INTRODUCTION

"ARABIC MUSIC" COLLECTIVELY describes the wide range of musical traditions and genres that originated and are performed in the Arab world. Any vocal music with Arabic lyrics, and any instrumental music played predominantly on traditional Arabic instruments, is considered Arabic.

As Arab countries extend from Morocco to Iraq and include hundreds of millions of people, they are home to many diverse local traditions in the folk, pop, classical, and religious genres. The broad musical regions within the Arab world are Iraq; the Arab Gulf (*al-khalij*); the Near East (*al-sharq*,[1] literally the East, spanning Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria); and North Africa (Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco), referred to as *al-maghrib* (the West, literally the direction of the sunset). Of course within each of these broad regions are subregions and many local genres particular to them. A case in point is that entire books[2] have been devoted to the music of Egypt alone.

Moreover, Arabic music was not conceived by Arabs in isolation, but evolved over many centuries in a region where old civilizations interacted. The Arab region extending from Egypt through Syria to Iraq was at the center of the old world, and as Arabic music developed locally, it also incorporated regional elements from

[1] A less commonly used synonym for *al-sharq* is *al-mashriq*, literally the direction of the sunrise.
[2] Lagrange (1996); Marcus (2007).

neighboring Turkish, Byzantine, Persian, and Indian music, as well as, among others, sub-Saharan African indigenous music. What constitutes Arabic music today is a hybrid amalgamation that has come to be accepted as one "ethnic" tradition. This cultural cross-fertilization wasn't limited to music, of course, and also manifested itself in, for example, language, architecture, and cuisine.

Given that a book covering the entire breadth of Arabic music would have to be more general, this book covers only one Arabic musical tradition in depth: the tradition that flourished in the Near East from the beginning of the 20th century until roughly the 1970s, especially during the period that began in the 1930s, often called the Golden Age of Arabic Music.

The Golden Age of Arabic Music

The Golden Age of Arabic music flourished from 1930 to 1970, in what today is called the Near East, the geographical region spanning Syria to Egypt, with Cairo as its epicenter. That period witnessed unparalleled musical growth, proliferation, and innovation, and its music achieved a wide reach across the Arab world, initially propelled by phonographic technology in the first decade of the 20th century and later by radio, cinema, and eventually television. As a result, music from the Golden Age traveled extremely well and became universal in the Arab world. For better or for worse, the music of the Golden Age is often used as the single or the most prominent representative of Arabic music, both in the Arab world and abroad.

The Golden Age came at the end of a cultural renaissance called *al-nahda* (literally, "the awakening"), during which the Arab world reclaimed its identity from Ottoman control, and Arabic music experienced a revival[3] alongside Turkish/Ottoman music. The *nahda* era music practiced at the beginning of the 20th century was largely a remnant of 19th-century music, but it laid the foundation and paved the way for the Golden Age.

In *The Seven Greats of Contemporary Arabic Music*, historian and ethnomusicologist Victor Sahhab (1987) credits seven musical pioneers with ushering in a new musical era that started in the early 20th century, explaining that "before them Arabic music was one thing, and with them it became something else."[4] These pioneers were Sayed Darwish (1892–1923), Muhammad al-Qasabgi (1892–1966), Zakariyya Ahmad (1896–1961), Muhammad Abdel Wahab (c. 1902–1991), Umm Kulthum

[3] Marcus discusses the revival of Arabic music in Egypt in the 1800s as evidenced by the popularity of Shihab al-Din's 1840 book *Safinat al-Mulk* (*The Royal Ship*), which included 365 *muwashshahat* arranged in thirty *waslat* (Marcus, 2015b, p. 136).

[4] Sahhab (1987, p. 6).

(born Fatima Ibrahim al-Sayyid al-Biltagi, c. 1904–1975), Riyad al-Sunbati (1906–1981), and Asmahan (born Amal al-Atrash, 1917–1944).

