart-beat’ pattern) (Hoefnagels 2016). Sainte-Marie’s vocal performance (especially during the ‘pre-chorus’ vocables section) supports the possibility of an underlying powwow aesthetic, where the vocals tend to be performed at the extreme high end of a singer’s range (see Hoefnagels 2015). As Norman Stanfield also describes, powwow drumming generally outlines a duple meter, though “the duple beats of the powwow drum in performance [...] are usually not performed in a manner that is understood in the West. Rather than a series of weak and strong beats in pairs, the performance sound of drum beats are equally consistent [...] Consequently, the non-Native listener might assume that the drum line is a series of single beats” (Stanfield 2010, 81).

4

7 (vocables)

11 Say O God my God

14 my Be - lov - ed my hearts' De - sire O God my God

16 my Be - lov - ed my hearts De - sire

Figure 10: Transcription excerpt of Buffy Sainte-Marie's performance for "My Heart Soars" (1995), focusing on the chorus.

(clap-clap-clap-clap)  
 ||: O God, my God, my Beloved, my heart's Desire. :||  
 ||: Ya Bahá'u'llabhá, Ya Bahá'u'llabhá, Ya Bahá'u'llabhá :||

Figure 11: Excerpts of a teaching document from the *Bahá'í Song Project* website for "O God My God." Note the emphasis on the first 'clap' (beat one). ("O God My God" n.d.)

Similarly, during the “Ya Bahá’u’lláh Abha” section (which resembles the “My Heart Soars” chorus) (see figure 12 for lyrics), the vocals repeat a simple descending line that moves from the 5th to the lower octave, providing a stereotypical rendition of a Canadian ‘First-Nations’ vocal performance. While the website does not credit Lenz or Sainte-Marie (instead, listing the prayer author as ‘Unknown’), these similarities may suggest that the global Bahá’í community has slowly adopted the recording into everyday devotional practice, but obscured its origins over time.<sup>67</sup> While these elements are problematic for perpetuating an oversimplified and tokenistic ‘Indigenous’ musicality—likely requiring acknowledgement/clarification on the *Bahá’í Song Project* site—the prayer has also been used in many Canadian Bahá’í communities, including those that boast strong First Nation’s memberships. For instance, Chelsea Horton’s dissertation research found “My Heart Soars” was a common resource for Indigenous Bahá’ís in British Columbia, some of whom shared the song at various devotional gatherings to celebrate the Faith’s embrace of First Nation communities (Horton 2013, 226-227). In this case, what may appear as a naive and (at worst) culturally essentialist prayer requires additional context and multi-sited analysis, for Bahá’ís utilize and engage with existing aesthetic resources for a myriad of reasons; deriving from individual, or broader theological beliefs about the relationships between culture, ethnicity, and the Faith’s message of global unity.

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<sup>67</sup> Anecdotally, I was first introduced to this version of the prayer in Edmonton around 2014, though the Bahá’í member who performed it attributed it to Buffy Sainte-Marie.

<b>Verse</b>	<b>Chorus</b>	<b>Verse</b>	<b>Chorus</b>
My heart soars At the mention of Your name My heart roars Like a great eternal flame Like an eagle Soaring far and high My heart soars (2X)  My heart yearns For the truth I'll see My heart yearns Like the river for the sea With an angel Watching over me My heart yearns (2X)	<i>Vocables and over-  dubbed vocal effects</i>  Say: O God, my God, my Beloved, my heart's desire! O God, my God, my Beloved, my heart's desire!	My heart cries When I feel so far away My heart cries When I know how we've strayed But when I think You love us even when we're lost Then my heart flies, my heart flies	<i>Vocables and over-  dubbed vocal effects</i>  Say: O God, my God, my Beloved, my heart's desire! O God, my God, my Beloved, my heart's desire!

Figure 12: Lyrics for “My Heart Soars” (1995) by Buffy Sainte-Marie and Jack Lenz.

C. Seals and Crofts: Eclectic and Worldly Bahá’í Sounds

Perhaps best-known for their Billboard Chart-topping hits “Summer Breeze,” the American duo *Seals and Crofts* were passionate Bahá’í converts who, in the early 1970s, incorporated several Bahá’í-related concepts and passages from the Holy Writings as the Faith “underlie[d] their entire outlook both musical and social” (Altham 1972). After a trip to Iran in the early 1970s, Jim Seals cemented his relationship with the Faith, stating in an interview: “I’ll never forget it as long as I live [...] I was already a Bahá’í, but it came home to me while I was there that it was *my* religion, that I was part of it” (Demorest 1974). The duo began learning new instruments after their conversion to the Faith in 1969 (mandolin, in the case of Dash Crofts, and guitar of Jimmy Seals)—instruments that they believed were ordained in the Writings of



‘Abdu’l-Bahá (Bernstien 1973, 48).<sup>68</sup> Over the course of their career, they would add Iranian instrumentation, hire Iranian-Bahá’í performers to appear on their recordings, and incorporate vaguely ‘Middle Eastern’ qualities and melodies. They would even host firesides after concerts for those interested in learning more about the Faith (Altham 1972), embracing their role as public voices and faces of North American Bahá’ism. The duo would eventually collaborate with the American NSA on a number of arts-based initiatives (including the 1992 World Congress). However, an *Encyclopedia of Popular Music* entry notes that by 1979 they “would leave the music business to devote themselves to [the Faith] full-time (Larkin 2009). Coinciding with this new-found path, Colin Irwin noted that the duo “made a pilgrimage to Haifa, Israel, and the Shrine of Bahá’u’lláh where they vowed to dedicate their lives, ‘talents and material wealth to the unification of this planet through the teaching of Bahá’u’lláh” (Irwin 1975).

Much of *Seals and Crofts*’ music can be categorized as ‘soft’ or ‘progressive rock,’ featuring elaborate, multi-part song forms with diverse instrumentation and psychedelic references to the East. Several of their compositions contained overt references to the Faith—a point that many rock journalists found negatively impacted their career. This can be heard in compositions like “The Year of Sunday” (1971), which addressed the notion of progressive revelation and revealed the divine revelations of Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, and Bahá’u’lláh (see figure 13), or “Hummingbird” (1971), which utilizes avian imagery to depict a new Manifestation ‘arriving’ and, subsequently, suffering the consequences of non-believers.

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<sup>68</sup> The band’s reference to mandolins indicates a Writing by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Addressing a crowd at the Wilmette House of Worship, He spoke: “I am hopeful that, during the coming Rizwan, a great feast shall be held in the land of the Mashrak-el-Azcar, a spiritual celebration prepared and the melodies of the violin and the mandolin and hymns in praise and glorification of the Lord of Hosts make all the audience joyous and ecstatic” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1909, 101).

Here, the lyrics of the first verse describe how each Manifestation of God experienced persecution during their era of dispensation: “Oh hummingbird, mankind was waiting for you to come flying along / Heavenly songbird, we were so wrong. We’ve harmed you / Oh hummingbird, lend us your wings. Let us soar in the atmosphere of Abha / Lift us up to the heaven of holiness, oh source of our being, oh hummingbird” (Seals and Crofts 2013c). There is also the inclusion of a well-known prayer from Bahá’u’lláh (1990, 295), used as a main chorus ‘hook’ for “Intone My Servant” (1973). Other examples, however, are less overt. For instance, the lyric “the Sun of Reality has dawned above eternity” in “Desert People” (1974) is a reference to the station of Bahá’u’lláh and an analogy for how God functions as “the one source of the existence and development of all phenomenal things” (Seals and Crofts 2013d) and akin to the sun in our solar system (see ‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1976, 254). Tracks like “Hollow Reed” (1970) incorporate quotes from a prayer attributed to both ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Bahá’í poet George Townshend,<sup>69</sup> while their major hit “Summer Breeze” was apparently about how “a prison can be the prison of self and a person can become insecure and paranoid if he doesn’t have a direction in his personal life” (Irwin 1975).

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<sup>69</sup> These details are found in a letter from the Department of the Secretariat at the UHJ (dated 12 December, 1999): “In response to a similar query in the past, the Research Department has advised that the first portion of the text, “O God! Make me a hollow reed from which the pith of self hath been blown, that I may become a clear channel through which Thy love may flow to others”, has often been attributed to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá; however, the Research Department has not yet located any original text and is therefore unable to verify its authenticity. As a result, the prayer may be recited or sung by the believers, but it should not be attributed to the Master nor appear under His name in books and other publications. You cite a reference which states that this prayer was in fact written by the Hand of the Cause of God George Townshend. Because this prayer has often been incorrectly quoted as the opening sentence from the following passage on page 124 of Mr. Townshend’s book *The Mission of Bahá’u’lláh* (London: George Ronald, 1965), it would give the impression that he has written the words. However, the prayer in question does not appear in his book and cannot be attributed to him” (UHJ 1999a).

### “Year of Sunday”

God made a pact with Abraham, never leave a man alone.  
So Abraham gathered his family, and brought his people home.  
Along came Moses, gave the world a push. Climbed upon a mountain high.  
He got the Ten Commandments from a burning bush and put together his first tribe.

Then came Jesus to Jerusalem, ridin' on His shoulder a dove.  
The dove upon his shoulder said he was the One, the One to teach us how to love!  
Mohammed stayed out in the desert sun, stayed out there just as long as he could.  
The Maker gave him water from the River of Life, and then he gave us nationhood.

And then time passed, soon the dark clouds, came and covered up Mohammed's sun.  
But the young Báb, down in Persia land, came to tell us of the Promised One.  
(From Bahá'í Scripture) "Lo, the nightengale of paradise  
Singeth upon the twig of the Tree of Eternity.  
With holy and sweet melodies,  
Proclaiming to the sincere ones the glad tidings of the nearness of God."  
Bahá'u'lláh! Bahá'u'lláh! Bahá'u'lláh! Bahá'u'lláh!

Figure 13: Selection of lyrics from *Seals and Crofts*' “Year of Sunday” (1972), which incorporates a section of Bahá'u'lláh's *Tablet of Ahmad*. (“Tablet of Ahmad” n.d.)

However, some directions in the duo's lyrics took many listeners off guard, delving into politically charged topics that, on some level, resonated with Bahá'í values. Namely, their album and title song “Unborn Child” presented an anti-abortion stance that led to nation-wide radio boycotts and protests.<sup>70</sup> Today, the song is adopted by pro-life advocates as a ‘rebellious’ and ‘courageous’ piece that reflects conservative, religious family values, though much of the criticism deals with issues of poor musical taste. “Unborn Child” apparently came about following a fireside they hosted in Atlanta that led to much discussion on abortion with attendees. This included an individual named Lana Day (daughter of the duo's manager), who

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<sup>70</sup> According to the Bahá'í Writings, the soul emerges at the point of conception, and while abortion is not permitted in the Faith, medical reasons for the procedure are heavily considered. Ultimately, it is left to Bahá'í families and “the consciences of those concerned who must carefully weigh the medical advice in the light of the general guidance given in the Teachings” (Hornby 1988, 345; citing a letter from the UHJ to an individual believer, dated 23 May 1975).

asked the band to write a song about the topic of abortion (Demorest 1974). However, the duo was advised against releasing it from their label, Warner Bros., as Bill DeYoung writes:

Proselytizing was and is a no-no for Bahá'ís, but Seals and Crofts had found a safe middle ground, where they could express their beliefs, and still have hit records. In 1973, however, when *Roe vs. Wade* was handed down, the singing/songwriting duo decided to put their mouth where their money was. And it cost them. The landmark Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion in the United States went against everything they believed in [...] Both Seals and Crofts insist the song's message was, simply 'don't take life too lightly,' to stop and think before going through with an abortion. But the critics tore the record to pieces, and Seals and Crofts with it. The public did not respond at the cash registers: Although the album made it to No. 14 on the Billboard chart, the single stalled at No. 66. (DeYoung 2015)

*Seals and Crofts* later acknowledged that they were ignorant to a “seething and boiling” social issue, noting: “If we'd known it was going to cause such disunity, we might have thought twice about doing it. At the time it overshadowed all the other things we were trying to say in our music” (Washburn 1991). However, the track is generally acknowledged for permanently stalling the band's success.

Beyond lyrics, *Seals and Crofts* would also elaborated upon Bahá'í concepts through incorporating clear and intentional instrumental references to Iran and the Middle East (Dash Crofts even began learning to perform on the *santour*). For Colin Irwin: “the public [was] attracted through a certain mystique in their music, perhaps attributable to a slight eastern oriental flavour, or the multi-level of their lyrics” (Irwin 1975). Some of these more ‘eclectic’ compositions were noted early on by several rock journalists. Witnessing a performance at the Troubadour club in Los Angeles, Colman Andrews muses:

They sound like some stoned Syrian oud ensemble, pickin' and grinnin' a backwoods reel, or like the Everly Brothers in Albania. They are, in other words, joyfully eclectic. And not just from song to song, but within each one. They are living, breathing, playing, singing proof that most musical barriers, useful as they may be for purposes of

classification, are in fact superfluous, since they can be transversed so skillfully and with such apparent ease [...] For their intricacy, their precision, and their serenity, they might well be called the MJQ [Modern Jazz Quartet] of soft rock. (Andrews 1971)

The duo collaborated later with notable Iranian-American Bahá'í and santour musician Manoocher Sadeghi, who appeared on the track “A Tribute to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá” (1978).<sup>71</sup> Here, Sadeghi begins the piece with a free-metered solo in *dastgah mahur* (C major), followed by an improvised vocal accompaniment in Farsi on a “poem that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’ wrote many years ago to his father, Bahá’u’lláh, the founder of the Bahá’í faith” (Seals and Crofts 2013e). Sadeghi’s performance follows general conventions set out in the Persian classical tradition by providing the ‘introductory’ material for the *dastgah* (the *daramad*) (Nooshin 1996, 170), focusing primarily in the lower register of the santour and showcasing the intervallic range of *mahur*. However, the song then transitions to the relative minor following Sadeghi’s emphasis on E (santour), introducing the fifth of A minor (the opening chord in the new section), which alternates to Bb major on the acoustic guitar. This section, which includes the main lyrics for the song (see figure 14), is performed in a 6/8 feel and echoes the santour’s characteristic ‘rolls’ in Dash Croft’s mandolin (i.e., utilizing a quick tremolo technique on a single string). In the largely instrumental composition “Nine Houses” (1973)—itself a reference to sacred Bahá’í numerology—the song moves between flamenco, rock, bluegrass, and Western classical styles, as well as featuring a wah-pedal-soaked electric guitar in the bridge that leads into a new ‘Middle Eastern’ section (D melodic minor) replete with strings and mixed time signatures (5/4, 9/4) (see figure 15). Rather than signifying anything particularly ‘Bahá’í’ (the song could be best described as

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<sup>71</sup> This piece was reprised during the second day of the Second Bahá’í World Congress in 1992, following the same sequence of Sadeghi’s solo, however bolstered with additional orchestration behind Croft’s vocals.

‘psychedelic’), the lyrics are ambiguously focused around the ‘senses’ and the vocals are performed in unison with the lead guitar melody (see figure 16). In contrast, “Traces” (1987) tells the story of Mona Mahmudnizhad and ten martyred Bahá’í women in Shiraz who were executed on 18 June 1983 (see figure 17). This story and other Iranian persecutory narratives forms a considerable body of ‘Bahá’í music’ beginning in the early 1980s, contributing to broader international awareness about the Faith after the 1979 Revolution and providing teaching opportunities for Bahá’ís, particularly in North America (see Chapter 4 for more details). The song appears on a rare album produced by Jack Lenz titled “Jewel in the Lotus: Music Dedicated to the Bahá’í House of Worship in India” (1987), which marked the celebration of the Bahá’í House of Worship in Delhi, India (the famed “Lotus Temple”) (“Jewel in the Lotus” n.d.).

Performed with a small choir and simple piano accompaniment, the piece includes an extended solo section with a droning, sitar-like instrument and synthesizer flute improvising over the E-flat harmonic minor scale (focusing mainly on runs between the Bb-B-Cb-Eb, thus giving it a ‘Middle Eastern’ quality). As the piece fades, the names of each of the ten martyred Shirazi Bahá’ís are read by child narrators atop a short rhythmic figure performed on a single drum (see figure 18). In this instance, linkages between the Faith, the band, and elements in the song are far more explicit, providing contextual details for distinct musical elements (ie. the ‘flute’ solo). But why would an album that commemorates the opening ceremony for the Indian House of Worship include a piece like “Traces”? As I will discuss in the following chapter, Iranian religious persecution post-1979 galvanized Bahá’ís around the world, contributing to a sense of identity formation (particularly for non-Iranian Bahá’ís) and inspiring a number of musicians to explore

musical traditions, instrumentation, and various sounds in order to dramatize the persecutory narrative.

<b>A Tribute to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá</b>
<p>Tearfully I raise my hands, and supplicate unto thee in prayer.            Close my eyes and you're there again. It's not the end. You are with me always.            Abdu'l-Bahá, your footsteps are oh so hard to follow.            For a broken-winged bird whose flight is very slow, such a long, long way to go.</p> <p>Hopefully, I turn my face to Thee, and ask forgiveness.            All my life I've been blind. Now I see.            Mankind is one, all religions agree.            Abdu'l-Bahá, the lessons of your life are here to follow.            Now this broken-winged bird, whose flight is very slow.            Has a way to go - home.</p>
<p>Lyrics by James Seals; music by James Seals and Dash Crofts (1978)</p>

Figure 14: Lyrics for “A Tribute to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá” (Seal and Crofts 1978).

The image shows a transcription of the vocal melody for the bridge section of the song "Nine Houses". It consists of three staves of music. The first staff is in 5/4 time and contains the first three measures. The second staff is in 6/4 time and contains measures 4 through 5. The third staff is in 5/4 time and contains measures 6 and 7, ending with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Figure 15: Transcription of vocal melody in the bridge section of “Nine Houses” (Seals and Crofts 1973).

<b>“Nine Houses”</b>
<p>I can see, I can feel.            I can do a million things in dreams where            sense is no longer needed.            In the wilderness, in the wilderness.            I can cross a million streams in dreams where sense is no longer needed.            Children in cocoons, many coloured tunes.            Seem to make their way into a day where sense is no longer needed.</p>
<p>Seals and Crofts (1973)</p>

Figure 16: Lyrics for the bridge section of the song “Nine Houses” (1973).

<b>“Traces”</b>
<p>Red is the color they wear.            Death is the shadow that was never there.            They left their traces in the sun, and thus they won the crown of martyrdom            In the Abha kingdom.</p> <p>Faith is the essence they shared.            Fate is the reason they cared.            I hear their voices proud and strong.            It's a martyr song at the break of dawn            Saying, "carry on."</p> <p>Ten is the number of angel's songs.            Ten is the number of flowers that grow.            They line the pathway that he chose.</p> <p>Crimson roses, beautiful roses, martyr's roses            We must carry on.</p> <p>Red is the color they wear.            Shining, the faces so fair.            They mark the spirits soaring high.            In the spaceless sky, so that you and I            Behold the traces. . .</p>

Figure 17: Lyrics for *Seals and Crofts*' "Traces" (1987).



Figure 18: Drum pattern during the conclusion of "Traces" (1987).

#### *D. Musical Exoticism in the Bahá'í Faith?*

In many respects, the compositional techniques employed in *Seals and Crofts*' music (among other examples discussed in this chapter) can evoke questions about Western exoticism—what Timothy Taylor defines as “manifestations of an awareness of racial, ethnic, and cultural Others captured in sound” (Taylor 2007, 2). Ralph P. Locke outlines some of the features of musical exoticism, as defined according to an ‘Exotic-Style Paradigm,’ which “assumes that music is, by compositional intent, exotic—and that it registers as exotic to the listener—if (and,



only if) it incorporates specific musical signifiers of Otherness” (2009, 48). This analytical approach tends to prioritize “the ultimate empirical evidence: the notes of the score, ‘the music itself,’” which risks conceiving “music history primarily in terms of styles and genres [...] rather than in terms of institutions, functions, meanings, and performative (and listening) practices” (44). From a compositional standpoint, historical examples of musical exoticism include: employing modal and harmonic material that are generally considered ‘non-normative,’ using constantly shifting harmonies, scales with chromatically ‘altered’ notes, distinctive rhythmic or melodic patterns, instrumental lines that emulate vocal melismatic lines in a given tradition, intentional and obtrusive ‘quick ornaments,’ foreign musical instruments, distinctive instrumental techniques, among others (Locke 2009, 51-54). For Locke, these various “‘nuts and bolts’ of musical exoticism range widely, from drones and ‘primitive’ harmonies to foreign or at least unusual-sounding tunes and rhythms,” as “the distinction between relatively concrete and faithful borrowings and utterly imaginary inventions may be [...] a real and important one to some listeners” (49).

Minor keys have also been employed as a Western musical marker of ethnic difference (Scott 1998, 310) in Orientalist depictions of Muslims, Turks, North Africans, the Balkan region, and countless Others, as well as connoting ‘sadness’ among Western listeners—a phenomenon associated with small pitch movement and linguistic studies of ‘sad’ vocal prosody (see Huron and Davis 2012). In both cases, the sounds (i.e. sitar, ‘Arabesque’ flute) and melismatic embellishments over the harmonic minor often signify ‘sadness,’ as well as an intentional cue for Middle Eastern/Persian immersion. As Taylor outlines in his study on the topic of musical

exoticism (2007), these aesthetic representations coincided with European colonial expansion to the New World, which

prompted the construction of new modes of difference, of new forms of otherness, and [...] played an important, even constitutive role, role in making modern selfhood. A new conception of otherness was one result of the colonial encounter, and a crucial factor in the rise of modernity itself. (9)

This process of colonial encounter also “solidi[fied] European conceptions of selfhood” through musical strategies and developments, “register[ing] in the establishment of tonality (the system of functional harmony that was dominant in art music in the west from round 1600 to 1900 and remains dominant in most western musics) and the rise of opera as a coherent genre” (17-18), thus serving “practical purposes for composers by facilitating melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic innovations” (211). In this manner, claims of exoticism carry with it a legacy of power, xenophobia, and Western domination through periods of colonialism, imperialism, and globalization (9). However, exoticism is often “a stylistic label; it does not explain anything in and of itself. Instead, it obscures. Calling a work, or a trend, or an oeuvre ‘exotic’ can impede [...] deeper historical, cultural, and social analysis” (Taylor 2007, 209). For Taylor, the musicologist then asks during instances of exoticism: “Who is represented, how, to what ends, and to whose ends?” (50).

While the use of Persian, Middle Eastern, and other non-Western musical elements may cohere with the Faith’s ‘unity in diversity’ aesthetic, or articulate a sense of honouring Bahá’í history and martyrs in Iran, the practice can justifiably provoke concern among non-Bahá’í scholars. These issues are especially relevant for most of the music I examine in this dissertation, which work primarily from a Western popular or art music tradition. It is important to highlight

that institutional guidance from the UHJ cautions against the tendency to conventionalize culturally-specific devotional practices in the Faith (as outlined in compilations about African traditional music) (UHJ 1998b), whereas Ludwig Tuman's individual Bahá'í reading advocates for an approach to non-Western borrowing, but from a distinctly *Westernized* musical entry point. For these reasons, Bahá'í artists in the West should consider if their own relationships with music perpetuate a sense of Western cultural hegemony, as well as how they perceive and integrate 'worldly' elements into their compositions. Doing so may help refine Bahá'í compositional discourses and strategies, as well as destabilize notions that Western music implies objectivity or a 'culture-free' space of creation.

As previously outlined in Chapter Two, such negotiations between the Faith's history, global outlook, and Western expansion are not new, but speak to a legacy of Bahá'í leaders ('Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi) translating the Faith's message to a broader, 'non-Eastern' audience. However, there has developed a tendency to disseminate Bahá'í ideas and concepts through a largely Westernized perspective (here, my own scholarly focus on mostly English-speaking, non-Iranian musicians in North America certainly does nothing to alleviate this). For instance, Margit Warburg argues that Bahá'ís have largely engaged in broader systems of discourse (what she defines as 'the world system of societies') through the mechanism of the "New York based Bahá'í International Community, which has a consultative status in the United Nations System and refers directly to the Bahá'í World Centre [in Israel]" (Warburg 2006, 105). Regarding issues with Bahá'í pioneering (a program of International missionary work in the Faith), Moojan Momen claims that some Bahá'ís make the mistake of projecting a Westernized vision of Bahá'ism abroad. This is because the "method by which the Bahá'í Faith

is diffused consists in large measure of the transfer of people from one culture to another, often from modern Western society to a traditional culture” (Momen 1987). Continuing, Momen believes that Western pioneers risk “impos[ing] an image of Bahá’u’lláh derived from Western cultural models upon the rest of the world,” arguing that they should not “hang on too tightly to their preconceptions of what Bahá’u’lláh and the Bahá’í Faith are, for these will be conceptions evolved within and therefore suited to a Western conceptual universe.” Here, Momen refers to a writing from Shoghi Effendi that describes *how* the Faith can “mean in each local culture,” as well as the role of pioneers,

which is to adapt the presentation of the fundamental principles of their Faith to the cultural and religious backgrounds, the ideologies, and the temperament of the diverse races and nations whom they are called upon to enlighten and attract. (Momen 1987; citing Effendi 1980, 25)

However, the original cited passage continues with Effendi specifying the degree of consideration needed for a successful pioneering experience:

The susceptibilities of these races and nations, from both the northern and southern climes, springing from either the Germanic or Latin stock, belonging to either the Catholic or Protestant communion, some democratic, others totalitarian in outlook, some socialistic, others capitalistic in their tendencies, differing widely in their customs and standards of living, should at all times be carefully considered, and under no circumstances neglected. (25)

From this perspective, the Faith *is* articulated and expressed differently with each place-based context. *And yet*, the goal is also to engender a global, unified Bahá’í identity that ‘sees past’ our differences, places authority in the Covenant and the Bahá’í administrative process, as well as challenges our reliance on traditional customs to allow for a ‘new’ Bahá’í culture to emerge. These inter-related outcomes present the Faith both within an indigenously derived theological context (i.e., the emergence of a Bahá’í Golden Age), as well as a religion that expresses itself

somewhat differently in each localized context. But given the current status of Bahá'ís in Iran, some musical significations can also be framed as melancholic and distressed: articulating a vision or idea of Iran before the Revolution, or grieving the impossibility for any Bahá'í to freely visit Iran and express their Faith in the country. In this sense, *Seals and Crofts*' "Traces" can also function as a lament for Bahá'í martyrs: its reimagined Persian/Middle Eastern elements intentionally honour and universalize their sacrifice for the global Bahá'í community to mourn and identify with. In this way, the musically 'exotic' can perform a meaningful role in generating Bahá'í communitas; signifying concrete instances of religious oppression, a global celebration of the Faith's diverse membership (here, reflected in the utterances of an American band performing with a choir to commemorate an Indian House of Worship), as well as dramatizing a history of trauma and persecution that befell the Faith since its inception.

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Before I continue to explore musical representations of Iranian Bahá'í religious persecution in the following chapter, I wish to conclude this section by way of comparison: music and Mormonism. Not only did the Mormon faith emerge around the same time as Bahá'ism, it also expanded internationally and diversified its membership, leading to confrontations with its own (Western) cultural legacies and aesthetic practices. My overview of Mormon music is not meant as analogous to Bahá'ism, but merely a case study about how another 'young' world religion has dealt with global conversion *and* the localization of devotional practices. As Bahá'ís continue to develop music around the world, studying the successes and challenges of other faiths can provide ample opportunities for reflection and consultation.

*E: Music and Mormonism: A Comparative Perspective*

In many respects, Bahá'í discourses about music and the future development of a 'Golden Age' share remarkable similarities with 'Zion' in Mormonism (formally instituted as members of the *Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, or LDS Church)—a faith that has navigated its own questions about fostering devotional identity as its membership progressively internationalized. Although I will not be able to delve deeply into the history and teachings of the LDS Church, the revelation of its founder Joseph Smith (1805-1844), or Mormon Holy Texts, I will focus on musical discourses in the LDS Church that present critical points of reflection for the Bahá'í Faith and its music.

Sometimes referred to as “‘the American religion’ [and] one of the Western Hemisphere’s novel contributions to global spirituality” (Mason 2017, 2), Mormons believe in establishing a heavenly kingdom on earth, the *Gathering of Zion*: a new Israel to usher in the Second Coming of Christ, Messiah. According to the official LDS Church website, Zion at once refers to “the pure in heart” in scripture, as well as physical locations such as the lost City of Enoch, the Ancient City of Jerusalem, and the ‘New Jerusalem’ (established in Jackson County, Missouri) (“Zion” n.d.). However, as the religion expanded and its membership internationalized, ideas about Zion also changed:

In the early days of this dispensation, Church leaders counseled members to build up Zion by emigrating to a central location. Today our leaders counsel us to build up Zion wherever we live. Members of the Church are asked to remain in their native lands and help establish the Church there. (“Zion” n.d.)

In addition to these conceptions of Zion, individual Mormons continually improve themselves and refine their sense of faith by looking outward and “gathering truth from any source” (Hicks

1989, 209). This proclamation, given by Brigham Young (1801-1877)—second president of the LDS Church—was first introduced by Smith, who described salvation as “consist[ing] of eternal progress, chiefly mental progress” (91). Continuing, Michael Hicks writes that

[Bingham] Young taught that the citizens of Zion would acquire truth partly through revelation and prayer, and partly through the ‘arts and sciences,’ the latter being a catch-all phrase that for him included any social grace or refinement, from tempering copper to painting murals, from farming to music theory. And Young believed that some of those refinements might well lie outside of Western culture, that indeed the ‘arts and sciences in the so-called heathen nations in many respects excel the attainments of the Christian nations.’ (209)

In the arena of music, Bingham Young and other Mormon apostles placed considerable emphasis on its role in devotional life, contributing to nuanced understandings of Zion itself. Here, Hicks describes how Young wanted to “enhance Zion” by supporting trained artists and musicians (114), as Mormon composers sought to “edify the Mormon nation with European-style concert music,” desiring for a sense of aesthetic ‘perfection’ in Zion: “a place that must advance in culture until it became the kingdom of God on earth” (Hicks 1989, 91). In this way, Zion’s ongoing process of gathering refinement and ‘progressive development’ uniquely resonates with the Bahá’í Golden Age: an *eventual* realization of sacred perfection and global unity. However, the overall effort to prepare and ‘build up’ Zion led to an “obsession” among early Mormons “for ‘home’ production of all kinds [...] [that] extended to virtually everything within the culture: home fashion, home literature, and even home music”; curtailing Young’s interests in nurturing European and American art music, as LDS church musicians wrote their own hymns instead of “relying on borrowed music of every sort, from hymn tunes to theatre music and parlour songs” (109). Outside of Salt Lake City, more simplified hymns became very popular in Mormon

communities and among their folk musicians, as exemplified in the *Beehive Songster* songbook (1868), which was deliberately meant to showcase “simple and plain” songs (114).

