

# Middle East and Central Asia Music Forum

## Monday November 7<sup>th</sup> 2016

### School of Oriental and African Studies

## Abstracts

Julian Harris (King's College, London)

### 'Ta'abiriya/'Expressionism' in Arab Music: Composition in the Iraqi School of Oud'

Many accounts of Arab classical music today in English-language scholarship emphasise the importance of *tarab* 'enchantment' aesthetics and song-based practice as a way of exploring questions of musical style, social significance, processes of creativity and composition-in-performance. However, as an oud student for the last seven years, studying with the London-based Iraqi master Ahmed Mukhtar, a problem surfaced in my oud-playing development for which '*tarab*' could not provide the answer. The Iraqi school of oud is famous for its tradition of solo playing, and as I've recently discovered, the final step along this path is to compose your own soloist music. But how? (This isn't usually taught). And why do so many of the *tarab* explanations and conventions stop short of producing the kind of music that contemporary soloists are making?

In this paper I investigate the aesthetics of *al-musiqa al-ta'abiriya* ('expressionism' or 'expressive music'), which despite having been an influential force in Twentieth-Century musical thought in Iraq and the wider region has surprisingly remained on the periphery of contemporary scholarship. Assuming a composer's-eye view (or at least, enriching my own student's-eye view) with interviews from a handful of Iraqi masters, drawing from Iraqi scholarship and reflecting on my own practice, we'll explore how a small constellation of design solutions – the voice of the oud, sentence thinking, colour music and *taswiriya* or 'depictive' music – combine to invigorate contemporary composition. And in so doing, we'll see that *seeing* through the oud can help provide a more balanced picture of modernist thought across many art forms in Iraq and beyond.

**Cristina Moreno Almeida (Middle East Centre & Department of Media and Communications, LSE)**

**“Sell Everything Except Yourself”: Understanding the Backlash Against Moroccan Rappers’ Involvement in Organised Political Campaigns**

Throughout the past five years, public, private and ‘anonymous’ initiatives have encouraged well-known Moroccan personalities from the cultural scene to participate in music videos with rappers as leading voices. In a country where political parties and civil society are looked at with suspicion, many view these contributions as a sign of ‘co-option’ as well as a loss of rappers’ artistic independence. Rappers’ participation in these initiatives, including those who have carved an ‘anti-establishment’ persona, have been particularly criticized by Moroccan audiences. Despite criticisms, these campaigns have also stimulated lively debates on the artists’ role in society and the state of Moroccan politics. This paper traces songs and music videos of different social and political campaigns to examine the use of rappers’ symbolic capital and the audiences’ responses. This paper questions why it is that when rappers decide to actively take part in an organised political campaign they instigate vibrant instances of political participation among young rap fans. In this vein, what are the implications of these instances of participation to the cultural and political field? Methodologically, I look at different campaigns during the past 5 years in Morocco that have produced a music video involving a rapper as part of their course of action. I carry out a textual and visual analysis to identify aesthetics that characterize these songs and videos and I examine the online debates as a result of the publication of these videos on Facebook and YouTube. The many debates that these songs and music videos have prompted challenge notions of political apathy and passivity linked to youth’s disbelief in the Moroccan political field. The aim of this paper is then to unpack narratives that depict rappers as ‘sell-outs’ arguing that in fact, these songs have significance in stimulating as well as showcasing young people’s political participation and awareness of the country's political scene.

**John Morgan O’Connell (Cardiff University)**

**Turân: A Turkic Myth in Turkish Music**

This paper concerns the musical articulation of Turkish nationalism during the Second Constitutional Period (1908-1918). In particular, it examines a contemporary fascination amongst artists and ideologues with a mystical land called Turân, a new homeland in Central Asia to replace an old empire in West Asia. Of especial importance, this imaginary nation was exclusively inhabited by peoples of Turkic stock. Although the notion of Turân can be found in Persian literature, and the concept of Turanianism was developed by European linguists, the Turân that was envisaged by Turkish commentators was distinct. It was a Turkish version of Lebensraum, a pristine land characterised by a single race (the Turks) and a specific religion (Islam).

In this paper, I will analyse a musical composition entitled the Turân March (tr. *Turân Marşı*). Composed specifically for the recently-revived Janissary Band (which was resident at the time in the Military Museum), I will show how music served to reinforce ideology at a critical moment in Turkish history. By validating the direct connection between blood and country, the composition reflects the nationalist prejudices of contemporary writers (such as Halide Edib [1884-1964]) and poets (such as Ziya Gökalp [1876-1924]) who employed the idea of Turân using a vernacular style of Turkish to imagine a Turkic heartland freed from the debilitating influence of non-Turks and non-Muslims. Significantly, the myth of Turân would soon be replaced by the reality of Turkism with catastrophic consequences for resident minorities in the Ottoman Empire.

