

Iranian artists bring their music, heritage to Lotus

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Classical Persian music has a past filled with stinginess, according to Sahba Motallebi, a performer at this year's Lotus World Music and Arts Festival.

Historically, music belonged to higher-class people, she said in a phone interview. "They didn't want to teach it because they had an asset in their hands." But musicians found ways to collaborate and pass their music on to others, eventually translating it to sheet music.

At multiple Lotus performances, Motallebi will play classical stringed instruments accompanied by percussionist Naghmeh Farahmand. Motallebi describes the genre of music, which is based on modal scales, as part composition and part improvisation. She hopes to evoke emotion through her work using her own experiences.

"I'll remember one of them, and I'm going to express it, even if I don't talk about it," she said. "It's something that happened with my soul, and I'm just going to express it." The listener may not know the story, she said, but much like viewing visual art, "each person can have their own experience."

When she's performing, Motallebi said, she tries to create a moment that encompasses her surroundings. "It's a flow between me and my audience," she said. "You are part of my composition. I feel their heartbeat and their motions, their concentrations."

Sharing music and keeping the tradition alive is a challenge musicians like Motallebi have worked to overcome. Laws in Iran prevent her from performing her music and sharing it with an audience in her home country. As a member of the Baha'i faith, she said, she was unable to play in front of people or record her music.

Instead, she's playing for audiences and teaching students all over the world from her home in Los Angeles using YouTube and Skype.

"Me and (Farahmand) have a mission to bring hope to people, even our brothers and sisters in Iran," she said. As women in music, she said, they're mothers for the next generation of musicians.

"Music of Persia does not just belong to Persian people," she said. "You're supposed to teach people ... tell about its story and what's happening in its music." Censorship of music, she said, is "why people are hungry ... they are thirsty ... they are looking for something."

But music, she said, can help people overcome crises and other hardships, as well as initiate conversations about global issues. She hopes to translate some of her own past as a child in a war-torn area into music.

Motallebi and Farahmand will bring the traditional music of their heritage to two performances Friday and Saturday, plus a third appearance at Lotus in the Park.