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The Cello in Arab Music, 1920s–2020s: Egyptian Cultural Policy, Cultural Security, and Performer Perspectives

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The Cello in Arab Music, 1920s–2020s: Egyptian Cultural Policy, Cultural Security, and  
Performer Perspectives

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts in  
Music

by

Kira Weiss

Committee in charge:

Professor Scott Marcus, Chair

Professor Paul Amar

Professor Dwight Reynolds

March 2022

The thesis of Kira Weiss is approved.

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Paul Amar

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Dwight Reynolds

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Scott Marcus, Chair

March 2022

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Performer Perspectives

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by

Kira Weiss



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## ABSTRACT

The Cello in Arab Music, 1920s–2020s: Egyptian Cultural Policy, Cultural Security, and Performer Perspectives

by

Kira Weiss

“The Cello in Arab Music, 1920s–2020s: Egyptian Cultural Policy, Cultural Security, and Performer Perspectives” focuses on the historical and contemporary use of the cello in Arab music, using the instrument as a window into issues of heritage, cultural security, and individual, national, pan-national and diasporic identities. Part I focuses on the cello’s emergence in Arab music ensembles in Cairo in the late 1920s, including in the ensembles of superstar singers such as Umm Kulthum and Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab. Part II focuses on three contentious moments in Egyptian musical history: 1. The First International Congress of Arab Music (1932); 2. The founding of the state-funded Arab music ensemble, *Firqat al-Musiqa al-‘Arabiyya* (1967); 3. The founding of two annual music festivals by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture (1992). I argue that the cello was initially perceived as a *threat* to Arab musical heritage by Egyptian elites and European scholars because of the musical and socio-political climates of 1932 and 1967. Since the 1990s, however, the cello has become “protected” and patronized by the Ministry of Culture and given unprecedented prominence in the annual, state-funded Arab Music Festival. This section explores the processes by which specific elements of a music tradition become securitized or “protected” by state-affiliated organizations. Using the cello as a case study, I examine how what was originally deemed a foreign intrusion that threatened the integrity and authenticity of Arab music has been transformed into a central element of that tradition.

Part III takes a transnational approach, centering the voices of five cellists from Egypt, Palestine, and Syria and using their experiences to document the cello's role in Arab music ensembles in Egypt and in the United States. Drawing on interviews and lessons with these musicians, I prioritize issues of diasporic and national identity, performers' lived experiences, and conceptualizations of technique. I define the instrumental idiom of the cello in Arab music ensembles by combining the perspectives of these five cellists with analysis of the cellists in Umm Kulthum's legendary *firqa* (orchestra) and my own perspectives as a long-term cellist. While this study focuses primarily on the cello, I use the instrument as an avenue into cultural policy, heritagization, and the construction of Egyptian and pan-Arab national and cultural identities through the securitization of "Arab music." This work thus seeks to contribute to scholarship on Arab music and cultural policy as well as scholarship on the indigenization of musical instruments.

## NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION

This thesis includes many translations from Arabic to English and a few from French to English. I feature translations by Arabic-speaking scholars whenever possible and have supplied my own translations when needed with the gracious help of Dr. Dwight Reynolds. For every translation, I include the text in the original language in a footnote. I follow the transliteration guidelines set forth by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* with the following two exceptions: First, I choose to provide a full transliteration of names the first time they appear in the text. This practice is intended to help readers search for these names in the Arabic script. Second, some of my transliterations are based on pronunciation in the Egyptian dialect. For example, I use the “g” of Egyptian Colloquial Arabic rather than the “j” (ج) of Modern Standard Arabic when appropriate.

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## **Foreword: A Statement on Decolonization and Positionality**

I write this thesis at a moment of reckoning and hopefully one of transformation in the field of ethnomusicology. Over the last few years, multiple events have rocked the field, coming to a head with Danielle Brown’s open letter to the Society for Ethnomusicology on racism in music studies—particularly in the field of ethnomusicology—and the urgent call to decolonize ethnomusicology.<sup>1</sup> This field has always been marked by self-reflexivity, sometimes to “a degree of neurosis,” as Dr. Birgitta Johnson put it in her plenary talk at the Society for Ethnomusicology Southern California and Hawai’i Chapter (SEMSCHC 2021), but the current critiques leveled against the field of ethnomusicology are hardly neurotic. This historic moment calls for more than reflexivity; it calls for a fundamental restructuring of ethnomusicology.

It would be remiss not to address these issues for several reasons. First, my research falls into the category of white European and American scholars researching “non-Western” or non-EuroAmerican music. This category of research has dominated the field of ethnomusicology since its founding in the 1950s. Second, my research methodology is “old-school,” stemming from Mantle Hood’s model of bimusicality in which ethnomusicologists learn to *play* and participate in the music of “other” traditions and cultures rather than researching from a strictly observational stance. While this hands-on approach has yielded engaged ethnographic scholarship built on participant observation, its premise is rooted in the concept of “us versus them.”

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mypeopletellstories.com/blog/open-letter>.

Decolonization has often been used metaphorically in the humanities, referring to social justice writ large (Tuck and Yang 2012). Recently, however, scholars and activists have fought for a reclamation of this word to mean specific, political, and radical changes in power relations and world views (ibid). Decolonization involves ceding native lands, making reparations, and dismantling settler-colonial institutions. American neoliberal universities continue to operate along settler-colonial logics, as do the scholarly disciplines they house. In the case of ethnomusicology, decolonizing processes can be applied by rethinking teaching, research methodologies, ethnographic processes and representations; writing for multiple publics (including those researched); and being activists for reparations and the return of stolen lands and materials, including those in our own archives.

In “Decolonization for Ethnomusicology and Music Studies in Higher Education,” Luis Chávez and Russell Skelchy suggest ten practical approaches and projects to begin the process of decolonizing music studies (2019). Chávez and Skelchy argue that ethnomusicology, more than other disciplines within music studies, has “the potential to be a decolonizing project of music studies” (ibid:116). Although ethnomusicology has a colonial legacy and, arguably, has perpetuated colonial practices, Chávez and Skelchy see the potential for a decolonizing project led by ethnomusicologists which would involve:

- 1) Decentering western art music as the focus of music studies
- 2) Listening to and implementing indigenous and non-Eurocentric methodologies and knowledge systems
- 3) Implementing decolonizing approaches in the classroom and in research practice

Decolonization is a *collective* project, involving group efforts and institutions, but must also be confronted at the individual level. In my work, I have tried to respond to the demands listed above. Although I come from a background in western art music, I have tried to decenter these modes of understanding cello playing, technique, and ensemble roles,

instead listening to cellists' own epistemologies and ways of knowing. That said, the conceptual frameworks of many of the Arab cellists I worked with are often rooted in western art music, using its terminology, frameworks, and practices. These frameworks have certainly been shaped by Eurocentric and settler-colonial logics. I have not de-emphasized the role of western art music in their musical identities and understandings, but rather accounted for it in relation to non-Eurocentric methodologies and knowledge systems. Here it is critical to recognize *coloniality* or “long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations” (Maldonado-Torres 2007:243). As a cellist trained in classical music in a settler-colonial society, I recognize the presence of coloniality in my *own* thinking as well as in the perspectives of the cellists I work with.

In the classroom, I try to use decolonial practices in my role as a teaching assistant, facilitating classroom discussions for courses ranging from “World Music” to “North American Popular Music” to “Music and/as Power.” In this role, I have tried to incorporate my own research to introduce students to the idea of ethnography as a tool for mutual understanding and social change (see, for example, *Decolonizing Ethnography* 2019). I also aim to equip students with the skills they need to engage in their own processes of decolonization through critical pedagogy (hooks 1994).

Resisting the ethnographic practice of controlling representations, I acknowledge coloniality in my research and attempt to show how the ways of being and knowing are negotiated at the personal and institutional levels. I recognize that this is not enough. Tuck and Yang identify six “moves to innocence” that settlers and scholars often take to assuage

feelings of white guilt (2012). In some ways, this foreword is reminiscent of one of these “moves to innocence,” but my intention is to write this foreword as a pledge to take part in the ongoing, collective efforts to decolonize ethnomusicology. In an address to the Society for American Music, Tamara Levitz rejected white guilt as the basis for action and instead called for a “collective moral disgust” powerful enough that members will “no longer tolerate structures of white supremacy [and] demand immediate change” (2017:8). Rather than presenting a tract of my own white guilt, I express my own moral disgust at the colonial logics that remain pervasive in our field.

In thinking about the concept of “bimusicality,” musical traditions, and heritage, I have been inspired by ethnomusicologist Anne Rasmussen’s perspective wherein musicality is not intrinsically connected to heritage but is part of a “patchwork” of musical experiences:

Whether or not one is born and bred in a musical tradition, one’s musicality is the result of a patchwork of experience. A culturally specific sense of musicality may certainly be developed through the process of being native to that culture, but musicians’ musicalities are also collections of encounters and choices: pastiches of performances they have experienced, the lessons they have taken, the people with whom they have played, the other musicians they admire, other musics that they play or enjoy, and the technical and cognitive limitations of their own musicianship. (2004:225)

With extensive knowledge, practice, and deep engagement in a music-culture, Rasmussen argues that it is possible to gain competency in a music tradition. By dedicating years of study to a music tradition, with the permission of the community, it is possible to develop expertise in a tradition that has no connection to the culture one was brought up in.

Musicality in a given tradition is not inherently connected to cultural background but is part of a “patchwork” of experiences and engagements.

The best-known example of a cellist who has cultivated musicality out of a “patchwork” of many musical traditions is Yo-Yo Ma, legendary as a musician and for his

cross-cultural work with the Silk Road Ensemble. In a conversation with Yo-Yo Ma through the UC Santa Barbara Music Department (April 2021), I asked Yo-Yo Ma how he adapts his techniques and mindset to play music influenced by many traditions. He responded that it is imperative to move beyond thinking of music traditions as “separate” and to turn the word “other” into “us.” He also emphasized the importance of transcending technique and seeking to understand cultural context. To demonstrate his point, Yo-Yo Ma played an excerpt of “*Morgh e-Sahar*” [Bird of Dawn], a well-known Persian song that he learned from his long-time collaborator and friend, *kamancheh* player Kayhan Kalhor. Ma first demonstrated the melody robotically, with good intonation and technique but little musical feeling. He shared that the mode of the song (*dastgah*), *Mahur*, had initially sounded like an out-of-tune D major scale and it had been difficult to play the correct pitches. Once he learned the cultural context of the song, studying *radif* and Rumi’s poetry, he was able to transcend technique and understand the music as part of a shared humanity. Ma played the same excerpt of the song, this time with expression and musicality.

I value Yo-Yo Ma’s universalist perspective while holding space for the de-colonial critique that many forms of music and knowledge are *not* part of a shared humanity. Some are intended to be inaccessible, belonging to only specially initiated members. Music is culture-specific; even if “shared,” in some sense, music is not inherently part of a universal, shared humanity because of its culturally based meanings. Yo-Yo Ma’s idea of turning the “other” into “us” does not account for the musics and knowledge that are intentionally inaccessible to people outside a music-culture. The idea of all musics existing as part of a shared humanity is problematic, especially when it comes to histories of exploitation. There are musics for which we do not have a culture’s permission to “turn into *us*.” Further, it is

increasingly common for musicians to appropriate elements from a music-culture with little understanding of the tradition. I do not intend to discount Yo-Yo Ma's perspective. Having collaborated with Kayhan Kalhor and many other musicians from various musical traditions for over two decades, he has dedicated his life to working toward mutual understanding and collaboration through music, even working with the United Nations. Yet the idea of universalism and shared humanity in music becomes complicated by histories of colonialism and imperialism.

Responding to postcolonial critiques of universalism, sociologist Sari Hanafi advocates for a *soft universalism*—one that recognizes the universality of certain global human *issues* such as poverty, *concepts* such as democracy, and *values* such as human rights. Postcolonial theorists have largely rejected the notion of universality on the grounds of so-called “universal values” as justification for colonial and imperial rule. Hanafi sees value in returning to a “softer” form of universalism, however, that accounts for local particularism while considering larger cross-cultural issues and phenomena that achieve normativity through “a collective historical learning process” (UCSB Global Studies colloquium lecture, Oct. 2021).

My work deals with soft universalist concepts and issues such as musical heritage and cultural policy. Although these concepts manifest in different forms geographically and historically, they are cross-cultural phenomena that can be useful tools. In my research, these concepts extend my specific arguments about the cello in Arab music into a broader realm of global issues such as cultural policy, heritage construction, and the formation of ethno-national categories such as “Arab.”

The story of the cello's integration into eastern Arab music is connected to the colonial encounter in Egypt and the so-called Arab world. I dedicate a significant section of this thesis to the First International Congress of Arab music (Cairo 1932), a congress in which many prominent European comparative musicologists were summoned to help preserve and revitalize Arab music. I recognize that by giving this conference a central place in my narrative, I reassign importance to an event marked by the continued colonial presence and colonized mindset in Egypt. Decolonizing the field of ethnomusicology mandates an honest assessment of how comparative musicologists, and later ethnomusicologists, have been implicated in the colonial encounter and thus shaped the heritagization and institutionalization of many forms of music.

The very term *al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya*<sup>2</sup> emerged in the colonial encounter, popularized at the 1932 Congress. However, teachers, performers, and consumers of *al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya* do not necessarily reproduce colonial institutions, relationships, and modes of thinking. The addition of the cello in Egyptian ensembles in the late 1920s was certainly connected to Egypt's colonial encounter, but it would be too reductive to understand the cello as a colonial instrument. Although *al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya* was reconceptualized and reconfigured in the colonial encounter, musicians who perform this category of music have created new relational modes of being and sounding. While Egypt's colonial past remains operational in certain musical institutions and policies, this is not always the case. Despite its colonial roots and the initial emphasis on modernizing Arab

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<sup>2</sup> The literal translation of *al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya* is "Arab music," and here this term refers to the "category of secular urban music" distinguished by the use of distinct modes (*maqāmāt*), rhythmic patterns (*īqā'*), vocal and instrumental compositional forms, ornamentation, and vocal and instrumental styles. The term *al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya* became widely used in the 1920s and 1930s and has been used to describe both traditional Arab music (pre-20<sup>th</sup> century, known as *al-turāth* or "the heritage") as well as the music of the stars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century including Umm Kulthum and Muhammad 'Abd al-Wahhab (*al-jadīd*, or "the new") (El-Shawan 1980b:86).



music along Western lines, *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* has *not* taken on the characteristics of Eurocentric “classical music,” for instance, and occupies a separate category between what might be considered “art music” and “popular music” in Euro-American contexts. Likewise, cellists who perform *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* have developed specific styles and techniques that differ dramatically from those of Western art music. Even today, cellists continue to challenge and further innovate the role of the cello in eastern Arab music, most recently by treating the instrument as a solo improvisational instrument. In my research, I show coloniality in Arab music while demonstrating how musicians respond to and challenge colonial legacies.

### Positionality

Decolonizing ethnomusicology involves self-reflexivity and recognition of the colonial logics that continue to operate in ethnomusicological scholarship, institutions, and networks. Recognizing privilege and power is a step toward decolonization, and I include the following positionality statement to situate myself in this study. Again, this statement represents a long-term commitment to decolonizing my own ways of knowing and being through community engagement and collaborative projects, decolonized listening practices, community-based participatory research, repatriation, engagement with indigenous epistemologies, and social/political action.

I come to this study with years of training in Western art music. In college, I worked as a semi-professional cellist, performing with two symphony orchestras in the North State region of California and maintaining a full private teaching studio. My introduction to “Middle Eastern music” was through the frame of Western art music. In 2010, composer

Mohammed Fairouz came to my hometown for a premiere of his compositions, and I learned one of his compositions for solo cello inspired by *The Ruba‘iyyāt* prior to the performance. The same year, I was invited to play cello with Natacha Atlas, an Egyptian-Belgian fusion singer who performs in a style she calls *cha‘abi moderne*. The violinist in the band, Samy Bashai [*Sāmī Bishay*], sent me recordings and sheet music a week before the show. At that point, I was unfamiliar with quarter tones and knew nothing about *maqām*, so I spent many hours playing along with the recordings, trying to match the intonation. My interest in Middle Eastern music was sparked that year and led me to pursue research on the cello in Middle Eastern musics.

In 2018, I organized an Arab music concert and workshop series at Humboldt State University, featuring violinist Georges Lammam [*Jūrj Lammām*] and his ensemble. That year, I attended the Middle East Camp in Mendocino where I studied with Georges Lammam and Dr. Scott Marcus and in the fall, I began my graduate studies at UC Santa Barbara working with Dr. Scott Marcus as my advisor. For the last three years I have performed with the UCSB Middle East Ensemble, gaining command over a wide-ranging repertoire of Arab and Middle Eastern music and performing two extended improvisations [*tāqāsīm*-s] in formal concerts. I have taken extensive *maqām* lessons with Dr. Marcus along with *tāqāsīm* lessons on cello and *‘ūd*. These lessons in *maqām* and *tāqāsīm* have been a cornerstone in my education at UC Santa Barbara, providing me with a musical framework and vocabulary for understanding and playing *tāqāsīm*, an art form which is undertheorized and often difficult for instrumentalists to describe, codify, and teach.

In April 2020, I began studying Arab music with several cellists online as lockdowns extended across the world due to COVID-19. Over the course of a year and a half, I took

lessons and conducted interviews with five cellists via ZOOM. Then, in the summer of 2021, I spent a month in Cairo on a research trip, meeting cellists, attending numerous concerts, and studying with Dr. Emad Ashour who is widely recognized as one of the first cellists to establish the cello as a solo, improvising instrument in Arab music. Dr. Ashour invited me to join his cello studio at the Higher Institute of Arab Music in Cairo where I hope to study from fall 2022–2023.

I share my musical and personal background to position myself in this research. In this thesis, I offer my own perspectives as a cellist, but I primarily seek to provide an account that centers the perspectives and experiences of cellists who perform *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* professionally. In my research, I recognize my position and biases in an effort to expose and decenter Euro-American systems of knowledge and hierarchies. I have taken decolonial approaches through citational practice, research practices and methodologies, and the exposure of coloniality as an ongoing and pervasive structure in *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya*.

## Introduction

At the First International Congress of Arab Music held in Cairo (1932), the Musical Instruments Committee declared that there was “no need” for the cello in Egyptian music, with its “excessive pathos and sentimentality” and “domineering quality of sound” (Racy 1991a:76). Yet the cello had already been added to several Egyptian *takht*-s, or small ensembles, by the late 1920s. Despite the proclamation made by the Musical Instruments Committee in 1932, by the end of the 1930s the cello was firmly established in the ensembles of the most prominent artists of the day, including the legendary *firqa* of Umm Kulthum (*Umm Kulthūm*). As the *takht* expanded into a larger ensemble called the *firqa*, it became common for ensembles to include two or three cellists.<sup>3</sup>

Just over a century ago, the cello was peripheral to eastern Arab music if not outside the tradition altogether, but today the cello has become part of the standard instrumentation of Arab music ensembles that perform *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya*.<sup>4</sup> To understand this historical shift, it is critical to examine the ideologies behind including or excluding the cello in eastern Arab music ensembles, aesthetic and affective considerations, and the role of cultural policy. Additionally, it is important to center the first-hand experiences of cellists who perform Arab music.

In this thesis, I explore the history of the cello in Arab music in Egypt and in the eastern Arab Middle East. I begin with a discussion of the history of bowed string instruments in the region, showing the circulation of bowed string instruments from the

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<sup>3</sup> “*Takht*” refers to a small ensemble with one of each instrument whereas *firqa*-s often featured multiple violins and other instruments.

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this thesis, the term *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* [Arab music] refers to a category of music that was re-conceptualized in the 1930s as “Arab music” rather than “Eastern music” [*al-mūsīqā al-sharqiyya*]. This genre is distinct from *sha‘bi* (popular-class urban music often played at Sufi *mulids* and weddings), *shababi*, *madh* and other genres (Puig 2006). I provide a more detailed definition of *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* in Part II, below.

Middle East to Europe and back again. I then document the controversial integration of the cello in Arab music from the 1920s to the 1960s, analyzing conference proceedings, policy recommendations, and articles in the popular press. I document the cello's developing role in Umm Kulthum's legendary *firqa* (orchestra) and other contemporary ensembles. Finally, I show the recent acceptance and celebration of the cello as part of the standard instrumentation of eastern Arab music ensembles.<sup>5</sup> Examining pivotal moments and movements in the rise of the cello in eastern Arab music, my research shows how instruments that are initially foreign to a given culture can become indigenized.

I begin with a series of questions: How did the cello become a fixture in eastern Arab music ensembles? Who were the actors—individual and institutional—that led this development? Given the fact that the cello originated in Western Europe and is associated with Western art music, to what extent was it embraced in the eastern Arab world? How has the position of the cello in *al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya* shifted over the last century? What are some of the specific techniques, skill sets, and competencies required to play *al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya* on the cello? Drawing on existing scholarship, ethnography, and archival work, I explore each of these questions.

I have chosen to focus on Egypt, and specifically Cairo, for several reasons. First, Cairo was the center of *al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya* in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when the cello was first included in Arab music ensembles. The first documented instances of the cello being used in *takht*-s, or traditional small ensembles, occurred in Egypt. Second, Cairo was considered the cultural capital of the Arab region for most of the twentieth century, particularly from the 1950s–1970s when Cairo was “the undisputed cultural—and political,

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<sup>5</sup> My larger focus is on Egypt and the Arab countries of the eastern Mediterranean, including Palestine/Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. The use of the cello in Iraq deserves its own study.

social, and religious—capital of the Arab Middle East” (Sadek 2006:153). Cairo’s cultural hegemony meant that musical developments that originated in Egypt were quickly adopted in other Arab countries.

My work contributes to a body of scholarship about instruments used in eastern Arab music such as the *nāy* (Cyr 2004; Oostrum 2004), the *riqq* (Stottlemeyer 2014), and the *zurna* (Shaheen 2012; Espinosa 2019).<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to ethnomusicologist Lillie Gordon’s dissertation on the “in-betweenness” of the violin in modern Egypt (2014). Drawing on postcolonial theory, Gordon uses the concept of in-betweenness to argue that the violin’s position in Arab music gives it unique political and social efficacy in Egypt. By emphasizing in-betweenness rather than static oppositional categories, Gordon emphasizes the fluid and dynamic nature of the monolithic concepts of East versus West, highlighting the interstitial spaces and processes in which violinists participate in Arab music. Her work has been foundational to my research and analysis.

There are no English-language publications that focus on cello in the Middle East, with the exception of Ghyas Zheidieh’s [*Ghiyās Zaydiyya*] 2020 DMA thesis on a cello concerto by Syrian composer Nouri Iskandar [*Nūrī Iskandar*] and a 2018 work by Ribal El Kallab [*Rībāl al-Killāb*].<sup>7</sup> Zheidieh’s thesis contributes to an understanding of the cello’s history and role in eastern Arab art music ensembles over the last century and associated issues such as circulation, globalization, and historical-political relationships between governmental institutions and Arab music ensembles.

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<sup>6</sup> Andrea Shaheen changed her name to Andrea Shaheen Espinosa; both names refer to the same author.

<sup>7</sup> Ribal El Kallab wrote a thesis entitled “The Cello in Lebanon: History, Development and Role” (2018), but I have not been able to access his work.

Methodologically, this project combines ethnography, historical analysis, and performance practice. The ethnographic work for this thesis was conducted virtually from 2020–2021 and in person during a month-long research trip in Cairo in the summer of 2021. My research is grounded in “multi-sited ethnography,” involving multiple *physical* sites and *conceptual* sites that move beyond a single framing concept (Qureshi 2000). My cello functioned as my principal ethnographic “site” as most of my ethnography was conducted while sitting “at” the cello, connecting virtually with cellists across the United States and in Egypt who simultaneously sat “at” their cellos. The cello served not only as an expressive instrument but also as an instrument of connectivity and as an ethnographic *site* of exchange.

My methodology combines ethnography with historical and qualitative research. My research “sites” span the physical-virtual continuum. Social media and file-sharing sites have been as central to my research. This includes historic recordings of Umm Kulthum’s *firqa* posted on YouTube as well as live updates posted ephemerally on Instagram stories. For the cellists I worked with, social media is not merely a platform for promoting or distributing their music but is constitutive in forming and shaping their musical identities and sounds. The musical identities they have built on social networking services (SNSs) such as Facebook and Instagram are co-constitutive with their offline lives as musicians.

In my physical-virtual approach to ethnography, I am influenced by Kiri Miller’s argument that the virtual and visceral are connected through embodied practice. Miller conceives of “playing along” as a form of participatory culture that bridges the gap between virtual and actual performance in the context of interactive digital media (2012). The false binary between the “virtual” and the “actual” was made increasingly apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic. While I did not intend for my ethnographic research to be primarily

virtual, this methodological approach proved fruitful. Most of my interviews, lessons, conversations, and performance observations took place online because of travel restrictions, allowing me to work with cellists of many backgrounds living across the United States and in Cairo. Using cellos as physical ethnographic “sites” linked digitally, this ethnographic work was both virtual *and* actual.

I combine ethnographic and practice-based research with historical analysis. In Part I, I provide a brief history of bowed string instruments in the Middle East since the 10<sup>th</sup> century to demonstrate the ongoing circulation of these instrumental forms and the historical link between the *rabāb*, *kamanja*, and the “violin family.” I describe the incorporation of the cello in early Cairene *takht* ensembles beginning in the 1920s, focusing primarily on Umm Kulthum’s *takht*. I choose to focus on Umm Kulthum’s *takht* and *firqa* (orchestra) not only because her ensemble was one of the first to incorporate the cello, but also because Umm Kulthum is widely recognized as the most prominent Arab singer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Ethnomusicologist Virginia Danielson has written the most authoritative source on Umm Kulthum’s life and career.<sup>8</sup> In her biography, *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthum, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century*, Danielson introduces Umm Kulthum as “the voice and face of Egypt”—“unquestionably the most famous singer in the twentieth-century Arab world” (1997). Umm Kulthum’s career lasted over 50 years, beginning around 1910 when she sang with her father in the eastern Delta region of Egypt. In her lifetime, she performed over 300 songs across the Middle East and remains iconic not only in Egypt but across the MENA region and beyond.

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<sup>8</sup> Laura Lohman addresses Umm Kulthum’s later years in her book *Umm Kulthum: Artistic Agency and the Shaping of an Arab Legend, 1967–2007*.



Umm Kulthum began to include a cello in her live performances and recordings in the late 1920s, a decade after beginning her career in Cairo. Other artists began to include the cello in their *takht*-s around the same time, including Muhammad al-Qasabji (*Muḥammad al-Qaṣabji*), Fathiyya Ahmad (*Faṭḥiya Aḥmad*), and Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab (*Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Wahhāb*). I present several theories as to *why* the cello became incorporated in *takht*-s at this time as well as theories about which artist was the first to include a cello in their ensemble. Of these artists, Umm Kulthum reached a level of fame that set an example for contemporary and future ensembles, establishing the cello as a standard instrument in the *firqa*.

With the inclusion of the cello and bass and the addition of more violinists, the small *takht* ensemble gradually expanded into large, orchestra-like ensembles called *firqa*-s. After 1964, Umm Kulthum expanded her *firqa* to include *three* cellists, setting a precedent for future ensembles. Two of these three cellists played with the bow while one primarily played *pizzicato*, supporting the *‘ūd* in a semi-percussive role by emphasizing the main notes of the melody. With the expansion of the cello section, Umm Kulthum’s ensemble provides a case study for analyzing shifts in the use of the cello in Arab music ensembles from the early to mid-twentieth century.

In Part II, I focus on the issues of cultural policy and cultural security in Cairo’s music scene over the last century, using the cello as a window into issues of musical heritage, modernization, and Westernization. I focus on three historic moments, beginning with the First International Congress of Arab Music in 1932. I analyze Egypt’s role in promoting the development (*taṭwīr*) of Arab music at this congress and the discursive construction of the cello as a “threat” to both Arab musical heritage and modernization. I deconstruct the

affective arguments used to support or oppose the use of the cello in Arab music—an instrument that was considered highly sentimental and evocative.

Continuing the discussion of the transition from *takht* to *firqa* from Part I, I discuss the founding of the first state-funded Arab music ensemble, *Firqat al-Musiqa al-'Arabiyya* (*Firqat al-Mūsīqā al-'Arabiyya*), which was established in the wake of the 1967 defeat. I use the term “cultural security” to explain how the cello was discursively constructed as a threat to Arab musical heritage and identity.

Finally, I discuss the founding of two music festivals by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture in 1992—the annual Arab Music Festival and Conference and the Citadel Festival for Music and Singing. I examine shifts in the perception and role of the cello in eastern Arab music, particularly its increasing prominence as a solo, improvising instrument. Throughout this section, I explain how the Egyptian government has used cultural policy to construct and control national identity.

Part III is based on my ethnographic research with cellists from Egypt, Syria, and Palestine who perform Arab music in Egypt and the United States. Drawing on interviews and cello lessons, I include brief biographies of five cellists and document cello techniques used in *al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya* with special attention to the art of solo instrumental improvisation in Arab music (*tāqāsīm*). In addition to detailing the musical skill sets of cellists in *al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya*, I analyze the diasporic and national identifications of the cellists I worked with, expressed in compositions and performances.

The three sections of this thesis together form an overview of the history of the cello in Arab music: Part I focuses on the emergence of the cello in Arab music ensembles in the late 1920s; Part II focuses on the initial perception of the cello as a “threat” to Arab music

and the instrument's shifting status in the context of Egyptian cultural policy; and Part III focuses on five cellists who perform Arab music today, documenting their perspectives, identities, and descriptions of cello technique in Arab music.

## **PART I: The Emergence of the Cello in Eastern Arab Music Ensembles**

### **Historical Precedents: Bowed String Instruments in the Medieval Middle East**

The history of bowed string instruments in the Middle East predates the European violin family by centuries. The earliest known references to bowed string instruments in the Middle East are found in theoretical treatises from the 10<sup>th</sup> century [CE] (Bachmann; Reynolds 2021:110). The first known reference to bowing in the Middle East appears in the early tenth-century treatise *The Grand Book of Music* [*Kitāb al-mūsīqī al-kabīr*] by al-Farabi (*al-Fārābī*) (c. 870–950 CE). This treatise contains the first musical classification system in Arabo-Islamic civilization, categorizing musical instruments according to their sound production (Hassan 2001). This classification system makes distinctions between plucked instruments, blown instruments, and instruments that make sound by “rubbing strings together” (ibid:25). The system is hierarchical, with the human voice at the apex, and musical instruments are categorized according to how closely they can imitate the human voice. In this hierarchical system, al-Farabi placed bowed instruments above plucked instruments because of their capacity for sustained sound (*muttaṣil*)<sup>9</sup> and their potential to imitate the emotionality of the human voice (Sawa 2001).

In the early 11<sup>th</sup>-century treatise, *Kitāb al-shifā'*, Ibn Sina (*Ibn Sīnā*, 980–1037 CE) described instruments whose strings were “stroked”<sup>10</sup> rather than “plucked,” citing the *rabāb* as an example (Bachmann:26). The *rabāb* was described as a long-necked, double-course lute played with a bow (ibid). Ibn Sina was not interested in the aesthetic value of musical

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<sup>9</sup> The converse is *munfaṣil* which describes short, unsustained sounds.

<sup>10</sup> Both texts use the verb *jarra*, meaning “to glide” or “to sweep lightly across” (Bachmann:25).

instruments in the way al-Farabi was, but rather categorized instruments according to the presence or absence of strings. Both treatises describe the structure of the *rabāb*<sup>11</sup> and al-Farabi described its various tunings, but neither included illustrations of the instrument likely due to aniconism in Islamic art (ibid:28). A Mozarabic illustration from the same period (c. 930) depicts four musicians with bowed instruments [see Figure 1].

**Figure 1:** *Four musicians and Seven Angels with the Seven Plagues, illustrating Revelation XV, 1–4. Mozarabic manuscript, S. Beati de liebana explanation in apokalypsis S. Johannis, Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid, Hh 58, fol. 127r. Spain, c. 920–30 (Photograph: Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid) in *The Origins of Bowing* (Bachmann).*



These theoretical treatises and this illustration provide evidence that the innovation of bowing had spread throughout the Islamic and Byzantine Empires and across the

<sup>11</sup> The medieval *rabāb* was a narrow, fretless instrument with a long neck and pear-shaped body, which corresponded structurally to the Khurāsān *tunbūr* of Central Asia. The instrument either had one string, two strings, or four strings double-coursed, attached to an end pin (Bachmann:27).