**Erum Naqvi (Pratt Institute, New York)**

### **'Gigging Classical in Iran'**

The term 'classical' is often applied in translation to the genre of Iranian music known as *musiqi-e sonnati* (traditional music), normally identified by a form of music making that involves extensive extemporization based on a rigorous structural framework called the *radif*. Historically, *sonnati* performance took place in intimate settings among small groups of individuals. Performances were not typically limited to the time conventions of contemporary concert norms, sometimes lasting for hours or taking place intermittently over the course of an entire day or several days. Performing in this style was also not normally something done for money. Today, however, classically trained musicians who are working the legal concert circuit in Iran face a somewhat different picture of musical practice. Many tend to categorize themselves as classical musicians, though they do not always perform according to the traditional parameters of *radif*-based performance, or *sonnati*-proper. And in classical gigs and concerts, they often move between more traditional and less traditional performances: the central difference being the extent to which the concert on offer is *radif*-based. Some distinguish *radif*-based performance, '*sonnati*', from something like new-classical performance, colloquially known as '*kelasik*' or '*dastgahi*'. This state of affairs raises questions about new developments in classical music that fall just outside *radif*-based performance, and about the perceived conceptual relationship between *sonnati* and new-classical performance as the genre evolves. This paper explores some of these dynamics through the reflections of performers who navigate Tehran's classical concert circuit today.

**Laudan Nooshin (City, University of London)**

**'Whose Liberation? Iranian Popular Music and the Fetishisation of Resistance'**

In November 2013, Pharrell Williams' song 'Happy', originally written for the soundtrack to 'Despicable Me 2', was re-released as a single together with a music video billed as 'the world's first 24-hour music video'. Comprising images of people in Los Angeles dancing and miming along to the song, the video was posted on the website [24hoursofhappy.com](http://24hoursofhappy.com). Soon after, tribute videos started appearing online and within a short period 'Happy' went viral with videos of happy, dancing people from all over the world. Wanting to be part of this global phenomenon, in the spring of 2014 a group of young Tehranis made their own video and posted it on YouTube. Many aspects of 'Happy in Tehran' - including the public expression of joy, dancing in public, and women without head covering - challenged local cultural and legal boundaries on behaviour in public space. The young people were arrested, prompting an outcry, both within Iran and internationally; they were released soon after and eventually received suspended sentences in September 2014.

This paper focuses on the case of 'Happy in Tehran' and what it reveals of the representation of Iranian popular music outside Iran, and specifically the somewhat romanticized discourses of 'resistance' and 'freedom' which have tended to characterise both journalistic and scholarly writings in this area. I consider the ways in which the 'Happy in Tehran' incident was reported in the media outside Iran and offer alternative readings of the video and its meanings. The paper considers how such reductionist views feed into wider regimes of orientalist representation and ultimately asks whose agenda such fetishisation of resistance serves.

**Roundtable with Oxford Maqam (Tarik Bashir, Yara Abou-El-Fadl, Martin Stokes and Ahmad al-Salhi)**

**'New Questions for Old Recording Technologies: Oxford Maqam's Wax Cylinder Project'**

The stylistic norms of the Egyptian recording industry were shaped by wax cylinder recordings late in the 19th century, norms that were transferred from wax to shellac to vinyl and to other media in the 20<sup>th</sup>. Little is known, other than anecdotally, about how these norms took shape, or what the broader implications of wax cylinder recording were for professional musicians and the music they sang and played. Oxford Maqam, an ensemble that uses performance practice as a way of approaching a variety of research questions pertaining to Nahda era Egyptian (and other) music, recently made a CD's worth of wax cylinders with Vulcan Records in Sheffield. Vulcan records is owned and operated by Duncan Miller, who has been making acoustic recordings on wax cylinders since 1979. Repertory chosen for this particular project fed back material learned from early recordings. This discussion will explore the questions, the process, the recordings, and some lessons learned.

**Ilana Webster-Kogen (SOAS, University of London)**

**'The Horn on the Move: Music among Ethiopian and Eritrean Migrants in the Middle East'**

The great migration of 2015 brought migrants and refugees to Europe from across the war-torn Middle East, dramatically reconfiguring the demographics of their sending countries. Meanwhile, a less-widely-publicized migration northwards has been sending young people from the Horn of Africa (Ethiopia and Eritrea) to the Middle East in substantial numbers as refugees and labour migrants. Offered little in the way of social welfare, these migrants fleeing military servitude or a bleak economic future now constitute the bottom rung of the labour force in the Gulf states, Israel, and Lebanon. Absent strong social networks, many of these migrants look to religious life as a form of protection and a way to strengthen ties in their new countries. This paper examines the music of Horn migrants to the Middle East, especially the religious music of converts to Islam and Pentecostalism, as a vehicle for understanding how Horn migrants use religious practice to improve their prospects and material circumstances. Focusing in particular on services in Tel Aviv and Abu Dhabi, I argue that Ethiopian and Eritrean migrants opt for new religious movements that, in contrast to the Orthodox Church back home that distances individuals from transformative religious experience, offer better futures to their practitioners. I will demonstrate that for Horn migrants across the Middle East, religious services constitute a space where labour migrants are transformed, via embodied liturgical practices, into agentive subjects, and that musical performance offers them a sense of control over their lives.

**Baha Yetkin (Independent Scholar and Performer)**

**'Ottoman-Turkish Makam-based Improvisation on the Turkish-style Oud'**

Turkish Classical Music is a prestigious art tradition based on the rich heritage born from the multitude of voices and cultural diversity that characterized the Ottoman Empire. The aim of this presentation is to demonstrate and explain aspects of Ottoman-Turkish *makams* (modes) on the Turkish style *oud*, with particular attention to some specific Turkish *oud* ornaments. Do we distinguish between the different *makams* only in terms of pentachords, tetrachords and intervals? What is the role of the *seyir*, with all its features, in giving a *makam* its character? I argue that the movement of *seyir* plays an important role in establishing the character of the *makam*. I will demonstrate how two different *makams* with the same scale can be distinguished by examining the pattern of *seyir*.