

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
**ARABIC MUSIC**

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### **Arabic Musical Traditions**

**Instruments.** Music is one of the most complex, varied, and ubiquitous aspects of cultural production in the Arab worlds. It is found even in the most conservative communities. In Arabic music, drums are the most important instruments for dancing and group singing such as wedding songs, and the lute is the most important for accompanying solo singing. Other traditional instruments include the *mizmar*, similar to an oboe, various types of flute called *nay* or *kawala*, a *rabab* or spike fiddle, and the *qanun* or zither. In modern times, the violin has replaced the *rabab* in many contexts. The piano was introduced and adapted, the electric guitar came and went, and the synthesizer and drum machine are now standard in pop music.

**Distinguishing features.** Arabic music is readily distinguished from Western music by several factors. It has distinct rhythms, usually played on a variety of ceramic or frame drum, and represented by a series of heavy and light strokes termed *dum* and *tak*. While a few of the most common rhythms fit into a 4-4 bar, many are more complex, having 7, 9, or 13 beats. The popular rhythms in the Middle East are distinguished from those found in Iran—where 6/8 rhythms are the most popular—and from rhythms in areas where sub-Saharan African influence is strong, such as the Gulf and Morocco, where 3 on 2 rhythms (i.e., two simultaneous rhythms) are popular. The equivalent of Western key signatures or scales are called *maqams* or modes, of which dozens exist, each with a name such as *rast*, *saba*, *nahawand*, and so on. Each *maqam* has a set scale, but also a set of rules about the relative importance of the notes in the scale and the patterns in which they should be presented. Each is associated with a particular emotion. In addition, many of the *maqams* involve scales that have quarter-tones—notes in between the notes on a Western piano, like B half-flat—that do not exist in Western music. In addition, traditional Arabic music is based on heterophony. All the instruments and the singer follow the same tune, rather than producing several different parts of harmony, but each improvises embellishments as he or she wishes. Often, the same phrase is repeated several times with different embellishments and flourishes each time. Another important aspect has to do with the process by which songs are written. Instead of coming up with a melody first and then finding words to make up the lyrics, classical Arabic songs were based on poems that were composed first, then set to music later. The close relationship between song and poetry remains important in Arabic music to this day.

**Tarab.** A key concept in Arabic music is *tarab*, a term that denotes both the joy one experiences from listening to great music and the artistry that produces that feeling. A singer is therefore often called a *mutrib*, someone able to create *tarab*. Racy's work endeavors to explain this concept in detail and in particular to describe the complex interlocutor between a performance of Arabic music and the audience.

### Questions

What are the main instruments in traditional Arab music?

How does Arab music differ from Western with regard to scales and rhythms?

What was the place of music in the medieval Islamic world? What kinds of music are allowed according to the strict interpretations of Islamic law? Were bans of music effective?

How did the colonial period affect music in the Arab world?

Discuss any of the regional traditions of Arabic music: Andalusian music in North Africa, *rai* in Algeria, *simsimiyya* music in Port Said, and so on. What role do these traditions play in modern culture? How have they developed and been preserved?

What are some of the historical connections between Western music and Arab music?

According to Racy, what does *tarab* mean? Are there equivalents to this word in English (or other languages)?

Who are *sammi`ah*, and what role do they play in musical performances?

Define *saltanah*, Maqam, p. maqamat, Taqasim, Alma, pl. `awalim, Qafrah, Asalah, Dawr, Firqah, Takht, Layali, Mawwal, m Waslah, Sahrah, Bast, Kayf.

Explain the stages involved in a *jalsah* or informal gathering for listening to music.

What are the stages involved in an Arab musician's training?

How is the performance of music related to hashish and alcohol?

What are the typical themes in Arabic song lyrics, and how are they related to musical performance and *tarab*?

