



MUSIC — NOTES FROM THE ARAB WORLD

Music has a special importance in the Arab Middle East. It is a vocal tradition which is dedicated to the praises of God and songs of love. Additionally, the music is participatory and usually includes some form of audience involvement. Arab music is very similar throughout the Middle East and works as a force to bind the Arab World together. This newsletter will examine the various factors that combined to create the unique traditions inherent to Arab music.



ARAMCO World Magazine

CELEBRATIONS AND FESTIVALS

Nowhere is the influence of music more evident than at a wedding celebration. The *mizmar* (an oboe-like instrument) and *mizwij* (a double clarinet) are the primary instruments played. The decibel is high and the music is designed to create a boisterous atmosphere for the celebrants. Customarily, a famous singer is invited to perform at the wedding. This tradition has been passed down through the years originating during the third century.

Due to the significance music plays in the Arab World, festivals are commonly held. The most famous festival of the past was the Baalbek Festival. Unfortunately, as a result of the war in Lebanon, the annual festival was terminated. Therefore, a need was created to replace the popular event. With this in mind, the Jerash Festival of Culture and Arts evolved. This is currently the largest such festival in the Arab World, with 70 different shows. It is held in the ancient city of Jerash, Jordan — a city whose colonnaded streets are well suited to this cultural event. The main events are held in the Temple of Artemis, an outdoor stadium from Roman antiquity. The Jerash Festival is a relatively new phenomenon having been held for the first time in August 1981. It was designed as a non-elitist and non-specialized cultural event. The purpose of the festival was to provide a showcase for Jordanian (and Arab) culture. During the festival the streets are filled with music, dancing, and other arts. Both little-known as well as premier artists are invited to perform. The most famous individual to appear this year was the internationally renowned Lebanese singer Fayrouz.

HISTORY

In the centuries prior to Islam Arabic songs were devoted to love — not religion. This tradition still exists to a lesser extent. Arab music developed in the homes of the wealthy and noble. In an Arab home of social standing young women were often engaged to sing, usually while accompanied by the *oud* (lute) or a percussion instrument. In fact, all women often joined in on village festivities by singing or playing an instrument.

Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) was considered the musical center of the Middle East prior to the fourth century A.D. Artists from all over the area traveled there for musical instruction. The more talented musicians could test their capabilities by participating in one of the many arts competitions. Two of the most famous were held annually in Ukaz and Mecca. Arab music developed and thrived as a result of this interaction of groups and their exchange of diverse musical techniques.

From the fourth through the seventh century Syria and parts of Mesopotamia became the cultural center of the Arab World. A more artistic musical style developed during this era and a new instrument appeared — the wooden-bellied lute.

Throughout the seventh century, after the introduction of Islam, music suffered a slight setback. No direct censure was imposed on music, but some theologians interpreted Islam as being anti-music and arts. So, for a period of twelve years, music was banned. By 656-661 music was again assured of its standing in society when a study was authorized by the ruler on the science of poetry and music. During this period music was significantly influenced by Islam. There has been little change since this time and Arab music remains very medieval in orientation.

