

Introduction: Arabic Music

Arab or Arabic music is a general term for the styles and genres of music of all the peoples who make up the Arab world today, which includes Turkey, Egypt, countries in the Arab peninsula (e.g. Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia) and many parts of North Africa (e.g. Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco). The music of the countries in this region has had a long history of interaction, resulting in the development of many regional musical styles. For several millennia, the region has been a cradle of great civilisation and cultures. Music is highly theorised and written music treatises have been influenced by ancient Greece, Egypt and India. The Islamic empire that emerged in the seventh century C.E. was a huge force dominating the entire region, with the Arabic language and Islam being a unifying force. Under the Islamic caliphates and courts, Arabic classical music developed. Poetry and music are closely related and form an important part of the vocal tradition. Arabic musical instruments, many of which were later introduced to Europe and the Far East, also form an important part of the musical tradition.

With the fall of the Islamic empire from the fifteenth century and the decentralisation of power, different styles of secular music emerged in various regions. Classical art song and instrumental ensembles developed alongside Islamic and Sufi religious music. The system of melodic modes, known as the *maqam*, is an important basis for music in this region, and at the 1932 Congress on Music in Cairo, at which authoritative Arabic music scholars and composers from the Arab world and Europe gathered, the classification and codification of the *maqamat* (plural of *maqam*) was accomplished.

Candidates do not need to study music from the whole of the Arab world, but should be taught about the instruments and musical features of *Takht* instrumental music and Egyptian *Shaabi* music, which are described in the following sections. The instruments or terms specific to this world focus with which candidates should be familiar are printed in bold. Information has been provided on the history and socio-cultural context of this music for the benefit of teachers; candidates should have a general awareness of the background to each style, but will not be tested in detail on this.

1 *Takht* Instrumental Ensemble

The most typical secular instrumental ensemble is the ***Takht*** ensemble; music played by this ensemble is considered the art music of the eastern Arab world. Traditionally, it is a small ensemble consisting of four melodic instruments and a percussion instrument. It can play on its own as instrumental music, or can be used to accompany singing or dancing. When vocals are added, there can be one male or female soloist and a group of three to six singers. In more recent times, the number of performers in the ensemble is not fixed; there could be more, or sometimes fewer, performers.

The following instruments are typically found in a traditional *takht ensemble*:

Ud (also spelled *Oud*) This is a pear-shaped plucked lute which has a short, unfretted neck. It has five strings in double courses tuned to low G, A, D, G and c. It is played with a plectrum held in the right hand. The main body of the instrument has a rounded back and a flat face.

Violin / Kaman In the mid-nineteenth century, an indigenous spiked lute (called *kaman* or *kamanja/kamanga*) was replaced in *Takht* ensembles by the western violin. In Arabic music the violin (which is now also called *Kaman*) is tuned to low G, D, G and d.

Qanun (also spelled *kanun*) This is a trapezoidal zither that is placed either across the performer's lap or on a small table in front of the seated performer. It has 25 to 27 sets of strings stretched across the face of the instrument; each set of strings contain 3 strings tuned to the same note. The strings are plucked by a short plectrum attached

to the index finger of each hand. Tiny levers placed under each course of strings (on the left side of the instrument) allow the player to change the length and tune the strings. The instrument has a range of over three octaves.

Nay (also spelled *Ney*) This is an end-blown flute made from a piece of hollow reed, which comes in different sizes. Each *nay* has nine segments with six holes on top and one thumbhole on the underside. The instrument is open at both ends; the player rests their lips on one end and blows across the rim (rather like blowing over a bottle) to produce the sound, holding it obliquely to the right side of the body.

Riqq This is a tambourine with 5 sets of cymbals mounted around the rim. The face of the tambourine is traditionally made from goat or fish skin and is mounted on a circular wooden frame.