According to Margit Warburg, there are a number of structural similarities between Mormonism and the Bahá’í Faith:

[both] originated in the nineteenth century, both have a centralised religious authority residing at a religious headquarters, both are active in mission all over the world, and they are not so different with respect to number of followers (the Mormons count 11 million, the Baha’is 5 million). (Warburg 2006, 446-447)

Here, the author considers both religions as “transnational imagined communities,” articulating a “feeling of commonness across national boundaries” (103). This characterization is mirrored by Patrick Mason, who describes Mormonism through a sense of transnational ‘peoplehood’ that, in the nineteenth century, was even thought of by “Mormons and non-Mormons alike [...] as a new ‘race’ (Mason 2017, 3). Despite being considered ‘ideal national citizens,’ Mormon church leaders “insist that a distinctive yet not fully defined ‘gospel culture’ should override any aspects of national, local, or ethnic culture that clash with Mormon doctrine or practice” (4). The LDS Church also engages in processes of institutional oversight, articulated through “a program of centralized institutional authority called ‘correlation’ [that] streamlines decisions over everything from architecture to Sunday School curriculum” (4). However, in Bahá’í scholarship and guidance, Mormonism essentially foretold the coming of Bahá’u’lláh. This is indicated in an early issue of *Bahá’i World* magazine (1944), which outlines Mormon theology and its concurrence with Bahá’ism and refers to Joseph Smith’s account of the “Doctrine of Covenants”:

When Joseph prayed to know the time of the coming of the Son of Man, he was informed: “Joseph, my son, if thou livest until thou art eighty five years old, thou shalt see the face of the Son of Man.” Joseph Smith was born in 1805, hence in 1890 he would have been 85. Who else has there been upon the earth between the years 1843 (the date



of this message) and 1890 except Bahá'u'lláh who could have fulfilled this remarkable prophecy? (Lamb 1944, 261)

However, the question of whether Joseph Smith is considered a prophet in Bahá'í theology provoked several letters and statements on behalf of Effendi and the UHJ, the latter indicating:

As there is nothing specific about Joseph Smith in the teachings, the Guardian has no statement to make on his position or about the accuracy of any statement in the Book of Mormon regarding American history or its peoples. This is a matter for historians to pass upon. (Collins 1990; citing Effendi 1976, 71)

A letter dated 7 February 1977 from the UHJ to an individual believer also describes Smith not as a prophet, but as “a religious teacher sensitive to the spiritual currents flowing in the early 19th century directly from the appearance of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh and the Revelation of Their Messages of hope and divine Guidance” (Hornby 1988, 512). As such, the similarities between the two religions only go so far, with Bahá'ism presenting itself as the *fulfillment* of Mormon prophecy.

Musical developments in the LDS Church also share several similarities with Bahá'ism, particularly regarding the influence of other sacred musical practices. Mormonism established itself within a predominately Protestant American landscape (akin to Western Bahá'í converts) and the denomination's influence can be found “largely in the specific realms of music and worship” (though, the LDS Church “has always taken a cautious and conservative approach to its broad, cultural development, such as in art, dance, and architecture”) (Kear 2001, 78). Early LDS hymnody “borrowed from existing Protestant collections, mainly Presbyterian and Methodist,” as well as formalized the organ as their principal instrument for worship (78). Owing to a culture of ecstatic evangelism and camp meetings in the USA during the early 1800s, singing in tongues also became a widespread practice in early Mormonism, even providing a vehicle for songs

about searching for Zion (Hicks 1989, 35-37). In short, Mormons inherited and drew from musical resources and practices that reflected the culture of American religiosity of the time—dynamics that would later become a point of internal debate in the LDS Church. According to Warrick N. Kear, Mormons have been ‘shedding’ the cultural, religious, and aesthetic baggage of earlier faiths since Brigham Young’s leadership, where around 1870 “the practice of borrowing hymn tunes and words from other denominations all but ceased” and “Latter-day Saint composers were encouraged to write original tunes for their hymnals” (Kear 2001, 79). In 1946, the Church instituted a prohibition of music “during the eucharistic ritual of the passing of the bread and water in church, known in Latter-day Saint terminology as ‘taking the sacrament’” (79-80). And, in 1980, there was a dramatic “reduction from the traditionally Protestant style of two blocks of meetings each Sunday to one three-hour block [...] represent[ing] a watershed in the process of de-Protestantisation, or the moving away from previously adopted Protestant forms of worship” (77).

However, Kear describes the LDS Church’s relationship with music as “dysfunctional,” outlining a “lessening dependency on music” throughout its history (86), including its role during sanctification rituals. Here, the Mormon Temple became seen as a place that “is already sufficiently sanctified through its ceremony of dedication and the sacred character of the activities performed within its walls” (89). Under the first presidency of the LDS Church, music was warned as a “distraction” and a “source of impurity” during their sacrament service; the unaccompanied spoken word and silence interpreted as a “more direct” and “unambiguous mode of ritual expression,” in contrast with an ambiguity of meaning through music (90). Like the Bahá’í Faith, music in the LDS Church is both seen as a vehicle for elevating sacred experience,

as well as a potential distraction or hinderance for believers to access sacrality and hear the divine Word (the primacy of the text). There are also fascinating parallels with how the LDS Church addressed certain musical practices that have become conventionalized in Mormon communities around the world. This is evidenced in Kear's reference to a *General Church Handbook* (published in 1960) that warns against a practice that was "common in some churches of the world" (i.e., meditating quietly while music is playing in the background), as well as in an *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* entry that critiqued certain practices among British LDS members:

Wishing to avoid the loss of Mormonism's basically populist spirit and lay-oriented worship, it [church leadership] repeatedly spoke and wrote against such Oxford-style innovations as wearing choir robes, giving choral benedictions, and meditating during musical postludes. (80)

As the Mormon faith began to internationalize and expand its membership across Africa, the Pacific Islands, and Asia, its leadership advocated that hymnals should "meet the varied needs of today's worldwide Church membership," which included "fewer Protestant-type hymns [...] as well as a significant number of new LDS hymn compositions and the internationalization of selected hymn texts" (80-81). Hicks notes that the Mormon Church Music Committee was aware of questions about "what could be played *in church*" in missionary communities for some time, citing their support of the Catholic Church's Vatican Councils of 1962-65 and their approach to "adapting worship to [the people's] native genius...[and] promoting the traditional music of these peoples, both in schools and in sacred services, as far as may be practicable" (Hicks 1989, 219). But the LDS Church's historical and theological conflicts with

Black members—considered to be the cursed descendants of Cain,<sup>72</sup> leading to practices of vetting ‘pure’ European lineage of priesthood candidates, as well as the delayed acceptance of Black males be ordained in the Mormon priesthood until 1978 (Mauss 2010, 231-232)—would translate into problematic musical discourses in missions across Africa. Here, Hicks describes how the integration of drumming and other musical practices in West African Mormon communities disturbed missionaries, leading one missionary president to declare music and dancing “satanic” and “descend[ing] from the culture of Cain himself,” leading to the bans on drums and music, as well as prompting secret services be held in the ‘old style’ among African converts when missionaries left (221). In this regard, Hicks concludes that as Mormons

encounter some of the world’s most ancient musical traditions, they will grapple with a longstanding dilemma: whether to pry their converts away from those traditions or to preserve the traditions from cultural erosion. And as Zion implants itself in nations whose identities are inseparable from their music, it will find fresh dilemmas about its own music, its own identity. (222)

Kear is far less optimistic, believing that an inherently Western tonality and cultural hegemony is present in Mormon hymnody, creating barriers for the diversification of global musical aesthetics in the religion. Instead, music and other “outward forms of religious culture” may not serve “as the flagship of [Mormon] institutional identity,” placing greater emphasis on “inner reinforcement of socially relevant foundational and sectarian beliefs,” such as family values, sexual purity, and gender roles:

Western tonality, on which the LDS church’s musical language is based, is exactly that—Western. Most Eastern Asian tonalities are not based upon the tonic scale. The Chinese

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<sup>72</sup> According to Armand L. Mauss, the apostle Joseph Fielding Smith (son of the sixth President of the LDS Church, Joseph F. Smith) “codified the entire framework of Mormon racialist teaching,” which “postulated a divine rank-ordering of lineages with the descendants of ancient Ephraim (son of Joseph) at the top (including the Mormons); the “seed of Cain” (Africans) at the bottom; and various other lineages in between” (Mauss 2010, 217).

have a very specialized form of pentatonic music, and Indian culture enjoys ornamental quarter-tones and un-Western rhythms that are very complex, not to mention the strangely religious, percussive music of the Javanese Gamelan. Certain Indian subcultures sing their scriptures, considering it blasphemous and vulgar to speak them. How will these peoples sing “Come, Come Ye Saints,” for instance, or adjust to hearing scripture spoken in conference? The scale and scope of such cultural assimilation can hardly be imagined. (92)

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The experiences and discourses around music in the LDS Church present a number of disparate and relatable topics for Bahá'ís to consider. In anticipation of a ‘future’ musical culture, Bahá'í artists and communities may wish to engage in a process of self-examination: reflecting upon ideas about music and culture in the Faith, personal relationships with particular musical styles and traditions, as well as how these factors relate to institutional guidance and administrative precedent. Regarding the latter aspect, Bahá'í communities and Local Assemblies may need to consult about music differently, prompting a broader *aesthetic* discussion, rather than gathering for a more utilitarian purpose (such as organizing music for an upcoming Bahá'í event). As Bahá'ís, we might ask ourselves: *are current, global music trends in the Faith reflective of our diversity? Where do our models for programming music at devotions, Holy Days, and feasts come from, and what alternatives can we develop? In what way is ‘unity’ achieved or articulated across national, cultural, and linguistic contexts if Western musical styles prevail? Does Western cultural hegemony matter from a Bahá'í aesthetic perspective?* Such questions, while framed around music, speak to much broader notions of Bahá'í identity and devotional practice: they challenge Bahá'ís to examine the cultural and aesthetic milieus in which they live, including those unspoken and taken-for-granted elements that persist in our theological soundworld.

## Chapter 4

### *Performing Trauma, Signifying Iran: Musical Narratives of Iranian Bahá'í Religious Persecution*

*Until [...] (1980) I was a member of the Bahá'í Assembly, but I have never distributed any publication against the Islamic Republic. Concerning the tapes, I must mention that you may play all of them right here, and if you find in these tapes anything except classical Iranian music, then you may execute me. ("Report from Trial of Farhang Maveddat, Chair of Bahá'í Assembly of Karaj" n.d.)<sup>73</sup>*

The legacy and enduring realities of Iranian persecution has long been a galvanizing force for the Bahá'ís, often dominating press and media coverage about the Faith in the broader international community. In many respects, the world became much more aware about the Faith in the early 1980s precisely *because* of religious oppression, so much so that persecution was approached as a teaching tool, particularly within the American Bahá'í community. For instance, the US National Spiritual Assembly sent out messages in 1981 “about how to use news reports about Persian persecution as opportunities to teach the Faith,” issuing the following statement: “Remember! Use of the current events and news stories about the Faith can be an excellent springboard to teaching” (McMullen 2015, 175-176). In June 1983, the NSA also wrote:

It is evident that the persecution of the Bahá'ís will not cease until the Cause has grown to a size and prominence that will compel the respectful attention of the world. We are fortunate that because of the events in Iran the earth is resounding with the proclamation of the Faith. Teaching opportunities become more abundant with every report of the oppressors' blow. Indeed, we have a chance for success that should not be allowed to slip from our grasp.” (176)

The circulation of news regarding Iranian oppression and religious discrimination thus became an important rallying call among American Bahá'ís—an opportunity to raise awareness and to

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<sup>73</sup> The above quotation is drawn from testimony by the former Chair of the Bahá'í Spiritual Assembly of Karaj, Farhang Maveddat. Originally featured in the Iranian newspaper *Ettelaat* on 25 April 1981, the article is reprinted and translated in the *Archives of Bahá'í Persecution in Iran* (organized under the auspices of the *Bahá'í International Community*).

support their Iranian co-religionists, while also achieving broader goals for attracting new converts. Between 1979-1996, the Bahá'í community—largely centred through activities in the USA—“emerged from obscurity, raising its public profile primarily through its vigorous defense of the Iranian Bahá'is facing persecution” (211). Utilizing media reports and letter-writing campaigns, the American National Spiritual Assembly called upon all Bahá'is to contact elected representatives in the country (which led to congressional hearings in 1982), as well as holding national prayer meetings at the House of Worship in Wilmette, among other outreach activities. “By October 1981,” writes McMullen, “there were over 200 local media committees and 300 local media contact persons to handle inquiries from newspapers and TV stations prompted by stories of Persian Bahá'is” (177). Ultimately these activities “helped legitimate the Bahá'í Faith in the eyes of the American public and US government” (179), and led to entirely new ways in which the Faith would engage in civil society, with the support of the NSA and the UHJ. As such, Bahá'is both at the individual and institutional level “needed to mature” (212), resulting in a period of transition and intensified civil activity throughout the early 1980s.

Margit Warburg similarly acknowledged a transformation in the Bahá'í community in the 1980s, though without attributing it to any intensified activities related to Iranian persecution. In a period “roughly between ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's overseas travels before World War I and the 1980s,” Warburg claims “the Bahá'is were involved only to a limited extent in society as an organised community [...] [and] were not particularly seeking to influence society” (Warburg 2006, 475). This changed radically in the mid 1980s as Warburg cites a letter from the UHJ in 1985, which encouraged Bahá'is to become involved in grassroots, collaborative social and economic development projects; global health and education initiatives; and community broadcasting (see

Warburg 2006, especially Chapter 11). Not only this, but “from the mid 1980s, the UHJ also began a more activist policy of addressing governments and the United Nations System in a series of statements on issues of global significance [...] in booklets or pamphlets,” including the text *The Promise of World Peace* in 1985, which “denounces the materialistic side of both capitalism and communism, and promulgates the Bahá’í principles of unity and equality” (503). Warburg also noted how this greater engagement in civil society post-1979 was reflected in intensified work among representatives at the BIC, which allowed the Bahá’ís to participate “in a considerable number of United Nations events through the 1970s and 1980s” (501). Through the traumas of religious persecution, the global Bahá’í community responded with social causes, projects, and media campaigns that, in turn, helped bolster greater awareness about the Faith, in general.

#### *A. Translating Persecution into Music*

In the arts, Iranian persecution was treated as an aesthetic resource, allowing musicians to retell stories of religious oppression, incarceration, and martyrdom; reimagine the perspectives and legacies of key figures; devise compositional strategies to sonically represent Iran; or remember historic events that remain significant in Bahá’í theology. Much of this work also began in the 1980s, including among several Canadian Bahá’í musicians. Due to the significance of religious oppression in the global Bahá’í community, I consider ‘Iranian Bahá’í religious persecution’ as a *primary narrative discourse* in the Faith, stimulating aesthetic practices that address a broad range of historical events, figures, and activities that collectively cohere into a universalized persecution discourse. Here, I draw from Gerard Genette, who writes that “narrative lives by its relationship to the story that it recounts,” whereas “discourse [...] lives by



its relationship to the narrating that utters it” (Genette 1980, 29). Accordingly, this chapter will explore the narrative discourse of Iranian Bahá’í persecution and the “relationships between narrative and *story*, between narrative and *narrating*, and (to the extent that they are inscribed in the narrative discourse) between story and narrating” (29; emphasis mine). However, the ways in which this narrative is musically represented varies with each artist and recording, emphasizing relationships between musicians, prominent stories (and figures) of persecution in the Faith, as well as the role of ‘official’ Bahá’í administrative bodies that circulate these stories to the wider community. The following chapter will detail musical narratives of Iranian Bahá’í persecution by focusing on a selection of recordings and videos in the pop, folk, and hip-hop genres. Adopting a multimodal approach, the analysis will not be limited to purely sonic phenomena, but will include visual and textual elements to enhance understanding about the ways in which music is created, disseminated, and consumed in the Faith.

### *B. Music and Martyrdom*

According to Mia Bloom, martyrs are ‘religious witnesses,’ referring to “the witness as the most powerful form of advertisement—communicating personal credibility and dedication” (Bloom 2017, 182; citing David Cook 2007, 1). Martyrdom, then, “is the process of making one’s death by violence meaningful” (182), and for those who are “struck down by the violence of the powerful [...] martyrdom of this type is a testimony...this martyrdom is an act of love” (188; citing Hardt and Negri 2004, 346). Subsequently ‘cultures of martyrdom’ develop in a multitude of contexts, including among ethnic groups inhabiting conflict zones; legacies of past humiliations among a particular community; involvement of state (or proto-state) institutions;

through children's education, the media, as well as 'secular sources' (including music and music videos) (183). For Amir Moosavi, the narrative of martyrdom is a critical dynamic for contemporary Iranian politics and aesthetics, particularly since the Iran/Iraq War. For instance, the potency of the martyr symbol helped lead to the development of "a body of wartime literature emerged that was fundamentally enchanted with battlefield death [...] [where] martyrdom was repeatedly portrayed as an inherently meaningful action for a war that was promoted on nationalist and religious grounds" (Mossavi 2015, 10). Through the mechanisms of the Islamic Republic and its relationship to its political adversaries (particularly the USA), any event—including an Iranian military C-130 plane crash that, due to the American embargo, was in such a state of disrepair and unable to receive replacement parts from the USA—could be marked as an instance of martyrdom, as the concept is "no longer confined to the domain of theology alone" and can become "discursively linked to the martyred body of Hussein" (Kaur 2010, 443). The ways in which these symbols are employed and disseminated speaks to the significance of the martyr in persecutory narratives, as well as how both governments and marginalized communities utilize them for political gain, or community building.

For some scholars, martyrdom is understood as a type of performance (or, more specifically, a *ritual* performance). According to Linda M. Pitcher's work on Palestinian *shaheen* (martyrs), the stories and languages we use to tell each other about martyrs help "mark the symbolic space of the martyr present in speech, poetry, [and] song" through coded references of blood to the land, for instance (Pitcher 1998, 24); reflecting a "duality in the performance of an act that is at once profoundly subjective and ultimately objectifying" (19). Accordingly, the study of musical representations of martyrdom, whether from religious, nationalistic, ethnic, and other

marginalized contexts, uncover complex re-enactments of past conflicts, traumas, theologies of noble death, and processes of collective memory-making. In the context of the Egyptian Uprising of 2011, Carolyn Ramzy's research on *taratil* in the Coptic Christian community detailed how a musical revival reframed "Coptic subjectivity as modern-day martyrs ready to give up their livelihood, time in service, and even their lives for the Egyptian Orthodox faith" (Ramzy 2016, 436). David A. McDonald's (2009) study of protest music and songs of Palestinian martyrdom also highlighted how musical meanings change over time, becoming progressively incorporated into "new social frames" through a sense of "familial intimacy." Here, "feelings of home and family become layered with new associations of nation, resistance, and martyrdom [...] The nation becomes circumscribed as an extended family, related by shared history, ancestral land, and a common cause or affliction" (67). For Palestinians living in exile,

such music performances offer an important forum for symbolically resisting foreign occupation, protesting social injustice, and beseeching international intervention [...] The performative action constitutive of these events is particularly important in its capacity to engender powerful associations of shared history, suffering, and dispossession between disparate (and desperate) communities. Violence, musically performed in mimetic acts of martyrdom and resistance, is a fundamental contingent for these events to communicate meaning among participants. The collective feelings of community engendered through performance bring forth the potentiality for the nation to exist within a concrete social space. (68)

During times of war and bloodshed, however, music can be seen as a vehicle for galvanizing patriotic support, while simultaneously being deemed socially inappropriate, considering its associations with joy and happiness. As Jane C. Sugarman found (2010), while some musicians in Kosovo ceased performing and recording music during the Yugoslav wars (1991-2001), several Albanian folkloric songs and 'hyper-ethnic' pop songs emerged (21), including patriotic songs about martyred Albanian freedom fighters (19). Bahá'ís in the West have similarly adopted

more restrained and cautious approaches to the use of music as a tool for commemorating Iranian martyrs, especially during the 1980s at the height of governmental oppression in the country (more on this later).

The performance of martyrdom, then, signals complex relationships with death, framed in distinct ethnic, religious, and/or nationalistic contexts (among other categories) that interpellate the subject as a participant in a sacred sound world: one that is figured by a pan-historical, yet immanent ‘presence’ (or, aura) of death, conveyed through forms of aesthetic labour that revisit, memorialize, and re-members sites of martyrdom. This musical ‘deathwork’—an epistemological concept where, following death, the body “passes into an alternate sensory and dialogically sonic realm” (Gill 2017)—re-members martyrdom *through* the act of performance. Unpacking some of the relationships between performance, memory work, and martyrdom as a form of story telling, Linda M. Pitcher theorizes how the event of heroic death becomes integrated into collective understanding and identification—both from the perspective of the martyr, as well as from those who perform and commemorate this most great sacrifice:

...as the self climbs into martyr’s clothing, as the performance becomes public, a transformation takes place. The subject assumes an image, an image with a history, an image with a voice. He becomes the mirror of the martyr and only in exteriority can he recognize himself (Lacan 1977). He begins to put himself in harm’s way, as a way of remembering the body of the voice he has found. He becomes narrative (Levi-Strauss 1967). He becomes an ideal, his self reconstructed in an image. And as he falls before the bullet, he feels no loss, for the performance has allowed that which has been forgotten to be remembered. And somewhere, amidst this crazy gestalt of occupation, the permanence of the martyr’s “I” is forever implanted. (Pitcher 1998, 27)

### ***Bahá'í Martyrdom and Persecution: Resources for Creative Expression***

Among the Bahá'ís, several key resources help inform and promulgate stories about Iranian persecution, many of which occur through updated media releases and reports from the highest Bahá'í administrative and research offices (namely, through the non-governmental organization, the *Bahá'í International Community*). In the process, Bahá'ís generate musical content and discourse around Iranian persecution often by referring (and, deferring authority) to texts produced by these administrative bodies, articulating a hierarchical relationship that speaks to the Faith's overall commitment to action-based advocacy, as well as maintaining the authority of Bahá'í institutions over the individual.<sup>74</sup> The following section will outline the use and impact of such reports and letters by the *Bahá'í International Community* (herein the BIC) and the UHJ, other notable Bahá'í texts and collections, as well as the symbolic meaning of individual Bahá'í martyrs, particularly among Western Bahá'í musicians.

#### *A. Historical Sources, Contemporary Accounts: Personalized Narratives of Persecution:*

Through the lens of Bahá'í progressive revelation, the plight of the Bábis and Bahá'ís retells an enduring narrative of persecution that befell all previous religious dispensations. This is particularly the case in the history of Shi'a Islam, where persecutory narratives and themes of martyrdom hold special stations across Shi'a, Bábí, and Bahá'í beliefs, beginning with the martyrdom of Imam Husayn. Tracing the history of the Faith, one can find countless proofs of a legacy of oppression since the founding of Babism, as well as in Bahá'u'lláh's decades of

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<sup>74</sup> This concept is further elaborated upon in several texts, particularly those produced by Shoghi Effendi, who wrote that no individual Bahá'í should “be allowed to eclipse the authority, or detract from the influence of the body of the elected representatives in every local community” (NSA UK 1950, 19). This sense of individual deferment to the authority of local assemblies and, ultimately, to the UHJ, is central to the Bahá'í Covenant. Bahá'í musicians regularly refer to letters by the UHJ and the reports by the *Bahá'í International Community* to, on the one hand, respond to calls for action, as well as to ensure that their work is up-to-date and well-informed.

imprisonment, torture, and exile. As a theological bridge to Shi'ism, Bahá'u'lláh's religious persecution was evoked in early Bahá'í Writings, "employ[ing] the martyrdom of Husayn at Karbala as an extended metaphor for his own exile to and persecution in Ottoman Europe" (Cole 1993, 458). Many Bahá'í texts and letters address this legacy, placing the Faith along a continuum of oppression and humiliation among followers of the prevailing religion of their era. For instance, 'Abdu'l-Bahá pointed to the persecution of Jesus by the Pharisees: "The result was that His lamp became ignited, His light began to shine and His followers sparkled like unto the stars from the horizon of existence; and the consequence to the Pharisees was the pangs of remorse and regrets" ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1909, 221). Elsewhere, in His letters to the Bahá'ís of Iran, 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote that:

The loved ones of the Almighty have always been exposed to the dire oppression and tyranny of the people of iniquity, and His chosen ones have continually suffered woeful cruelties at the hand of the perfidious. The friends of God have always quaffed the cup of adversity proffered by the hand of the immortal Cup-Bearer. They have been made targets for the darts and spears of the curses, accusations and reviling that the rebellious and the wicked hurled at them, and have been persecuted and ill-treated by their opponents among the people of the world. (UHJ 1982, 24)

Bahá'u'lláh also spoke directly about the persecution of the Bábis and Bahá'ís in Iran, citing how their opponents have "resort[ed] to cruelty and oppression, striven to extinguish the Light of divine manifestation" (Bahá'u'lláh 1988, 33). Elsewhere, He writes

Behold how in this Dispensation the worthless and foolish have fondly imagined that by such instruments as massacre, plunder and banishment they can extinguish the Lamp which the Hand of Divine power hath lit, or eclipse the Day Star of everlasting splendor. How utterly unaware they seem to be of the truth that such adversity is the oil that feedeth the flame of this Lamp!" (1983, 72)

For Denis MacEoin, persecutory discourses transformed from Shi'ism through the emergence of Babism and the Bahá'í dispensations, writing that in Shi'ism, martyrdom (*shahada*) "had long

been elevated to the rank of a primary religious ideal, and the figure of the martyr loomed large in Shi'i hagiography as the supreme embodiment of faith," as well as for the early Bábis, "especially those at Shaykh Tabarsi [...] [who] had drawn extensively on martyrdom motifs" (MacEoin 1983, 225-226). However, Bahá'u'lláh

became concerned to replace the extreme Shi'i obsession with *shahada* [...] command[ing] his followers not to seek martyrdom and in one place even writes that it has actually been forbidden to give up one's life in this way. Instead, he says, individuals are to dedicate their lives to faith in God and the task of spreading His word. 'Martyrdom,' he says, 'is not limited to self-sacrifice and the shedding of one's blood, for a man may be accounted in the book of the King of Names as a martyr, though he be still alive.' (226)

Bahá'u'lláh's *Tablet of Ahmad* also demonstrated how the Bahá'í Faith distanced itself from Shi'a concepts of *shahada*, placing the role of chanting the Tablet as superior to martyrdom. Here, Bahá'u'lláh writes: "Learn well this Tablet, O Ahmad. Chant it during thy days and withhold not thyself therefrom. For verily, God hath ordained for the one who chants it, the reward of a hundred martyrs and a service in both worlds" ("Tablet of Ahmad" n.d.).

Some of the earliest tales of Bahá'í martyrdom were collected in Shoghi Effendi's translation of the *The Dawn-Breakers* (1932) (also known as *Nabil's Narrative*), detailing the level of sacrifice and tribulations that faced early followers of the Faith. Here, Bahá'ís learned of the Faith's emergence from its earliest stirrings, beginning in its 'pre-revelation' phases through the travels and writings of Shaykh Ahmad-i-Ahsa'i (1753-1826): founder of the Šayḡī school of Shi'ism who, as it turns out, was present at the Shah's court in Tehran around the time of Bahá'u'lláh's birth. On this occasion, Shakh Ahmad apparently "recognised in its full measure the meaning of this auspicious event" (Nabil-i-'Azam 1932, 13). In each chapter, the narrative documents some of the earliest followers of The Báb, including Mulla Husayn (1813-1849),

known as the “Gate of the Gate” and the First Letter of the Living of the Bábi Faith, as well as the travelling narratives of Tahiri, and the Báb, including His pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina, subsequent arrest at the Castle of Chihriq, and execution. *The Dawn-Breakers* has often been noted for its potential to inspire Bahá’í artists and musicians, including among three musicians I interviewed for this chapter (Brett Smith, Gordi Munro, and Jack Lenz), who identified the text as having made a profound effect on their music and faith. Such utilizations of the *Dawn-Breakers* was encouraged by Shoghi Effendi, who wrote: “Feel impelled appeal entire body American believers to henceforth regard Nabil's soul-stirring Narrative as...source of inspiration in all literary and artistic pursuits...” (Effendi 1947, 1). The Guardian’s invitation to utilize the text as a resource for future teaching and creative projects prompted some to publish study guides, including ones to help Bahá’í musicians and visual artists to apply the narratives to their artistic pursuits (Zamir 2002). There are other Bahá’í figures celebrated for their bravery among artists and musicians, such as Aqa Buzurg (1852-1869), otherwise known as Badi, or the “Pride of the Martyrs,” who was tortured and executed while delivering a Tablet addressed to Nasiri d-Din Shah (Momen 1995). Badi’s story, along with those of the Báb and other martyrs, are outlined as key resources for inspiration on the website for *Drama Circle*, a Bahá’í-inspired theatre group founded by American playwright Mark Perry that produces works drawn from the Faith, including productions that focus on the religion’s history of persecution.<sup>75</sup>

It is in these respects that the Bahá’í Faith can be understood as a religion grounded in historical narratives of persecutory suffering, understood through a continuum of trauma that befell each previous religious dispensation. But over-emphasizing the role of Iranian persecution

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<sup>75</sup> This includes the play “A Dress for Mona,” which has been performed in several countries (“A New Dress for Mona” n.d.).



and martyrdom in the construction of a collective, global Bahá'í identity can also pose a number of issues. According to Per-Olof Åkerdahl, the founding of the Bahá'í Administration during Effendi's leadership was meant to take precedent over other issues, including martyrdom, which was "seen as a part of the past that prepares the way for the present and the future ideal which is the servant ideology" (Åkerdahl 2002, 37). Specifically, the author cites a letter written by Effendi: "In the blood of the unnumbered martyrs of Persia lay the seed of the divinely-appointed administration which, though transplanted from its native soil, is now budding out, under your loving care, into a new order, destined to overshadow all mankind" (37; citing Effendi 1991, 52). Maintaining the authority of the Faith's institutions is often made paramount in examples of Bahá'í research. Scholars who have theorized notions of identity construction in the Faith have tended to focus on how Bahá'ís enact universal principles in localized contexts, including the equality of men and women among Bahá'ís in Canada (van den Hoonaard and van den Hoonaard, 2006), as well as race unity in the United States (McMullen 2000). For instance, Michael McMullen's work on the Atlanta Bahá'í community and the construction of a 'global Bahá'í identity' did not indicate how the persecution of Iranians impacted the everyday lives of American Bahá'ís, but does note that the American NSA (specifically, the Office of External Affairs) was engaged in multiple campaigns to raise awareness about religious oppression: lobbying for US Congress "to pass resolutions condemning the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran" (McMullen 2000, 37), for instance; or, how Persian Bahá'í neighbourhoods developed in certain areas of the city, thus contributing to an "enclave mentality" in the Atlanta community as Iranian families reunited with their loved ones after fleeing the country (92). Ultimately, McMullen maintains that along with the beliefs and religious values gleaned from the Holy

Writings, the charismatic leadership of Bahá'u'lláh, the Bahá'í Administrative Order and its process of institutionalization through Local and National Assemblies, committees, and other administrative bodies functions as the key focal point for the construction of a global Bahá'í identity, “link[ing] the local community and global hierarchy” and thus “shaping Bahá'í identity as situated universalists” (54). McMullen reiterates:

Bahá'ís consider their ecclesiastical organization unique in the world, not only because it was designed, Bahá'ís claim, to be the model of world government, but also because Bahá'u'lláh was the first Manifestation of God to deliberately design the organization that would ‘routinize his charisma’ (cf. Weber 1946, 297). (35)

Elsewhere, Lynn Echevarria’s work (2011) collected several personal stories of religious identity construction, noting how certain female Bahá'í ‘mentors and heroes’ played important roles for women she interviewed in her study. This included Tahirih (1817-1852) and Bahá'u'lláh’s daughter, Bahiyyih Khanum (1846-1932)—both having experienced untold hardships, and/or sacrificed their lives in the name of the Faith and its values, but framed in the context of discrimination that all women would have faced in the Middle East during the time of Bahá'u'lláh (15-20). However, Echevarria also documented the life stories of Canadian Bahá'í women and how their experiences coalesced into their own religious identity, including instances of discrimination they faced as single women in Iran (101), encountering resistance within families and negotiating cultural differences in a mostly Catholic region of small-town Quebec, (111-114) among other stories. Similarly, Parin Dossa found that the experiences of female Bahá'ís were dramatically shaped by the ‘gendering the state’ in Iran, focusing on a narrative told by a 70-year old Bahá'í named Sahra, where: “the martyrdom of largely male members of her family meant that her work in the domestic sphere increased to such an extent that Sahra

grew up not knowing what it is like to be a child” (Dossa 2004, 133). Though Sahra’s story is uniquely tragic—her father, as well as 17 other family members were martyred in Iran (119-120)—Dossa indicates how witnessing religious persecution manifested into certain behaviours and episodes throughout Sahra’s life, including bouts of anxiety, crippling stress, and illness. Neither authors claim a universalized, persecutory Bahá’í collective identity, but the profundity of trauma and persecution were vital in the life stories they documented on being, or becoming female Bahá’ís in Canada.