Mediterranean by the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Based on other historical texts and iconography, musicologists speculate that bowed string instruments first emerged in Central Asia in the North-Eastern border provinces of the Islamic Empire before spreading to the Arabic and Byzantine Empires in the 10<sup>th</sup> century (ibid:50–56). Notably, both al-Farabi and Ibn Sina were originally from Central Asia and moved to Abbasid territory (ibid:48).<sup>12</sup> In tracing the history and origins of bowed string instruments, it can be tempting to isolate their origin to a single empire or place. However, as early as the the 10<sup>th</sup> century, mass movements of peoples, instruments, and musics defied geographic and cultural boundaries.

The two main types of bowed string instruments that emerged in the 10<sup>th</sup> century Middle East were the *kamanja*<sup>13</sup> and the *rabāb*.<sup>14</sup> These two types of bowed string instruments were widespread, though their forms and uses varied considerably across regions and time periods.<sup>15</sup> Edward Lane, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Orientalist scholar, described the *kamanja* and *rabāb* in detail in his 1836 text, *The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* after residing in Egypt for five years (1825–28 and 1833–35). In Lane’s description, the *kamanja* consisted of a “sounding body” made by stretching fish skin over a hollow coconut shell and attaching it to a bridge (*ghazāl*). The *kamanja* had a cylindrical neck (*sā’id* or

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<sup>12</sup> al-Farabi was born in Central Asia and later moved to Baghdad and Damascus. Ethnomusicologist Ann Lucas writes: “The dynastic landscape of Ibn Sina’s lifetime was a portrait of what it meant to live on the edge of empire. The empire’s borders were porous and ever changing, even as direct dynastic control over large empires was limited” (2019:36). Ibn Sina was born in Bukhara (present-day Uzbekistan) in 980 and died in Hamadan (present-day Iran) in 1037 and spent many years in Isfahan (present-day Iran) (Wright 2001).

<sup>13</sup> The word “*kamancheh*” means “little bow” in Persian (*kaman* [bow], *-cheh* [a diminutive]). Because there is no “ch” sound in Arabic, the Persian “ch” becomes “j” in Arabic and “g” in Egyptian colloquial Arabic.

<sup>14</sup> Etymologically, the word “*rabāb*” most likely comes from the Arabic verb “*rabba*,” meaning “to bind together.” The origin of the word “*rabāb*” has been explained as either coming from the Hebrew *lābab* (r and l interchangeable) or the Persian *rubāb*, but these explanations are not as likely (Farmer 1976).

<sup>15</sup> The *kamanja* and *rabāba* were widespread throughout the Middle East, from North Africa (*Maghrib*) to the Gulf countries and the eastern Arab countries (*Mashriq*) but has largely been replaced by the violin in “art music” ensembles of the eastern Arab world today. The *rabāb* is still played in folk music ensembles today and the North African *rabab* remains a symbol of the Andalusian musical tradition (p.c. with Dwight Reynolds, Nov. 2021).

“arm”) of ebony “inlaid with ivory.” The pegs (*melāwee*) were made of beech (a fine-grained wood) and placed in the “head” or scroll of the instrument (*khazneh*) (Lane 1973 [1836]:362–364). The two strings of the *kamanja* each “consist of about sixty-horse hairs” and the ash wood bow (*qūs*) was loosely strung, the horsehair held together with an iron ring and leather (ibid). The total length of the *kamanja* was 38 inches with a bow of 34.5 inches. Confusingly, the historic *kamanja* described above is called *rabāb* in present-day Egypt (Reynolds 2001).<sup>16</sup> The *kamanja* was played by rotating the instrument sixty degrees from side to side (Lane 1973 [1836]:364, 366) rather than changing the angle of the bow arm to access different strings [see Figure 2]. According to Lane, the *kamanja* was part of “an ordinary Egyptian band, such as is generally seen at a private entertainment” along with the *qānūn*, *ūd*, and *nāy*, singers (often two), and occasionally other musicians (364).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The *kamanja* came to be a folk instrument after its role in urban art music ensembles (*takht*-s) was “usurped” by the Western violin (Reynolds 2001). Epic singers adopted the coconut-bodied *kamanja* and came to refer to it as *rabāb*. Today, the coconut-bodied *rabāb* is commonly seen in current Egyptian folk music ensembles—groups that have collected folk instruments in the name of nationalism, creating large “national folk ensembles.” These “national folk ensembles” are large and orchestra-like, far removed from the traditional poetic and vocal accompaniment in which one or two *rabāb*-s may have accompanied a solo singer. In Egypt, one example of a “national folk” ensemble is The Nile Ensemble for Folk Instruments (*Firqat al-Nīl li-l-Ālāt ish-Sha‘biyya*).

<sup>17</sup> See the next section for a description of the changing instrumentation and expansion of this *takht* ensemble.

**Figure 2:** “A Performer on the Kemengeh [*kamanja*].” From Edward Lane’s *The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1836):364. The musician rests the instrument’s endpin on the ground and rests three fingers on top of the bow hair, controlling the tension of the hair while playing.



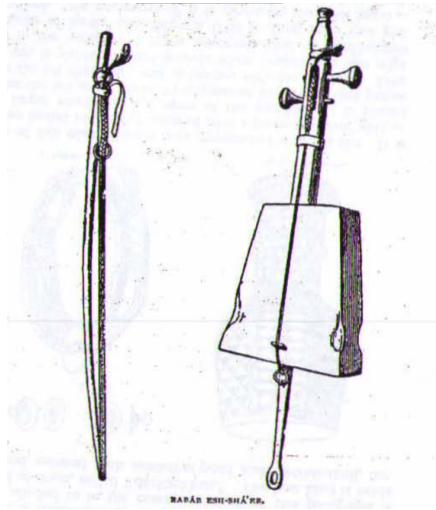
According to Lane, the historic *rabāb* was a “viol” made of a trapezoidal wooden frame covered by parchment in the front and left uncovered in the back. Like the *kamanja*, the strings and bow were made of horsehair and the total length of the instrument was 32 inches, with a 28-inch bow, slightly smaller than that of the *kamanja*. In the mid-nineteenth century, there were two types of *rabāb*-s: “the singer’s *rabāb*” [*rabāb mughannī*] and the “the poet’s *rabāb*” [*rabāb ish-shā’ir*] that was used to accompany the performance of epic poetry (*sīra*, pl. *siyar*)<sup>18</sup> [see Figure 3] (Villoteau 1823:722–4; Lane 1836; Reynolds 1995; 2001). The two types of *rabāb*-s differed only in that “the singer’s *rabāb*” had two strings while “the poet’s *rabāb*” had one.

**Figure 3:** “Rabāb Esh-Shā’er” (“The Poet’s *Rabāb*”). From Edward Lane’s *The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1836):371. Lane tells us that the length of the *rabāb* was 32 inches. The body of the instrument was made of wood, the front is covered with parchment and the back left uncovered. The “foot” was made of iron. The bow was twenty-

<sup>18</sup> In Egypt, the *rabāb esh-sha’er* was eventually replaced by the coconut spike fiddle (formerly called *kamanja*) among epic singers (Reynolds 2001:369).



eight inches long and made of horsehair (like the *kamanja*) (Lane 370–71). Interestingly, in the illustration there are two tuning pegs but only one string.



Both the *rabāb* and *kamanja* have been played in the Middle East for centuries, long predating the development of the violin (Bachmann 1969:24). Scholars have debated whether the *rabāb* was in fact the ancestor of the European violin. Kathleen Schlesinger, a British music archaeologist, argued that the *rabāb* was *not* the ancestor of the Western violin in her 1910 book *Precursors of the Violin Family*. Schlesinger’s argument was based on the following grounds:

- 1.) The *rabāb* is entirely different from the European *rebec*
- 2.) The *rabāb* is held like the violoncello
- 3.) There are no proofs of the *rabāb*’s antiquity

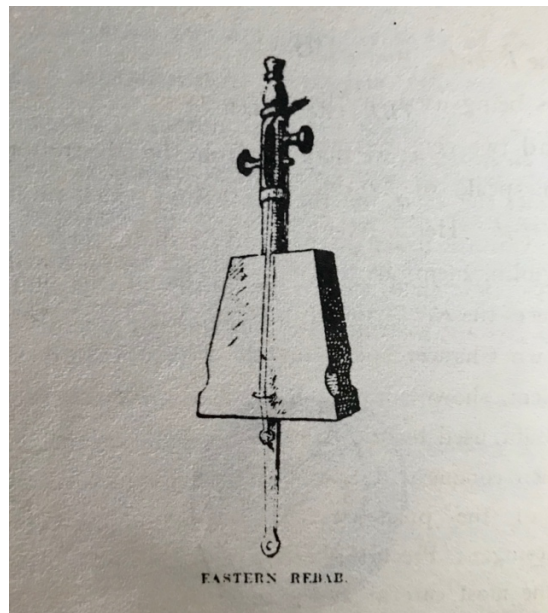
Henry George Farmer, a musicologist and Arabist, contested Schlesinger on all three accounts, retorting that “none of these reasons appear to be valid enough for rejecting the Eastern Rebab” (231). His points are the following:

- 1.) The Rebec did not come from the flat-chested *Eastern Rebab*, but from the Oud, which [...] was the parent of the vault-chested *Moorish Rebab*.
- 2.) Other recognized precursors of the violin were played violoncello-wise, e.g., the guitar-fiddle given by Miss Schlesinger [...] which is admitted to be ‘by no means a solitary example of this position.’

- 3.) The very primitive construction of the “*Eastern Rebab*” is itself sufficient evidence of its antiquity.<sup>19</sup>

Farmer’s first point is worth considering closely. Drawing on Salvador-Daniel’s observations, Farmer distinguishes between two types of *rabāb*-s, the “flat-chested” *Eastern Rebab* [see Figure 4] and the “vault-chested” *Moorish Rebab* [see Figure 5].<sup>20</sup> He notes that the *Moorish Rebab* could be the ancestor of the European rebec by way of the ‘ūd. In his use of the word “*rebab*,” Farmer notes that this term “was given generally to all bowed instruments” (233). Recognizing the broad, ambiguous nature of the term *rabāb*, he notes the distinctions between these two types of *rabāb*.

**Figure 4:** “Eastern Rebab” [*rabāb*] (Farmer 1976).



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<sup>19</sup> Farmer’s third point is partly based in socio-cultural evolutionism and Eurocentric ideologies. This sentiment is echoed more explicitly in other statements Farmer makes such as: “The truth is that whilst Europe has progressed with civilization, the Arabs have remained stationary, and the instruments of the modern Arabs are practically in the same state as they were at the fall of the Arab polity in Spain” [referring to the loss of Granada in 1492, ending nearly eight centuries of Muslim rule in the Iberian Peninsula] (235).

<sup>20</sup> The difference between “flat-chested” and “vault-chested” *rabāb*-s, but the “flat-chested” *rabāb* likely refers to instruments that are flat on both sides whereas “vault-chested” might refer to “boat-shaped” instruments with a rounded side.

**Figure 5:** “Moorish Rebab” [*rabāb*] (Farmer 1976).



Some sources state that the *rabāb* was the direct ancestor of all European bowed instruments, by way of the pear-shaped *rabāb* introduced by the Byzantine Empire in the ninth century (predecessor of the *lyra*) [see Figure 6] and the boat-shaped *rabāb* brought to Spain by Arabs in the 11<sup>th</sup> century (predecessor of the *rebec*) (Britannica 2019). The word “*rabāb*” was used as a catch-all term for bowed string instruments in the medieval period such that any statement about “the *rabāb*” as an ancestor of other instruments is inherently vague.

**Figure 6:** Earliest known depiction of the Byzantine *lyra*, descendant of the pear-shaped *rabāb* (c. 1000). Ivory casket. Museo Nazionale, Florence, Coll. Carrand, No. 26. Photograph by Paul Butler.



The first known uses of the term “*rabāb*” in reference to bowed string instruments occurred in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, in al-Farabi’s and Ibn Sina’s treatises. At this time, and in the centuries that followed, the organological structure of the instrument and the bow varied widely. What is clear is that bowed string instruments existed in the eastern Arab world long before the Western violin came into existence in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Italy, having evolved from several predecessors: the medieval fiddle, the *lira da braccio*, and the *rebec* (Britannica).

### **Circulation and Westernization**

The violin and cello are generally conceived of as “Western” instruments, but in some ways these instruments were re-circulated versions of the historic *rabāb* which likely spread to Europe from North Africa and the Middle East by way of the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See Section II.

Ethnomusicologist Lillie Gordon explains that Egyptians often referred to the violin as a descendant of the bowed lutes that had already existed in the Middle East for centuries:

Egyptians had the (correct) idea that the origin of the violin lay at least in part in the kinds of bowed lutes still played in Egypt in the nineteenth century. Therefore, adopting the violin would be a logical step, an adoption of a more “developed” version of an instrument already present. (2014)

With this logic, the violin can be understood as a recirculated and “developed” version of the bowed lutes (e.g., *rabāb* and *kamanja*) which had existed in the Middle East and North Africa since the 10<sup>th</sup> century. To re-imagine these instruments as part of a continual global circulation of materials and concepts means re-analyzing their purported positions in processes of globalization and Westernization (Novak 2013; Appadurai 1996, 2010; Taylor 2020). While the introduction of the violin and cello in the eastern Arab world were certainly connected to processes of Westernization and globalization, this frame can be reductive if the centuries-long historical interactions and circulations between Western Europe and the Middle East are left unacknowledged.

The concept of circulation was used by the Egyptian elite in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to explain the view that Egyptian and European cultures were historically related but had lost touch with one another through the perceived delayed cultural development of the East (Thomas 2006:93). Taha Hussein (*Ṭāhā Ḥusayn*) and other prominent Egyptian intellectuals noted a historical shared cultural heritage between Egypt and Europe which they viewed as a justification for “reorienting” toward the West (ibid). Musically speaking, several Egyptian intellectuals observed that European instruments were derived from Arab instruments in the Middle Ages (ibid). According to these views, what was perceived as a new connection between European and Arab music was in fact a “return” to a historical period of exchange.

Circulation has long been used to describe global networks of exchange, including the intercultural exchange of expressive forms (Appadurai 1996). The uptake of the violin in Arab music was connected to the perception of the violin as a direct descendant of the *kamanja*. The transnational circulation of bowed string instruments beginning in the ninth century did not culminate with the uptake of the violin in *takht* ensembles; rather, this ongoing circulation has (re)constituted and (re)produced many musical cultures across space and time. The inclusion of “violin family” instruments in Arab music therefore cannot be reduced to a linear, unidirectional discourse of Westernization; rather, these historical development of bowed string instruments was characterized by continual, circulatory, co-constitutive processes of mutual influence and exchange.

### **Violin and Cello in the Early Egyptian *Takht***

The *kamanja* was part of the standard instrumentation of *takht*-s in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The term *takht* (pl. *tukhūt*) refers to a small ensemble generally consisting of three to five male instrumentalists accompanying a singer (*muṭrib*) and small chorus (*sannīda*) (Racy 1988:139).<sup>22</sup> At full size, the traditional instrumentation of the *takht* included the *ūd* (short-necked lute), *qānūn* (plucked zither), *nāy* (end-blown flute), *riqq* (tambourine), and *kamanja* (two-stringed bowed spike-fiddle) (Marcus 2015:274). This instrumentation was standard in Egypt in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Lane 1860; Villoteau [1809] 1823), but by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (c. 1870) the European violin replaced the *kamanja* in the *takht*-s of Cairo’s urban secular music scene (Racy 1988:139; al-Khula‘ī 1904; Gordon 2014). Thereafter, the violin

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<sup>22</sup> This all-male *takht* differs from *takht al-‘awālim*, which refers to all-female ensembles with different instrumentation and repertoire that are performed almost exclusively for other women. There are no photos or recordings of *takht al-‘awālim*; their existence is only known through written descriptions (AMAR Foundation: “The Oriental *Takht*”; Racy 1983).

was referred to with the term *kamanja*. In this sense, the Western violin not only “usurped” the *kamanja*’s position in the *takht* but also its name (Reynolds 2001).

The violin and members of the violin family (viola, cello, bass) were common in Cairo by the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Khedive Ismail had vowed to make Egypt “part of Europe” and European communities flourished in Egypt under his rule [1863–1879] (Sednaoui 1998:124).<sup>23</sup> During this time, private conservatories of Western classical music were attended by students from foreign communities and the Egyptian upper class (ibid:125).<sup>24</sup> Instruction at these conservatories was typically limited to piano and violin, but the cello would certainly have been heard at the Cairo Opera House [founded in 1869] (ibid).<sup>25</sup> European instruments were also commonly used in musical theater which was popular in Cairo in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Musical theater ensembles were generally enlarged *takht*-s which included a variety of Western instruments, such as the piano, clarinet, flute, and cello (Abyad 1970; Butrus 1976; Al-Hifni 1974:167–173, cited in El-Shawan 1984).

Many scholars ascribe the addition of the cello to the *takht* to the popularity of musical theater from 1890–1920 (p.c. Virginia Danielson 5/19/21; El-Shawan 1980a:169–170).<sup>26</sup> During this period, theater in the Arab world was almost always *musical* theater (Shawul 1989:471, cited in Stone 2008:7) and musical theater ensembles included Western

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<sup>23</sup> The English, French, Italian, and Greek communities were the most prevalent at this time, while Armenian and Jewish musicians often taught at conservatories.

<sup>24</sup> Sednaoui notes that the best known of these conservatories was the Tiegerman Conservatory (formerly the Conservatoire M. (Joseph) Berggrun, founded in 1921) (ibid:133; Rafaat 1997).

<sup>25</sup> Sednaoui does not mention the cello specifically, except to note the performances of renowned Western classical cellists Pablo Casals (b. 1876), Mstislav Rostropovich (b. 1927), and André Navarra (b. 1911) who performed in Cairo and Alexandria on tour [dates unspecified] (1998:124; 127).

<sup>26</sup> Virginia Danielson suggests that it is *possible* that the cello was used in *takht*-s as early as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century seeing as the instrument was being used in symphony orchestras and musical theater troupes at that time (p.c. 5/19/21).

instruments such as the piano, clarinet, and cello (El-Shawan 1980a:82, 170). Linda Fathallah attributes the cello's first use in Arab music to Sayyid Darwish's plays (*Sayyid Darwīsh*).

She writes:

Sayyid Darwish is indeed the first to have composed “showstoppers” [lit. “curtain raisers”] and to have inaugurated the use of instruments such as the cello, double bass, oboe, and piano. This is confirmed by the “Dean of Arab theater,” Yūsuf Wahbî, when he says that Sayyid Darwish is the first to have formed a Western orchestra and to have oriented his compositions according to this context [...]

There is no denying the role and influence of Sayyid Darwish on modern Arab music. Later, the presence of these two instruments [cello and bass] was affirmed in the orchestras of the musicians Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Wahhâb and Umm Kulthûm, ensembles to be regarded as undeniable testimony to the expression of the character of the Arab music. Finally, the status of these two instruments was confirmed academically when they were introduced into the teaching programs of the various institutes with instrument-specific methods. (In Hassan 1993:101, my translation)<sup>27</sup>

Dawud Husni (*Dāwūd Husnī*, 1870–1937), who composed for musical theater well before Sayyid Darwish (1892–1923), is also said to have used the cello in musical theater ensembles.

Although the cello was part of musical theater ensembles by the early twentieth century, the available evidence indicates that the cello was not a regular member of a *takht* until the late 1920s. The first evidence of the cello's use in the *takht* occurred about 50 years after the violin's introduction, which had been adopted in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century [c. 1870] (Gordon 2014).

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<sup>27</sup> Sayyid Darwīsh est en effet le premier à avoir composé des “leviers de rideau” et à avoir inauguré l'utilisation d'instruments comme le violoncelle, la contrebasse, le hautbois et le piano. C'est ce que confirme le “doyen du théâtre arabe,” Yūsuf Wahbî, lorsqu'il dit que Sayyid Darwīsh est le premier à avoir formé un orchestre occidental et à avoir orienté ses compositions en fonction de ce contexte. On ne peut nier le rôle ni l'influence de Sayyid Darwīsh sur la musique arabe moderne. Plus tard, le présence de ces deux instruments s'est affirmée dans les orchestres du musicien Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Wahhâb puis d'Umm Kulthum, formations devant être considérées comme un témoignage indéniable d'expression du caractère de la musique arabe. Enfin, le statut de ces deux instruments s'est vu confirmé au plan académique lorsqu'on les a introduits dans les programmes d'enseignement des divers instituts et que des méthodes leur ont été spécialement consacrées.



Beginning in the late 1920s, the cello became increasingly common in expanded *takht*-s and *firqa*-s, both in live performances and on the radio. The first known recordings of *takht*-s that include cello and double bass date to the late 1920s and early 1930s. Ali Jihad Racy notes that the use of the cello and bass in recordings was “undoubtedly facilitated by the technical advantages of electrical recording” after 1925 when it became possible to record a wider range of frequencies, including low register instruments such as the cello and bass (Racy 1997:239).

The cello is audible on Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s recordings of the songs “*Raddat al-Rūḥ*” [“The Soul Responded”], “*Bulbul Hayrān*” [“Bewildered Nightingale”], and “*Fi-l-Layl*” (*Fī al-Layl*) [“In the Night”] (Baidaphon 25cm, 1929). The song “*Fi-l-Layl*” is especially novel in terms of arrangement, structure, and instrumentation (cello, bass, clarinet, oboe, and castanets) (El-Shawan 1980a:53). “*Fi-l-Layl*” begins with the cello and violin alone, playing a unison *pizzicato* line (plucking the string) before a brief *rubato* interlude played by the cello and *nāy* in unison.<sup>28</sup> Throughout the song, the cello doubles the *ūd* an octave below, expanding the pitch range of the *takht* (Racy 1977:239, 289).<sup>29</sup> The cello plays both *pizzicato* (plucking the string) and *arco* (bowing the string) in the recording. Rather than playing the melody note-for-note, the cello and double bass reinforce the significant pitches of the melodic line, commonly those that outline the basic structure of the rhythmic mode (*īqā’*), often using the technique of *pizzicato* (Danielson 1997:99). This

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4dGVYeX6xg>. Listen for cello and violin *pizzicato* (0:00–0:19) and the *nāy*/cello interludes (0:31–0:46) in the song’s introduction. Later in the song, the *nāy* and double bass play brief interludes. There is a waltz-like section in the middle of the song with an occasional *pizzicato* bass line alternating between the tonic and dominant (I-V-V).

<sup>29</sup> This song was first recorded in 1928 but appeared in a Baidaphon catalog in 1932 that specialized in Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s recordings (Racy 1977:231). The song “*Fi-l-Layl*” was first performed at the opening of the Arab Music Institute in 1929 which, ironically, was considered the haven for the preservation of *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* (Castelo-Branco 1980:53).

recording is a clear example of how the addition of the cello and bass in the *takht* created a thicker texture in which ornamented heterophonic lines, a common feature of traditional Arab music performance, gave way to unison doublings at the octave.

‘Abd al-Wahhab explained his addition of the cello and bass in the song, “*Fi-l-Layl*.” “These instruments [the cello and double bass] can depict the mood of the night, and they suit the scene described in the poetry. I was greatly moved by this scene” (interview, Aug. 1983, translated and cited in Azzam 1990:55). His decision to include the cello and bass was also based on their register. In the same interview, he stated that the cello and bass “fill the gap and add to the *takht* what was originally lacking, that is, the low register” (ibid).

Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab also used the cello to quote excerpts from well-known Western classical music compositions. In the song “*Bulbul Hayrān*” (1929), the cello is featured in a brief excerpt from “March Slave” (Op. 31) by Pyotr Illyich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893), one of the most famous Russian composers in Western classical music.<sup>30</sup> In the opening bars of ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s song “*Ayyuhā al-Rāqidūn*” (1935), the cello is featured along with the violin, playing an excerpt from the opening theme of the first movement of Franz Schubert’s Symphony in B minor, D. 759 (“The Unfinished”) “in order to depict grief” (Azzam 1990:136).

The cello was increasingly common in Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s recordings in the late 1920s. By 1933, the cello had become a “permanent and integral” member of ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s ensemble, and it was one of three core instruments consistently used in the ensemble, along with the violin and *qānūn* (Azzam 1990:128, 135, 144). The 1933 film *al-Warda al-Baydā* [*The White Rose*] included a cello in the song “*Sahirtu Minhu al-Layālī*” [“I

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<sup>30</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10txY5FS6WY> (3:16–3:31). The cello is more prominent in this section than in the rest of the recording.

Spent My Nights Awake Because of Him”]<sup>31</sup>, with tango-like sections and a *mawwāl*, and in the song “*al-Nīl Nagāshī*” [“The Nile is a King”]. The photograph below is a still from a scene in the 1933 film in which a *takht* plays “*al-Nīl Nagāshī*” [see Figure 7].<sup>32</sup>

**Figure 7:** *Takht* from *al-Warda al-Bayḍā* (1933), a film starring Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab (AMAR Foundation). Note the cellist on the left.



There are several theories as to which artist was the first to include a cello in their *takht*. Several sources identify Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s ensemble as the first to include a cello (*Wizārat al-Thaqāfa* 1998:47, 105). The 2020 program for the annual Arab

<sup>31</sup> A 1935 recording of “*Sahirtu Minhu al-Layālī*” featured a much larger *firqa*, including two cellists rather than one (Khuri 2018).

<sup>32</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VNvsFa5cxes&t=3s> (1:20:32–1:26:10).

Music Festival and Conference in Cairo points to a particular historical moment that motivated Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab to include a cello in his *takht*:

Since 1928 and with the release of the film “The White Flower” in 1933, ‘Abd al-Wahhab included the cello in his music ensembles for his film soundtracks and songs after attending a concert at the Fu‘ād I Institute of Arab music and watching an orchestra that included cello in its instrumentation conducted by “*Kāntūnā*” who presented some traditional musical works of Arab music at the ceremony. Seeing the success of the works presented at this concert, ‘Abd al-Wahhab was influenced by this instrument [the cello] which prompted him to introduce it more effectively in his film music and songs. The first to play this instrument [within Arab music] in Egypt was Hassan Hamli.<sup>33</sup>

One popular source attributes Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s decision to include the cello in his ensemble to Gamil ‘Uways (*Gamīl ‘Uways*, 1890–1955). This source states that ‘Uways persuaded Abdel Wahhab to include “bass violins” (*al-kamān al-jahīr*) [cello and bass]<sup>34</sup> in his ensemble in the late 1920s, setting a precedent for contemporary groups such as Umm Kulthum’s *firqa*. Gamil ‘Uways headed Abdel Wahhab’s ensemble from the late 1920s to the late 1930s and is said to have also advised Muhammad al-Qasabji during that time who also included cello and bass in his songs.<sup>35</sup>

Another theory is that Muhammad al-Qasabji (*Muḥammad al-Qaṣabji*, 1892–1966), the iconic Egyptian composer and ‘ūd player, was the first artist to include a cello in his

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<sup>33</sup> منذ عام ١٩٢٨ وبظهور فيلم الوردة البيضاء عام ١٩٣٣ أدخل هذه الآلة في فرق الموسيقى الخاصة بموسيقاه التصويرية للأفلام والألحان، وذلك بعد حضوره حفلا موسيقيا بمعهد فؤاد الأول للموسيقى العربية، ومشاهدته الفرقة الموسيقية التي كان ضمن تشكيلها آلة التشيللو تحت قيادة “كانتونا” الذي تولى التوزيع لبعض الأعمال الموسيقية التقليدية في الموسيقى العربية، وقدمها في الحفل. ونتيجة لنجاح الأعمال التي قدمت في هذا الحفل تأثر عبد الوهاب بهذه الآلة، وهو ما دفعه إلى إدخالها بصورة أكثر فاعلية، وذلك في موسيقاه التصويرية للأفلام وأغانيه، وأول من قام بالعزف على هذه الآلة في مصر هو حسن حملي.

I have not found any information about the cellist, Hassan Hamli.

<sup>34</sup> *al-kamān al-jahīr* [lit. “loud”] refers to the cello and *kamān al-ajhar* [lit. “louder”] refers to the bass. These terms are commonly used. The Arabic-language Wikipedia page about the cello uses *al-kamān al-jahīr* often and interchangeably with *tshīlo* or *tshīllo*, the most common transliteration of “cello.” The Arabic-language Wikipedia page for the bass is actually entitled *kamān ajhar* rather than *kūntrabaṣ*, the transliteration of “contrabass,” a term taken from the original Italian word *contrabasso*. “Cello” is also transliterated as “*fīūlunsīl*,” the French word for cello, and I have seen it transliterated in a 1980s popular magazine from Cairo with *ق* as in *فيلونسيل*.

<sup>35</sup> Published on a public Facebook page (*Liqa’āt wa-Nawādir Fanniyya*, pub. 12/9/14).

*takht*. According to popular sources, al-Qasabji had formed his own *takht* in 1927 with Sami al-Shawwa (*Sāmī al-Shawwā*) (violin) and Muhammad al-‘Aqqad (*Muḥammad al-‘Aqqād*) (*qānūn*) which included cello and bass.<sup>36</sup> Sherine Abdo (*Shīrīn ‘Abduh*), a writer for *al-‘Arabī al-Jadīd*, states that al-Qasabji was the first to introduce the cello and bass to the *takht*, providing a strong foundation in the middle and lower registers.

Along with Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab and Muhammad al-Qasabji, Fathiyya Ahmad (*Fathīyya Aḥmad*, 1898–1975) performed with the cello in the late 1920s. The photo in Figure 8 depicts Fathiyya Ahmad’s *takht* with a cellist on the far right. Fathiyya Ahmad began her career in musical theater around 1910 and transitioned to a professional singing career in 1925, quickly becoming a prominent *takht* singer [*muṭriba ‘alā takht*] (AMAR Foundation). It is unclear exactly when Fathiyya Ahmad began to include cello in her *takht* but given that she took a multi-year hiatus in 1929 to raise her children, this photograph may have been taken between 1925–1929 and re-published in 1930/31 (p.c. Virginia Danielson 5/19/21).<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/محمدالقصبجي; <https://www.arabmusicmagazine.com/index.php/2012-03-12-12-51-00/424-2014-08-31-08-15-06>; <https://akhbarelyom.com/news/newdetails/96802/1/-الموسيقى-الذي-جلس-خلف-أم-كلثوم-43-عاما>

These three musicians, along with a *riqq* player and Umm Kulthum’s brother, Khalid, formed Umm Kulthum’s *takht* in 1926.

<sup>37</sup> Virginia Danielson also points out that Fathiyya Ahmad had gained a significant amount of weight when she returned to the stage, indicating that this photo may have been taken before 1929.

**Figure 8:** Fathiyya Ahmad’s *takht*. “Fathiyya Ahmad, the Number One Artist of Egypt Today” in *Rūz al-Yūsuf* 189 (September 28, 1930/31):19.<sup>38</sup> In Haghani 2008:165.



A photograph of Umm Kulthum’s *takht* from 1928 shows a cellist, indicating that she was also among the first artists to include a cello in her ensemble [see Figure 9].<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> The arrangement of the *takht* in this photograph is unusual; usually the cello would be positioned on the far left of the photo with the *riqq* player to the right of the singer.

<sup>39</sup> Frédéric Lagrange states that Umm Kulthum included a cello in her *takht* as early as 1927, but I have not found any corroborating sources (1996:129).



**Figure 9:** Photograph of Umm Kulthum’s *takht* (1928).<sup>40</sup> The caption reads: Umm Kulthum and her orchestra led by al-Qasabji in Baghdad in 1928. From the right: *riqq* player Salah Muhammad (*Ṣalāḥ Muḥammad*), *madhhabjī* [accompanying singer] unknown, *madhhabjī* Khalid al-Baltagi (*Khālīd al-Baltāgī*), Umm Kulthum’s brother, al-Qasabji, ‘*alā qānūn*’ Muhammad al-‘Aqqad, violinist Ismail al-‘Aqqad (*Ismā’īl al-‘Aqqād*), and *nāy* player Girgis Sa‘ad (*Girgis Sa‘id*), and an unknown “bass violinist” [cellist] (photo from Victor Sahab’s personal collection).<sup>41</sup>



أم كلثوم وفرقتها الموسيقية بقيادة القصبجي في بغداد (١٩٢٨)، ويبدو من اليمين عازف الرق صالح محمد، ثم مذهبجي مجهول، ثم المذهبجي خالد البلتاجي شقيق أم كلثوم فالقصبجي، ثم محمد العقاد على القانون واسماعيل العقاد على الكمان، فجرجس سعد عازف الناي، ثم عازف الكمان الجهير (فيولونسيل) وهو مجهول (الصورة من المجموعة الشخصية لفكتور سحاب).

