The Middle East

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The Middle East

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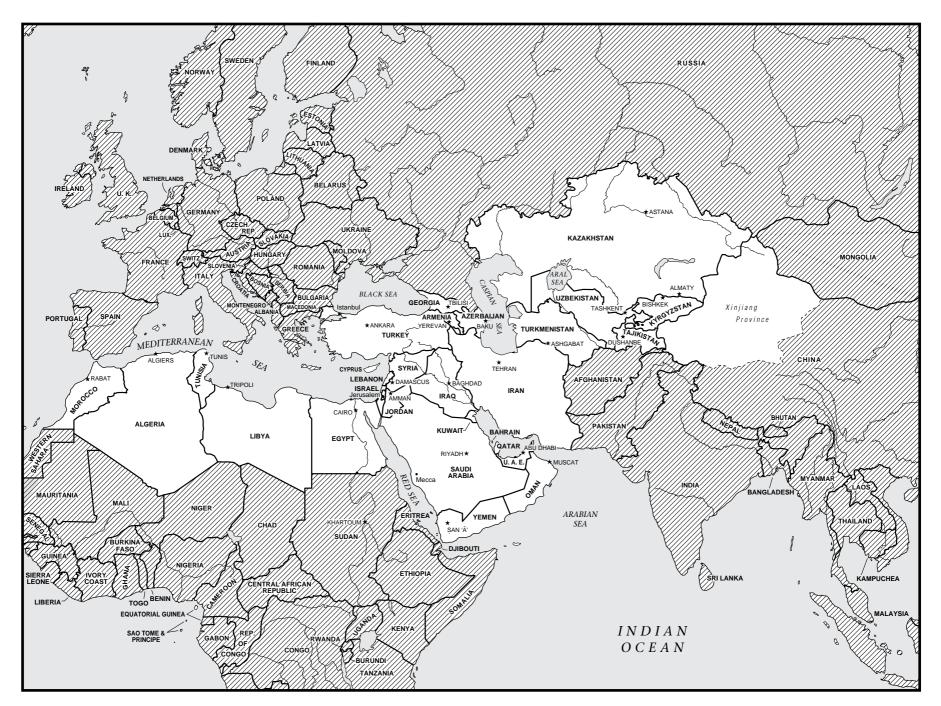
Hearing the Music
of the Middle East
Stephen Blum

Improvisation and the Centrality of the Voice
Distinctive Features and Structural Dimensions
Sequences and Compound Forms
Cultural Diversity and Social Distance

For musicians and listeners of the twenty-first century, the Middle East is a region with far-reaching connections that extend across large portions of three continents—Africa, Europe, and Asia—and can be discerned, as well, in large diasporic communities of Australia and the Americas. The contributors to this volume have been more concerned with fundamental principles of the musics of the Middle East, and with ways in which shared resources and values have been adapted to local requirements, than with drawing sharp contrasts between Middle Eastern musical practices and those of neighboring regions.

An especially impressive continuity in Middle Eastern music is the ingenuity with which musicians, in response to changing demands, have systematized resources drawn from many regional practices while devising countless ways for groups and individuals to articulate their differences. Musicians pursuing local interests and those attempting some kind of supralocal synthesis run up against different pressures for change. The desire to construct comprehensive musical systems derives, in part, from the cultural prestige and the intellectual frameworks of the world religions born in the Middle East, which include Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In no other part of the world have the cantillation of sacred texts and the organization of liturgies occupied a greater share of musicians' energies. Classifications of rhythmic and tonal patterns according to their character and function have served both sacred and secular ends (which have often been closely intertwined).

