

Cleveland Silent Film & Colloquium:
Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life

by Mike Telin



When Mahtab Nadalian was asked to create a score for the film *Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life*, the Pittsburgh-based santour player was intrigued by the idea. "I've never played a live accompaniment for a silent film, so it sounded like a very interesting project," she said during a recent telephone conversation.

On Saturday, November 23 at 7:00 pm at the Cinematheque, the Cleveland Silent Film Festival & Colloquium will present Merian C. Cooper's and Ernest B. Schoedsack's 1925 documentary film complete with an original score composed and performed by Mahtab Nadalian. The film will be introduced by Evan

A. Liberman, Associate Professor of Film, Television, and Interactive Media at Cleveland State University. Tickets are available [online](#).

Considered one of the earliest ethnographic documentary films, *Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life* follows a branch of the Bakhtiari tribe of Lurs in Persia as they and their herds make their seasonal journey to better pastures.

"I've watched it many times. It's so emotional because you can feel the challenges during its deeply emotional scenes," Nadalian said. "It's also fun because you see the many animals — you never get bored."

Nadalian began the process of creating her score by watching the 70-minute film many times. And while music had been added, she said, "it didn't fit the different scenes very well. But I had to watch it with the sound just to get an idea of what was happening."

When she began to play along with the sound muted, ideas began to fall into place. “I could enhance the visuals without dominating them, and I could leave some spaces of silence for the audience to observe the visuals during the moments that they needed to feel the tension and the challenges.”

In order to create a sense of authenticity, Nadalian’s score draws heavily from Persian classical music, particularly the *Dastgāh* modal system. “I would say 90 percent of it is improvised. Although I’ve seen it several times, so I know what’s going to happen next and the rhythmic motives I want to use — if I want a happy theme, or one that is more emotional.”

Nadalian said that Saturday’s performance will be a great way to share the santour with people who might not be familiar with the instrument. “The first thing I ask people when I introduce my instrument is if they know the hammer dulcimer, and almost everyone says no. So I say, ‘Let me tell you about it.’”

The santour is a Persian dulcimer that is played with two wooden hammers with tips wrapped with cotton. It has nine bridges that hold the instrument’s 72 strings. There are four strings per note and a sound range from low, middle, and high. “We tune it on half and quarter tones, so it’s different from Western classical music with its flats and sharps. And we cannot change the pitch of the strings during the performance — that’s why I’m going to use two instruments on Saturday.”

Tuning the instrument is a job in itself, taking between 40 minutes to one hour. Nadalian said that although many Iranians start playing santur, they stop after a few years because it takes so much time and effort to tune it perfectly.

Nadalian’s journey with the instrument began when she was six years old. “I was in a music group for children where we used Orff instruments, and after a year we had to choose an instrument to play and I chose the santur.” After graduating from a music high school, she went on to earn a performance degree at the University of Tehran.

Concluding our conversation, Nadalian said that she sees the silent film project as the beginning of something new. “I would love to compose even more, learn some jazz, and maybe do a studio recording of this performance.”

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