

TODAY'S ZAMAN

ALİ PEKTAŞ

Iranian-American duo Niyaz dedicates new album to women

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The Iranian-American world music duo Niyaz, formed by Azam Ali and her husband, Loga Ramin Torkian, has a huge fan base in Turkey.

The group has just released their fourth studio album, a collection of original songs and new arrangements of folk songs that they recorded in Canada and Turkey.

Titled "The Fourth Light," the new album is dedicated to women, "the largest minority on Earth," as Azam Ali put it during a concert last weekend in İstanbul. The duo was recently in Turkey for three concerts in Ankara and İstanbul on the heels of the album's launch.

Sunday's Zaman spoke with the couple about "The Fourth Light" and the music of Niyaz in general.

You dedicate each of your albums to a specific topic. What's in the focus of this new collection?

Azam Ali: This album is a tribute to Rabia al-Basri [an eighth-century female Muslim saint and Sufi mystic in Iraq]. She was one of Islam's first Sufi saints, and strived throughout her entire life to break away from male pressure. She is one of the most important characters in Islamic mysticism, so much so that she has influenced other renowned mystics, including Mevlana Muhammad Jelaluddin Rumi. Her ideas were beyond her era; they even spoke to the present day. So we chose [to dedicate the album to] her as a symbol representing all women, because she is such a universal character.

Protests against the coup d'état in Egypt also took place at Rabea al-Adawiya Square, named after Rabia al-Basri. Is there an allusion in your songs to the situation in Egypt as well?

Loga Ramin Torkian: No, we weren't referring to events in Egypt. An overall essential theme in our albums is the plight of immigrants and minorities, and in fact women make up the greatest minority on Earth. It's a curious fact that such a powerful figure as Rabia al-Basri hasn't become a dominant figure [in women's

movements] to date. She was such a unique, special and revolutionary woman and we believe she has been deliberately neglected even by the Muslims. This album focuses on the troubles of women with Rabia al-Basri at its core.

How did you choose the track list?

Azam Ali: We mostly chose songs [with lyrics] that highlight [the troubles of] minorities and their rights. For instance, one of the songs is a Bakhtiari folk song called "Sheer-Ali-Mardan." He [Ali-Mardan] was a freedom fighter who fought for the rights of minorities. And Bakhtiari are an Iranian minority.

Also, there are lyrics that were inspired by the poems of Rabia al-Basri. Sadly only seven of her poems are known today.

Apart from these, we reinterpreted several songs in Urdu and Turkish that were written by people who were deemed minorities in the societies they lived in.

We also set a poem by [the late Indian-Urdu poet] Kaifi Azmi to music. He had written that poem for his wife.

You also have a well-known Turkish Alevi folk song on the album called "Eyvallah Şahım." Why did you choose that song?

Azam Ali: There are lots of similarities between the music of Turkey and Iran. As it is, we have a Turkish song on almost all our albums. Every time we visit Turkey I go to music stores and buy albums. One day a friend of mine told me that all the albums that I bought from Turkey featured Alevi music. I wasn't aware of it until then. That made me realize the subconscious fondness I had for Alevi music. Not that it matters for us whether the music we like is Alevi or Sunni, but by coincidence it happened to be this way. We worked for almost a year to get copyright clearance for that song and I'm so happy that we could record it.

Getting back to minorities, do you feel like you are part of a minority, personally and mentally?

Azam Ali: I was born in Iran. Back then we were part of the majority. But after the revolution we mentally became part of a minority. We had to emigrate because of the revolution and the ensuing conflict. In the country we immigrated to, we became the minority. Right now we live in Montreal, where I'm again a minority. When I was a kid, Afghan people used to come to Iran for work, I can still remember their [misery]. But right now I'm not focused on being the minority or the majority in Canada or elsewhere. What I care about is the plight of minorities anywhere on Earth.

You have a very special voice. You could have used that to sing pop and become a worldwide celebrity. But you didn't choose that.