Musical instruments originating in the Middle East and Central Asia were carried, together with ideas about music, in all directions—to sub-Saharan Africa, South and East Asia, and Europe (Blench 1984; Lawergren 1995–1996, 1997). A striking example is a type of ensemble that served as an emblem of power in countless Asian, African, and European courts from Sumatra and Malaysia to northern Cameroon and northern Nigeria (Dauer 1985:57–65; Farmer 2000). The core instruments of this ensemble, in its various manifestations, are oboes, long trumpets, and kettledrums, though others (cylindrical drums, shorter trumpets, and various metallophones) have often been added and the long trumpets are not always present. The towers called *naubat-khānā* in South Asia and *naqqāra-khāne* or *ṭabl-khāna* in the Middle East were designed for this paradigmatic "outdoor" ensemble, which contrasts in almost every respect with the ensembles that have cultivated more refined sounds, suitable to garden

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EQUATORIAL GUINEA UGANDA KENYA INDIAN OCEAN

SAO TOME & PRINCIPE GABON REP. OF CONGO CONGO RWANDA BURUNDI

TANZANIA

The Middle East.

pavilions or "indoor" settings. Different attitudes and postures were associated with each type of ensemble, as was also the case with the Chinese distinction between "military" and "civic" instrumentation and the medieval European classification of instruments as either *haut* 'loud' or *bas* 'soft'.

The manner in which music solicits (or demands) the attention of potential (or involuntary) listeners is one of the main respects in which genres of performance and roles of performers are distinguished. The need for such distinctions stems from the importance of music as a medium through which people interact and through which they can represent different styles of interaction.

This article introduces a few of the major issues that are explored in greater depth throughout the volume: improvisation and the centrality of the voice, distinctive features of sounds, compound musical forms, and models of cultural diversity. (For basic information on the peoples, languages, religions, geography, and history of the Middle East, see Bates and Rassam 1983; Eickelman 1998; Goldschmidt 1999; Hourani 1991; Lapidus 1988, Mostyn and Hourani 1983; and Rahman 1979.)

IMPROVISATION AND THE CENTRALITY OF THE VOICE

The forms of music making most highly valued in many Middle Eastern societies, as well as in some adjacent regions, require performers to improvise—that is, to adjust patterns and sequences they have mastered in ways they find appropriate for each occasion. Performers may learn such patterns and sequences as a fund of resources assembled for use in composing unique performances, or by way of a repertoire of relatively fixed compositions which they may modify during performance. These terse formulations describe two extremes, neither of which can be wholly absent from a competent musician's learning process. The relationship between resources organized for use in composition and repertoires of more or less finished compositions has varied significantly at different times and places, with the result that important musical terms have acquired multiple meanings.

Some forms of musical interaction depend on face-to-face contact among a restricted number of participants, and some may occur in public as well as in more private spaces. Amateur musicians often create their own relatively private space as they perform for one another in a venue, such as a teahouse or public park, where other activities are also taking place (figure 1). When a group of men or women will sing short responses to a leader's phrases, the leader, in turn, must respond to his or her perceptions of changes in the group's emotional state, noting as well the variable reactions of its individual members. Soloists must be similarly attentive to the responses of listeners who do not sing but utter conventional expressions of pleasure during the performance or even remain silent until they applaud or offer compliments once the performer has finished. Professionals or semiprofessionals who provide music on demand—notably for weddings and other celebrations—must quickly learn the necessary improvisational skills. Members of a circle of amateur musicians who perform for themselves alone are likely to cultivate an acute sensitivity to the ways in which different facets of a musical personality may manifest themselves from one session to the next. A star whose performances give listeners a sense of the links joining a national idiom of their own to a greater world must also make every performance a unique event.

Lila Abu-Lughod (1986:172–175) describes an occasion when two bedouin women sewing tents sang verses about patience and love to each other. Each woman's spontaneous choice of verses that offered an appropriate response to those her friend had just sung resulted in a sequence that other women, hearing Abu-Lughod's recording of the improvised exchange, have found deeply moving. Listening to the sequence aroused strong emotions in women who knew both singers and were well aware of the hardships suffered by one of them in particular. Repertoires of verses,

along with techniques for presenting them musically, take shape as groups of singers find that they can voice their desires and frustrations by drawing on these repertoires and techniques. Quite often a singer or an instrumentalist hears an immediate response from another musician, as when two bedouin women or two Kurdish men exchange verses.