In contrast with these more nuanced Bahá’í ethnographies, Douglas Martin posits a far more wide-ranging understanding of how Iranian Bahá’í oppression has shaped the Faith. He argues that Bahá’ís have not only become accustomed to narratives of oppression and martyrdom, but that they engage with these histories and participate in processes in their everyday lives through a number of ways:

Throughout the Bahá’í world, countless memorial services are held to commemorate the lives of those dying in Iran as martyrs for their beliefs. The stories of the latter, their photographs, reproductions of their last messages to their families, poems written by them and memoirs contributed by their friends are published in the many Bahá’í news organs. Children are named after them, songs are written, teaching and service projects are undertaken in their honour and financial sacrifices are made as tributes to their memories. Towns in other countries are “twinned” with counterparts in Iran and goals of the international plan are adopted in order to compensate for the disabilities which restrict the efforts of Iranian Bahá’ís. Summer and winter schools include special sessions on current events in Iran, studied against the background of the heroic days of the Faith’s origin. (Martin 1985, 323)

But if Iranian persecution has become such a critical narrative for the construction of a transnational Bahá’í identity, uncovering just how much it has impacted the lives of everyday Bahá’ís has yet to be fully understood. In McMullen’s later work (2015), he focuses on some of

the annual themes that appear in the *Ridvan*<sup>76</sup> letters by the UHJ written between 1964-2013. These letters include setting particular goals, offering encouragement for Bahá'í communities, as well as statements to “overcome opposition and persecution,” explicitly addressing the persecution of Persian Bahá'ís on several occasions (McMullen 2015, 46; see especially McMullen 2015 Chapter 2). The impact of this ongoing presence and awareness of Iranian persecution has been studied by Curtis Humes and Katherine Ann Clark, who explored the legacy of persecution among Bahá'ís living in the American Pacific Northwest. The authors found that American Bahá'ís recognized Iranian persecution as “a collective experience, especially since the direct experience of persecution is far removed from their everyday living” (Humes and Clark 2000, 24), very often speaking “about persecution using metaphors of the body influenced by religious texts” (25). One of the authors of the study, Chris Humes, grew up in a Bahá'í household and reflected on the significance of Iranian persecution for his own understanding about the Faith:

I was keenly aware while I was growing up of the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran. Within my local Bahá'í community, the persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran was discussed regularly. In addition, I remember that the experience of Bahá'ís in Iran was presented as a universal experience, something that all Bahá'ís share. It wasn't until much later that I realized how significant these perceptions and beliefs surrounding the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran were on the lives of every Bahá'í that I knew while growing up. (28)

For Iranians who experienced persecution firsthand and later emigrated to the USA, however, the status of being a Bahá'í martyr presented its own issues and discomforts. One informant in Humes' and Clark's study found that there were certain expectations of him to become a Bahá'í religious leader in the United States, much like his father was in Iran before he was tortured and

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<sup>76</sup> *Ridvan* is a period in spring that marks both a twelve-day Bahá'í festival that celebrates Bahá'u'lláh's declaration, as well as the beginning of Bahá'í local assembly elections.

executed: “He was considered blessed as a member of a martyred family, yet he did not feel blessed; he was tormented by the inability to adequately convey his experiences of torture” (30). It is therefore necessary to consider how perceptions of Iranian Bahá’í martyrdom among non-Iranian co-religionists can problematically universalize pain and suffering at the expense of the traumatic and debilitating experiences that individual Iranians faced before settling in new locales around the world.

*B. Letters from the UHJ, the BIC, and Bahá’í Scholarly Reports:  
Resources for Reflection and Consultation*

At the level of private devotional life, Bahá’ís regularly consult and hold deepening sessions to study the letters of the UHJ, many of which focus on teaching campaigns, multi-year plans, and other community-based initiatives. At times, the UHJ also release letters that discuss the persecution of Bahá’ís in Iran, among other parts of the world, thus providing direct and official statement about religious persecution and, in some cases, particular actions that may follow. These include notices about Iranian Bahá’ís who have recently been killed (UHJ and NSA USA 1997);<sup>77</sup> the arrest of friends of the Faith in Iran (UHJ 2010); or how some members of the Iranian Bahá’í community “have apparently been approached by officials to sign a document stating that they will not undertake any individual or collective Bahá’í activity” (UHJ 2009a). For instance, in a letter addressed to the Iranian Bahá’ís dated 23 June 2009—about one year following the arrests of the Iranian Spiritual Assembly, known as the Yaran—the letter read, in part:

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<sup>77</sup> This particular letter, written on behalf of both the UHJ and the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, detailed the deaths of Masha’llah Enayati and Shahram Reza’i in the summer months of 1997.

Keep alive in your hearts the feeling of confidence that the future of Iran holds bright promise, the certitude that the light of knowledge will inevitably dispel the clouds of ignorance, the conviction that concern for justice will protect the nation from falling prey to calumny, and the belief that love will ultimately conquer hatred and enmity. You have demonstrated in the example of your lives that the proper response to oppression is neither to succumb in resignation nor to take on the characteristics of the oppressor. The victim of oppression can transcend it through an inner strength that shields the soul from bitterness and hatred and which sustains consistent, principled action. May the words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá resound: “Iran shall become a focal centre of divine splendours. Her darksome soil will become luminous and her land will shine resplendent.” You and your compatriots are in our continued prayers. (UHJ 2009b)

One of the most urgent letters came in May 13, 1984, which was sent to all National Spiritual Assemblies. Immediately following an uptick in violence, arrests, and executions in Iran, Bahá’ís were asked to circulate the letter internationally, detailing gruesome prison conditions, as well as interrogation and torture procedures. Concluding, the letter asks Bahá’ís to “Kindly share this information with the believers in your community, and use it as a basis for answering inquiries which you may receive from news media or government” (UHJ 1984). The letter read in all-caps:

OVER THE LAST FIVE YEARS ABDUCTIONS, EXECUTIONS, THE IMPRISONMENT OF HUNDREDS, DISMISSAL FROM JOBS, EXPULSION OF BAHÁ’I CHILDREN FROM SCHOOLS, DESTRUCTION OF HOMES HAVE BEEN THE COMMON LOT OF THIS OPPRESSED COMMUNITY. NOW, HOWEVER, THE AUTHORITIES IN IRAN SEEM TO HAVE DECIDED TO SUBJECT PROMINENT BAHÁ’IS TO BARBARIC METHODS OF TORTURE TO EXTRACT FROM THEM CONFESSIONS TO THE FALSE CHARGES LEVELED AGAINST THEM. TORTURE HAS BEEN USED ON BAHÁ’I PRISONERS BEFORE, BUT HITHERTO THE PURPOSE HAS BEEN TO FORCE THEM TO RECAT THEIR FAITH OR REVEAL INFORMATION ABOUT THEIR FELLOW BELIEVERS. ALL BUT A FEW OF THE BAHÁ’IS REMAINED FIRM AND PREFERRED IMPRISONMENT AND DEATH TO RECATATION OF THEIR FAITH. (UHJ 1984)

However, due to the waves of immigration that followed, other letters required further clarification around administrative matters, such as how Bahá’ís who escape persecution in Iran by lying about their faith in order to leave the country by official routes (i.e. flying out of Tehran airport) may have their official voting rights revoked in the countries here they resettle. Here, the

Department of the Secretariat of the UHJ (in partnership with the NSA of the USA) issued a letter to NSAs in Canada, the USA, France Germany, and the UK on July 8, 1985, reminding Bahá'ís that:

it was permissible in Shi'ih Islam for believers to deny their faith in order to escape persecution. Since the time of Bahá'u'lláh such an action has been forbidden for Bahá'ís. We do not defend our Faith by the sword, as was permissible in Islam, but Bahá'ís have always held to the principle that when challenged they should 'stand up and be counted', as the modern expression is, and not purchase their safety by denying that which is most important to them in this world and the next. The principle is well known to the Iranian Bahá'ís and is upheld by the overwhelming majority of them when the penalty is martyrdom. (UHJ and NSA US 1985)

In this case, Bahá'ís may have been confused about why such a punitive measure was instituted (in fact, the letter appears to be in response to a message sent on behalf of a Bahá'í, written by their non-Bahá'í husband). As I will discuss later, Bahá'í fidelity to the Faith—even in the face of execution—is a main point of glorification in narratives of martyrdom, particularly in musical representations, which celebrate the lives of Bahá'ís who refused to recant their Faith and, in some instances, welcomed death.

Along with these letters from the UHJ, Bahá'ís also receive regular updates about the precarious status of the Faith in Iran and, in recent years, Yemen (“Reports on the Situation in Yemen” 2019; BIC 2017a), through the operations of a key research and policy organization: the *Bahá'í International Community* (BIC). Founded in 1948, the BIC is a registered UN non-profit with consultative status on a number of UN international councils, departments, policies, and programs with offices in both New York City and Geneva. The BIC's approach and mandate is to integrate concepts and teachings from the Bahá'í Faith in order to address global challenges and issues, such as employing the principles of “collaborative decision-making; shaping efforts

around a process of action, consultation, and reflection; functioning in a mode of learning; [and] building unity while valuing diversity.” Representing the collective voice of the worldwide Bahá’í community, the BIC currently focuses on six areas of work that are “intimately connected to one another” that “together [...] advance the overarching goal of peace” (“Focus Areas” n.d.):

- Realizing the equality of men and women
- Human rights and the well-being of humankind
- Development and community building
- Youth as protagonists of constructive change
- Religion in the life of society
- Situation of Bahá’ís in Iran

In many respects, the BIC serves in an ‘official’ capacity on Bahá’í matters, functioning as a critical resource for the community. With offices at the UN in New York, Geneva, as well as Addis Ababa, Bangkok, Nairobi, Rome, Santiago, and Vienna, the BIC serves

as the direct extension of the Universal House of Justice in all relations with the international public and with the United Nations System. Several times a week, the New York office is in contact with the three members of the Universal House of Justice who make up the Policy Committee for External Affairs. (Warburg 2006, 501)

Due to their authority, many Bahá’í artists refer and cite BIC reports when inspired to create topical songs about the *Yaran*, Bahá’í university education, or Bahá’í religious persecution, more generally. For those living outside Iran, publications about Iranian persecution help construct a sense of Bahá’í collective identity, as “the American sense of Bahá’í collective identity and experience allows [a paper publication] to share and convey the feelings of a martyr” (Humes and Clark 2000, 29). Logistically, the BIC gives voice to Iranian Bahá’ís, who are unable to freely share, or face great difficulties sharing information outside the country. As stated on their website:



Because Iranian Bahá'ís are unable to speak out internationally, our Office acts as the official outlet for information on the situation of Iranian Bahá'ís. We also seek to use all available international mechanisms to call attention to their plight. Such efforts include advocacy and support of resolutions at the UN Human Rights Council and in the General Assembly, cooperation with other human rights NGOs, and outreach to the international news media, along with the coordination of various campaigns to raise awareness about the ongoing human rights violations against Iran's peaceful and nonviolent Bahá'í community. (“Situation of Bahá'ís in Iran” n.d.)

The BIC thus operates at a unique political intersection, representing the perspectives and interests of the global Bahá'í community, while also writing policies and reports that critique Iranian governmental actions against the community to an international coalition of countries, associations, and economic partners. It must be reiterated that the BIC (or any other Bahá'í organization) does not advocate for territorial autonomy or self-determination in Iran—a distinguishing factor from other groups, such as the Kurds—but the “recognition of the community as a group with the same rights that other groups are able to enjoy collectively” (Ghanea-Hercock 2002, 221). By “keep[ing] the issue [of Iranian Bahá'í persecution] on the UN agenda” (201) and repeatedly calling for the “emancipation of the Bahá'í community” (147), the activities of the BIC have often been the subject of severe critique by Iranian representatives and remain unable to attend meetings or summits in Iran, despite their status as an accredited non-governmental organization (540-541). For instance, in 1983 Iranian delegates accused the BIC at the Commission on Human Rights that they “exist[ed] purely in order to wage a propaganda campaign against Iran” (111), circulating a document titled ‘Bahá'ism—its origins and its role’ that argued the Bahá'ís “were responsible for the policies of the Shah and the operation of SAVAK [Iranian secret police during the Pahlavi Dynasty], were agents of Russian imperialism, British colonialism, American expansionism and also of

Zionism” (113). 1983 was a benchmark for the Bahá’í community, representing what McMullen states was the “height of persecution of the Bahá’ís,” following a decree by the Prosecutor General of the Islamic Republic on September 21, 1983, which criminalized and banned membership to “all Bahá’í spiritual assemblies and their ancillary institutions”—to which the UHJ “instructed the Bahá’ís in Iran to adhere to the law in this regard, and disbanded the entire Bahá’í administration in Iran” (McMullen 2015, 171). Throughout these proceedings, the Iranian delegation denied any persecution against the Bahá’ís, or charges that they initiated 22 Bahá’í executions at the Court of Shiraz by means of religious discrimination (287).

Bahá’í academics and writers also published a number of works in the early 1980s that detailed Iranian persecution for different audiences. For instance, senior Bahá’í scholar Douglas Martin released a detailed study on “The Persecution of Iranian Bahá’ís 1844-1984” in a special edition of the *Bahá’í Studies Journal* (Martin 1984), which followed Geoffrey Nash’s monograph *Iran’s Secret Pogrom* (1982). Television specials and other news items that documented the plight of Iranian Bahá’ís also increased in the early 1980s, including a CTV Toronto piece entitled *Bahá’í: Iran’s Secret Pogrom* (1980), *A Cry from the Heart* (1982), and a twenty-six-part television series *The Spiritual Revolution* (1981) (Naficy 2012, 104). The intensification of media efforts and reports by Bahá’í scholars, filmmakers, administrators, and non-Bahá’í allies in the 1980s came in direct response to a progressively worsening situation under the newly founded Islamic Republic. However, certain events would help significantly inform how both the public and the global Bahá’í community would understand the trials of what the believers faced in Iran. One such instance occurred on June 18, 1983, where Mona Mahmoudnejad—a 17-year old student and Bahá’í youth and educator in Shiraz—was executed

together with nine other women: Nosrat Ghufrani Yaldaie, Ezzat-Janami Eshraghi, Roya Eshraghi, Tahereh Arjomandi Siyavushi, Zarrin Moghimi-Abyaneh, Shahin (Shirin) Dalvand, Akhtar Sabet, Simin Saberi and Mahshid Niroumand (“Mona Mahmoudnejad - Executed by hanging on 18th June 1983 in Shiraz” n.d.). Representing “a symbol for the group” (BIC 2008, 47), Mona’s story remains one of the most powerful and enduring symbols of Bahá’í martyrdom. In more recent years, the continued imprisonment of the “Friends,” known as the *Yaran* (an informal council that organized the affairs of the Bahá’ís in Iran, much like a National Spiritual Assembly), as well as barriers for Iranian Bahá’ís to access to higher education represent two of the most common persecutory discourses in the Faith. The UHJ have issued letters of support for the *Yaran* (2009a), including the commemoration of the anniversary of their arrest, along with faculty members from the Bahá’í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) in Iran (UHJ 2012). The BIC also publishes ongoing UN periodic reviews of human rights in Iran, including updated reports about Bahá’í persecution in the country (BIC 2008 and 2017b), recently launching a new online *Archives on Iranian Bahá’í Persecution* that details the full history of oppression, imprisonment, and martyrs of the Faith since the founding of the Bábi religion. Other highlighted topics in the web archive include detailed evidence of Iranian government reports and memoranda that outlined barriers for Bahá’ís to access university education (BIC 2005), as well as numerous reports on the government of Iran’s failure to live up to the conditions of meeting the UN’s Universal Periodic Review to improve their human rights record.

In short, Bahá’ís regularly receive or have access to a range of materials concerning Iranian persecution, most of which come from the highest administrative offices in the Faith. These letters and reports provide Bahá’í communities with resources and topics to engage in

prayerful activity, reflecting a global culture of commemorating Bahá'í martyrs and the Faith's underlying values in social justice and human rights advocacy. The following section will discuss how these topics and incidents became immortalized in song, as well as instances where Bahá'í artists utilized above mentioned letters and reports, articulating a common practice of utilizing authoritative (thus, 'official' or legitimate) sources for their lyrics.

### ***Recordings and Case Studies: Sounding Iranian Bahá'í Persecution***

Beginning in the 1980s, several Bahá'í artists have released musical recordings that directly address instances of Iranian persecution, often through recalling specific events, historical narratives, and figures of martyrdom. Due to the nature of the Faith's traumatic history in Iran, it has been common for Bahá'í compositions to be framed within a persecutory context, including children's songs. In the latter instance, Jack Lenz's "The Prisoner" (1982) tells of Bahá'u'lláh's exile in Acre and alludes to His religious station (however, without mentioning His name). There are also several suggested examples of children's songs from the *RUHI Institute*: a sequence of official Bahá'í teaching activities and books originally developed from the Colombian NSA, but now formally implemented throughout the world to help teach the Faith. These include "The Shores of Acre," "Tahirih the Pure" (see figure 19), and a version of Robert Gregory Shaw's "The Bábis of Tabarsi" (more on this composition below). In many cases, the songs unfold as a testament to the bravery of the early believers and reasserting Bahá'u'lláh's prophetic station. Some recordings feature album covers and designs that pay tribute to the Faith's traumatic legacy, including the *Boston Praise Collective's* 2005 release "From Exile to

Exaltation” (see figure 20),<sup>78</sup> which honours the life and trials faced by the prophet-founder, Bahá’u’lláh, spanning African American church spirituals to Persian chanting, folk, and hip-hop. However, with the rise of arrests and executions taking place in the early 1980s, Bahá’í musicians became much more explicit about *contemporary* religious oppression, generating concern in the broader community about how to appropriately commemorate martyrdom through music.

The following section will examine select Bahá’í popular music compositions, predominately focusing on lyrical analysis, intertextual relationships with reports by official Bahá’í institutions, and broader programmatic contexts (i.e. liner notes, album design). The majority of works are performed within a Western rock, or subdued folk/singer-songwriter aesthetic, in addition to hip-hop. In accordance with the legacy of Bahá’í aesthetics and musical discourse (see Chapter 1), emphasis is primarily placed upon the importance of the lyrics (especially if quoting from the Holy Writings). However, it is also possible to find theological resonance with the stylistic and genre codes of the music that some Bahá’í musicians employ—for instance, referencing conscious hip-hop aesthetics from the 1990s and early 2000s, drawing upon diverse ‘world music’ elements from multiple traditions and styles (see Chapter 3), or a simplified, acoustic singer/songwriter context. I will organize the pieces according to key figures, or topics of persecution, namely: the life of Mona Mahmoudnejad, the *Yaran*, and the denial of university education for Bahá’ís in Iran. Many of the songs selected below were taken from a

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<sup>78</sup> As stated in the description of the album on *9 Star Media* (a Bahá’í music distribution service), it reads: “This is our offering to Bahá’u’lláh, the Prophet, the Promised One, the Ancient Beauty. Banished from his native Persia in 1853, Bahá’u’lláh spent most of His life in captivity, and died a prisoner in Acre, Israel in 1892, for teaching that there is one God, that all the religions come from the same Divine Source, and that all the world’s people are members of one family” (“Boston Praise Collective - From Exile to Exaltation” n.d.).

blog post by Bahá'í hip-hop artist and producer Colby Jeffers, titled “Songs About Human Rights: 10 Tracks for the Bahá'ís in Iran.” In this curated collection of music released by Bahá'ís (including Jeffers himself), the artist hopes that the “more light we shed on the situation, the sooner we hope the Bahá'ís will see the day where they can live in freedom” (“Songs About Human Rights: 10 Tracks for the Bahá'ís in Iran” n.d.).

“Tahirih the Pure”	“The Shores of Akka” (verse excerpt)	“The Prisoner”
<p>Tahirih, the Pure one  Consolation of the eyes  What I would give to meet you now  While my life is new  You had the strength I pray for  The courage that life calls for  The Master that I too adore  Revealed himself to you  In a dream He stood perfection  And your life it changed direction  You knew it then, your life would end</p> <p>To glorify his name (3x)</p>	<p>They led them to the barracks  where great hardships were in store  Bread and water were denied  Banishment and exile were the price they had to pay  To keep the Blessed Beauty by their side  A place of desolation, full of filth and dread disease  By every passing bird it was abhorred  For four and twenty years the Most Great Prison was a home  For the One that all the world would call their Lord</p>	<p>Is there a prisoner in Acre?  Lately I have heard  They say his name will heal the lame  And there's power in his every word</p> <p>And his name will make us one</p> <p>Is there a rose in Sharon beside the shining sea?  They say his eyes will fill the skies for everyone to see</p> <p>And his name will make us one</p> <p>Did you see his window when you passed the place?  Did they know and does it show when they look into his face?  Is there a prisoner in Acre beside the shining sea?  They say his eyes will fill the skies for everyone to see</p>
<p>Music: Joan Lincoln  Lyrics: Unknown</p>	<p>Lyrics: Leslie Garrett</p>	<p>Music and Lyrics: Jack Lenz</p>

Figure 19: Lyrics for “Tahirih the Pure,” “The Shores of Akka,” and “The Prisoner.”

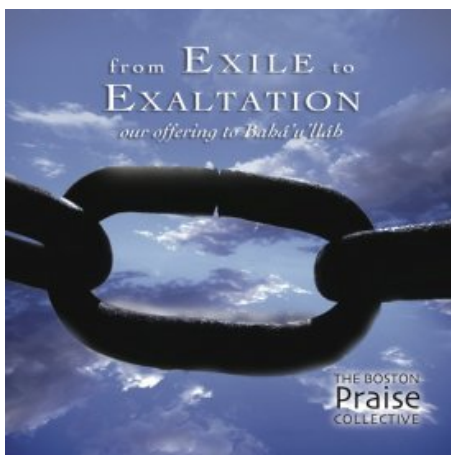


Figure 20: Front cover for *The Boston Praise Collective* album, “From Exile to Exaltation: Our Offering to Bahá’u’lláh” (2005). (“Boston Praise Collective - From Exile to Exaltation” n.d.)

*A. The Dawn-Breakers: Early Bábí and Bahá’í Figures of Martyrdom*

One of the earliest English-language recordings that explicitly discussed Bahá’í persecution was released in 1984 by Gordi Munro, a Canadian Bahá’í singer-songwriter of considerable renown who currently resides in High Level, Alberta. Having spent much of his professional life as an educator and school principal, Munro remains active as a performer at Bahá’í events across North America, specializing in his own interpretations of prayers, chants, as well as celebrated original compositions. In particular, Munro’s recording of “Fort Tabarsi” (see figure 21) documents the last stand among a group of Bábís that battled against Persian guards during a time in which religious *jihad* was encouraged, though later abrogated by Bahá’u’lláh. The events at Fort Tabarsi and other sites of Bábí conflict were documented in the *Dawn-Breakers*, which Munro found to be a crucial resource for him to help “touch the hearts” of listeners, while also teaching concepts about the Faith: “These stories, or these ideas, need to be stated in many different ways for people to understand them and to appreciate them, and for non-

Bahá'í to be seduced by them, if you like [...] Without being pedantic, I am still teaching” (Gordi Munro, interview). However, Munro was quick to clarify that he didn't write the lyrics for “Fort Tabarsi”:

It's associated with me, but I didn't write the song. The song was actually written by Jeannie Murday [...] she's originally from Mauritius [...] I've never been able to get a hold of her. When I recorded that song, tried my darnedest to get a hold of her, but I acknowledged [her] on the album [...] I sort of took it and made it my own, but she wrote the song. It's just references, it doesn't get into detail about it. If you look at the *Dawn-Breakers* and you look at Nayriz and Fort Tabarsi, Zanzan and what happened there and the kind of spirit that was going through these Bábis at that time. At that point, they were defending themselves, right? They were allowed to do that at that point. They were out there with swords and horses and, you know, cutting off heads, basically! Some of the accounts in the *Dawn-Breakers*, it sort of takes you back to, you know, I don't wanna say the Crusades, but it's kind of got this spirit of it. You know, what they were up against and what they had to do. When I first heard it, I just fell in love with it. (Munro, interview)

The song moves between an alternating A/B format with short verses and a repetitive refrain.

The recording production style echoes the ‘worldly’ aesthetics of the 1980s, featuring West African and Latin percussion, Persian santour, flamenco-style guitar, and a full rock rhythm section. It is difficult to find a physical copy of the recording—Munro shared with me a digitized version he made from a rare master tape—but the song remains a favourite among Bahá'ís, especially among those who were youth in the 1980s. There are indications that an earlier version of the lyrics was in broad circulation across the country, as found in a Bahá'í songbook from the Red Deer, Alberta region, titled *Songs of Joy: Bahá'í Songs, Chants, Prayers, Children's Songs, and Others* (Andersen et al., 1979). Here, the lyrics appear in “Martyr's Song” (1979, 3) (see figure 22) with slight variances (however, no author was attributed).



Verse 1	Verse 2	Verse 3	Verse 4	Verse 5
Fort Tabarsí they rode, they rode From Fort Tabarsí they rode	They raised the clarion-call Yá Sá'hibuz-Zamán, Yá Sá'hibuz-Zamán! For the glory of God, they raised the cry Yá Alí'u'l-Alláh, Yá Bahá'u'l-Abhá!	Zanján they rode, they rode, they rode From Zanján they rode, they rode  (Chorus)	Nayríz they rode, they rode, they rode From Nayríz they rode, they rode  (Chorus)	Mount your steeds, O heroes of God! Mount your steeds, O men!  (Chorus)

Figure 21: Lyrics for “Fort Tabarsi” (1984), as performed by Gordi Munro.

Verse 1	Verse 2	Verse 3	Verse 4	Verse 5
From Mazindaran they rode, they rode From Mazindaran they rode	And they raised that clarion-call Yá Sá'hibuz-Zamán, Yá Alí'u'l-Alláh,	From Shaykh Tabarsi they rode, they rode From Shaykh Tabarsi, they rode  (Chorus)	From Nayríz and Zanzan they rode, they rode From Nayríz and Zanzan they rode  (Chorus)	Now mount your steeds, O heroes of God! (2x) As you raise that clarion call Yá Sá'hibuz-Zamán, Yá Alí'u'l-Alláh,

Figure 22: Lyrics for “Martyr’s Song” (Andersen et al., 1979).

Munro believes the song endures because of an imbued “energy” that is channeled through the words and declarations in the chorus, which have their root basis in the Holy Writings. This is particularly the case “in the words of the Manifestation,” stating that: “in the transformation of us as human beings, [power] lies in the word. The word is the Creator. In the beginning, there was the word and the word was with God [...] It comes from the *release* of those words.” As such, Munro sees his role as “a tool that’s being used to express certain spirits,” articulating a sense of musicality that is structured predominately around musical affect: upbeat grooves, powerful vocal performances, and repetitive sing-along choruses. For these reasons, he found that

Fort Tabarsi is not a detail song, it's a spirit song. It's the *energy* of it that I'm trying to convey. So, 'Ya Bahá'u'l'Abha! Yá Sá'hibuz-Zamán!,' those are powerful words that *have* power. 'Yá Sá'hibuz-Zamán' means the 'Lord of the Age' [...] the Qa'im that they were expecting in Islam, right? And, of course, 'Yá Alí'u'l-Alláh' is the 'Most Exalted Essence of the Exalted Essence,' and 'Ya Bahá'u'l'Abha' is 'Oh Thou The Glory of Glories.' Those words are charged with an energy [...] with the Manifestation, they have a power. All these songs work for me because of the energy that's in the words and that's how I try to convey it. (Munro, interview)

As a point of contrast, Munro cites Robert Gregory Shaw's composition "The Bábis of Tabarsi" (see figure 23) as a "far-more detailed" musical depiction of the events (Munro, interview), outlining how the Bábis needed to eat their own leather boots to survive months of being under siege. Shaw's version of the story is much more critical of the Persian forces, including the Prince's 'treachery and trickery,' as well as mentioning particular Bábi martyrs (Quddus and Mulla Husayn) that fell during battle.

Verse 1	Verse 2	Verse 3	Verse 4	Verse 5	Verse 6
Three hundred thirteen faithful sheltered by the wall Greedy prince of Persia land bound to see them fall All the evil forces lined up before their eyes	Brave Quddús, the Living Letter, raised a guiding hand Here's a place we've come to give our lives in love for man Though I know you all will go before their vicious lies	Sound the Faithful Trumpet, Ḥusayn, take your mighty sword Few the True Companions, but all strength is from the Lord Send the coward enemies in flight before your cries	Reinforced, the prince's armies dare again to fight But Holy blood can only feed and not put out the Light Ḥusayn falls, Quddús is wounded, the haughty armies cheer But never will the surrounded Bábis knell to dust in fear Boots and horses' leather, yes, on that they did survive	Swearing on the Holy Book, the prince writes down his plea "You've shamed my mighty forces, come out, you can go free!" So the trusting Bábis fell into the liars' knives	Now the Holy Candle draws the people to its Flame But long will live the infamy of Persia's endless shame Their treachery and trickery, no history denies
The Bábis of Ṭabarsí, giving up their lives	The Bábis of Ṭabarsí, giving up their lives	The Bábis of Ṭabarsí, giving up their lives Let the world to a man against this handful rise The Bábis of Ṭabarsí, giving up their lives	The Bábis of Ṭabarsí, giving up their lives	The Bábis of Ṭabarsí, giving up their lives	The Bábis of Ṭabarsí gave the Lord their lives

Figure 23: "The Bábis of Tabarsi" Lyrics (Written by Robert Gregory Shaw).