The cello became a common addition in many *takht*-s and *firqa*-s after its initial introduction to Arab music ensembles in the late 1920s. Salwa El-Shawan surveyed eleven *takht*-s from 1930–1945, and nine of the eleven included at least one cello (1980a: 171–175).

<sup>40</sup> أم كلثوم وفرقتها الموسيقية بقيادة القصبجي في بغداد (١٩٢٨)، ويبدو من اليمين عازف الرق صالح محمد، ثم مذهبجي مجهول، ثم المذهبجي خالد البلتاجي شقيق أم كلثوم فالقصبجي، ثم محمد العقاد على القانون واسماعيل العقاد على الكمان، فجرجس سعد عازف الناي، ثم عازف الكمان الجهير (فيولونسيل) وهو مجهول (الصورة من المجموعة الشخصية لفكتور سحاب).

<sup>41</sup> Photo from <https://www.reddit.com/r/arabs/comments/hsh3a5>.

It is possible that the cellist depicted is Mahmud Ramzi (*Mahmūd Ramzī*) who played in a seven-person *takht* with Umm Kulthum in the 1930s along with Girgis Sa‘id and al-Qasabji.

<http://www.zamanalwasl.net/forums/showthread.php>

At the Cairo Congress in 1932, *Firqat al-‘Aqqad al-Kabir*, *Firqat Umm Kulthum*, and *Firqat Muhammad al-‘Aqqad* all included cello in their enlarged *takht*-s (ibid). From 1930–1940, the *firqat* which accompanied Ahmad ‘Abd al-Kabir (*Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Kabīr*) on radio and live performances included a cellist.<sup>42</sup> In 1935, the Eastern Radio Ensemble (*Firqat al-Rādiū al-Sharqiyya*)<sup>43</sup> included a cello as did the Studio Ensemble (*Firqat al-Ustūdiyū*), another group created for radio. From 1935–1940, the *firqat* which accompanied vocalists Umm Kulthum, Su‘ad Dhaki (*Su‘ād Dhākī*), Muhammad Sadik (*Muḥammad Sadīq*), and Khalil al-Masri (*Khalīl al-Maṣrī*) in live and radio performances also included a cello. As previously stated, the *takht* which accompanied Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab on some of his commercial recordings from 1930–1940 included both cello and bass. Likewise, the *firqat* that accompanied Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab in several of his song-films included cello (1932–1945). From 1935–1940, the *firqat* which accompanied Umm Kulthum on radio included cello<sup>44</sup> and after 1946, Umm Kulthum’s *firqat* (both live and radio) included *two* cellos.<sup>45</sup>

Although it is unclear which artist was the first to include a cello in their *takht*, it is evident that the cello was included in *takht*-s in Cairo by the late 1920s, a common addition to the ensembles of the most successful singers of the day. It is possible that the cello was used in musical theater ensembles prior to the late 1920s and included in *takht*-s thereafter (p.c. Virginia Danielson 5/19/21; El-Shawan 1980a:170). By the 1930s, the cello was ubiquitous in live performances and recordings of Arab music in Egypt, well on its way to becoming a part of the standard instrumentation of the *firqat*.

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<sup>42</sup> In 1934, Egypt launched the first state-run radio service in the Middle East (Shaheen 2002)

<sup>43</sup> This ensemble aired on the Egyptian State Radio Broadcast Station’s Arab Music Program and performed instrumental compositions exclusively.

<sup>44</sup> *al-Rādiū al-Maṣrī* 1935 17(21); 1939 217(3); 1940 278(14); 1941 309(18); 1945 522 in El-Shawan 1980a:171–2.

<sup>45</sup> P.c. with violinist ‘Abd al-Mun‘im al-Harīrī who was a member of this *firqat* in 1946, in El-Shawan 1980a:173.



## Playing Techniques and Instrumental Character

When the violin replaced the *kamanja* in the *takht*, violinists were expected to be able to perform *tāqāsīm* or “instrumental improvisation” just as *kamanja* players had, along with the traditional instruments (‘*ūd*, *qānūn*, *nāy*, *riqq*). Although the violin had replaced the *kamanja*, thus changing the instrumentation of the *takht*, the ensemble remained unchanged in terms of register and heterophonic texture (Racy 1988:143).

The introduction of the cello to the *takht*, on the other hand, had a much more destabilizing effect. Unlike the violin, which replaced the *kamanja* and filled a pre-existing role in the *takht*, the cello did not assume the role of any of the established instruments of the *takht*. As an *addition* to the *takht*, rather than a replacement, the cello marked not only a departure from traditional instrumentation but also an expansion of the ensemble. The cello added a lower register to the rendition of the melody (*lahn*) and augmented the rhythm (*īqā’*), emphasizing the important notes of the melody and, at the same time, the important beats of the rhythm. Michael Ibrahim, director of the National Arab Orchestra notes, “Cello is a relatively new instrument [in Arab music]. We know that the violin replaced the *rabāb*, but really the cello is a completely Western innovation into the Arab world” (NAO Live Tuesdays: Interview with Naseem Alatrash 2020, 7:43).

In performance, the cello’s role most closely resembles that of the ‘*ūd* in terms of its register and function as a mediator between the melody and rhythm. Before the addition of the cello, the ‘*ūd* had been responsible for playing the melody and reinforcing the rhythm through percussive plucking with a plectrum, especially absent a *riqq* player (El-Shawan 1980a:145). Like the ‘*ūd*, the cello often filled a percussive role in the ensemble,

emphasizing the main beats of the rhythmic mode, often with *pizzicato* (Azzam 1990:135).<sup>46</sup> The cello did not replace the *‘ūd* but adopted a similar role in the expanded ensemble. The expansion of the *takht*, beginning with the addition of cello and bass and multiple violinists, was the first of a series of expansions that occurred in urban secular music in the eastern Arab world throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ultimately leading to the prevalence of orchestra-like *firqa*-s.<sup>47</sup>

### Cello in Umm Kulthum’s *Takht*

As mentioned, Umm Kulthum was among the first artists to include a cello in her *takht*. Prior to moving to Cairo, however, Umm Kulthum sang unaccompanied religious repertoire with her family. Even after relocating to Cairo, she at first continued performing in the same manner. In 1926, having gathered a large following, she took on a *takht* (Danielson 1997:182). She was still at an early point in her career and was trying to appear sophisticated both musically and personally in a way that was appealing to the Cairene elite. With these motivations, Umm Kulthum hired three of the top musicians of her day who played in the *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* tradition: Muhammad al-‘Aqqad (*qānūn*), Sami al-Shawwa (violin), and Muhammad al-Qasabji (*‘ūd*).<sup>48</sup> Two years after establishing her *takht*, Umm Kulthum

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<sup>46</sup> Azzam notes the rhythmic role of the cello in Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s songs “*Yāmā Banēt*” [“How Many Times Have I Built”] and “*Aḥibbi ‘Ishat al-Ḥurriyya*” [“I Love the Life of Freedom”] in which the cellist and bassist play only the first beat of the four-beat rhythmic cycle, emphasizing the main beat (1990:135).

<sup>47</sup> See Part II. The word “orchestra” was used to refer to an ensemble playing Arab music as early as 1927. A photograph in a Columbia Records catalog (c. 1927) shows an ensemble playing Arab music as early as 1927. A photograph in a Columbia Records catalog (c. 1927) shows an ensemble of seventeen musicians, including cello double bass, and multiple violins entitled “Orchestre led by Ustādh Jamīl ‘Uways” (Racy 1977: 194). This ensemble performed *sama* ‘i-s among other genres.

<sup>48</sup> Prior to this, record companies had provided her with an accompanying *takht* for her initial commercial recordings, from 1924–1925.

decided to add a cello to her ensemble though it did not become a permanent member of her ensemble until several years later.<sup>49</sup>

Umm Kulthum's later decision to include a cello in her *takht* may have been influenced by Muhammad al-Qasabji who began composing for her in the late 1920s in a genre called "sentimental monologue" (*mūnūlūj 'ātīfī*) which departed from established traditions (Racy 1988:148). al-Qasabji was already an experienced composer at this point and, as previously mentioned, formed his own *takht* in 1927. As a composer, al-Qasabji was clearly influenced by Western music. Beginning in the 1930s, he used triadic patterns, harmony, heavy orchestration, major and minor modes, and other techniques associated with Western music, particularly Western European art music (Danielson 1997:75). The use of cello in his late 1920s *takht* aligns with the overall influence of Western music in al-Qasabji's artistic decisions.<sup>50</sup> Umm Kulthum did not always accept his artistic choices. For example, she declined al-Qasabji's request to compose an operatic song that was "entirely based on Western compositional principles" (Danielson 1997:75). As leader of her *takht* and one of her primary composers in the 1920s and 1930s, it is possible that al-Qasabji influenced the adoption of the cello into Umm Kulthum's *takht*.

al-Qasabji was not the only one of Umm Kulthum's composers to employ Western European musical aesthetics. Riyad al-Sunbati (*Rīyād al-Sunbātī*, 1906–1981) is said to have introduced bass lines as well as triads suggestive of harmony and has been credited with "enlarg[ing] the accompanimental ensemble to include seven or eight violins in addition to

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<sup>49</sup> That said, based on my own close listening it seems that Umm Kulthum did not include cello in her recordings until 1932. Perhaps this was due to technological limitations in recording technology, or perhaps she was slow to embrace the instrument either out of caution, still being in the early stages of her career and perhaps not wanting to jeopardize the reputation she had built on religious and traditional forms (p.c. with Virginia Danielson, 2021; p.c. with Scott Marcus, 2021).

<sup>50</sup> See the discussion of the inclusion of the cello in al-Qasabji's *takht* in the previous section.

the violoncello, string bass, *‘ūd*, *qānūn*, *riqq*, and *nāy*” (Danielson 1997:115). Virginia

Danielson notes:

Triadic passages, melodic leaps, occasional harmonization, and a few new instruments such as the violoncello were virtually *the only Western features* of Umm Kulthum's repertory in a musical world where Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab, with his extensive borrowings from Western musics, was a potent force. (ibid:76, emphasis mine)

In other words, the addition of the cello and bass was not indicative of a wholesale shift toward “Western” music; in fact, Umm Kulthum distinguished herself from contemporaries with her reticence to adopt Western Euro-American musical aesthetics.

Based on close listening to over a hundred commercial studio recordings from 1924–1936, I found that the cello was not included in Umm Kulthum’s *takht* recordings until 1932, after the release of over fifty recordings.<sup>51</sup> It was in this year that the cello became a regular member of Umm Kulthum’s *firqa*. The following year, in 1933, the cello became a “permanent and integral part” of Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s *firqa* (Azzam 1990:128, 135). Many other *firqa*-s followed suit.

By 1931, Umm Kulthum had released recordings of songs by Muhammad al-Qasabji (beginning in 1924–5) and Dawud Husni (beginning in 1929), but it was not until that year that she recorded a song by Zakariyya Ahmad (*Zakariyyā Aḥmad*, 1896–1961). Zakariyya Ahmad’s song “*Mākānsh Zunnī fī-l-Gharām innuh Hawān*” [“I Didn’t Think That Love Was Shameful”] (1931) is the first of Umm Kulthum’s recordings in which I hear a double bass and it seems that it was not until 1932, the following year, that a cello was included in one of

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<sup>51</sup> It is clear from a photograph taken of Umm Kulthum’s *takht* in 1928, however, that the cello was used in live performances prior to 1932 [see Figure 9].

her recordings. That year, Umm Kulthum released recordings of songs by Muhammad al-Qasabji, Dawud Husni, and Zakariyya Ahmad that seem to include both the cello and bass.

The following table lists Umm Kulthum's recordings from 1931–1932 that include cello and bass, based on my listening. Umm Kulthum recorded twenty-three songs in 1931 and thirteen songs in 1932. Only one recording from 1931 includes double bass whereas eight songs released in 1932 include cello and/or bass [see Figure 10]. Most of the songs recorded from 1931–1932 do *not* include cello and/or bass, but 1932 marks a turning point after which the cello became increasingly common in Umm Kulthum's studio recordings and live performances.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Only five of the fifteen Zakariyya Ahmad songs recorded from 1931–1932 include cello and/or bass. Only two of the twelve Muhammad al-Qasabji songs include cello and/or bass. Three of the six Dawud Husni songs include cello and/or bass.

**Figure 10:** Table of Umm Kulthum’s songs that include cello and/or bass from 1931–1932, sorted by composer. The data in the first six columns is compiled from Virginia Danielson’s dissertation (1991) and is also available online.<sup>53</sup> Danielson cross-referenced information from Egyptian periodicals, archival documents, and private record collections with Khalil al-Masri (*Khalīl al-Maṣrī*) and Mahmud Kamil’s (*Maḥmūd Kāmil*) *al-Nuṣūṣ al-Kāmilah li-Jamī‘ Aghānī Kawkab al-Sharq Umm Kulthum (The Complete Texts for All of the Songs of the Star of the East, Umm Kulthum)* (1979: Appendix). The final column is based on my listening to Umm Kulthum’s studio recordings.

Year Released <sup>54</sup>	Song Title	Composer	Lyricist	<i>Maqām</i>	Genre	Use of Double Bass/Cello
1931 <sup>55</sup>	“ <i>Mākānsh Zunnī fi-l-Gharām innuh Hawān</i> ” [“I Didn’t Think That Love Was Shameful”] ما كانش ظني في الغرام	Zakariyya Ahmad	Yahya Muhammad ( <i>Yahyā Muḥammad</i> )	<i>‘Ajām ‘Ushayrān</i>	<i>Dawr</i>	Double Bass
1932 <sup>56</sup>	“ <i>Gannat Na ‘īmī</i> ” [“Garden of Paradise”] جنة نعيمة	Dawud Husni	Ahmad Rami [ <i>Aḥmad Rāmī</i> ]	<i>Hijāz Kar</i>	<i>Ṭaqtūqa</i>	Double Bass
1932	“ <i>Yā ‘Ayn Dumū ‘ak</i> ” [“Oh Eye, Your Tears”] يا عين دموعك	Dawud Husni	Ahmad Rami	<i>Rast</i>	<i>Dawr</i>	Double Bass
1932 <sup>57</sup>	“ <i>Kulli Mā Yizdād Raḍā ‘Albak</i> ” [“Everything That Increases Your Heart’s	Dawud Husni	Kamil al-Khula’i [ <i>Kāmal al-Khula’ī</i> ]	<i>‘Irāq</i>	<i>Dawr</i>	Cello Double Bass

<sup>53</sup> <http://bolingo.org/audio/arab/uk/firstlinechron.html>

<sup>54</sup> The dates of these early songs are contested. The dates listed here generally refer to the song’s first performance, which often corresponded with the dates of the release of the commercial recording, with a few exceptions (Danielson 1991:483). In the 1930s, due to difficulties in the recording industry, songs were only released as recordings after proving their popularity through live radio broadcasting or films (ibid). Some websites list 1936 as the year of the original studio recording of the song “*Yā Mā Nādēt*,” for instance, which may indicate that the recording was made five years after the initial performance.

<sup>55</sup> Undated in *al-Maṣrī* and *Kāmil* 1979.

<sup>56</sup> Danielson lists 1932 as the year of the first performance; *al-Maṣrī* and *Kāmil* list 1931 as the year it was recorded.

<sup>57</sup> *al-Maṣrī* and *Kāmil* list 1931 as the year it was recorded.

	Satisfaction”] كل ما يزداد رضا قلبك					
1932 <sup>58</sup>	“ <i>Yālli Tishkī Mālhawā</i> ” [“The One Who Complains About Love”] ياللي تشكي مالهي	Zakariyya Ahmad	Ahmad Rami	<i>Bayyātī</i>	<i>Dawr</i>	Double Bass
1932	“ <i>Akūn Sa ‘īd</i> ” [“I Would Be Happy”] أكون سعيد	Zakariyya Ahmad	Hasan Subhi ( <i>Hasan Ṣubhī</i> )	<i>Bayyātī</i>	<i>Ṭaqṭūqa</i>	Double Bass
1932	“ <i>Mālak Yā ‘Albī</i> ” [“What’s Wrong, My Heart?”] مالك ياقلبي	Zakariyya Ahmad	Ahmad Rami	<i>Kirdān</i>	<i>Ṭaqṭūqa</i>	Double Bass
1932	“ <i>al- ‘Azūl Fāyi’ wa-Rāyi</i> ” [“The Rebuker is Awake and Vigilant”] <sup>59</sup> العذول فايق ورايق	Zakariyya Ahmad	Ahmad Rami	<i>‘Irāq</i>	<i>Ṭaqṭūqa</i>	Double Bass
1932	“ <i>Lēh Tilāwa ‘Anī</i> ” [“Why Do You Turn Away From Me?”] ليه تلاو عني	Muhammad al-Qasabji	Ahmad Rami	<i>Rast</i>	<i>Ṭaqṭūqa</i>	Cello Double Bass
1932	“ <i>Yā Mā Nādēt</i> ” [“Oh, What Did I Call?”] ياما ناديت	Muhammad al-Qasabji	Ahmad Rami	<i>Maḥūr</i>	<i>Monolog</i>	Cello Double Bass

In the recordings from 1932, the cello and bass trace Umm Kulthum’s vocal melody, adding short instrumental phrases (*lāzima*; pl. *lāzimāt*) between vocal phrases along with the rest of the melodic instruments of the *takht*. There are a few examples of distinctive bass lines on these early recordings. Virginia Danielson notes the cello’s *pizzicato* line in “*Mālak*

<sup>58</sup> *al-Maṣrī* and *Kāmil* list 1931/1932 as the approximate years of recording.

<sup>59</sup> The *‘adhūl* is a standard figure in love poetry who maliciously wishes to keep lovers from being happy. This word is sometimes translated as the “rebuker” or “critic” (p.c. with Dwight Reynolds, Dec. 2021).

*Yā 'Albī'* (1932), one of Umm Kulthum's first songs to include cello and double bass.<sup>60</sup> In this brief yet innovative instrumental section, the cello and bass pluck a descending sequence (first, B C A F $\sharp$ , A B G E; second, F $\sharp$  A F $\sharp$  D, B-b- D B-b- G), accompanying a men's chorus in the second half of the *dawr*.<sup>61</sup> There is a similar bass line in Dawud Husni's "*Gannat Na 'īmī'*" (1932) with a triadic *pizzicato* section in a brief instrumental interlude (D A D F $\sharp$ , D F $\sharp$  A F $\sharp$ , D A D F $\sharp$ , D F $\sharp$ A F $\sharp$  D).<sup>62</sup> Zakariyya Ahmad's *dawr* "*Yālli Tishkī Mālhawā'*" includes bass, but does not have a *pizzicato* bass line.<sup>63</sup>

### ***Takht to Firqa: Umm Kulthum's Ensemble from 1932–1967***

The cello remained part of *takht* ensembles, which predominated up to the late-1920s and early 1930s, and the instrument became a fixture of the larger ensembles (*firqa*-s) which eventually replaced the *takht* (El-Shawan 1984; Racy 1988). By the late 1920s, both the *takht* and much of its associated repertoire began to be considered outmoded and the *takht* began to be replaced by the *firqa* (Racy:139). By the 1940s, "the *firqah*, both the ensemble and the term, totally replaced the *takht*" (El-Shawan 1984:275).

Many of the musical practices associated with the *takht* disappeared as ensembles expanded into *firqa*-s. Heterophony, a musical texture consisting of the simultaneous performance of many variations of a single melody, was no longer feasible in these increasingly large ensembles.<sup>64</sup> Heterophonic melodies depend on differences in timbre and

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6BOQsSTVIsW>. Listen to the *pizzicato* bass line from 4:36–4:53.

<sup>61</sup> F $\sharp$  represents an F half-sharp and B-b- represents a B half-flat.

<sup>62</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PX\\_MFoHRnts](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PX_MFoHRnts) Listen to the *pizzicato* bass line throughout, with a brief triadic instrumental interlude at 2:46–2:55.

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FxAOpB6W20>

<sup>64</sup> In some of Umm Kulthum's concerts, there were heterophonic moments when many members of the *firqa* would stop playing to allow a few musicians to play a heterophonic *tarjama* (lit. "translation") of the melody (p.c. with Scott Marcus, Oct 2021).



register, allowing a listener to hear multiple melodic and rhythmic renditions at once. With the increasing number of instrumentalists in the *firqa*, it was no longer possible to clearly discern different renditions of the melody.

Performance practice and performance settings also changed during this period. Whereas *takht* performances had often taken place in intimate settings such as the *hafla* (“musical party”) at weddings or other events, the transition to the *firqa* was paralleled by a transition to concert hall and movie hall performances. The *firqa* was orchestra-like, both in size and in presentation, and Western European instruments such as the violin and cello were thought to add a sense of “sophistication, modernity, and, to a lesser extent, secularity” to the ensemble (Danielson 1997:162). The shift from *takht* to *firqa* was not only a matter of expanded instrumentation and ensemble size, but a sociocultural shift that involved changes in performance, aesthetics, and listening practices.<sup>65</sup>

Umm Kulthum’s ensemble changed dramatically over the course of her career, paralleling the general shift from *takht* to *firqa* in Cairo’s music scene. In the early 1930s, Umm Kulthum’s *takht* consisted of only seven musicians: Muhammad al-Qasabji (*‘ūd*), Muhammad ‘Abduh Salih (*Muḥammad ‘Abduh Ṣāliḥ*) (*qānūn*), Ahmad al-Hifnawi (*Aḥmad al-Ḥifnāwī*) and Karim Hilmi (*Karīm Hilmī*) (violin), Gerges Sa’ad (*nāy*), Ibrahim ‘Afifi (*Ibrāhīm ‘Afīfī*) (*riqq*/percussion), and Mahmud Ramzi (*Maḥmūd Ramzī*) (cello).<sup>66</sup> This *takht* expanded into a *firqa* when Umm Kulthum starred in the films *Widād* (1936) and *Nashīd il-Amal* (1937). The ensembles featured in these films included a cello, bass, and expanded violin section (Danielson 1997:182). The creation of a *firqa* for these early films carried over to her live performances and her ensemble grew increasingly larger.

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<sup>65</sup> See Scott Marcus’ discussion in *Music in Egypt* (Oxford University Press) 2007:97–100.

<sup>66</sup> <http://www.zamanalwasl.net/forums/showthread.php>

By 1946, Umm Kulthum's *firqa* had expanded to include two cellists. These cellists were not considered part of the "core" of her *firqa*, however (Danielson 1997:130).<sup>67</sup> The cellists belonged to the second stratum of her ensemble, along with eight to ten violinists. Danielson notes that this second stratum "consistently worked with her but were not members of her inner circle of associates" (Danielson 1997:130). That said, cellists were closer to the "core" group than the third stratum, which consisted of people who worked with Umm Kulthum only periodically.<sup>68</sup> It seems that the personnel of the second and third strata were subject to change, especially as the *firqa* continued to grow.

By 1961, Umm Kulthum's *firqa* included about eighteen instruments, including two cellos, eleven violins, bass, a percussionist, *ūd*, *nāy*, and *qānūn* (Danielson 1997:182),<sup>69</sup> and by 1964, there were three cellists established in Umm Kulthum's *firqa*.<sup>70</sup> In a 1967 performance of "*al-Atlāl*" ["The Ruins"] (November, Paris), the entire string section had expanded greatly including around twenty violinists, three cellists, and one bass player (ibid:179). Umm Kulthum's *firqa* was not unique in including cello and double bass; by the 1950s, both instruments had become "permanent features" of most *firqa*-s (El-Shawan 1984:275). The overall size of Umm Kulthum's *firqa* continued to expand after 1964, especially with the use of nontraditional instruments such as accordion, electric guitar,

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<sup>67</sup> The core group included al-Qasabji (*ūd*), Muhammad 'Abduh Salih, (*qānūn*), Sayyid Salim (*Sayyid Sālim*) (*nāy*), Ahmad al-Hifnawi, Karim Hilmi, and 'Abd al-Mun'im al-Hariri (violin), and 'Abbas Fu'ad (*Abbās Fu'ād*) (bass) (Danielson 1997:130). Ibrahim 'Afifi (*Ibrāhīm 'Afīfī*) might be included in this group, as a percussionist rather than melodic instrumentalist (p.c. with Scott Marcus, Dec. 2021).

<sup>68</sup> This stratum came to include players of "newer" instruments that were introduced to the *firqa* including accordion, guitar, and sax.

<sup>69</sup> See, for example, the two cellists in a live performance of "*Huwwa Saḥīḥ*" in June of 1961 (22:24) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X1JXWbZhv9w>, and in a performance of "*il-Hubb Kida*" that year <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HQQI5Br6nN8>.

<sup>70</sup> As late as June 20<sup>th</sup> 1963, there were only two cellists in a performance of "*Hayrat Qalbī Ma'āk*" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UvZV3OFNtEc>). By the time of her 1964 live concert of "*Aqūlak Ayh*," there were three cellists established in her ensemble (January 25<sup>th</sup>, Cairo Police Club in celebration of Police Day with Gamal Abdel Nasser in attendance). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ESg1pereilw> and <https://www.sama3y.net/omkolthom/sdetails.php?id=324>.

saxophone, and keyboard in Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s compositions. Nevertheless, the number of cellists remained fixed at three for the remainder of Umm Kulthum’s career.<sup>71</sup>

Despite the expansion and changes in instrumentation, the general arrangement of Umm Kulthum’s *firqa* remained relatively consistent over time and became a standard model for future *firqa*-s.<sup>72</sup> Umm Kulthum sat in the middle of the *firqa* during the *muqāddima*, or instrumental introduction, standing just before she sang. From the audience’s perspective, the *qānūn* player sat to her immediate left and the ‘ūd player to her immediate right, beside the *nāy* player. The violin section was situated on the left-hand side of the stage with the most renowned violinist sitting next to the *qānūn* player while the percussion section (*īqā’*) was on the right. The cellists sat on the right-hand side of the stage, typically in the front row between the *nāy* player and the percussion section. The bass player generally stood behind the cellists. From the audience’s perspective, the arrangement was the following (left to right): violin section, *qānūn*, Umm Kulthum, ‘ūd, *nāy*, cello/bass, *īqā’*.<sup>73</sup>

The cello can be understood as having displaced the ‘ūd aurally in the *firqa*. The instruments share a similar register, the lowest pitch on the ‘ūd matching the lowest pitch on the cello.<sup>74</sup> The effect of adding cellos to the *firqa* was such that the cello overpowered the sound of the ‘ūd. There are several reasons for this: A shared register meant that the

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<sup>71</sup> Instruments such as accordion, saxophone, and guitar were occasionally brought in for specific songs, but did not become part of the standard instrumentation of the *firqa* as in the case of the cello and bass.

<sup>72</sup> Visually, one might perceive Umm Kulthum’s *firqa* as an imitation of the symphony orchestra because of the large violin section, three cellos, and bass. Yet the musicians sit facing the audience, unlike the string section in a symphony orchestra. That said, music director Salim Sahab has chosen to position the violins, cellos, and bass to be center-facing in his Cairo-based *firqa* (*Firqa al-Qawmiyya l-il-Mūsīqā al-‘Arabiyya*, the National Arab Music Ensemble, founded in 1989).

<sup>73</sup> Interestingly, the arrangement of Umm Kulthum’s *firqa* also reflects the mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century arrangement of the *takht* described by Edward Lane. From the perspective of the onlooker, the arrangement was as follows (from left to right): *kamanja*, *qānūn*, ‘ūd, *nāy* (Lane 1973:364).

<sup>74</sup> This was a factor in the 1932 Congress discussions about the desirability of adding the cello to the traditional (eastern) Arab ensemble.

sustained sounds of the bow on the cello could easily swallow the short, plucked notes of the *'ūd*. Even one cello alone had the potential to obscure the sound of the *'ūd*, but the addition of two or three cellos to the *firqa* certainly overpowered the single *'ūd* player of the *firqa*, by sheer numbers alone.

Whereas the violin replaced the *rabāb* in the *takht*, the cello *displaced* the sonic centrality of the *'ūd* in the *firqa*.<sup>75</sup> The violin was clearly intended to be a substitute for the *rabāb* whereas the sonic presence of cellos in the *firqa* displaced the sound of the *'ūd*. One indication of this is that when Muhammad al-Qasabji passed away, Umm Kulthum did not immediately find another *'ūd* player to take his place in the *firqa*, content to perform without an *'ūd* (p.c. with Scott Marcus, 2021). The register that the *'ūd* had reigned over in the early *takht* ensemble was now occupied by the cello.

In Umm Kulthum's ensemble, a practice developed in which two of the cellists would play the melody *arco* (bowed) along with the violins while one would play *pizzicato*, adding a strong percussive element and mimicking the plucked sound of the *'ūd*. The *'ūd* remains part of the standard instrumentation of *al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya* ensembles today but continues to be overpowered by the cellists in *firqa*-s, becoming clearly audible only during solos or other carefully orchestrated moments.<sup>76</sup> Although the sound of the *'ūd* is undoubtedly masked by the sound of multiple cellos, it has remained part of the standard instrumentation of the *firqa*, surely in part as a symbol of Arab identity and tradition.

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<sup>75</sup> The *'ūd* was historically accorded the epithet “king of the instruments.”

<sup>76</sup> Examples of prominent Cairo-based *al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya* ensembles in the post-Umm Kulthum era which followed this model include *Firqa al-Māsiya*, *Firqa al-Qawmiyya*, Farouk al-Babli's (*Fārūq al-Bāblī*) ensemble, Sabah Fakhri's ensemble (see, for example <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9G9fKEXots>), and many of the Opera House ensembles. Fairouz also included three cellists in her ensemble (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UhfRSsYRTzM>) as did Warda (for example, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRnok6ZdWT8>).

## Playing Style and Technique in Umm Kulthum's *Firqa*

Having presented a brief history of the introduction of cello in Umm Kulthum's *firqa*, I will turn to a discussion of playing style and technique of cellists in her *firqa* based on footage of live performances. Although the cello was associated with Western classical music and notated sheet music, the cellists in Umm Kulthum's *firqa* learned the music orally along with the other members of the ensemble. As the narrator of the 2007 film *A Voice Like Egypt* states, "Umm Kulthum took new instruments in her orchestra—especially strings—but she always insisted her musicians learn the music in the traditional way, by ear." Though the cellists in her ensemble presumably read sheet music, they were expected to learn by ear in the oral tradition of traditional Arab music.<sup>77</sup>

In this documentary, one of the bass players in Umm Kulthum's *firqa* shared his experience of learning a song's melody by listening to the *'ūd*: "They wanted us to learn by ear, to play by heart." The bassist, Abbas Fu'ad, added that he would "bring in something of my own," likely referring to his artistic agency in choosing how to render the melody. As a bass player, his rendition of the melody entailed leaving out some notes in fast passages and emphasizing melodic notes that occurred on the stressed beats of the rhythmic modes.

Even though Umm Kulthum incorporated Western instruments such as the violin, cello, and bass in her ensemble, she called for continued use of Arab musical styles:

Music must express our Eastern spirit... Those who study European music learn it as one would learn a foreign language. Of course it is useful. But it would be silly to expect that this European language become our language. (quoted in Zaki Mustafa, *Umm Kulthum: Ma'bad al-hubb*:63–4, English translation in Danielson 1998:114)

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<sup>77</sup> In Egypt, violin, cello, and bass pedagogy begins with up to three years of Western music study before the student is introduced to Arab music (Gordon 2014).

Umm Kulthum called for maintaining an expression of the “Eastern spirit” in music, even if the musicians in her ensemble had studied European music. The musical language and idiom of the cello in Umm Kulthum’s *firqa* is distinct from the cello’s typical role in Western European symphony orchestras and might be said to have a distinctively “Eastern spirit.” Ali Jihad Racy points out that musical instruments renegotiate their roles according to changing physical and cultural realities:

Instruments interact dialectically with surrounding physical and cultural realities, and as such, they perpetually negotiate or renegotiate their roles, physical structures, performance models, sound ideas, and symbolic meanings (1994:38).