The voice has remained central to the musics of the Middle East because it is the primary instrument of human communication. Voices can be effectively supported, extended, contradicted, or transcended by the other musical instruments. We use our voices much more for dialogue and conversation than for monologues, to the point that speaking or singing to oneself is best understood as internalized dialogue through which a speaker or singer responds to remembered voices of others. Knowledge of a repertoire of poetic and musical resources enables a performer to rearrange familiar sequences and activate the listeners' memories. Listening to music of the Middle East becomes hearing as we expand our capacity for remembering rhythmic and melodic patterns, and for associating these patterns with human actions and emotions.

With his incomparable ability to depict the elaborate networks in which humans move and act, Leo Tolstoy specified each moment in a series of memories experienced by a Muslim warrior as he overhears one of his disciples singing familiar verses about a *ghazavāt*, a military campaign for a religious end. The protagonist of Tolstoy's story *Haji Murad* is about to fight his last battle against the Russian forces of occupation in the Caucasus as he listens to a song in which a dying *jigit* 'warrior' tells birds to carry news of his own and his companions' deaths to their female relatives (who, by implication, will create narrative songs praising their heroic deeds). Haji Murad hears other events in the soundscape—nightingales cooing, knives being sharpened, a cheerful voice responding to the song with *Lā illāhi illā 'l-lāh!* 'No divinity apart from God!'—and he is reminded of a narrative song addressed to his father by his mother, who composed it after the father stabbed her during a quarrel. She concluded her song with the line "I did not fear death, neither will my boy *jigit*." Haji Murad's memory of his mother singing the song as he lay beside her under a fur coat and saw the scar on her side conjures up a long string of further memories of his childhood and of his own wife and son. Tolstoy's finely wrought prose brings out the almost limitless power of song to evoke formative relationships among parents and children, husbands and wives, masters and disciples.

The song that Tolstoy imagined Haji Murad's mother to have composed, like the verses that Abu-Lughod heard bedouin women singing, might have seemed almost meaningless to listeners who did not understand the words, knew nothing of the circumstances to which the singers referred, and lacked the memories of earlier musical experiences that enable a hearer to notice significant differences in a new composition or performance. Several ways of overcoming such limitations are available to singers and instrumentalists who address themselves to a broader public.

When a performer draws attention to one musical segment by repeating it with slight (or extensive) changes, the listeners' short-term memory may retain a provisional "background" against which they can perceive potentially meaningful changes from one repetition to the next. Which of the potentially meaningful differences prove to be decisive in any listener's response to the performance will depend on habits this listener formed during earlier performances as well as on his or her immediate desires.

Structurally, a musical performance in the Middle East normally consists of several sections of varying length. A shift from one section to the next may be quite abrupt, or it may be so gradual that listeners do not immediately realize that the music is taking on a new character. Listening for the most striking contrasts between sections with respect to pitch register, timbre, rhythm, and mode is probably the best way for new listeners to approach Middle Eastern music. With further experience, very subtle contrasts within each section start to register on the ear.

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES AND STRUCTURAL DIMENSIONS

While music always involves coordination of more than one sequence of movements and sounds, musical practices differ with respect to which distinctive features and structural dimensions are most pertinent. Musicians and listeners in the Middle East often enjoy the interplay among accents that are grouped in at least two different ways.

Another type of interplay is that between sounds whose duration is sustained and sounds that fade away more quickly. Two syllables used by speakers of several languages to represent this fundamental contrast are *dum*, for the resonant sounds produced by striking the center of a drumhead; and *tek*, for the drier, brighter sounds produced by rapping on or near the rim of a drum. The oppositions between the initial consonants, central vowels, and final consonants of the two syllables are iconic, with distinctive features of the two classes of drum sounds; moreover, they exemplify principles of rhythmic theory that were richly developed in Arabic writings on music (Neubauer 1995–1996; Sawa 1989:35–71).

