

Arab Music

A survey of its history and its modern practice

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Foreword

Around the middle of the nineteenth century the first monograph of Arabic music appeared in German. The material that the author, Rafael Georg Kiesewetter, had at his disposal, consisted of a number of treatises on Arabic musical theory and a few musical notations made by European researchers and travelers during their stay in the Arab world. His study focused on the theory of music; the musical notations were regarded by him as minor details, showing the remnants of culture flourishing in the past; so he put them in an appendix. Since then, the musicological understanding of the Arabic musical culture has changed significantly, due to fact collecting musical data has become increasingly possible. In the last decades the Internet in particular has contributed to this enormously. Many Arabic musical genres are freely accessible on line and information about performers, instruments, theory and the like can easily be obtained.

Yet is not easy for someone interested in Arab music to build up a general and coherent picture of Arabic musical culture on the basis of the many but often not related pieces of information found on the internet. For that purpose a book still is a better medium, especially in combination with the potential of the Internet. That idea slowly evolved in the author's mind, resulting in a book, which, after a description of the history, the musical theory and the major classical traditions, offers a tentative survey of the extensive field of the popular music and of some aspects of folk music. I make no claim to be exhaustive; for many details, the reader had better turn to the relevant websites on the internet. Some of these are listed at the back of this book. On the other hand I discuss the various musical genres by analyzing a piece that I consider to be representative. To this purpose musical notations are added as well as transliterations and translations of the Arabic song texts. Thanks to modern technology, the music of many notated examples can be listened to on the internet via the website of Archaeopress, others, due to legal restrictions, only directly via Youtube. However, these have often replaced earlier performances, and consequently differ from the notated versions. Unfortunately some songs and instrumental pieces are no longer available.

This book would not have been written, without the instance of Joost van Leeuwen, head of the Dutch publishing house Bulaaq, which specializes in publishing books on Arabic literature and culture. Thanks to his gentle insistence the original Dutch edition appeared some years ago. I also owe many thanks to the Arab musicians, composers and theorists, whose artistic and intellectual property I have made use of in composing this book, particularly Sala Raouf and Afra Mussawisade, who introduced me to the wonderful world of *maqām* and *īqāʿ*. I am grateful to Djûke Poppinga for translating the greater part of the song texts and her advice on many problems regarding the Arabic language. I also thank Willem Stoetzer, Maarten Kossman and Vertaalbureau Sahra for their translations of several lyrics. My colleague Anne van Oostrum was very helpful in providing material for the chapter on Egyptian music. Wieland van Eggermont was the first critical reader of the completed manuscript. His comments and suggestions have been very valuable. The same goes for Scheherazade Hassan, Virginia Danielson and George Dmitri Sawa, who read the English translation. Dwight Reynolds must also be mentioned here for his kind permission to use a fragment of his website on the *Sirat Banī Hilāl*. Finally, I am very grateful to Hanny Groenhart-Dammers and Lia Twint, who helped me with the translation.

Recorded Music

Recorded music is referenced throughout the text. A List of Recorded music is provided after the Bibliography and Discography at the end of the volume. Where permissions have been attainable, these recordings are available to access freely via the DOI links provided in the text and in the List of Recorded Music. Other recordings are referenced by the physical media on which they were accessed when preparing the text.

All available recordings can be accessed at: <http://doi.org/10.32028/9781789699326-REC00>

Transliteration of the Arabic letters

Arabic transliteration Pronunciation

ا	= ā	‘a’ as in French: Paris
ب	= b	‘b’
ت	= t	‘t’
ث	= ṭ	‘th’ as in English thing
ج	= j, g	‘dj’
	= g (Egyptian)	‘g’ as in English: grade
	= ž (Moroccan)	‘j’ as in French: jambe
ح	= ḥ	h
خ	= ḵ	‘ch’ as in Scottish: loch
د	= d	‘d’
ذ	= ḏ	‘th’ as in English: although
ر	= r	‘r’
ز	= z	‘z’
س	= s	‘s’
ش	= š	‘sh’ as in English: she
ص	= ṣ	emfatic ‘s’
ض	= ḏ	emfatic ‘d’
ط	= ṭ	emfatic ‘t’
ظ	= ḏ	emfatic ‘z’
ع	= ʿ	a strong glottal stop
غ	= ġ	‘r’ as in French: Paris
ف	= f	‘f’
ق	= q, ’	emfatic ‘k’
	= (Egyptian: - or ’)	a weak glottal stop
	= g (Moroccan)	‘g’ as in English: ‘grade’
ك	= k	‘k’
ل	= l	‘l’
م	= m	‘m’
ن	= n	‘n’
ه	= h	‘h’
و	= w, ū, ō	consonant: ‘w’; vowel: u; in dialect also ‘o’
ي	= y, ī, ē	consonant: y; vowel: ‘ee’; in dialect ook ‘a’ as in English: name