Several factors enabled the Arabic music of the Golden Age to reach a critical mass; the numbers of composers, singers, instrumentalists, listeners, and producers all grew, and they all fed on each other. The most prominent singers, composers, and performers from the Near East reached unprecedented heights of stardom throughout these years. Egypt's beloved diva Umm Kulthum (nicknamed *kawkab al-sharq*—the Star of the East); Leila Mourad (born Lillian Zaki Mordechai, 1918–1995); Muhammad Abdel Wahab (nicknamed *musiqar al-ajyal*—the Musician of Generations); Abdel Halim Hafez (born 'Abd al-Halim 'Ali Shabbana,1929–1977; nicknamed *al-'andalib al-asmar*—the Tan Nightingale); Warda[5] (born Warda Fatuki, 1939–2012; nicknamed *al-jaza'iriyya*—the Algerian, after her father's nationality); Syria's Farid al-Atrash (1915–1974); Asmahan, Muhammad Khayri (born Muhammad Khayr Julaylati, 1935–1981); Sabah Fakhri (born Subhi Abu Qaws, 1933); and Lebanon's Wadih al-Safi (born Wadi' Francis, 1921–2013), Sabah (born Jeanette Feghali, 1927–2014; nicknamed *al-shahrura* after her native mountain village of Wadi Shahrur), and Fairouz (born Nuhad Haddad, 1935) represented the very best this era had to offer, and they contributed to the impressive canon of Arabic music from that period. Umm Kulthum, whose career spanned over five decades, embodied the music of the Golden Age so much that one could consider the year of her death, 1975, synonymous with the end of that era.

The influence of European classical music in the region was evident well before the Golden Age, as many Arab musicians were already using the violin to replace indigenous varieties of spike fiddles. The Golden Age saw the introduction of more Western instruments like the piano, the electric organ, the electric guitar, and the double bass, and the influence of Western music continued to manifest itself through the gradual move toward the standardization of Arabic scale intonations across different Arab regions; the gradual shift toward equal-tempered tuning; the adoption of the Western staff notation system; the increased use of harmony; the growth of the traditional Arabic chamber group (the *takht*) to the size of a large orchestra; and last but not least, the use of a conductor.

Perhaps the "Seven Greats'" most important achievement was to negotiate the tremendous influence exerted by European Western music while remaining faithful to the principles that gave Arabic music its character and had distinguished it for centuries: an emphasis on vocal music, improvisation, and the Arabic *maqam* tradition as a modal music framework. As such, this book's coverage of Arabic music focuses primarily on *maqam*-based Arabic music from the Golden Age.

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[5] Warda was married to composer Baligh Hamdi from 1972 to 1979.

The Arabic *Maqam*

Arabic music is founded on a centuries-old melodic framework called the Arabic *maqam* (pronounced "ma-QAHM"). In short, the Arabic *maqam* is a system of scales, habitual melodic phrases, modulation possibilities, ornamentation norms, and aesthetic conventions that together form a very rich artistic tradition. The *maqam* is used both in composed and improvised music and can be performed as either vocal or instrumental music. Although *maqam* music is very rich in rhythms, the Arabic *maqam* does not define a rhythmic component as such.

The word *maqam* (pl. *maqamat*) in Arabic means place or position and shares its root with the verb *aqama* (to dwell/to reside). It came to be used in its current musical context probably because each *maqam* is based on a hand position and is the place where the melody occurs. Other words are used for *maqam* in the Arab world, such as *nagham* (melody) in Syria and *tab'* (character or nature) in Tunisia. Over time the word *maqam* acquired a second and related meaning; it is used to describe the entire *maqam* system used to build Arabic music and the general melodic and modal approach to music that is fundamental to this system.

The Arabic *maqam* broadly fits the description of a "melodic mode," which is why the word *maqam* is sometimes translated that way in English. However, this translation is not precise because the word "mode" in Western music is also used in a simpler context to mean a scale or a set of tonal intervals (e.g., the major and minor modes). For this reason, this book uses the Arabic word *maqam* rather than an English translation.

Given the geographical span of the Arab world, many regional Arabic *maqam* systems exist, each with its own history, aesthetics, forms, naming conventions, and individual character. *Maqamat* prevalent in North African Arab countries (Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia), for example, are different than *maqamat* in the central part of the Arab world (Egypt to Syria), and these are quite different than the Iraqi Maqam, which has a lot more in common with the Persian *dastgah*. Thus, there isn't a single Arabic *maqam*, but rather several regional Arabic *maqamat*.