An opposition between two types of sound is often replicated by two or more instruments that have complementary timbres. Double-headed cylindrical drums and paired kettledrums are invariably constructed and played so that the sounds produced on one skin will contrast with those obtained from the other. Combining two or more such instruments yields a compact system of differentiated timbres, as in the typical drum ensemble of the Tihāma plateau in Yemen, consisting of a large deep kettledrum (*mirfaʻ*), a small deep kettledrum (*dumduma* or *tungura*), a double-headed cylindrical drum (*ṭabl marad*), and a single-skinned cylindrical drum (*ṭabl muʾastā*). Each instrument plays rhythmic figures appropriate to its pitch level and flexibility: faster movement and improvised variation are associated with higher-pitched sounds, slower movement and greater predictability with deeper sounds. [See Rhythmic Structure and Drum Improvisation in Yemen.]

The makeup of numerous small ensembles exploits the opposition between the sounds of bowed stringed instruments and those produced by strings that are plucked (with a fingernail or plectrum) or struck (with light hammers). The contrast provides an effective accompaniment to sung poetry, as the string attacks can reinforce the initial consonants of sung syllables and the fiddle can proceed to imitate subtle in-

flections of vowels. In this respect the most important rival or partner of bowed instruments is the rim-blown flute most often called *nāy* or *nei.*

The Egyptian *takht*, which was replaced in the 1930s by the larger *firqa*, included up to five instruments as well as a solo vocalist and a small group of supporting singers: *ʿūd* (a short-necked lute), *qānūn* (a plucked dulcimer), *nāy*, *kamanja* (a spike fiddle) or Western violin, and *riqq* (a small frame drum). A similar Persian ensemble of the late nineteenth century would have *tār* (a long-necked lute) and *santūr* (a hammered dulcimer) rather than *ʿūd* and *qānūn*, and a goblet drum (*żarb*) alongside or in place of the frame drum (called *dāʾire* and usually larger than the *riqq*). The frame drum was banished from elite Persian ensembles through most of the twentieth century, but it began to return after the Iranian revolution of 1979. It remained essential to the Azerbaijani genre known as *muğam*, which is performed by a trio consisting of Azerbaijani *tar* (distinct from the Persian variety), *kəmənçe* (spike fiddle), and a singer who also plays the frame drum (*dəf*) during instrumental interludes. A somewhat similar genre known as *al-maqām al-ʿirāqī* 'Iraqi *maqam*' requires a minimum of three performers in addition to the vocalist, in one of two standard ensembles. The *chalghī al-baghdādī* consists of *santūr*, *joze* (spike fiddle), *daff* (frame drum), *dumbak* (goblet drum) and perhaps *naqqāra* (paired kettledrums); in the *takht al-sharqī* the *santūr* and *joze* are replaced by *ʿūd*, *qānūn*, and *nāy*.

A pair of sounds may be understood as an opposition of two locations—center or rim, upper string (*bam*) or lower string (*zīr*) on a long-necked or short-necked lute. A different but equally important concept of the two options is to locate them with reference to a center: a membrane or a string may be tightened or loosened if it is not left alone; a pitch may be raised or lowered if it is not repeated unchanged; a beat of moderate speed may be halved or doubled (see Neubauer 1995–96:297 on the rhythmic theory associated with Isḥāq al-Mawṣilī). The same tripartite structure is apparent in the ancient Greek classification of musical compositions according to ethos and in the Arabic adaptation of this classification that appears in writings of the philosopher al-Kindī (d. c. 866). The Greek hesychastic became *al-muʿtadil* 'the temperate', diastaltic became *al-basṭī* 'the expansive', and systaltic became *al-qabḍī* 'the constrained' (Lachmann and al-Ḥifnī 1931:xx, 30; Strunk 1950:45). More complex classifications by ethos generally include similar distinctions between assertion and withdrawal. Such schemes have proved useful both in classifying repertoires and in spelling out musical itineraries that start with one ethos and end with another. The distinction made by Mauritanian musicians between "blackness" (connoting youth, strength, war, tension) and "whiteness" (connoting maturity, nostalgia, love, loosening) operates on every level of temporal organization; most broadly, every performance moves from the strength of youth to the nostalgia of old age (Guignard 1975). Other modal systems have been designed to allow for a variety of plots.