Canadian Bahá'í group *Smith and Dragoman* also focused much of their creative attention to the stories found in the *Dawn-Breakers*, including their own composition titled “Fort Tabarsi” (2004), which, in comparison with Munro’s recording, utilizes passages quoted directly from the *Dawn Breakers* text.<sup>79</sup> In particular, the third verse of the song depicts the heroism of the Bábis fighting a far more powerful and heavily armed force, riding towards them on their ‘mounted chargers’ (akin to Munro’s ‘mounted steeds’). Furthermore, “Fort Tabarsi” incorporates a diversity of musical sounds, including Middle Eastern percussion, Arabic-style chanting, and other instrumentation to support the historical narrative—in many ways, demonstrating that to honour and to know of the Faith’s history is to become acclimated to an aesthetic of re-telling religious oppression within the geographic (and sonorous) landscape of Iran (see figure 24). “Fort Tabarsi” opens with a male voice singing indiscernible vocables in an ornamented style reminiscent of Persian Bahá'í chanting, outlining a chord in D minor after resolving from the 6th (Bb) to the fifth and ending on C. This occurs over a short percussive intro on Indian tabla and what sounds like a West African djembe. The piano introduces the main melody line in D minor, which Brett Smith sings throughout the verses (see figure 25 for lyrics). A clarinet responds after each line of the verse with ornate solo passages in a timbre and style of performance of a Turkish or Arabic *ney*. Much like the work of *Seals and Crofts*, these various ‘exotic’ elements contribute to how Bahá'í listeners might understand the persecution narrative,

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<sup>79</sup> The lyrics for “Fort Tabarsi” details the Mazindaran Upheaval (1848-1849) and the martyrdom of both Mulla Husayn (the ‘First Letter of the Living’) and celebrated martyr Quddus during an armed stand at Shaykh Tabarsi’s shrine against Persian governmental forces. In particular, Mulla Husayn was in Mashhad “when a messenger arrived bearing to him the Báb’s turban and conveying the news that a new name, that of Siyyid Ali, had been conferred upon him by his Master. ‘Adorn your head,’ was the message, ‘with My green turban, the emblem of My lineage, and, with the Black Standard-unfurled before you, hasten to the Jaziriy-i-Khadra, and lend your assistance to My beloved Quddus’” (Nabil-i-‘Azam 1932, 324).

periodizing and situating the events at Fort Tabarsi in the ambiance of 19th century Persia. The theme of persecution was first developed in *Smith and Dragoman's* 2004 release “Open the Gates”, which focused “on the life of the Báb and His followers, and takes the listener on a journey of courage, faith, crisis and victory” (“Smith & Dragoman - Open The Gates” n.d.). In the liner notes for the album, the band describes their music as

a humble backdrop for the magnificent stories of individuals in recent history who mirrored in their lives a degree of human virtue that will inspire others for centuries to come. It is our hope that these songs will encourage others to read about the profound character of these precious souls who exemplified the pinnacle of human nobility, helping to shape the future destiny of this planet. (Smith and Dragoman 2004)

Elsewhere, *Smith and Dragoman* released work that document Bahá'u'lláh's trials and periods of exile across Iran and the Middle East (“Exile,” 2007), as well as the lives of well-known Bahá'í martyrs, including “Badi” (2007) and “The Purest Branch” (2007), which tells the story of Bahá'u'lláh's youngest child Mirza Mihdi (1848-1970), who died falling from a skylight while deep in prayer at the prison in Acre/Acre (Bahá'í Chronicles 2015a).



Figure 24: Transcription of opening melody (piano) for “Fort Tabarsi” (2004).

Verse 1	Chorus	Verse 2	Bridge	Verse 3	Outro (repeat)
In the stillness of night with the moon as his guide, the traveler knocks at His door Green turban in hand with a message to bear “Assist My beloved Quddus” On leaving he gathered some 202 Who chose to stay close by his side Accepting to face the great trials ahead Offer life at the altar of sacrifice	And they knew once they entered Their lives would soon yield And their hearts would meld as one In their love for the Promised One	They mounted their chargers, a handful of men Facing thousands of soldiers in arms Their victory a proof and divinely ordained Strength from God’s invincible power Within their deep silence a voice could be heard From the inner most depths of their heart When they came through those walls a loud cry could be heard Calling “Yá Sáhibu’z-Zamán”, Oh Lord of the Age  (Chorus)	(He told them)  Mount your steeds, oh heroes of God The vanguard of His Cause They journeyed far to call all the souls And carried the flame in their hearts	Now you are the chosen of God in this Day Within each lies the fate of this world Strive day and night to unite as they were Raise the call Oh Lord of the Age Yá Sáhibu’z-Zamán!	(They chanted)  Holy, Holy, the Lord our God The Lord of the Angels and (the) spirit

Figure 25: Lyrics for *Smith and Dragoman’s* “Fort Tabarsi” (2004).

In lieu of their prominent subject matter, the description for the “Under the Lote Tree” CD on the Bahá’í-inspired music distribution website *9 Star Media* clarifies that

While several songs in our music refer to the harm inflicted upon the early followers of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh, it should be clearly noted that the Bahá’í Faith itself is a life-affirming faith with its aims fixed on the peace and unity of the peoples of the world. Its members are actively concerned with the well-being of the world and are striving to bring about unity at all levels of society. (“Smith & Dragoman - Under The Lote Tree” n.d.)

During my interview with Brett Smith, the singer described why so much of their music has dealt with the theme of religious persecution. Citing the *Dawn-Breakers* text, Smith found

that it “really redefined my understanding of where the Faith came from, I guess, and I felt compelled to share in my own way.” (Smith interview, 2017) In particular, Smith recounts one key story and figure from the book that helped steer him towards his musical path:

I was really intrigued by the story of Sulayman Khan, which you can find in the *Dawn-Breakers* [...] It was the first time that I was brought to tears reading a historical event in the Bahá'í Faith [...] He was captured and was an extremely well-liked person in Iran, very respected for his intellect. So, when he became a Bahá'í, it was really challenging for the authorities at the time because anyone who was becoming Bahá'í, they put them to death. Someone of his caliber, he had such influence that they had to put him to death. They gave him many opportunities to recant his faith and, of course, he refused. In the end, they said ‘we respect you so much, we will allow you to choose the way in which you want to die.’ So, he said—and this is all in the song, too—he said ‘I’d like to carve nine holes in my body and my chest, my shoulders and my back,’ and he himself carved those holes in his chest. And then he lit nine candles, and he said ‘I want to walk down the streets of Tehran and I want everyone to see that this is what happens to Bahá'ís. He really wanted to them to see his staunch faith and that nothing could ever waver his opinion on his faith. He walks down this street and thousands of people gather around and he’s laughing, dancing; his body gradually catches fire. He was obviously in a different state of mind, his soul was somewhere else. At the end he says, ‘when I die, I want you to cut my body in half and I want you to put one half of my body on each side of the gates to the city so people know that this is the destiny of a Bahá'í and all its glory.’ (Smith, interview)

Smith began taking a strong interest in music around the same time as meeting his main collaborator Mike Dragoman in Guelph, Ontario. The two would begin performing at ‘Bahá'í cafes’ and devotionals throughout the city, but eventually decided to embark on their own original compositions. During the song-writing process, both men looked to the *Dawn-Breakers*’ stories as a key reference, stating that their first record *Open the Gates* was guided by a vision “to put the *Dawn-Breakers* on the map and to create a musical narrative around some of the key figures and events that happened between 1817 [...] and really up to the martyrdom of the Báb, inclusive of Tahiri, Quddus, Mulla Husayn” (Smith, interview). The compositions were ambitious, incorporating instruments and languages to, as Smith describes, take on a more

‘Middle Eastern’ sound. For instance, the duo worked with producer Jack Lenz on songs like “Divine Tapestry” (2004), which featured the writings of the Báb in English, Persian, Arabic, and “an African language” because they “wanted to convey that it is from that part of the world.” The band also “brought in professional musicians to play certain instruments we couldn’t, like an oud, or certain drums, stuff like that” (Smith, interview). Moreover, the band dedicated a song to the martyrdom of Sulayman Khan, titled “Voice in the Flame,” (see figure 26) taking direct quotations from the *Dawn-Breakers* text and detailing the very same narrative Smith described above.<sup>80</sup> This includes Sulayman Khan’s nine holes pierced in his chest, which also symbolically indicated the Bahá’í 9-pointed star symbol and the number 9, that, according to Shoghi Effendi:

symbolizes the nine great world religions of which we have any definite historical knowledge, including the Bábi and Bahá’í Revelations; second, it represents the number of perfection, being the highest single number; third, it is the numerical value of the word ‘Bahá.’ (UHJ 1999b)

Today, Smith notes that several Bahá’í junior youth and children’s classes use their music to help teach aspects of the Faith, which provides a deliberate timeline that shows how their songs retell a Bahá’í chronological narrative through their 47 songs:

You know the analogy that music is a ladder for the soul [...] *Smith and Dragoman*, we want to contribute and help people ‘go up a ladder.’ That can be different for everyone [...] we want to help people with their relationship with Bahá’u’lláh, first and foremost; we want to dilate hearts in any way we can [...] Before I read the *Dawn-Breakers*, the history of the Faith was very binary for me: you know, couple names here and there, you go to a Holy Day and hear the same stories [...] Probably each CD has a song or two about ‘recognizing,’ or about ‘searching,’ or ‘what would you do if,’ the questions. We want people to reflect—we want praise awareness about the current state of the Bahá’í situation in Iran [...]. (Smith, interview)

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<sup>80</sup> Specifically: “You have long lost your sting oh flames and have been robbed of your power to pain me” (Nabil-i-‘Azam 1932, 617) and “Make haste for from your very tongues of fire I can hear the voice that calls me to my Beloved” (619).

**“Voice in the Flame”**

Sulayman Khan a song for you, the first to make me cry  
How my heart stopped and paused on the beat, when I learned of the way you died  
If I were there on that fateful day would I have felt or heard the voice  
Calling to you from the fire on your skin like a mad lover’s rejoice  
Recant your faith or die this day, the sovereign dealt his reign  
Never so long as my lifeblood continues to pulsate through my vein  
Nine holes in all that was his request to be carved out deep in his skin  
A candle in each lit by his own hand and placed courageously within  
Oh my God what a story this is of a man who would die for his love  
The truth of his life and the power of his death and the voices caressed him from above  
Led by the minstrels and drummers alike a sight for all to behold  
And his only crime the thoughts in his mind more precious than a world of gold  
Oh my Lord what did he say as he danced and smiled at the flames  
Singing out in rapture the gallows await to cleave his body in twain  
And he moved through the crowd his body ablaze of light  
Enveloped by the flames intent on consuming his life  
To live and die for his love with a heart so pure  
Was his sweetest wish and dearest hope  
And he walked to his end like a conqueror  
Make haste for from your very tongues of fire I can hear the voice that calls me to my Beloved  
You have long lost your sting oh flames and have been robbed of your power to pain me

Music and lyrics: Michael Dragoman and Brett Smith

Figure 26: Lyrics for *Smith and Dragoman’s* “Voice in the Flame” (2004).

Having devoted much of their music to Bahá’í martyrdom, especially those featured in the *Dawn-Breakers* text, Smith hopes that listeners “will have a stronger appreciation for the countless number of sacrifices that were suffered in order to pave the way for growth and the emancipation of the Bahá’í Faith” (Naraqi 2012b).

*B. Mona: A Sign of Global Bahá’í Mourning*

Perhaps more than any other figure of martyrdom since the 1979 Revolution, Mona Mahmoudnejad’s story has endured as a key persecutory narrative for Bahá’ís. Certain aspects of Mona’s execution have become critical aesthetic resources that many Bahá’í artists have clung to; namely, how Mona ‘kissed the rope’ after witnessing each of her fellow inmates being hanged. This image is evoked in several Bahá’í compositions, including *Nabil and Karim’s* “Mona” (2008), *Smith and Dragoman’s* “Kiss the Rope (Tribute to Mona)” (2007), and Douglas



Cameron's "Mona With the Children" (1985). Mona's refusal to recant her Faith—a common request for Bahá'ís during sentencing—also evoked a powerful message of religious conviction for the international Bahá'í community; many of whom came to understand Iranian persecution far more intensely through learning of the death of the young student.

For instance, in *Smith and Dragoman's* tribute to Mona, "Kiss the Rope" (see figure 27) opens with references to Iran as the "Cradle of His faith, Where the rivers turn to red"—a site of religious significance, mourning, and trauma. Appearing as the final track on their 2007 release "Under the Lote Tree," the album continues the band's interest in documenting the "heroes and heroines who embraced the teachings of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh in Persia between the years 1852 and 1892" and is "dedicated to the Bahá'ís in Iran who still suffer unspeakable injustice and persecution for their beliefs" ("Smith & Dragoman - Under The Lote Tree" n.d.).

Interestingly here, the evocation of Mona's suffering becomes tantamount to instances of the earliest martyrdom that occurred within the Faith, as the song depicts Mona's refusal to recant her Faith and smiling in the face of death. Performed in a sparse arrangement with piano, vocals, synthesizer pads, and flute accompaniment, the song provides a narrative of her execution, as well as Mona's unflinching faith. For listeners, Mona's strength of belief conveyed a sense of maturity far beyond her years, as indicated in a comment from user 'Annique' on *Smith and Dragoman's* YouTube channel:

Mona's story as always touched me, like all the martyrs who rather went to their grave than recanting the Faith. How strong, how fundamental must one's faith be to do something so selfless. Giving up your life like that, especially when one is so young, is the very meaning of detachment. Even though I grow into the Faith more and more (2 years now) I don't know if I could so [sic] something so unreal. Yet it is a very real thing and we should help the Bahá'ís in Iran in any way we can. Alla'u'abha.  
(smithanddragoman 2008)

Verse 1	Chorus	Verse 2
In the cradle of His faith Where the rivers turn to red The sunlight softens the dark And the shadows in their lives drift apart She stands before her fate And the heavens open the gates From the darkness they are called Ten brave women to face the end She smiles and prays for their faith And she knows their inner souls are filled with grace One final chance to deny (her faith) She lifts her eyes, “no” is her reply	Mona, angel, resolute and strong Your smile drifts across the ages And whispers your song Mona the comfort they feel from your eyes In the silence that echoes before Mona dies	She is led into the square All the angels have gathered there The rope hangs down from the sky Her soul quickening prepares to fly Her heart eternally wed A kiss for the rope that leaves her for dead  (Chorus)

Figure 27: Lyrics for “Kiss the Rope” by *Smith and Dragoman* (2007).

*Nabil and Karim’s* track “Mona” features the rap and beatbox stylings of Karim Rushdy and the melodic accompaniment of Nabil Moghaddam, who performs acoustic guitar and sings the chorus refrain. The song tells Mona’s story through her perspective, structured around the line “reunion is life, separation is death”—a reference, perhaps, to one of Bahá’u’lláh’s *Hidden Words*: “O SON OF JUSTICE! Whither can a lover go but to the land of his beloved? and what seeker findeth rest away from his heart’s desire? *To the true lover reunion is life, and separation is death.* His breast is void of patience and his heart hath no peace. A myriad lives he would forsake to hasten to the abode of his beloved” (Bahá’u’lláh 1985, 23; emphasis mine). Karim cites a now-defunct website as the inspiration for the song ([www.monasdream.com](http://www.monasdream.com))—even recalling that he read from the website while listening to Nabil’s looped guitar track and ‘hook’ (Karim Rushdy 2013)—which was likely the main web domain for a film project that, as

of this writing, still has yet to materialize.<sup>81</sup> Finding a hard-copy of the recording is difficult, though the song was uploaded to Nabil and Karim’s official YouTube page on November 23, 2008 (Nabil and Karim 2008), placing it within the same timeframe that broader interest in the Mona film project began circulating in the Bahá’í community. Several Bahá’í archives and websites also provide information from Mona’s diary that correlate with the lyrics, particularly those which are prefaced with the prompt, “She said.” The website *Bahá’í Chronicles* provides an in-depth account of Mona’s life, using material from the book *The Story of Mona* (both of which seem to have been published by the same author, Mark Perry) (Bahá’í Chronicles 2015b). The website also details a dream that Mona purportedly had about meeting both ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Bahá’u’lláh ten months before her execution, which was transcribed in her personal diary. As such, Mona’s dream and her subsequent martyrdom is sacralized in the Faith; her premonitions connected to a surge of Bahá’í arrests that occurred in 1982—“dream[ing] and writ[ing] about her father’s death”—as well as describing how she met a martyred Bahá’í in her dreams (Mehdi Anvari) (Bahá’í Chronicles 2015b). There are also references to notes from an essay she wrote at school where she questioned why she was not allowed to freely express her religious beliefs. In this account, Mona wrote:

‘Freedom’ is the most brilliant word among the radiant words existing in the world. Man has always been and will ever be asking for liberty. Why, then, has he been deprived of liberty? Why from the beginning of man’s life has there been no freedom? Always, there have been powerful and unjust individuals who for the sake of their own interests have

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<sup>81</sup> A number of blogs, forums, and news outlets (see Baquia 2005 and 2008; Kadivar 2008; Malta Independent 2008; Posner 2007) published stories about a potential film about Mona’s life with reports occurring between 2005-2008. Associated with composer Jack Lenz, the film apparently had the support from the producers of *The Passion of the Christ*, co-production by Mel Gibson (whom Lenz previously worked with), as well as a preliminary cast of actors (including Shohreh Aghdashloo and Keisha Castle-Hughes) with filming set to occur in Malta. On Jack Lenz’s professional website, a post indicates that a screenplay version of the film won a “Female Eye Audience Choice Screenplay Award” in 2010 (Lenz Entertainment 2009).

resorted to all kinds of oppression and tyranny... Why don't you let me be free to express our goals in this community; to say who I am and what I want, and to reveal my religion to others?

These lines directly correlate with Karim's lyrics from the beginning of the second verse, namely: "She said, freedom is the most brilliant word that exists in the whole world / So, why am I not free to exist in this community? / I got dreams of liberty, but when I open my eyes all I see is tyranny." Furthermore, each of Karim's verses end with same the final tag line "I'm gonna kiss the rope, I'm gonna raise the call" (see figure 28), reiterating the iconic image highlighted in *Smith and Dragoman's* composition.

The overall production aesthetic of "Mona" (among other *Nabil and Karim* recordings) can be situated under the sub-genre of 'conscious rap.' This style of hip-hop boasts a rich legacy of socially-progressive and often spiritual lyrics, themes of self- and black-empowerment, as well as Neo-soul-era (mid-1990s) beat production, sampling techniques, and nostalgic vinyl timbres. These sounds have helped characterized the work of MCs like Common, Mos Def, Rakim, Talib Kweli (McMurray 2007, 88) among others, many of whom are also practicing Muslims. For Juan M. Floyd-Thomas, conscious rap "has been positioned and marketed as a bulwark against the more facile, materialistic, and thuggish elements that tend to mark the current state of mainstream rap music" (Floyd-Thomas 2003, 64). As such, discourses of authenticity have been attributed to the Neo-soul genre, which, in the realm popular culture, has come to represent a secularized form of black spirituality, according to Loren Kajikawa (2012). Here, the author posits that Neo-soul artist Michael 'D'Angelo' Archer's sonic significations of African and Afro-Caribbean religiosity contribute to the formation of "black music as *itself* a kind of popular religion, not in an institutional sense but as a means of accessing the numinous

and extraordinary”; allowing listeners to have “spiritual experiences [...] in the ostensibly secular contexts of popular music consumption.” (Kajikawa 2012, 139). By tapping into the coded references of conscious rap as a more spiritual or ‘elevated’ style of hip hop, *Nabil and Karim* present Mona’s life and execution in a manner that can be deemed aesthetically and theologically appropriate from a Bahá’í perspective.

Monologue	Verse 1
<p>This song is about a girl named Mona            She was executed at the age of 16            And until the last moment            She stood strong in the face of oppression</p>	<p>Innocent people torn from their homes            What is this prejudice, what is this hatred?            Carried in sacks and beat to the bone            How is this violence meant to be sacred?            Here we all gotta sacrifice, but            Their souls carry on in the afterlife (repeat 3x)</p> <p>And among these Bahá’is arose one girl            Had one dream just to change the world            They said what could she do ‘cause she's only 16            She could recognize truth that nobody had seen            She could change the world one soul at a time</p> <p>Where was her freedom?            A gift divine            She said reunion is life, separation is death            That's what I gotta say to my last breath            Go ahead take me, take me home            But don't take my family, take me alone            Alright, go ahead take us, take us all            I'm gonna kiss the rope, I'm gonna raise the call,            she said</p>

Chorus	Verse 2
Just take my soul away Can you free me from these chains? God where have you gone? Let me share with you my pain	She said, freedom is the most brilliant word that exists in the whole world So, why am I not free to exist in this community? I got dreams of liberty, but when I open my eyes all I see is tyranny And I swear by the red in my veins that there is no love, I can only see pain I can only see the blood that'll drip like rain Only see the villains that are killing with no shame And they're filling up the cemetery with all of my friends Not willing to stop, they go again and again They're coming real fast and they're coming to attack I'll sit right here, just breathe and relax Think thoughts that'll make me smile Gotta close my eyes, pray for a while 'Cause reunion is life, separation is death That's what I gotta say to my last breath Go ahead take me, take me home But don't take my family, take me alone Alright, go ahead take us, take us all I'm gonna kiss the rope, I'm gonna raise the call And I'm ready to go, so please set me free Please break these chains, Lord when will it be? (Chorus)

Figure 28: Lyrics for *Nabil and Karim's* "Mona" (2008).

However, the most well-known musical example to document Mona's life and martyrdom was released 1985 by Canadian singer/songwriter Douglas Cameron. His recording "Mona With the Children" became one of the most celebrated Bahá'í recordings around the world and helped significantly propagate the plight of Iranian Bahá'ís to an international audience. The song also achieved surprising success in the Canadian pop charts, reaching #14 in Canada on 19 October 1985 and garnering a Juno nomination for "Most Promising Male Vocalist" in 1986 ("Most Promising Male Vocalist of the Year 1986: Doug Cameron" n.d.). Today, Bahá'í artists continue to cover the song, including Tom Francis (Naraqi 2015d) and Neena (Naraqi 2015e); their videos also circulate on popular Bahá'í media outlets, like *Bahá'í*

*Blog*. Performed in the vein of Bruce Cockburn and other popular Canadian singer-songwriters of the mid-1980s, the recording features background vocals from Dan Seals (of the band *Seals and Crofts*) and Buffy Saint-Marie, both of whom appear in the music video. The recording opens in characteristically 80s ‘rock-ballad’ style: drummer Kevan McKenzie keeps 16th-note time on the hi-hats, emphasizing ‘diamonds’<sup>82</sup> over reverb-saturated electric guitar, bass, and keyboards with his crash cymbal. This dramatic effect is maintained throughout the introduction, which McKenzie punctuates with a simple groove on the kit that only emphasizes beats 1 (kick) and 4 (snare); creating an open space for Cameron’s vocal narrative to flow as the other accompanying instruments maintain the diamond figure over a D major power chord. The energy ramps up from the first verse onward with McKenzie’s quarter time backbeat as group vocals enter during the chorus, echoing Cameron’s refrain “send your love.” This line is further reinforced in the music video with images of Bahá’í community solidarity, as children, adults, and musicians stand with Cameron in Mona’s graveyard, holding flowers and staring directly into the camera. As I will discuss, these and other details surrounding “Mona With the Children” make it an important topical song that not only helped spread information about the worsening conditions for the Iranian Bahá’ís to a much wider audience, but it introduced many non-Bahá’ís to the Faith and helped Western Bahá’í converts to emotionally identify with the realities of Iranian persecution. Due to the significance of “Mona With the Children” for the global Bahá’í community, I will devote considerable attention to the song, as well as Cameron’s personal account.

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<sup>82</sup> In the Nashville numbers system—a charting technique that is common among country and rock session players—a ‘diamond’ indicates a chord change that should be held as a whole note.

The genesis of the song took place at a newly built Toronto Bahá'í Centre in the early 1980s between Doug Cameron and music producer/composer Jack Lenz. The two would work together on music for an Bahá'í International Teaching Conference in Montreal (1982), culminating in the release of Lenz's album "We Are Bahá'ís"—a collection of songs written for children and youth. In the winter of 1983, the two started writing music for another Bahá'í conference in London, Ontario to occur the following year: "We were going to write a bunch of songs and do a recording and [Jack Lenz] was sort of collecting songs and told me the story about this girl Mona. All that was known at that point, or all that I could remember—information was very sketchy—was that her name was Mona, she had been imprisoned and executed, and that she had been hung" (Cameron interview, 2017). Cameron believes that Lenz may have first learned of the story through Ruhi Jahanpour—a friend of Mona who served prison time with her in Iran.<sup>83</sup> Jahanpour was also the first Bahá'í that Cameron ever met or heard of who had been imprisoned because of their shared faith. Around June 1983, following the executions of Mona and the 9 other women, Jack Lenz described a period of intense involvement in creative work that centred around themes of Bahá'í religious oppression in the Bahá'í community, particularly between 1979 and 1986: "there was a lot of stirring around this issue of martyrdom and the issue of persecution" (Lenz, interview). This included a play that Lenz wrote and directed for the 1984 London Bahá'í conference—a first in his career—titled "Midsummer Noon," focusing on narratives of the life of The Báb through a series of monologues and songs, later developing

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<sup>83</sup> Per-Olof Åkerdahl's dissertation (2002) makes mention of both the London youth conference (dated August 26, 1984) and Jahanpour's talk, which apparently detailed prison conditions and torture: "she was imprisoned in the prison of Shiraz together with those Bahā'īs who were later executed. In this talk, she chose to talk about some of the martyrs who were also youth. The story of the imprisonment and execution of Mona Mahmūd-nizhād, one of the 10 women, was later told in the music video Mona's story that presented the song 'Mona with the children'. Ruhi Jahanpour and Mihrīh Mavadat were both part of the production of this video" (Åkerdahl 2002, 119).



into a “radio play” and audiobook of the same title. Lenz also recorded a theme song for the conference “Let It Be This Generation” (which also featured Douglas Cameron on vocals).

According to Lenz, all of this work in 1984 was occurring

at a time when the persecutions were at their height in Iran with the Islamic Republic persecuting the Bahá’í community, putting them in jail, and executing the leadership. It was really centred around that [...] It was the confluence of The Báb obviously being the greatest martyr of the Bábi and Bahá’í Faith, because of the fact that he was the messenger of god, and of course the circumstances [...] it emerged out of that desire to tell *that* story in a time when persecution was intense in Iran; it was just after the ten women are executed in Iran, National Assemblies were disappearing, it was really fraught with that intensity. (Lenz, interview)

Eventually, Lenz would suggest to Cameron that he should write a song about Mona, but Cameron was initially quite reluctant: “I went away thinking, ‘there’s no way I can write a story about someone who has been hung!’ I mean it’s just too awful, it was just unimaginable. And because I didn’t really know a lot about the story, I didn’t have very much to go on. So, I sort of said to myself ‘I can’t do this.’” Returning home to Peterborough, Ontario, however, Cameron received a sudden flash of inspiration:

I’m walking down one of the main streets and I was right in front of the police station. I remember this very vividly. I was stepping off the curb onto the street to cross the street. I got this image in my head of dancing, and I thought ‘oh, that is what it could be about.’ I went home later around 9 or 10 o’clock and I shared an apartment with some other people at that point. I picked up the guitar, sitting in the kitchen, and I just started to strum some chords in an open D tuning and was starting to hum and sing along, started making up some words. The other thing I knew was that she had taught children. That was the reason she had been arrested. It was because she was teaching kids in her house [...] I happened to be sitting in the kitchen with a friend of mine who wasn’t a Bahá’í. He asked ‘what’s that song?’ I said oh I just started making it up. He says ‘that’s great, I love that song.’ I thought, that’s interesting that he responded so quickly. So, I composed this song to some extent in this earlier version. The lyrics weren’t quite as graphic in terms of telling the story. I went back to Toronto at some point and played it for Jack and he liked it, we recorded it. That was sort of the story of how it began, in terms of the song. (Cameron, interview)

Cameron would often travel and perform solo in Canada and the Caribbean, eventually playing an early version of “Mona With the Children” at Bahá’í conventions, devotionals, and other events. The response to the song was overwhelming: “For the Iranian Bahá’ís this was a huge deal because suddenly this story, which was very much *their* story, was being publicly sung by this guy [...] I remember at the conference in London [...] I performed the song to a whole bunch of people [...] people were weeping. It was incredible because suddenly this story was made real. Especially for people Mona’s age, it was a huge deal.” Back in Toronto, Cameron would record an acoustic version of the song with Lenz that was originally much more “impressionistic,” including the chorus line: “Mona with the children, send your love to me and *all along the line* we’ll go dancing.” Cameron described the reference to ‘all along the line’ as “an old folk music phrase about how the telegraph line would go down beside the railroad tracks and people all along the line would get the news”—a poignant choice of words for how the song and music video would later function as a main teaching tool in the Faith. The later version of the song (see figure 29) provides an account of what happened to Mona, followed by the interspersed refrain depicting her ‘dancing’ in the afterlife.

Verse 1	Chorus	Verse 2	Extended Chorus (with lyrical variations)
<p>A 16-year-old girl living in a land so cruel,  She said, this is where I've got to be.  Taken in the night, her heart full of light,  She said this where I've got to be.  How can I tell you, how could she be so young?  To know the truth in all her dreams.  She stands before them to hear them say,  "Save your life and throw your faith away."</p>	<p>Mona with the children send your love to me  All around the world we'll go dancing.  Mona with the children send your love to me  Every precious moment we'll be dancing  Every precious moment we'll be free.</p>	<p>I can see her in my heart, the whole world was falling apart  She said, this where I've got to be.  A captive in the light, a love that burns so bright  This is where I've got to be.  And when they asked her, what could she say.  She said, "You can't break my heart, you can't take my faith away."  When they told her the prices she would pay,  She said "Take my life, take it all the way" (all away).</p>	<p>Mona with the children send your love to me  All around the world I see you dancing  Mona with the children send your love to me  Every precious moment you'll be dancing  Every precious moment you'll be free.    Mona with the children send your love to me.  All around the world our souls go dancing.  Mona with the children, you gave your life.  All around the world we'll go dancing.  All around the world we'll be free.</p>

Figure 29: Doug Cameron’s “Mona With the Children” Lyrics (1985).

In an extended version, Cameron repeats the chorus with slight variations in the lyrics. Here, there are arguably more overt spiritual connections between Mona’s martyrdom and the Faith itself, interjecting words like “sacrifice,” describing visions of Mona “bravely dancing,” “lighting the world” and causing souls “all around the world” to be dancing, thus framing her execution as a universalized Bahá’í narrative.

