

Cultures of the Middle East

Midterm paper: Class of Professor Abdelrahim Salih

Music and Dance of the Middle East

Music transcends language. It can put forth emotions of deep sorrow or ecstatic joy whether the language of the song is in Chinese, English, French or Arabic. With music comes dance. Dance is shaped by the music, as it is the dancer's duty to display the emotions of the music; dance is as diverse as the music itself is. Middle Eastern music is a language of its own; it is extraordinarily different from Western music and was shaped by its own great theoreticians of music. The instruments of the Middle East are exotic looking, though they are the ancestors of many Western instruments. The dances of the Middle East vary – there are feminine dances and masculine dances and dances that everyone joins. In the Middle East, music and dance cannot be put under one category because of the extreme variations throughout the region itself.

From the beautiful melodies of Debussy to the dramatic compositions of Mozart, there is one thing in common: they are all based on an octave scale that includes thirteen notes. They are based on the Western scale. Vocalists using the Western scale must be very precise when it comes to the notes because there are no “in-between” or quarter notes. Also, compositions are almost always polyphonic; they have both a melody and a harmony (Todd, 2003). A piece that does not include a harmony is considered to be rather simple and not a great classical. When a pianist performs a piece from one of the great composers such as Bach, there is almost no improvising. The performer very much follows the piece as it is written. The same holds true to learning a musical skill: in the West, music is learned by written compositions and rarely by ear

alone. While there is a great variety of music, the most common topic between any Western music is love.

Middle Eastern music is quite different. There are seventeen, nineteen, or twenty-four notes in an octave. There are quarter notes or “in-between” notes and three-quarter tones that are made by dividing a string into forty equal parts (Todd, 2003). While a vocalist must still be precise when it comes to notes, there is more flexibility due to this scale.

A Middle Eastern song can be like a mini-musical in itself; it can include dialogue that makes the song into a story. Usually, the compositions are monophonic, meaning they have no harmony. To a Western musician, having no harmony may induce that the composition is simple, but there are very complicated rhythms. Rhythm in Middle Eastern music is played with a drum or tambourine. The musician will tap either the center, giving a deep sound, or the edge, giving a higher sound (Bartel, 2003). Performances are usually done by soloists due to the artistic license the musician takes. Sometimes, however, there is a backup group that repeats what the soloist plays or sings, which gives the musician the desired flexibility. No two performances are ever the same.

Musicians in the Middle East learn mostly by ear; very rarely is there written music. Recently, however, there are some recordings to learn by. Like Western music, the theme transcends culture and distance is love. The love and longing for homeland is a common topic usually found in Middle Eastern music (Bartel, 2003).

There are many differences between Western and Middle Eastern music, but people love both despite the differences. Music needs no language; emotions that cannot be said out loud are said through music and that transcends language. While music needs no language to be understood, there are many different accents.

Most instruments in Middle Eastern culture look strange and exotic. They are not the traditional European piano and violin. Not only do they look quite different, but Middle Eastern instruments have a wide range of sounds that are never heard in Western music. The qanun looks quite odd: it has a trapezoid shape and many, many strings. It has, in fact, eighty-one strings in groups of four. The qanun is an ancestor of the ancient Egyptian harp and, although it looks very exotic, it was introduced to Europe in the late twelfth century and is known to the Western world as the psaltery or zither. The name of the instrument itself, qanun, means “rule” or “law” in Arabic (Arabic musical instruments, 2001).

The nay is a reed flute that does not look so different than a recorder but sounds very different; the nay has a very mellow, soothing quality to it while the recorder is screechy and high pitched. The nay has been played for four to five thousand years – people are depicted on ancient Egyptian pyramids playing it. While the shape of the nay is the same throughout regions, there are some variations. Arabic and Turkish nays have seven holes in the front with one hole in the back where the thumb covers while modern Iranian nays have five to six holes in the front, a different mouth piece and a lower thumb hole. The name for this flute was not very creative: nay means reed in Persian (The nay (ney) – middle east musical instrument, 1999).

Emotions are extraordinarily played using the nay. The famous poet, Jalal Al-Dim Al-Rumi wrote:

“Listen to the reed, how it complains and tells a tale of separation pains. Ever since I was cut from the reed bed, my lament has caused man and woman to moan. I want a bosom torn my separation, to explain the pain of longing. Everyone who is far from his source longs for the time of being united with it once more” (The nay (ney) – middle east musical instrument, 1999).