Introduction

The music of the Arabic-speaking population of the Near East and the North coast of Africa is the subject of this book. The language is an important, if not the most important criterion applied when defining the subject. As a result, traditions of larger and smaller minorities (such as the Berbers and Kurds) as well as the important and related music cultures of the Turks and Persians have remained beyond the scope of this book, although they had a great impact on the Arab culture in the past. In fact, Near and Middle East knew for many centuries a music culture, in which the differences in language played no role. Arab, Persian, Byzantine and later also Turkish art music traditions show an historical development, which was marked by reciprocal influences 'not only in the domain of nomenclature and theory, but also, broadly in such areas as performance practice, modal structure and types of instruments employed.'¹

In the early twenties of the last century this unity of music culture has partly come to an end after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, not least due to all sorts of political developments. Musicians began to restrict themselves more and more to the regions of their own language area and to regard themselves as Turkish, Persian or Arab musicians. The musical cooperation between musicians of these different regions is nowadays perceived as rather cross-cultural.

Besides language, history also plays a role in the definition of the subject. Arab music can be traced back to the period before the rise of Islam on the Arab Peninsula. Music flourished in the commercial centres of Mecca and Medina where singing girls played an important role in the promotion of music. Musical forms, practiced by the Bedouins, such as the camel-driver's song *ḥudā'* or *ḥidā'* are mentioned by early writers such as Ibn Ḳurraḍāḍbih (820-911). Lute, flute, shawm, and tambourine were some of the many musical instruments in use.²

Since the seventh century Arab music spread jointly with the religion of Islam and the Arabic language across the Middle East, the Near East and North Africa. In its historical development it was further influenced by and enriched with elements of Persian and Turkish art music as well as of the local music cultures that it met during this cultural expansion.

Arab music essentially is a vocal art and as such it is closely related to Arab poetry. The human voice is considered the most suitable musical instrument to arouse and express emotion and feelings both autonomously and as a vehicle for lyrics. Instrumental music serves mainly as preludes and interludes in vocal compositions, and instrumental forms as *bašraf* and *samā'i* go back to Persian and Turkish models.³

Arab music possesses a number of characteristic features, in which it differs from Western music, but which it shares with Persian, Turkish and Central Asian music.

A first feature to be mentioned is the essentially monophonic structure of the Arab music, which means that the musical expression is mainly concentrated in the melody and the

¹ Wright, O., 1980: I, 514.

² Farmer, 1929 : 4

³ Touma, 1989 : 136

rhythm. Unlike in Western music, polyphony and harmony hardly occur. The tuning system is different; it is not solely based on the diatonic tuning (do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-si) but in addition to the whole tone and the semitone it also contains a third fundamental tone step in between, which differs from one country to another, but approximately may be conceived as a three-quarter tone step. As a result, Arab music has a much larger variety of basic scales than Western music, where since the seventeenth century the tone system mainly rests on two categories: major and minor. The common term in Arab music to indicate the tonal characteristics of a piece, however, is not scale but *maqām*,⁴ a more complex concept, which we may define as melodic mode; the term will be discussed more in detail in the second part of this book.

A second feature relates to the manner in which the musical time of a composition is organized. The Western concept of 'measure' is rather inadequate or inappropriate. Musical time is expressed in cycles that are distinguished from each other by rhythm, dynamics, timbre and tempo. These cycles or rhythmic modes are called *awzān* (sing: *wazn*) or *īqā'āt* (sing: *īqā'*).

A last feature to be mentioned is the oral nature of almost all Arab music. Traditionally, music in these regions is transmitted through listening, remembering and vocally or instrumentally repeating and through learning in a master-disciple relationship. This form of transmittance and distribution involves a large variety of performances and a continuing emergence of variants. Improvisation, variation and ornamentation are important and esteemed skills for a musician in the Arab world.