This book primarily focuses on the *sharqi* Arabic *maqam* tradition that flourished in the Near East/Eastern Mediterranean (from Cairo to Aleppo) during the early to middle 20th century. This regional tradition is the most well-known among local Arabic *maqam* traditions and is sometimes incorrectly assumed to be the only Arabic Maqam tradition (and however unfair that may be, it is nonetheless the focus of this book).

The Wider *Maqam* Phenomenon

The Arabic *maqam* tradition is part of a wider phenomenon that is prevalent in the music of countries from North Africa all the way to Central Asia. These traditions include Byzantine music, the *makam* in Turkish music, the *dastgah* in Persian music, the *mugam* in Azerbaijani music, the *meqam* in Kurdish music, the *makam* in Assyrian music, the Shash Maqom in Tajik/Uzbek music, and the *muqam* in Uyghur music in China[6]. These traditions are all centuries old and have influenced one another to the extent that their geography and history have allowed.

Over the centuries, the Arabic *maqam* has given and taken a great deal of material from the two immediately neighboring local *maqam* traditions: earlier the Persian *dastgah* and later the Turkish *makam*. While these have been gradually changing over time, they have proven easier to standardize and document than Arabic music.[7] One possible reason is that both traditions are rooted in a single country (Turkey and Iran, respectively), whereas Arabic music spans many countries, creating local *maqam* flavors in the same way that Arabic language has many dialects.

As most of the Arab world was part of the Ottoman Empire for four centuries, the influence of Ottoman Turkish *makam* on the Arabic *maqam* is stronger than any other. As a testament to this influence, Arab musicians still perform and compose music in Ottoman instrumental forms, such as the *sama'i, bashraf*, and *longa*, a century after the end of the Ottoman Empire.

The commonality between the Arabic *maqam* and its Turkish and Persian cousins goes beyond the modal approach to the music. Many of the commonly used Arabic *maqamat* (e.g., Bayati, Rast, Sikah, Hijaz, Nahawand, and 'Ajam) exist in some form in all three traditions, although they may not necessarily have the same exact names, intonation, or melodic pathways. The names of many Arabic *maqamat* can be traced to the Persian language: for example, Farahfaza (from Farah Faza); Suzidil, Dalanshin (from Dil Nishin); Suznak, Rast, Sikah (from Seh Gah); Bastanikar (from Basta Nigar); Jiharkah (from Chehar Gah); and Nairuz (from Nowruz). The reverse is also true, with Persian *gusheh* (scale fragment) names taken from Arabic, such as Hejaz (from Hijaz), Hosseyni (from Husayni), and Oshshagh (from 'Ushshaq). Similarly, many Arabic *maqam* names come from the Turkish *makam* system, such as Sultani Yakah and Buselik, while some Turkish *makam* names, for example, Hiçāz, Irak, Huseyni, Sűnbűle, and Uşşak, trace their origins to Arabic.

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[6] The 2018 Maqom Art International Forum held in Shahrisabz, Uzbekistan included performers from Turkey, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, as well as from many Arab countries.

[7] A very mixed blessing for those traditions, in our view.

Oral Transmission

Prior to the 20th century, music in the Arab world was preserved and transmitted orally (only lyrics were historically preserved in writing). Oral transmission of music fits within a broader framework of oral transmission of other cultural forms in the Arab world, including literature, poetry, and religious texts.

In music, oral transmission entails a student learning the fundamentals of music (a repertoire of pieces, instrumental or vocal technique, and music theory, either formal or informal) by ear—either on his or her own, through immersion in the musical culture and practice, or directly from a music teacher—over a period of many years, without the aid of music notation. During that process, the student is able to absorb many intricate performance details that are extremely difficult to notate, such as intonation, ornamentation, and phrasing. Thus, the student eventually inherits the body of knowledge and aesthetics (some local only to that region) available in his or her tradition.

The modern-day version of oral transmission is a hybrid approach in which a student takes lessons with a teacher, privately or within an established curriculum in a music conservatory, while also making use of notated music. Depending on how much the student relies on sheet music, the hybrid approach may come close to matching oral transmission's benefits, although today the reliance on memory is declining, and most contemporary musicians don't have as prodigious memories as their forebears.

