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Persian dulcimer player sees music as international language

By Vincent Nicholas Rossi

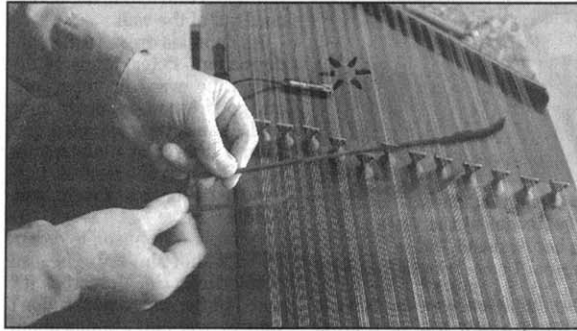
RANCHO BERNARDO — Ostad Behrouz Sadeghian is a civil engineer with CalTrans. Right now he is involved with "Project 15," adding four additional HOV lanes to inland North County's main freeway.

When he's not working to modernize local highways, Sadeghian pursues a far different calling; he is a master of the santour, or Persian hammered dulcimer, a musical instrument dating back to the 16th century.

A trapezoid-shaped wooden sound box with strings stretched across the top, the santour is played by striking the strings with light wooden mallets, called "mezrab" in Farsi, the language of Persia, which is now Iran.

As he sat playing in his Rancho Bernardo home, the mallets in his hands seemed to float over the strings, as if they were barely touching them. Yet out came waves of chords, washing over the listener's ears.

Abdy Salimi, a friend of Sadeghian who is studying santour with him, spoke of the differences between Persian Music and Western music. While notes in Western music



Sadeghian played the stringed instrument by hitting the strings with small wooden mallets, creating uncommon tones.

are divided in half, into sharps and flats, Persian music is further divided into quarter notes.

Salimi said he has been told by some psychologists that the quarter notes resonate with "a special part of the brain," causing a hypnotic effect.

Santour-like instruments can be seen in stone carvings of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires, back as far as 669 B.C., according to research by Dr. Hormoz Farhat, an Iranian-born composer and scholar who has taught at University of California Los Angeles, Harvard and other schools. His works have been

performed by orchestras worldwide.

Descendants of the instruments were known by the English as dulcimers as far back as the 15th century, and similar instruments have appeared in Iraq, Egypt and India.

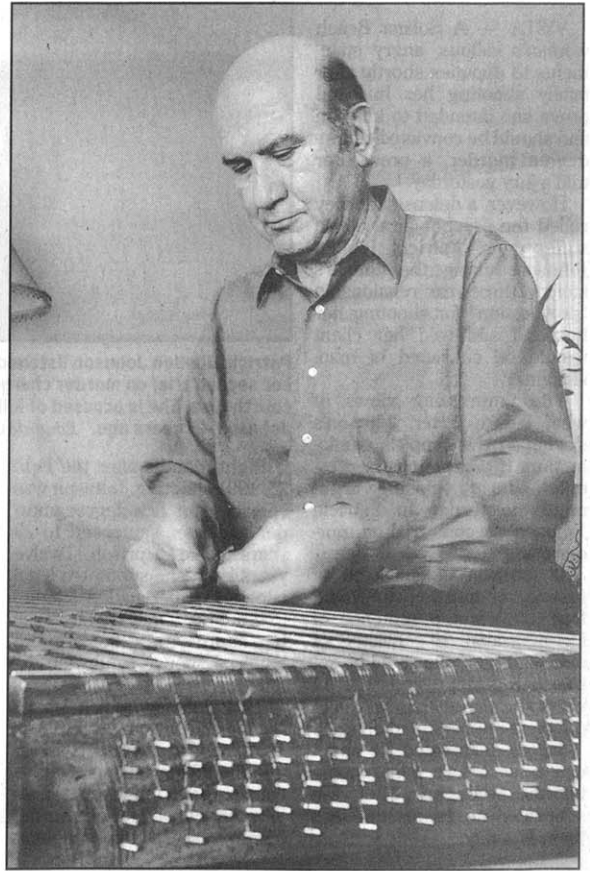
The arrangement of strings — stretched in bunches of four across wooden bridges, struck by a small hammer — brings to mind another instrument, so it is no surprise when Sadeghian notes that "actually, this is the mother of the piano."

How does one become a master santour player?

"The first thing is to have talent to play the music," said Sadeghian, insisting that traditional Persian music is not something that can be learned by reading texts.

"Persian music is about 80 percent improvisation. If you want to become a master, you have to listen to the music that exists and you have to have a master with all kinds of knowledge — and get from him as much as you can, and put your idea into the music and give it to the audience."

For Sadeghian, 63, the master was Reza Varzandeh, whose recordings Sadeghian began listening to as a 12-year-old in his native Iran. After listening to recordings for two years, Sadeghian went to Varzandeh's home and asked to become his student.



Ostad Behrouz Sadeghian played the Persian hammered dulcimer. The Rancho Bernardo resident works to maintain Persian musical heritage. Don Kohlbauer / Union-Tribune photos

From the 1950s until his death in 1977, Varzandeh was heard daily on Iranian radio and television. He developed what was considered an innovative technique for playing the santour and was a master at improvisation.

"He was not less than Beethoven or Mozart," said Sadeghian.

Yet Varzandeh died in poverty, Sadeghian said. He said the culture did not value, and thus compensate, musicians as artists.

Sadeghian left Iran at the age of 19 and lived in Europe for many years before coming to the United States in 1989. He has lived in Rancho Bernardo for four years. He has worked to keep Persian musical heritage alive. One of his santour students, Neema Hekmat, is the Web master of

a site dedicated to Varzandeh, which includes recordings of his music.

Last month Sadeghian drove to Los Angeles to play a concert broadcast on an Iranian cable channel. He doesn't do it for the money, said Sadeghian. Playing and teaching is his relaxation, and his avocation. He said he wants to "give back what I have learned from my master to the youth, to the next generation, that they can carry it."

This year, in addition to playing at Iranian community events, Sadeghian performed at RB Alive, the annual Rancho Bernardo street fair. He said he wants to play for all kinds of audiences because he sees music as an international language.

Vincent Nicholas Rossi is a freelance writer from Rancho Bernardo.