

Arabic Music and Its Development

An Overview



basics of Arabic



Zoom

Arabic music can, broadly speaking, be divided into two styles, which can be clearly differentiated from one another: popular music, and so-called classical music. The following article is a simple introduction to the music.

In the ninth century Arabic music was already highly developed. At that time the Arabs already had an extensive musical repertoire, a musical history recorded in writing, and well-trained musicians and singers who stimulated the musical life of the courts.

In Arabic music the scale, like that in the West, consists of tones and semitones, but can also move in quartertones. Whereas in European music the smallest interval is the semitone, it is therefore possible in Arabic music to make far smaller tonal steps. This is what characterises the typical sound of Arabic music: it repeatedly plays around the notes in slight variations, without the musician losing sight of the keynote.

Two of the most important things all Arabic music has in common are a delight in improvisation, and the predominance of melodic forms. A melody is usually sung by a solo voice, which may also be accompanied by a choir. Polyphony, such as we are accustomed to in Western orchestral music, does not exist in classical Arabic music. The basis of Arabic music is the *maqam* or mode. The term *maqam* originally means 'pedestal', 'step', or simply 'location'. It was also used to designate a gathering in which poems were recited; later, a musical gathering was also called a *maqam*. In classical Arabic music theory, the *maqam* indicates the pitch of an Arabic scale, comparable with the ancient ecclesiastical modes, or the two modes of flat and sharp in European music, although the individual shifts in tone can, as mentioned above, be smaller than a semitone. Arabic music, however, has more than ten different modes. Furthermore, as a complete piece of music, what differentiates the *maqam* entirely from its European counterparts is that the musician has complete freedom with regard to the rhythm and the potential for introducing variations. This is hardly possible in European music. Here a particular rhythm is prescribed, the melody for which can be modified freely.

The *maqamat*

Many musicians and music theorists of the Arab world ascribe specific states of feeling to particular *maqamat*. Thus, for example, mourning is often expressed by the *maqamat* 'hijaz' and 'saba'. The mesmerising beauty of the beloved and all her charms are usually dwelt on in the *maqam* 'bayati'.

Arabic music does not measure itself in terms of technical perfection, but by the degree of intensity and emotion in the tone, feeling, ornamentation, performance and singing. The Western musician repeatedly practises a piece as it is written in the sheet music until he is able to play and interpret it perfectly. The classical Arabic musician, on the other hand, is only able to access the music through its 'soul' and what it stimulates within him. If he touches this 'soul', he surmounts all other difficulties. Here, then, a great deal of personal initiative is required from the interpreter. He improvises, not sticking to the basic form of the piece of music but varying it according to the time of day or the occasion - for the same piece can sound quite different played at midday or at night, as it is being performed in a completely different atmosphere.

This has far-reaching consequences. Classical European music was written down in notes, which to this day is not the case for classical Arabic music, as the same *maqam* is always improvised and performed in a different way.

One of the most important classical music forms in the east of the Arab world is the *waslat*. It consists of a series of compositions and improvised instrumental and vocal pieces, which are all played in one and the same *maqam* series. The *waslat* always begins with an instrumental piece, which may be a *sama'i* or a *bashraf*. Both forms are played by the entire orchestra and are similar in form, but differ in rhythm. They could, however, be compared with the overture in a European suite. Between the individual songs of the *waslat*, *taqsim* are played: these are solo pieces for one instrument only, which enable individual soloists to demonstrate the range of their improvisational skill.

This is followed by a group of up to eight vocal pieces with instrumental accompaniment. The texts of the songs are mostly ancient poems, generally from the Middle Ages, which were written to go with a particular melody.

In northern African countries another form of classical music has established itself: the *nouba*. This is a specific, large-scale musical form of Arabic-Andalusian music. In the cities of the Maghreb countries Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria and Libya, the *nouba* has retained its characteristic form to this day. The *nouba* is an important large-scale musical form comparable with the European suite. It usually consists of five parts, called *mizan*, which are each characterised by a particular fundamental rhythmic pattern. The individual sections are named after these rhythmic patterns. The *nouba* consists of different musical themes, which are not woven together as is often the case in European music; however, stylistically and melodically, as in the European suite, they create a whole.

Song and poetry

The key starting point for Arabic music is song. In Arabic musical tradition there is hardly any music without song. Music and poetry are so closely woven together that to this day it is difficult to discover the names of the composers of classical Arabic music. We often only know the names of the singers and poets. If purely instrumental pieces are played at all, it is usually as an introduction to a song. Polyphonic elements, like those typical in European music, have therefore scarcely been able to establish themselves.