This is true of the cello from the time of its introduction to Egyptian *takht*-s in the 1920s to its present-day role in Egyptian *firqa*-s. In Umm Kulthum’s *firqa*, the cello’s role was multifaceted; it functioned as a bass/percussive instrument at times, playing *pizzicato* along with the bass, and at other times it played the melody in a lower octave. Virginia Danielson writes: “The violins simply doubled the melody line while the cello and bass usually reinforced the significant pitches of the lines” (1997:103). After watching extensive video footage of Umm Kulthum concerts, I would add that cellists also frequently doubled the melody line just as the violins did, without seeking to emphasize particular pitches. After 1964 when three cellos were established in her *firqa*, two of the cellists typically doubled the melody line while one played *pizzicato*. The cellist playing *pizzicato* typically accentuated the important notes, and occasionally even added a separate bassline, and the two cellists playing *arco* (bowed) doubled the melody along with the violinists.

As Umm Kulthum’s *firqa* grew, so did the length of her instrumental *muqāddima*-s (introductions) and interludes. A genre called *ughniya* or “long song” became popular in the 1940s, initially including a short *muqāddima* (Danielson 1997:167). Over the next decades,

the instrumental *muqāddima* became increasingly long, eventually including not only an expanded instrumental introduction at the beginning of the song, but also distinct and expanded introductions to each section of the song.<sup>78</sup> Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab is commonly cited as one of the main figures in this shift (p.c. with Scott Marcus, Oct 2021). The instrumentalists were featured more than they had been previously, so it was important to have a full-sounding orchestra (ibid:135). The cello’s role shifted somewhat during these instrumental introductions and interludes. If one of the cellists had been playing *pizzicato* throughout the verses, that cellist might transition to playing *arco* during the instrumental introductions and interludes.

#### The Cellists of Umm Kulthum’s *Firqa*

The cellists of Umm Kulthum’s *firqa* included Mahmoud Ramzi (*Maḥmūd Ramzī*), Mahmoud al-Hifnawi (*Maḥmūd al-Ḥifnāwī*), ‘Abd al-Fadil Muhammad (*‘Abd al-Faḍīl Muḥammad*), Magdi Boulos (*Magdī Būlos*), and Hassan Kamal (*Ḥassān Kamāl*).<sup>79</sup> A Facebook post from the account “Artistic Encounters and Anecdotes” [*Liqā’āt wa Nawādir Fanniya*] states:

When mentioning the most famous and skilled cello players in Umm Kulthum’s *firqa*, several well-known names come to mind such as Mahmoud al-Hifnawi, ‘Abd al-Fadil Muhammad, Magdi Fouad Boulos and Hassan Kamal. It is true that they played the same instrument, but the feelings, techniques and skills were different, like different species of birds or types of perfume, for all the specialities and distinguishing features of their playing. In most of Umm Kulthum’s performances, we saw that Magdi Boulos contended with the *saltana* of the Eastern violin on his cello, despite the different spacing of the fingerboards. However, Hassan Kamal—who usually sat to the right of Magdi Boulos—was undisputedly considered “the Prince of the Arab *pizzicato* technique. (2015)<sup>80</sup>

<sup>78</sup> *Muqāddima-s* were both metric and non-metric.

<sup>79</sup> According to one source, cellist Yusuf Abdullah was added to Umm Kulthum’s *takht* in the late 1920s, but I have not found corroborating sources. <https://manshoor.com/art/um-kalthoum-musicians-band/>

<sup>80</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/li9aatfannia/photos/>. Accessed June 11th, 2020.

عند ذكر أشهر وأمهـر عازفي آلة التشيلو بفرقة أم كلثوم تتوارد على ذاكرتنا أسماء وازنة من قبيل محمود الحفناوي وعبد الفضيل محمد ومجدي

In a comment below, the author of this post shared a link to a live performance of the Umm Kulthum song “*Fāt al-Mī‘ād*” [“It’s Too Late”] as an example of Hassan Kamal’s novel *pizzicato* technique.<sup>81</sup> Kamal’s *pizzicato* technique is highly percussive, accenting the important beats and notes within a phrase (8:00) and plucking the string at different angles, sometimes pulling the string horizontally as a jazz bassist might, and sometimes plucking vertically in a more Western classical style.<sup>82</sup> Perhaps he switches between these approaches to emphasize certain beats in a given rhythm (*īqā’*).

Hassan Kamal played in Umm Kulthum’s *fīrqa* as well as with The Diamond Ensemble (*Firqat al-Māsīyah*). One of his colleagues, violinist ‘Adil Samuel (‘*Ādil Ṣamū’īl*), describes Kamal’s playing style in a set of five essays about his own career as a violinist with *Firqat al-Māsīyah*, a hugely important ensemble of 20–40 instrumentalists founded in the 1950s and active until the 1990s under the artistic direction of Ahmad Fu’ad Hassan (*Aḥmad Fu’ād Ḥasan*) (Danielson 1996:305).<sup>83</sup> ‘Adil Samuel recounts his memories of *Firqat al-*

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فؤاد بولس وحسان كمال، صحيح أنهم يعزفون نفس الآلة، لكن الأحاسيس والتقنيات والمهارات كانت مختلفة كاختلاف أشكال الطيور وأنواع العطور، فلكل خصوصيات ومميزات عزفه. وفي أغلب سهرات السيدة أم كلثوم كنا نرى مجدي بولس يميل إلى مقارعة سلطنات الكمان الشرقي بألة التشيلو رغم تباعد المسافات على سكة الرقبة بين الألتين، إلا أن حسان كمال - الذي يجلس بالعادة على يمين مجدي بولس - اعتبر بلا منازع أمير تقنية البتريكاتو العربي وعنه يحدثنا الأستاذ والباحث الكبير عادل صموئيل عازف الكمان الأول في الفرقة الماسية قانلا:

<sup>81</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VrSr-6AeIOE&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR21Va7\\_PR0bwhyJMXuQY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VrSr-6AeIOE&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR21Va7_PR0bwhyJMXuQY)

[6AeIOE&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR21Va7\\_PR0bwhyJMXuQY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VrSr-6AeIOE&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR21Va7_PR0bwhyJMXuQY) RyVWD3vamodjCafOLNXn9hkDC8eYq-pLeuwx4U. Hassan Kamal begins to play *pizzicato* at 7:45, after the *muqāddima* when the percussion section enters. There are several moments from 8:00–9:00 when Kamal almost exactly matches the bongo player, for example from 8:39, playing on beats 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8 with accentuated *pizzicato* on beats 1 and 4, two of the defining beats of the *waḥda* rhythm (along with beat 7). This is a very clear example of the cello as a percussion instrument, which helps explain the cello’s position on the right side of the stage, next to the percussionists.

There are moments when the other two cellists stop playing while Hassan Kamal continues to play a *pizzicato* line, such as during the brief accordion and saxophone solos beginning at 19:40. In the unmetred sections, Hassan Kamal plays *arco* along with the two other cellists (37:23–40:00) but as soon as the rhythm section re-enters, Hassan Kamal returns to playing *pizzicato*. He shifts back to *arco* for certain *lazima*-s (e.g., 40:58–41:24).

<sup>82</sup> In my own training Western art music, I was taught to pluck the strings vertically for maximum resonance and minimum “extraneous noise.”

<sup>83</sup> This *fīrqa* was the dominant independent ensemble for decades, meaning that the group was not tied to a specific solo singer as Umm Kulthum’s *fīrqa* was. Many artists who came to Cairo without their own band hired *Firqat al-Māsīya* to back them up (e.g., Warda and ‘Abd al-Halim, a Sa‘udi singer). Another important



*Māsīya* rehearsals, sitting in front of cellists Magdi Boulos and Hassan Kamal, the aforementioned “Prince of Pizzicato”:

Hassan Kamal was one of the most skilled cellists in the world, but he was distinguished by the fact that he used to play with *pizzicato*, meaning that he played with his fingers more than with the bow. He invented a new school in *pizzicato* – that of the eastern rhythms [īqā’] set to pitches. If you want to hear his creativity in Umm Kulthum’s songs, turn up the bass and listen to the creativity which was not repeated nor succeeded by anyone because it is an innate talent that cannot be studied.<sup>84</sup>

‘Adil Samuel also describes his colleague Magdi Boulos, one of the cellists of Umm Kulthum’s *firqa* and *Firqat al-Māsīyah*:

Magdi Boulos: He was the most skilled cello player in the entire Arab world and his skills were competitive with those of skilled violinists, especially given that distances on the cello are very wide which means that on the violin it is possible to play for many hours in one position – that is, with your hand fixed in one position while the fingers move – but a single phrase on the cello requires the cellist to shift between three positions, moving his hand up and down. That is why there are very few proficient cellists – proficient meaning having perfect intonation. Magdi Boulos was not only proficient but outstanding, especially with the Eastern notes, which are very difficult on the cello [...].<sup>85</sup>

On January 1<sup>st</sup> 2020, Egyptian TV channel DMC programmed an interview with one of the last surviving members of Umm Kulthum’s *firqa*, cellist ‘Abd al-Fadil Muhammad [see Figure 11].<sup>86</sup> In this program feature, ‘Abd al-Fadil Muhammad describes his experiences in the *firqa* and performs two instrumental excerpts from Umm Kulthum songs—one from “*al-*

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independent ensemble was Hani Muhanna’s, one of the most renowned keyboard (*org*) players in Egypt (p.c. with Scott Marcus, Oct 2021).

<sup>84</sup> <http://monaelshazly.ahlamontada.net/t10900->

[topic?fbclid=IwAR2pwaQjEJFIjZcKeVxAAGxwMVjpR492HdJmpfKsgMkGcIjMUq2srkDpAs](http://monaelshazly.ahlamontada.net/t10900-topic?fbclid=IwAR2pwaQjEJFIjZcKeVxAAGxwMVjpR492HdJmpfKsgMkGcIjMUq2srkDpAs)

ان كمال: كان من أمهر عازفي التشيللو في العالم ولكن امتاز بأنه كان يعزف بتسكاتو  
يعنى بأصبعه اكثر من القوس واخترع مدرسة جديدة في البتسكاتو وهي الإيقاع الشرقي المنغم  
وان أردت سماع ابداعه في أغنيات أم كلثوم افتح مفتاح الباص واسمع الإبداع والذي لم يتكرر ولم يخلفه أحد لأنها موهبة فطرية لا تستطيع  
الدراسة تكوينها

<sup>85</sup> مجدي بولس : كان أمهر عازف تشيللو في العالم العربي على الإطلاق وبلغت مهارته منافسة عازفي الكمنجة المهرة علما بأن مسافات التشيللو  
واسعة جدا بمعنى انك في الكمنجة ممكن تعزف عشرات الساعات على وضع واحد بمعنى يدك ثابتة في مكان بينما الأصابع تتحرك لكن التشيللو  
يعزف جملة واحدة محتاج ان يتحرك بين 3 أوضاع ويده كلها تتحرك إلى أسفل و اعلى لذلك عازف التشيللو المجيد قليل جدا والمجيد يعني أن تكون  
نغماته سليمة ومجدي بولس كان ليس مجيداً فقط ولكنه كان مبدعا وبالذات في النغمات الشرقية وهي صعبة جدا على التشيللو

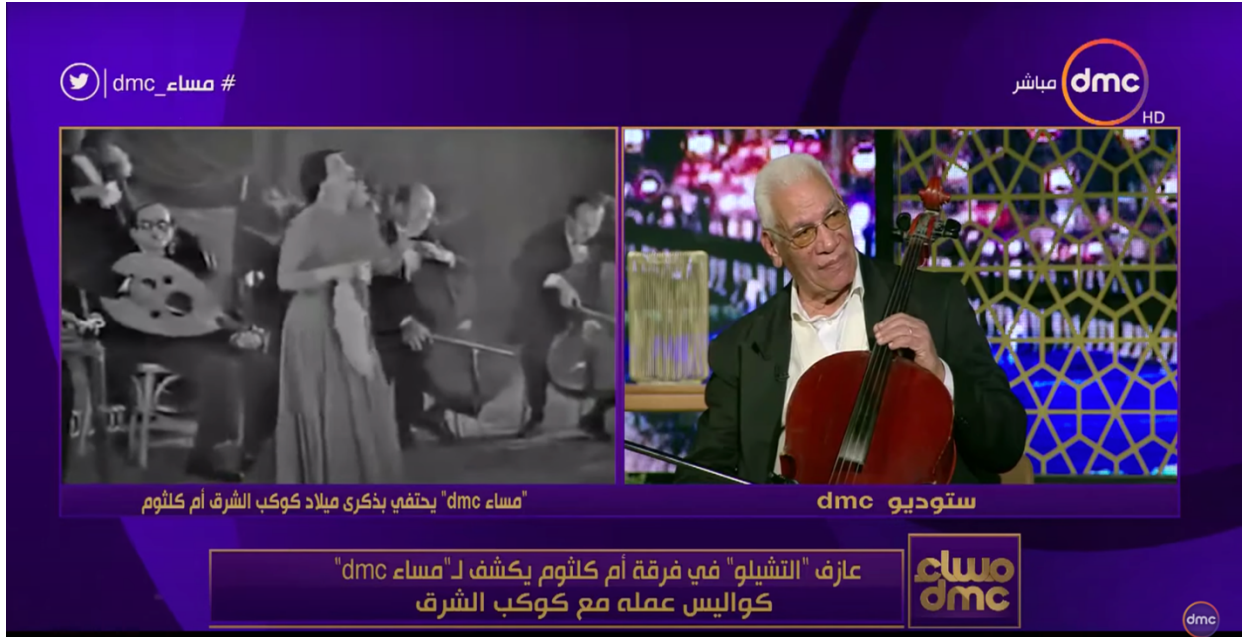
<sup>86</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bNIJSrlmzyM> See 21:38–25:26 and 33:40–36:11 for instrumental excerpts.

*Aṭlāl*” [“The Ruins”] and the other from “*Yā Masharnī*” [“You Who Keep Me Awake”] ‘Abd al-Fadil Muhammad recalls how he came to join Umm Kulthum’s *firqa*, pushed into Umm Kulthum’s studio 35B in the Radio and Television Union Building by his colleague Riyad al-Sunbati and challenged to play for her. After an impromptu yet successful audition, he became a lifelong member of her *firqa*.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> <https://www.vetogate.com/List/32/arts>

**Figure 11:** ‘Abd al-Fadil Muhammad interviewed on DMC. January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020.



Magdi Boulos described a similar story in a video presentation about his career at a function held in his honor (Sydney, Australia 2016).<sup>88</sup> He recalled having the chance to play for Riyadh al-Sunbati with a group of fellow musicians. al-Sunbati liked the way Boulos played and asked him to join Umm Kulthum's *firqa*. Boulos was accepted the invitation immediately and played with Umm Kulthum's *firqa* until the end of her career. Boulos is pictured below in rehearsals and performances with Umm Kulthum [see Figures 12 and 13].

<sup>88</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7QL8icpqmw> (31:30–41:30).

**Figure 12:** Magdi Boulos and Umm Kulthum [n.d.]



**Figure 13:** Magdi Boulos' video presentation at an honorary function (2016)



Few cellists who perform *al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya* today are familiar with the names of these cellists, unless they happen to have known them. Ashraf Hakim, one of the cellists I worked with, studied with Magdi Boulos in Egypt as a student at the Higher Institute for Arabic Music. Yet he remembers Boulos more for his pedagogy and Western art music skills

than for his position as one of the cellists in Umm Kulthum's *firqa*. Kinan Abou-afach (*Kinān Abū 'Afaṣh*), another cellist I worked with, noted:

I really mean no offense... but there was no cellist that could be remembered for what he did. You can remember some of the *riqq* players with Umm Kulthum. You can remember some of the violinists. You can definitely remember al-Qasabji and whoever played [...] the *nāy* and the *qānūn*, but I've never heard the name of a cellist [in Umm Kulthum's *firqa*].(12/17/20)

Although these cellists are not generally remembered by name, the techniques they used became standard for cellists in Arab music ensembles.

Arguably the most famous singer of the twentieth-century Middle East, Umm Kulthum's inclusion of cellists in her *firqa* set a standard for contemporary and future *al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya* ensembles in Egypt and beyond. The multiple roles of the cello in her *firqa* have been adopted by cellists in other *firqa*-s. Today, cellists still understand the role of the cello in *firqa*-s as two-fold, serving as both a melodic and percussive instrument with *arco* and *pizzicato*.<sup>89</sup>

In this section, I have explored the first historical evidence of bowed string instruments in the Middle East, from the first documentation of the *kamanja* and *rabāb* in the ninth century, to the introduction of the violin and its adoption in *takht* ensembles in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, to the cello's introduction and use in Egyptian *takht*-s beginning in the late 1920s. The cello became a regular addition to the most prominent *takht*-s of the time, live and on recordings, and became a fixed member of many eastern Arab music ensembles from the 1930s to the 1940s.

In addition to documenting the adoption of the cello in *takht*-s, I used the concept of circulation to challenge the hegemonic concept of Westernization as the singular explanation

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<sup>89</sup> See "*Arco and Pizzicato*" in Part III.

for the addition of violin family instruments in the *takht*. I showed the process of circulation by which the violin, whose predecessors emerged in Central Asia and the Middle East, was integrated into Arab music in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Shifting from this discussion, I turned to a particular member of the violin family, the cello, which was adopted in *takht*-s in the late 1920s. Using Umm Kulthum's *takht* and *firqa* as a case study, I analyzed some of the specific uses, playing styles, and techniques of the cello in Arab music ensembles from the 1930s to the 1960s. I also discussed the cellists of Umm Kulthum's *firqa*, describing the roles of cellists in her ensemble.

Throughout this section, I documented the gradual establishment of the cello as part of the standard instrumentation of *firqa*-s, initially with one cellist and later with two or three. The establishment of the cello in the *firqa* was a gradual process, in part because of the controversy about the instrument's use in Arab music which I describe in the following section (Part II). Using three historic moments as case studies (1932, 1967, and 1992), I will document this controversy, showing how the cello was positioned as a threat to Arab music in 1932 and 1967 and as a symbol of internationalism and high culture in 1992.

## **PART II: Cultural Security and the Cello: Three Historic Moments in Egypt (1932, 1967, 1992)**

In this section, I analyze the status of the cello in Egyptian cultural policy over the last century using three case studies: 1. The First International Congress of Arab Music held in 1932; 2. The founding of the first state-funded Arab music ensemble, *Firqat al-Musiqa al-'Arabiyya* (FMA) in 1967; 3. The establishment of two music festivals in Cairo in 1992. I demonstrate how the cello was initially seen as a threat to Arab music, a locus of the debate about the Westernization of Arab music. I then analyze recent changes in the status of the cello in *al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya* since the founding of two music festivals by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture in 1992.

Throughout this section, I analyze shifts in Egyptian cultural policy related to the use of the cello in Arab music. Cultural policy can be defined as “a set of values, principles, and goals that guide the state, local governments or NGOs in cultural interventions [...] intended to promote productive forms of cultural citizenship, ameliorate social dysfunctions, and stake political claims” (Belkind 2021:6).<sup>90</sup> Cultural policy makers operate at the national, regional, and local levels, through state actors, public-private partnerships, and nongovernmental actors. Although “culture” and “politics” are often reified as mutually exclusive categories, the “cultural” and the “political” interact with each other.

Music is often a locus for political change. Ethnomusicologist Nili Belkind notes that because music combines different ways of knowing, it is a “potent *instrument of* governmentality as well as a powerful medium for projecting and mobilizing oppositional individual and/or collective agency” (ibid:12, emphasis added). Culture and music are not

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<sup>90</sup> I use the term “cultural policy” rather than “music policy” throughout this section because the term “music policy” implies a single, coherent policy specific to music. Rather than isolating “music policy,” I use “cultural policy” to account for the web of policies, strategies, and initiatives that influence music-specific policies.

only *instruments* of governmentality, but also *objects* of governmentality (Bennett 1992 in Winegar 2006:178). In the arts, cultural policies can be classified by whether they treat art as possessing instrumental or intrinsic value (Behr, Brennan, Cloonan 2016). An instrumental understanding of arts often leads to cultural policies with an end goal in mind, leveraging the arts to help attain that goal. Cultural policies that treat art as having intrinsic value, however, hold that the arts are valuable to the common good by nature and should not be instrumentalized to an end.

That said, the arts are not solely an instrument of governmentality or an intrinsically valuable realm existing outside the political sphere. Arts institutions themselves are often a site of political expression and emergent policy. Contesting the idea that the arts are merely indicative of shifts in politics and economics, Sonali Pahwa and Jessica Winegar write:

Changes in the cultural scene are not simply a barometer of broader political and economic change, but part and parcel of it, particularly in countries with strong, centralized ministries of culture. (2012)

In Egypt, a country with a powerful ministry of culture, shifts in the cultural sphere are not mere reflections of developments in the political economy but are themselves a crucial *part* of the state's political and economic development. Music, specifically, is “a vital arm and not just a reflection of state cultural policy” (Stokes 1994:11).

Cultural policy is a critical aspect of governmentality and nation-building, and this is especially true of Egypt in the post-independence period, which I discuss in the first case study. This is also true of the post-revolutionary period under Nasser, which I address in the second case study, and of the neoliberal period and emergence of the human-security state<sup>91</sup> discussed in the third case study.

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<sup>91</sup> See Amar 2013b.



The topic of cultural policy links all three case studies. In 1932, ten years after nominal independence,<sup>92</sup> King Fu'ad hosted an international conference to create policy recommendations for the future of Egyptian and Arab music. In 1967, Nasser issued a republican decree to found the first state-funded and state-run Arab music ensemble after the devastating defeat of the Egyptian military in the Six-Day War with Israel. Since the 1990s, the cello has taken on a new role in government institutions and festivals under the auspices of the Egyptian Ministry of Culture.

In the final section of this chapter, I will present the concept of *cultural security*. While other types of music have been censored and policed by the Egyptian state for moral reasons, the state has consistently protected and defended *al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya* over the last century through cultural policy recommendations, funding, and promotion.<sup>93</sup> Since the 1930s, *al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya* has been associated with Egypt as an independent nation-state, connected to pan-Arab identity and ideology, and coded as both “cultural” and “cultured.” Although genres that have been censored by the government seem to exist in a separate sphere from *al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya*, these musics are fundamentally related because of the government’s heavy involvement, supporting, sponsoring, and protecting *al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya* while censoring, policing, and criticizing certain popular styles and genres such as *mahragānāt*.

In 2013, ethnomusicologist David McDonald noted that “contemporary ethnomusicological accounts of power have largely stalled in their attempts to provide a

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<sup>92</sup> Although Egypt became nominally independent in 1922, the British continued to have major political influence, troops remained stationed in Egypt, and Britain retained control of the Suez Canal until 1956 with the nationalization of the Canal under Gamal Abdel Nasser and the last British troops withdrew that year.

<sup>93</sup> Along with *al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya*, the Egyptian government supports folk music and religious music by establishing and supporting ensembles that perform those traditions.

theoretical framework for understanding both the social structures that create and sustain formations of domination and the potentialities for subverting those formations” (25). The framework of *cultural security* can be used to analyze the power structures that are used to control and censor music in Egypt and to examine how these structures have been subverted.

### **The Controversy of the Cello: The First International Congress of Arab Music (1932)**

Ethnomusicologists have written prolifically about The First International Congress of Arab Music in Cairo (1932), an event which is considered a watershed moment in Arab music history (Thomas 2006, 2007; Katz 2015; Castelo-Branco 1994; Hassan 2001; Racy 1991a).<sup>94</sup> This congress is considered a turning point in Arab music history, evidenced in a publication by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture’s Foreign Relations Sector:

That conference had a far-reaching significance because it marked a new era for [Egyptian, Syrian, Lebanese, Iraqi, Tunisian, Algerian and Moroccan] heritage, signaling a real cultural revival, and an aspiration for modernity after centuries of withdrawal to the past and its old parameters of monodism and aural disseminations of unauthenticated legacy, perpetuated only by groups of memorizers, by rote. (El Kholy et al. 2004:45)<sup>95</sup>

Initiated by King Fu’ad (*Fu’ād*) (1922–1936) to “bring Egypt up to par with the modern, ‘civilized’ world,” the aim of the congress was to survey and document the state of Egyptian music and generate strategies for developing Arab music while preserving its essential nature. The idea for the congress was suggested to King Fu’ad by French musicologist and orientalist Baron Rodolphe d’Erlanger, who served as one of the congress organizers. King Fu’ad agreed to fund the congress and it was held under the auspices of the

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<sup>94</sup> One of the reasons this congress has loomed so large in scholarship on Arab music is that the congress proceedings are considered one of the most reliable sources about traditional Arab music (El Kholy et al. 2004:45). This conference is also recognized as one of the first international music conferences in the world (Levine 2008:65).

<sup>95</sup> This book has been published in both English and Arabic.

Ministry of Education (Farmer 1976). Perhaps part of King Fu'ad's decision to host this international congress rested on the idea that Egypt would be granted "the right to control" this pan-Arab "cultural and political sphere" (Stokes 1994:15). Congress members included upper-class Egyptian musicians and musicians and scholars from other parts of the Middle East and Europe.

The fact that the congress organizers invited experts from outside of Egypt to comment on musical reform speaks to a long colonial legacy that influenced the event. A decade after nominal independence, Egypt continued to be under indirect control of the British following nearly half a century of British occupation (Salem 2020:90). In 1932, the question of Egypt's cultural and national identity still loomed large as did the position of Egypt within a broader identification increasingly conceived as "Arab" (Thomas 2006:54). The congress was connected to the project of nation-building and, in a postcolonial framework, represented the "classicization of tradition" that often occurs in post-independence nation states (Chatterjee 1993:72–4). The committee members of the 1932 Congress were interested in questions of post-colonial identity—both Egyptian and pan-Arab—while continuing to operate under the shadow of colonialism.

One of the major shifts that occurred at the congress was the replacing of the term "Eastern Music" (*al-mūsīqā al-sharqiyya*) with "Arab Music" (*al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya*) (El-Shawan 1980a).<sup>96</sup> This terminological shift was highly significant in terms of ethnic identity and regional affiliation.<sup>97</sup> *al-Mūsīqā al-sharqiyya* referred to a pan-Eastern regional identity

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<sup>96</sup> Efforts to introduce the term *al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya* were underway by the late 1920s with the renaming of the "Arab Music Institute," which had previously been the "Eastern Music Institute" (El-Shawan 1980a:54).

<sup>97</sup> Philippe Vigneux suggests that the shift in terminology was partly a reaction to the fall of the Ottoman empire after WWI. The term "Eastern music" had referred to a broad, pan-Islamic musical world while "Arab music" distinguished between the music of Arab countries and that of the Turks or other ethno-national groups (Hassan 2001).

that could include Turkey and Iran whereas *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* marked a pan-Arab ethnic identity, excluding Turkish and Persian associations. There was significant anti-Turkish sentiment at the time and the concept of “Arab music” was a “device in an effort to withdraw from the Ottoman domination of the century prior” (Danielson 1994:134).

Salwa El-Shawan Castelo-Branco uses the term “heritagization” to describe the process of reconceiving pre-existing musical genres as “Arab.” She argues that the 1932 Congress “established *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyyah* as a discursive field grounded in the ideal of authenticity” (2016). By entitling the 1932 Congress “The First International Congress on Arab Music,” rather than “The First International Congress on *Eastern* Music,” the conference organizers established “*al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya*” as the umbrella category for many pre-existing genres of music and coded these genres as “Arab”

The literal translation of *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* is “Arab music,” but this term is also used to refer to an “Egyptian category of secular urban music”<sup>98</sup> characterized by the use of distinct modes (*maqāmāt*), rhythmic patterns (*īqā’*), vocal and instrumental compositional forms, ornamentation, and vocal and instrumental styles. The term *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* has been used to describe both traditional Arab music (pre-twentieth century, known as *al-turāth* or “the heritage”) as well as the music of the stars of the twentieth century, including Umm Kulthum and Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab (*al-jadīd*, or “the new”) (El-Shawan 1980b:86). In the 1930s–40s, “traditional music” [*al-turāth*] referred to repertoire composed and performed up to the 1910s, but in the 1960s–70s the term expanded to include “traditional” repertoire from the 1930s and 1940s as well.

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<sup>98</sup> The term *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* is also used in Jordan, with ensembles such as The Oman Arabic Music Ensemble. The same is true in Syria and Palestine with ensembles such as the National Syrian Arabic Music Ensemble and the National Palestinian Arabic Music Ensemble.

Today, this repertoire is often called *ṭarab*, a term that refers to a highly inspirational state as well as the style of music and performance that provokes this state.

Ethnomusicologist A.J. Racy explains that *ṭarab* can be used to refer to the “indigenous, essentially secular music of Near-Eastern Arab cities” which might be categorized as “art music” from a Western perspective (2003:6).<sup>99</sup> In a more specific sense, *ṭarab* “refers to an older repertoire, which is rooted in the pre-World-War I musical practice of Egypt and the East-Mediterranean Arab world and is directly associated with emotional evocation” (ibid). Later in this section, I will return to a discussion of *ṭarab* to discuss the role of sentimentality and emotionality in the modernization of Arab music.

In ethnomusicological scholarship about the 1932 Congress, the discourse has mainly been that of preservation versus modernization (Racy 1991a; El-Shawan 1994; Thomas 2007). Ethnomusicologists have largely understood the mission of the congress as two-fold, concerning both the preservation and modernization of Arab music. This analysis mirrors the discourse from the time of the conference itself. Ethnomusicologist Salwa El-Shawan Castelo-Branco makes note of two terms that were used in Cairo’s music scene at the time of the 1932 Congress—the “old” [*al-qadīm*] and the “new” [*al-jadīd*] (1994). Using these two historical terms, El-Shawan analyzes the tension between “traditional and modern orientations” that came to a head at the congress (ibid:73). The “old” [*al-qadīm*] supporters advocated for the preservation of “authentic” Arab music in the context of Westernization, fearing that the inclusion of European musical instruments, harmony, rhythm, and performance practice would alter the “essence” of Arab music. The “new” [*al-jadīd*] supporters, on the other hand, “viewed the integration of Western musical elements as a way

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<sup>99</sup> *al-Mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya*, or *ṭarab*, is distinct from *sha‘bī* (popular-class urban music often played at Sufi *mawlid*-s and weddings), *shabābī*, *madḥ* and other genres (Puig 2006).

of modernizing Arab music, a prerequisite for its survival” (ibid). In her own scholarship, El-Shawan uses these terms to describe a dualist tension between preservationist and modernist attitudes at the 1932 Congress.

While it is important to recognize the debates between the “old”/preservation and the “new”/innovation as dualistic, it is also crucial to understand these discourses and perspectives as interactive and dialectical. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes, “Heritage is a new mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past” (1995:369). Heritage projects do not only preserve the past but create the present; in this sense, the construction of heritage is part of the project of modernization. The seemingly oppositional processes of classicization and modernization of “Arab music” occurred simultaneously (Hassan and Vigreux 1992:232). The fear of heritage-loss was in dialogue with a simultaneous interest in reform and modernization.

There were multiple imaginaries of reform, many of which envisioned reform and modernization as tantamount to heritage preservation. In other words, some understood musical reform as essential to maintaining the relevancy of traditional Arab music amidst shifting national and international mediascapes in the post-WWI era.

The labels “protectionist” and “modernist” serve as a useful heuristic marking two extreme ends of a spectrum of perspectives and ideas. By destabilizing, historicizing and contextualizing the binaries of “old v. new” / “preservation v. innovation” / “protectionist v. modernist,” it is possible to see what appear to be “opposite ends of the spectrum” as working in tandem. The very meanings of these terms are continually at play; what is now considered “old” was once “new;” what is now considered “tradition” began as “innovation.”

These categories are useful tools in understanding a highly complex set of debates about the future of eastern Arab music if their dynamic nature is considered.