A relatively "coarse" distinction, such as that between a "taut" and a "loose" string, can gradually be transformed into a set of "fine" distinctions (Picken and Nickson 2000:129). Before or early in the second millennium b.c.e., Sumerian or Babylonian musicians developed systematic procedures for generating seven different orderings (or "octave species") of a set of seven pitches, by tightening or loosening the strings on a lyre or harp to produce different sequences of descending fifths and ascending fourths. The Old Babylonian tablet known as the "tuning text" identifies the string that must be retuned in order to transform the tritone formed between the first and last notes in each such sequence into a perfect fifth (West 1994:162–168). Assigning a name to each string made it possible to name each interval formed by a pair of strings as well as the tuning based on each string; an inventory of Akkadian love songs classified by tuning also survives. In Babylonian musical notation, the interval names are followed by numeral signs that have been variously interpreted (West 1994:171–178).

Assigning names to strings, intervals, tunings, and eventually positions on strings has remained central to many Middle Eastern musical practices, as have the classification of repertoires by tuning or mode and a preference for modes containing seven pitch classes. But in the Middle East musical notation did not attain the same degree of importance that it acquired in East Asia and Europe. Master musicians have tended to regard face-to-face communication over an extended time as the only adequate channel for the transmission of musical knowledge, although this has not prevented students from trying to learn what they could from a variety of sources. [See THE IRAQI MAQAM AND ITS TRANSMISSION.]

A major reason why most Middle Eastern practices never came to rely on musical notation is the complexity of the rhythms to which verse and prose are appropriately sung or recited. Many musical genres require flexible rhythms that do not depend on a regular, predictable grouping of accents. One could scarcely overemphasize the significance, for musicians of the Middle East and neighboring regions, of poetry composed in quantitative meters, which furnish one rhythmic dimension (a regular distribution of long and short syllables) that musicians are free to coordinate with other patterns involving duration and various types of accent. The enduring cultural prestige of the pre-Islamic *qaṣā'id* 'odes' (singular, *qaṣīda*) in classical Arabic must have motivated, to varying degrees, many of the poets who created quantitative poetry in Persian, Hebrew, Chaghatai Turkish, Ottoman Turkish, Urdu, Swahili, and Hausa—to name only seven of the major languages for which a stock of quantitative meters was developed at some point during the past twelve centuries.

An eloquent and influential argument that "a tune is independent of the [poetic] meter, or of the lesser or greater number of syllables" was advanced by the great Jewish poet and philosopher Yehuda Ha-Levy (d. 1141) in the same section of his *Book of the Kuzari* in which he extolled the advantages of face-to-face conversation over writing (Shiloah 1992:55–56, 96–98). Ha-Levy's argument did not rule out all forms of notation: he remarked that certain features of oral communication—such as changes of pace, pauses that separate subjects, and differences between commands and requests—are effectively communicated by the *te'amîm* accents that were devised for biblical cantillation.

Whether, as al Faruqi (1979, 1985b) argues, secular performance genres came to be more highly esteemed the more closely they resembled the cantillation of religious texts is a controversial issue. But there can be no doubt that the rhythmic sensibilities of countless musicians benefited from hearing and participating in sophisticated practices of cantillation, as well as from exploiting the possibilities made available by quantitative poetry.

