

# Culture

## MUSICAL EXPLORER



Musician Mohammad Sahraei looks over a python skin strung instrument in his Halifax home on Thursday. Sahraei draws on generations of family tradition when playing the folk music of his native Iran, and brings it into an entirely new context when he performs with his group Open Borders as part of the 2021 Open Waters Festival on Monday night, livestreaming from The Music Room. **TIM KROCHAK • THE CHRONICLE HERALD**

**STEPHEN COOKE**  
THE CHRONICLE HERALD  
✉ scooke@herald.ca  
🐦 @NS\_scooke

**M**ohammad Sahraei came to Halifax from Iran in 2017 with two music degrees, two business degrees, and generations of rich family folklore tradition.

Within two weeks of his arrival in a new home on the other side of the world, he was holding his first Halifax Central Library performance with the Iranian Cultural Society, making contacts with other musicians and festival and concert organizers, and sowing the seeds for the genre-transcending group Open Borders.

On Monday night at 7:30 p.m., Sahraei will join Iranian-Canadian musician/composers Behrooz Mikhankhah and Yousef Mousavi and the Halifax rhythm section of drummer Matt Gallant and bassist Lukas Pearse for a livestreamed concert from Halifax's Music Room as part of Upstream Music's 2021 Open Waters Festival.

The virtual version of the annual celebration of new music is currently running through Jan. 16, full details are available at [www.upstreammusic.org/open-waters-festival-2021](http://www.upstreammusic.org/open-waters-festival-2021).

Over a cup of tea in his Armale studio, its walls lined with beautiful handcrafted instruments both inherited and collected in his travels, Sahraei says it's been a long journey to get to this point for himself and his family, but he's forever grateful for the musical community that welcomed him with open arms when he felt like a stranger in a strange land.

"When I came to Canada, and Halifax, it was my concern, really, how I could

## Musician Mohammad Sahraei combines Iranian tradition with adventurous spirit

match and adapt my music with this new culture?," asks the virtuoso musician and educator. "I was thinking maybe they don't like my music, because the culture is different, and what should I do?"

"But when I came here, people really supported my music and they loved my music. They invited me to play many of the festivals in Nova Scotia, and we had a tour across Canada (with Nova Scotia folk musician Kim Barlow) from west to east."

Whenever he performs, Sahraei shares the stories behind each instrument, like the long-necked figure-8-shaped stringed tar, or the two-stringed dotar, which has a remarkably rich and invigorating tone when he picks and strums it with a rapid hypnotic rhythm.

Some of them even come with in-jokes, like the overgrown Iranian cousin of a tambourine called the daf, which is augmented by metal links suspended behind the drumhead and is traditionally played outdoors, usually in the mountains where the sound can travel for miles.

"The daf can make you go deaf," grins Sahraei, who says he quickly learned to appreciate the Canadian concept of the cultural mosaic, where mutual respect and mutual curiosity and interest in each other's traditions go hand-in-hand.

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Mohammad Sahraei

"I've lived in and traveled to lots of countries around the world," says the musician, whose master's degree in ethnomusicology led to a Silk Road-style journey from China through Central Asia to the Middle East.

"I've never had this experience like Canada. I feel free to wear my traditional clothes, to have my beard and play my music without any problem."

He describes his life as an artist in Halifax as a sharp contrast to Iran, where state restrictions make it virtually impossible to be a full-time performing musician. Although there is a wide-ranging music culture there — from traditional folk to classical composition to contemporary pop and rock — it exists under punitive conditions that make it difficult to experience performances or recordings except under tightly controlled conditions.

"You cannot be a professional musician and make your living with music, you have to do something else," says Sahraei, who has an MBA and worked by day as an accountant in Iran. "The government doesn't support music at all, and they don't allow you to publish an album."

"If you want to hold a concert, it's not easy for people and you need to get lots of certification. ... And on TV, it's prohibited to show instruments, so it cannot be your

profession. It's really difficult for people to live just with music, you have to do lots of other things for your daily bread."

In Halifax, he can continue to develop his dream of opening a world music and folklore museum that would celebrate many cultures and provide a performance space, as well as becoming close friends and collaborators with Nova Scotian musicians like Barlow and his Open Borders bandmates, fellow Open Waters artist Janice Jackson, classical cellist Shimon Walt and multi-talented composer/conductor Scott Macmillan.

When COVID-19 restrictions are eased once more for musical performances, Sahraei plans to rejoin his friends for the international concert that was postponed last December, featuring a host of musicians from four continents. But for now he's looking forward to performing live with Open Borders again on Monday as they share an ever-changing melange of composed and improvised sounds.

The concert will be live as viewers watch it on their devices at home, although the multi-talented musician says being on stage for the camera isn't the same as being among a roomful of engaged listeners.

"In our music, the audience is a part of the band," he says. "They give you lots of feedback during the performance, and you can sense when they feel something. In classical music, they listen and at the end they clap, but in our culture, they are collaborating with the musicians onstage, like in jazz music, for example."

"But no, we won't have any audience, it might be a little awkward to sit and play for the room, but I'm really excited to share the stage with my lovely friends."