Drawing on Chakrabarty (2000) and Chatterjee (1993), Amanda Weidman argues that modernity should not be approached as a European invention, period, or process alone but should be understood as “constituted in and by the colonial encounter” (2006:7). Weidman argues that Karnatic (South Indian) classical music was produced in and through the colonial encounter. Rather than using “Western” or “Indian” to understand sounds, practices, and categories, she suggests that it is critical to see Karnatic music as *colonial*, positioning the West and India in relation to one another. Writing about the use of the violin in Karnatic music, Weidman argues, “Rather than suggesting a history of Westernization, the story of the violin points to the emergence of a musical practice and discourse that is specifically colonial” (15). The same could be said of the emergence of the term *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* at the 1932 Congress, replacing the term *al-mūsīqā al-sharqiyya*. Arguably, this new terminology and conceptualization was also the result of the colonial encounter; it was in the post-independence period that the category *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* was conceived, part of a reaction to the national and pan-Arab nationalist projects of newly independent Egypt. The incorporation of the cello in Arab music ensembles was also a result of the colonial encounter, with British, Italian, and other European music teachers at newly established music schools in Cairo.

I follow Weidman in my conceptualization of the cello not as an element of Westernization but as a manifestation of the “colonial encounter.” Weidman cogently argues that the violin in Karnatic music was not merely a “colonial add-on to an already existent musical tradition;” rather, the violin *stages* or *produces* the singing voice, which became a

sign of “Indianness” and resistance to colonization, leading to the moniker “Kingdom of the Voice” (15). Similarly, the addition of the violin, cello, and bass in Arab music helped *stage* and *produce* superstar singers such as Umm Kulthum who came to be considered “the voice of Egypt” (Danielson 1997).

Just as Weidman describes the developments by which Karnatic music came to be understood as “classical” music, it is important to understand the developments by which the category *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* has come to be understood as “art” music through the colonial encounter of modernity.<sup>100</sup> As with the reconceptualization of Karnatic music as “classical” music, *al-mūsīqā al-sharqiyya* was reconceptualized as *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Over the next decades, *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* came to incorporate many of the musical practices introduced to Egypt during the colonial period including staff notation, performances in concert halls, institutionalized pedagogy, and the growing importance of the composer. All these things, while associated with “the West,” cannot be understood as exclusively Western or Euro-American. The development of *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* was not a unidirectional process of Westernization, but a complex, dialogical modern creation through colonial institutions and modes of thinking.

### The Musical Instruments Committee

The 1932 Congress was marked by a general debate between the “old” [*al-qadīm*] and the “new” [*al-jadīd*], mentioned above, which often led to “bitter” and “unresolved disputes” (Davis 1993:137). Ethnomusicologist Ruth Davis notes that “probably the most hotly debated issue was whether western instruments in general, and the cello and piano in

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<sup>100</sup> The adjective “classical” is not commonly used to describe *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* though Arab music “acquired a ‘classical’ hue” because of features characteristic of Western classical music such as orchestras led by a conductor, performances in concert halls, etc. (Marcus 2015:281).



particular, should be admitted into Arab musical ensembles” (ibid). This debate came to a head in the Musical Instruments Committee. Egyptian committee members mostly argued in the favor of including these instruments, but European participants strongly discouraged the use of the cello, even though it was already a “standard member of indigenous ensembles” (ibid).

The Musical Instruments Committee was one of seven committees at the 1932 Congress, each tasked with creating policy recommendations for a particular issue or topic. The Musical Instruments Committee, headed by the Berlin school comparative musicologist Curt Sachs (1881–1959), was tasked with surveying musical instruments and assessing their appropriateness in *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* (Racy 1991a; Castelo-Branco 1994:72).<sup>101</sup> Many prominent Egyptian musicians were skeptical of Curt Sachs and deplored his appointment as head of the Musical Instruments Committee.

A year before the congress, Curt Sachs had been asked to survey the state of music in Egypt and he produced a report with his findings. After Sachs’ report was published, composer Dawud Husni published a highly critical review of the report, revealing that Sachs had only consulted three people and had ignored large aspects of Egyptian music in his report such as musical theater (in Hassan 1993, trans. by Philippe Vigneux: 279–281). Additionally, Sachs’ report was highly critical of urban professional musicians in Egypt (Sahhab 1997:42, 72–73, cited in Thomas 2006:78). Despite critical reviews of this report, Curt Sachs was appointed head of the Musical Instruments Committee, overseeing Egyptian musicians and

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<sup>101</sup> Curt Sachs and Erich von Hornbostel created the Sachs-Hornbostel system of musical instrument classification in 1914 which remains the basis of organological classification systems, though it has been criticized for its system of “downward” classification, Eurocentrism, and ties to settler colonialism (Dawe 2003:277; Levitz 2017:7). It is said to have roots in ancient Indian classifications of musical instruments (p.c. Scott Marcus, 17 October 2021).

scholars as well as musicians and scholars from outside the country including Mesut Cemil (1902–1963), a Turkish composer and multi-instrumentalist (*tanbur*, lute, and cello),<sup>102</sup> Lebanese composer and conservatory director Wadi‘ Sabra (*Wadī‘ Šabrā*) (1872–1952), and comparative musicologist Dr. Erich von Hornbostel (1877–1935).<sup>103</sup>

The committee discussed a series of questions related to musical instruments, one of which specifically dealt with European instruments. This question read as follows:

Is it necessary in Arab music to refrain from using European instruments individually and in *firqa*-s [ensembles], or is it correct to adopt some of those instruments? Which instruments? Should these instruments be taken as they are, or do they need to be modified?<sup>104</sup>

Ethnomusicologists note that it was mainly the Europeans committee members who felt strongly that European instruments should *not* be used in Arab music, contending that Western instruments were likely to “disfigure the beauty of Arab music” (Racy 1991a:71 translation of KMMA).<sup>105</sup> Castelo-Branco refers to this group as “protectionists”—those who felt that “since musical instruments expressed specific musical styles, the use of Western instruments for the performance of Arab music was inappropriate” (1994:75). This opinion

<sup>102</sup> Mesut Cemil (b. 1902) was the son of Tanburi Cemil Bey (1868–1925), one of the most renowned Ottoman composers and musicians. Both Mesut and his father were multi-instrumentalists who played cello among many other instruments. Tanburi Cemil Bey recorded *taksim*-s on cello at the turn of the century, a practice that did not become common for cellists in Arab music until the 1980s and 90s. In fact, Tanburi Cemil Bey is considered the “first musician to use the cello in Turkish music” (Ezat 2009:76). Listen to recordings of Tanburi Cemil Bey’s cello *taksim*-s here: (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqGqrLQq5CA>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cd74ZGJi3wQ>). Tanburi Cemil Bey’s son, Mesut Cemil, may have recorded this *taksim* at the 1932 Congress, but I have not yet confirmed this: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rfd\\_G6D\\_aWs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rfd_G6D_aWs).

<sup>103</sup> The Musical Instruments Committee included Curt Sachs (chairman), Naguib Nahas (secretary), M. Jamil Bey, Henry George Farmer, Alois Hába, Wilhelm Heinitz, Paul Hindemith, Erich von Hornbostel, Ahmad Amin al-Dik, F. Cantoni, Muḥammad Ezzat Bey, Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab, Muhammad Fathi, and Wadi‘ Sabra (Katz 2015:325). Although Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab was listed among the committee members, he did not attend the congress. Muhammad Fathi explained that he was “too embarrassed” to attend the Congress because it was known that he “literally stole themes from Western art music” (El-Shawan 1973:6, cited in Katz 2015:153).

<sup>104</sup> السؤال الرابع: أيجب في الموسيقى العربية الامتناع عن استعمال الآلات الأوربية للأفراد أو للفرق أم يصح اتخاذ بعض تلك الآلات؟ وما هي؟ أيبقى ما يتخذ منها على حاله أم يحتاج إلى تعديل؟

<sup>105</sup> تفاديا من تشويه ما في الموسيقى العربية من جمال  
*Kitāb Mu‘tamar al-Mūsīqā al-‘Arabiyya* 1933:393.

was grounded in the idea that “instruments were determined by local musical styles and aesthetics [...] Each musical tradition [having] instruments that suit its style and expression, which could only change as the music itself changes” (Racy 1991a:76). It was predominantly the European members of the Musical Instruments Committee who made this claim, arguing that “instruments develop in tandem with musical style, and that to introduce European instruments would compromise the nature of Arab music” (ibid).

A letter sent by the University of Paris to the Musical Instruments Committee in 1932 made a recommendation along similar lines, posing Western instruments as “threats” to Arab music:

In order to save Arab music which, in certain regions, is *threatened* by instruments which might not suit it, could the Congress not absolutely outlaw fixed pitch instruments which permit only the semitone (piano, harmonium, mandolin and even violin) and strongly advise against any fixed pitch instrument as well as instruments whose sounds are tinny, dry or not vibrating (too pure sounds) which do not combine well with the sound of the old Arab instruments. (In Hassan 1993:216, emphasis added)<sup>106</sup>

It is odd that this recommendation lists the violin in a set of fixed pitch instruments when the violin is perfectly suitable for playing microtones, but the crucial point here is the perception of instruments as a “threat” to Arab music, and the imperative to save Arab music from such threats.

Some non-European committee members held similar attitudes. Syrian theorist and violinist Tawfiq al-Sabbagh (*Tawfiq al-Ṣabbāgh*), for instance, warned against giving up Middle Eastern music for Western music and accused the Middle Eastern members of the

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<sup>106</sup> “Afin de sauver la musique arabe qui, dans certaines régions, est menacée par des instruments qui ne sauraient lui convenir, le congrès ne pourrait-il pas proscrire absolument les instruments à sons fixes ne donnant que le demi-ton (piano, harmonium, mandoline et même violon) et déconseille vivement tout instrument à son fixe ainsi que les instrument dont la sonorité grêle, sèche ou non vibrante (sons trop purs) s’allie mal avec celle des anciens instruments arabes.”

committee as being “ignorant of the emotional essence of their own musical heritage” (Racy 2003:3, citing al-Ṣabbāgh 1950:15). In general, this “protectionist” group was resistant to adopting European instruments in Arab music ensembles.

The counterpart to the “protectionists” was the “modernist” group, composed mainly of the Egyptians on the committee who looked favorably upon using European instruments in Arab music and understood Western influence as an inevitable reality that could bring traditional Arab music into the modern world. As such, part of the “modernist” argument was rooted in the notion that the “assimilation of European instruments [...] [would] advance the renaissance of Arab music and move it forward toward progress” (Racy 1991a). Virginia Danielson notes that new instruments and techniques were not typically seen as a threat to Arab music in Cairo. Egyptian musicians generally “saw no objection to the introduction of European musical instruments [...] as long as the essential Eastern character (*tābi*) of Arab music was preserved” (Danielson 1997:162).

There were exceptions to the general trend of Egyptian musicians and scholars favoring the addition of Western instruments and European scholars discouraging their use. For example, shortly after the congress committee member George Samman (*Jūrj Sammān*) published an article in *al-Sahāh* entitled “*Un musicien de renom explique au Ministère de l’Instruction publique et aux lecteurs ce qui s’est passé au Congrès de Musique orientale*” [“A Renowned Musician Explains to the Minister of Public Education and to Readers What Happened at the Congress of Oriental Music”]:

I told them [...] Soon the day will come, and I see it imminent, when the conquering renovator will throw your *bashraf*-s and your instruments into the waters of the Bosphorus where he has already thrown your splendid Arabic calligraphy and your dear *tarbouches* [cloth caps, traditionally red and with a silk tassel, often worn by musicians in the early-twentieth century], forcing you to exchange them for Latin

letters and the European cap.<sup>107</sup> You will then only have the diatonic piano, the guitar, the mandolin, and the cello! (In Hassan 1993, trans. from Arabic to French by Philippe Vigreux:243, my translation from French in Hassan)<sup>108</sup>

George Samman warned of a slippery slope in which Arab music would be erased by so-called renovation, eventually leaving Egyptians stranded with only the piano, guitar, mandolin, and cello.

Samman refers to the *ṭarbūsh* which was a dynamic and contested symbol in Egypt in the 1930s. Worn mostly by the *effendi* class of men, the Ottoman *ṭarbūsh* was appropriated by Egyptian nationalists around 1914 when the British went to war with the Ottomans. Several years later, in the immediate post-independence period, the *ṭarbūsh* became a “symbol of the reborn nation, an accessory essential to being modern, Eastern, and Egyptian” (Jacob 2011:219). By the 1930s, however, the sartorial decision of whether to wear the *ṭarbūsh* was reflective of one’s stance on modernity.

The debate came to a head during what the Egyptian popular press called the “*ṭarbūsh* incident” when an Egyptian ambassador wore the *ṭarbūsh* to a celebration of Ottoman Republic Day in Turkey in 1932 and was forced to remove it by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the first President of the Republic of Turkey, who had banned this head covering seven years prior. This incident incited great debate among the Egyptian public. Atatürk was known for having forcefully Westernized Turkey and codifying a secular state. In 1925, seven years

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<sup>107</sup> The Turkish government replaced Arabic script, with which Ottoman Turkish had been written for centuries, with Latin script. Latin script increased literacy but also distanced modern Turks from their heritage, no longer able to read texts that were written before the 1920s.

<sup>108</sup> “Je leur dis [...] Bientôt viendra le jour, et je le vois imminent, où le rénovateur conquérant jettera vos *bashraf-s* et vos instruments dans le eaux du Bosphore où il a déjà jeté votre splendide calligraphie arabe et vos chers *tarbouches*, vous obligeant à les échanger contre les lettres latines et la casquette européenne. Il ne vous restera plus alors que le piano diatonique, la guitare, la mandoline, et le violoncelle!”

before the “*ṭarbūsh* incident,” Atatürk had banned the *ṭarbūsh* stirring debate in Egypt about the meaning of the *ṭarbūsh* (ibid). Jacob describes both sides of the debate over the *ṭarbūsh*:

When culture was conceived hermetically and as ontologically unique, the *ṭarbūsh* appeared to be indispensable to national identity; when culture was regarded as always already a site of difference and hybridity, the change of headdress was viewed positively. (ibid:188)

That Samman places the *ṭarbūsh* in juxtaposition with European instruments in this passage shows a disconnect from the *ṭarbūsh*'s initial signification of Ottoman domination in the 1860s. What had initially been a symbol of Ottoman domination over Egypt was resignified over the next half century. By the time Samman wrote this article in 1932, the *ṭarbūsh* had lost its former associations with Ottoman rule and was instead a symbol of traditional *Arab* identity. With this historical background in mind, Samman may have been able to conceive of a future of Arab music in which the cello—previously a symbol of “the West” and modernity—could be appropriated and re-signified over the course of several decades.

Apart from Samman, Egyptian musicians generally took a “modernist” stance, in favor of incorporating Western instruments in Arab music. Some even saw their incorporation as *necessary* to the survival of Arab music rather than a threat to its essential character. The “modernist” committee members were interested in adding European instruments to (Egyptian) Arab music ensembles for several reasons. In the case of the piano, for instance, some committee members thought it could “help standardize intonation [and] assist in fixing an agreed-upon Arab scale” with twenty-four equal-tempered quarter tones per octave (Racy 1991a:76).

Muhammad Fathi (*Muḥammad Faṭḥī*), an Egyptian committee member who was one of the founders of the Egyptian Oriental Music Institute (*Ma‘had al-Mūsīqā al-Sharqiyya*)

and later served as director of the Arab Music Institute from 1952–1964, advocated for the use of European instruments in Arab music for an entirely different reason.<sup>109</sup> Fathi was interested in musical *expression* more than music theory. He argued that “such instruments [European instruments] possessed tremendously varied expressive means and depictive powers” and that “‘Oriental’ instruments were suited for nothing except the expressing of love and infatuation” (Racy 2003:3, citing KMMA).

In a private interview with Salwa El-Shawan in 1973, several decades after the congress, Fathi explained that his main role on the committee was to resist the proposal “to eliminate all Western instruments from the Arab music ensemble.” He felt that “all the instruments ‘*a ton libre*’ [that could be freely tuned, i.e., not fixed pitch] such as the violin, viola, cello and bass [could] be utilized in the Arab music ensemble, because they render all the subtleties of the *maqāmāt*” (interview with Salwa el-Shawan, cited in Katz 2015:152).

### Affective Considerations

The issue of affect loomed large in the Musical Instruments Committee’s discussion of the incorporation of the cello in Arab music ensembles. Whereas the committee’s discussions about the use of the piano, bass, and viola focused on technical issues such as intonation and register, the primary concern about the cello was the instrument’s affect. Some committee members saw the cello as “a desirable addition to the local instrumentarium,” especially as it was already incorporated in many Arab music groups,<sup>110</sup> but others were wary of its inclusion because of its affective qualities (Castelo-Branco in Hassan 1993:46; Racy 1991a:75).

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<sup>109</sup> Fathi later served as Director of the Arab Music Institute from 1952 to 1964 (El-Shawan 1980a:177).

<sup>110</sup> Umm Kulthum, Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab, Muhammad al-Qasabji, and Fathiyya Ahmad had already incorporated the cello in their *takht*-s by 1932 (see Part I: The Violin and Cello in the Early Egyptian *Takht*).

The divisiveness regarding the inclusion of the cello in Arab music ensembles was part of what stalled the Musical Instruments Committee, requiring more time than most of the other committees to agree upon a policy recommendation (El Kholy et al. 2004:45). Though the question of whether to include the cello or not was highly controversial, the *published* proceedings of the committee unilaterally advocate against including the cello in Arab music ensembles, citing affect and sentimentality as one of the primary reasons for its exclusion:

As for the violoncello, the committee saw no need to use it in Egyptian music since its tonal quality is overly sentimental (*shajw*),<sup>111</sup> arousing emotions and agitating tears. Its voice carries over the other instruments, which disperses the rest of the Egyptian instruments,<sup>112</sup> homogenous in emotion. Perhaps it fills the void that the *kamanja* (violin) cannot fill in the lower registers. (KMMA 2007:395)<sup>113</sup>

Racy summarizes this section of the committee proceedings, paraphrasing some of the key phrases:

The committee discouraged the use of the cello for enriching the low octave registers because the excessive pathos and sentimentality as well as the domineering quality of its sound make it incompatible with Egyptian instruments. (1991:76)

Salwa El-Shawan paraphrases the same section of the proceedings as follows:

... the cello should not be used in Egyptian music because its sound overwhelms the other instruments, excites the feelings, and brings on tears. (1980:176)

Linda Fathallah paraphrases the committee's decision in slightly different terms:

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<sup>111</sup> According to the Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic (4<sup>th</sup> edition), *shajw* (شجو) means "wailing, plaintive, moving strain (of a tune, of a song, of an instrument)." Ali Jihad Racy has translated this word as "sentimentality."

<sup>112</sup> It is notable that the committee referred to the other instruments as "Egyptian" instruments. This indicates a nationalization of instruments were shared across many countries in the region and did not originate in Egypt. Calling these instruments "Egyptian" is especially interesting given the pan-Arab nationalism that pervaded the conference; this underscores the idea that there were competing nationalisms. One strand of nationalism was based in post-independence Egyptian particularity while the other emphasized a shared, pan-Arab identity.

<sup>113</sup> أما الفيولونسيل فلم ترا اللجنة وجها لاستخدامها في الموسيقى المصرية، لما اصطبغت به ألحانها من فرط الشجو وإثارة المدامع، وتغلب صوتها على ما عداها من الآلات، مما يتنافر مع باقي الآلات المصرية من تجانس في الصبغة، على أنه سدا الفراغ الذي لا يتأتى الكمنجة أن تملأه في الطبقات المنخفضة. Translation with the help of Dr. Dwight Reynolds.



The opinions of members of the Instruments Committee differed over the integration of the cello and double bass into the core of Arab instruments. The argument of the oppositional party was that their adoption would be of no effect, except to fill the void that the violin could not fill in the low registers, and would adulterate the character of Arab music, particularly in terms of singing. (In Hassan 1993:100)<sup>114</sup>

Although these three representations have subtle variations, all three scholars concur that the cello was dismissed on affective grounds. Although the cello could play in lower registers outside the range of the violin, the committee decided that ultimately it would be disadvantageous to include the cello in Egyptian Arab music ensembles because of its “excessive pathos and sentimentality” (Racy 1991a:76).

Linda Fathallah, a contemporary scholar, challenges this perspective. She holds that the fact that the cello produces “sentimental, tearful and overly melodic sounds” is one of the most powerful indicators of the *need* to integrate the instrument into Arab music. As she puts it, “these qualities are lacking in the means of expression of our music” (in Hassan 1993:101). The arguments in favor and against the incorporation of the cello in Arab music both hinge on affective considerations.

Muhammad Fathi presented another affect-based argument in an article published after the conference:

The Musical Instruments Committee has decided in one of the sessions not to use the cello and double bass in oriental music. It was seen that including these instruments would spoil the special vocal style of Arab music because the cello and double bass excite the feelings and bring tears to the eyes, as Mr. Sachs says. I view these characteristics as the strongest motivation for the inclusion of these two instruments in Arab music. (Fathi 1935:11–12, cited in El-Shawan 1980a:177)<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> “*Les opinions des membres de la Commission des Instruments ont divergé quant à l’intégration du violoncelle et de la contrebasse au noyau des instruments arabes. L’argument de la partie contre était que leur adoption ne serait d’aucun effet, si ce n’est de remplir le vide que le violon ne pouvait combler dans les registres graves et d’adulterer le caractère de la musique arabe, particulièrement au niveau du chant*” (100–101).

<sup>115</sup> El-Shawan notes that Fathi’s views were shared by many other musicians and decision makers in Cairo during the 1930s and 1940s, so the frequency of cellos and basses in ensembles is not unsurprising (1980a:177).

Like Fathallah, Fathi believed the cello and double bass *should* be included in Arab music specifically because of their affective dimensions, able to “excite the feelings and bring tears to the eyes.” Here Fathi inverts Curt Sachs’ argument for why the cello and bass should *not* be included in Arab music ensembles and uses the same rationale as a justification for their inclusion.

Committee members were divided over whether the cello should be included in Arab music ensembles, yet both sides agreed that the cello would bring pathos and sentimentality to Arab music. Depending on the committee members’ perspectives, this outcome would be either positive or negative. Some committee members felt that emotional expression was one of the defining aspects of Arab music. al-Sabbagh stated that that “Oriental” music was “first and foremost an emotive expression” while European music placed the highest premium on technical perfection. He lamented that Middle Eastern musicians were often “ignorant of the emotional essence of their own musical heritage” (Racy 2003:3, citing al-Sabbagh 1950:15).

Muhammad Fathi nuanced this discussion of affect in his statement that European instruments had a greater range of “expressive powers” whereas Middle Eastern instruments could only express love and infatuation (Racy 2003:3, citing al-Sabbagh:15).<sup>116</sup> For this reason, Fathi was interested in adding European instruments to Arab music ensembles to expand the affective *range* of the music. In this case, the emotional spectrum of Arab music would be enhanced by the addition of the cello and bass.

While most Egyptian committee members embraced European instruments for their potential to express the emotive qualities of “Oriental” music, the European committee members disparaged the excessive sentimentality of European instruments. Hornbostel, for

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<sup>116</sup> See full quotation on previous page.

instance, bemoaned the Western violin replacing the Arab violin [sic].<sup>117</sup> He saw the adoption of the Western violin as a vehicle for introducing “our technique, our vibrato, and, horrors, *our sentimentality*” (Racy 1991a). Mirroring the committee’s denigration of the cello’s “excessive pathos and sentimentality,” Hornbostel saw the “horror” of sentimentality in the entire violin family.

Thus, the issue of whether to include the cello in Arab music ensembles had as much to do with affect and aesthetics as it did with the issue of preservation versus modernization. The “affecting presence” of the cello connects to broader debates about affect, emotion, pathos, and sentimentality in Arab music (Dawe 2003:275). Both al-Sabbagh and Fathi referred to the affective dimension of Arab music, though they differed in their assessment of specific affective *qualities* and the expressive range of Arab musical instruments. Perhaps the concern with the cello’s “excessive pathos and sentimentality” was connected to a desire to shift away from the stereotype of “Oriental” music as highly emotional and sentimental.

It would be remiss not to mention *ṭarab* here, a concept that refers to a “state of heightened emotionality” and is considered one of the defining features of Arab music (Shannon 2003:74; Racy 2003). Historically, the term *ṭarab* was associated with the recitation of poetry and the *Qur’ān*, but the term was also frequently used in medieval and modern writings on music (Racy 1998; Racy 2003:6). Racy describes the experience of *ṭarab* as part of an “ecstatic-feedback model” in which performers, audience members, lyrics, music, atmosphere, and other factors all interact in a feedback loop that generates ecstasy.

Though *ṭarab* refers to a highly emotional and even ecstatic state, *ṭarab* differs from “sentiment” (Racy 2003:202). “Sentiment” implies specific emotional experiences such as

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<sup>117</sup> The “Arab violin” refers to the *kamanja/rabab*.

sadness, anger, and joy whereas the *tarab* state moves beyond “plain sentiment-related terms” into more “abstract emotional” territories rather than “explicit sentiment-like conditions” (ibid:203). There is no direct translation of *tarab* in English, but Racy uses the term “transformative blending” to describe the mixing of emotional and experiential conditions that, together, create a blend in which specific emotions and sentiments are “no longer identifiable” or “no longer emotional in the familiar sense” (ibid).

Racy notes that dictionaries from various eras associate *tarab* with both joy and sadness; intensity and “extreme-ness” (*shiddat*); with “physiological changes”; “drastic shift[s] from one emotional state to another; longing and yearning (*shawq*); performative; melancholic, combining joy and sadness (*shajan*) (ibid:203–205). Based on these definitions, the Musical Instruments Committee’s description of the cello as “excessively sentimental” and capable of moving listeners to tears makes it seem as though that the instrument would fit well into *tarab* music-culture. While committee members made no explicit connection between the cello and *tarab*, it is possible that the rejection of the cello as “overly sentimental” had to do with a general turn away from emotionality in Arab music. In the context of the Syrian music scene, Jonathan Shannon notes:

Some intellectuals and artists despair about Arab emotionality, asserting that it is the cause of Arab “backwardness” (*takhalluf*), and they show little interest in authenticity—indeed, they consider authenticity to be an impediment to modernity. For them, *tarab* is no longer a positive aesthetic term; they prefer a more intellectual music that caters to the thinking listener and not the old-fashioned emotional *tarab* listener, whose shouting and sighing to them seem “vulgar” (habit). In this view, *tarab* is nonmodern, nonreflective, hopelessly repetitive, and emotional.” (2003:89)

The cello is positioned in this wider, ongoing debate about the place of emotion in the context of Arab music and modernity. Ali Jihad Racy observes that Arab music has been defined by the “centrality of emotional evocation both as a musical aesthetic and as a topic of

concern” (Racy 2003:4).<sup>118</sup> “Emotional evocation” was certainly a “topic of concern” at the 1932 Congress, and the cello was an object of undesirable “emotional evocation” with its oversentimentality and propensity to move people to tears. In Ahmedian terms, the cello was an “object of emotion.” The hyper-emotionality associated with the cello did not align with modern rational modes of thinking. As Sara Ahmed writes, “Emotions are bound up with the securing of social hierarchy: emotions become attributes of bodies as a way of transforming what is ‘lower’ and ‘higher’ into bodily traits” (2004: 4). The emotion of excessive sadness was affixed to the body of the cello, thus rendering the cello both an object and instrument of undesirable affect.

As Egypt tried to secure its status as a modern nation in the post-independence period, anything that was deemed overly emotional might threaten to lower Egypt’s status in the rational-modern paradigm. Perhaps the attempted shift away from emotion and sentimentality that accompanied the adoption of modern ideologies was played out on the body of the cello, thought to lower or “adulterate” Arab music with its sentimentality (Fathallah in Hassan 1993:1000).

As Egypt transitioned into a modern nation-state, one of the imperatives was to represent its modern-ness and this might have entailed countering any representations of the country as sentimental or soft. Lila Abu-Lughod has written about the power of emotion in oral traditions, focusing particularly on gendered expressions of sentiment among Bedouins in the Western Desert of Egypt (1988). As an oral tradition, Arab music may have been a site for the socially sanctioned, collective, and public expression of emotions and sentiment.

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<sup>118</sup> As late as the 1970s, intellectuals and the “Arab left” leveled “virulent criticism” [*critiques virulentes*] for AMAA “indulging in sentimentalism” [*sentimentalisme*] (Lagrange 1996:126).

The claims about the ability of the cello to affect certain emotional states were in no way independent from issues of power relations and representation. A surface-level reading of the congress proceedings might have it that the cello's specific timbre is *naturally* sentimental because the cello's range covers the range of the human voice. Such a reading is both overly simplistic and rooted in Eurocentric conceptions of the instrument. Classic Western European treatises on orchestration and instrumentation, for instance, associate the cello with the emotion and affect of melancholy and nostalgia.<sup>119</sup> Hector Berlioz's famous mid-nineteenth century treatise on orchestration, revised by Richard Strauss, describes the melancholic nature of the cello in the following passage:

Violoncellos, in a group of eight or ten, are essentially melodic instruments; their tone on the upper strings is one of the most expressive in the entire orchestra. Nothing is so melancholy, nothing so suitable to rendering tender, languishing melodies, as a mass of violoncellos playing unison on the highest string. (82)<sup>120</sup>

Later in the passage, Berlioz cites an example from Wagner's "Meistersinger" in which the cellos both "express profound contrition" and "intensify the noble ardor" of the violin section (83–84). He concludes by writing, "Violoncellos are able to express a complete gamut of moods, both in man and in nature" (90).

The notion of the cello as an instrument of emotion and melancholy certainly predated Berlioz's treatise, but this classic text on instrumentation and orchestration perpetuated pre-existing associations. Many subsequent composers studied this treatise and the cello's association with melancholy and sentimentality remains hegemonic today, not just in Western classical music but in popular music and film scores. These musical texts reveal

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<sup>119</sup> In the last decade, many scholars have "rejected the division between affect and emotion in favour of examining the complex interplay and overlap between embodied intensities, subjective experiences and discursive practices" (Desai-Stephens and Reissour 2021).

<sup>120</sup> In Arab music, cellists often play on the two higher strings (in pitch), the D string and the A string, though they tend to stay in the lower positions and do not play higher pitches than A4 (440 Hz).

the indexical status of the cello, connecting the emotional associations (signs) with the instrument itself (object) (Turino 1999). Instruments carry emotional power as indexical signs, with repeated experiences leading to “collective, culturally conditioned responses to the meanings that are activated by a musical instrument” (Rancier 2014:385). Over time, the cello has come to be associated with emotion and melancholy.

In Ahmedian terms, the cello is both a site of the circulation of emotions, with the potential to provoke tears and emotions in others, and a “sticky” object in the sense that certain emotions have become attached to the very body of the instrument. In a “cultural politics of emotion,” then, the cello is highly significant as a site of both the movement of emotions and a sticking point for certain emotional qualities. Following Descartes (1985), Ahmed argues that objects do not have natural properties that elicit emotions; rather, our feelings take the shape of the contact we have with objects. In affective economies, emotions are not “in” the subject or the object but exist in the orientation between subject and object. Objects, such as the cello, are perceived as beneficial or harmful depending on how people are affected by them. The Musical Instruments Committee’s published recommendation stated that the cello was not beneficial for Arab music because of its evocative qualities, affecting people and moving them to tears.

In these debates, musical instruments often become metaphorical and abstract, standing in for affective experiences and aesthetic judgements. Musical instruments are “socially constructed to convey meaning” through sound (Feld 1983:78, cited in Dawe 2003). These semantic processes of meaning-making are multivalent, but in these debates *affective* meaning is the consistent point of contention. The cello must be understood as highly affective and *meaningful* in this specific historical and cultural context. Regula Qureshi’s

pithy two-word statement, “Instruments mean,” refers to the significance of instruments themselves as meaning-makers and affective objects (2000:810). Qureshi argues that the *sarangi*<sup>121</sup> became “an icon of intense affect and performance contexts” in postcolonial India, entangled in webs of meaning and (re)signification. Like the *sarangi*, the meaning of the cello is not created only by cellists but also by the discourse of listeners. The affective and aesthetic dimensions of the cello as “sentimental” in the committee discourse were inseparable from the politics of both modernization and preservation in mid twentieth-century Egypt. The cello should thus be understood as a deeply meaningful object, laden with both affective and cultural associations.

Understanding claims about affect is crucial to understanding the proceedings of the Musical Instruments Committee. The debates over the cello’s inclusion or exclusion in Arab music hinged on affect, indicating a broader debate over whether sentimentality would define the future of Arab music or not. The discourse of modernity often emphasizes rationality over emotion, so the issue of the affective qualities of Arab music was connected to the issue of the modernization in Arab music. As ethnomusicologist Martin Stokes writes:

Musics are invariably communal activities, that brings people together in specific alignments [...] The ‘tuning in’ (Schtuz 1997) through music of these social alignments can provide a powerful affective experience in which social identity is literally ‘embodied.’ (1994:12)

The communal nature of music, as Stokes writes, can create highly affective experiences in which people are aligned and social identity becomes embodied. Thus, the sentimental tone quality of the cello had the power to shift the affective experience of Arab music, potentially shifting social alignments and the affective experience of Arab identity.