Another instrument, the ud, looks almost like a guitar, but with more of a gourd shape. It has five to thirteen strings (Parfitt, 2001), depending on the region and maker. The number of

strings on the ud did not always have such great variation. In the eighth to tenth centuries, it only had four strings; the fifth was added later, though there is some debate on if Ziryab or Al-Farabi added this string. Those who are familiar with the European lute, as famously depicted in Walt Disney's *Sleeping Beauty*, will recognize this instrument. In *Sleeping Beauty*, the court jester poured wine into the ud, otherwise known as a lute, and drank from its hallowed shape while the lords and ladies of the court were under a sleeping spell. The ud is the ancestor to the lute and takes its name from the Arabic word "al-oud" meaning branch of wood (Parfitt, 2001).

The qanun, reed and ud are all instruments used in traditional Arabic ensembles. Other instruments more familiar to the Western world, such as the violin, are also included. While usually these instruments only are generally used in traditional Middle Eastern ensembles, there are many others in the Middle Eastern world such as the riq and buzuq.

Westerners are very familiar with the riq though they know it by a different name: the tambourine. People who have grown up with the Disney movies will remember the gypsy in the *Hunchback of Notre Dame* playing the riq, or tambourine. The riq is usually covered in a goat or fish head skin stretched over a frame inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Both the goat and fish head skin produce a very warm sound, but they are very sensitive to humidity. Before a performance, players have to heat their riqs due to the stretching from the humidity. Usually, the players have another riq at hand incase theirs' stretches during a performance. In the frames are five sets of two pairs of brass cymbals that produce the jingle noise most associated with the tambourine (Arabic musical instruments, 2001).

The next instrument is again vaguely familiar to the Western world. The buzuq is a long-neck fretted lute typically used as a solo instrument. It is most commonly played in Syria,

Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine. The term buzuk is a Turkish word comes from the name given to the Turkish troops: “bashi-buzuk,” meaning “burnt head” or “uprooted.”

While many of these instruments seem exotic and different, they are not so foreign to the Western world because many of these Middle Eastern instruments are ancestors to the Western instruments.

Music in the Middle East is as diverse as the land itself; the music varies according to region. The music of Gulf countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Yemen, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, etc. is quite different from the music of North African countries such as Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Algeria and Morocco.

The Gulf region has touches of African and Indian qualities due to the immense trading and traveling. Along with transcontinental touches, the Gulf music arose from the Bedouin, an ethnic group from the Gulf countries, pearl divers, fishermen and farmers (Campbell, 2009). Melodic lines are repetitive and have a step-like quality to them. The instruments most common in traditional music are the tar, a single framed drum, and the tabl, a double sided drum. The drums are often decorated for dances such as the ‘ardha which has its roots in the Bedouin culture. In Bedouin music, the tar is the most frequently used percussion instrument and accompanies poetry that is sung. Oman traditional music has few melodic instruments, like the Bedouin, because of the focus on the vocalist. Melodic instruments include stringed and wind instruments such as the violin and nay. Rhythm instruments are essential to Omani music; Omani music is known for its strong and sometimes complex rhythm. Double skinned, single skinned and non-skinned (percussion, wind and idiophone, or shaking) instruments are used to produce rhythm. Traditionally, Omani music was not linked to musical notation; the music was not written down very often. Today, music is written though not everything may be included in the

written piece. For foreigners trying to learn Omani music, it is best done by listening (Musicology, 2002).

North African music usually begins with singing and uses the nay, qanun and ‘ud. It also includes sub-Saharan musical traditions such as dense rhythms and call-and-response dialogue. In Morocco, the classical music is referred to as the Andalusian music of the fifth to tenth centuries. The classical music is extremely complex in musical structure and is played by an orchestra including the: tar (tambourine in Morocco), darbuga (clay drum), and three stringed instruments: rebab, kemanja (violin) and ‘ud (Banning Eyre, 2009).