However, singing about *recent* Bahá’í martyrdom was, at that time, relatively uncharted territory, especially when performed with a contemporary Western pop sensibility. Due to a sense of unease regarding how to appropriately commemorate a Bahá’í martyr through music, as well as Cameron’s deep involvement in Bahá’í events and the growing popularity of “Mona With the Children” among Bahá’ís, the song led to a brief period of controversy (though, Cameron felt it was a bit of “a tempest in a tea pot”):

It was determined that singing a song about someone who was a martyr was not appropriate. This was determined by the National Spiritual Assembly. Somebody decided that this was questionable, so I was instructed not to sing the song. I said, ok... Except that everywhere I went, everybody always wanted me to sing that song [...] it might have been around the time of that [1984 London] conference. There was some question as to whether this was an appropriate thing to do, to sing what was essentially a pop song about someone who had been executed, who was a martyr. But I think I sang it at the conference and I think the Hands of the Cause were there and stuff, like heavy! (laughs) Somehow I sang it there and the controversy went away and it was like, 'no, of course this was the appropriate thing to do.' Everybody was weeping. I remember one time Rúhíyyih Khánum [Shoghi Effendi's wife] came up to me and said, 'that was great,' or 'that was beautiful,' I can't remember. I may be confusing this with when the actual video was made, it is a bit of a blur... But there was this initial response to the song that was quite natural, then there was this moment of 'this is not appropriate, you can't sing it,' and then it was this overwhelming like, 'this is okay.' (Cameron, interview)

Following several unsuccessful attempts at getting signed to a record label—describing his demos as being “universally rejected by every record company that there was”—Cameron decided to pursue university education and start a separate career from the music business around the winter of 1985, flying out to the Caribbean for another short round of visits and performances at Bahá'í events. Returning to Toronto, however, Jack Lenz had other plans:

I arrived [in Toronto] and somehow was speaking to Jack on the phone fairly quickly after I was back. I didn't even get to say 'this is what I decided, blah blah blah' and he said: 'we decided to make a video for the Mona song.' I said, 'oh!' He said, 'we raised some money. We wanted to make a feature film, but we don't have enough money, so we want to make a video.' I said, 'oh! That's great!' [...] And then he said: 'we want you to sing it.' (Cameron, interview)

The song needed to be re-recorded and updated, featuring a number of top-rated Toronto session musicians that included drummers Jorn Juul Andersen and Kevan McKenzie, as well as bassist

David Piltch. In the control room, there was “a committee”<sup>84</sup> of Bahá’í talent, including both Dash Crofts and Dan Seals, who essentially worked as unnamed co-producers, according to Cameron. Creative differences emerged between the artists, namely concerning the lyrics and the idea about Mona dancing—evoking the very same debate about the song that occurred months prior:

I’m singing the song and everybody is in the control room [...] there’s Jack, Jimmy Seals, Dash Crofts, and I see all this commotion and they’re talking [...] they click the little talk back mic and say: ‘Doug, we’re not sure about this idea of dancing. We don’t know if that’s appropriate for someone who’s been martyred, whether you can talk about them dancing’ [...] I said if you want to change that lyric about dancing, that’s fine by me, but you’ll have to get someone else to sing it. I wasn’t angry, I just thought, ‘I’m not going to do it’ [...] they said ‘ok, we’ll do it this way for now, leave it in and if we want to change it, we’ll get someone else.’ I said ‘great, no problem,’ and sang it. (Cameron, interview)

At the time, Cameron was still undecided about pursuing a career in pop music, and, despite his initial concerns about leaving the song a certain way, he described a sense of eventually surrendering himself to the project. At several moments throughout the recording, Cameron felt like he needed to “get out of the way” because he believed something else was at work, alluding to notions of divine-inspiration, even Mona’s involvement in the project: “*we’re* not doing this. This story is going to get told. The way that I eventually thought of it was that this was Mona, this was her story and it was going to get told her way. If you weren’t going to be part of that then you’re going to be swept away, you’re going to be left out” (Cameron, interview). One particular moment during the session reconfirmed to Cameron that the project was serving a

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<sup>84</sup> This reference is quite Bahá’í-specific, in the sense that committees are a common feature of Bahá’í sectors and clusters to help achieve community goals, or to meet broader multi-year campaigns, such as those instituted by National Spiritual Assemblies or in letters from the UHJ. While joking in tone, Lenz’s reference does speak to an administrative culture that exists at the grassroots level: the Faith is not organized around a particular church in a city, but relies upon individual participation to organize core activities and community projects, necessitating a more formalized collective process of consultation and implementation.

greater purpose, despite that the core of the song revolved around a "random idea about dancing."

The next day we're back at the studio [...] to do some background vocals and overdubs. Jack comes in and he had a piece of paper in his hand and was sort of shaking. He said, can I talk to you for a minute. He said I just got a letter from Mona's sister—Mona's sister and her mother were aware of the fact that this video was being made and that this song was being recorded. I think they escaped Iran and were in Saudi Arabia at the time [...] this was a letter from Mona's sister that she had written and in it she described her last visit to the prison to see Mona. She recounted in the letter that Mona—and Jack was telling me this—Mona had said to her: 'please pray that we go to our execution dancing.' [...] It was the only thing left in the song that had been in the original, everything else was changed. All the other images had been made more specific to the facts of the story. The only image left that was not factual was the idea [of dancing]. [...] For me, at that initial moment when I stepped off the curb and got the idea of dancing out of nowhere, as if it was sort of placed in my head. And then to hear that that's what Mona had asked for, I thought, well there you go. (Cameron, interview)

Production for the music video began in March of 1985. According to Cameron, Lenz raised around \$80000 from "a number of wealthy Iranian Bahá'ís" living in North America.<sup>85</sup> Heading the film project, Lenz made a call out to the Bahá'í community to have actors in the video, which included a teenage Payam Akhavan playing a Revolutionary Guard,<sup>86</sup> Ruhi Jahanpour (who played herself in the prison scene), and other Bahá'ís from the Toronto area. The role of Mona was played by an amateur Californian actress who apparently "resembled the real Mona," whereas the 'judge' was performed by Alex Rocco, an American actor who appeared in a number of mobster movies, including *The Godfather*. The video was shot over three days in the

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<sup>85</sup> This point is somewhat corroborated by Lenz. He explained that he borrowed resources on the advice of friends in the Faith from "Persians who saw what was going on in Iran and knew what we're trying to do on a public level. So, they helped. And they all got their money back [...] That particular project, the proceeds—because we made money on that project—additional money went to Nur University in Bolivia [a Bahá'í school of higher education]. That was a decision of everybody involved to do that. It was a really happy story, despite the sad subject matter" (Lenz interview, 2018). Hamid Naficy also notes that the music video was produced "by an Iranian Bahá'í" (Naficy 1993, 104).

<sup>86</sup> Today, Akhavan is a celebrated human rights lawyer, author, and professor at McGill University.

Toronto area, including an apartment in North York (likely the home of local Bahá'ís) and the Don Jail in Eastern Toronto, which was “built the same year as the prison where Mona [was incarcerated].” Cameron’s costume in the video included a very distinctive red beret—an item that he admits was chosen quite at random while shopping at an army surplus store in Toronto, searching for wardrobe options with the stylist (he was required to wear the hat for all later public appearances, much to his dismay). Cameron believes that due to the subject matter of the song and underlying radical, or political connotations associated with the beret, some considered “Mona With the Children” to be a protest song (Naraqi 2014a)—something the songwriter denies:

There was this aesthetic that sort of was arrived at, in terms of what I looked like, that suggested it was a protest song [...] I don't think it was a protest song [...] The original song I wrote was not a political statement, it was a song about a girl who had been executed. The notion that some of these other elements crept into it later with the change of lyrics but, you know, it was *perceived* as being that. I think it was an attempt to connect people to the emotion of the story and the reality of what this was [...] To me, there was so much about the video and the story that were just so arbitrary and random. You know, I get an idea of dancing that's totally random, I wear a red hat that's totally random. They all seem like random things, but then they have significance, and the significance to me served the purpose of telling the story and making sure that the story got to as many people as it did. (Cameron, interview)

The song and music video for “Mona With the Children” was not just surprise hit in Canada, but ‘exile’ Iranian media outlets in the USA also aired the video, including *Cheshmak* (Naficy 1993, 103-104). Grounded in filmic neorealism, the video provided graphic representations of Mona’s arrest and execution. It opens with a shot of a gravestone with subtitle text “Bahá'í Cemetery Shiraz, Iran.” Among the rubble of destroyed graves, revolutionary guards cover a grave with dirt, laughing and spitting on the site while saying (in Farsi): “Yes brother, we will get rid of all of them,” and “this is just the beginning.” As Cameron looks on, he approaches

the grave and sees a vision of Mona standing among the broken tombstones, clutching books in her hands. The scene dissolves to the circumstances surrounding her arrest: armed guards storm a children's class in what appears to be a private home (the room features a wall hanging with the Bahá'í symbol for The Greatest Name, as well as an illustrated poster of people linking hands around the world). Mona immediately and agreeably covers her hair with a scarf and leaves with the men.<sup>87</sup> At the prison, Mona happily greets other women, offering comfort to one another as scenes of interrogation and torture soon follow (notably, images of bloodied feet on the prison floor). Mona is interrogated and asked to renounce her Faith by a member of the guards, who is dressed like a cleric in dark robes and a turban (i.e. the 'judge'). Refusing to recant, the judge smashes a class photo of Mona with her students. The scene moves to a charter bus that leads the women to their execution. The driver is pictured sobbing as the women collectively chant a faint rendition of the prayer written by The Báb, "Allahumma Ya Subuhun." Translated to English, the prayer is read as: "O God, Praised and Holy! O God, Merciful and Kind! Remove us from difficulties by Thy grace and favor. Verily, Thou art Merciful and Kind" (McCants 2010). As Will McCants writes, a literal Arabic transliteration can be read as:

**allahumma** [O God] **ya subbuhu** [O praised one] **ya quddusu** [O holy] **ya rahmanu** [O merciful] **ya mannanu** [O kind one]. **farrij** [comfort] **lana** [for us] **bil-fadli** [by grace] **wa'l-ihsani** [and favor]. **innaka** [truly, you are] **rahmanun** [merciful] **mannanun** [kind]. (McCants 2010)

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<sup>87</sup> According to the *Bahá'í Chronicles* website, Mona was not teaching a children's class, but was arrested at her family home on October 23, 1982 while studying for an English exam. Her father was likely the initial target due to his service on the Local Spiritual Assembly and Auxiliary Board of the Bahá'ís, but Mona would also be taken by the Revolutionary Guards, who explained to her mother: "Do not call her a child. You should call her a little Bahá'í teacher. Look at this poem. It is not the work of a child. It could set the world on fire. Someday she will be a great Bahá'í teacher." In this account, Mona's father told her to recite the Bábí prayer "Remover of Difficulties" and the guards confiscated her papers, as well as "cassette tapes of Mona's chanting" (Bahá'í Chronicles 2015b).



However, the author points out that Bahá'í chanting practice in Farsi apparently altered the text, providing a transliterated version of what many Iranian Bahá'ís would be more familiar with:

Allahumma yá Subúhun yá Quddus yá Hannánu yá Mannán. Farrij Laná Bi'l-Fazli Va'l-Ihsán. Innaka Rahmanu Mannán.<sup>88</sup>

The 'judge' asks Mona one final time to renounce her faith after witnessing the hanging of the other women. Defiantly, Mona removes her headscarf, kisses the noose, and places it over her head, thus correlating direct synchronicity with Cameron's lyrical narrative, as well as the story that began circulating throughout the global Bahá'í community (see figure 30). During this particular scene, the music continues with an extended breakdown and guitar solo that is saturated with distortion and effects (however, this section is cut out of the edited 'single' version of the track). Throughout Mona's ordeal, Cameron continues to sing at the gravesite with more and more people of "various ethnicities and races" joining him, singing along to the chorus, dropping flowers and 'universalizing' the pain of the Bahá'ís in the process (Naficy 1993, 142). The final shot of the video ends with the face of the actress, blending into a photo of the real Mona Mahmoudnejad and the subtitle "Mona's Story."

At present, the only scholar to examine the music video is Hamid Naficy, which appear in his voluminous studies on Iranian cinema (1993; 2012). Noting that Bahá'ís are not likely to produce documentaries in Iran, Naficy writes that outside the country Bahá'ís are involved in a range of "documentary films and television programs in exile." Furthermore, these projects tend

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<sup>88</sup> However, McCants also cites the following letter from the UHJ about *Allahumma*, which states: "With regard to the correct transliteration and the meaning of the song quoted by Mr. ..., it is suggested that his request be directed to one of the knowledgeable Persian believers residing in the ... community" (UHJ 1997b). Interestingly, this prayer is attributed to American Bahá'í composer Tom Price, who along with Jack Lenz and Dan Seals, represent core members of the North American Bahá'í artistic community in the early 1980s. The *Bahá'í Choral Music* website also credits Price as the composer (or, perhaps arranger) of a large-scale choral version of Allahumma ("Sheet Music and Audio Files" n.d.).

to document and express the pain, persecution, and the terrible loss of life and property that the Bahá'ís suffered under the Islamic regime" (Naficy 2012, 104). It is interesting to note that Naficy's first description of the "rock video" considered it more as a form of political commentary. The re-enactment and realistic documentation of "Mona's Execution"—the title Naficy gave to the video—provided an instance where the depiction of "maimed, tortured, and destroyed" bodies (particularly those of ethnic and religious minorities) become economically and ideologically 'productive,' particularly when they "are shown to be subjected to the pervasive disciplinary technologies of the Islamic regime" (Naficy 1993, 142). Here, the author is particularly interested in the visual 'fetishization of exile,' describing the music accompanying the video as merely "an English language soundtrack" (142), perhaps unaware at the time that the production was in fact a commercial music release, not merely a form of Bahá'í propaganda. Continuing, Naficy indicates that this process of exilic fetishization

results when the exiles invest heavily in constructing certain cathected images of homeland and the past while knowing deep down that those are forms of disavowal, or of partial representation, because they are fixed and frozen [...] fetishization is a homeostatic mechanism by which exiles attempt to transform an unstable *societas* (empirical exilic community) into a stable *communitas* (symbolic exilic community). (127)

From this perspective, the music video and its subsequent broadcast on exile television stations pointed to a broader motivation for Iranians to document, reinvent, and reinvest in such narratives *after* the founding of the Islamic regime. Naficy's analysis acknowledges that the video critically portrayed Islamic Republic soldiers and the treatment of Bahá'ís in the country, adding to broader political discourses of dissent, regardless of the community's underlying motivations to create and circulate the video.



Figure 30: Still images from “Mona With the Children” Music Video (1985).  
(Sian Rezvani 2008)

However, the project was highly unconventional. For one, the song and video were stand-alone projects: there were no initial plans to release a full-length record. Bernie Finkelstein of True North Records eventually read an article in the newspaper about the song, noticing that both *Seals and Crofts* and Buffy Sainte-Marie were part of the project (thus sparking his interest). On the first day of shooting the video, Finkelstein contacted Lenz and said he wanted to sign Cameron, but only if he releases a whole record. Laughing, Cameron stated: “We had sent demos to Bernie and he rejected them, but he was working with Bruce Cockburn and Bruce had written

‘If I Had a Rocket Launcher,’ and it was a big deal: outspoken, a protest song, all that stuff [...] Essentially, we took all the demos that had been rejected and we sort of bumped them up” (Cameron, interview). The album was also titled ‘Mona With the Children’ and received distribution from CBS (later, SONY), but “people didn’t buy the record in any great numbers. It was called what’s known as a ‘perceived hit.’ In other words, it had all the trappings of being a hit because it was on the radio and on the TV all the time, but I think only 15000 copies of the record were sold” (Cameron, interview). Furthermore, Cameron was mostly performing at Bahá’í events, or concerts “that were largely sponsored by Bahá’í communities.” This may have included a performance he did at the United Nations while touring in the USA, perhaps organized through the BIC. Because of this, Cameron wasn’t perceived as a commercial artist and was later dropped: “[the song] was topical, it was meaningful, but it wouldn’t sell records. I was classed as ‘easy listening’ and those records didn’t sell in any numbers.” Still, the short-lived success of the song fed into broader concerns over Iranian reprisals against the Bahá’ís. This is a point that Bernie Finkelstein mentions in his brief account of the song in his autobiography, where following the release of the single and video, True North’s offices needed to stay alert, fearing retaliation (Finkelstein 2012, 251). Cameron felt that these concerns were “fairly nebulous,” but recalls an instance in Manitoba, where following a performance,

somebody came to me backstage and said ‘there are some Mujahideen here.’ And everybody is freaked out. I mean, I don’t even know what that means. I guess these guys who had shown up were Iranian and probably had come to Canada as refugees. Everybody was freaked out and I remember being a little bit freaked out, but what are they going to do? And, at the end of the concert, one of these so-called Mujahideen came up to me and he was crying. He was weeping because of [Mona’s] story. (Cameron, interview)

Ultimately, “Mona With the Children” became a significant Bahá’í teaching tool and point of artistic pride, screened at various youth conferences, gatherings, Bahá’í conventions, as well as personal use in private Bahá’í devotions. As mentioned in Chapter Three, this included a screening of a video following a live performance of Buffy Sainte-Marie in Hawaii (Bahá’í News 1985, 14). The video would later be distributed through Bahá’í channels as suitable material for classroom use, particularly “for high school and junior college classes” (“Videos” n.d.). For these reasons, Cameron wholeheartedly believes that the Bahá’í community was essential for the promotion of the song and video, both during and after the project’s completion:

The Bahá’í community had a huge stake in it because this was a story that would, in fact, reach lots and lots of people. It did something that simply *telling* people about the Bahá’í faith couldn’t do. It *moved* people. People would hear the story of Mona, they would hear the song and see the video. I would make them feel something and for some reason that story was so universal and so direct that it had a huge impact on people [...] People became aware of the situation of the Bahá’ís in Iran, I think more than they ever had. And not only were they aware of it, but they also felt something about it. (Cameron, interview)

While his own career in pop music didn’t last more than a year after the song’s release, Cameron felt that the real benefit and purpose of “Mona With the Children” was how it helped raise awareness about Bahá’í religious oppression: “what it did for the Bahá’í community, what it did for that story, and for the idea of, you know, ‘Iranian Bahá’ís are being persecuted!’ It was momentous and huge” (Cameron, interview).

### C. The Yaran and Bahá’í Education: Official Campaigns and Responses

The mass arrests of the *Yaran* and faculty members at the *Bahá’í Institute for Higher Education* (BIHE) in 2008 harkened to an era of governmental oppression that characterized the years immediately following the establishment of the Islamic Republic. According to the BIC,

“there are currently 97 Bahá’ís in prison [...] includ[ing] six of the seven national-level Bahá’í leaders, who currently remain in prison for allegedly ‘disturbing national security,’ ‘spreading propaganda against the regime,’ and ‘engaging in espionage’ (“Situation of Bahá’ís in Iran” 2019). Within the past three years, the majority of the *Yaran* have been released after serving ten-year sentences, including Mahvash Sabet (released September 18, 2017) (Iran Press Watch 2017a), Fariba Kamalabadi (released October 31, 2017) (BWNS 2017a), Behrouz Tavakkoli (released December 5, 2017) (Iran Press Watch 2017b), Saeid Rezaie (released February 16, 2018) (BWNS 2018a), Jamaloddin Khanjani (released March 17, 2018) (BWNA 2018b), and Vahid Tizfahm (March 20, 2018) (Iran Press Watch 2018). However, Afif Naemi remains in prison and is currently serving an extended sentence, despite suffering severe health complications (Center for Human Rights in Iran 2018). While there has been no substantial era of ‘improvement’ for the Bahá’ís following the Revolution, the widespread arrests and anti-Bahá’í policies during President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s presidency were significantly harsher than under Mohammad Khatami. Accordingly, these mass arrests have created a space of dialogue for Bahá’í musicians to historically and theologically contextualize their imprisonment, listing all the many forms of persecution that Bahá’ís have faced in the country. As with the case of Mona, the arrests of the *Yaran* and BIHE faculty members served as a teaching opportunity for Bahá’ís to talk about the Faith to non-Bahá’í friends and colleagues, or to circulate information to local media outlets and governmental representatives. For artists like *Smith and Dragoman*, the need to highlight the plight of the *Yaran* inspired them to “move off script,” adding the final song “Prisoners” on their most recent album *The Mystery* (2012), which is dedicated to the life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (Smith, interview).

However, many of songs about the *Yaran* present unique relationships between the Faith's administrative institutions and individual Bahá'ís—in particular, through social media campaigns and international initiatives that were implemented by the BIC. Given the title “Seven Days in Remembrance of Seven Years for the Seven Bahá'í Leaders,” the #Bahais7years campaign was launched from May 14-21, 2015 and each day of the week was dedicated to one of the seven imprisoned *Yaran* members (BWNS 2015). The initiative followed a letter that was issued by the UHJ on May 8, 2015 which was addressed ‘To the Bahá'ís of Iran’ (UHJ 2015). In it, House members described how support for the Iranian Bahá'ís has manifested into multiple acts that “demonstrate the support, in cities and villages, of the generality of the people in Iran.” Continuing, the letter read:

Whether it was students placing on an empty chair the name of a Bahá'í who had been barred from attending university; shop owners offering work to a Bahá'í, a fellow businessman whose trade permit had been revoked; or a number of friends and neighbours signing a petition consenting to the burial of a deceased Bahá'í whose interment had been prevented because of the alleged objections of the public. (UHJ 2015)

The UHJ also addressed that while the “anniversaries of the arrests of the *Yaran* and some of the distinguished friends who served the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education” were at the forefront of their prayers, the UHJ also recalled “the persecution that thousands of Bahá'ís in Iran continue to face each day because of their religious beliefs and the more than one hundred believers that remain unjustly imprisoned” (UHJ 2015).

Through the BIC hashtag and associated Facebook event pages (hosted by the BIC and presented in both English and Farsi), the campaign invited Bahá'ís globally to share images, videos, and creative content to demonstrate their support for the *Yaran* (see figure 31). Here, Bahá'ís shared personal stories, messages of support, pictures from their private devotionals, as

well as original poems, collages, posters, paintings, musical recordings, links to videos, and other media content related to the imprisonment of Bahá'ís in Iran.



Figure 31: Collage of images related to the #7Bahais7years campaign, compiled on *Bahá'í Blog*. (Naraqí 2015c)

Several Bahá'í musicians also responded to the call, including Luke Scott, Shadi Toloui-Wallace, Colby Jeffers, Erika Mahoney, Nabil and Karim, Tom Francis, among many others—each framing the *Yaran's* imprisonment within a continuum of trauma and oppression in Iran, serving as a catalyst for artists to share the legacy of persecution. In some cases, recordings may only provide liner note dedications to the Bahá'ís of Iran, including Vanda Mary Khadem's 2013 release “Zuhur” that was dedicated to the *Yaran*. According to her profile on *Bahá'í Music Store*, she was “inspired by the lives of the heroines and heros (sic) of her beloved Faith, from the East and from the West, who are both known and unknown to us” (“Vanda Mary Khadem - Zuhur” n.d.). For others, responding to the crisis was due to a far more personal connection. For instance, Badi Yazdi—an engineer by trade, working and residing in California—shares a family relation to one of the members of the *Yaran*, Behrooz Tavakoli, who is the husband of Yazdi's cousin.



Considering his passion for music as more of a hobby, Yazdi dedicates his talents to raising money for the Faith. In fact, Yazdi claimed in a *Bahá'í Blog* interview that all the proceeds from his recordings have been donated to various Bahá'í funds (Naraqí 2014b), including the International Fund, one of nine official fundraising categories that Bahá'ís can earmark through their donations to the Faith. For his album “Yaran: A Selection of Prayers,” the cover is adorned with the faces of the seven imprisoned members of the Yaran (see figure 32), offering a selection of original recordings that mix Western popular genres (arranged by Eric Harper) with Persian chanting. In an interview with *Bahá'í Blog*, Yazdi states:

I try to do what I can to help the process of freeing the Yaran, and in this case I intend to forward all proceedings of the sale of this Yaran album earmarked to “Freedom of Yaran” to be sent to the International Fund; but also by spreading the Yaran CD as wide as possible to the friends around the world, I hope that the album’s seven prayers will help generate more and more prayers being said for the freedom and wellbeing of the Yaran, and for all those prisoners of conscience imprisoned in Iran. (Naraqí 2014b)

Yazdi’s songs draw from the Holy Writings, mainly those which ask of God “for the freedom of our friends from prison and for their protection,” or “refer[ring] to the theme of reflecting on what Bahá'u'lláh wants for us, and how we should obey God’s will and not be sad” (Naraqí 2014b). In the title track “Yaran,” Yazdi chants a prayer used to offer support for Bahá'í prisoners, which is meant to be recited 9 times. Yazdi also includes both a provisional English translation, along with the original Arabic in the album sleeve.

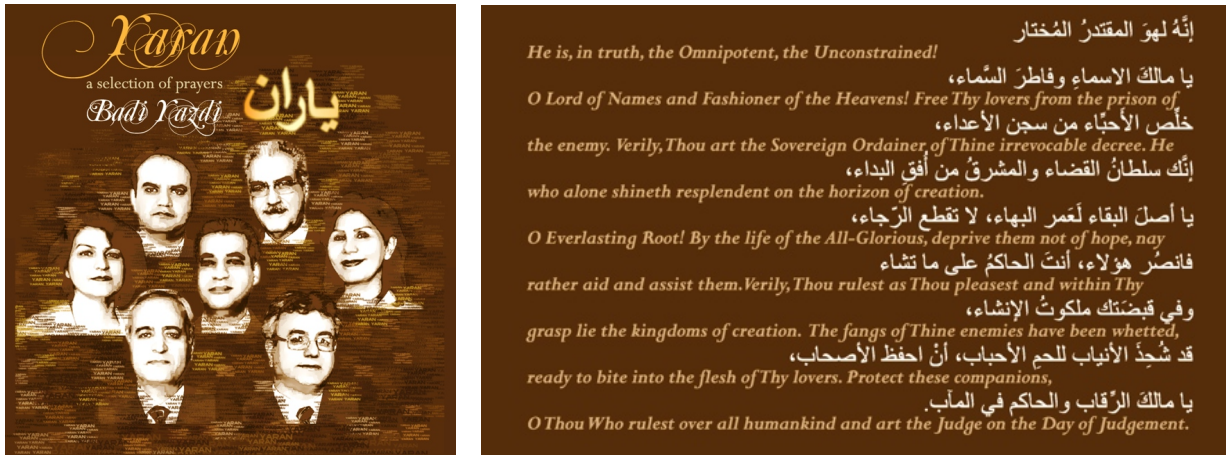


Figure 32: Front (left) and back cover (right) of Badi Yazdi’s album “Yaran: A Selection of Prayers” (2013). On the back of the album, the lyrics for the title track are displayed (right), derived from Bahá’u’lláh’s “Prayer in Times of Difficulty.”<sup>89</sup>

The piece opens with a synthesizer drone in E as Yazdi slowly recites the prayer in an almost spoken monologue. A classical guitar performs a short solo and introduces the raised seventh (D#), altering the ambiguous chord to E harmonic minor (as well as repeatedly resolving from the sixth to the fifth semitone interval [C-B] in the synths). As the song progresses, more prominent orchestral elements (likely programmed from digital sources) are introduced, such as cymbal swells, timpani rolls, strings, flutes, and santour; transitioning to Yazdi’s chant of the prayer, though remaining somewhat subdued throughout and without an abundance of vocal leaps or melismatic flourishes. However, the song concludes with a triumphant instrumental section in 6/8, incorporating more orchestral percussion, strings, and ending with a short response from a flute or reeded instrument (perhaps a clarinet or ney) that slowly resolves from the third and second semitone interval (G-F#), back to E. Here, as with both “God is Sufficient Unto Me” and *Seals and Crofts*’ “Traces” (see Chapter Three), the harmonic minor is once again

<sup>89</sup> It is difficult to find an authoritative Bahá’í source and translation the prayer, though several Bahá’í websites share the prayer for the *Yaran* and, more generally, the Bahá’ís of Iran (Hulme 2009; Iran Press Watch 2009).

used in hybridized Western/Persian compositions that address the Bahá'í persecutory narrative: from Bahá'u'lláh's chanting of the Báb's prayer in the Siyah Chal, to Mona's execution, and now for the *Yaran*. In each example, too, non-Iranian Bahá'ís composed and arranged the music (in particular, Jack Lenz served as the key contributor for two of the above mentioned songs, reflecting perhaps his own compositional tendencies and style).<sup>90</sup>

Elika Mahoney's "Persecution" (2010) was initially inspired by the 2008 arrests of the *Yaran*, but it details a number of crimes against the Bahá'ís that span several decades: "Their children suffer the same fate, subjected to an endless hate / Denied basic human rights, yet guided by a greater light / Pressured to recant their faith, their Holy Places destroyed / Their graves unearthed, no place to bury their dead / Denied the right to education, riddled with false accusations" (Elika Mahoney 2009a). In what would later appear in a full-length release titled *Edge of Forever* (2013), Mahoney described her motivations behind the song in two separate blog posts from 2009, outlining prison conditions that the *Yaran* faced (i.e. solitary confinement, small living quarters), as well as the charges laid against them, such as "espionage for Israel, insulting religious sanctities and propaganda against the Islamic Republic" (Elika Mahoney 2009b). The songwriter also shared her own familial connections to religious persecution in Iran, including the imprisonment of her grandparents and the martyrdom of her uncle (2008).

Mahoney provided links to an official letter written by the BIC to the Prosecutor General of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Qorban-Ali Dorri-Najafabadi (dated March 4, 2009), which

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<sup>90</sup> There is historical precedent for the use of the harmonic minor, however, as Sarah Moore explains that for "Western-enculturated" listeners, the 'small' intervallic quality of the harmonic minor (which possesses three semitone intervals) has often coincided with longstanding associations between semitones and negative feelings, effeminacy, incompleteness, sadness, and melancholy (Moore 2012, 139; see Huron and Davis 2012).

called for the sentencing of the *Yaran* to be fair, just, and in accordance with international law (BWNS 2009).

The broader persecutory scope in Mahoney's lyrics, as well as her links and references to research conducted by the BIC and other institutions is not unique, but represents shared strategies among many Bahá'í musicians in their songs about the *Yaran*. For instance, Vancouver-based singer/songwriter Shadi Toloui-Wallace's single "Yaran" (2014) cited a *Hidden Word* from Bahá'u'lláh as a source of inspiration, as well as facts derived from a BIC report published the same year as the release:

"O SON OF SPIRIT! ***The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice***; turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee. By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbour. Ponder this in thy heart; how it behooveth thee to be. ***Verily justice is My gift to thee and the sign of My loving-kindness***. Set it then before thine eyes." (Toloui-Wallace 2014; emphasis mine)<sup>91</sup>

The poem/lyrics for Shadi Toloui-Wallace's single "Yaran" was in fact written by her father, Paul Wallace, who dedicated the song "to the many thousands of friends who have suffered systematic persecution, hardship, and even death, at the hands of the current Iranian regime, simply due to the fact that they are Bahá'í's" (Toloui-Wallace, n.d.). Akin to Mahoney's composition, the song also provided additional contextual background for the *Yaran*'s imprisonment ("They stopped you working / Closed your schools to stop you learning / They'll hurl hate and slander / Create false propaganda"), writing that "in their empathy and concerted belief, Bahá'ís around the world would gladly swap places with the *Yaran*. There is an international outcry and support of justice for the Iranian Bahá'í Community. All Bahá'ís pray for the immediate release and swift return of all Bahá'í prisoners, including the *Yaran*, to their families" (Toloui-Wallace 2014). These points

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<sup>91</sup> The highlighted sections of the prayer appear in the lyrics for "Yaran".

are reiterated in the poem/lyrics with the repeated refrain: “I close my eyes and I see your faces / Oh Yaran, can we trade places.” The song was also shared on the “Seven Days...” campaign Facebook page on May 19, 2015.