The figure of the singer is central to any musical group, and bears a huge responsibility. She (or he) must not only be a talented singer; she must also have a strong, beautiful voice that is capable of representing a counterpart to the orchestra. In the Arab world the musical experience a singer, with her ensemble, conveys to her audience is referred to as *tarab*. The term signifies exhilaration, ecstasy, or euphoria. It is a mood created by the song and the music, which culminates in a feeling of happiness bordering on intoxication. The *tarab* can transport the entire audience; sometimes people weep or groan in pain when the singer sings of her lost love. Other listeners jump up and loudly cheer on the performers. The degree of intensity of the *tarab* depends primarily on the voice and manner of performance of the singer. According to temperament, mood, and occasion, the singer not only allows herself the freedom of creative artistic interpretation but does in fact improvise.

A singer's career is usually characterised by a thorough training in Koran recitation according to the traditional rules of song. There are hardly any singers who have subsequently become famous who have not undergone the hard schooling of Koran recitation; for the musically modulated performance of the *suras* is part of the cultural heritage of classical Arabic music. Just as many European singers who want to specialise in baroque music make a thorough study of Renaissance and baroque choral music, many Arab classical music singers choose the route of Koran recitation. This is why until the 1950s almost all well-known singers and musicians bore the title 'Sheikh', which in this case designates a religious dignitary.

The traditional orchestra for classical music, called *al tacht*, consists of three main instruments: the *oud*, the *qanoun* and the *nay*, to which was later added the Arab violin, the *kamanija*. The *oud*, the Arab short-necked lute, provides both the rhythm and the melody in Arabic music. It has been celebrated by many Arab poets, and is the foundation of Arabic music theory.

This is complemented by the *qanoun*. It is similar to a zither but has movable bridges, which enable it to produce numerous micro-intervals. It has 78 strings, and its name essentially means 'the law' – an

expression of Pythagorean thought, which establishes a connection between the relations between intervals in general, particularly in music, and the composition of the cosmos.

The *nay* is a wind instrument used in classical Arabic music. To the European ear, its sound is similar to that of the panpipes. The *nay* was originally a wooden pipe with a total of seven holes. It is thus able to play the pure Oriental tonal sequence, unlike, for example, the piano or the organ, which cannot play quartertones. The ensemble also includes a variety of rhythm instruments such as the *daf*, the *darbouka* and the *riq*.

The encounter with Western music

Classical Arabic music was nurtured and handed down for centuries in Persian culture and in the Arab and Ottoman Islamic empires. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards it was confronted with Western music – primarily by way of British colonial policy – and absorbed new elements as a result. However, during the First World War and the resulting rise in nationalist sentiment, people began to turn again more strongly to their own musical roots. The Egyptians in particular took the opportunity to develop from the Arabic tradition a new kind of music.

In 1932 the first international Congress of Arab Music was held in Cairo. Arabic music experienced a kind of rebirth. The congress is regarded to this day as one of the most important stages in the development of recent Arabic music history. Numerous musicians and musicologists from all over the Arab world as well as from Turkey, Persia and Western Europe met here for the first time to consider in detail the subject of Arabic music and engage in intercultural dialogue and exchange.

Important personalities from all over the world were invited: well-known music critics and composers like Béla Bartók, Paul Hindemith or Henri Rabaud; musicologists such as Erich Moritz von Hornbostel, Robert Lachmann or Curt Sachs, Orientalists like Henry George Farmer or Alexis Chottin. Renowned Arab classical musicians also came, such as Sami Shawwa from Aleppo, or Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab from Egypt. Famous poets were invited, too. And of course there were performances from the best-known Arabic classical music groups of the time, who came from Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia.

The congress cleared the way for a new type of Arabic music. It was anchored firmly in its indigenous traditions, and had rediscovered its own foundations. At the same time, Arab musicians and composers had gained considerable freedom of movement. Their orientation towards the modern age, very soon integrating new methods and techniques, was seen by many as an expansion of musical possibilities. Modern European music, for its part, adopted from the Orient not only the ancient art of the quartertone but also its variety of rhythms and timbres.

The most important subject addressed at the congress was the introduction of Western instruments into Arabic music. The subject occasioned a great deal of discussion, because it would mean having to alter the Arabic scale. There were those in favour, who saw it as an opportunity to renew Arabic music, to introduce more harmony and polyphony, as well as extending the orchestra.

But there were also those who opposed the idea. They feared that Arabic music would lose its identity as a result. They argued that Western instruments were not suited to the reproduction of the quartertone so typical for Arabic music. Time, however, has shown that a fusion of these instruments was possible. There were even musicians who built a special piano capable of playing a quartertone.

Those in favour argued that many ideas and instruments later developed in Europe had actually originated in the Orient. They had come to Europe centuries earlier, and were now returning to Arab culture in a different form.