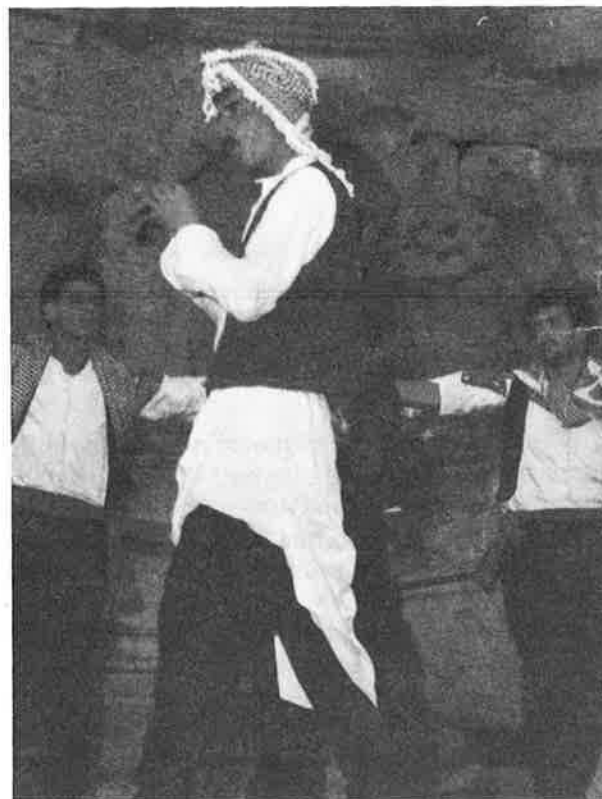


THEMES/TECHNIQUES

The key to Arab Music is melody, a melody which is strictly governed yet improvised and free-flowing. The strongest impact on the development of the melody was the chanting of the Koran. This is still a prevalent factor today in the Middle East. Harmony is considered unimportant and is usually relegated to a drone instrument in the background. The melody line, which utilizes subtleties of pitch and tone, is primarily carried vocally. Techniques have developed through the years which work to serve these musical traditions, thus creating the unique qualities distinctive to Arab music.

Arab culture expresses song through poetry. In fact, poetry creates the song which then emphasizes the poem's deepest meaning. Arab music is usually dedicated to the praises of God. As such significance is given to the words and their meaning, the music is basically vocal in tradition. This is in direct contrast to other Middle Eastern cultures. Therefore, the melodies developed have been intended to accompany the voice. In essence, Arab instrumental music has evolved in a manner which works to enhance the voice.

The qualities described above derive from the utilization of various unique techniques created to sustain the musical traditions. Microtones, or the space between tones, are significantly shorter than those used in Western music. The prevalent usage is the semi-tone, or half step; but one-third and one-fourth tones are not uncommon. The utilization of the smaller interval



Jordan Information Bureau

allows for a greater range of tonal possibilities. Therefore, notes display a vibrancy and ability to change in a manner comparable to the range required of an opera singer. Additionally, the *maqamat* or the modal system, incorporates a much more extensive range. Arab music uses 12 modes as opposed to the two modes (major and minor) of the West. The *maqamat* is a system which exists between the Western concepts of scale and theme. It is considered a unifying factor which develops musical form. Rhythmic cycles, which can be defined as patterns of strong and weak beats, are known as the *iqa'at*. *Lahn* is the style or feeling with which one performs — one of the most important features in the distinctive quality of Arab music. The traditions are further preserved through the usage of instruments which have developed over the years as a means of strengthening the music.

Middle Eastern (Arab) instruments are descendents of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia which date back thousands of years. Evidence of the origin of these instruments can be found in paintings and carvings from past civilizations. It should be noted that Arab instruments were developed a millenium before classical Greek and Persian instruments. The modern form evolved between the 8th and 10th centuries. Instruments of the Arab World are the source from which European folk and classical instruments were created. In fact, the West is known to have inherited the guitar, in several different forms, from Arab instruments. Other instruments the Arab World employs are the *nay*, a simple reed pipe which possesses a stark, woody sound. The *nay* is comparable to the recorder in the West. The *tabla*, a hand drum, is commonly used in the Middle East and South Asia. This is square as opposed to the hourglass figure of the *durbake*; another drumlike instrument. If a musician would want to produce a strong, deep, resonant sound on the *durbake*, he would hit the center of the instrument. If a sharp, bright sound is desired, the drummer would hit near the edge. The *duff* is a tambourine and the *kemancheh* is a spiked-fiddle. Additional instruments are the *mizmar*, similar to the oboe, the *mizwij*, a double clarinet which sounds something like bagpipes, and the *oud* which is like the lute. The lyre is still commonly played in the Middle East; it originated during the middle ages. A one-stringed violin is called the *rebab* and the zither is named the *kanoun*. All of these instruments combine to create the free-flowing melodic qualities common to Arab music.

The Palestinians have developed a slightly different tradition from that of other Arabs. In the past Palestinians have tended to sing of their love for the land and their pride in their home. Basically the music reflected a need for the Palestinian people to belong and stay together. This is true of much of Arab music. However, the modern Palestinian folk music concentrates more on their common struggle. An example of this trend is reflected in a piece written by the Palestinian musician Mustafa al-Kurd. The chorus is as follows:

In hope we used to plant
And it is hope we now plant



In the hope that someday
Our hope
Will be reality.

Arab music, while difficult for Westerners to understand and appreciate, is very influential in the Arab World. To the Arab people, separated by vast geographical distances, music serves as a binding force. Throughout the history of the Arab Middle East music developed special techniques which has sustained a uniquely Arab tradition.



Arab Perspectives

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This issue of the ANERA Newsletter was written by Mariam Djavaherian, ANERA's Administrative Assistant.

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