Some recordings utilize a range of source materials that were created by members of the Yaran. In KC Porter’s single “Yaran” (2011), the song opens with a distorted recording of a woman’s voice chanting in Farsi. On his *bandcamp* webpage, Porter shared that this was in fact the voice of one of the Yaran prisoners, Fariba Kamalabadi, chanting a prayer by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (“Yaran, by KC Porter” 2011). Featuring multiple Bahá’í and non-Bahá’í session musicians, including Manoochehr Sadeghi on santour, “Yaran” was initially released as a single, but later appeared on Porter’s album *Where the Soul is Born* (2013). Australian singer-songwriter Tom Francis was inspired to write “This is Where I Stand” (2014) after reading a poem by Mahvash Sabet, one of the seven imprisoned *Yaran* members who secretly published a collection of poetry in 2013 while serving at Evin prison in Tehran (Vreeland 2017). Francis does not indicate which exact poem inspired him, but Francis’ *bandcamp* page and liner notes for the *From Up There* recording note that the song “is dedicated to her and the many other Bahá’ís who are currently imprisoned in Iran for no other reason than practising their Faith. This song is a humble attempt to help words of strength and hope uttered in confinement to reach hearts in wide open spaces” (“From Up There, by Tom Francis” 2014). The lyrics shine through an unobstructed and paired down instrumentation as variations of a simple 4-chord progression (E-B-C#-A) is performed on acoustic guitar and supported with minimal percussive accompaniment and reverb-saturated electric lead guitar. Here, the lyrics describe someone calling out beyond the walls of their cell: “This is where I stand, in this darkened place / And they didn’t know that I don’t need

a light to see your face / This is where I stand, this is all I see / It is all that I can give, this is all of me.” From utilizing a first-person perspective of a persecuted Iranian Bahá’í, “This is Where I Stand” helps universalize Bahá’í suffering, interpellating listeners to recognize and identify with its narrative discourse. This connection is further strengthened by Francis’ use of a published Bahá’í resource (i.e. Sabet’s collection of poetry), framing the song within a process of ‘bearing witness’ to the *Yaran*’s suffering and speaking to a tradition of Bahá’í musicians citing official reports, letters, Holy Writings, and auto-biographical accounts as a means of legitimizing and sacralizing their artistic practice. In 2017, Sabet’s collection of “Prison Poems” was recognized by PEN International as “The International Writer of Courage” and her poetry has been the subject of considerable media attention and praise, recently inspiring Norwegian composer Lasse Thoresen to premier a work in Oslo that both adopted the name of Sabet’s collection and featured readers reciting her poems over electroacoustic soundscapes, multi-voiced choir, and solo flute (BWNS 2017b). Other Bahá’í musicians have similarly used Sabet’s poems in recent musical releases, including Badi Yazdi and his 2017 recording *Crucible of Love*, which drew inspiration from Sabet’s poem of the same name (also titled “Mahlakeh”) (“Badi Yazdi - Crucible of Love” n.d.).

Perhaps the most detailed historical account of persecution appears in Colby Jeffers’ song and music video for “Oh Yaran (7 Years)” (2015), which also connects Bahá’í persecution narratives to Christian and Islamic texts. Through cultivating interfaith awareness about the plight of Iranian Bahá’ís, Jeffers’ lyrics articulates the concept of Bahá’í progressive revelation (particularly in Verse 1) (see figure 33). In a blog post, Jeffers wrote of the story behind the song and its production, referencing the following passages from the Quran and the Bible:

One of the concepts I've always been most struck by in the Bahá'í Writings is the idea that one of the holiest acts of a believer is to endure persecution to prove one's faith in God. I learned that this is not unique to the Bahá'í teachings, but also appears in other holy texts. For the song, I wanted to highlight this common thread, so I researched and found the following exhortations in the Bible and Quran.

*“Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.”* – Bible (Matthew 5:11-12)

*“And We will surely test you with something of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth and lives and fruits, but give good tidings to the patient...”* – Quran (Surah 2:155)

*“Do men think when they say ‘We believe’ they shall be let alone and not be put to proof?”* – Kitab-i-Iqan. (“The Story Behind the Song: Oh Yaran (7 Years)” n.d.)

For “Oh Yaran,” Jeffers collaborated with Bahá'í artist Nabil Moghaddam (mixing/mastering; from the duo *Nabil and Karim*), Jose Maria (producer), as well as a Barcelona-based female vocalist by the name of *Emphavoice*, who Jeffers found through the online job posting site *Fiverr*. As with other songs of the Yaran, Jeffers' track outlines the charges laid against them (“Espionage, propaganda, and disturbing the peace? / Their main pursuit was selfless service to humanity”) as well as a timeline of injustices that have befallen the community since the early days of the Faith, including the arrest and detention of mothers with their babies, schoolteachers ridiculing Bahá'í students, denial of pensions, benefits, and the destruction of Bahá'í cemeteries (See Verse 2 in figure 33). Initially, the song was borne as a stand-alone project to commemorate the *Yaran's* seventh year of serving their prison sentences, but eventually it became part of an album titled *Wizdome* (2016) after a successful Kickstarter crowdfunding campaign. Jeffers shared the video on the BIC-sponsored “Seven Days in Remembrance...” Facebook event page on May 21, 2015, indicating how it was important to use the resources provided by a trusted Bahá'í institution, such as the BIC, throughout his songwriting process:

I began writing the lyrics in April 2015. To find my inspiration, I thoroughly researched the situation, reading through the Bahá'í International Community website to more fully understand the situation that the 7 Yaran, and the rest of the Iranian Bahá'í community has been facing. I wanted to make sure that I depicted the situation as accurately as possible. (“The Story Behind the Song: Oh Yaran (7 Years)” n.d.)

Subsequently, “Oh Yaran” cites a number of key reports and publications from the Islamic Republic, as heard in Verse 3, including “Check out the secret document approved by the country’s leader” (to which Jeffers holds a copy of a report at 2:40-2:42min of the video).<sup>92</sup>

Jeffers also includes Bahá'í demographic figures that estimate the number of Bábí martyrs,<sup>93</sup> as well as brief descriptions about each *Yaran* member—i.e. their family life and occupation—as the camera pans across their portraits.

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<sup>92</sup> The document in question refers to a leaked report from 1991, titled the “Bahá'í Question memorandum,” which outlined the Islamic Republic’s plan to block the progress and development of Iranian Bahá'ís. Signed by the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the document listed the following policies for achieving this aim, including denying Bahá'ís employment and limiting access to education (BIC 2017b).

<sup>93</sup> While this figure (20,000) has circulated within the Faith for quite some time, other scholars have argued the number to be closer to 2000. Denis MacEoin questioned the 20,000 martyr figure on two separate occasions (1983a and 1983b), to which the UHJ clarified (initially) in 1984 that the number is indeed true, citing the scholarship of one Faḍil-i-Mazandarani. However, in a later letter dated September 4, 2005, the UHJ admits that a proper citation for this number has yet to be found (UHJ 2005).



## “Oh Yaran (Seven Years)”

(Verse 1)

They say God works in mysterious ways,  
we go through tests and difficulties so that God can determine our faith  
Jesus said that we are blessed when faced with persecution in the name of righteousness  
It earns you a seat in His Kingdom  
That’s Matthew Chapter 5, Sermon on the Mount  
Now let’s flip to the Quran and the Sura of the Cow, yo!  
That’s Chapter 2, check out verse 155, read that God will send us tests for the duration of  
our lives, but If we are patient and we keep our faith in God He will shower us with blessings, that’s a  
promise from Allah  
Turn to Bahá’u’lláh and His book the *I-qan*,  
says if we accept His truth God will put us all to proof, yeah  
So when the friends of God are suffering with pain all because of their beliefs you won’t see ‘em  
complain  
They embrace it with joy because of the Holy Book, but that don’t mean we let the persecutors off the  
hook

(Chorus)

Oh Yaran, 7 years locked away  
Oh Yaran, we pray for you every day  
You serve as an inspiration for the entire human race  
Oh Yaran, justice will find a way

(Verse 2)

Seven leaders behind bars for seven years,  
And they’re facing twenty even though their innocence is clear  
Prisoners of conscience, charging them with nonsense  
Targets of prejudice, imprisoned without evidence  
Espionage, propaganda, and disturbing the peace?  
Their main pursuit was selfless service to humanity  
The world is crying now for the Yaran,  
but this injustice is nothing new for the Bahá’ís in Iran  
Since the beginning, back in 1844  
Up to 20000 executed, countless others persecuted  
Fast forward up to ’79 when the Islamic Revolution brought a brand new constitution and  
Keeping down Bahá’ís became systematized from the cradle to the grave, their rights taken away  
Bahá’í babies held in prison with their moms  
When the children go to school they’re constantly ridiculed and insulted by their teachers  
But it goes much deeper  
Check out the secret document approved by the country’s leader  
Bahá’í youth are banned from higher education and adults are blocked from obtaining prominent  
occupations  
Marriage not recognized, rightful pensions are denied, cemeteries of Bahá’ís repeatedly get vandalized  
Denied a proper burial for their deceased, even when they’re dead Iran’s Bahá’ís still cannot rest in  
peace

<b>“Oh Yaran (Seven Years)”</b>
<p>(Verse 3)</p> <p>Now let me paint this picture with a final brush and share the stories of these seven people taken off in handcuffs  Portrayed as criminals, a threat to national security all because they were leaders of Iran’s Bahá’í community  A school teacher and a principal, mother of two  A social worker with a passion for empowering youth  An engineer and a scholar, an optometrist  A mom of three and developmental psychologist  A business owner working factories, father of four  An industrialist served on the Auxiliary Board  All they wanted was to better their community  What have these seven servants done to be punished so brutally?  The world’s praying for you every day  Your faith and certitude inspires the entire human race  Justice will come my friends, so just stay strong  The world is with you, Yaran</p>

Figure 33: Lyrics for “Oh Yaran (7 Years)” by Colby Jeffers and Emphavoice (2015).

#### *D. Online Memorialization*

Musical activity and discourse surrounding the *Yaran* has been greatly shaped and facilitated by the use of social media technologies to circulate messages and creative content. In the case of the YouTube video platform, tribute and memorial videos have become a meaningful vehicle to publicly honour and engage in dialogue about death and dying, providing new spaces for religious groups (including Bahá’ís) to communicate these topics to a broader audience. As such, this section will outline some of the features and dynamics of these videos as a way of incorporating them into broader forms of musicking in the Faith.

YouTube users are able to create and post tribute and memorial videos and generate community-engaged experiences of mourning, “function[ing] as cultural archive of communication about death and dying” (Gibson and Altena 2014, 15). Interestingly, since the platform operates in a public forum, “protagonists of YouTube sites about death and dying—video makers, editors, advertisers and commentators—negotiate the boundaries of acceptable

behaviour, making these boundaries explicit through provoking public debate” (16). For instance, graphic images of death and dying in a given video may be too extreme or provoke a sense of disrespect among viewers. Some topics may provoke controversy, as with the online memorialization of fallen Danish soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq, for instance, where Knudsen and Stage found that online comments and critiques questioned their perceived “grievability,” a perspective that was largely dependent on one’s position on “the status and legitimacy of the war” (Knudsen and Stage 2012, 2-3). In short, the activities associated with YouTube tribute videos present a relevant case study for the analysis of persecutory aesthetics and narratives. Within the YouTube frame and its ‘performative’ functions—i.e. actions and practices associated with the site, such as advertising messages, the ‘like’ and ‘dislike’ video functions—users “construct and contest in dialogue with others the social meanings and values around subject matters that provoke communal discourse” (Gibson and Altena 2014, 19).

The use of music in memorial videos is quite common, though it has been found to greatly impact their reception. According to Pentaris and Yerosimou (2015), the authors found that background music can enhance engagement, draw attention to certain parts of the song, increase anxiety, or elicit emotional responses when watching videos that “communicate death.” Such experiential dynamics help bridge binary understandings between public and private bereavement online, since users can post comments that reflect their emotional states. Furthermore, a user’s musical choice for a tribute video—ranging from existing popular sources, or their own original compositions—can provide a window into understanding their sense of loss. The addition of a song is meant to “express privately expressed feelings toward the loss,” which are then “externalised to the public via background music and viewers experience the

elicitation of possibly similar emotions” (Pentaris and Yerosimou 2015, 307). Subsequently, a significant area of aesthetic work that memorialized Bahá’í martyrdom was created through online, user-generated videos. Coinciding with the efforts of the BIC, some of these tribute videos included images from the various *Yaran* campaigns. In one video titled “Dear Yaran: a tribute to the unjustly imprisoned Bahá’í friends in Iran” (sheida gv 2015), photographs and bios for each member of the *Yaran* move across the screen, as well as an image of the banner for the #7Bahais7years campaign (seen at 3:29min) (see figure 34). Set to a choral performance of the Bábí prayer “Qul Allah’u Yakfí” (“God Is Sufficient Unto Me”), the video includes photos compiled through the BIC campaign from across the globe. As outlined in Chapter One, this is a historically significant Bahá’í prayer that was recited by Bahá’u’lláh and His co-prisoners in the Siyah-Chal as they “would face each other in two rows. Half the prisoners, chained in one row, would chant, ‘God is sufficient unto me. He verily is the all-sufficing.’ The other half would respond, ‘In Him let the trusting trust’” (Langness 2015).<sup>94</sup>



Figure 34: High resolution image of the #7Bahais7years campaign banner. Copyright © Bahá’í International Community. (“Campaign Banner” n.d.)

Some of these videos use a mix of brutal and traumatic imagery, incorporating pictures of the *Yaran*, as well as images that have circulated in Bahá’í magazines and reports—including those of elaborate methods of torture in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and unverified

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<sup>94</sup> The narrative for this incident is documented in *The Dawn-Breakers* (Nabil-i-‘Azam 1932, 631-632).

photographs of deceased Bahá'ís. For instance, Bobby Aazami's video "Murder with Impunity" (Bobby Aazami 2009) features a montage of Bahá'í news-reel material and stories since the early 1980s with a layered track of an acoustic guitar accompaniment (perhaps performed and recorded by Aazami himself). In the description of the video (dated May 17, 2015), Aazami writes of a dream he had on May 14, 2008, where he held documents that bore the signatures of each of the members of the Yaran almost immediately prior to their arrest, receiving news through the Bahá'í National Centre in the USA later that day. Here, the YouTube user reposted the video as a response to the BIC #7Bahais7years campaign, attaching the hashtag, along with link to the campaign website ("Seven Days in Remembrance..." n.d.) to explain for why the video contained earlier images and footage of martyrdom to convey support for the *Yaran*:

In an effort to shine a spotlight on the darkness that has taken over what was once my homeland, I made this video. It was made 7 years ago while the 7 Yaran were still awaiting a trial date and I share it with you again today, hoping you would do the same. Although I was extremely limited on photographs and media footage concerning their situation (all I had access to was one photograph), I decided to use archival footage and photographs from the early 1980's, a time when the focus of a systematic, government sponsored persecution of all Bahá'ís in Iran was at its zenith in a most brutal and heinous way. I chose to parallel the stories of the many who lost their lives on account of their beliefs and contrast it with current events relating to the Yaran. (Bobby Aazami 2009)

In this instance, the memorialization of present-day martyrdom calls forth the artifacts of previous injustices, often figured around the image of the mutilated body of the martyr: a video may include photos of some of Bahá'u'lláh's earliest followers, or the unspecified bodies of killed Bahá'ís during the Pahlavi dynasty. The images of persecution and state violence holds weight in a semiotic context, representing the "accounts of various kinds of assassinations, hangings, and stoning and raping of women," particularly among ethnic and religious minorities

like the Kurds and Bahá'ís of Iran (Naficy 1993, 142). According to Naficy, “the tortured body, the exposed flesh, becomes a text [...] in which visions of power and resistance, of difference and transgression, are inscribed” (142-143).

The majority of these user-generated tribute videos used music from well-known popular recordings, articulating a process of sacralizing existing aesthetic resources to reinscribe them into the Bahá'í persecutory narrative. For instance, Gary Jules' cover of *Tears for Fears*' single “Mad World” (made popular on the 2001 *Donny Darko* film soundtrack) appears in Sara Roshani's video “Bahá'í Persecution in Iran” (2011)—a project she describes as part of an eighth-grade assignment (Sara Roshani 2011). Against the backdrop of Jules' solo piano, synthesizers, and multi-part vocal performance, the video documents the history of Iranian Bahá'í persecution of Bahá'ís since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and provides additional context and information. Images of the *Yaran* and other female Bahá'í educators who were arrested between 2007-2008 are shown, concluding with the faces of Mona and the seven other female Bahá'ís executed in 1983. In a video titled “Yaran,” uploaded by YouTube user falizaer (2014), images of the *Yaran* and descriptions of their previous professions are underscored by Shidan Toloui-Wallace's version of The Báb's prayer “Remover of Difficulties,” which also features her daughter Shadi Toloui-Wallace on vocals (singing in English). However, some videos appear to contain original recorded content (as with Bobby Aazami's video [2009]), whether chanted, performed on instruments, or dictated as a spoken-word poem. Shahla Nabilzadeh Ghotbi's video “Yaran 7 years” (posted under the YouTube name ghotbi99 [2015]) includes a recited poem in English, titled “The Seven Roses.” Accompanied by classical guitar, synthesizers, and

programmed drums, the video offers a sequence of images of the *Yaran*, as well as highlighted sections of her poem—an excerpt of which reads in the video description:

Seven years imprisonment of innocent lives, Leaving yaran behind closed doors and bars  
Can anyone say how far? and what more? Tell me what... for? Seven years breaking  
thousands of hearts, This journey begins and cruelty starts Persecution increasing day by  
day, more and more Tell me what for? Seven years away from their homes Under harsh  
conditions, with all sorts of storms Feeling pushed behind with pain that they ignore, Tell  
me what for? Seven years in prisons, foul and rotten These souls who will never be  
forgotten, Are tortured, their hearts heavy and sore, Tell me what for? (ghotbi99 2015)

Relatedly, in a video uploaded by Vedad Theophilus titled “Hidden Word for Bahá’í  
Yaran,” (2014) the singer offers her own solo performance of a Persian chant for “O Son of  
Justice!,” accompanied by alternating images of candles, the *Yaran*, and the gardens at the Shrine  
of Bahá’u’lláh in Israel. In the description section, the English version of the prayer follows:

Whither can a lover go but to the land of his beloved? and what seeker findeth rest away  
from his heart’s desire? To the true lover reunion is life, and separation is death. His  
breast is void of patience and his heart hath no peace. A myriad lives he would forsake  
to hasten to the abode of his beloved. (Vedad Theophilus 2014)

Several Bahá’í artists shared stand-alone music videos to commemorate the *Yaran*’s  
imprisonment—some of which were never released as an audio track. This includes a  
collaboration between hip-hop/R&B duo *Nabil and Karim* and singer/songwriter Chelsea-Lyne  
Heins on “This Love” (nabilinho 2010) as well as a large-scale collaboration for the video “A  
Tribute to Yaran” (NinthPoint 2011) that features Cameroonian drummer Gustaff Besungu,  
singer-songwriter Ali Youssefi, Persian vocalist Saied Mastoori, and several others. In the latter  
example, the song moves between Farsi, English, as well as rapping in French and Spanish with  
the repeated refrain of “Yaran, Yaran, Bahau’llah’ zamji rast.” The slideshow-style YouTube  
video provides biographical details for each *Yaran* representative, images of the prison where

they are incarcerated (i.e., Gorhardasht Prison, as seen at 3:47min) (NinthPoint 2011), as well as highlighting prayers from the Holy Writings. During Youssefi’s English and Spanish verses, images of the Houses of Worship emerge, as well as uplifting pictures of children’s classes and teaching campaigns around the world, coinciding with the lyrics: “Your feet are in chains, yet you have risen above the darkness / Your thoughts fixed on the aim of united us despite the oppression that surrounds you every night and day / So we join hands to sing out and to pray that very soon there’ll be a different way” (NinthPoint 2011; 4:19-4:49min). New Zealand-based songwriter and film scorer Grant Hindin Miller also released a stand-alone video for his song “We are with you, Yaran” (Sonbol Taefi 2015) depicting himself and vocalist Sonbol Taiefi in the studio recording the track. The video similarly incorporates images gathered from the #7Bahais7years campaign (in fact, the chorus refrain and title of the song appears as a commonly used slogan for the campaign) (see figure 35) and images of the Yaran are superimposed over Taiefi and Miller as they sing: “We’re with you Yaran / Ever true Yaran / We free your names in the open sun and watch them fly away / You be strong, Yaran / Hear our song, Yaran / We won’t stop ’til you’re free again / You will never ever be alone” (Sonbol Taefi 2015) (see figure 36).



Figure 35: Image from Cambridge, UK on the #7Bahais7years campaign website (the text on the page reads “We are with you Yaran: Cambridge, England). (Naraqı 2015c)





Figure 36: YouTube Screenshot of Grant Hindin Miller and Sonbol Taefi performing “We are with you Yaran.” (Sonbol Taefi 2015)

### *E. Conclusions*

This chapter examined how Iranian persecution is represented in different forms of Bahá’í musicking practice, identifying the resources in which many artists draw inspiration and information. Initially, Bahá’ís became aware of the situation in Iran through letters of the UHJ, the research of the BIC, or word of mouth within their own communities; initiating musical projects that—at least in the early 1980s—appeared largely self-directed, but coincided with an intensification of Bahá’í activity across scholarly, literary, and media-related circles. Over time—and with the advent of social media technologies—Bahá’ís have been able to produce musical and creative content that not only memorializes Bahá’í martyrdom, but helps raise awareness about Iranian persecution under the guidance and auspices of the Faith’s administrative institutions.

In contrast with the previous chapter concerning the Bahá’í ‘unity in diversity’ aesthetic, the persecution topic exemplifies a far more direct form of musical signification that openly connects the Faith to its Persian origins and ongoing political issues in Iran. Here, Bahá’í

musicians make explicit lyrical references to martyrs, traumatic events in Bahá'í history, and, in some cases, even include statistical data to help contextualize present-day conflicts and traumas in Iran (often through citing 'official' Bahá'í reports and documents). This strategy is not unlike the majority of contemporary pop and folk songs in the Faith, which prioritize the role of lyrics and text. But through integrating a range of multimodal semiotic resources—whether using images of Bahá'í martyrs in online memorial videos, or creating and sharing music in support of Bahá'í international media campaigns—persecutory songs form a critical area of Bahá'í musical discourse that demonstrate global solidarity with members from the 'cradle of the Faith.'<sup>95</sup> These connections are further supported from a musical standpoint, as the sounds used to accompany persecution topics and lyrics sometimes reproduce an imagined 'Persian' soundscape: using Iranian and Arab-sounding instruments, various 'world' and Middle Eastern percussion, among other compositional strategies. As discussed, however, some approaches to creating a 'Persian Bahá'í sound' raise ethical concerns about musical borrowing and stereotyping in the Faith to convey cultural, ethnic, and/or geographically-specific musical sounds. This is an interesting dynamic among non-Iranian Bahá'í musicians who utilize these musical codes to support the persecutory topic. Of course, several Iranian Bahá'ís featured in this study have also drawn from their background and training in Persian music to contribute to awareness campaigns about the *Yaran*, among other subjects of persecution. Collectively, persecutory songs represent a field of Bahá'í musical practice that acknowledges the Faith's Persian roots in a much more open way; musically-interpellating the dynamic of religious oppression as a crucial facet of global Bahá'í

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<sup>95</sup> Iran has been referred to as the 'Cradle of the Faith' in several letters by Shoghi Effendi and in later documents from the UHJ (see UHJ 2010 and 2008). In a letter written on Effendi's behalf (dated 24 May 1955), one Leroy Ioas writes to a National Assembly Letter about recent "persecutions of the firm believers in Persia, the Cradle of the Faith" (Effendi 1999, 221).

identity formation. Whereas the ‘unity in diversity’ aesthetic is perhaps more ambiguous and subject to a multitude of genres, styles, and ‘worldly’ significations, the specificity and *intentionality* of the Bahá’í persecutory topic reveals in a Persian milieu: one that recognizes the global import of Persian aesthetics, history, and culture in the Faith; celebrates the resilience of Iranian Bahá’ís today; and forms a central node of international discourse that contributes to how Bahá’ís understand themselves, the Faith, and the global Bahá’í community.

## Chapter 5

### *Music as Social Action at the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) in Iran*

#### *A: Musical Prelude*

Eruptive and, at times, ululating with alarming effect, Parisa Sabet's "Geyrani" (2012) for solo violin combines elements of both Western contemporary and Persian art music traditions; inspired by the masterful Persian *kamancheh* (spiked fiddle) player Keyhan Kalhor, whose dedication is included at the beginning of the score. On the *Crossing Borders* website—the Chicago-based non-profit organization that premiered the piece for their (now annual) series, "Celebrating Resilience: Music from Iran's Bahá'í University"—the composition "depicts a deer, first calm, then, sensing danger, running away and escaping" ("Parisa Sabet" n.d.). The organization also used the theme of the piece to promote the event, featuring a golden stag against a red background (see figure 37):

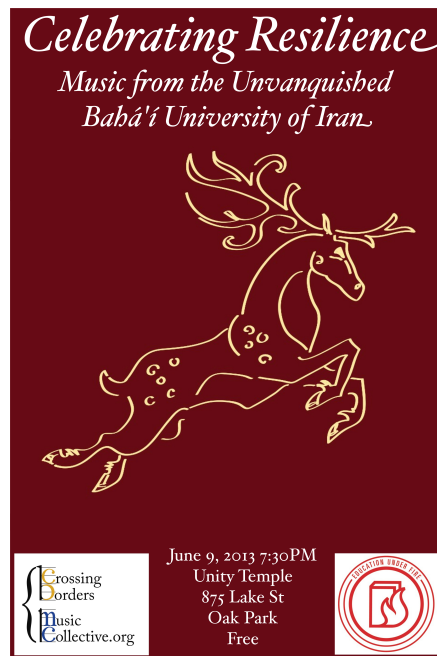


Figure 37: Promotional poster for the 2013 Crossing Borders concert series: "Celebrating Resilience."<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Special thanks to Tom Clowes for sharing this image with me.

“Geyrani” (deriving from the word *geyran*, or ‘deer’ in Farsi) evokes elements of *kamancheh* performance techniques (including left-hand pizzicato, semitone ornaments, slurred phrasing, and a ‘raspy’ or ‘windy’ bowing texture) as well as the Persian classical tradition (the *radif*): opening with an expressive rubato section, considerable use of overtones and natural harmonics, quintuplet and sextuplet melodic clusters, as well as densely chromatic and quarter tone effects (see figure 38):

Figure 38: Selection from Parisa Sabet’s “Geyrani” (2012). Copyright © 2012 Parisa Sabet Sarvestani (reprinted with permission from the composer). (Sarvestani 2012)

However, Sabet admits that she has not studied Persian classical music in-depth, but cites an enculturated familiarity with the music:

I don’t know about *radifs*. I never studied it in a very academic way, but I heard it a lot. My sisters, both of them at home, they played Persian music. They played, you know, *setar* and *santour*. So, I don’t know it exactly, but I usually do it by my ear and that is

how I understand it. Usually when I do it, I get the gesture or I get the rhythmic pattern, or you hear it somehow; it sounds different but it's with a very particular sound in a specific mode. So I usually get the essence of it rather than any specific mode; you might hear it, it sounds Persian. (Parisa Sabet, interview)

“Geyrani” serves as an apt metaphor for Iranian Bahá'ís like Parisa Sabet, who studied music at the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) in Tehran under a veil of secrecy, owing to the government's systematic denial of public higher education for Bahá'ís in the country. This chapter will focus on the history of the BIHE, Iranian policies of educational exclusion, aspects of the music curriculum, as well as the experiences of music faculty, administrators, and alumni. In this manner, I continue with the previous chapter's emphasis on the persecutory narrative, but frame it through the remarkable case study of this grassroots educational initiative; reiterating, as well, the dynamic mix of Western and Persian musical elements in Bahá'í musicking practice.

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As Alessandro Bausani writes, one of the most celebrated pillars of the Bahá'í Faith is universal access to education (Bausani 2000, 399). However, this has proven to be one of the greatest obstacles for Bahá'ís in Iran who, since the early 1980s, have been excluded from attending post-secondary education in the country. In response to this situation, a group of Iranian Bahá'í academics—many of whom were former professors that were fired after the Revolution—established a decentralized/unofficial/unregistered<sup>97</sup> university in 1987: the *Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education* (BIHE). Offering 18 Undergraduate, 15 Master's, and 5 Associate degrees, BIHE courses are taught online by Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í faculty around the world, as

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<sup>97</sup> Later, I will outline some of the motivations behind utilizing these terms to describe the BIHE's activities, which counter popular interpretations and international awareness campaigns that often overtly politicize the institution, or insinuate a romanticized 'underground' dynamic.

well as in-person across Iran in private homes and offices; relying upon “a network of community volunteers [...] [to] provide logistical support such as transportation, accommodation, and hosting of academic events” (Affolter 2007, 67). Despite its unregistered status in the country, the institution has gained an international reputation for academic excellence, prompting “twenty-five respected universities in North America, Europe, and Australia to accept BIHE graduates directly into programs of graduate study at the masters and doctoral levels” (Karlberg 2010, 240).<sup>98</sup>

Since 2002, the BIHE has offered a 4-year Bachelor’s of Music degree, which is the product of amalgamating an earlier musical institute known as the *Kardoni*, among other smaller Bahá’í institutes in Iran. Drawing from fieldwork interviews with BIHE faculty, administrators, and graduates now living in North America, this chapter will provide an oral history of the development and implementation of the BIHE music program; highlighting the difficulties and celebrating the resilience of the Iranian Bahá’í community, who continue to endure state-sponsored measures that amount to ‘suspended’ genocide (Momen 2005). Additionally, this chapter will provide an overview of available literature on the BIHE, as well as highlight arts-based initiatives (namely, *Celebrating Resilience* and *Education is Not a Crime*) that have helped draw attention to the plight of Iranian Bahá’í access to education.

Some scholars of Iranian Bahá’í persecution have documented the experiences of BIHE students. In Tenty and Houston’s paper (2013), Iranian-Australian participants shared their time at the BIHE, describing why they left in order to pursue education abroad, attending classes in

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<sup>98</sup> However, in a more recent blog article from Bahá’í Teachings.Org, this number is said to be 75 (Teybanian 2014).

private homes, and the process of transferring transcripts to international institutions to pursue graduate work (Tenty and Houston 2013, 636). Affolter’s broad survey from over 100 BIHE alumni found that the institution “sustained hopes for academic recognition of one’s academic efforts at least outside of Iran [...] [and] provided a venue for sharing and bonding with equally discriminated peers and for peacefully resisting the government of Iran’s policy of educational exclusion” (Affolter 2007, 71). Here, the author found that the university created a “synergy between marginalized but dedicated students working with marginalized but dedicated staff [that] transformed BIHE into an academic and social sanctuary” (73). Furthermore, Robert H. Stockman’s editorial on the topic included copies of published work by journalists, academics, and university administrators around the world—most of whom were responding to the 1998 BIHE raids and arrests. This included articles in the *Washington Post* (25 October 1998), the *New York Times* (29 October 1998), and the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (13 November 1998)—each providing a historical synopsis on Bahá’í persecution, the recent attacks against the BIHE, and calling out the actions of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Stockman 1999, 11-15). What followed were numerous letters written from American senators, congressmen, university chancellors, presidents, student unions and groups, and faculty members across the USA, some of whom wrote directly to Iranian officials (16-28). As with the early 1980s, the events that occurred in the late 90s and early 2000s prompted international response, criticism of the Islamic Republic, and raised awareness about the Faith in Iran through the lens of persecutory discourse. While this music-focused study will contribute to these studies, it also aims to problematize some of the ways in which Iranian Bahá’í educational persecution is framed in Western media and scholarship.