SEQUENCES AND COMPOUND FORMS

Listeners who are new to the music of the Middle East can quickly learn to appreciate the diverse ways in which instrumentalists interact with singers (some of whom are also instrumentalists, as in the Azerbaijani trio). No function is more important than supplying instrumental interludes, which in many performance genres offer a much-needed respite after the most intense passages of sung poetry. One large set of variables concerns the rhythmic and tonal relationships of the interludes to the music that precedes and follows them. Great composers, such as Riyāḍ al-Sunbāṭī (1906–1981), have designed impressive sequences in which one interlude is performed between a few sections, then replaced by a new interlude for the next few sections, and so on. Outstanding improvisers may be recognized by their ability to create effective transitions between the emotional coloring of one passage and the frame of mind that suits the poetry of the following passage.

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The density of events must vary if a performance is to hold the attention of listeners. Exchanges between singers and instrumentalists often involve overlapping entries which in a conversation would sound like interruptions but in music can show support while at the same time articulating a complementary perspective. Listeners whose musical habits were largely formed by the polyphonic music of Europe and the Americas have sometimes described Middle Eastern music as "monophonic," in other words "single-voiced." This term can be misleading to the extent that it directs attention away from the interactions through which performers create sonorous textures whose components cannot be enumerated as easily as the individual lines in, say, a four-voice fugue by J. S. Bach. Sometimes a singer is "shadowed" by one or more instrumentalists who follow every twist and turn in the singer's line almost (but not quite) as closely as possible. The precise points where instrumental figures begin and end are often left to the performer's discretion; as a result, the number of sounds that can be heard at any given moment and the harmonic relationships among them will fluctuate.

Many instruments and small ensembles are designed to allow for the continuous sounding of a drone—generally a complex sound in which certain partials of a fundamental pitch stand out. Three important classes of such instruments are long-necked plucked lutes with sympathetic strings, drone strings, or both (for instance, the *saz* of Turkey and Azerbaijan); double duct-flutes (such as the *donelī* of Baluchistan); and single-reed double pipes with either a conical or a cylindrical bore (such as the *mijwiz* of the Levant and the *duzele* of Kurdistan). The one- or two-stringed fiddles used to accompany some epic singing (such as the bedouin *rabābah*) for the most part play patterns that function as drones. Double-reed pipes with a conical or cylindrical bore (such as the *zurna* and *mei* or *balaban* of Turkey and Transcaucasia) are often played in pairs, with one player concentrating on the melody and a second player responsible for the drone. Similarly, in ensembles that include two or more stringed instruments, the open strings of one (such as the *setar* or *tanburag* of Baluchistan) may be strummed in a repeating rhythmic pattern. A unique genre in which a group of men responds to a vocal soloist by producing a compound vocal drone is the *nahma* ritual cycle of pearl divers along the Arabian Gulf.

Drones are established in order to be interrupted, then renewed. The same can be said of rhythmic patterns that are repeated a number of times (with or without melodic changes), then replaced by different patterns or by music that avoids repetition of fixed rhythms. The desire for interruptions or departures followed by returns has led to the development of suites or compound musical forms, which have a long history in the Middle East and the rest of Eurasia.

One reason to create a compound form is in order to tell a story without using words. Robert Lachmann (1929) drew a parallel between a flute piece about a fight with a lion that he had recorded from a Tunisian shepherd and the ancient Greek *nomos* describing Apollo's victory over the python. Two recorded versions of a Turkish

instrumental narrative, *Kara koyun* 'Black Sheep', use different instruments—the rim-blown flute *kaval* and the duct-flute *düdük*—and different sequences of musical figures to tell what is essentially the same story about a shepherd who wins his bride by meeting her father's challenge to play music that can prevent sheep from slaking their thirst (Brăiloiu 1984:disk 2, side A, track 1; Simon and Wegner 2000:CD 2, track 1). Other stories associated with instrumental pieces also account for the creation of the piece itself, or at least of its culminating section. In one type of plot, a ruler is informed of the death of his son or his favorite horse by an instrumental narrative newly composed for that purpose, in response to the ruler's threat to punish any bearer of bad tidings.