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<sup>121</sup> A bowed string lute used in North Indian Hindustani music.



## Institutionalization, Class, and *al-Mūsīqā al-‘Arabiyya*

The perception of the cello in the early *takht* was likely as sociocultural as it was musical. The cello, in many ways, is an instrument of “elite sociability” having existed in middle and upper-class circles since its courtly origins in Italy and the surrounding areas in the 16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> centuries (Ahrendt 2018:94). The “social life” of the cello was mostly in middle and upper-class circles, contributing to its association with “high art” and high culture (Bates 2012). The cello carried strong associations sonically and visually, not only with “the West” but also with high status and class.

The conceptual category of *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* was popularized at the 1932 Congress and the policy recommendations issued at the congress had the potential to determine the course of this new orientation to pre-existing musical genres.<sup>122</sup> The category of *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* can serve as an “anchor” for mapping high culture and class structures in post-independence Egypt as well as the “underlying structures of social interactions, power dynamics, processes of inclusion and exclusion, and the matrix in which nation, race, class, ethnicity, gender, [and] diaspora [...] are constructed and stylized” (Belkind 2021:23). By analyzing the emergence of the category of *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya*, it is possible to analyze issues of nation, ethnicity, gender, power, inclusion and exclusion, and class. Though the inclusion or exclusion of the cello may seem like a minor detail in Arab musical history, this decision indicates how broader issues such as nation and class were reconciled in twentieth-century Egypt.

Music is often “mobilized in the construction of subjectivities” (ibid:7) and this was certainly true of *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya*, a classification defined not only by ethnicity (“Arab”

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<sup>122</sup> These pre-existing musical genres included *dawr*, *muwashshah*, *ṭaqṭūqa*, *qaṣīda*, and other vocal and instrumental forms.

music) but also, perhaps less obviously, by class. The 1930s saw the beginnings of the institutionalization and professionalization of “Arab music” in Cairo. This process was not unique to Egypt; many nations in the early years of state formation professionalized and nationalized forms of music (Stokes 1994). Yet the process of institutionalization and professionalization in post-independence Egypt manifested itself in unique ways, perhaps connected to the desire to elevate Arab music to a form of high culture.

The articulation of class associations and the institutionalization of Arab music caused divisions at the time of the 1932 Congress. Musicians were conceptually split in two categories: “modernist musicians” (*al-jadīd*) and more “traditional musicians” (*al-āṭī*). The distinction was often grounded in whether musicians had trained at the Institute of Arab Music or not, a privilege that could only be afforded by those of higher socio-economic classes (Puig 2006:523).<sup>123</sup> In this sense, these two classifications were also *class*-ifications. Nicolas Puig notes that the word “*al-āṭī*,” which was used to describe traditional musicians, is also “a synonym of cunning or craftiness with the connotation of the resourcefulness of popular musicians who manage to make a living despite numerous problems” (Puig 2006:523). Lower-class musicians of the *al-āṭī* category were distinguished by resourcefulness in the face of socio-economic struggle whereas those belonging to the *al-jadīd* group were able to afford formal study at the Institute.

The distinction between these two groups of musicians was already perceived by 1932, but “official distinctions enforced between the *al-āṭī* and *al-jadīd* [...] were] highlighted” at the congress (ibid). *al-Jadīd* tended to look down upon the *al-āṭī*, criticizing their “backward” practices which, they claimed “caused musical disorder” (ibid:524). Musicians

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<sup>123</sup> The Institute of Arab Music was founded in 1923.

of the *alati* category were disproportionately represented in the Musicians Union (a syndicate founded in 1920) and the two groups were defined in opposition to one another by a series of binaries [see Figure 14] (Vigreux 1992:232 cited in Puig 2006:524). It can be assumed that cellists belonged to the *al-jadīd* category of musicians, associated with the middle to upper class and distinguished by institutionalized musical training.

**Figure 14:** *Alātī* versus *al-jadīd*. This table shows a series of oppositions between “modernist musicians” (*al-jadīd*) and more traditional instrumentalists, *alātī* (Vigreux 1992:232 cited in Puig 2006:524).

<i>alātī</i>	<i>al-jadīd</i>
Trade union (syndicate)	Institute
Common people	Beys, pashas, and aristocrats
Considered Amateurs	Professionals
<i>Alatiya</i>	<i>Musiqiyyin</i> <sup>124</sup>
Traditional musicians	Modern musicians
Space of immorality	Space of morality
Attachment to an Eastern legacy (Persian then Ottoman)	Purified and paradoxically classicized and modernized “Arab music”

### Instrumentation in Arab Music Ensembles

The Musical Instruments Committee’s published recommendation noted the cello’s “incompatibility” with Egyptian instruments. This concern may have stemmed from the idea that the cello would compete with the *‘ūd* or even render the *‘ūd* obsolete. With a shared register, the sound of the *‘ūd* could easily be overpowered by the cello in terms of volume.

<sup>124</sup> “*Alatiya*” and “*musiqiyyin*” are Arabic plural terms. *Alatiya* literally means “instrumentalists” whereas *musiqiyyin* means “musicians.”

Although the committee rejected the use of the cello in Arab music primarily on affective grounds, the issue of instrumentation and balance also factored in their decision.

Though the Musical Instruments Committee advised against incorporating the cello in Arab music ensembles, the committee *did* suggest using “a musical instrument practiced by Western musicians long ago” that “fits the common habit in the East in terms of placing it on the knee.” They refer to this instrument as the “*Kamān Tenor* (Violon-Tenor) [sic].” The committee proceedings state: “The violin-tenor bolsters the lower register of the violin, with a sound like that of the viola. Examples of this instrument are found in museums and can be used as models to recreate this instrument” (KMMA:395).<sup>125</sup>

According to the Grove Encyclopedia of Music, the term “tenor violin” refers to several instruments: 1. A three-stringed viola tuned upwards in fifths from low c (documented in mid-16<sup>th</sup> century treatises); 2. A larger form of the modern viola; 3. An instrument “resembling and played like a small cello, with four strings tuned upward in 5<sup>ths</sup> from *F* or *G*” (Boyden 2001). The last description best fits the committee’s reference to the “tenor violin.” The “tenor violin” is highly obscure and its use was “peripheral and sporadic” in Western music history, first referenced in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and “hardly noticed by the theorists or explicitly called for in music after the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century” (Encyclopedia Britannica; *ibid*).

Confirming the obscurity of this instrument at the time, the 1932 proceedings state that the instrument could be found in musical instrument museums and used as a model for creating a similar instrument for Arab music. Why would the committee advocate for this obscure period instrument rather than adapting the violin or cello to traditional forms of

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تشد عادة على طبقة فرار الكمان العادية وصوتها قريب الشبه بصوت الفيولا و تجد منها (Violin-Tenor) "وهذه الآلة تسمى "كمان تينور" <sup>125</sup> نماذج في المتاحف الموسيقية، وليس من المتعذر صنعها على مثل تلك النماذج

playing? Was it a matter of organological similarity to the *rabāb*, an instrument played on the knee in North African Arab countries?

Interestingly, the Musical Instruments Committee did not object to the inclusion of the viola, possibly because it did not threaten to drown out other instruments the way the cello did.<sup>126</sup> In fact, the viola was recommended as an addition to Arab music ensembles by consensus (Fathallah in Hassan 1993:100).<sup>127</sup> This is surprising seeing as the viola was not used in Egyptian Arab music ensembles during that time nor after the congress.<sup>128</sup> Perhaps the viola did not carry the “sentimental” associations the cello did, or perhaps it was similar enough to the violin that the committee saw no issue in adding the viola to ensembles.

Regarding the bass, the committee stated: “As for the double bass, it does not fit the current character of Egyptian music because of Arab music’s homophony.”<sup>129</sup> While this statement lacks clarity, perhaps the committee meant that including the bass might lead to the addition of harmonic, contrapuntal bass lines which would alter the traditionally heterophonic nature of Arab music. Ironically, the cello and bass became typical members of the *firqa* in Egypt, while the viola has remained largely outside the tradition. This is an example of the asymmetry between the discussions and recommendations of the congress and actual practices of musicians in Cairene society (Fathallah in Hassan 1993).

The terse statements about each instrument in the Musical Instruments Committee’s published proceedings do not reflect the full complexity of the debate about the future of musical instruments in Arab music ensembles. Prominent Egyptian committee members such

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<sup>126</sup> أما الفيولا فلم تر اللجنة وجهها الاعتراض على إدخالها.

<sup>127</sup> Despite this recommendation, the viola did not become a common member in Arab music ensembles.

<sup>128</sup> It is possible that the viola was already in use in North African Andalusian music ensembles at the time of the congress. Viola is commonly used in these ensembles today (p.c. with Dr. Dwight Reynolds, Dec. 2021).

<sup>129</sup> إما الكونترباس فلا يلائم الطابع الشرقي الموسيقي المصرية الحالية ما دامت تلك الموسيقى ذات صوت العربية واحد هوموفونية

as Muhammad Fathi actively and vehemently argued against the European comparative musicologists, both in committee and at the plenary session of the congress, but his position does not appear anywhere in the published proceedings of the congress (Racy in Hassan 1993:113).

The fact that the published proceedings mainly reflected the attitudes of the European committee members is an example of the broader character of Western intellectual domination and coloniality. The silencing of Egyptian perspectives was part of a broader issue of representation at the congress. The Egyptian Ministry of Education nominated the members of all seven committees, each of which comprised a president, secretary and about twelve members. There were thirty notable Egyptian musicians and scholars as well as foreign invitees from France, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Italy, Syria, Turkey, Tunisia, and Morocco (Farmer 1976), but Egyptian and Arab participants in the 1932 Congress were primarily treated as musicians and practitioners rather than intellectuals or experts (Hassan 1993). The conference organizers deliberately excluded practicing, professional musicians from the organizing committee, limited the attendance of instrumentalists at the congress, and did not invite the Egyptian Musicians Syndicate to the organizing sessions (Thomas 2006:88, citing Sahhab 1997). The Egyptian Musicians Syndicate comprised lower-class professional instrumentalists and religious singers, and members believe this reason was the reason for their exclusion from the organizing sessions (Vigreux 1992).

The leader of the Musicians Syndicate, Ibrahim Shafiq, implied that if the professional musicians of the Syndicate were not invited, it would be evidence that they were regarded as “working men,” an insult which “would need to be explained” (*al-Sabah* 1932,

cited in Thomas 2006:90). An article written on behalf of the Musicians Syndicate criticized congress organizers for excluding professional musicians, stating that professional musicians are the “active troops” of musical change and modernization and should not be “ignored” or “treated with contempt” (in *al-Radiyu* 1932 [anonymous], cited in Thomas 2006:97). On the other hand, educators from the Oriental Musical Institute, a higher-class institution, were invited to help organize the congress. The exclusion of practicing musicians from the organizing committee and Musical Instruments Committee is a clear example of the social inequality inherent to this event.

The devaluing of instrumentalists’ perspectives was a reflection of the general status of musicians in Cairo at that time. Until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, musicians in Cairo were generally considered “low status,” often marginalized and associated with “illicit activity” (Nieuwkerk 1995). At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, a group of “gentlemen musicians” (*hawwin*) emerged within the *effendiya*.<sup>130</sup> This elite group of musicians founded The Oriental Music Club (1914) [*Nādī al-Mūsīqā al-Sharqiyya*], which was renamed The Conservatory of Arab Music [*Ma‘had al-Mūsīqā al-‘Arabiyya*] upon securing government funding in 1929 (Thomas 2007; Castelo-Branco 2001).<sup>131</sup> The 1932 Congress took place at this newly-minted and state-funded conservatory. The new class of elite musicians (*hawwin*) involved in the congress were differentiated from lower class practitioners who were dismissed as “uninformed and illiterate” (Danielson 1994:135). Not only were the voices of Arab committee members silenced on the matter of including the cello or not, but professional musicians themselves were categorically excluded from the discussion itself.

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<sup>130</sup> A new class of educated Egyptians mainly of Ottoman heritage.

<sup>131</sup> Until this point, musicians had been organized by guilds – a practice that was common throughout the Ottoman territories.

## Cellists at the Congress

“Policy makers don’t make music, musicians do.” – Simon Frith, 2013

While the Musical Instruments Committee debated whether the cello should or should not be included in Arab music ensembles, artists in Cairo were performing with cellists in their *firqa*-s. The two Egyptian *firqa*-s invited to perform at the congress included cellist al-Hagg Yusuf Mitwalli (*al-Hāgg Yūsuf Mitwallī*) [see Figure 15 and Figure 16 below of *Firqat Umm Kulthum* and *Firqat al-‘Aqqād al-Kabīr*]. At this time, membership in *takht*-s and *firqa*-s was fluid, which may explain why the same cellist appeared in both ensembles (El-Shawan 1980a:158). Al-Hagg Yusuf Mitwalli, the cellist who played with both Egyptian *firqa*-s at the 1932 Congress, was normally the *bass* player in *Firqat al-‘Aqqād al-Kabīr*.<sup>132</sup> He is also listed as the bass player on a 1944 BBC recording of Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s “*Igrī Ya Nīl*” [“Flow, Oh Nile”]<sup>133</sup> along with cellists Mahmud al-Hifnawi and Hasan Hilmi (*Hasan Ḥilmī*). Hasan Hilmi, one of the cellists on this Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab recording, was the regular cellist in Muhammad al-‘Aqqad’s *firqa*. This information shows a rotating cast of characters, with the same cellists and bassists appearing in more than one *takht* and *firqa*.

Notably, the members of the Musical Instruments Committee did not attend these live performances, “reportedly because they were too busy holding discussions and writing their reports” (KMMA translated and quoted in Racy 1991a:81).<sup>134</sup> If the members of the

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<sup>132</sup> *Firqat al-‘Aqqād al-Kabīr*, named for renowned *qānūn* player Muḥammad al-‘Aqqad (senior) was founded in 1929 and performed at the opening of The Conservatory of Arab Music. Al-Hagg Yusuf Mitwalli played bass in this inaugural performance (Hassan 1993:379).

<sup>133</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ewPe0ecqJM>;  
<https://www.sama3y.net/forum/showthread.php?t=57162&page=21>

<sup>134</sup> The only committee that attended these performances was the Recording Committee, which had organized the concert.



committee had heard and seen these performances at the congress, would they have reframed their opinions? Would the significance of cello and bass in the context of Arab art music ensembles have been re-signified upon listening? Would the same aesthetic and affective concerns have dominated the discourse? Would there have been more focus on renewal (*tajdīd*) or development (*taṭwīr*)?

**Figure 15:** *Firqa Umm Kulthum*. From Salih Mahdi's (*Ṣāliḥ Maḥdī*) *al-Mūsīqā al-'Arabīyah* (1986), p. 18. Note tuxedo/fez combination. From right to left: Ibrahim 'Afifi (*Ibrāhīm 'Aḥḥī*) (percussion [*īqā*']), Ibrahim al-Sayyid al-Baltagi (*Ibrāhīm al-Sayyid al-Baltāgī*) (her father), Khalid Ibrahim (*Khālid Ibrāhīm*) (her brother; an accompanying singer [*madhabgī*]), Muhammad al-Qasabgi ('ūd and composer), Ibrahim al-'Ariyyan (*Ibrāhīm al-'Ariyyan*) (*qānūn*), Muhammad Karayyim (*Muḥammad Karayyim*) (violin [*kamān*]), Girgis Sa'ad (*nāy*), and al-Hagg Yusuf Mitwali (cello) (Katz 2015:329). This ensemble performed at the congress gala concert at the Royal Opera House on Sunday, April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1932.



From my intensive listening, I concluded that Umm Kulthum first included cello in her recordings in 1932, the year of congress, but likely included a cello in her *takht* performances as early as 1928 [see Figure 9 in Part I]. Commenting on the photograph of Muhammad al-‘Aqqad’s *takht* [see Figure 16 below], Lillie Gordon notes that “it is unclear whether or not this was the group’s normal make-up, or an expanded version gathered for the purposes of the conference or the conference photo” (2014:80). If we can understand these photographs as ethnographic texts, it becomes clear that they are “partial truths,” documenting a moment when musical instruments were brought into a new sociocultural arena overseen by a colonial gaze (Clifford 1986).

It is possible that Umm Kulthum’s decision to include a cello in this performance had to do with the congress’s image and vision, but perhaps the cello was already a regular addition to her *takht* in live performances. In one of our interviews, cellist Kinan Abou-afach shared:

I’ve seen videos from the 1950s/60s, but I never heard [the sound of a cello in these recordings]. It could be that [the cello was a] sign of modernization, like “We want to give the impression of modernization.” Maybe there was a cello, but only as an image or a feeling, because in the old recordings [from the 1930s] I never heard the cello. (12/17/20)

As Kinan Abou-afach and Lillie Gordon surmised, perhaps the addition of the cello was as much an aesthetic or sociocultural nod to modernization as a musical choice. Interestingly, scholars have noted that many of the *takht*-s invited to perform at the congress were deliberately “thinned out” at the request of European comparative musicologists who sought the most “pure” and “authentic” performances, those exhibiting minimal influence of Western music (Sawa 1993:107). The Egyptian *takht*-s were the only performing groups that included cello.

**Figure 16:** *Firqa al-‘Aqqād al-Kabīr*. Isma‘il al-‘Aqqad (*Ismā‘īl al-‘Aqqād*) and Mustafa ‘Abdel ‘Aziz (*Mustafā ‘Abd al-‘Azīz*) (*kamān*), Fahmy al-Madbuli (*Fahmī al-Madbūlī*) (*nāy*), Mahmoud al-‘Aqqad (*Mahmūd al-‘Aqqād*) (*qānūn*), Muhammad al-‘Aqqad al-Saghir (*Muḥammad al-‘Aqqād al-Saghīr*) (1911–1993; principal *qānūn*), Mustafa al-‘Aqqad (*Mustafā al-‘Aqqād*) (1886–1942; *riqq*; artistic director of the ensemble, and one of the founders of the Institute), ‘Abdel al-Fattah Sabri (*‘Abd al-Fattāh Ṣabrī*), Hassan Gharib (*Ḥasan Gharīb*) and ‘Abd al-Mum‘im ‘Arafa (*‘ūd*), al-Hagg Yusuf Mitwali (cello), and Muhammad Ahmad (*Muḥammad Aḥmad*) (*rabāb*) (Katz 2015:329).<sup>135</sup>



In this first case study, I have described the proceedings of the First International Congress of Arab music in 1932, focusing on the Musical Instruments Committee and the

<sup>135</sup> Katz indicates that Muhammad al-‘Aqqad al-Saghir lived from 1851–1932[?] in his description of this photo, but Dr. Scott Marcus points out that none of the *qānūn* players look as though they could be in their 80s. Muhammad al-‘Aqqad al-Kabir, for whom the ensemble is named, lived from 1851–1931/1932. His grandson, Muhammad el-‘Aqqad al-Saghir, lived from 1911–1993 and is pictured in this photograph (p.c. with Scott Marcus, Oct. 2021).

controversy over whether to include the cello in Arab music ensembles. The question, “Should the cello be included in Arab music ensembles?” yielded responses connected not only to modernization but to musical balance, aesthetics, and affect. I have analyzed the complexities of this debate from multiple perspectives, all against the backdrop of modernization, showing the discrepancy between conference recommendations and the decisions artists made thereafter. As these questions were raised in committee, the Egyptian performing ensembles at the congress led by Umm Kulthum and Muhammad al-‘Aqqad were already staging the answers.

### **Founding of the First State-Funded Arab Music Ensemble (1967)**

The first state-funded Arab music ensemble was founded in Egypt in 1967 under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture (*Wizārat al-Thaqāfa*) established under President Gamal Abdel Nasser (*Gamāl ‘Abd al-Nāṣir*, in office 1954–1970). In this section, I will focus on the shift from private to public patronage of *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* with the emergence of the Ministry of Culture; the call for a government ensemble by Umm Kulthum and Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab; the founding of the national Arab music ensemble; and the sociocultural climate following the 1967 defeat.

From 1932–1967, *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* was patronized by a combination of public and private domains, but mainly by the private sector. Before the 1952 revolution, the aristocratic elite had been patrons of *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya*. Although King Fu’ad I (*Fu’ād*, 1922–1936) was a major patron of *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya*, funding the 1932 Congress, financing the construction of the Arab Music Institute edifice, and providing the institute with financial assistance from its opening in 1929, these funds could be considered “private” because he made financial contributions privately rather than using government funds (El-

Shawan 1980a:92). Under King Faruq I (*Fārūq*, 1936–1952), the government did not provide direct support to *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* but supported several institutions which did, including The Higher Institute for Music Teaching (founded 1935) and The Egyptian State Radio Broadcast Station (1934–1947), which aired *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* and hired two Arab music consultants (ibid:112).

After the 1952 revolution, the Egyptian government came to consist of a new elite ruling class which assumed the majority of funding for *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* (Salem 2020). With the founding of the Republic of Egypt in 1952 under Gamal Abdel Nasser, power shifted away from the aristocracy and to the state, and *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* institutions came to operate under the state’s cultural policy (ibid:118, 134).<sup>136</sup> The Free Officers expelled the British colonialists in 1952 and established the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance only a few months later, seeking to protect Egypt from neocolonial influences by “unifying regional solidarity and cultural consciousness” (Sadek 2006:158).

Cultural policy under Nasser was oriented toward preserving cultural heritage, bringing Egypt up to par with Europe, and uniting the Arab world. Pan-Arab nationalism defined Nasser’s rule and from the 1950s to the 1970s, Cairo was the “capital of revolutionary Arab nationalism,” a movement that began as a struggle for anticolonial culture and political-economic sovereignty (Amar 2013b:70). There was already vested interest in pan-Arab regional unity from several other countries, and with instrumental cultural policies, Nasser attempted to provide Arabs with a new pan-Arab consciousness (ibid).

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<sup>136</sup> The Higher Musical Committee, founded in 1952, organized performances and published research, documenting *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* by recording artists and creating transcriptions. The Higher Council for Arts, Letters, and Social Sciences (HCLASS) was founded in 1956 and included a music committee. The Ministry of Culture was founded as an independent body in 1958, supervising policymaking in the arts and overseeing the Higher Institute for Arabic Music. In 1969, Presidential Decision 78 established The Academy of Arts, including the Higher Institute for Arabic Music (al-Batrawi 2014:22). The Higher Institute for Music Teachers (including Arab music) was also founded around this time (El-Shawan 1980a:118–127).

Nasser's had a goal of unification along regional and class lines. Under Nasser, art was to be a representation of the "modernizing socialist nation in which social class hierarchy would disappear" (Winegar 2006:175). Echoes of Nasserist socialist policy remained after his death in 1970. In the single-page conclusion to a 1972 United Nations report on Cultural Policy in Egypt, Magdi Wahba (*Magdī Wahba*) discussed the Egyptian Ministry of Culture's role in a "socialist transformation of society" which rejected the fallacy that culture is "highbrow" and the "separation of culture into two categories, one for a so-called élite and a lesser one for the so-called masses" which ultimately would lead to "alienation" (84). At the same time, however, Wahba warned against the "lowering of standards" in cultural matters and the necessity of a Ministry of Culture for the preservation and diffusion of culture "without any dilution of [universal] standards [of excellence]" (ibid).

While Nasser was in power, the Ministry of Culture's mission aligned with pan-Arab nationalist and socialist ideologies with goals such as: 1) defining the nation and national identity, 2) protecting cultural patrimony, 3) uplifting citizens by exposing them to the arts (Winegar 2006:175). Yet there was a dissonance between the Ministry's mission and actual policies. For the first decade under Nasser, for instance, the government directed most music-related funding to *Western* art music ensembles such as the Cairo Symphony Orchestra and the Cairo Conservatory, paying little heed to Egypt's musico-cultural patrimony.<sup>137</sup>

That said, a 1970s brochure for the Cairo Conservatory stated that one of the main goals of the institution was for students to gain "a deep knowledge of Western music without threatening his sense spiritual belonging to his musical culture" (brochure written by Dr. Samha El-Kholy, cited in Uscher 1985:25). Conservatory students were required to take one

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<sup>137</sup> The Cairo Symphony Orchestra was founded in 1956 and the Cairo Conservatory in 1959 (Sednaoui 1998:124–125).

course in traditional Arab music, and instrumentalists were required to include an “Egyptian Arab work” in their final recitals (ibid). This policy indicates that Arab music was still valued as a form of cultural heritage and identity even as Western classical music was privileged financially by the Egyptian government.

In 1966, the Ministry of Culture<sup>138</sup> was “formally detached” from other ministries with similar agendas and was directly overseen by a Deputy Prime Minister, a move which gave the Ministry of Culture more independence in decision-making and was intended to be a formal recognition of the role of culture in development (Wahba 1972:29). The same year, the Institute of Arabic Music Studies was incorporated into the Academy of Arts, one of the divisions of the Ministry of Culture, and raised to the status of a “higher institute,” the only one of its kind in the Middle East at that time, with branches in Cairo and Alexandria (ibid:44, 81).<sup>139</sup>

In the fall of 1967, a year after this institutional development, the government founded a state-funded *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* ensemble to “help ensure the preservation and revival of the traditional Arabic music heritage” (ibid:45). Dr. Samha El-Kholy (*Samḥa al-Khūlī*) described this ensemble as performing “classical art music in its authentic, purely monodic form” (El-Kholy 1968).

Artists had advocated for such an ensemble for years. Umm Kulthum had long tried to use her leverage to advocate for a state-founded and state-funded *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* ensemble. Umm Kulthum and Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab held preliminary meetings throughout the 1960s, first privately and then publicly, including the Minister of Culture. It

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<sup>138</sup> Formerly the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance, established in 1952, the Ministry of Culture split into its own unit in 1958.

<sup>139</sup> There was a total of 276 students at the Cairo branch (151 male and 125 female) and 34 at the Alexandria branch (28 male and 6 female) (Wahba 1972:82).

was not until the fall of 1967, however, after several years of lobbying that the Ministry of Culture founded *Firqat al-Mūsīqā al-'Arabiyya* (FMA) (El-Shawan 1980a:185–7).

This ensemble was founded at a pivotal moment in Egyptian and Middle Eastern history. Several months before the FMA's founding in 1967, the Middle East was forever changed because of the *Naksa* (“setback”) when Israel took control of the Palestinian-populated West Bank, brutally defeating the Egyptian military in the Six-Day War (June 5–10, 1967) and seizing control over the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, and the Sinai. Sara Salem describes this defeat as the “official death knell for pan-Arab nationalism as well as the end of the various anticolonial nationalist projects still active in the region” (2020:162).

The Nasserist project had already been undermined by the failed union with Syria (Younes 2012 in Salem 2020), but the 1967 defeat was an “official” indicator of its demise. After the defeat, Egypt's leadership in the Arab world began to decline and the pan-Arab national project fell from cultural hegemony (Belkind 2021a:72). Perhaps the FMA was especially important after June of 1967 when Egypt's position as a world power was threatened and weaknesses in its security forces were made visible. It was logical for the Egyptian government to attempt to strengthen national and pan-Arab pride through the securitization of culture following its military defeat.

The 1967 defeat led many Arab intellectuals to “abandon their modernizing and pro-Western stances” and instead orient themselves to their past in order to revitalize culture by returning to authenticity [*aṣṣāla*] and heritage [*turāth*] (Shannon 2003; Agbaria 2018). It was at this crucial historical moment that *Firqat al-Mūsīqā al-'Arabiyya* came into being, founded in the fall of 1967 and giving its first performance in December of that year (El-



Shawan 1984:277).<sup>140</sup> At the time, the press mentioned that establishing this ensemble was “the most important cultural even in Egypt after the July revolution” and other Arab countries followed in Egypt’s footsteps, establishing their own governmental ensembles to perform traditional music (Ezat 2009:52). This Cairo-based ensemble was established specifically to perform the repertory known as “heritage” music [*al-turāth*] (Marcus 2001).<sup>141</sup> At this time, Arabic music fell under the category of “The Conservation of Cultural Heritage” in the Ministry of Culture’s UN cultural policy report (1972) alongside tangible cultural heritage such as antiquities (Wahba).

When the FMA was founded, there was a debate over whether the ensemble should be a *takht* or a *firqa*. An “artistic committee” of ten musicians and ten music scholars was appointed to make decisions about FMA’s “appropriate size, instrumental and vocal make-up, patterns of musical leadership, and transmission processes” (El-Shawan 1984:278). The committee was divided not only on the question of whether the FMA would be a *takht* or *firqa* but also on the issue of whether the ensemble would include Western European instruments of the violin family. The committee members who were in favor of a *takht* rather than a *firqa* were opposed to the inclusion of any Western instruments apart from the violin, namely the cello, viola, and double bass (ibid:278). Notably, these committee members were trained in Western classical music.

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<sup>140</sup> The Arab Music Ensemble was not founded until almost a decade after the founding of the Ministry of Culture and musical events only constituted 10% of the Ministry of Culture’s cultural activities from 1968–1969, the majority of which related to cinema (Wahba 1972:74). Musical events became more central to the activities of the Ministry of Culture in the 1990s (see the section below: “Founding of Two State-Funded Arab Music Festivals [1992]”).

<sup>141</sup> In the 1930s, *al-turāth* referred to Arab music that was composed before 1910. In the 1960s and 1970s, however, the term came to include “traditional” repertoire from the 1930s and 1940s (Castelo-Branco 1980:48). By the 1980s, the term expanded once again to include repertoire from the 1950s and 60s (p.c. with Scott Marcus, Oct. 2021).

The FMA committee decided to audition two potential ensembles—a *takht* and *firqa*—for a committee of musicians, administrators, and “high-level decision makers within the Ministry of Culture.” The *firqa* was favored over the *takht*, but the question of instrumentation remained contentious. The inclusion of a cello and double bass in the FMA was not considered “desirable” by many of the members involved in this decision (El-Shawan 1984:279). After lengthy negotiations, it was decided that the FMA would be a *firqa* but would exclude the cello and bass.

More than three decades after the First International Congress of Arab Music (1932), the question of whether to include a cello and double bass in an Arab music ensemble remained highly controversial. In 1932, the issue had been whether Egyptian/Arab music ensembles should include cello and bass in general, but in 1967 the question became whether the Egyptian national government ensemble should include cello and bass in its instrumentation.

It is likely that the political realities of the 1967 defeat caused questions of Westernization and Western influences to resurface. The cello and bass had already found a home in Arab music ensembles by 1967; the question was now whether the *national* heritage music ensemble would perform with these “Western” instruments that were relatively recent newcomers to Arab music and remained associated with European musical genres.

Initially, the FMA committee decided *against* including the cello and the bass in the *firqa*. One year after the founding of FMA, however, two cellos and a double bass were added to the *firqa* despite the committee’s initial decision (El-Shawan 1984:279).<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> A book published by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture notes that Hassan Kamal was the original cellist in the FMA (15-member *firqa*) and does not list a second cellist (Ezat 2009:53). Hassan Kamal was also one of the cellists in Umm Kulthum’s *firqa* [See “The Cellists of Umm Kulthum’s Firqa” above for information about Hassan Kamal].

Moreover, the FMA administrators decided to program a separate, small group (*al-Magmū‘a al-Ṣaghīra*) in addition to the main *firqa* and even this small, exclusive *takht* included a cello. Even though the committee had initially decided against the inclusion of the cello in 1967, only a year after its founding, cellos were added to both the *firqa* and the *takht*. The cello remains part of FMA’s instrumentation to this day; even as the makeup of the *firqa* has changed, two cellos have remained fixed in the ensemble’s instrumentation.<sup>143</sup>

Four *firqa*-s were modelled after the FMA, three of which included cello. *Firqat al-Takht al-‘Arabi*<sup>144</sup> (founded 1972) included two cellos; *Firqat Umm Kulthum*<sup>145</sup> (professionally active since 1973) included three cellos, and *Firqat al-Thaqāfa Jumhūriyya l-il-Mūsīqā al-‘Arabiyya*<sup>146</sup> (founded 1975) included one.<sup>147</sup> That said, *Firqat al-Samāḥ* (founded 1974) did not include cello or bass despite its sizable violin section (El-Shawan 1984:280). Although the FMA committee was conflicted about whether to include cello and bass as a specifically preservation-oriented ensemble, the ultimate decision to include these instruments in the *firqa* and *takht* seems to have set a precedent for the *firqa*-s established in the following years.