The Berber music, a major ethnic group in some North African countries, in Morocco differs from the Moroccan classical music. Singers are accompanied by the frame drum (bendir), and tambourine (t’bel) for rhythm and the flute (ajouag) and bagpipe (ghaita) for melody. Berber music is extremely close linked to poetry, more so than Arab music; the poetry is sung (Music, drama and dance). While dances and styles vary amongst the Berber according to region, performances take place at harvest festivals, weddings and religious ceremonies (Banning Eyre, 2009).

In Western composition, the great masters of music such as Bach, Mozart and Debussy, all influenced classical music. Middle Eastern composition, too, has the great minds of music including Al-Farabi, a Renaissance man before the Renaissance came to Europe, Ziryab, an extremely gifted musician, and Al-Kindi, the great theoretician.

Little is known about Al-Farabi’s life; he lived from 870 C.E. to 950 C.E. in Turkestan though it is not known how or exactly when he died. Al-Farabi was the great philosopher of his time in the Arab world; after Aristotle, he is known as the “Second Master” and is also the “Father of Islamic Neo-Platonism.” He tried to combine Platonism and Aristotelism and divided

the study of logic into two categories: logic (takhayyul) and proof (Thubut), earning him the exalted title (Abu Al-Nasr Al-Farabi (870-950 AD)).

In the music world, Al-Farabi played a key role: he invented the Arabic scale. Also, he contributed to the knowledge of musical notes and several instruments including the qanun. His book, *Kitaab Al-Musiqa Al-Kabir*, *The Great Book of Music*, is one of his most famous books on music. It discusses such major topics as the science of sound, intervals, tetra chords, octave species, musical instruments, compositions, and the influence of music (Netton, 1998).

Talented musicians in the Middle East also found ways of putting their mark on music history. Ziryab was gifted pupil of Ishaq al-Muwsili and lived from 767 C.E. to 850 C.E. Ziryab had to move to Spain because he surpassed his teacher with his talent, much like DaVinci surpassed his teacher with his beautiful paintings of angels. Ziryab's exceeding talent over his teacher was considered a great offense. In Spain, he established the first schools of music and had a great influence on Spanish music. In addition to being a very gifted musician, he supposedly added the fifth string to the 'ud though there is some disagreement between scholars on who really added the fifth string (Who was Ziryab?).

Another man determined to make music history is Al-Kindi. Al-Kindi was one of the first great theoreticians of music. He lived from about 800 C.E. to sometime after 866 C.E. Al-Kindi was a member of the Kinda tribe and played an important role in early Islam. Like many of the Middle Eastern music notables, Al-Kindi was a philosopher, scientist, mathematician, psychologist and music theoretician. He is, " ... known for the cosmological links he made between the four strings of the 'ud and the seasons, the elements, the humors, and various celestial entities" (Racy). Also, Al-Kindi was said to have added the fifth string to the 'ud,

though again there is debate on who added the fifth string, in order to expand the theoretical pitch range between two octaves (Racy).

Al-Kindi used a twelve tone scale and was the first to tune that used identical note names to identify the notes of the lower and higher octaves. This idea is used in Western music: on a full-scale acoustic piano there are eighty-eight keys in sets of twelve notes: C, C sharp, D, D sharp, E, F, F sharp, G, G sharp, A, A sharp and B. On the whole piano, there are seven C's. In each octave, (set of thirteen notes or from C to C), there are two C's. The tone of the C's are identical but the pitch raises as the musician plays to the right and lowers as the C's are played to the left. Al-Kindi states in his text that, "...the musical 'qualities' of tones separated by an octave are identical" (Forester, 2009)

Al-Kindi was not only a great musician but an insightful philosopher. His famous words are:

"We ought not to be embarrassed of appreciating the truth and of obtaining it wherever it comes from, even if it comes from races distant and nations different from us. Nothing should be dearer to the seeker of truth than the truth itself, and there is no deterioration of the truth, nor belittling either of one who speaks it or conveys it" (Al-Kindi, 2003).

With music comes dance. There are many, many dances in the Middle East that vary according to tribe, region and culture. Two of the most known dances are the Saudi 'ardha, considered to be Saudi Arabia's official dance, and belly dancing, or raqs sharqi. The Saudi 'ardha is a dance performed by men and is the "sword" dance or "warrior's" dance. Its' ancient roots are from the central area Najd in Saudi Arabia and the dance's name, "Al ardha" may be derived from "ardhal kheil" meaning displaying the horses or "I'tirade" meaning the crossing of the swords (Al-Oweigan, 2008).

