

## Preview

### **CMA's Masters of the Fiddle: a conversation with Persian spiked fiddle virtuoso Kayhan Kalhor**

by Mike Telin



“I think that being back in Cleveland is a very beautiful déjà vu. I have been there many times with various projects and it’s so nice to return and play for the audience in the same place again,” kamancheh player Kayhan Kalhor told us by telephone from the west coast. “As a touring musician it’s always very nice when you develop that relationship with a venue. It builds a trust that they want to hear your new projects and I’m glad that I have this

relationship with the Museum.”

On Wednesday, November 20 Persian spiked fiddle virtuoso and three-time Grammy nominee [Kayhan Kalhor](#) returns to the Cleveland Museum of Art's Gartner Auditorium for a concert beginning at 7:30 pm. Kalhor will be joined by Ali Bahrami Fard, santoor. The performance is part of the Museum's Masters of the Fiddle series.

Kalhor, a member of Yo-Yo Ma’s Silk Road Project, is known around the globe for his performances of traditional Persian music as well as for his multiple collaborations. In addition to Silk Road, Kalhor has appeared as soloist with various ensembles and orchestras including the New York Philharmonic, the Orchestre National de Lyon and the string quartet Brooklyn Rider, and was recently featured on the soundtrack of Francis Ford Coppola’s *Youth without Youth* in a score on which he collaborated with Osvaldo Golijov.

Kalhor says that his CMA program is the result of an experimental project that began after meeting instrument maker [Peter Biffin](#) in Germany. “Peter had made this fascinating instrument that reminded me of kamancheh but he called it [tarhu](#). It had a big belly and long neck and it sounded wonderful. I asked him to make me a kamancheh version of it and he said yes. So he measured my kamancheh and he built me one.”

After he received the first prototype, Kalhor played the instrument for three or four months then made some suggestions as to how it might be improved and asked Biffin to build a five-string version with seven sympathetic strings. “When I got that instrument it was just magic. It sounded really wonderful. I called it [Shah Kaman](#), which means the King of Bowed Instruments.”

After he began to feel comfortable with the new instrument, Kalhor soon began to collaborate with his CMA concert colleague, santour player Ali Bahrami Fard. “He was my neighbor and I just invited him over. After we began to work together I asked him to ask his instrument maker to build a santoor with bigger dimensions and lower strings, and he did. The bass santoor, as it is called, is a 96 string, hammered dulcimer type of instrument.”

Kalhor says he found the sound the two instruments made together to be magical and after two or three months of practicing they decided to play them on a tour of Iran. He says that because the concerts were so well received by the people the two also decided to record an album, *I will not Stand Alone* (2012).

“This series of events all happened during really difficult days that we had in Iran following the second term election four years ago of Mr. Ahmadinejad,” Kalhor recalls. “We were sitting at home and wondering about the events and I think the outcome of that plus these new sounds and new instruments — emotionally, technically, socially, in every aspect — the outcome was the new album.”

Remembering those circumstances Kalhor says, “sometimes you just wonder what your role as a musician in society is, especially during difficult times when people are desperate and everybody is on the street for one reason or another. And as a musician you just find yourself not in command and you ask, what is the purpose of music? Kahlor thinks that while it was a difficult period he is very happy to have turned it into something fruitful. “I think that a lot of people have understood my message and have connected to it.”

Regarding the history of Persian classical music as being a 20<sup>th</sup> century development, Kalhor believes this is somewhat of a misrepresentation. “Obviously a culture with thousands of years of history has something more to offer.” He adds that today, “most people in university are in love with the music of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and this is what is most talked about in Iran.”

Kalhor points out that at one point in history there were only Persians and Greeks in that part of the world and that things were very similar in terms of literature, music and art and every other aspect of social life. “Sometime after the crusades, when western culture took a different direction, Persian culture took a different direction as well. So we became more separated and more different.” And because Persia covered such a large geographic area, almost every kind of folk music from the central Asian countries has been heavily affected by the musical system of Persia.

“During the golden era of our music, we weren’t really in conflict with religion. And the dynasties that ruled Iran heavily supported the arts between the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries,” says Kahlor, who believes the many people only think of Persian classical music as being the music of that era. “It started from there and is an obsession — that’s all they talk about and that’s all they want to present as Persian classical music.”

Does Kayhan Kalhor believe that being a member of the Silk Road Project helped his career? “The answer is, yes! My purpose in doing all of these joint projects is to quench my thirst or curiosity of how it is to combine different styles of ancient music. And in the case of western classical music I think there are many good things that can happen. We live in a very small world today and we have to learn to live together and respect each others' cultures. So I think it is inevitable that as musicians we search for this.”

He also says that these types of projects have helped him to have access to other audiences that normally would not listen to Persian music. “And because Yo-Yo Ma, who is of course a big name, people are curious and they want to hear what he is doing. When we started thirteen years ago nobody would have thought that it would go on forever and it really has.”

What first attracted him to the kamancheh? He says that like many kids he was attracted to the sound. “The instrument's sound just spoke to my soul, and I have stayed with it for forty-four years, so that means I probably made the right choice.”

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