The keepers of Persian classical music

By Andrew Gilbert
Correspondent

Sometimes it seems that classical Persian culture is welcome everywhere but at home in Iran.

Music in particular has been badly buffeted in the Islamic Republic, where even the most venerable artists often are tolerated more than celebrated. While sold-out venues greeted the multigenerational ensemble Masters of Persian Music, which performs Saturday at Zellerbach Hall for Cal Performances and Sunday at Montalvo Arts Center's Carriage House Theatre, in Iran the group rarely has the opportunity to play in public.

"One of the first efforts that the regime made in the early days was to ban music," says Abbas Milani, director of Stanford's Iranian Studies Program. "Initially, the only thing they would allow on TV and radio were Islamic passion plays and Koranic recitals. Vocalists, particularly women vocalists, were banned.

Iran loosened strictures against concerts in the 1990s, but the country's musicians have found themselves in an increasingly tenuous position since the contested elections in June and the rise of a broad-based protest movement. For Kayhan Kalhor, who founded Masters of Persian Music with Hossein Alizadeh in 1992, the group has provided a welcome international outlet at a time when many doors at home have closed.

"The situation is too social and too political," says Kalhor, 47, speaking from his home in Tehran. "There are humongous limitations on what we can do. We don't have any concerts scheduled here now, though we're hoping to perform over the summer."

It's difficult to overstate the reverence with which the ensemble's leaders are held.

A visionary composer who is his generation's most vivid and eloquent instrumentalist, Alizadeh, 58, is a virtuoso on the Persian spiked fiddle, or kemancheh, he was born into an Iranian Kurdish family, and like Alizadeh has expanded the classical repertoire to incorporating folkloric music. He's performed widely as a founding member of Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble, and last

masters of persian music

when: 8 p.m. sunday

where: montalvo arts center, 15400 montalvo road, saratoga


also: 8 p.m. saturday, zellerbach hall, berkeley, $25-$60, 510-642-9988

performed in the bay area with the innovative string quartet brooklyn rider.

one of the main reasons that he and alizadeh founded masters of persian music was to bridge a generational chasm exacerbated by the revolution, which sundered a musical tradition dating back some 1,500 years. many of the country's mid-20th century masters left iran in the 1980s. their departure left the post-revolutionary generation, which makes up nearly 70 percent of the population, without teachers and guides to pass on the ancient oral tradition.

"there's a consensus that alizadeh is someone who has delved deeply but also innovatively, particularly by bringing elements of folkloric music into the classical structures. his most famous songs use all the ornamentation and all the structures of classical music, but infuse it with vivacity and energy of folkloric and ethnic music."

Kalhor is better known in the west than his older colleague, having lived in europe and the united states for much of his adult life (although he moved back to iran in 2003). the world's foremost master of the persian spike-fiddle, or kleinere, he was born into an iranian kurdish family, and like alizadeh has expanded the classical repertoire to incorporation into folkloric music. he's performed widely as a founding member of yo-yo ma's silk road ensemble, and last cases some of the tradition's most celebrated younger players, most notably vocalist hamid reza nournabakhsh, a disciple of the vocal legend mohammad reza shajarian, who is making his bay area debut. the group also features alizadeh's son, nima alizadeh on robab (lute), rouzbeh rahimi on santur (hammered dulcimer), ali reza hosseini on tombak (drum) and slamak jahaninary on ney (reed flute).

rather than only setting beloved medieval persian poems such as hafez, Ferdowsi, Sadi and Rumi to music, the group also interprets contemporary poetry.

while building bridges among iranians, kalhor and alizadeh are equally committed to presenting another face of iran, where the political situation often overshadows an ancient and sophisticated civilization.

"we come from a very old and valuable culture that has contributed a lot to the world," kalhor says. "we're always trying to represent the modern culture of iran. we're not pure traditionalists, but we're very rooted."

"the link with the old culture is there, but we try to build on that with modern artists living in today's world as well."

Kayhan Kalhor, left, and Hossein Alizadeh, of the group Masters of Persian Music.

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the latest version of masters of persian music

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