One interesting feature of oral transmission is that some compositions mutate over time into slightly different versions. This multiplicity of versions happens most often with *muwashshahat* (a classical vocal form), which were passed on orally before the advent of music notation or recording in the early 20th century. Information that is retained and transmitted by human memory among large numbers of people over long periods of time is prone to change. Culturally, these differences in versions are not seen as a flaw, but are accepted as contributions to the richness of Arabic music.

A Vocal Tradition

Arabic music is overwhelmingly vocal. Indeed, a live performance is synonymous with a vocal performance, and *tarab* (the type of musical pleasure that is particular to Arabic music) is embodied by the presence of a *mutrib*/*mutriba* (literally, "the person who creates/conveys *tarab*"). Although performances on traditional Arabic instruments like the *'ud*, violin, *qanun*, or *nay* can produce much *tarab*, no instrumentalist, no matter how virtuosic, is ever called a *mutrib*. For this reason, entirely instrumental Arabic music recordings are very rare, unlike other musical traditions

such as jazz or classical, in which a sizable share of recordings and performances is instrumental.

The vocal quality permeates many aspects of Arabic music, such as the traditional instruments' tonal range to their dynamic range (volume). Traditional phrasing, even when used in instrumental compositions, mimics the possibilities of the human voice and usually stays within a *jins* (a 3- to 5-note *maqam* scale fragment), avoiding large jumps. This can be clearly seen[8] in the *taqasim* (traditional instrumental improvisations) performed on the *'ud* by, for example, Muhammad Abdel Wahab, Riyad al-Sunbati, Sayed Makkawi, Muhammad al-Qasabgi, and Wadih al-Safi.

While Arabic music includes many instrumental forms like the *taqsim*, the *dulab*, the *muqaddima*, and the *maqtu'a* (as well as the borrowed Ottoman instrumental forms *sama'i, bashraf*, and *longa*), they rarely constitute a performance by themselves; instead they serve to complement the vocal pieces, which are the meat of any *wasla* (suite) or concert.

A Communal Character

Traditional Arabic music has a communal character. It sounds best when performed in a live setting for a relatively small, attentive, experienced, and responsive audience. The ideal setting for traditional Arabic music is a *jalsa* (a sit-down gathering), which consists of half a dozen musicians in a large room or small hall with an audience numbering in the dozens. In such a setting, musicians can play acoustically and still hear themselves and each other and be heard by the audience.

Arabic music sounds much better when the musicians can see and hear their listeners well. For this reason, recording Arabic music in a studio[9] is challenging, and even the best studio recordings lack a certain warmth felt by musicians when they are encouraged by their audience. This is because recording separates the musician from his or her audience, interrupting a connection called "audience feedback," which is indispensable for the artist's creative process.[10] Only live concert recordings capture the full potential of Arabic music, especially when improvisations are involved. Understandably, there is a difference between improvising for a microphone and a sound engineer and improvising for an experienced, attentive, and ecstatic crowd expressing a reaction after every little musical feat. As such, the audience plays an essential role in Arabic music making.

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[8] El-Mallah (1997, p. 24).

[9] Racy (2003) covers in depth the issue of reaching and conveying *tarab* in a studio without any listeners present.

[10] Racy (1978).

Experienced listeners are called *sammi'a* (literally, "people who listen attentively"). The *sammi'* is any person who enjoys Arabic music and has heard it for many years, to the point that he or she knows a decent chunk of a favorite repertoire by heart and has a clear expectation of what good Arabic music should sound like.

The *sammi'a* have one musical mission, to seek *tarab* (musical joy). In a concert, they are the ones who follow a *taqsim* (traditional instrumental improvisation) like hawks, note for note, and exclaim "Allah!" when an interesting modulation takes place. Each *sammi'* feels like the musician is performing for him or her, and therefore the *sammi'a* feel that they have a right to respond personally and loudly to the performer. But their input is far from disruptive; it is what fuels the performer to excel.