The dance begins with a single line of poetry read while drums beat in the background and swords are swung. This dance, founded by King Abdul-Aziz, is a symbol of pride and victory in Saudi history, and especially Saudi wars. The 'ardha dates back to the age of Jahiliya before Islam; warriors would dance the 'ardha before a battle to show fearlessness, loyalty and obedience as expressed in the poetry (Al-Oweigan, 2008).

The 'ardha, like any Middle Eastern dance, has variations according to region. In modern times, the 'ardha is performed on special occasions such as the Muslim holiday Eid, weddings and the Saudi National Day. When performed on National Day, only men participate in this dance. On other occasions, women also join in this impressive dance.

The infamous dance of the Middle East that provokes images of harems and provocative women is the belly dance, or raqs sharqi. The raqs sharqi is an ancient dance that may have originally been a fertility dance. While very little of the true history of belly dancing is known, the dance was performed almost exclusively for women and by women – men generally did not have a part in the raqs sharqi. It was usually danced in the harems, or women's quarters, for entertainment and exercise (Arabic dance (belly dancing), 2005). Unlike the costumes shown in the Western world, the dancers often did not show the midriff.

With infamous dances come infamous myths. The myth most closely associated with the raqs sharqi is the Dance of the Seven Veils:

Ishtar, a Babylonian goddess of love and sensuality, was the life-giver and a great nurturer; but she was also known as the mother of darkness and destruction. Ishtar's husband died and descended into the land of darkness. Ishtar dressed in seven veiled costumes and jewels and went to retrieve him from the land of darkness. She deceived her way into the underworld through 49 gates. At every seventh gate, she danced and gave up a jewel and a veil. In her

absence, no crops grew and no festivals took place. When she triumphantly returned with her husband and seven veils, the crops flourished and the people celebrated (Belly dance history: The origins of belly dancing, 2009).

While this myth of Ishtar and the removal of her seven veils do not actually have any historic or otherwise connection with belly dancing, many people believe the Dance of the Seven Veils is an actual dance that belly dancers perform.

Middle Eastern raqs sharqi is divided into two categories: cabaret (city or stage dance) and country (regional folk dances: “raks sha’ abi”) dances. Cabaret is most often seen in Western culture; it is a sensual dance that involves complex isolation and movement of different body parts. The performers are usually dressed in a “typical” belly dancing outfit: a bra-type top and long flowing skirts. The cabaret style dance also will usually be performed for crowds and will include special effects such as lighting and smoke, as the Columbian singer and dancer, Shakira does during her concerts. While cabaret raqs sharqi is a very showy dance, the country dance, or raks sha’ abi, focuses more so on the dance than the dancer. The dress for the country dance varies according to region, as do the movements (Nuget, 2000).

In the Western world, the term “belly dance” derives directly from the French term “danse du ventre” or dance of the belly. “Belly dancing” refers to the isolated movements of the body, especially those in the abdomen. The belly dance was introduced to America in 1893 at the World Fair by a performer called “Little Egypt” (Roxalot Entertainment) May people were scandalized by Little Egypt’s movement of the body and her clothing. One reason for the scandalization of the raqs sharqi in America was the time period. Belly dance was introduced during the Victorian Era, a time when the most popular dances were ones such as the waltz

which did not focus at all on a woman's body and the dress of the time was corsets and layered gowns that did not show the women's body (Arabic dance (belly dancing), 2005).

While Middle Eastern and Western music are as different as the moon and the sun, they both do have underlying connections. Both have the marks of great theoreticians and tell stories of longing or heartbreak or joy.

The Middle East is rich in music and dance. Though there are many different types of music and dance, there is still a single connecting thread: the basic structure and instruments are similar throughout the regions. From the fearsome Saudi 'ardha to the sensual raqs sharqi, and the reed nay to the stringed qanun, all qualities of Middle Eastern music and dance have their own unique beauty that is made from a blending of cultures. The music and dance are performed with passion and emotion, two qualities that connect all music together, whether the music may come from the Western World or the Middle East.

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