

Middle Eastern Music

Introduction, Instruments, and FAQs

Introduction

Scales—The Basic Building Block

Middle Eastern music is based on the *maqam* system. A *maqam* roughly corresponds to a Western musical scale. For example, where an American musician might perform Pachelbel's *Canon in D* (a canon—a classical form—played in the key of D major), a Middle Eastern musician might perform the *Samai Kurd Shaheen*. (A *samai*—a classical form—played in the *maqam* known as *Kurd* and composed by Simon Shaheen.) A composition can begin in a certain *maqam*, then shift to others during the course of the song. There are at least 24 distinct *maqamat*, developed over thousands of years of musical history.

A *maqam* tells a musician what the correct intervals are between the notes of a scale, and which notes should be emphasized. Often, the notes of a scale lie only a quarter-tone apart, rather than half-steps apart. What can sound like dissonance to American ears are actually extremely subtle differences in tone.

Rhythm

Middle Eastern music often contains overlapping rhythms. The drummer may be playing one rhythm, the violinist another, the *riq* (tambourine) player a third, while the dancer keeps yet another on her *sagat* (finger cymbals), yet all are woven together into a seamless tapestry of sound. The dancer's job is to embody the different rhythms for the audience, while also expressing the emotion of the music.

Improvisation

Middle Eastern musicians frequently perform *taqasim*—the art of improvisation. *Taqasim* may be woven into existing compositions—similar to a guitar riff in the middle of an American rock song—or played as an art in themselves, as in the Arabic classical tradition. The musician begins with a well-known melody, a *maqam*, or a simple collection of notes, then embellishes it in a free-flowing manner.

Ornamentation

Often, Middle Eastern music involves ornamentation. In the same way a dancer's delicate hand gestures ornament her dance, a musician's style may embrace and color individual notes. Ornamentation includes the use of grace note, trills, runs, arpeggios, “bending” a note, and other techniques. To draw a parallel, imagine singing a simple child's melody like “Three Blind Mice.” Then imagine how a jazz musician might play with the song, stretching out certain notes or adding syncopation. You still recognize the basic melody, but the musician has put his or her stamp on it. Both improvisation and ornamentation allow musicians to express their individual style within traditional forms.

Call and Response

Middle Eastern music frequently employs a call-and-response form in which a lead instrument plays a phrase and another instrument responds, creating a musical conversation. The lead and responding instrument can change throughout the composition.

Instruments

Tabla—A drum, shaped somewhat like a goblet, traditionally made of clay and covered by a goatskin head. The *tabla* is literally the heartbeat of Middle Eastern music, as its beat keeps time for the other members of the orchestra. This drum is sometimes referred to as a *durbakke* or the *doumbek*.

Oud—A short-necked, pear-shaped string instrument, the ancestor of the European lute. (Say both words aloud, and you'll hear the relationship.) Sometimes beautifully ornamented with mother-of-pearl, the *oud* was traditionally made of the wood of a fruit tree and plucked with an eagle feather. (Today's musicians use a plastic plectrum or pick.) The sound is warm and full and deep.

Violin—Familiar to American audiences, the violin was introduced to the Middle Eastern orchestra only recently, in late 19th or early 20th century. The violin is frequently the lead or responding instrument in a traditional call-and-response. Because of its resemblance to the human voice, the violin is capable of expressing tremendous emotion.

Singer—The singer plays a vital role in both traditional and classical Middle Eastern music, due to the importance of the lyrics. A classical Arabic vocalist can present an entire evening of sung poetry. Part of the singer's role is to bring the poetry to life through vocal techniques that invoke the emotions.

Sagat—Small finger cymbals, similar to a Flamenco dancer's castanets. A dancer may play the underlying percussive rhythm of the music on her *sagat*.

Nai—A hollow reed flute, the *nai* has the haunting, breathy quality that Americans often associate with Middle Eastern music. Because these flutes cannot be tuned to the different *maqamat*, a *nai* player carries flutes of many different sizes.

Kanun—A stringed instrument similar to the zither, the *kanun* has 72 strings, which are plucked by rings fastened to the musician's fingers. The *kanun* has a delicate, intricate sound, brighter and seemingly faster than the *oud*.

Riq—The Middle Eastern tambourine, the *riq* (sometimes called the *daff*) is played by striking both the fishskin head and the cymbals that surround it.

Tar—A large, round frame drum, similar to the Irish *bodhran*. The tar is used mainly in popular and folk music and is also referred to as the *duff* or the *bendir*.

Other Traditional Instruments include the *tabal beledi*, a large bass drum played in folk music; the *mizmar*, an oboe-like reed instrument; the *mijwiz*, a double-reed instrument with a droning sound; and the *rababa* or *rebec*, a two-stringed fiddle held upright on the knee.

Modern Instruments such as electric guitar, accordion, saxophone, clarinet, organ, piano, cello, bass, and even drum machine and synthesizers are common in today's pop music. Like all great musical traditions, Middle Eastern music is a living art form that is always adapting and changing while staying true to its heritage

FAQS—Frequently Asked Questions

What should I listen for?

Hearing an orchestra play Middle Eastern music for the first time can be overwhelming. Begin by concentrating on how one instrument is playing. Try listening to the drums first, then focus on another instrument. Then hear how the instruments interact with each other. If there is a singer, listen to how he or she interacts with the musicians. When in doubt, listen for the deepest drum beat—it is literally the heartbeat of the music! Mostly, listen with your entire body, and when the music goes somewhere, let it take you on its journey.

Where does the music come from? What do we know about its history?

Middle Eastern music is a living tradition that has roots in the ancient civilizations of the Middle East. It echoes the court and folk music of Sumeria, ancient Egypt, Arabia, the Islamic Empires, Andalusia, and Persia. The resulting music traditions are deep and varied, but always evolving as each generation adds its innovations while honoring the forms and work of the past.

What are the different styles of music?

Within the two broad categories of folk and classical music, there are hundreds of styles springing from various regions and sub-cultures. For instance, the pearl-divers of Bahrain have their own musical styles. So did the court musicians of the Ottoman Empire, the mystics of Persia, the folk musicians of Andalusian Spain, the villagers of Lebanon, and many others.

What are the songs about?

Love is a major theme in Middle Eastern music, in all its aspects—love of family, country, nation, nature, and of course, the beloved, whether close at hand or separated by oceans. In addition to love, many songs focus on religious and national ideals. Whatever the theme, however, it is always rendered with strong emotion and passion.

Is this music written out in scores?

Yes, composed music and folk tunes are often written out in scores using Western notation, although many musicians (particularly folk musicians) still learn pieces by ear.

I'm hooked! How can I hear more Middle Eastern music?

Listen! Middle Eastern music is now available in large music retailers and specialty shops. You can also order by catalogue—Rashid's, Daff & Raff, and al-Manar are some of the companies to look for.

Watch! Check the newspaper for performances in your area. Or look for the movie *Umm Kulthum: A Voice Like Egypt* by Michal Goldman. This 1997 film (now available on video) explores the performances and life of the greatest Arabic songstress of the 20th century, Umm Kulthum.

Read About It! A few books to start with include Habib Hassan Touma's *The Music of the Arabs* and Virginia Danielson's *Umm Kulthum: The Voice of Egypt* (published by the University of Chicago Press.)

Surf the Net! Start with our website at www.jawaahir.org—we have links to many web sites and discussion groups on Middle Eastern dance, music, and culture.

Contact Us! We'd love to hear from you! Call, write, or E-mail us at:

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