The *sammi'a* can be appreciative of a phrase or section even when it's not improvised. In that case, a beautiful delivery or ornamentation can move the eager listeners. Many long songs have short composed solo lines, especially during a long instrumental introduction. These lines can be on the violin, the *qanun*, the electric guitar, or any instrument appropriate for a solo. Umm Kulthum's violinist Ahmad al-Hifnawi and her *qanun* player Muhammad Abdo Saleh often get applause for their composed short solo lines, even when they repeat them two or three times.

Listening and Readiness

Traditional Arabic music is improvisational and highly personalized. Although improvisation has been slowly disappearing from mainstream Arabic pop music in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, when discussing Arabic music, this book's emphasis is on the mid-20th-century period or the Golden Age, when music was ripe with both vocal and instrumental improvisations. The abundance of improvisation keeps the music from sounding too rigid and makes it much more personal. The effect of improvisation is to constantly assert the presence of the performer and the essential relationship between him or her and the listener.

Because of its richness in ornamentation, Arabic music is not required to faithfully follow a composition note for note and can therefore be highly personalized. Heterophony (when different musicians simultaneously ornament the same melody differently) is a dynamic exercise, one that cannot be composed or notated. It happens in a live performance and needs a type of musician who devotes more energy to listening than to reading sheet music. Therefore, experienced Arabic musicians develop a resilient disposition that allows them to be attentive and quick to react to the other musicians' playing.

In a well-oiled ensemble, a singer and an attentive audience feed off each other, and the musical tradition affords performers a fair amount of room (as far as the

official musical composition/score is concerned) to interpret pieces according to the mood of the performance. Singers in Arabic music are given a relatively wide license to repeat sections or to insert a short *mawwal* (traditional vocal improvisation) at convenient junctures in a long song. Although these additions may be planned, often they depend on the mood of the performer and that of the audience; therefore, they can be unpredictable and require the ensemble to be ready to act on short notice.

In a bootleg recording of the long song "*hayyarti albi ma'ak*," recorded live at the Azbakiyya Gardens in Cairo, singer Umm Kulthum skipped a beat and started the vocal line "*hayyarti . . .*" a quarter note too early. It took the orchestra—made up of dozens of musicians—less than a measure to follow her and shift the entire performance to her timing. Without an ensemble that is ready, a conductor, no matter how capable and alert, could not have achieved that rapid adaptation. And this is not something that the ensemble could have done either had its members all been busy reading the song's musical score or watching the conductor. That formidable group reflex only succeeded because every individual musician was independently listening carefully, ready to react.

The benefit of such readiness is not only the ability to cope with mistakes; these are a rare occurrence. The real benefit is that the music that results is less rigid, and the ensemble moves together, constantly adjusting and adapting to its members and to the singer. It is a continuous negotiation, a live exercise in consensus building.

One downside of this spontaneous aspect of Arabic music is that it doesn't easily lend itself to being recorded using overdubbing (a recording technique in which different instruments are recorded at different times, then later mixed together). Overdubbing Arabic music takes away the ability of musicians to tailor their playing (speed, dynamics, level of ornamentation, and especially solos) to each other in real time. Unfortunately, today Arabic music is losing its spontaneous quality due to modern studio recording techniques, and rigidity can be heard in most contemporary Arabic recordings.

Standards of Formality

To a Western observer, Arabic music may appear "informal" in many respects: musicians vary the composition with each performance, sometimes even simultaneously; audience members react vocally—sometimes loudly—to things they like in the music; and music is transmitted orally, with variation in versions and the addition of individual or regional characteristics.

While these aspects of Arabic music (and others discussed here) may appear to be *informal* compared with Western classical music, it is important to recognize that in

reality, they reflect different standards of formality than Western music does—and Arabic music adheres as closely to its standards as Western music does to its own.

As an example, one very obvious area in which the standard in Arabic music is far stricter than in Western music is intonation. In Western music, numerous compromises exist in intonation because of the development of harmony (see chapter 11: Tuning System), and as a result the intonation of performers tends to be fuzzier and less precise than it is in Arabic music. There is a greater tolerance for imprecise intonation in Western music than in Arabic music, even among the ranks of the top professional classical musicians (though this tolerance is rarely explicitly perceived by musicians or audiences, as glaring as it may appear to experienced Arab musicians and listeners). In Arabic music, because the slightest difference in intonation can suggest an entirely different *maqam* (there are so many different notes identified in between the notes of the Western equal-tempered scale), and because there is no harmony to confuse matters, the standard for intonation is much more stringent. Thus, we could say that Western music is *more informal* than Arabic music in terms of intonation—or we could say that the two traditions have different standards of formality.

