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Research Article

The art of crafting Iranian Tar and Setar: Personal experiences

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Abstract

This article presents the personal craftsmanship experience of Morteza Salimian Rizi, a master luthier and founder of Sapp Saz, an independent Iranian instrument workshop in Zarrin Shahr, Iran. Drawing on more than a decade of professional practice, Salimian Rizi documents the complete process of crafting two central instruments of Persian classical music: the Tar and the Setar. The study explores the careful selection of materials such as mulberry wood, specialized construction techniques, and structural decisions that affect tonal quality and resonance. It analyzes the organological differences between the Tar's double-bowl, six-string design and the Setar's lighter, four-string structure, addressing challenges such as neck curvature and soundboard integration. Combining traditional craftsmanship with innovative approaches, Salimian Rizi reflects on how personal experimentation enhances sound production and contributes to preserving Iran's musical heritage. This work aims to transmit valuable artisanal knowledge to future generations, enrich the academic field of organology, and support the cultural sustainability of Persian musical traditions.

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Introduction

Since childhood, I have been a passionate player of the Iranian Tar, always captivated by its structure and sound. At the age of 25, I met a master luthier whose craftsmanship inspired me to transition from playing to making instruments. This article narrates my journey from a dedicated musician to a skilled luthier specializing in Tar and Setar, including detailed insights into the materials, tools, and techniques involved in this art.

Early Experiences in Tar Making

The first time I stepped into the master's workshop, I was fascinated by the variety of tools and types of wood. Despite my lack of experience, the master encouraged me to give instrument-making a try. In just 20 days, I crafted my first Tar—a feat that even surprised my teacher. Later, I rented a small workshop and sold my first semi-finished instrument before it was completed, which motivated me to continue. Over the next decade, I honed my craft and gained recognition in my hometown.

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Figure 1. Raw mulberry wood prepared for carving

Figure 2. First stage of Tar body carving

Figure 3. Finishing work with hand tools

Transition to Setar Making

Driven by curiosity, I ventured into Setar making despite the lack of formal training. I started experimenting with minimal tools and tested various woods including walnut, spruce, maple, and eventually mulberry—traditionally used for its exceptional resonance. Setar making proved to be even more challenging and rewarding than Tar due to its acoustic sensitivity and craftsmanship standards.

Key Considerations in Setar Making

Wood Selection: Primarily mulberry and walnut for their acoustic and durable qualities.

Soundboard Material: Mulberry wood is used traditionally for its high resonance capability.

Essential Tools: Chisels, hammers, bending irons, and sanding tools are essential. Precision and patience are crucial.

Technical Features and Differences between the Iranian Tar and Setar

The Iranian Tar and Setar, while closely related, differ in their construction, acoustic qualities, and performance roles: Body (Bowl): The Tar has a larger double-bowl body traditionally made of mulberry, with a thin animal skin stretched over its top. The Setar, by contrast, has a smaller single-piece bowl, usually carved from mulberry or walnut, with a wooden soundboard. Strings: The Tar is strung with six strings arranged in three pairs. The Setar has four strings—two single strings and one pair—giving it a softer, more intimate tone. Sound and Tone: The Tar produces a powerful, resonant, and vibrant sound, making it suitable for large performances and ensemble playing. The Setar, however, is valued for its subtle, delicate, and meditative timbre, often used in solo or spiritual contexts.

Function in Music: The Tar is considered the "mother of Iranian instruments," representing strength and versatility in Persian classical music. The Setar, by contrast, has long been associated with mysticism and personal expression. These distinctions not only highlight the diversity of Iranian luthiery but also demonstrate the cultural and musical roles of the instruments within Persian music tradition.

Challenges and Rewards

Crafting these instruments requires balancing artistic intuition with technical understanding. It demands patience, deep knowledge of materials, and constant refinement. The greatest reward is hearing musicians bring these instruments to life on stage.

Based on my personal experience, mulberry wood has always been the most pleasant and aesthetically suitable choice for crafting both the Tar and the Setar. For centuries, the people of Iran have listened to the sound of these instruments resonating from the heart of mulberry wood. I have also crafted custom Tars from walnut wood, which, although visually more attractive than mulberry, showed a noticeable difference in tonal quality and beauty compared to Tars made from mulberry.

In the case of the Setar, however, with some tolerance, many makers—including myself—sometimes use other woods for the body, such as walnut, maple, padauk, or rosewood, and occasionally a combination of different woods to enhance the visual appeal. Nevertheless, for the soundboard of the Setar, mulberry remains the standard choice because of its superior resonance.

The most challenging part of Setar-making is achieving the ideal sound quality through years of trial and error. It is commonly said among luthiers that "it should sound like a Setar, not like a Dotar or a Tanbur." The same is true in Tar-making, where a master luthier gradually learns through countless attempts how to adjust the thickness of different parts of the bowl. For example, I have often taken the carving process of a Tar's body to the final stage, only to see the bowl crack due to the slightest impatience or lack of precision, losing several days of work.

Equally important in both Tar and Setar construction is the joint between the neck and the body, which we call the "neck angle." Without exaggeration, half of the instrument's beauty and tonal quality depends on this factor, and luthiers achieve mastery when they can produce tones that are both soft and powerful. In the adjustment stage (reglaj), there is little difference between Tar and Setar, since both have necks of similar length and share similar fret arrangements.

Among Iranian instruments, the Tar is regarded as the most majestic—indeed, many consider it the "mother of Iranian instruments." Without undue bias, I share this belief. The Setar, on the other hand, is a companion for solitude and introspection, a friend to both maker and player. It is no coincidence that many prominent musicians, such as Kayhan Kalhor, who is best known for his Kamancheh, also play the Setar.

The years I have spent crafting the Tar and Setar have been the sweetest period of my life. In moments of despair, it is the scent of wood and the sound of chisels and planes that encourage me to continue. A voice from within tells me that music is eternal, and that I, too, am a small part of it.

Conclusion

This journey from musician to luthier is a story of passion, tradition, and expertise. Sharing this path helps safeguard Iranian musical heritage and may inspire new generations to embrace this noble craft.

Biodata of Author

Master Luthier and Iranian String Instrument Maker, **Morteza Salimian Rizi** is a founder of Sapp Saz, an independent platform promoting handcrafted Iranian musical instruments. With over a decade of experience, he specializes in crafting Tar, Setar, and other stringed instruments. He holds official certifications in luthiery from the Iranian Technical and Vocational Training Organization. Affiliation: Sapp Saz (Independent Workshop for Iranian Musical Instruments), Zarrin Shahr, Iran. Email: Mortezasalimian83@gmail.com

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