Nowadays Western music notation is known and used in the Arab world. In the course of the twentieth century it has been introduced into and adapted to urban music practice and from there taken over in the entertainment industry. However, the position of musical notation in the Arab world can hardly be compared with its position in European music. An Arab notation is not considered to be a detailed prescription of a composer or an interpretable yet invariable starting point for a musical performance but rather a reminder or educational tool. The notation of compositions was initially focused on the classical repertoire in particular; a musician notated simply the version he knew by heart or transcribed a recording he had at hand. Notations of the same piece, therefore, may vary considerably, as can be seen by comparing the following two notations of the beginning of a classical, Egyptian composition.

Within Arab music culture a clear musical dichotomy may be distinguished, a dichotomy that coincides with the usual division into East (Mashriq), with the core countries Egypt, Syria and Iraq, and West (Maghreb), enclosing broadly Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. The musical distinction between the two regions had probably come to a conclusion already in the thirteenth century, when in the Mashriq Baghdad and other important cultural centers had adopted the Persian court music, while in the cities along the northern coast of Africa the Arabo-Andalusian music tradition was practised. The most striking difference between the two musical territories is the tuning system. In the Maghreb – except for the Tunisian classical music – diatonic tuning (i.e. the tone steps are similar to those used in Western music) is practised, while in the Mashriq the use of three-quarter tones is widespread.

⁴The basic meaning of *maqām* is 'place'. Another term for melodic mode is *nağma* (tone, melody).



Beginning of taḥmīla sūznāk; to the left the notation according to ‘Abd al-Mun‘im ‘Arafa (1976:81) and to the right the notation according to Ṣāliḥ al-Mahdī (1990:193).

A wide variety of traditions and genres exists in the Arab world within the dichotomy between Mashriq and Maghreb. These can roughly be classified into three categories: art music, popular music and folk music, although the boundaries among them are not sharply drawn. Many forms of musical expressions can easily be sorted into more than one category.

The first category, art music, includes the music that is traditionally practised and appreciated in particular by city dwellers, including the elite and the aristocracy in the various centers of power in the Arab world. There are several local traditions, e. g. in Baghdad, Aleppo, Cairo and Tunis, each of which has its own history of development regarding style, form, repertoire etc.

The second category, popular music, owes its existence and spreading substantially to mass media and is produced with the primary goal to be consumed and appreciated by large groups of listeners. This music does not require intensive attention from the listener, but it appeals quickly, flatters the ear and is easily remembered. Although most compositions of this category - unlike those of art music- are short-lived, there are exceptions that remain popular and survive as evergreens.⁵ The radio station of Cairo was for decades the main producer and broadcaster of Arab or rather Egyptian popular music.

The third category, folk music, is the music that is practised in relatively small communities and is perceived within such communities as their own. Generally, Arab folk music is simple, rarely using a scale of more than five tones. It is also limited in terms of the musical time; simple binary and ternary rhythmical patterns dominate. A favorite musical instrument is the *qaṣaba* (flute), which is generally played in combination with the *bandīr* (frame drum). The combination of *zūrṇā* (oboe) and *ṭabl* (two-headed drum) which can be heard on many festive events throughout the Arab world and beyond, is also very popular.

⁵ The urban popular songs of Umm Kalthūm, ‘Abdu-l-Wahhāb and Fayrūz are widely spread and appreciated in the Arab world.

ARAB MUSIC

In order to bring some structure into the diversity of the subject this book is divided into two parts. The first part is a historical sketch, in which we have traced the origin of certain features and elements of the contemporary Arab music as far as the data, handed down through the ages, have made it possible.

The second part dwells first in broad outlines on the melodic- and rhythmic-modal system⁶ that forms the basis of contemporary Arab music, followed by numerous discussions of important traditions and genres, based on representative musical examples. The discussions include an analysis of the chosen example - a composition or improvisation - and relevant socio-historical data that are not or just briefly discussed in the historical section of this book. The music of each discussed music example can easily be found on the internet as indicated in the book.



1 Two Tunisian musicians, a drum player and an oboist, are about to play at a festive village gathering. The drum player uses two different sticks, while playing the two headed drum (ṭabl). In his right hand he holds a rather firm stick fit for heavy beats on the skin on the right hand side; in his left hand he holds a flexible reed with which he plays quick rolls on the other side of the drum. The player of the oboe (zūkra or zūrṅā) uses a special breathing technique that allows him to breathe in and out, without interrupting his play.

⁶ Modes are the basis of a modal system. Modes are specific melodic and rhythmic patterns, which a musician takes as a starting point for a composition or improvisation and in accordance with which compositions and improvisations are ordered.