The creation of suites or compound forms must have made it easier for musicians to remember a large repertoire. One model of cyclic organization used by composers from the eighth through the early sixteenth centuries is a sequence of seven songs, such as the cycle about seven fortresses composed by Ma'bad (d. 743; Neubauer 1997:317–18, 352 n. 234). The most richly elaborated compound forms are cycles consisting of pieces and improvisations in a more or less prescribed sequence of genres—such as the *nūba* of North Africa, the *waṣla* of Egypt and the Levant, the Turkish *fasıl*, and the five great *fuṣūl* of the Iraqi *maqām*. Different types of sequence, some more formalized than others, have been worked out to meet the diverse needs of courts, Sufi lodges, circles of amateurs, the *naqqāra-khāne*, and in the twentieth century the concert hall (al Faruqi 1985a; Feldman 1996:177–192; Racy 1983).

A compound form conceived as a sequence of genres may or may not progress through a prescribed sequence of musical *maqāmāt* 'modes' (singular, *maqām*); in some cases each "movement" or major section of the compound form begins and ends in the same mode. Compositions or improvisations that move systematically through every available mode have constituted a genre of their own at certain times and places, sometimes to provide a synopsis of the modal system, at other times to challenge composers or performers to display their command of the entire system. Two Byzantine *stichera*, short monostrophic hymns, which move systematically through all eight modes of the *oktōēchos*, seem to have been composed as a synopsis (Strunk 1942:202–204; Husmann 1970:306, 314–315). As described by the great Timurid musician and theorist 'Abd al-Qāder Ibn Gheibī al-Marāghī (d. 1435), the vocal genre *koll ol-żorūb va 'l-nagham* 'compendium of rhythms and melodies' called not only for modulation through twelve primary modes (*maqāmāt*), six secondary modes (*āvāzāt*), and twenty-four branches (*sho'ab*) but also for systematic use of the available rhythmic cycles (Marāghī 1987 [1415]:249). A musician's ability to make a harmonious arrangement of the full range of modes was also tested by such Ottoman Turkish genres as the precomposed instrumental *küllî külliyat peşrev* 'compendium prelude' and the improvised *taksîm külli* (Feldman 1996:294–299). One Persian *dastgāh* 'system' in current use, *rāst panjgāh*, is sometimes said to have been assembled in large part from portions of other *dastgāh-hā*.

The idea of modulating through several—if not all—parts of a modal system is easily combined with the idea of a compound form made up of several genres. Different ways of joining the two concepts are evident in the Iraqi *fuṣūl* 'cycles', the Persian *radīf* 'row', and the Tajik-Uzbek *shashmaqom*, among others.

The long-standing interest in compound forms stimulated efforts to classify tonal and rhythmic patterns according to their potential functions—such as introducing, continuing or moving away, reaching a culmination, and returning or closing. Terms for music that fulfils these functions occur in all major languages of the Middle East—for example Arabic *qafla* 'lock' (a cadential pattern), Persian *forūd* 'descent' (an extended melodic descent toward a cadence), Azerbaijani *ayaq* 'foot', and Kurdish *paş-bend* 'after the verse'.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND SOCIAL DISTANCE

The development of compound forms provided much-needed opportunities for bringing together verses, rhythms, and melodies from highly diverse sources. A ceremony of the Qāderi dervishes in Iranian Kurdistan might include texts in Arabic, Persian, and Sorani Kurdish (During 1994). The Iraqi *maqām* is a particularly impressive achievement, incorporating both rural and urban genres, performed in both religious and secular settings, and with texts and vocables taken from dialectal Arabic, Persian, Kurdish, Turkish, and Hebrew as well as from literary Arabic; before the emigration of Iraqi Jews to Israel in 1949, Jewish instrumentalists and Muslim vocalists collaborated in performance of the *maqām* (Shiloah 1992:200–202). For most of its existence, the Tajik-Uzbek *shashmaqom* accomodated sung poetry in both Tajik (Persian) and Uzbek, but in the twentieth century nationalist pressures led to the artificial construction of separate Tajik and Uzbek "traditions" (Djumaev 1993).