2 Musical Features

Maqam

The **maqam** (pl. *maqamat*) is a **melodic mode** in Arabic music. A *maqam* is built from a scalic system comprising 24 notes per octave. It includes all of the 12 semitone steps per octave of Western music, but a further division into quarter steps gives it the total of 24 notes. The whole step C to D, for example, is divided into 4 quarter steps. The notes one-quarter step below the Western natural notes are labelled as '**half-flats**'. In notation, this is designated with a flat sign with a slash through it: \flat . Similarly, the notes one-quarter step above the Western natural notes are known as '**half-sharps**', written as follows: \sharp . Thus within the 24-tone Arab scalic system, there are seven half-flats and seven half-sharps, but E half-sharp and F half-flat are theoretically the same note, as are B half-sharp and C half-flat.

In performance, however, not all the 24 notes will be played. The fundamental scale usually consists of seven pitches to the octave, making it heptatonic. But the great variety of possible notes per octave provides scope for the great number of melodic modes that exist in Arabic music. Thus, a *maqam* will contain a specific choice of pitches, intervals, and specific melodic patterns; but it also gives the music its distinctive characteristics, moods and emotions. It is the basis upon which musical improvisations and compositions are carried out. Each *maqam* has its own name; for example, the *maqam* from C to c is named *Maqam Rast*. This *maqam* is the most preeminent *maqam* as it consists of the notes of Arabic music's fundamental scale. Of the seven tones in this scale, five of these notes (C, D, F, G, A) are tuned to those in the Western major scale, while two (E half-flat and B half-flat) are non-Western.

Candidates will not be expected to identify any specific maqamat, but should understand and be able to describe the general principle of how these melodic modes are constructed.

Rhythm

Time in Arabic music is organized in a system of **rhythmic modes** called *iqa'at* (singular *iqa'*). Each mode consists of a succession of beats, with a unique structure, character and mood. Each beat is verbalised using different mnemonic sounds. The first sound is *dumm*, the lowest sound possible on a drum, made when it is struck toward the centre of the drumhead. The second is *takk*, a short high-pitched sound played at the rim of the drum. Using these two sounds, a variety of drum rhythms can be spoken.

One of the most widely used pattern in Arabic music is the *maqsum*, an 8-beat rhythm. The pattern is as follows (D = *dumm*, t = *takk*, – = *rest*):

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
D	T	–	T	D	–	T	–

In performance, the drummer is expected to **ornament** the basic rhythmic patterns by adding to the *takk* strokes. The drummer is able to freely vary any given rhythm by improvising on the skeletal structure.

Melodic Texture

In eastern Arabic music, a single melodic line is presented in performance; this is the case whether there is one or many performers. Traditionally, there are no chords or harmony in this music. Melodies are performed using a variety of textures. The texture of **monophony** is common when there is a solo voice or solo instrument. Solos may also be accompanied by a melodic **drone**, or melodic or rhythmic ostinato patterns. A solo voice or instrument may also alternate with a responding group of instruments.

In ensemble performance, the texture of **heterophony** is common; multiple instrumentalists and singers perform a melody together, but each performer may play variations of the melody according to the idiom of their instrument. When one or more instruments accompany a solo voice, the instrumentalists may also spontaneously create simultaneous imitations of the vocalist's melodic line, resulting in rich heterophonic textures.

Musical Form

The repertoire of the *takht* ensemble is based around a **suite** form consisting of about 10 to 12 pieces based in the same *maqam* with different rhythmic modes. Most pieces begin with an *ud* improvisation, known as **taqsım**, to establish the mood and mode of a performance. Following the improvisation, short instrumental compositions and several pre-composed songs may follow. Improvisatory solos (*taqsım*) on other instruments may be added in between the compositions.

If there are vocals, **unmetred** vocal improvisation known as **layali** could also be used (the Arabic word *layl* (pl. *layali*) means night). Its role is similar to that of the *taqsım* instrumental improvisation. In the *layali*, the singer improvises melodically by using combinations of 'ya *layli* ('O my night') or *ya layl* ('O night'), or *layali* ('nights'). These words are sung more for their enchanting lyrical effect rather than their literal meaning. The *layali* generally serves as an introduction to the vocal genre. The vocal genre also usually concludes the suite.

