

AN INTRODUCTION TO ARABIC MUSIC

Middle Eastern music is based on scales (Maqamat) and use of a singular melodic line which is embellished with ornamentation. This art of ornamentation is a main element of Arabic music as is its use of quarter tones. Another distinguishing feature of Arabic music is the art of solo improvisation, when the singer or the musician departs from the melody to explore a maqam to bring out its emotive quality. When a improvisation is sung it is called a mawal, when it is played on an instrument it is called a taqasim. Simon Shaheen, a contemporary virtuoso on the violin and oud, tells first time listeners to “Think with your voice when you listen to Arab music. It has a linear quality like the voice. Concentrate on its melodies, and listen to how they interact with the rhythm. Arab music is characterized by the use of quarter-tones which lie between the half-steps of western music. They have a quality that you may not be able to hear at first. Don’t think of them as out-of-tune notes. They are deliberate. The more you listen, the more you will begin to hear them and come to love them, for it is the quarter-tones which distinguish many beautiful maqams in Arabic music.” (Aramco World, May/June 1996, p.5) Like western music, Arabic music varies in region and in form from the sophisticated classical and urban music to the simpler pop and rural or country (beledi) music.

The drum is essential to most Arabic music, it is its heart. The types of drums and the rhythms played can vary from region to region. A few common types include: *Tabla or Darabuka*, *Duf*, and *Riq*. The rhythms are distinguished by the placement of the dums (base beat from striking the center of the drum) and the tecs (treble beat from striking the rim of the drum) in a series. Time signatures can vary with and within a region. Turkish music has a 9/8 which Egypt does not. 6/8 is very common in Tunisia and Morocco and less so in Egypt. 2/4 and 4/4 is the basis of a lot of the dance and popular music of Egypt. Still, the placement of the dums (D) and tecs (T) can differentiate a 2/4 from Saudi Arabia or a 2/4 from Egypt. Egypt actually has two versions of 4/4: maqsoum, masmoudi sauer (the most widely used and often called “beledi” in the U.S.) and Sa’idi, and 3 versions of 2/4: Malfuf, Zar, and Fallahi. Another popular rhythm in Egypt is the Masmoudi kabir which has an 8/4 time signature. Throughout the Arab world 10/8, 6/4, 3/4, and 7/8 signatures are common in classical music.

Sample rhythms:

4/4: Sa’idi- D,T,DD,T. Beledi-DD,T,D,T. Maqsoum- DT, T, D, T

2/4: Ayub- D, DT. Karachi- T, TD

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Watch the video/DVD “Umm Kulthum, A Voice Like Egypt” available at libraries and thorough Amazon.com