Another example of apparently "greater formality" in Arabic music has to do with improvisation. In a traditional improvisation, the opening and closing phrases are more or less completely set by tradition for each *maqam* and are completely familiar to audiences, who expect to hear certain melodies (albeit with ornaments and variations) open an improvisation in a given *maqam*. There is room for a great deal of unique variation in the middle of the performance, but the ending is also standard. This type of formality doesn't exist in Western improvisation today, and not enough is known about improvisation in the time of, for example, Mozart to know whether there was that level of formalism in the past.[11]

There are also numerous ways in which Arabic music doesn't adhere to Western standards of formality. The main priority of Arabic music is to create *tarab* and to please and entertain the audience. For this reason, the protocols governing the audience's behavior during a live concert are informal and more accommodating than in Western classical music. In live recordings with large orchestras and iconic singers such as Umm Kulthum, Warda, or Abdel Halim Hafez, the cheering of the audience could stop a new section halfway and force the orchestra to restart the previous section, which the audience enjoyed greatly and didn't get enough of. In one video recording of an Umm Kulthum concert, the last song had actually ended and the curtains were closed, but the audience started screaming "*iftah! iftah!*" (Open!

[11] Though we suspect, based on Gjerdingen's (2007) work on Galant-period musical schema, that improvisation was more constrained at that time.

Open!), after which the curtain was reopened and the orchestra started playing the entire last song over again, starting from the introduction. We know that this type of thing used to occur in Western music in the time of Beethoven, for example, but it no longer happens today.

Musical transmission (oral or notated) is another area of Arabic music with different standards than Western music. A composed piece can be transcribed and/or performed multiple times and can include minor variations from the original with every adoption by a different musician. This is because most compositions from the 20th century were recorded but never had their official musical scores published. Subsequent versions would simply transcribe them from the recording, which is an imprecise process, and then a new performance would add another layer of personalization on top of that. Such minor discrepancies between originals and their cover versions can be seen in works like, for example, the *dawr* "*inta fahim*," recorded by both its composer Zakariyya Ahmad and the Lebanese singer Su'ad Muhammad (1926–2011); the long song "*lis-sabri hudud*," recorded by both its composer Muhammad al-Mougi and the singer Umm Kulthum; or the *qasida* "*ya jarat (garat) al-wadi*," recorded by both Muhammad Abdel Wahab and Lebanese singer Nour al-Hoda (born Alexandra Badran, 1924–1998). Instead of viewing these discrepancies as a weakness, Arabic musicians and audiences are very accommodating about these differences and prefer that their favorite songs come in many recorded versions that do not match note for note, as this adds to the richness of the repertoire.

A video recording of an Umm Kulthum concert illustrates this point. As the diva was performing the long song "*ba'id 'annak*," she stopped singing after the phrase "*tiftikirli lahza hilwa*" and did a long *tafrid* (a repetition of one or more phrases on a slightly improvised melody), then started the next verse with a different melody, in Jins Nahawand instead of Jins Nikriz (while maintaining the same lyrics and rhythm). The alternative melody was a sort of counterpoint to the original melody. The informality of the compositional structure of the music (and arguably, her incomparable clout) afforded her the opportunity of searching for *tarab* by changing a composed section. Her orchestra, which was extremely well trained to listen and adapt, continued playing the new melody without any apparent difficulty.

Perhaps the best example of "informality" in Arabic music is heterophony, in which, to the uninitiated listener, the music may appear to be messy or disorganized, with every musician playing a slightly different version of the same melody. This could sound very disconcerting to a listener who comes from a musical tradition that values precise unison above all. But in Arabic music, precise unison (military style) is not the goal, and the informal approach to unison leaves a lot of room for interpretation and ornamentation, which in turn produces richer Arabic music.