*B. Background: Education in the Faith and the Issue of University Access in Iran*

Bahá'í exclusion from university began almost immediately after the events of the 1979 Revolution, as they were subsequently “banned from attending and teaching at post-secondary institutions and were systematically dismissed from their jobs in education and government” (Warburg 2003, 69). By 1983, participation in any Bahá'í administrative or community activity—as well as declared membership to Bahá'í administrative institutions—was considered a criminal offence. The denial of education for the Bahá'ís was a devastating blow. Members of the Faith were, on average, more educated than the rest of the Iranian population during the Pahlavi dynasty, working as health care professionals, civil servants, teachers, and government officials (Warburg 2003, 68). An issue for Iranian authorities was that the Bahá'ís tended to side with ideas about reforming education in the country, advocating that, along with many non-Bahá'í intellectuals, that Iran needed to modernize education through adopting a “more modern approach to education based on curricula developed in the West” (Momen 2008, 97). These kinds of initiatives brought on harsh criticisms from the ‘ulama, who were the traditional heads of children’s education in the country. The Faith established some of the earliest girls’ and boys’ schools that offered a Western curriculum inside Iran, establishing a “modern-style school for girls in 1909 in Qazvin” and, by the 1920s, “were running over twenty such schools, including ten that had been accredited by the state” (Zabihi-Moghaddam 2012, 516-517). Bahá'í schools were also recognized for having significantly improved literacy outcomes for women by the early 1970s (Momen 1994). Several Holy Writings outline how education serves as a vital component for the development of human beings (Momen 2008, 94), particularly the education of children—a point reiterated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as so necessary that

the ‘body politic’ (i.e. the broader community) needed to provide education for children if the parents have little means of doing so:

Bahá’u’lláh has announced that inasmuch as ignorance and lack of education are barriers of separation among mankind, all must receive training and instruction. Through this provision the lack of mutual understanding will be remedied and the unity of mankind furthered and advanced. Universal education is a universal law. It is, therefore, incumbent upon every father to teach and instruct his children according to his possibilities. If he is unable to educate them, the body politic, the representative of the people, must provide the means for their education. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1982b, 300)

There were also unique international partnerships between Iranian and American Bahá’í educators, including those who helped develop the *Tarbiyat al-Banat* girls schools during the late Qajar and early Reza Shah periods. However, the school—along with other Bahá’í educational institutions—was forcibly closed in 1934 due to increased pressures from Shi’a clerics, spurring government crackdowns on all Bahá’í activities (a product of Reza Shah’s modernist reforms to centralize, and thus control, missionary and foreign-run schools that sought to operate independently of the state) (Rostam-Kolayi 2013, 91).<sup>99</sup> By the time of the 1979 Revolution, Bahá’í educators became targets of government suppression and violence, as Chehabi notes that four Bahá’ís who taught at a school in Alborz were killed (Chehabi 2011, 721 note 24). In more recent studies on Iranian Bahá’í persecution, the most pressing issue for the community often revolves around the question of access to post-secondary education. For instance, an interview participant in Christopher Buck’s article on the subject (2003) stated that: “In my understanding, the most urgent need of the Iranian Bahá’í community is for the youth to have access to higher education in the regular official universities. (I need to emphasize again that this is my very

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<sup>99</sup> Ironically, Reza Shah himself had sent his own children to study at *Tarbiyat* schools (Rostam-Kolayi 2013, 92).

personal judgment. Other friends might think totally different[ly].)” The interviewee also recommended that the international scholarly community could help “assist the present institutes of higher education established within the Bahá’í community of Iran,” as well as raise awareness about the denial of education in Iran, design courses, and teach online (Buck 2003, 104). In many ways, the emphasis on Bahá’í education is a reflection of more recent Iranian policies that have focused on implementing “economic, social, and cultural denials” since the 1990s, which contrasted with the more “crude denials of civil and political rights” that occurred in the 1980s (Ghanea-Hercock 2002, 134).

The most significant document to illustrate direct government involvement in the exclusion of Bahá’ís from university education appeared in a letter popularly referred to as the “Bahá’í Question,” or “Golpayangi Memorandum,” named after the author of the document, Dr. Seyyed Mohammad Golpaygani (dated February 25, 1991). In this report, which was signed by Supreme Leader Khamenei, educational exclusion was part of a broader systematic effort to ultimately ‘confront and destroy’ the Bahá’ís and remains a critical source for ongoing anti-Bahá’í educational policies. For instance, a confidential letter in 2006 from the *Central Security Office of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology* (MSRT) cites the Memorandum and explicitly set out directives to expel students when they are discovered to be Bahá’í (BWNS 2007). In a letter dated 9 April 2007 from the *Public Places Supervision Office*, Bahá’ís were to be banned from specific professions, “noting that their activities in ‘high-earning businesses should be halted, and only those work permits that would provide them with an ordinary livelihood should be allowed””(BIC 2017b, 101-102). In one of many updated reports from the *Bahá’í International Community*, a translation of the 1991 Memorandum is featured and details a

number of ‘general,’ ‘educational,’ and ‘legal’ status recommendations about how to manage Bahá’ís in the country. Below is an English translation of the Golpaygani Memorandum document (BIC 2017b, 94-95) with my own emphases highlighted in italics:

#### SUMMARY OF THE RESULTS OF THE DISCUSSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

##### A. General status of the Bahá’ís within the country’s system

1. They will not be expelled from the country without reason.
2. They will not be arrested, imprisoned, or penalized without reason.
3. ***The government’s dealings with them must be in such a way that their progress and development are blocked.***

##### B. Educational and cultural status

1. ***They can be enrolled in schools provided they have not identified themselves as Bahá’ís.***
2. ***Preferably, they should be enrolled in schools which have a strong and imposing religious ideology.***
3. ***They must be expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, once it becomes known that they are Bahá’ís.***
4. Their political (espionage) activities must be dealt with according to appropriate government laws and policies, and their religious and propaganda activities should be answered by giving them religious and cultural responses, as well as propaganda.
5. Propaganda institutions (such as the Islamic Propaganda Organization) must establish an independent section to counter the propaganda and religious activities of the Bahá’ís.
6. ***A plan must be devised to confront and destroy their cultural roots outside the country.***

##### C. Legal and social status

1. Permit them a modest livelihood as is available to the general population.
2. To the extent that it does not encourage them to be Bahá’ís, it is permissible to provide them the means for ordinary living in accordance with the general rights given to every Iranian citizen, such as ration booklets, passports, burial certificates, work permits, etc.
3. ***Deny them employment if they identify themselves as Bahá’ís.***
4. ***Deny them any position of influence, such as in the educational sector, etc.***

As seen above, some of these points (especially numbers 4 and 5) mention common indictments by the Islamic Republic that claim that the Bahá’ís conduct espionage in the country (often on behalf of the UK, USA, or Israel). These beliefs, according to Mina Yazdani, stem from “the purported memoirs or political confessions of Dimitriy Ivanovich Dolgorukov (d. 1867), the Russian minister in Iran from 1845 to 1854” (Yazdani 2011, 25-27). It is a redacted text that was published numerous times under different titles between 1935-1943, outlining a conspiracy that Dolgorukov falsely converted to Islam, employed the help of Mirza Husayn Ali as a spy (i.e.

Bahá'u'lláh, founder of the Faith), and helping establish the Bahá'í Faith to “destroy national unity” in a post-Constitutional Iran (27). These political discourses, in addition to the already-heretical charges against the Bahá'ís, endure and inform the many efforts to quash the Faith in the country. Other scholars working within the first few years of the Revolution documented several reports by high-ranking Iranian officials concerning educational prohibitions and the firing of Bahá'í educators. Here, Geoffrey Nash quotes the Director of Education, Dr.

Nayyirvand in Azarbaijan Province from a February 18, 1980 newspaper edition of *Etela'at*:

During this week 30 persons employed in the Department of Education in this province who have collaborated with SAVAK and 50 who are Bahá'ís have been dismissed from their jobs...if the Bahá'í accept Islam, they will again be employed and can return to their former jobs; otherwise, their files will be sent to the Revolutionary Courts in Tabriz for investigation.” (Nash 1982, 87)

However, many of the policies of educational exclusion were executed in a rather inconsistent manner, as Iranian officials would exert these policies through a number of seemingly arbitrary ways.<sup>100</sup> According to Bremner, for a few years Bahá'í youth were prevented from attending the final year of high school (a restriction that ended in 1998) (Bremner 2000, 8–9). Haghani points to a number of educational policies and discriminatory activities that occurred in 2011, as “more than 30 [BIHE-affiliated] homes in Tehran, Karaj, Isfahan, and Shiraz were raided and property was confiscated” (Haghani 2014, 16). In November of that year, “a directive

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<sup>100</sup> In many respects, this phenomenon is not new, or unique to Bahá'ís. Arbitrary enforcement—also known as a set of “strict yet shifting set of rules and policies” (Hemmasi 2013, 57)—as well as navigation of musical prohibition in the country is something that Laudan Nooshin, among others (see Robertson 2012) have indicated in their research on Iranian popular music. For instance, Nooshin writes that the status of music has changed so frequently in Iran that music precariously exists “in a liminal space and people were often unsure exactly what was allowed at any particular time.” However, it was precisely this lack of clarity that “created crevices—opportunities for resistance—particularly since many of the laws were effectively unenforceable in the private domain. And it was in the private domain that Iranians, very adept at resistance after centuries of one form of oppression or another, had the greatest opportunity for subversion” (Nooshin 2005, 242).

[was] issued by Iran's Ministry of Education [...] to identify all Bahá'í children, including those at the pre-school level," which led to "widespread discriminatory measures [against] Bahá'í students in primary, middle, and high schools," including "expulsion, physical punishment, pressure to convert to Islam, physical isolation in classrooms, and having their beliefs vilified and scorned in front of the class" (11). For twenty years, Bahá'í high school graduates were also not permitted to take part in the nationwide university entrance exam (Yazdani 2015, 6). On this exam, applicants had to choose one of the four officially recognized religions of the country: Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism. Many Bahá'ís refused to indicate another religion, forfeiting their application, or if they admitted their Faith, their applications would simply say 'incomplete' in place of exam results (7). In many instances, students who were initially accepted would be expelled once their Faith became known to administrators (a result of the above-mentioned report from the Bahá'í World News Service [2007]). Furthermore, during years of perceived relaxation of tensions between the government and the Bahá'ís (notably under Mohammad Khatami's Presidency, 1997-2005), changes in the university application process initially appeared promising. Here, Yazdani writes:

In 2004, the National Education Measurement and Evaluation Organization issued new application forms with a change that sounded promising: The question of religious identity was replaced by one asking on which religion the applicant wanted to be examined. The Bahá'ís gladly filled out the forms and took the entrance exam for the first time in years. However, when they received their transcripts, they saw that on the top of the page it was mentioned: "Religion: Islam." Astonished and disappointed, they decided that moving on to the next step of applying for the programs and universities of their preference, based on their score, would practically mean admitting the false religious identity indicated on the exam results. In other words, they had to accept identification as Muslims in order to enter university. (7)

What followed, however, were complex efforts to ultimately render Bahá'í university applications as 'incomplete:' officials would inform Bahá'ís that they simply did not apply after their exams (resulting in roughly 800 incomplete applications from Bahá'ís who took the national exam for the academic year 2007–2008), or the small pool of accepted Bahá'í applicants would eventually be told they lacked 'general qualifications', were expelled due to 'legal obstacles,' or found out that they were dismissed for 'a security problem' when logging into their student accounts (7). Such stories are further corroborated in personal statements from Bahá'í university applicants, such as Rahil Mehdizadeh, who appeared in a 2010 report from the *International Campaign for Human Rights (ICHR)* in Iran:

Every year following the entrance exam, the phrase 'your file is incomplete' would appear instead of the exam results. This was exactly the same process faced by all of my Bahá'í friends at the time. Obviously, if there were anything missing from our files, they would not have issued us the ID card necessary for taking the entrance exam in the first place. I took the examination in 2005, 2006, and 2007, but I was not able to enter the university. (Haghani 2014, 14)

### *C. The Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education*

As mentioned above, BIHE courses utilize a blended method of in-person and online components to offer programs ranging from accounting to chemical engineering, childhood education, sociology, business administration, among many others. 75% of BIHE students are women (Affolter 2007, 69) and more than 1,000 Bahá'í students apply to BIHE every year (Haghani 2014, 16). Many online courses are also offered in English by non-Farsi speaking faculty, many of whom are part of the institution's affiliated global faculty (AGF) (Madyarov and Taef 2012, 78). Tuition is free for students and none of the faculty (global affiliated or 'on-the-ground') are compensated; their involvement with the institution is treated as a form of service

(Haghani 2014, 15). Before online access facilitated greater options for programming, the university relied on couriers to circulate course materials and communication in print form between students and faculty (Small Media 2013, 20). In this way, the internet significantly opened new capacities for education. However, ongoing issues with internet connectivity and government monitoring in Iran remain two of the most pressing issues for the university (29). To address this issue, the university also provides students with reading materials on CDs (Madyarov and Taef 2012, 85).

A typical academic year at the BIHE is quite “condensed and intense” (Farshid Samandari, interview), organized to maximize teaching and learning opportunities for students.

According to Madyarov:

A semester lasts 20 weeks, of which four weeks are reserved for the preparation and administration of the proctored midterm and final examinations. An academic year at the university includes two semesters, with the fall semester starting in September and ending in February. The spring semester runs from April until August. (Madyarov 2009, 10)

However, risk of government intervention remains very high and the BIHE experiences a number of complex barriers and constraints alongside the possibility of faculty/staff imprisonment. This includes shortfalls in English-language preparation and instruction for students—a factor that was addressed by the BIHE through collecting TOEFL curriculum assessments in 2005 to survey student’s language proficiency, as well as by offering a ‘Critical Thinking’ course through the Moodle platform as a bridge for beginner and intermediate students (Madyarov 2009, 11-15; Madyarov and Taef 2012, 85). There are also considerable systematic issues that can impede student success, namely: the BIHE’s unaccredited status in Iran may influence students to prioritize “more tangible goals such as work and family,” and “many



students come to the Institute without sufficient English proficiency to handle successfully college level content in English” (Madyarov and Taef 2012, 84).

Since its inception the BIHE has been subject to several raids, forced closures, and arrests by government officials—activities that have often occurred during ‘peak’ years of state suppression. A rather minimal confiscation of records occurred in 1996 and government officials “did not otherwise interfere with the university’s growth” (Stockman 1999, 8) until 1998, where “between September 29 and October 3 [...] [the BIHE] was raided and closed by the Iranian authorities throughout Iran.”<sup>101</sup> Continuing, Affolter describes how

More than 36 faculty members were arrested. Most of those arrested were released soon afterwards, but four were given prison sentences ranging from three to ten years. The arrests were carried out by officers of the Iranian Government’s intelligence agency, the Ministry of Information, and also involved the seizure of textbooks, scientific papers, and documentary records. Those arrested were asked to sign a document declaring that BIHE had ceased to exist as of September 29, and that they would no longer cooperate with it. All of the detainees refused to sign such a declaration. (Affolter 2005, 87 note 3)

According to the UK non-profit group *Small Media*, the 1998 raids resulted in 30 arrests, 4 convictions and the Institute’s temporary closure (Small Media 2013, 21). Hundreds of Bahá’í homes were raided that year, followed by another raid of three classrooms in early 2001 (Haghani 2014, 15) and, in July 2002, the disruption of “BIHE qualification examinations in eight different locations simultaneously, videotaping proceedings, inter-viewing students, and confiscating examination papers and Bahá’í books” (Affolter 2007, 68). These issues are ongoing, as the BIC found that very little has changed under each Iranian President. For instance,

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<sup>101</sup> Stockman noted of the many locations where records and courses were being taught in Iran, including “five hundred homes and businesses of Bahá’í is in Tehran, Rasht, Borujerd, Babol, Zanzan, Sanandaj, Babulsar, Khorramabad, Hamadan, Tonekabon, Arak, Birjand, Chalus, and Tabriz” (Stockman 1999, 9).

in May 2017 two students were expelled from university, as were 12 other Bahá'ís in December 2016 for their beliefs. Under Rouhani's Presidency (2013-), at least 54 Bahá'ís have been expelled from university, as well as at least 84 arrests in 2017, "up from a total of 81 in 2016 and 56 in 2015" ("Current Situation" n.d.). As discussed in Chapter 3, the eight-member informal committee to oversee the Faith in Iran, known as the *Yaran*, or friends of the Faith, were arrested in 2008 for their involvement with the BIHE. Each received a twenty-year sentence, which was then reduced to ten years (Yazdani 2015, 4). These members were essentially functioning as the assembly for the Bahá'ís in Iran whose activities were considered both illegal and subversive to the state. These activities and incidents demonstrate that the Iranian Bahá'ís are "forcibly reduced to a state of 'bare life' [...] [and] outside the country's legitimate social life" for their heretical beliefs in a 'post-Islamic' faith (5). However, as I will discuss later, the conditions for the dehumanized status of the Iranian Bahá'ís is nuanced and marked by a discourse of hiddenness. According to my informants, many Bahá'í activities are, in fact, tolerated in Iran, so long as they refrain from publicly interacting with the non-Bahá'í population, or performing music in large ensembles (something that is not exclusive to Bahá'ís in the country, of course). This tolerance even extended to some of the activities of the BIHE.

Understandably, there are a number of barriers and logistical difficulties that exist for BIHE students—many of whom travelled vast distances to study; completed coursework in condensed bi-weekly sessions; sometimes struggling to find instructors, or instrumental lessons, in addition to constantly moving class to different locations (many of which did not have access to teaching resources, like a piano). The following section will provide additional context and first-person narratives about the BIHE Music program through incorporating a selection of

interviews with faculty, administrators, and former students. Through these conversations, I gained critical insight into some of the details behind the curriculum design, planning, implementation, and student assessment for the program, while also learning about their experiences in this unique learning environment. Many students would later become instructors at the institute and were often close friends and colleagues prior to studying at the university. I spoke with 8 BIHE-affiliated members between 2016-2018, most of whom were involved with the institution during a period when the music program evolved from an independent music institute, known as *Kardoni*. When the program became integrated into the BIHE fold around 2002—an initiative that include other Bahá'í educational institutions, which included a Bahá'í Advanced Studies institute, a Ruhi Institute, and an Institute of Art—some students continued their degree (initially a two-year Associate) and completed the 4-year BA program. As such, our discussions about the BIHE music program sometimes moved across each of these transitional stages and blended into a single entity. However, the program developed in the following process: 1) as an independent music institute to 2) an official BIHE Associate Degree program, and (eventually) 3) a 4-year BA in Music. I will try to clarify when these chronologies become intertwined. All of the interviewees featured in this section live in North America, arriving as international students and/or religious refugees. For security purposes, some details in our conversations have been adapted to account for ongoing safety concerns for their family members in Iran, as well as for Bahá'í committee members who still remain active in the country.

I came in contact with the majority of these individuals through the Chicago-based non-profit organization *Crossing Borders Music*, which was founded by cellist Tom Clowes in 2010.

In addition to curating concerts that feature classical music compositions from Haiti, Colombia, India, Nigeria, Syria, among others, the “Celebrating Resilience” concert series is an unprecedented achievement: an annual event that highlights compositions and performances from BIHE affiliates since 2013. This includes the work of composers Parisa Sabet, Nikan Milani, Badie Khaleghian, and Farid Javidan (“Bahá’ís from Iran” n.d.). I am very grateful to both Tom Clowes and fellow ethnomusicologist Dr. Suzanne Wint, who serves on the board of *Crossing Borders*, for connecting me with these and other Iranian Bahá’í musicians.

### ***An Oral History of the BIHE Music Program***

*You had to be very careful because, as you know, the government didn’t like it and didn’t want us to do it. So we try to keep everything kind of hidden, not very public. That’s why we couldn’t get very many students, so we had to do it very, very secretly. But we try to keep it going.* (Pegah Yazdani, interview)

*You know how we have the Writings on the Mashriq-ul Adkhar—the Houses of Worship—which are kind of ‘silent teachers’ of the Faith? Basically, the topic of education became a silent teacher of the Faith in Iran. Without saying anything, it became the reason for people to check out the Faith [and] the Writings.* (Samandari, interview)

#### **A. Teaching Perspectives:**

The BIHE Music program offers a combined Western and Persian classical music curriculum that includes a series of required courses for all students: Western and Persian music history and theory; Persian poetry; rudimentary studies of Persian *dastgah*; Western harmony; solfege; ear training; and private lessons on Western and Persian classical instruments. Students were also taught two English classes per semester to assist with studying English-language texts on music (Shahzad Dastoornezhad, interview). According to Farshid Samandari—a Vancouver-based composer and current BIHE online faculty member—the design of the curriculum was

largely inspired by the Bahá'í tenet of 'unity in diversity,' "because over there [in Iran] they [Western and Persian classical traditions] are completely separate." In this manner, the very premise of the program was indigenously derived from a Bahá'í conception of grassroots social action and a recognition of common Bahá'í musicking practices in Iran (that is, how both Persian and Western classical music training is common in Iranian Bahá'í communities). Samandari was involved with the music program from its earliest days as an independent music institute known as *Kardoni*<sup>102</sup> around 1995, which offered two-year Associate degrees (something that the BIHE continued to provide, but later changed to become a 4-year BA). The initial stages of the program developed out of a number of meetings with high-profile members of the Bahá'í community, as well as artists, educators, and musicians: "We had regular meetings in, I guess the Dean's office, or the directorship's office, and we even had a representative from *Yaran* for about 2-3 years. That was kind of like [demonstrating] the importance [the *Yaran*] were just giving to the institute." Samandari admitted that the program itself was very difficult, due to what they believed were standards at university institutions outside Iran. However, this was met with an enthusiastic adult cohort during its first few years:

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<sup>102</sup> In effect, the BIHE amalgamated a number of college-level institutes, reflecting a kind of 'centralization' of Bahá'í educational administration in the country, but through implementing coordinated *decentralized* strategies to evade government intervention. In an article by Christopher Buck (2003), the author interviewed an anonymous Iranian Bahá'í who described two separate Bahá'í higher-ed institutes in Iran, one of which was likely the BIHE (referred to as the "Bahá'í Open University"). Here, Buck writes: "*Bahá'í Open University*: Was established some 17 years ago with the help of Bahá'í university professors who were dismissed from the universities. There are different fields in this university: engineering (civil, computer), mathematics, pharmacology, languages (English, Arabic, Persian), psychology, sociology, law, etc. Interestingly, some of the graduates of this university have been accepted to Carleton University in Canada for their graduate studies. *Institute for Advanced Bahá'í Studies*: Established some seventeen years ago. A BA-level academic curriculum was developed. Half of the courses dealt with the Bahá'í Writings and the other half with subject[s] such as: Arabic language, Persian literature, English language, psychology, sociology, history, philosophy, logic, etc. Students are expected to write a thesis upon completion of their courses. Already one thousand people have been graduated from this Institute and one thousand are currently studying there" (Buck 2003, 103).

We were trying to achieve a high standard and we managed to achieve it, actually, from the beginning. We set higher goals—we set goals that were compatible with standard universities and it was a bit challenging for students, because they were comparing their program and the amount of work that they had to put in to what they would see was going on in university, but we had the luxury. The first two generations of our students were not young students: they were all experienced musicians who were dying to get proper education. I remember, actually, there were a few kids that were older than me. It was a little bit difficult, but that was fine. So, they all were eager to learn, they were eager to spend time to work and get better and go forward. (Samandari, interview)

Toronto-based pianist Pegah Yazdani, who taught at the BIHE from 2003-2007, indicated that part of the desire to raise academic standards came from the fact that the university was unaccredited in the country. By providing students with advanced skills training in music, the hope could be that they would excel in their studies elsewhere:

It's very hard, but you know what's good is they have the knowledge and they have the skills. So, even if they start from zero, they can go far because it's not something that's very unfamiliar for them and probably they progress faster because they already know this kind of thing [...] You knew that you do something to help others. For me it was a very interesting experience and what I did, I just tried to have the level [...] even higher than standard university, so the students don't feel they were left out or they can't have access to any kind of education. It made them interested in learning and practicing and doing things. We even organized some concerts for them. We all were in houses. It was something for them to do. (Yazdani, interview)

According to Samandari, the *Kardoni* program emerged as a response to a letter from the UHJ, which urged Bahá'ís to revive arts initiatives in the community. Though Samandari was unsure of when this letter was issued, it most likely came from the UHJ's annual Ridván message of 1996, which asked of Bahá'ís globally:

to give greater attention to the use of the arts, not only for proclamation, but also for the work in expansion and consolidation. The graphic and performing arts and literature have played, and can play, a major role in extending the influence of the Cause. At the level of folk art, this possibility can be pursued in every part of the world, whether it be in villages, towns or cities. Shoghi Effendi held high hopes for the arts as a means for attracting attention to the Teachings. A letter written on his behalf to an individual thus

conveys the Guardian's view: 'The day will come when the Cause will spread like wildfire when its spirit and teachings will be presented on the stage or in art and literature as a whole. Art can better awaken such noble sentiments than cold rationalizing, especially among the mass of the people.' (UHJ 1996)

Samandari later met with members of the *Yaran* to discuss arts-based initiatives in Tehran and quickly realized that the majority of committee members were musicians themselves: "very soon [we realized] we need music and there are enough musicians to do something proper, so it led to the formation of an institute of music and then, quickly, they said we need proper education in music" (Samandari interview). By 1997/1998, Samandari recalls that a committee of experts, enthusiasts, and novice musicians decided to run a two-year music program, prompting hundreds of applications from Bahá'ís across the country. However, they could only accommodate 15-20 students at the time, a decision that, according to Pegah Yazdani, was chosen to help prevent unwanted attention from government officials. Fellow BIHE faculty member and colleague of Samandari, Nikan Milani, reflected upon this early application process:

One summer, from 9 o'clock in the morning to 10 o'clock at night every day, we had meetings to build the department. At the end of the summer, we had auditions and theory tests—it all just happened. We had 400 people applying to become students at that department, we wanted to get 20 of them. So, as you could imagine, 400 people came to Tehran to audition and to do theory tests, and out of all of them, 20 people got accepted. And, then they started the school basically. That was a highlight in my life and music, especially, because it was different. People came from all the villages—remote places in Iran to take the audition, to become the students of BIHE in music. I saw instruments that I have never seen before! [...] It was very interesting. Some people played the piano, sang, there were singers; there were violin players, some of them very good, really good. They got accepted to the program and they basically started. (Nikan Milani, interview)

As with other BIHE programs, the music program offers a mixed/hybrid university curriculum with both in-person and online components. While most of the faculty based in Iran

are Bahá'í, the BIHE music program relies heavily on face-to-face instruction by non-Bahá'í allies, in addition to those engaged in the Affiliated Global Faculty online network. This dynamic added a particularly precarious dimension for faculty members, Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í alike. Pegah Yazdani indicated that when it was not possible to find an instructor in the community, non-Bahá'ís were often employed. But many of these instructors were unaware that they were teaching BIHE students. This was the case for private instrumental instructors, as BIHE students would study with these teachers under the recommendation of their professors to prepare for their final concerts. Nikan Milani also recalled that the instrumental performance component of the degree was the most difficult aspect of the curriculum, since there was such a small Bahá'í faculty (some of whom didn't play a particular instrument):

[students] would study with someone else outside the Bahá'í community and then come take the test *in* the community, and those teachers outside the Bahá'í community had to accept to work with the Bahá'ís [...] it was difficult for them and it was dangerous for them. So, there were a lot of ups and downs [...] because some of the teachers were afraid, and they would say 'oh, I cannot do that; it was too dangerous for us. If we are labelled as someone who is working with the Bahá'í community, we are in danger,' and of course we understood that. But [...] some of them said, 'yes, that's okay, we'd love to do that.' And some of them, we didn't actually tell them because the students decided to not tell the teacher [...] and we said 'okay, it is up to you. If you don't want them to know, just study with them, do your things, and then just come here, take the test and we're going to move forward with that.' The other things were taught in the department, the university. But for instruments, we had to go with other, outside teachers. For example, we didn't have a cello teacher. So, if you wanted to do cello, you had to go study outside and come take the test after you studied for three months a term, basically. That is how it went." (Nikan Milani, interview)

Faculty members and administrators associated with the university were at the greatest risk of facing government reprisals and imprisonment, but this did not necessarily extend to students (expulsion appears to be the most common retaliatory technique). However, for Badie



Khaleghian—a student of the BIHE (2004-2006) and later, an instructor of aural skills—he recalled about how a ‘funny tradition’ emerged during his aural skills class at home, likely to mitigate surveillance or the risk of sharing information about the location:

We gathered together in my apartment. We had like 15-16 students and we asked them to just...you know, like how in Persian culture we take off shoes when we go into our houses? Everyone needed to put their cellphones in their shoes behind the doors (laughs). It was a funny thing and became a tradition of our classes. But, it was really risky and we knew that it could happen that they just come and arrest us all.” (Badie Khaleghian, interview)

Like Samandari, Khaleghian taught his peers in the program, but while he was still a student in BIHE: “We were friends! Lots of my students, we were co-workers in music institutes [outside the BIHE]. So, we were really good friends and I was not much older than them. You know, we were the same age, kind of. I was fourth year and they were, like second year, so not a huge difference” In this regard, Khaleghian’s shifting status between student and faculty member would have placed him in a far more precarious legal position.

Though Samandari would eventually move to Western Canada in 2000, he was contacted in 2006 by Kamran Morteza’i, then-executive director of BIHE to turn the music degree into a 4-year Bachelor program. Samandari, eight other Bahá’í musicians, community leaders, and a representative from *Yaran* helped design the program over a year, with input from consultants from both Iranian and Egyptian public universities (Samandari, interview). However, after the 2008 raids of BIHE and the arrest of Kamran Morteza’i—who just finished serving a five-year sentence at Raja Shahr prison<sup>103</sup>—he worried this would be the end of the music BA initiative.

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<sup>103</sup> Morteza’i and six other Bahá’ís—Riaz Sobhani, Noushin Khadem, Mahmoud Badavam, Ramin Zibaei, Farhad Sedghi, and Kamran Rahimian—were arrested in 2011 for their involvement with the BIHE. Morteza’i was released in 2016, serving a five-year sentence in Raja’i Shahr prison (Iran Press Watch 2016).

But this was not at all the case. Samandari continues to teach online correspondence courses in music harmony, composition, and history from Canada on a bi-weekly basis with an assistant that provides tutorials on the odd weeks. At present, Samandari is the only informant who continues to teach online courses through the BIHE.