The *rabab*, a precursor of the violin, for example, came from the Arab cultural realm to Europe, where its register and quality of sound were considerably improved upon. As early as the seventeenth century, Arab musicians and composers began to introduce the European violin in Arabic music ensembles to accompany the *rabab*. In the nineteenth century the *rabab* was largely replaced by the violin, which produced an audibly

better tone. Modern Arab musicians were already using it in the twentieth century as a matter of course. The violin was thus the first European instrument to be incorporated into Arabic classical music.

Nonetheless, composers were happy to include Western harmonies and Western instruments, such as the violin, cello, and double bass, in their repertoire, and this was the start of the modern Arabic music we have today.

Influential singers



Zoom

One musician who has contributed a great deal to the renewal of Arabic music is the Egyptian Sayyid Darwish. Born in Alexandria in 1892, he was the first Egyptian musician to avoid wherever possible the company of political rulers. In the Egypt of his day the Ottoman pashas were still the ruling class. As a result, people followed the Turkish musical style, and Turkish elements also found their way into the texts of songs. Darwish, however, did not use one single Turkish word in his songs. He is universally regarded as the father of quasi-classical modern music. The majority of the songs he sang were *taktuka*, mostly short songs played for the amusement and entertainment of the audience.

With Darwish, Arabic music began to concentrate on the expression of something substantial in terms of content. He is credited with revolutionising Arabic music at the start of the last century. In particular, he changed the traditional musical forms. Before him Arabic music was very soft and monotonous, and had almost no recognisable rhythmical structures. By contrast, Darwish's songs are clearly modulated, with a catchy rhythm. It is therefore not surprising that his melodies are still well known and loved by a wide audience.

During this period new song forms also developed, influenced in part by European musical theatre and film. In the 1930s and '40s songs in dialogue form were very popular. A more monologic song form developed under the influence of the opera aria, to which the Egyptians had been introduced by the Italian opera performed at the opera house in Cairo.

Another musical form, developed early in the nineteenth century and still often performed, is the *dor*. The *dor* is sung by a soloist and a choir and is always written in Egyptian dialect. One of the famous composers of the *dor* in Egypt at the beginning of the twentieth century was Zakaria Ahmed. He wrote many *dors* for singers including Umm Kulthum, the *grande dame* of Arab song. In the Arab world she was called 'Kaukab al-Sharq', or 'Bright Star of the Orient'.

From the 1940s onwards the huge film and music industry in Cairo became a magnet for artists, musicians and composers from all over the world. Cairo became known as the 'music capital', and from there new, important musical impulses have since emerged.

Even prior to this, the greats of Arabic music such as Mohammad Abdel Wahab, Umm Kulthum, Abdel Halim Hafex and many others had come from Egypt. Their names and their music influenced the Cairo music scene until well into the 1970s. At the same time there had also, since the 1950s, been the so-called Beirut school. The city's exposed situation created a particularly liberal climate, which turned it into a cultural meeting point for many intellectuals and artists. For music, too, this was, of course, an unusually positive starting point, and Lebanon's cultural variety is indeed still reflected in its music today. Lebanese songs are altogether faster and shorter, and are characterised by the diversity of their sounds. The Beirut school was regarded as particularly captivating because of its rich tradition of Lebanese folk music.

Then, in the 1950s, the phase of appropriating European melodies and traditions began. European harmonies and melodies from concerts and operas were thus integrated into Arabic compositions.

People began to develop a new kind of music, after some musicians went abroad to study Western instruments and the theory of harmony. Once again, this took place primarily in Egypt, but also in Syria and in Lebanon. The large-scale orchestra opened up the possibility of extending the musical repertoire. Instead of the small ensemble with which classical musicians had, until this point, been familiar, they now founded symphony orchestras. Instead of melodic elements they used harmonic idioms. Sometimes they extended the ensemble with traditional Oriental instruments like the *rabab*, lute, and flute. This created a new, unusual tone; for the Western instruments have their own tonal colour. The combination of the various elements from Orient and Occident also influenced this music. Relatively quickly, Arab ears became accustomed to the new music.

The musicians saw the new-found freedom of West-Eastern creativity as an opportunity, and orientated themselves towards this modern artistic development. In their works they have created a musical synthesis that links European compositional styles with the traditional music worlds of their respective countries. Their work is already leading the way for coming generations of Arab musicians and composers.

Suleman Taufiq is originally from Syria, and has lived in Germany since the late 1960s. He is a freelance writer and regularly presents radio programmes on Oriental music for German listeners on Westdeutscher Rundfunk.

*Translated by Charlotte Collins
Copyright: Goethe-Institut e. V., Fikrun wa Fann
November 2011*

Your opinion concerning this topic? Write to [✉ kulturzeitschriften@goethe.de](mailto:kulturzeitschriften@goethe.de)