Performance Contexts

During the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, performances of *takht* ensembles were hosted by the rich elite and local government officials in private homes or courts and palaces. These were exclusive events attended mostly by patrons and their families and friends, in contexts such as wedding parties, religious holidays and receptions of the elite and officials.

Public performances often took place in the open courtyards of a home, attracting audiences from surrounding neighbourhoods. Performances also took place in coffeehouses, but these were considered less prestigious and tended to be frowned upon due to the totally public nature of the event and the possible consumption of alcohol.

In the twentieth century, following the introduction of concert halls and opera houses by the Europeans, *takht* ensembles began to play in these venues. Radio, television and film also became the media through which art music was disseminated to a wide audience.

While earlier generations of musicians were often self-taught or had studied with one or more master musicians, the new generation of musicians are trained in music conservatories and music colleges, which were established at the end of the nineteenth century.

3 Egypt: *Shaabi* Popular Music

Background

By the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, modern universities and schools had been established in Egypt; a number of music academies and conservatories were set up to teach both Western music and the country's classical art music. Thus, music in modern-day Egypt reflects influences brought by European colonisation, with traditional instruments and art music genres juxtaposed with Egyptian folk and popular music.

In the 1970s, following the death of Egypt's president Gamal Abdel Nasser, the new government that followed opened its doors to the West. Tourism in particular helped to boost the country's economy. The working class people were finally able to rise up against the oppression of the moneyed society and its conservative codes and to speak out against the political rule and corruption. At this time, the emergence of affordable music technology to the populace also led to grassroots movements that changed the music scene. The introduction of **cassette tape** recorders and boom boxes made music production cheaper and more widely available to the working class. As a result of such changes, a new popular music and dance genre ***Shaabi*** (which means 'folk' – the people) came to the fore. Known as *al-musiqā-al-shaabi*, it literally means 'people's music'. The genre and its music became the voice of the street, of the ordinary working class people, with its social commentaries on the government and its policies. Today, *shaabi* music continues to evolve.

Instrumentation

Shaabi music combines the folk music tradition from the countryside with urban classical traditional instruments and modern Western instruments. Western instruments used in *shaabi* include electric keyboard, synthesizers, accordion, saxophone, trumpet and drum machines. Traditional instruments such as the *nay* may be included, and the ***darbuka***, a single-headed goblet-shaped drum is used.

Musical Features

Shaabi songs often begin with a free-rhythm ***mawwal***, a vocal improvisation whose poetic form is characterized by wordplay in colloquial Arabic, breaking free from the strict constraints of classical Arabic. In this sung improvisation, the singer expresses his/her sorrowful complaints. It introduces the beliefs and feelings of the singer and sets the emotional mood of the song. The singer's voice often has a low, raspy and rough edge; a high-pitched, nasal 'crying' intonation expresses plaintiveness and melancholy. The *mawwal* may be accompanied or answered by the traditional *nay* or the accordion, saxophone or keyboard.

Following the *mawwal* and before the actual song, a fast upbeat rhythm is played by the *darbuka*. The song that follows is short and fast, often repetitive, creating a hypnotic and trance-like effect. Simple lyrics that contain slang or street talk are sung to the melody, and may contain commentaries on issues such as alcohol, poverty, work, money, love, marriage, and everyday life and problems.

Performance Contexts

Since *Shaabi* songs originated as the voice of the ordinary people expressing resistance, its performance was often censored in government-supported media, unlike the classical art traditions that were promoted on television, radio and in concert halls. Through cassette technology, these songs were passed around and sold in street kiosks and then circulated among the working class. In more recent times, the genre is disseminated via mobile phones and the internet. The genre has rapidly spread to become the music of today's urban youth, and it is also often played at weddings.