*B. Student Perspectives: Learning Music at BIHE and Privately*

Learning music in Iran, especially as a Bahá'í, meant studying privately with several tutors and masters. This was a common practice among both the BIHE music faculty I spoke with, as well as BIHE alumni. For example, Samandari studied with a former head of music at the University of Tehran whose classes were very popular among Bahá'ís and non-Bahá'í alike. (Note: I have been unable to get in touch with any of the private instructors mentioned below, so I have chosen to keep their names anonymous. One of whom continues to teach at a public university in Tehran, whereas the other two primarily work from home). According to Samandari,

[One former Tehran University professor] was actually part of the committee and he was also teaching. I was kind of teaching the same [BIHE] courses, alternates between two of us [...] He is a crucial figure in Iranian music after the Revolution. Both classical and Persian musicians, everyone is studying with him, even the ones that are going to university. If they want to learn anything, they come and study with him [...] It is interesting, in a way, that everyone of every background comes and studies with him and they accept that he is a Bahá'í, that he is putting it in a very different format. It's a very bizarre phenomenon [...] His home is a hall, it's basically a centre and all the youth are there and he has two or three classes on a weekly basis." (Samandari, interview)

Being part of the generation of Bahá'ís that could not study music in an institute setting, Samandari's involvement with the university essentially gave younger students the opportunity he never had. Nikan Milani, who also contributed to the early development of the *Kardoni*, did

not get a chance to see it flourish, having left for the USA to receive a degree in music only months after the institute started:

I was studying with all the private teachers, private classes. I was pretty good, but it was not official; I wanted to get something official. That's why I left the country and came to the USA and studied at the Longy School of Music in Cambridge. I got my Bachelor's degree and then my Master's, and then I got a little bit of a Doctoral Degree from the [New England Conservatory] as well. (Milani, interview)

Utilizing his newfound training and expertise, Milani would later teach an online BIHE course on music theory over Skype. Other instructors would similarly give back to the university after pursuing studies elsewhere. Pegah Yazdani, initially a civil engineering student at the BIHE, heeded the advice of her piano teacher and moved to Russia to pursue a music degree (one of the first in her community), eventually completing a Master's in the UK. In a BIC article that featured the lived experiences of educational persecution among three Bahá'í students, Yazdani was described as a 'pianist in exile.' Here, the article explains that after she completed her study in Moscow, she was offered a part-time job at Tehran's conservatory, but was fired after her religion became known to faculty and administrators ("Banned from Making Their Mark" 2012). In our interview, Yazdani described her motivations to leave (and later return) to her country:

I left Iran to study music and I went to Russia and studied music there. After I finished my studies—after 5 years—I came back to Iran and when I came back they already had that [BIHE] department; they already started to do something with music and [offered] some music courses as a two year program. So, they knew me and they knew that I graduated from Russia, so they asked me if I can help and that's why I became part of the committee to design the courses, to choose the courses, and all the normal department activities. I also became an instructor. I taught piano to major piano students and I also taught theory of music and, yeah, I kind of was an examiner sometimes. I was at auditions, I did some recitals, like lecture-recitals to students and all of these normal activities at a college or university. (Yazdani, interview)

Many BIHE students continued to take private lessons during and following their completion of the Associate Degree. Badie Khaleghian, for instance, studied with a prominent educator and composer originally from the Republic of Georgia where he learned how to teach aural skills and theory pedagogy. These skills eventually helped Khaleghian and others teach at the BIHE during periods of faculty and resource shortfalls. At the same time, Khaleghian felt that the students had a say in developing the music program through actively seeking “professors from around the world to teach online classes” (Raskauskas 2017). In our interview, Khaleghian described this process of inviting university instructors:

It was really hard because we didn't have any resources. We had some courses, but after two weeks of the semester, we couldn't find any teachers. Like, we were students but we tried to find teachers for ourselves. So, we come here with like, outside of Bahá'í community and find some non-Bahá'í professors for ourselves. Actually, it worked but it'd take too long, like 3 and a half years, or more, actually.

When we finished our Associate Degree, we knew that it was not enough for us. So, we started to just go to and do lessons with other teachers, like non-Bahá'í teachers, and do three years of aural skills, theory, harmony, form, composition with totally different non-Bahá'í professors, individually. I already knew them, so I just approached them and said, ‘okay, that’s the situation—can you come and teach us?’ And, yeah, for some of them it was hard because they were also teaching at public universities in Iran; it was kind of risky for them. Some of them accepted, some of them didn't. (Khaleghian, interview)

While Khaleghian's efforts to teach, reach out to instructors, and maintain a sense of normalcy for other BIHE students ostensibly grew out of an environment of educational insecurity, his perseverance also reflects a sense of grassroots initiative and dedication that pervades the history and development of the university. Students, faculty, and administrators alike share the risks and responsibility associated with participating in the university, using whatever tools and resources they have to keep the program running.

According to BIHE alumni, the music program was very intense. This was largely due to the bi-weekly schedule, especially before internet correspondence improved in the country. The ability to take regular instrumental lessons was quite limited (about 8 per semester) (Samandari, interview), but the opportunity to study music in-depth excited the students, including Toronto-based composer and BIHE alumni Parisa Sabet: “especially learning theory and history, I never had the opportunity to academically study about it. It was really good” (Sabet, interview).

According to Khaleghian, BIHE students roughly gathered “two times per month for four or five days” and attended three to four classes during those days (Raskauskas 2017). This schedule was further supported by Samandari, who recalled that students

would come and start lessons from 8am and it was going all the way until 4 or 5pm. After that, often because many of them realized that they could form ensembles, they ensemble rehearsals, and that was usually for two or three days in a row. Then they would go back home, come back for another intense camp. That was the situation and often because it was in people’s places, they would provide food and breaks—the host would provide that.” (Samandari, interview)

The curriculum also required more regular visits to the city than other BIHE programs, which was partly due to the in-person, private lesson component. Parisa Sabet recalled that “for music, it was every other week. For other programs [...] it was like once a month or two months.”

Students also had to remain secretive about their involvement with the university:

I wouldn’t tell everybody, like ‘I’m not going today,’ or ‘I’m going to university, I’m not going to apply to university like you guys, because...’ You want to be careful who you’re talking to, right? But some of my very close friends, they knew, but I never told them that we have our own, you know, university and that’s where I’m going to pursue my higher education. It is something that you have to be very careful, because the way it works, you don’t want to give information to the wrong people who can take advantage and you don’t know who you are talking to all the time [...] So, even when we were traveling and people were asking us on the bus, ‘where are you going?’ We would just say that we were musicians and we were going to take, you know, music lessons. We wouldn’t even tell them that’s how it works. Even if we would see my friends, if they

asked me ‘do you go to university?’, sometimes I would just say ‘no, I was just working on my music’, so I would just tell them that’s how I was studying. (Sabet, interview)

BIHE students could not have a consistent travel schedule, often preparing excuses and explanations to strangers and friends on their journeys. It would take Sabet between 9 and 16 hours to travel from Shiraz to Tehran by bus. After completing her courses, she would then immediately leave for home and avoid conversations with friends in her hometown. Some instructors would even travel eight hours to Tehran to teach BIHE courses (Small Media 2013, 36). However, travel within a sprawling metropolis like Tehran is no easy task, as BIHE music alumni Fahimeh Mehrabkhani describes in a TEDx presentation that doing so was often very difficult. Students would need to move throughout the day to different corners of the city at rotating private homes in order to disrupt government surveillance:

We were always at the risk of being attacked, we could never really have a settled location. We had to constantly move from one location to another, so we could never really have a fully-equipped room that is fully operational. We also had to travel long distances in heavy, heavy, heavy traffic. In the metropolitan city in Tehran, just to get to our classes, in the morning we had a session in the north of the city, in the afternoon we had to be somewhere in the deep south. (TEDx Talks 2015)<sup>104</sup>

Similarly, Khaleghian described in a feature story on his music and education experience in Iran about how class locations would change weekly and sometimes be offered in unconventional spaces, such as parking lots (Raskauskas 2017). Still, the opportunity to study and visit Tehran regularly was exciting for some BIHE students, allowing some to access rare resources and learning materials that were unavailable to them in their respective cities, towns, and villages. For instance, Parisa Sabet found that buying classical recordings in Tehran was very different than in Shiraz, where she admitted having had to purchase records ‘under the desk.’ “when I

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<sup>104</sup> Transcribed from the TEDx YouTube video at 10:30-11:05min.

went to Tehran, there was a store that you could go and it had a big, you know, catalogue of classical music. I would order this, this, and this, and they would tape record them for me and the next week I would go [back to BIHE in Tehran] and pick it up then” (Sabet, interview).

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*If they see ‘Bahá’í’ there, they don’t even look at you, they just deny the form [...] I knew I wasn’t able to do anything in Iran. I wouldn’t be able to study there. I wouldn’t be able to work. I wouldn’t be able to live there normally.* (Pegah Yazdani in BIC 2012)

Most of the alumni I spoke with attended the BIHE in the early 2000s around the time when the government appeared to loosen restrictions for Bahá’ís to write university examinations, even study at public universities. As noted earlier, during early 2000s Bahá’ís were allowed to write the national university entrance exam for the first time in over 20 years. However, this opportunity was short lived: the exam was essentially designed to deny Bahá’í enrolment, unless they revoked their religion; or, they would have to accept that their transcripts labelled their faith as ‘Muslim.’ Some former music students described this period of short-lived optimism. Babak Katozy—now a business student at the University of California, Berkley—completed the two-year music degree at BIHE, continued to study privately, and successfully enrolled in a master’s program in music at an Iranian public university after completing the exam. He nearly finished his degree, but was given a condition: “They said I have to go and publish something bad about Bahá’í religion in newspapers, then they could give me my Master’s and I said, ‘no thank you’” (Babak Katozy, interview). Former BIHE student and Toronto-based Opera singer Shahrzad Dastoornezhad knew that the possibility to continue music studies at a public university was really low, but was comforted by a faculty member (and

ongoing University of Tehran music professor) that her private lessons and courses at the BIHE were “like the courses that are in the Master of Music that [he] is teaching at the University of Tehran” (Dastoornezhad interview). Khaleghian also recalled that during his time at the BIHE (2004-2006), the university had a building to conduct all of its classes, but by the end of his third year of studies, it was closed down (this likely occurred around the time of the 2007 raids and arrest of the BIHE executive director, Kamran Morteza’i) (Khaleghian, interview). Some within the BIHE even believed that if the government was beginning to allow Bahá’ís to attend public institutions, perhaps they should close the university:

[the government] started letting [Bahá’í] students take the exam and at some point they said, ‘okay, you can even register for university, so why don’t you close BIHE?’ That turned into a big challenge for the community that, maybe we should. It was actually a time that there wasn’t enough resources; there were some struggles with the organization and keeping everything going. We had a handful of [Bahá’í] students who were accepted and could go to university, so why not? For about a year, it was a big discussion—this was after 2000, I was [in Vancouver] and was in contact with them. There was a direction from the Universal house of Justice to wait for the first group of students to graduate from universities. And lo and behold they didn’t let any one of them finish their studies, they were kicked out again. (Samandari, interview)

In rare cases, exceptions were made for Bahá’í students to enrol at Iranian music conservatories, which function as specialized arts high school programs. Farid Javidan, a composer and recent DMA graduate in the USA, described how he was able to study at a conservatory in Esfahan because his father worked as a violinist before the Revolution: “many of his friends, his non-Bahá’í friends from before the Revolution [...] they played in the orchestra together, went to school together, taught together, they were those who were teaching at the Esfahan conservatory. So basically, out of their loyalty to him, they gave me a break. They let me in” (Farid Javidan, interview). Others were not so lucky. Celebrated *tar* and *setar* performer



Sahbha Motabeli—an award winning Bahá'í musician now living in California—was apparently allowed to study at the music conservatory in Tehran due to the influence of her Master (who also taught at the institution). Samandari recalls:

So, [name redacted] brought her, and that was the point that actually it became very obvious that they don't let Bahá'ís in. She had a hard time just staying in the program, they were kicking her out. [Name redacted] was a big master, he told them 'if that they don't let her in, I'm going to resign'. (Samandari, interview)

### C. International Attention and the Question of Political Subversion

*I have a bloody heart [...] I left my country, I left all those things. I leave my parents in my country and they are not coming out because [of their beliefs]. I know these things, I don't know how can I explain...* (Dastoornezhad, interview)

Contributing to the teaching and development of the BIHE music curriculum came with a number of risks. Most of my informants personally experienced state violence and/or arrests within their family history: Nikan Milani's father was executed shortly after the Revolution; Badie Khaleghian's father was imprisoned just days after receiving notice from *Crossing Borders* that they would commission a piece of his music in 2016 (Raskauskas 2017). Some fled Iran as religious refugees (Khaleghian), often via neighbouring countries like Armenia or Turkey (Dastoornezhad and Kotozy); at times, they left because of a growing number of government interventions and restrictions on their employability in the country. For instance, Samandari disclosed how he was once questioned by the authorities, seizing his notes from BIHE committee meetings soon after the 1998 raids:

Once, basically they drugged me and they wanted to check my books because I was taking all the records. There wasn't anything in my books because it was all, kind of like doodles (laughs). No one could really make sense of it. So, they went through my books, they couldn't find anything and that was it. But it led to...I couldn't do some work. I was working at a journal, they closed the journal. I had a commission from the National

Orchestra, they were asked not to pay me and not to perform it. And then I had three recording contracts—again, the label was threatened ‘you’re not supposed to work with him.’ So, it led to my personal problem with work, but they didn’t say anything about *Kardoni*, they were okay with that. They started to limit me as a person, rather than the institution—they didn’t mind. ‘Do it, keep it for yourself, but you can’t do anything outside that institute.’ That was their policy at the time. (Samandari, interview)

Similarly, Milani described that his problems with the government were largely “outside of BIHE. My house was attacked by the government two times, one at the very beginning of the Revolution, once in 1995. The intelligence service was on my case and they came to our house. Anyway, we had different types of problems, but not because of the BIHE” (Milani, interview).

These discourses provide a much more nuanced understanding about Bahá’í educational discrimination in the country. For a number of years, the plight of Bahá’ís and their exclusion from attending university in Iran received considerable news coverage from major media outlets, Bahá’í blogs, and non-profit groups. In particular, the non-profit *Education is Not a Crime* has helped bring significant attention to the topic, often through arts-based initiatives (murals, songs) and film screenings (notably, *To Light a Candle*). However, there is often an overemphasis on the BIHE being an ‘underground’ university—something that Samandari and others are trying to correct (Hume 2011; Reisz 2011; Murphy 2016). The emphasis on ‘underground’ implies that the BIHE operates without the government knowing about it. In some ways, the term politicizes the initiative—an approach that runs antithetical to Bahá’í teachings regarding political activity. As a recent UHJ letter indicates, dated 2, March 2013 and titled “Letter to the Bahá’í Community in Iran,” states:

Bahá’ís do not seek political power. They will not accept political posts in their respective governments, whatever the particular system in place, though they will take up positions which they deem to be purely administrative in nature [...] [Bahá’ís] view government as a system for maintaining the welfare and orderly progress of a society, and they

undertake, one and all, to observe the laws of the land in which they reside, without allowing their inner religious beliefs to be violated. (UHJ 2013)

The question of whether the Bahá'í community and the BIHE was working in conflict with Iranian law is also addressed by Robert H. Stockman, who writes:

By creating the BIHE, the Iranian Bahá'í community broke no law because Iran has no law stating that such subjects as dental hygiene or engineering cannot be taught informally. The BIHE was not in a position to be accredited, but its graduates could demonstrate the skills they had acquired and thereby find employment. Some came to the West and, by being accepted into graduate schools without a recognized bachelor's degree, proved that they had learned quite well. Success in the BIHE required considerable self-discipline because students studied, for the most part, on their own, meeting their professor only once during a course. (Stockman 1999, 8)

In this sense, Iranian Bahá'ís must navigate a difficult political terrain by adhering to the laws of the land, while also asserting a sense of autonomy—in many cases, responding generously to Iranian regulations and policies, however oppressive. For instance, Yazdani writes that the community found ways to interpret the religious observance conditions on their university applications (namely the 'belief in Islam') "as not necessarily tantamount to being a Muslim. After all, they thought, as Bahá'ís they do believe in the truth of Islam and other religions. Therefore, they found no contradiction between their being Bahá'ís and meeting this condition" (Yazdani 2015, 8). But the BIHE was never an "underground" university since its existence was well-known to the authorities from its earliest years (Bremner 2000, 9). Instead, it is perhaps more to describe is as an 'unofficial' institution, borrowing from Bronwen Robertson's research (2012) on rock scenes in Tehran, choosing the term over 'underground' for the latter's more politically-charged and romanticized terminology. Instead, the emphasis on *decentralizing* the university and keeping details and faculty names a secret (some students did not learn the professors name over the course of their 4-year degree) challenged the Iranian government's

systematic repression of Bahá'í activity. According to the Small Media report (2013), decentralization serves as *the* critical basis for the BIHE's success in evading the Iranian government, extending to practically every domain of the university's activities:

That lecturers can construct their courses free from the prescriptions of a single organisational body, in conjunction with a heavy reliance on networks of teaching assistants in the actual delivery of education, has meant that no single figure or group drives the BIHE's operation. If administrators are arrested, there is a risk of disruption to assessment, reform and reorganisation efforts (as evidenced in 1998), but such barriers can be easily overcome. Simultaneously, if lecturers are arrested, teaching assistants and students can collaborate to complete the courses based on the materials provided at the start of the course. Independence - of lecturer from administrator, teaching assistant from lecturer, and student from all - has always been the guarantor of adaptability in the BIHE, and this facet of its character has been preserved and complemented by the ongoing process of modernisation and the shift toward online learning. (44-45)

While each facet of BIHE university life, teaching, and administration may function somewhat 'independently' in order to safeguard the university, its goals, and the individuals involved, these collective efforts also provide a sense of security for Iranian Bahá'ís. According to Samandari, the government didn't really take issue with Bahá'ís studying at their own, unregistered university. The fact that the BIHE was unaccredited in Iran almost guaranteed that students would still have difficulty securing employment in the country. However, the plan backfired:

As soon as they realized that these students finished their studies, they don't have any proper degree. Like, you've done engineering and you have a Degree of Engineering from a university that is not even registered, you can't work. It's obvious. You can't take your degree and say, 'okay can I get a job in this company?' You can't find a job, but [BIHE graduates] realized that, actually, they can. Because they are capable—they go to offices of businesses and they do some free work and they have some references. The offices would realize that this guy is really smart and better than our own top university graduates, so why not, let's hire him. So when that started, that first generation of products of the university started to flourish, [the government] realized this is dangerous because [they] wanted to stop education for them not being able to thrive as a community,

but they are thriving anyway. So that's when they attacked in 1998 and later with Kamran [Executive Director of the BIHE] because it became more active beyond the Bahá'í community. They don't like that. The biggest policy in Iran is they didn't want it openly, is like, putting Bahá'ís in a ghetto. It wasn't obvious, we didn't have a sign. But, the whole process was to segregate us, put us in a corner and treat us like Jews in Germany—like, you are a special entity. We don't even mention your name. For over 20 years, they wouldn't even say 'Bahá'í' [...] because they thought we were negligible [...] they thought that they could, but it didn't work out. (Samandari, interview)

Other aspects about how the university developed were in direct response to government raids and closures, forcing the committee to consider expanding their faculty to include more international members online. Following the 1998 raids and arrests of BIHE faculty, “the *Yaran* directly took the institution under their auspices and they said that, ‘ok we would be the committee that’s running it’” (Samandari, interview). The *Yaran* also anticipated early on that if anything happened to them, this would profoundly disrupt the university. As such, the Affiliated Global Faculty of BIHE was a necessary component to develop programming and to further decentralize the university because “it would be very easy to put all of them in prison” (Samandari, interview). In fact, the Dean of the BIHE now resides outside of Iran, while an Executive Director works locally in the country. In this respect, many of the government's attempts to stop the university only led to its further decentralization and expansion.

In contrast, Samandari believed that problems mainly arose with the government when *individual* arts-based initiatives in the Iranian Bahá'í community generated too much public attention: “They didn't mind the fact that we were keeping kids busy to study [...] they know that it is better than Bahá'ís going out and teach [the Faith]. In that sense, they didn't have any problems with BIHE or any other Bahá'í institution because it was only inward [...] They didn't want people to get together in large numbers to perform” (Samandari, interview). Samandari

cites two examples in 1999: one being the development and public concert of an all-Bahá'í 30-40 piece chamber orchestra (where he contributed sound production assistance), as well as a choral initiative that expanded a local Bahá'í choir to three, 20-person ensembles with scheduled public events and concerts. According to Samandari, the *Yaran* received phone calls from government officials immediately following these activities “saying stop having choirs! No choirs anymore.”

Continuing, Samandari said:

Right after the orchestra [the government] got very aggressive and anxious that probably we are behind it [...] There's a distinction between education and performance, or external activity and connection with the non-Bahá'í community. They don't mind if you're doing something within the community [...] but as soon as it became larger than 15 or 20, then it would be problematic and questionable. If it was open to public, then it was a big no-no.' (Samandari, interview)

Furthermore, the impact on Samandari's career was largely the result of crackdowns on these public musical initiatives—not the BIHE: “They didn't call it a ‘Bahá'í concert’ or something, but everyone knew that everyone in this group was Bahá'í. Individual initiatives, if it led to something big, it would usually be stopped, either by a Bahá'í institute, or the government very quickly [...] Basically that's the situation. Anytime something would become expressive, there was a problem, but education was okay” (Samandari, interview).

In this way, tensions with government officials about Bahá'í educational activities were spurred from much more public initiatives. Otherwise, Bahá'í education was more or less tolerated. As such, Samandari expressed how there is greater safety and security in doing things as a group and through the administrative institutions, rather than with individual projects. With the support of existing Bahá'í networks and its institutes in Iran, both the educational and expressive activities of the community safely remain hidden from public view. Samandari also

believes that the temporary loosening of entrance exam requirements in the early 2000s made the general public much more aware of Bahá'í educational persecution due to Bahá'ís meeting with non-Bahá'í student activists and unions:

they realized that Jim and John are getting kicked out of university because they are political activists, but this guy is being kicked out only for being a Bahá'í, not for being an activist or anything. The same way that they have rights, he also has rights to study. And so, at that point that was a change—that was a shift in the discourse [...] For many years, non-Bahá'ís would not talk about Bahá'ís in Iran, but then since because the student activists and unions got involved, then everything changed and they started to look at the Bahá'í community in a different light and a different way; they started studying some of the writings and realized there is nothing wrong about it. All these accusations are just lies, they're not facts. (Samandari, interview)

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The BIHE case study provides a radical instance of creative music praxis that addressed the community's need to provide training for emerging classical artists in Iran. Through heeding the call of the UHJ and the desire to establish greater arts-based support in Bahá'í communities, Iranian Bahá'ís utilized local resources and administrative capacities—often at great risk—to manifest this institutional guidance into applied and tangible practice. And, with the help of international campaigns raising awareness about the topic of Bahá'í educational exclusion, non-Bahá'í academics have greater opportunity to learn about these issues and potentially contribute to the Affiliated Global Faculty through course design and teaching, via online correspondence and video conferencing.

## **Conclusions: *Gaps and Prospects***

This dissertation sought to provide an account about how Iranian legacies and traumas in the Bahá'í Faith have helped shape the religion's aesthetic cultures and devotional practices. In many cases, the development and implementation of Bahá'í artistic projects often coincided with broader administrative goals, recent guidance, or widespread grassroots campaigns on issues facing the global community; indicating a close relationship between individuals and the Bahá'í institutional process. At times, this dynamic was internalized among individual songwriters who wanted to provide accurate descriptions and representations of the Faith in ways that align with 'official' outlets and authoritative publications. While there remain no definitive forms of music in the Faith, the prevalence of persecutory discourses and concepts related to cultural and ethnic diversity—often subsumed under the Bahá'í tenet of 'unity in diversity'—have considerably inspired and shaped Bahá'í creative projects, compositions, as well as education initiatives. These themes will likely continue to inform how many Bahá'í artists convey core messages of the Faith to co-religionists and outside audiences, contribute original music to their local devotions, and pursue professional careers in the arts.

However, there are still many areas needed for further research and development, as well as a number of topics that are specific to the internal workings of Bahá'í scholarly and administrative practice that could help shape this research into new directions. This project admittedly focused on a very limited segment of music-making, primarily within a North American context. Given the geographic spread and diversity of musicianship in the Faith, other regionalized studies could provide an abundance of research possibilities and address how Bahá'í



ideals or topics are manifested into musical projects. For instance, India currently boasts the largest Bahá'í community in the world, representing nearly 40% of global Bahá'í membership (Garlington 1997). Exploring the devotional cultures and musical practices of the Bahá'ís on the Indian subcontinent, among other locations, could help ground the Faith's internal dialogues, approaches to community differentiation, and universal teachings in its process of progressive expansion and growth. My hope is that this research can help contribute to such dialogues through an analysis of Persian culture, discourse, and aesthetics in the Faith; acknowledging the Bahá'í embrace and creative articulation of ethnic and cultural diversity, while also identifying an ongoing legacy of Persian *and* Western influence in global Bahá'í communities.

A key oversight in this dissertation is the role of the *listener* in Bahá'í-inspired music and recordings. I have alluded to possible ways of listening to certain Bahá'í recordings, or reading Bahá'í texts and discourses on music and the arts, but I realize that it would have been very helpful to gather interview data about how Bahá'ís listen and interpret their Faith through the vehicle of music. This would have been especially relevant for discussions about musical exoticism, as Bahá'ís may interpret the integration of various 'worldly' themes and sounds in otherwise Western pop, folk, hip-hop, or classical formats in a multitude of ways. Instead, I've only included my own interpretations, or used published statements from Bahá'í leaders, artists, bloggers, and scholars as the only external voices on the topic. Another facet I overlooked, but intend to explore in my future work, concerns the lives of BIHE graduates *after* they have moved on to live, work, or study abroad. In my interviews, I learned that due to the many difficulties incurred while pursuing music education in Iran, a discourse of secrecy and hiddenness remains among many BIHE music graduates. Some wrestle with sharing their biographical information,

in some instances removing their BIHE accreditation from the bios of their personal websites. Others have expressed that they cannot collaborate ‘officially’ with other Persian classical ensembles: their compositions are performed under pseudonyms, or simply labelled by ‘anonymous’ because they are Bahá’í ‘trouble makers’ (Sabet, interview). This often occurs out of concern for the safety of their non-Bahá’í collaborators, who may regularly return to Iran to perform and/or visit family. In this case, the notion of an Iranian diaspora—though conceptually problematic from a Bahá’í perspective—operates in a particular way for Bahá’í musicians outside Iran who collaborate with Persian musicians abroad, but remain limited in their official capacities as collaborators. For others, it has been a difficult transition moving to countries like the USA as a professional musician, finding a lack of support for artists in the North American Bahá’í community—a common sentiment among many Iranian Bahá’í musicians I have interviewed, who felt connected to a much stronger arts community back home.

Regarding the latter topic, discussions around support for the arts in the Bahá’í community emerged frequently in my interviews. Some individuals expressed dismay about how members of the Bahá’í community frequently copy and circulate Bahá’í artist’s CDs, mentioning a lack of fair compensation for Bahá’í musicians performing at Bahá’í national conventions, conferences, and other large-scale special events that are arranged by Bahá’í committees. This included the *Toronto Persian Conference* (2012-2015) and *The Association of Friends of Persian Culture*, held annually in Chicago.<sup>105</sup> One Iranian Bahá’í interviewee claimed that there are cultural factors at play, such as the high regard for engineers, doctors, and lawyers in the

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<sup>105</sup> Here, studies of how music is treated in different Bahá’í venues—diverse *places* for devotional music, ranging from private homes to the Houses of Worship, conferences, and conventions—can provide a site-specific analysis of religious music and its relationship to notions of sacred space and place.

community who perform Western and Iranian classical instruments, whereas full-time musicians receive little respect. Some felt that non-Bahá'í Iranian performers and senior Bahá'í members/administrators who provide keynote lectures are also more likely to receive travel support and honorariums (and, if a musician were to be compensated, it is often for non-Bahá'í Iranian pop acts). In many respects, there is an ambiguity surrounding the status of music in the Bahá'í Writings with notions of music as service (i.e., volunteerism) in this process of hiring Bahá'í musical talent, frustrating Bahá'í artists who want to pursue music professionally. As a consequence, the lack of artistic support has led to a long-standing discourse on music 'professionalism' in the Faith. Noted Bahá'í scholar and composer Ludwig Tuman wrote in 1989: "At present [...] the Bahá'í community as a whole does not appear to be fully conscious of its artists as a distinct element within the community, nor to fully recognize the nature and magnitude of the spiritual service that the arts are capable of rendering [...] As regards their sense of usefulness and belonging, then, Bahá'í artists are at the mercy of their coreligionists" (Tuman 1989, 92). It is quite rare to find examples of Bahá'í interviews and publications that openly discuss the issue of generating greater value and monetary support for the arts in the Faith, which would help develop a culture of professionalization in the community. Clearly, this is an important issue for many emerging and established Bahá'í artists, as indicated in a recent *Bahá'í Blog* article on Bahareh Khademi, who was surprisingly forthright on the topic:

Hmmm. Where can I list all the challenges I face as a Bahá'í, let alone a Bahá'í musician? [Laughs] The main thing I find challenging as a Bahá'í musician is for Bahá'ís to see the absolute value of music in our communities [...] I wish our institutions recognised that sometimes musicians also need to be paid too and not pressured to perform because it's a service – which sadly I have experienced. Yes music

is a wonderful service to humanity, and aren't also administration services, high school teaching, being a heart surgeon, dentist, gardener, and accountant? Why don't they work for free too? Yes it can be offered as a service but that's up to the creative to decide in a spirit of service. I think we have a long way to go as a society, and especially here in Sydney to value our Bahá'í creatives. I'm paraphrasing here but didn't Bahá'u'lláh say music heals? We know doctors heal. I don't see the difference in value. We can't live in this wonderful age without one or the other. So I believe we have a long way to go to recognise the spiritual value of music. And until we all need money to live in this monetary system we've built around ourselves, in this world I feel our artists, musicians, painters, writers, photographers, etc. also need to be supported to survive, one which we know lacks the integrity to support all its members of the world [...] It's a tough subject to talk about. One could argue that perhaps there are people more in need than our creatives. It's all relative to their circumstances of course. But I honestly see a pattern with musicians. Bahá'u'lláh says "The best thing before my sight is Justice" ... I think if we were to live as that, not one member of our society would live in need. I share this because as a Bahá'í musician I'd love to be an active member of society; serving in an occupation I love and have the ability to pay my bills too! (Naraqi 2015f)

However, there are some fascinating developments in this regard, namely through the rise of the crowdfunding services. Here, Bahá'í songwriters like Shadi Toloui-Wallace (2016) and Luke Scott (2016) have successfully funded new Bahá'í-inspired albums through services like *KickStarter*; perhaps demonstrating an emerging revenue stream for Bahá'í artists.

As discussed early on in this dissertation, there exists a process of pre-publication review on Faith-related subjects among Bahá'í scholars, something that would undoubtedly arouse controversy among most non-Bahá'í academics. While dissertations are not subject to this process, any of my future journal articles and manuscripts that emerge out of this research will have to engage in pre-publication review. Given this somewhat alien notion in broader musicological scholarship, I believe that creating 'meta-discursive' texts—where Bahá'í articles and monographs include dialogues between authors, editors, and committee members—would contribute a great deal to the Faith's scholarly ideals and goals. For instance, Bahá'í music researchers could collaborate with other artists *as well as* pre-publication review committee

members to demonstrate the process. Project outputs could include recording and releasing an album of original Bahá'í music, publishing a collaborative article, or presenting a joint paper at a conference. Not only does this approach reflect a distinctly-Bahá'í mechanism for community discourse (i.e., consultation), but it can also contribute a theomusicological alternative to traditional analysis and critique; providing a collaborative, faith-based case study that includes practitioners, administrators, and scholars.

From this applied and collaborative perspective, there are several opportunities to help Iranian Bahá'í musicians pursue lasting musical careers, while also contributing to new methods of research dissemination. This can include grant-writing services for Iranian Bahá'í musicians who are seeking financial support for their projects (recordings, marketing, tour support, etc.). The vast majority of Iranian Bahá'í musicians I have spoken with have self-financed and independently released their albums, expressed that they are not comfortable with their English language skills to apply for grants, or felt that they would be ineligible for funding from provincial or federal arts agencies (such as the Canada Council for the Arts). Bahá'í arts scholars can also help raise these concerns to the National Spiritual Assemblies of Canada and the USA, including issues for supporting Bahá'í artists in the community, particularly regarding compensation at conferences, attracting greater attendance of Bahá'ís at local concerts, and purchasing records. Perhaps these discussions could lead to grassroots initiatives, such as the establishment of local assembly funds or scholarship programs to provide financial assistance for Bahá'í musicians. Such activities would not only help contribute to the growth of music and increase the value of the arts in Bahá'í communities, but it would directly reflect the Faith's interests in applying the Teachings to forms of social praxis, as well as participating in the

broader discourses of society. As Bahá'u'lláh writes: “Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and centre your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements” (Bahá'u'lláh 1990, 19).

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