Historians of European music have traced continuities in the traditions associated with a single language and nation, giving us excellent histories of, for example, "Italian music" and "Russian music." However, the model of national music histories is more misleading than helpful when applied to the Middle East, where the norm has been cultural interaction among speakers of two or more languages and among practitioners of several religions. Middle Eastern writers have often described such interactions by attributing a group of innovations to one outstanding individual.

In his remarks on the early history of Andalusian music, Aḥmad ibn Yūsuf al-Tīfāshī (d. 1253) reports that Ibn Bajja (d. 1139) "secluded himself for several years with skilled singing girls, whereupon he improved the *istihlāl* [a vocal prelude] and the *'amal* [another vocal genre] and combined the songs of the Christians with those of the East, thereby inventing a style (*ṭarīqa*) found only in Andalus, toward which the temperament of its people inclined, so that they rejected all others" (Monroe 1986–1987:256–257). Several points are noteworthy in al-Tīfāshī's account: the collaboration of a male innovator with "skilled singing girls"; the identification of vocal practices according to both religion (Christianity) and region (the Mashriq); acceptance of the new style because of its perceived compatibility with the Andalusian temperament (*ṭab'*); and the resulting obsolescence of older styles. In an earlier passage, al-Tīfāshī likewise claims that the adoption of stylistic innovations introduced to al-Andalus by Ziryāb (d. c. 850) caused all other styles to be abandoned. The topics and formats of these statements turn up continually in spoken as well as in written discourse.

A somewhat similar story, as told in the *Kitāb al-aghānī* 'Book of Songs' of al-Iṣfahānī (d. 967), is that of the singer Ibn Misjaḥ, who was active in Mecca during the reigns of the first six Umayyad caliphs (661–715). He is said to have traveled widely in order to assimilate the best aspects of several musical repertoires—Byzantine melodies, the Syrian *oktōēchos* (*al-alḥān al-ustūkhūsīya* or *al-luḥun al-thamāniya* in Arabic), songs from the Persian province of Fars, and the repertoire of the Persian short-necked lute *barbat* (Neubauer 1994:374–375). Two key verbs in al-Iṣfahānī's narrative form a complementary pair: *wa-akhadha* 'he assimilated' and *wa-alqā* 'he discarded'. Selecting the features one wishes to adopt from a foreign musical practice entails identifying and rejecting its undesirable features, in this case certain *nabarāt* 'vocalises' (singular, *nabra*) and melodies (*nagham*) that Ibn Misjaḥ deemed incompatible with Arabic vocal art. A more sociological account of the Arab assimilation of Persian and Byzantine vocal idioms was offered by Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406), who famously described "the craft of singing" as "the last of the crafts attained in civilization" and noted that the military successes of the Arabs in the first century of Islam led singers to abandon the courts of the Persians and Byzantines in order to seek their fortune in the Hijaz, where "Ma'bad and his class of singers . . . learned from them" (Ibn Khaldūn 1967:ii, 404). If they ever performed at the same gatherings, Ma'bad

and some of the singers whose vocalises he had rejected may have found occasion to dramatize their artistic differences.

How perceptions of cultural difference or social distance can be enacted in performance has remained a major concern of Middle Eastern musicians. A musician may avoid any reference to specific dance rhythms or to the whole area of dance. An entire category of performers, such as the *nashshādīn* of Yemen (Schuyler 1990), may be distinguished by its avoidance of all musical instruments. A listener who hears the options that performers have chosen is often in a position to recognize the options they have rejected.

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