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<sup>143</sup> The instrumentation of FMA changed in the course of a decade, with an additional *‘ūd*, *nāy*, and *qāmūn* added to the ensemble, but the cello remained fixed in the ensemble’s instrumentation. Even with the addition of two cellos, the ensemble maintained *multiple* performers on the “traditional” instruments in the ensemble for over a decade. Scott Marcus notes that this was a highly unusual instrumentation for the 1980s, seen almost exclusively among “government-supported, preservation-oriented ensemble[s]” (2001:317). It was very rare to see three *‘ūd* players in an ensemble, for instance, especially as Umm Kulthum’s *firqa* had only one *‘ūd* player and three cello players.

<sup>144</sup> *Firqat al-Takht al-‘Arabi* was a privately sponsored ensemble which had to discontinue its activities by 1980–1981 due to finances (El-Shawan 1984:287).

<sup>145</sup> *Firqat Umm Kulthum* was the conservatory ensemble at the Giza *ma‘had* [conservatory].

<sup>146</sup> *Firqat al-Thaqāfa al-Jumhūriyya l-il-Mūsīqā al-‘Arabiyya* was founded by the Ministry of Culture in order to “disseminate TAM [traditional Arab music] to working-class Cairenes” and its performances were free of charge and took place in the government-owned cultural palaces in the working-class neighborhood of *al-Ghūrī* (El-Shawan 1984:282).

<sup>147</sup> Salwa El-Shawan observed this instrumentation in 1977.

It was one thing for independent artists to include the cello and bass in their *takht*-s, but it was quite another for a state-funded ensemble dedicated to the preservation of Arab music to include the cello and bass. Although Umm Kulthum showed her support for Nasser and the Egyptian government and military, she and her *firqa* were not formally connected to the Egyptian government.<sup>148</sup> As the political landscape of the Middle East changed in 1967, so too did Egypt's formal and informal cultural policy. Umm Kulthum became an unofficial cultural diplomat after the 1967 defeat, performing nationalist songs in Paris (Fall 1967) to counter the “destructive propaganda describing the Arabs as the instigator of the war and the aggressors” (“*Umm Kulthūm fī Faransā*” 1967, cited in Lohman 2010:32). When she declared that all concert revenue would be directed toward the war effort, Egyptians came to see her as working at “the front line of war” (Matar 1967, cited in Lohman 2010:34). Umm Kulthum was not a government employee, but she effectively served as a cultural diplomat in the post-1967 period, performing nationalist songs and donating the proceeds from tours to the Egyptian government [1967–71] (ibid).

The FMA did not perform specifically nationalist repertoire but represented an Egyptian and Arab national identity. The FMA, now called the ‘Abd al-Halim Nuwayra Ensemble (*Firqat ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Nuwayra*) in homage to its founding director, is still a state-funded Arab music ensemble dedicated to the preservation of Egyptian and Arab music, but the ensemble’s repertoire since its founding in 1967.<sup>149</sup> The ‘Abd al-Halim Nuwayra Ensemble is distinct from the National Arab Music Ensemble (*Firqat al-Qawmiyya li-l-*

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<sup>148</sup> Umm Kulthum showed her support for Nasser and the Egyptian government by commissioning poet Ahmad Rami Salim to write a national song entitled “Egypt, Which is in My Mind and My Blood.” (<http://albustanseeds.org/digital/kulthum/timeline/#>). She sang eight nationalist songs during Nasser’s rule (<http://bolingo.org/audio/arab/uk/firstlinechron.html>).

<sup>149</sup> The ensemble is currently led by Salah Ghobashi.

*Mūsīqā al-‘Arabiyya*), founded in 1989 and led by Salim Sahab (*Salīm Saḥāb*). The National Arab Music Ensemble generally includes three or four cellists in its instrumentation and the violinists and cellists are positioned facing opposite each other, facing the conductor rather than the audience, as in a Western symphony orchestra. This differs from the arrangement of Umm Kulthum’s *firqa* and the FMA [‘Abd al-Halim Nuwayra Ensemble] in which the musicians sit in a semicircle facing the audience, in a more traditional manner.

Scott Marcus reports that soon after its founding in 1989, the National Arab Music Ensemble came to be the more popular of the two ensembles, attracting enthusiastic audiences to its full-house concerts. This ensemble plays mostly mid-twentieth century compositions rather than older, traditional repertoire (*muwashshah*, *samā‘ī*, etc). Previously, the ‘Abd al-Halim Nuwayra Ensemble performed older repertoire in addition to mid-twentieth century compositions, but Qadri Sorour (*Qadrī Surūr*), former *nāy* player in the ensemble, lamented that even this group has stopped performing older repertoire (p.c. with Qadri Sorour, Sept. 2021).

In this section, I discussed the founding of the first state-funded Egyptian music ensemble in 1967, explaining its significance in the sociopolitical climate of that year. The 1967 defeat led to an increased emphasis on cultural security, with the aim of protecting Egyptian culture and heritage from outside influences. In the founding of the FMA, there was still debate over whether the cello should be included in this national heritage ensemble or not. Nasserism was “an elitist state-led project of *decolonization*” and the founding of this ensemble was probably intended to be a decolonizing effort in part, supporting and forefronting Arab music alongside Western art music (Salem 2020:81–83). The cello, at this time, may have been reminiscent of Egypt’s colonial history.

Although the cello had become a part of the standard instrumentation of *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* ensembles over several decades, the question became whether it would be part of the first national, state-funded ensemble *heritage* ensemble. Salem notes that the Nasserist decolonial project held many “internal contradictions including the reproduction of colonial institutions” (ibid). Even if the first state-funded Arab music ensemble represented a project of decolonization, with skepticism about the cello as a symbol of the colonial past, the very concept of a “national ensemble” itself came from colonial legacies revealing an “internal contradiction” with the reproduction of high culture through institutionalization and colonial institutional forms. The return of the debate about the cello and its symbolic value is indicative of a larger societal questioning in 1967.

The FMA was the first of many ensembles founded under the aegis of the Egyptian Ministry of Culture. A 1969 UNESCO cultural policy report from the Egyptian Ministry of Culture states:

One of the pitfalls of cultural planning is the temptation to patronize, to lower standards under the mistaken impression that the widest dissemination of cultural values involves a necessary simplification or vulgarization [...] What the Ministry of Culture diffuses must always be of the highest quality, without any concessions to shallowness [...] In the present period of development and *national emergency*, the ministry prefers to concentrate on the improvement of the instruments already established [including] the *protection and preservation of the cultural heritage* [and] the “living arts.” (Wahba 1972:35–6)

In this report, the Ministry of Culture explicitly links cultural policy to the state of national (in)security, referencing the “national emergency” which necessitated focusing on developing cultural policy instruments that were already in place.

In the following section, I will analyze the founding of two music festivals by the Ministry of Culture in 1992 through the lens of cultural security. One of these festivals, The Arab Music Festival and Conference, is a large-scale, modern-day recreation of the 1932

Congress, featuring several state ensembles including the National Arab Music Ensemble [*Firqat al-Qawmiyya li-l-Mūsīqā al-‘Arabiyya*] and the Arab Musical Heritage Ensemble [*Firqat al-Musiqa al-‘Arabiyya li-l-Turāth*]. The issues of “protection” and security remain part of the discourse in the descriptions of these ensembles. On the official website of the Cairo Opera house, for instance, the caption describing *Firqat al-Musiqa al-‘Arabiyya li-l-Turāth* states:

They regularly give concerts at the Arab Music Institute, the great building that witnessed the first Conference for Arab Music in 1932 and still plays an important role in the *protection* of the different styles of Arab music (emphasis added; acc. 2021).<sup>150</sup>

Likewise, the description of *Firqat al-Qawmiyya li-l-Mūsīqā al-‘Arabiyya* states: “The goal of establishing the Arab National Music Ensemble was to collect the musical and lyrical heritage in the Arab countries and present it in an advanced academic and scientific style.” These are two of many Arab music ensembles featured in festivals organized by the Ministry of Culture, described in the following section.

### **Founding of Two State-Funded Arab Music Festivals (1992)**

The 1967 defeat set the stage for neoliberalism in Egypt in the early 1970s. Anwar Sadat (*Anwar al-Sādāt*, in office 1970–1981), the third President of Egypt, “pushed the Ministry [of Culture] to the brink of dissolution” (Pahwa and Winegar 2012:2) and the Ministry no longer allocated state funds for the arts. Moreover, many cultural icons from Egypt’s “revolutionary golden age” were lost during the Sadat era. The Cairo Opera House

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<sup>150</sup> This *firqa*, led by *Fārūq al-Bāblī*, includes traditional forms of Arab music that have fallen out of favor in other ensembles, including *bashraf*, *muwashshah*, and *samā’ī* (cairoopera.org/companies.php; p.c. with Scott Marcus, November 2021).

burned down in 1972, Umm Kulthum passed away in 1975, and ‘Abd al-Ḥalim Hafiz (*‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Ḥāfīz*) passed away in 1977 (Sadek 2006:159).

Hosni Mubarak (*Husnī Mubārak*, in office 1981–2011), the fourth president of Egypt, restored some power to the Ministry of Culture but continued Egypt’s process of neoliberalization which had begun in the post-1967 period (Salem 2020:170). State cultural policy and governance was characterized by privatization and the promotion of “neoliberal artistic subjectivity” that drew on international trends while maintaining “cultural integrity” (Winegar 2006:178, 185). Cultural policy under Mubarak supported what were viewed as “Westernized” genres, which the Minister of Culture at the time considered appropriate for a “globalizing nation building its international trade and fighting what was viewed as a backward Islamist front at home” (Pahwa and Winegar 2012:9). This cultural policy, beginning in the early 1990s, was marked by a “redefin[ition of] some forms of nationalism as internationalist, particularly in realms of cultural production and was “markedly different” from the policies that preceded it (Winegar 2006:185). In the next two sections, I will discuss two festivals founded in 1992 during this new era in cultural policy.

### The Annual Arab Music Festival and Conference

Conferences have played a significant role in the construction of “Arab music” since the First International Congress on Arab Music in 1932. Conferences, festivals, competitions, and tourist promotions have been paramount in defining and constructing musics based on ethnicity (e.g., Arab, African, Mediterranean, European, etc.) (Stokes 1994:15). In 1992, the annual Arab Music Festival and Conference (*Mahrajān wa-Mū’tamar al-Mūsīqā al-‘Arabiyya*) was founded under the auspices of the Egyptian Ministry of Culture. A recreation of the 1932 Congress, this international festival hosts musicians and academics from around



the Arab world and beyond to perform and discuss Arab music. While this festival is modeled after the 1932 Congress, the mission of the event has changed significantly.<sup>151</sup>

In 1992, there was no question of whether the cello was a suitable instrument for the Arab music ensembles featured in the annual Arab Music Festival and Conference. At the festival, a variety of genres are showcased, including those classified under the category of *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya*. The government Arab music ensembles perform at the festival each year. In 1992, the Arab Music Festival and Conference was held at the new Cairo Opera House, which had been inaugurated four years earlier as part of the National Cultural Center, a large multi-building complex constructed with Japan’s financial support.<sup>152</sup> Since then, the Cairo Opera House has staged most *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* concerts in Cairo and is home to several state-funded Arab music ensembles.

As mentioned above, the cello was no longer perceived as a threat to Arab music by the time of the founding of the annual Arab Music Festival in 1992. On the contrary, the cello became a featured instrument in government-sanctioned “Arab music.” The cello has been featured in this annual festival and celebrated as an integral instrument in Arab music. In the Routledge Companion to Media and Risk (2020), Bishnupriya Ghosh and Bhaskar Sarkar state: “Risk is virtual, an outcome always on the horizon. We require mediation to render risk legible.” In 1932 and in 1967, the cello mediated the risk of losing the essential character of the newly conceived category of Arab music, as well as the threat of Westernization. The idea of “Arab music” being threatened or “at risk” revealed a

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<sup>151</sup> In between the 1932 and 1992 Congresses on Arab Music, there was an international conference on Arab music in 1969, held as part of the millenary celebration of Cairo, one thousand years after the city’s founding (Wahba 1972:51).

<sup>152</sup> The original Cairo Opera House had been built in 1869 under Khedive Ismail’s rule to celebrate the opening of the Suez Canal but burned down in 1971. Many books and documents related to music were lost in this fire (El Kholly et al. 2004:65).

fundamental instability in the concept of “Arab music.” Just as the stationing of military and police, the erection of walls and fences, and the implementation of security cameras constitutes an aesthetic-performative aspect of security, so the “protection” of Arab music at the hands of the state through cultural policy is part of a performance of the cultural security of ethno-national identity (ibid). Ghosh and Sarkar state: “Crucial to the operations of the security paradigm, the same publics who are being protected are also constantly subjected to surveillance.”

The same can be said of the “protection” of “Arab music”—a protection which necessarily entails the surveillance and policing of music genres that supposedly threaten the reputation or morality of what the state sanctions as Egyptian or Arab music.<sup>153</sup> The category *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* can present a breach or enable a transgression in the state’s increasing dominion over performances of the genre, however, as certain songs have been appropriated by revolutionaries. In general, however, *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* is under the control of the Egyptian state, “protected” under its auspices.

In 1932 and 1967, committees sought to “protect” *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* from European instruments such as the cello. Even as the cello became a fixture in Arab music ensembles, the instrument was seldom featured as a solo instrument in the way other instruments such as the *qānūn*, *nāy*, and violin were throughout the twentieth century.<sup>154</sup> Since the founding of this festival, the role of the cello in *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* has shifted in ensemble and solo performances. In the last five years, cellists have taken center stage at

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<sup>153</sup> See the final section of Part II below for a more in-depth discussion of music genres that have been surveilled and censored.

<sup>154</sup> Cellist Emad Ashour was first invited to perform as a soloist for *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* concerts put on by the Ministry of Culture in the 1990s. He does not know of any cellist who preceded him as a cello soloist for *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* concerts (p.c. with Emad Ashour, Aug. 2021).

the Arab Music Festival and Conference several times. At the 29<sup>th</sup> Arab Music Festival and Conference in November 2020, cellist Abdullah Samir (*‘Abdullah Samīr*) performed a solo cello version of the well-known *ṭaqṭūqa* “*Kulli Dāh Kān Lēh*” [“Why Did All This Happen?”], originally composed and sung by Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab in 1954.<sup>155</sup> In this performance, Abdullah Samir sat in front of the *firqa* beside the conductor’s podium, as a soloist does when performing a *concerto* with a Western classical symphony. As typical of concerto performances, Samir played from memory while the rest of the instrumentalists used sheet music. For most of the song, Samir played the vocal line, ornamenting the melody and virtuosically switching between registers.<sup>156</sup> In the middle of the song, Samir performed a brief improvisation (*tāqāsīm*) in *maqām bayyātī* before returning to the melody. His performance was received enthusiastically.

Playing covers of classic *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* songs is increasingly common among cellists.<sup>157</sup> In the 1980s, cellist Emad Ashour (*‘Amād ‘Āshur*) began to record covers of Umm Kulthum songs. His recordings eventually gained the respect of government ensemble directors, and since the 1990s he has been featured as solo cellist playing covers of Umm Kulthum songs with *firqa*-s. Emad Ashour paved the way for other cellists to do the same. In 2020, Egyptian cellist Muhammad Isma’il Sadiq (*Muḥammad Ismā’īl Sādiq*) performed a cover of an Umm Kulthum song as a soloist for the Cairo Opera House’s

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<sup>155</sup> The lyrics of “*Kulli Dāh Kān Lēh*” were written by Ma’moun al-Shinnawi (*Ma’mūn al-Shannāwī*) (c.1907–1991).

<sup>156</sup> In Western classical music, it is somewhat unusual to hear “echo effects” played on a single instrument by switching registers. In Arab music, however, such registral shifts are common for an “echo effect” and otherwise. The *nāy*, for instance, often switches registers within a given melody because of the timbral aspects of its upper and lower ranges. In other words, if the pitches of the melody go so high that the instrument might sound “screechy,” it is common for *nāy* players to switch those notes to a lower octave. The same is true for the lower register; if the pitches of the melody are too low, leading to a weak sound, *nāy* players might play those notes an octave higher.

<sup>157</sup> There is a tradition of instrumental covers to well-known *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* songs, especially Umm Kulthum songs, on violin and other instruments.

celebration of Umm Kulthum’s death anniversary under the baton of Maestro Salim Sahab.<sup>158</sup> Recently Emad Ashour himself performed Umm Kulthum’s “‘*Awwidt ‘Aynī*” [“I Habituated My Eyes”] and “‘*Ana fī-Intiḏārak*” [“I Am Waiting for You”] as a soloist with *firqa* in 2018.<sup>159</sup> In an interview Ashour was asked, “How do you make the cello sing when you play?” He responded that he first learns a song by singing it; then, when he plays the song on cello, he breathes when a singer would breathe to match vocal phrasing.<sup>160</sup>

Many cellists post solo covers of classic *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* songs on YouTube. Syrian cellist Bashar Sharifa (*Bashār Sharīfa*) has covered many songs, including Umm Kulthum’s “‘*Inta ‘Umrī*” [“You Are My Life”] (2016)<sup>161</sup> and Egyptian cellist Mahmoud Abdel Maksoud (*Maḥmūd ‘Abd al-Maqṣūd*) has released a version of “‘*Bi-Riḏāk Ya Khaliq*” [“By Your Will, My Creator”], originally sung by Umm Kulthum in the 1945 film *Sallāma* (2017).<sup>162</sup> These two videos take place in unique performance settings: Bashar Sharifa performs with electronic keyboard (*org*) and trap drums on a small stage while Mahmoud Abdel Maksoud plays in his living room, using a digital drone for accompaniment. These recent covers of Umm Kulthum songs are part of a growing number of cellists performing in a variety of private and small-audience settings and as soloists in *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* ensemble performances on formal stages with *firqa*.<sup>163</sup>

<sup>158</sup> <https://www.youm7.com/story/2020/1/30/حفل-المايسترو-سليم-سحاب/4607934> The song and orchestra are not specified in this article.

<sup>159</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vrrxl8eEks0>

<sup>160</sup> <https://www.copts-united.com/Article.php?I=3760&A=466138>

<sup>161</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9rRLSF-xDJU>. Note the context of this video: cello plays with *org* chordal accompaniment on a small stage with trap drums.

<sup>162</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ia9Kumt\\_nAc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ia9Kumt_nAc). In this video, Mahmoud Abdel Maksoud sits alone on the screen in his living room with a digital drone as accompaniment.

<sup>163</sup> Other notable cellists who frequently perform *tāqāsīm* include Emad Ashour (Egypt) and Bashar Sharifa (Syria) as well as Muhammad Ghnia, Muhammad al-‘Uthaimin, Ahmad Taha, Salah Namek, and Fahd Abdullah.

At the 2016 Arab Music Festival and Conference, cellist Yehiye Mehdi (*Yahyā Mehdi*) performed a cover of a song by Angham (Egyptian singer; b.1972) called “*Arrifha Biyya*” [“Introduce Me to Her”] from her 2003 album ‘*Umrī Ma ‘āk* [see Figure 17]. In this performance, he was backed by a large Western-configured ensemble consisting of a center-facing string section, brass section, timpani, drum kit, congas, and electric guitar, an instrumentation very similar to that of the original song.<sup>164</sup> In the original song, a viola plays a solo instrumental three times, a somewhat unusual instrument for an instrumental solo.<sup>165</sup> Perhaps this viola solo, played on the two lowest strings, was the inspiration for Yehiye Mehdi’s cover of the song. The image below shows Mehdi featured as a soloist in front of a huge ensemble—a powerful visual for the new position of the cello in Arab music [see Figure 17].

**Figure 17:** Screenshot of Yehiye Mehdi’s performance at the Annual Arab Music Festival and Conference in Cairo (2016). Mehdi is sitting to the left of the conductor at the front of the stage. Note the unprecedentedly large size of the ensemble.



<sup>164</sup>Cello cover: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOqnVDiaUcI>. Original song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BIEYRbucXvY>.

<sup>165</sup> Listen for the instrumental viola solo at 1:33–1:57 and 3:06–3:30, and 4:13–4:52: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BIEYRbucXvY>.

In this performance, Mehdi played with Arab-style ornamentation though the song is not based in *maqām*. Interestingly, the *ūd* and *qānūn* players set down their instruments and did not play during in this song. In addition to live performances such as this one, Mehdi has been featured in soundtracks for music videos and serials.

Cellist Emad Ashour was featured as a cello soloist with *firqa* at the 2019 Arab Music Festival and Conference.<sup>166</sup> The poster in Figure 18 is highly significant seeing as the festival organizers and marketing team decided to use a shot of Emad Ashour playing cello as publicity for the event. In this poster, he becomes “the face of the festival,” signifying the organizers’ curated image.

**Figure 18:** Poster Advertisement for Emad Ashour at the Arab Music Festival and Conference (Cairo 2019).



<sup>166</sup> For more information about Emad Ashour, see “Best-Respected Cellists in Egypt” in Part III, below.

Cellists from outside Egypt also perform at the annual Arab Music Festival and Conference. Iraqi cellist Qusay Qadduri (*Qusay Qaddūrī*) performed at the 2017 festival along with his brother Furat (*Furāt Qaddūrī*), a *qānūn* player, and three violins, bongos, drum kit, electric bass, and piano [see Figure 19].<sup>167</sup> This concert combined Qadduri’s many musical influences, from Western classical music to Latin American jazz, *flamenco*, *rumba*, *salsa*, and other genres (Festival Program 2017:4). This was Qadduri’s first time participating in an Arab music festival, though he had participated in many international festivals for Western classical music in the Gulf, Europe, and the United States. This recent performance is an example of how the festival has opened not only to cello soloists who play traditional *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* but also to cellists who play a fusion of Arab music with other genres.

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<sup>167</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZ7mnF\\_knf8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZ7mnF_knf8). This concert was advertised as “*Umsīat Ghazal ‘Ishtār*” in reference to ‘Ishtar, the Mesopotamian goddess whose temple was in Warka, present-day Iraq. To clarify this reference to Mesopotamia in conjunction with Iraq, the word “Iraq” is put in parentheses next to the event title.

**Figure 19:** Qusay and Furat Qadduri at the Arab Music Festival and Conference (Cairo, 2017).



The program for the 2020 Arab Music Festival and Conference included a full-page description of the cello as an instrument of Arab music (see Figure 20). This is remarkable as the cello has historically been absent from accounts of the “instruments of Arab music” which tend to include the violin but not cello or bass. This page includes a description of how the cello and bow are made as well as an explanation of the bass and tenor clef. It also states that the tuning for cello in Arab music is the same as the tuning in Western art music.<sup>168</sup> Interestingly, the program states that Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab is considered the first artist to introduce the cello to Arab music.<sup>169</sup>

<sup>168</sup> See Part III: *Tuning* for more information about tuning the cello in Arab music.

<sup>169</sup> See Part I: *Cello in the Early Takht* for more information about the wide range of theories about who was the first to introduce the cello to the *takht*.



**Figure 20:** Full-page description of the cello and its history in Arab music in the 29th Arab Music Festival and Conference program (2020:15).



## آلة التشيللو

إحدى الآلات ذات الصوت الغليظ من عائلة الكمان، وبها أربعة أوتار، وتُعرف آلة التشيللو بلغات مختلفة: الفرنسية Basse de Violon، الألمانية Violoncello، الإيطالية ViolonCello، الإنجليزية Bass Violin.

تعتبر التشيللو تطوراً لإحدى آلات أسرة الفيول (Viol) في القرن الخامس عشر، وتتكون من الصندوق المصوت، وهو عبارة عن صندوق خشبي تعتمد جودته على نوع الخشب.. والقوس: وهو عبارة عن عصا رفيعة تصنع من خشب، ويشد عليه شعر من ذيل الخيل أو خيوط من النايلون، ويوجد أسفل القوس ماكينة تصنع من خشب الأبانوس، وظيفتها شد وترخية الشعر بواسطة مسمار في نهاية القوس.

تسوى أوتار آلة التشيللو من أسفل لأعلى على مسافة الخامسة التامة، ويستخدم نفس أسلوب ضبط آلة التشيللو في عزف الموسيقى العربية، ويكتب عادة دور آلة التشيللو في مفتاح (فا) الباص، ويمكن كتابة النغمات الحادة في مفتاح (صول) لتفادي الخطوط والمسافات الإضافية الكثيرة، وفي بعض الأحيان يستخدم مفتاح (دو) تينور، وتمتد المساحة الصوتية لهذه الآلة ما يقرب من ثلاثة أكتافات، وربما تزيد هذه المساحة تبعاً لمهارة كل عازف.

يعد محمد عبد الوهاب بتفكيره المستمر نحو تطوير الموسيقى العربية المصرية هو أول من أدخل آلة التشيللو في فرق التخت العربي، فمنذ عام ١٩٢٨ ويظهر فيلم (الوردة البيضاء) عام ١٩٣٣ أدخل هذه الآلة في فرق الموسيقى الخاصة بموسيقاه التصويرية للأفلام والألحان، وذلك بعد حضوره حفلاً موسيقياً بمعهد فؤاد الأول للموسيقى العربية، ومشاهدته الفرقة الموسيقية التي كان ضمن تشكيلها آلة التشيللو تحت قيادة "كانتوني" الذي تولى التوزيع لبعض الأعمال الموسيقية التقليدية في الموسيقى العربية، وقدمها في الحفل.

ونتيجة لنجاح الأعمال التي قدمت في هذا الحفل تأثر عبد الوهاب بهذه الآلة، وهو ما دفعه إلى إدخالها بصورة أكثر فاعلية، وذلك في موسيقاه التصويرية للأفلام وأغانيه، وأول من قام بالعزف على هذه الآلة في مصر هو حسن حلمي.

وقد قام بعض رواد التأليف الموسيقي، أمثال: يوسف جريس، حسن رشيد، أبو بكر خيرت، حليم الضبع، أحمد عبيد، عزيز الشوان، جمال عبدالرحيم، رفعت جرانة، إبراهيم حجاج، فؤاد الظاهري، علي إسماعيل، عبد الحليم نويرة، عطية شرارة - بكتابة موسيقى تصويرية متطورة ذات طابع قومي، تستمد جنورها من تراث الموسيقى الشعبية المصرية، وقد سطوروا خطأً موسيقياً لآلة التشيللو في موسيقاهم، ونجد بعد ذلك مؤسسي فرق الموسيقى العربية قد ضموا أكثر من عازف لآلة التشيللو ضمن تكوين فرقهم.

This document also lists composers of Arab music who have written specifically for the cello: *Yūsif Jarīsh, Ḥasan Rāshid, Abū Bakr Khayrat, Ḥalīm al-Ḍaba', Aḥmad 'Ubayd, 'Azīz al-Shawān, Gamāl 'abd al-Raḥīm, Rifa't Garāna, Ibrāhīm Ḥajjāj, Fu'ād al-Zāhirī, 'Alī Ismā'īl, 'Abdel al-Ḥalīm Nuwayra, and 'Aṭiya Sharāra*. Regarding these composers, the program states:

Writing a sophisticated soundtrack with a national character, which derives its roots from the heritage of Arab music groups, they have included more than one cello player in the composition of their ensembles.<sup>170</sup>

This statement implies that the cello added a level of “sophistication” to compositions based on traditional Arab music. Many of the composers listed have written pieces for cello inspired by Arab folk songs and musical heritage, playing with folk motifs as Béla Bartók did in the early twentieth century. Gamal Abdel Rahim’s (*Gamāl ‘Abd al-Raḥīm*) pieces for cello and piano are prime examples, including motifs from Egyptian traditional wedding songs. Nagy al-Habshi’s (*Nāgī al-Ḥabshī*) composition for cello and piano is another good example of the use of folk songs, using the melody of “*Āh Yā Zēn*” [Oh, Beautiful One!] as a motif in the final movement of the piece.<sup>171</sup>

Since the founding of The Arab Music Festival and Conference in Cairo (1992), the cello has taken on a new meaning in *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* and in Arab music writ large. No longer perceived as a threat to Arab musical heritage as it was at the 1932 Congress and during the founding of the first state-funded Arab music ensemble in 1967, the cello is now part of the Arab musical heritage that is preserved, protected, and celebrated by the state through the financing of ensembles and through the annual Arab Music Festival and Conference. The changing meanings and perceptions of the cello throughout the history of Arab music ensembles reflects the tremendous changes that have occurred in Egypt over the last century, from the post-independence period (1932) to the post-revolutionary period (1967) to the Mubarak era (1981–2011) and beyond.

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<sup>170</sup> وقد قام بعض رواد التأليف الموسيقي، أمثال: يوسف جريش، حسن رشيد، أبو بكر خيرت، حليم الضبع، أحمد عبيد، عزيز الشوان، جمال عبد الرحيم، رفعت جرانة، إبراهيم حجاج، فؤاد الظاهري، علي إسماعيل، عبد الحليم نويرة، عطية شرارة — بكتابة موسيقى تصويرية متطورة ذات طابع قومي، تستمد جذورها من تراث فرق الموسيقى العربية قد ضموا أكثر من عازف لآلة التشيللو ضمن تكوين فرقهم.

<sup>171</sup> <https://youtu.be/PKLBVac4Jlk>. This composition appears on a record released by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture Media called “Cultural Exchange” (*al-tabādil al-thaqāfa*). I give my thanks to cellist and friend Fahmy Tarek for introducing me to this composition.

## The Salah El-Din Citadel Festival for Music and Singing

The annual Salah El-Din (*Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn*) [Saladin] Citadel Festival for Music and Singing was founded by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture in 1992, the same year as the founding of the Arab Music Festival and Conference. The Citadel Festival is part of the Egyptian Ministry of Culture's Cultural Justice Program, one of many international festivals organized by the Ministry through this program. The Cultural Justice Program holds that culture is a right for every citizen (Moghith 2020, Quadrennial Periodic Report: Egypt). The Citadel Festival features a wide range of artists and genres, ranging from popular artists such Dina El Wedidi (*Dīnā al-Wadīdī*), Carmen Suleiman (*Kārmin Sulaymān*), and soft rock band *Wust al-Balad*, to Western classical pianists and opera singers, to *al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya* ensembles (2021 festival).<sup>172</sup>

Compared to other concerts and events, tickets for the Salah El-Din Citadel Festival are affordable and the outdoor venue holds thousands of spectators each night. In 2021, the festival boasted 23,000 spectators in nine days (Middle East in 24). A set of actors that Paul Amar calls the “morality bloc” has critiqued festivals at Salah El-Din Citadel for their “Americanization,” in the “perverse American-style” of generating revenue. This festival, however, was intentionally made affordable and accessible for a wide audience through the Cultural Justice Program (Amar 2013b:116).

The Citadel Festival is held at the Salah El-Din Citadel (*Qal'at Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn*), a large medieval fortress in Cairo built during Salah El-Din's reign, beginning in 1176 CE during the

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<sup>172</sup> In summer 2021, *Firqat al-Qawmiyya l-il-Mūsīqā al-'Arabiyya* performed at the Citadel Festival and several singers performed pieces that would likely be considered within the “*al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya*” category. While in Cairo, I heard Jordanian singer Nada' Sharara (*Nadā' Sharāra*) sing part of Umm Kulthum's song “*Aghadan Alqak*” (“*Aghadan al-Qāk*”) [“Will I Meet You Tomorrow?”] with a *firqa* made up of musicians associated with the Cairo Opera House, including my teacher and interviewee Borg Ibrahim Muhammad.

Ayyubid period. The Citadel was the seat of power and the residence of rulers in Egypt for nearly 700 hundred years, from the thirteenth century to the nineteenth century. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Muhammad Ali Pasha (*Muḥammad ‘Alī Bāshā*) demolished many of the older buildings at the Citadel and built new monuments including the famous Muhammad Ali Mosque. The Citadel was used by the British military during the occupation and later by the Egyptian army until 1983 when it was opened to the public. In 1976, the Citadel was proclaimed part of the World Heritage Site of *Historic Cairo*, and today the Citadel houses four museums<sup>173</sup> and is a major tourist attraction for both Egyptians and foreigners.<sup>174</sup>

Festivals are important sites for “constructing and performing the nation,” and the historic location of the Citadel Festival is part of the Egyptian Ministry of Culture’s performance of the nation (Belkind 2021a:71). At the most recent festival in 2021, Minister of Culture Ines Abdel-Dayim (*Inās ‘Abd al-Dāyim*) shared:

Hundreds of years ago, Salah El-Din Castle represented a source of homeland security, and the Salah El-Din Citadel Festival came to *protect* public taste ... embod[ying] a number of [...] goals of the Ministry of Culture, which are represented in presenting the [...] serious and high [...] arts.