Azam Ali: At the start of my career, a well-known manager said to me, "You have a great voice but if you continue singing those songs you'll never become famous." But music for me is a journey of dreams and of the heart. I follow what

my heart tells me. I may not be too rich or too famous but I have enough resources to do whatever I like. I have musical dignity. I've never done anything I regret. And the power to continue doing what one likes to do is the greatest gift one can have on Earth. I've never had any expectations or concerns about popularity.

What's your biggest source of support in your career path?

Azam Ali: The letters we receive from our fans give me a lot of strength. [...] Just this morning I received an email from a Palestinian woman. She wrote: "I'm proud of you. You make me proud of being a woman." I can't imagine any financial value corresponding to these emotions. And I'm definitely not discontented with the choices I've made [about my career].

Loga Ramin Torkian: One of the reasons we became musicians was our search for a home ground, a space of our own [where we could express ourselves]. This is one of the meanings of our journey. If we made things we didn't feel, we'd be feeling like living in somebody else's house; in a place we don't belong. We don't see music as a means of making money. It's our home, our motherland.

How does it feel to be in the same band as a married couple?

Loga Ramin Torkian: For me it's a miracle, a blessed gift from heaven.

Azam Ali: It's not something everybody can do. Most people like to separate family life and work. But for us everything's great. I'd never thought I'd have a husband who'd be OK with me traveling around the world to sing in concerts, but Ramin supports me a lot and I'm very happy about it.

How did the birth of your son, Iman, affect your career and your daily life?

Azam Ali: Of course it had some effect; suddenly everything about your life changes; from that point on you have someone in your life who constantly looks up to you, who looks to you as a role model and who forces you to become a better person. And as much as it affects your personality, it affects your music, too. It has made me a more serious person regarding both my music and my lifestyle.

Loga Ramin Torkian: Iman starting to tour with us brings more enjoyment to not only us but also to the members of our band. He has the ability to take away all the nervousness in the band; his presence creates a family environment not only between the two of us but among the entire band. He is the secret star of our group. And he's most probably not aware of it.

Your music sounds so familiar yet so new. What's the secret to that?

Loga Ramin Torkian: That's very similar to the way I feel whenever I visit Turkey; everything here is so familiar to me, and yet so distant. When we make music, we take something unfamiliar and then we make it our own. That's why the result makes listeners feel that way. Another major reason is that we have no financial concerns related to our music.

Azam Ali: I went to India when I was 4. Even back then I had great love for music, but I didn't understand a word of the language spoken in that country, yet its music could touch my heart. What's important in music is its ability to touch the hearts of those who listen; what we do is this. We try to focus on emotions.

You have a touching, almost poignant voice. Are you as emotional as a person?

Azam Ali: I wouldn't want to sound miserable, but life is full of pain and sadness. And it's impossible to set these [emotions] aside when making music. Also there's a liberating side to melancholy and sadness; melancholy and mental freedom are closely related. Leo Tolstoy once wrote, "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

In our previous interview in 2011, you sounded very hopeful about the Arab Spring and the future of the Middle East. How do you feel about the developments in the region after four years?

Azam Ali: It's difficult to still be hopeful when so many people are dying and suffering over there. I have no hopes about Iran, but for the Mideast in general I still think there's a glimmer of hope. There's a new generation on the rise and that still gives me hope.

Loga Ramin Torkian: I have high hopes about the future of the Middle East. There's a certain power, a system that arms all sides and gets them to fight each other, but that cannot go on forever. I'm sure that at some point this absurdity will cease. On the other hand, social media and the Internet help create a powerful and dynamic interaction among the young generation and I think that's something no one can prevent from happening for too long.



Azam Ali (L) and Loga Ramin Torkian of Niyaz pose for a photograph during an interview with Sunday's Zaman on March 24 in İstanbul. The world music band launched their fourth studio album last month. (Photo: Sunday's Zaman, Şule Tülin Üner)



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