#### Reading

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#### Further Reading

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## **Song**

**Singers.** Since the early Islamic period, the musicians who have gained the greatest fame have been singers. Many of these have also played the lute, the main instrument accompanying solo singing. In the Umayyad period, Medina became a prominent center for the performance of music and the training of musicians. During the Abbasid period, skilled slave girls (*qayna*, pl. *qiyana*) gained prominence as the most expert musicians of their day by performing for the caliphs and other elite households. They were endowed not only with beautiful voices and an extensive repertoire of songs but also with ready wit and the ability to compose poems and set them to melodies on the spot. A number of these women became close companions of Abbasid Caliphs and later rulers. Singers such as `Arib al-Ma'muniyyah were also appreciated by contemporary musicians and poets for their skills. One of the most famous male musicians of all times is Ziryab (Abu al-Hasan `Ali b. Nafi`, 789-857), a skillful singer, composer, and player of the lute who was trained in Baghdad under the prominent musician Ishaq al-Mawsili (d. 850) but left to seek his fortune at the Andalusian capital, Cordoba, then under the rule of the Umayyad Abd al-Rahman II (822-52). He quickly gained renown not only for his musical talents but also for his role as trendsetter and arbiter of taste at court. He supposedly introduced new fashions in dress, cuisine—introducing asparagus—and hairstyles—supposedly wearing his hair cut short, with bangs across his forehead. He was held up as a founding figure in the musical tradition of al-Andalus, and later sources credit him with technical innovations such as the addition of a fifth pair of strings to the lute and the use of a beak or quill as a pick rather than a wooden one. Andalusian music exerted profound influences on European musical traditions, introducing instruments such as the lute and the rebec. The songs of the troubadours indebted to Arabic poetry and song, and flamenco music and dance also draw on Arabic music and dance traditions.

**The Book of Songs.** One of the most important works of Arabic literature and at the same time musical lore is *Kitab al-Aghani* (*The Book of Songs*), written by the Shiite historian and literary scholar Abu al-Faraj al-Isbahani (d. 356/967), who was active at the court of the Hamdanid rulers at Mosul in northern Iraq. This massive work, 20 volumes in modern editions, includes an extensive commentary on 100 of the best songs of the time of Harun al-Rashid, as well as the author's selection of later favorites. Al-Isbahani reports that it took him over 50 years to compose the work, which draws on an earlier *Book of Songs* by the eighth-century musician Yusuf al-Katib. The collection includes the stories of songs' original composition and anecdotes about their famous performers. It contains a great deal of information about singers and musicians, performance contexts, music, instruments, and lyrics, and is thus one of the major sources on medieval Arabic music.

**Umm Kulthum.** Umm Kulthum, who was born in 1904 and passed away in 1975, is still considered the greatest Arab singer. From humble origins in northern Egyptian village, she sang as a child with her father who performed devotional music. She was endowed with an extremely powerful voice and had an extraordinary range, was trained in the techniques of Qur'anic pronunciation and recitation. She came to Cairo in her youth and quickly became a regular performer on Egyptian radio and then in films. In a spectacular career that spanned five decades, she rocketed to stardom and became known simply *al-Sitt* ("The Lady"). From the 1930s to the 1970s, she gave a concert on the first Thursday of every month which was broadcast throughout Egypt and the other nations of the Arab World (and Israel as well). It was as if the entire Arab World came to a halt to listen to her concert. In general, each concert was only one song, with a long instrumental introduction, followed by Umm Kulthum's performance of the song. Umm Kulthum would sing each verse of the poem many times over with skillful variations. She always wore dark glasses in her later years because of an ailment that caused her eyes to bulge, and was careful to assume conservative dress.

She never married, though many men declared their love for her, including several of the poets who wrote songs for her. Rumors suggest that she may have been a Lesbian; whether this is true or not, it is probable that any husband she married would have asked her to stop singing in public, something she was not willing to do. She was also known for her sharp wit and good humor in addition to her taste in music.

### Questions

How has technology affected modern Arab music?

In Arabic popular music there is an evident divide between low-brow and high-brow culture, similar to that seen in other areas of cultural production. What are the views representing the two ends of the spectrum regarding the positive and negative aspects of these two types of music? What is your view on the music and on the debate?

Describe the relationship between Arabic music and the post-colonial Arab nations. Describe the role of music in pan-Arab nationalism.

What made Umm Kulthum the greatest Arab singer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? How do the songs she sang differ from American pop songs?

How was Umm Kulthum's career related to Egyptian nationalism?

Watch a performance of Umm Kulthum, Fairouz, Abdel Halim Hafez, or other famous singer from the 20<sup>th</sup> century and write a commentary on the performance.

Watch the video clip of any recent Arabic pop song on youtube or elsewhere and analyze it. What ideas are the images intended to convey?

Why is the Western music industry challenged in the Middle East?

Analyze "Desert Rose" by Sting and Cheb Mami, or "Diddi" by Cheb Khaled.

### Reading

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### Further Reading

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