The Ministry of Culture sees “the role of the festival and its artistic value as one of the arms of the forces of Soft Egypt in the face of extremist ideology” (Anny 2021). The “high arts” Abdel-Dayim references included a performance of one of the Bach cello suites at the opening ceremony of the festival. More importantly, however, is the parallel Abdel-Dayim draws between the festival and historic “homeland security.” She describes the festival as

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<sup>173</sup> The Police Museum (sometimes referred to as the Prison Museum), the Egyptian Military Museum, the Carriage Museum, and the Al-Gawhara Palace Museum.

<sup>174</sup> See Lonely Planet guidebooks and Caroline Williams’ *Islamic Monuments in Cairo: The Practical Guide* (2018).

instrumental, working to the end of “Soft Egypt” which uses soft power to counter extremist ideologies both domestically and internationally.

The annual Arab Music Festival and Conference and the Citadel Music and Singing Festival were both founded by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture in 1992 and the policies that supported the founding of these two major international festivals were not unprecedented. Since its founding in 1958, the Egyptian Ministry of Culture has used cultural policy to construct a national Egyptian culture and international Arab culture and identity. In this process, the Ministry of Culture has securitized and moralized Egyptian and Arab music-cultures by fully funding some styles of music while censoring and policing others.

*Mahragānāt*, a genre of Egyptian electronic dance music (EDM) that emerged in the early 2000s, is an example of a genre that has been heavily censored and policed by the Ministry of Culture.

The Egyptian Ministry of Culture uses cultural policies to the end goal of securitizing Egyptian and Arab music and preserving Egyptian morality through music. *Mahragānāt* and other alternative genres that show resistance to the state and purportedly corrupt public morality have been discursively constructed as threats to public morality and national security.<sup>175</sup>

### Cultural Security in Egypt

In this section, I have used the cello as a window into greater shifts in cultural *policy* over the last century using three case studies from 1932, 1967, and 1992. To conclude, I will introduce the concept of cultural *security*, which I define here as the execution of cultural

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<sup>175</sup> See pp. 128–130 below for a discussion of the censorship of *mahragānāt* in Egypt.

policy under the pretext of national security, often involving the use of securitization tactics to enforce policies. Culture has been used as both an instrument and object of security in Egypt, and the issue of cultural security has grown increasingly pressing as Egypt has greatly expanded its security forces over the last three decades (Salem 2020:183), securitizing many aspects of society, including culture.

The term “cultural security” is not widely used, and scholars have not settled on a definition. In the introduction to *Worlds on the Move: Globalization, Migration and Cultural Security* (2004), Jonathan Friedman defines cultural security as a subset of human security, one of three broader categories of security: human security, economic security, and national security. The use of the term “cultural security” has often been used in reference to “protecting national culture from outside corruption” (Nemeth 2015:xi; Renwick and Cao 2008). In a recent article, Alsudairi and Xiaojun explain that “cultural security” has been a watchword in Chinese and Saudi Arabian national security discourses since the 1990s and that “cultural security is realized through the state’s enactment of preventative and curative measures aimed at inoculating and cleansing society (the carrier of culture) from the corruption of internal and external forces” (2021). But what does “outside” mean? The internal-external division clearly does not occur at the nation-state border alone, so what divides these “forces” abstractly? What does culture mean for security, and security for culture?

Like Friedman, Paul Amar defines cultural security as a subset of *human security* in what he terms “the human-security state” (2013b). The human-security state is a type of governance that exists at the intersection of several logics of securitization, all of which aim to “protect, rescue, and secure certain idealized forms of humanity” (ibid). In the context of a

project to “rescue” and develop Cairo’s Islamic architecture as part of the “heritage of humanity,” Amar identifies two blocs, each with its own logic of securitization: the “heritage bloc” and the “morality bloc” (101). In the case of developing Cairo’s Islamic heritage sites, the heritage bloc included the Egyptian Ministry of Culture, United Nations agencies, and the Cairo governor while the morality bloc included Al-Azhar Mosque and University, populist political groupings, and nationalistic intellectuals and journalists (104). Amar’s categorization of these state, parastatal, and nonstate actors is productive for examining competing and overlapping logics of securitization and cultural security.<sup>176</sup>

Cultural policymakers have employed *cultural security discourse* in Egypt since the early twentieth century. At the First International Congress for Arabic Music in 1932, European comparative musicologists and some Egyptian elites used *cultural security discourse* to weaponize European instruments, such as the cello, and European-based musical theories and practices in an attempt to “rescue” or “protect” so-called authentic Egyptian and Arab culture from the encroaching forces of Westernization. For example, French comparative musicologist and orientalist Rodolphe D’Erlanger, vice-chairman of the congress organizing commission, led a “mock court orchestra” in Tunisia, which served to “militate against ‘new’ instruments [...] and resurrect old instruments and genres” (Davis 1993, cited in Stokes 1994:15).

The colonial mindset of preserving “traditional” forms of music was common among European musicologists at the 1932 Congress. The cello was perceived as a threat to the safeguarding and development of what came to be known as *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya*. Cultural security discourse is marked by semantic references to perceived threats and invasion and, in

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<sup>176</sup> Amar uses the term “parastatal” to refer to coalitions between government policymakers, NGOs, private-security agencies, morality campaigns, and other actors (2013b:18).

this case, was used to warrant the heritagization and canonization of what came to be considered Arab musical tradition. The cello was cast as a threat in the early to mid-twentieth century, but by the late twentieth century the instrument came to be accepted as a fixture in traditional Arab music ensembles.

Creating an ethnic-based genre category like “Arab music” required a policing of what music could be considered “Arab” and to what extent it could show influences of Turkish, Persian, and European musics. To construct this category meant delimiting its boundaries. The musical instruments used in this tradition were perhaps one of the most outwardly and visibly apparent markers of Western influence, which may be why policy makers employed cultural security discourse, connecting these instruments to the cultural security issue of Westernization and colonial legacy. I have used the debate over the cello’s inclusion in the reconceived category of “Arab music” in 1932 as a lens for understanding the larger nation-building project in the post-independence period. This musical tradition was in fact a means of creating a core, unified national identity, both in the sense of Egypt as a newly independent nation-state and in the broader pan-Arab nationalist framework.

The concept of cultural security implies that there is some element of culture that must be *secured* or protected from internal or external threats. In the case of music, its *intangibility* may seem to render it incapable of being truly securitized in the way *tangible* heritage might be (e.g., artifacts and monuments). Although music is an abstract phenomenon, it is associated with tangible objects. The adoption of the cello, as a physical instrument, could thus be positioned as a more concrete, tangible threat than the adoption of European music theory, for example.



Attempts to protect heritage and culture are linked to moralization and the concept of “moral rescue.” In *The Security Archipelago*, Paul Amar uses the term “cultural rescue models” to describe human-security governance systems which emerged in the early 1990s, focusing on heritage restoration, population management, and cultural moralization (2013b: 29, 102). These cultural rescue models used “humanitarian rescue doctrine” that was characterized by two processes: the “forcible protection and moral rehabilitation of the citizenry” and the “securing and policing of certain forms of space, labor, and heritage seen as anchors for counterhegemonic development models” (6).

Amar uses the concept “humanitarian rescue doctrine” to analyze the “rescue” of a physical space, focusing on the restoration of *tangible heritage* such as sites in Old Cairo (*al-Qāhira*).<sup>177</sup> This model can also be applied to the deliberate removal of space that had been used for Sufi rituals with the erection of large iron fences as a tangible and physical form of moral policing. Amar’s “cultural rescue” model can also be applied to music as a form of *intangible heritage*. “Cultural moralization” was a crucial dimension of 1990s cultural policies related to music. Certain categories, such as *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* and Western classical music, were elevated by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture while other genres were policed for “corrupting Egyptian morality.”

Under the pretext of moralization and cultural security, some genres have been *policed* or “*policy-ed*” with the establishment of cultural policies that are enforced by the police force. In contrast to the *cultural security discourse* used by policy makers in the context of *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya*, certain musical genres have faced more literal *cultural security* practices through censorship and policing in the name of national public morality.

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<sup>177</sup> The Historic Cairo Restoration Project (HCRP) under the Ministry of Culture, for instance, sought to restore and remake the historic area and create an “open-air museum” (Hassan 1999 in Williams 2006).

Since the 1990s, there has been police suppression of popular spiritual festivals, particularly Sufi *mawlid*-s including the razing of a mosque for *zikr* in 1999 (Puig 2006).<sup>178</sup> In 1999, *zār*-s or traditional spiritual dance and music gatherings for women, were increasingly policed and seen as “an aberration to the program of the morality bloc” (Amar 2013b:117). Along with spiritual forms of music, popular genres such as *sha‘bī* have been censored. Rock music has been policed in live settings and online for the sake of the “protection of morality” against content with sexual language, particularly lyrics related to homosexuality (Bahgat 2004 in Amar 2013b:76). Heavy metal has also been heavily censored in Cairo with tabloids referring to metal shows as “Satanic concerts” and fans as “devil worshipers” since the infamous police raid and arrest of more than a hundred metal musicians and fans in Cairo’s Heliopolis district (Levine 2008:62).<sup>179</sup>

Since 2011, the independent music scene has come under vigilance, and shows are often cancelled abruptly and arbitrarily for “security reasons” or without explanation (Abdelmagid 2018:134). Musicians and listening publics have found ways around these bans and censorship, whether by openly defying bans,<sup>180</sup> operating underground, working in exile, and spreading music virtually rather than in live shows (for example, hip-hop artist El General who was arrested but whose music spread regardless, Amar 2013a:14–15).

Most recently, the genre *mahragānāt* has come under heavy censorship, involving many arrests. In 2020, the director of the Musicians Syndicate, Hani Shakir (*Hāni Shākīr*),

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<sup>178</sup> A *zikr* (*dhikr*) is a Sufi religious ritual in which members of a Sufi order “seek to achieve a degree of union with God” (Marcus 2007:49). *Zikr*-s occur in public settings, such as at celebrations of Sufi saints (*mawlid*s) and in private settings (ibid).

<sup>179</sup> <https://freemuse.org/news/egypt-fear-of-heavy-metal-returns/>

<sup>180</sup> Sheikh Imam [*Shaykh Imām*] and poet Ahmad Fu‘ad Nigm’s [*Aḥmad Fu‘ād Nigm*] criticized Nasser’s role in the aftermath of the 1967 defeat and their work was banned by state media. Despite arrests under Nasser and Sadat, their songs remained popular throughout the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in the context of the Leftist movement of the 1970s and were played once again during the 2011 revolution (Frankford 2017; Puig 2006:530).

declared that the Central Censorship of Artistic Works (*al-Raqāba al-Markaziyya ‘ala al-’Amāl al-Faniyya*) would ban any *mahragānāt* song with sexual references and inappropriate words in the interest of securing a “decent” music scene (Mustafa 2021).<sup>181</sup> This statement came after the release of “*Bint al-Gīrān*,” [“The Neighbor’s Daughter”], a song by *mahragānāt* artists Hassan Shakosh (*Hassan Shākūsh*) and Omar Kamal (‘*Umur Kamāl*) with lyrics that reference drugs and alcohol. The Musicians Syndicate instated a ban in September and Shaker announced, “This cancerous type of music is not worthy of the name of Egypt, its arts, or the beautiful reign of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi” (Youssef 2021).

One of the most vocal critics of *mahragānāt*, Helmi Bakr (*Hūlmī Bakr*), called the genre “more dangerous than coronavirus,” stating:

When a virus kills a person, this is his fate, but to intentionally harm the society and damage its [artistic] taste is a wrongdoing that we will be accountable for in front of God; that’s why I say this genre is more dangerous than coronavirus (ibid. 2021).

This statement reflects the government’s view of this genre as a threat to Egyptian society.

One of Egypt’s current cultural policies is entitled “Promoting Positive Values in Society” with language such as:

[The program] aims to instill the values of citizenship in society to achieve the objectives of the SDS [Sustainable Development Strategy] and the pursuit of a better life by building the character of the Egyptian citizen to be an active member in a *cohesive social structure that combats extremism and preserves the national identity*. (UNESCO, italicization added)<sup>182</sup>

While this policy language seems relatively benign, more extreme policy measures have been taken to “combat extremism” in the arts. Authorities have arrested artists under the pretext of counterterrorism; in fact, in 2020 Egypt had the world’s highest rate of misusing national counterterrorism laws to restrict artistic freedom alongside Turkey (Freemuse:49).

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<sup>182</sup> See <https://en.unesco.org/creativity/governance/periodic-reports/submission/6924>.

"decent" : لا يُقْبَلُ <sup>181</sup>

In Egypt, “vague provisions” of counterterrorism laws have been used as legal instruments against citizens who criticize the government rather than serving as measures for true threats to national security (ibid:55). The main obstacle for artistic expression in Egypt, arguably, is legislation on “countering terrorism and protecting public morality” (ibid). Although Article 67 of the Egyptian constitution guarantees artistic freedom, the government has adopted a series of legal instruments including the Anti-Terrorism Law No. 94 of 2015 and the 2018 Anti-Cyber and Information Technology Crimes Law to circumvent the protection of artistic freedom (ibid:101).<sup>183</sup>

Dozens of artists have been detained, prosecuted, and imprisoned by counterterrorism and emergency courts since the establishment of the anti-terrorism law in 2015. The law defines terrorism much more vaguely than the UN Security Council’s definition of terrorism and has been used to squelch civil disobedience, “disproportionately used” against artists (“Egypt: Counterterrorism Law,” Human Rights Watch; Freemuse). Under this law, artists can be held in pre-trial detention for up to two years, and many have been held longer. The law also allows heavy penalties, including the death penalty.

Under this law, seven artists associated with Ramy Essam’s (*Rāmī ‘Aṣām*) music video “*Balaḥa*,” which mocks President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, have been arrested. Lyricist Galal al-Bahayri (*Galāl al-Baḥayrī*) was arrested by National Security Police facing charges of “terrorist affiliation” and “contempt of religion” and was likely subjected to torture (“Egypt: UN Human Rights,” OHCHR). The director of the music video, Shadi Habash

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<sup>183</sup> The definition of a “terrorist act” in this law encompasses any “use or force or violence or threat or terrorizing” that aims to “Disrupt general order or endanger the safety, interests or security of society; harm individual liberties or rights; harm national unity, peace, security, the environment or buildings or property; prevent or hinder public authorities, judicial bodies, government facilities, and others from carrying out all or part of their work and activity” (“Egypt: Counterterrorism Law,” Human Rights Watch).

(*Shādī Habash*), was in pre-trial detention for over two years and died in prison in May 2020 (Freemuse:51).

Egypt's use of counterterrorism measures has taken place at the same time as Egypt chaired the UN Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTS) that acts to "ensure compliance with counterterrorism resolutions."<sup>184</sup> The UN has looked the other way when faced with the Egyptian government's misuse of this law ("Egypt: Intensifying Crackdown," Human Rights Watch). Egypt's current Minister of Culture, Ines Abdel-Dayem, delivered a speech to a forum of 120 ministers of culture at UNESCO's general conference in 2019 in which she described Egypt's strategy of "confronting extremism and fanaticism" and "consolidate[ing] the values of citizenship" in Egypt ("Egypt's Culture Minister"). This statement aligns with the counterterrorism discourse and measures that have been used to limit artistic freedom in Egypt.

Despite the Musicians Syndicate's ban and condemnation of *mahragānāt* and the use of counterterrorism measures to threaten and detain artists, *mahragānāt* continues to define the soundscape of Cairo and Hamo Bika (*Ḥamū Bīka*), a famous *mahragānāt* artist, is one of the most-listened-to artists in Egypt today (Naji 2021). Even as shows and concerts are banned, authorities have not been able to ban digital streaming. The Musicians Syndicate announced that they would hold auditions for *mahragānāt* singers to "legalise their status" and thus "control the music and lyrics they present" (ibid. 2021). At these Syndicate auditions, however, self-taught musicians or those who studied privately outside a formal institution, are generally not granted membership, effectively excluding non-academics and

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<sup>184</sup> Council resolution 1624 (2005) declares that member states "must ensure that any measures they take to carry out the resolution comply with all their obligations under international law, in particular international human rights law" ("Egypt: Intensifying Crackdown," Human Rights Watch).

non-members from working in the music industry (Kheder 2021:59). More than protecting its members, the role of the Musicians Syndicate seems to be preventing non-members and “uneducated” musicians from working in the music industry.

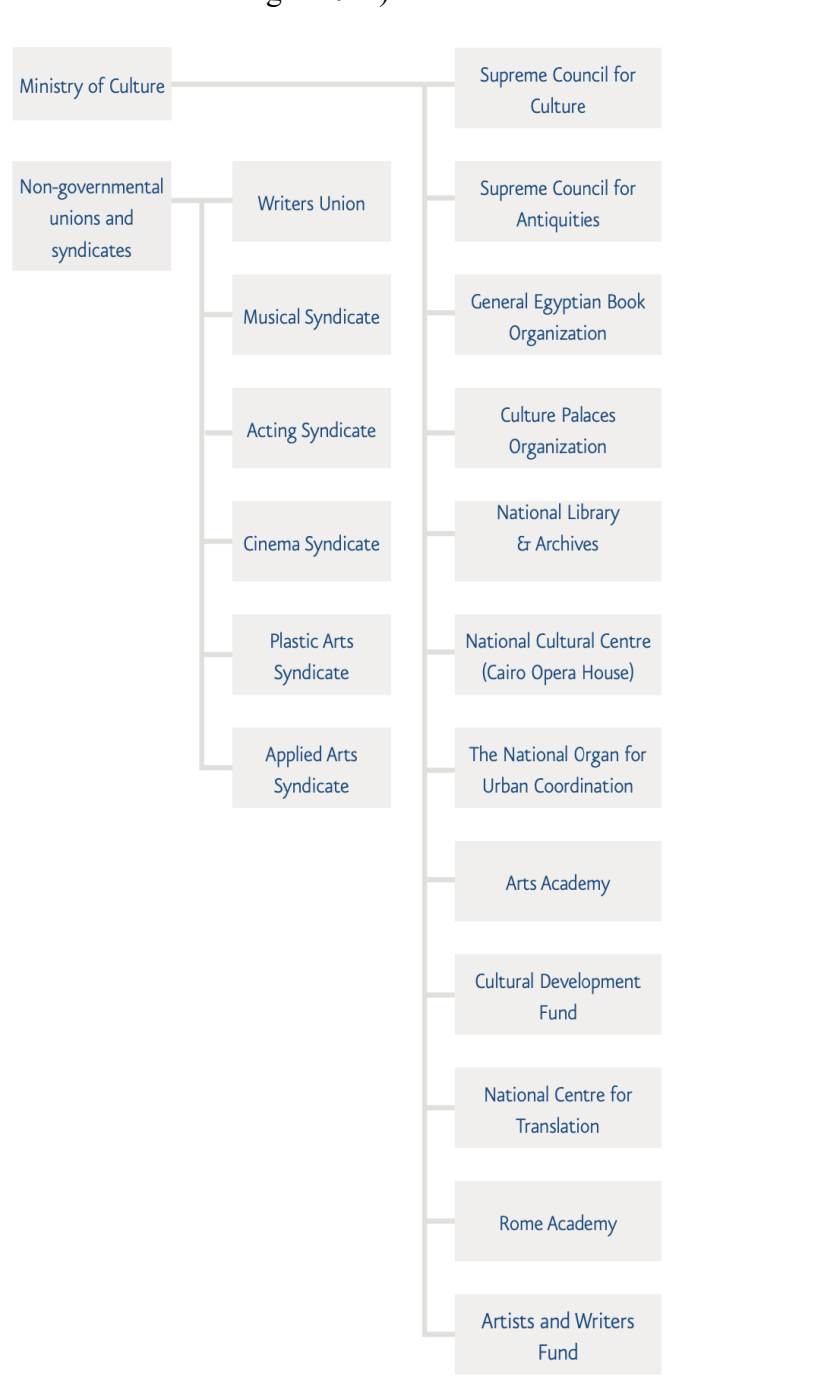
With the support of the Musicians Syndicate, police pursue *mahragānāt* singers to stop public performances and make arrests (Naji 2021). Although the Musicians Syndicate is not a governmental organization, it works with designated censors of music in the government’s censorship department and with the police force [see Figure 21]. In 2014, Minister of Justice Ahmad al-Zand (*Aḥmad al-Zand*) provided judicial investigation powers to the president of the Musicians Syndicate, turning Hani Shakir and syndicate authorities into a “music and singing police” (ibid). Additionally, since President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi came into power, musical venues must procure clearances and permissions, from the fire department to the National Security Department (ibid).

The Musicians Syndicate has a strong hold not only on *mahragānāt* but on all public performances in Egypt. Even foreign singers need permission from the Musicians Union. Interestingly, Sadek notes that although the Musicians Union occasionally bans foreign artists, it is not difficult to overcome this ban through connections and sometimes “intimations of a ban [... are] merely a publicity stunt designed to promote that singer and attract an audience” (Sadek 2006:174).

The Musicians Syndicate profits greatly from cultural operators and venues who must pay taxes to the Syndicate as well as from dues from members. In 2020, a musician reported that members of the syndicate must pay for the membership and “get nothing in return,” given only 500 EGP per month during COVID-19 which is not enough to survive (Kheder 2021:49). Another musician reported that a 1978 law criminalized any musician who was not

a member of the syndicate, threatening three months in prison if they refused to pay a fine (ibid:58).

**Figure 21:** Diagram of the Ministry of Culture and Non-Government Unions and Syndicates in Egypt. From *Cultural Policies in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Syria and Tunisia* (El Batraoui and Khafagui 2012).



*al-Mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* ensembles and institutions continue to benefit from the financial backing of the Egyptian state through the Ministry of Culture.<sup>185</sup> Egypt is currently ruled under a military dictatorship with the military owning 60% of the economy (Sprengel 2021). The support under the current military dictatorship demonstrates *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya*’s continued use as a public-facing symbol of the state and as an element in a project of national cultural security.

In an interview, Jihan Morsi (*Jihān Mursī*), head of the annual Arab Music Festival and Conference, commented on the current state of the music scene in Egypt:

As long as private production remains dominant, art will remain under *occupation* [*iḥtilāl*] because the ruling factor is commercial goals without regard to artistic and cultural value. For that reason, I hope state production resumes because it will restore things to their proper order and restore singing to its prestige, as singing is one of the most important *weapons* [*asliḥa*] of society that can be relied upon in building cultures and belonging to the new generations. (Interview with Hamdi Tariq [*Hamdī Tāriq*] November 2019, emphasis added)<sup>186</sup>

The terminology she uses reflects a securitized vision of art and culture with words such as “occupation” and “weapon,” viewing the government’s role as protecting art from commercial domination and weaponizing art as a tool in state-building.

*al-Mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* has been used as a tool in nation and state-building for decades and, for most listeners, this category of music harkens to previous periods in Egyptian history, associated with Egypt’s “golden age.” In the 1990s when Cairo faced

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<sup>185</sup> See Salwa El-Shawan’s dissertation for an extended discussion of government funding of *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* from 1927–1952 and 1952–1977 (1980a:114–128).

<sup>186</sup> <https://alwafd.news/article/2625969>

طالما سيطر الانتاج الخاص، سيظل الفن تحت قيد الاحتلال، لأن المسيطر هنا هو الأهداف التجارية بدون النظر للقيمة الفنية والثقافية، ولذلك أتمنى عودة انتاج الدولة من جديد، لأنه سيعيد الامور إلى نطاقها الصحيح وسيعيد للغناء هيئته، فالغناء من اهم اسلحة المجتمع التي يمكن الاعتماد عليها في بناء ثقافات وانتماء الاجيال الجديدة.



poverty, urban decline, squatter settlements and repressive rule, audiences and critics “look[ed] back nostalgically to the earlier golden age represented by Cairo’s films and music of the 1940s to 1960s” (Armbrust 2006:428). The mid-twentieth century star ‘Abd al-Halim Hafiz, for instance, is considered an icon of the Nasser era “for which some are nostalgic and others disdainful” (ibid).<sup>187</sup>

The 25 January Revolution in 2011 also generated nostalgia for Nasser’s time, which was considered *al-zaman al-gamīl* (“the beautiful old times”) in comparison to the harshness of Mubarak’s military regime (Abaza 2020). During the revolution, Egyptians played *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* songs in the street signaling nostalgia for these past eras.<sup>188</sup> *al-Mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* is highly valued in Egypt, not just by the government who uses this music in nation and state-building projects, but also by people for whom this music offers a sense of shared identity and history, an affective manifestation of nostalgia, patriotism, and national belonging.

The concept of cultural security provides a framework for understanding cultural policy developments in Egypt over the last century. Cultural policy was developed in post-independence Egypt, and arts policy developed further with the founding of the Ministry of Culture under Nasser. Policy recommendations as early as 1932 were concerned with the degree of emotionality permissible in Arab music. Today, cultural policies support *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya*, Western art music and dance, and folklorized genres while policing popular

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<sup>187</sup> Walter Armbrust notes that one of ‘Abd al-Halim Hafiz’s films “My Father is Up the Tree” has become a cult classic. Youth make fun of him in this film as a way of making fun of their parents’ generation, a “product of a sharp disjunction between official culture’s heavy-handed obligatory reverence toward him [‘Abd al-Halim Hafiz] and their own circumstances” (2006:429).

<sup>188</sup> For example, Sayyid Darwish’s song “*Ahū Dah Illī Šār,*” variously translated as “This is What Happened,” “So It Goes” and “This is Where We’re At,” became part of the revolutionary repertoire in 2011 (Swedenburg 2012).

music genres that criticize the government or challenge perceived moral standards.<sup>189</sup> While these styles of music may seem distantly related, the ideologies and practices of cultural security are present in both contexts.

Securitization theory clarifies the process of enforcing cultural policy. Securitization describes how speech acts transform political subjects into “security” matters, thus justifying the use of the military, police, and emergency measures under the pretext of protecting the state (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998).<sup>190</sup> Securitization acts have several components: a *securitizing actor*, a *threat* (concrete or abstract), a *referent object*, and an *audience*. In contemporary Egypt, the *securitizing actors* are the Egyptian Ministry of Culture and the Musicians Syndicate which use cultural security discourse and practices to justify the censorship and policing of certain forms of music. The *threat* is any form of music that threatens Egyptian morality, and the *audience* is both state actors and citizen listener publics. Finally, the *referent object* is Egyptian and Arab music and Egyptian public morality.

The same framework can be applied to cultural security *discourse*, which does not necessarily involve state actors but employs the same language to create supposed “threats” that justify the use of policy and institutional measures to protect against them. In the case of the 1932 Congress, the committee members used cultural security discourse to advocate for policies relating to the emerging category of “Arab music.” In this case, the *referent object*

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<sup>189</sup> The Cairo Opera House includes eleven government ensembles. Three ensembles are *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* ensembles; one religious music; two dance companies [ballet and modern dance]; five Western classical music ensembles [opera, opera orchestra, opera choir, *a capella* choir, and symphony]. Other ensembles receive government funding but are not listed as the Opera House’s main companies. Examples of *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* ensembles that fall in this category include *Shāri‘ al-Fann* (Street of Art), Sayyid Darwish Heritage Ensemble for Arab Music, and the Arab Takht for Arab Music and Singing (see <https://www.cairoopera.org/companies.php?lan=En> for main companies).

<sup>190</sup> The term “securitization” was coined by Ole Wæver in the late 1980s and is associated with the Copenhagen school of security studies (Anheier and Juergensmeyer 2012). The Copenhagen School has been critiqued by the field of Critical Security Studies for its narrow scope, Eurocentrism, omission of gender in the framework, and “problematic normative implications” (McDonald 2008; Hansen 2000; Wilkinson 2007).

was “Arab music” itself, specifically the newly-conceived category of *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya*. The *securitizing actors* in 1932 were European and some elite Egyptian committee members who posed the cello and other European instruments as *threats*. In this case, the intended *audience* was other committee members and practicing musicians. The *cultural security discourse* used at this congress continues to manifest in other ways. Though the cello is no longer discursively securitized as a threat to Egyptian Arab music, the same discourse is used to securitize popular music genres that “threaten” the morality of Arab music, justifying the issuing of censorship policies and the use of police force.

Since the early twentieth century, there have been ongoing attempts to “protect” the category of *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* as a form of intangible cultural heritage, symbolizing Egypt and its regional-ethnic identification with other Arab countries. Since 1932, there have been continuous efforts to define what is and what is *not* Arab music, and what constitutes a “threat” to Arab music whether concerns over that threat are related to heritage or morality. Over this period, there have been many examples of musicians and artists who are supported by these securitizing policies and others who reject or resist these same policies. The securitization of “Arab music” thus affects all artists in Egypt.

### **PART III: Perspectives of Five Contemporary Cellists in Arab Music**

*“Identity is mobile, a process not a thing, a becoming not a being [...] Our experience of music—of music making and music listening—is best understood as an experience of this self-in-process” (Frith 1996: 109).*

Today, the cello is considered an established instrument in *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* and has been given unprecedented prominence in public performances of *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* in recent decades, particularly since the 1990s in Egypt. The cello has also begun to emerge as a solo and improvising instrument in Arab music beyond the context *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* ensembles. In the following section, I describe the current position of the cello in eastern Arab music, drawing on interviews and lessons with five cellists from 2020–2021 with Naseem Alatrash (*Nasīm al-‘Atrash*), Kinan Abou-afach (*Kinān ‘Abū ‘Afash*), Ashraf Hakim (*Ashraf Ḥakīm*), Peter Abadier (*Bītīr ‘Abādīr*), and Borg Mohammed Ibrahim (*Burg Muḥammad Ibrāhīm*).

I present short biographies of these cellists who perform *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* in the United States and in Egypt, each of whom offers a unique perspective on the role of the cello in Arab music. Synthesizing information from lessons, interviews, and performance observation, I draw parallels between their experiences, particularly in terms of identity, and I point out crucial divergences in their perceptions of the technique and role of the cello in Arab music. In contrast to the first two chapters of this thesis which deal with the historical arc of the cello’s use in Arab music in Egypt and the implications of cultural security in *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya*, this chapter privileges the individual perspectives and lived experiences of five cellists who play Arab music in the United States and in Egypt.

Ashraf Hakim, Peter Abadier, and Borg Mohammed Ibrahim are all originally from Egypt while Naseem Alatrash is from Palestine and Kinan Abou-afach is from Syria.

Although this thesis focuses primarily on Egypt, I have chosen to highlight Naseem and Kinan in this section because they are arguably the most prominent cellists who play Arab music in the United States and offer invaluable insights and perspectives. This section is highly specific to their individual experiences, but it is also comparative and transnational in scope. In analyzing the individual perspectives of these five cellists, I aim to avoid essentialism and demonstrate a variety of views and approaches while keeping a transnational perspective in mind.

### **Biographies**

#### Naseem Alatrash

Palestinian cellist Naseem Alatrash (b. 1991) grew up in Beit Sahur (*Bayt Sāhūr*), a Palestinian town east of Bethlehem under the administration of the Palestinian National Authority. Naseem was surrounded by Arab music from childhood, but his musical training was almost exclusively in Western classical music. Naseem began playing violin at a school whose music teacher happened to be the director of the Bethlehem branch of The Edward Said National Conservatory of Music (*Ma'had Idwārd Sa'īd al-Waṭanī l-il-Mūsīqā*).

Noticing his talent, his teacher urged him to take lessons at the conservatory. Naseem signed up for lessons only to find that the violin teacher was leaving the country: “It was the Second Intifada (*Intifāda*) in Palestine, and the violin teacher was European and left the country because of the political events” (interview with author, Sept. 14, 2020). Naseem was instead directed to the cello because of the absence of a violin teacher and because of the lack of cellists in Palestine at the time: “There were only a couple of students in the entire country!” Naseem had never seen nor heard a cello before his first lesson. Laughing sardonically, he joked: “The Intifada is the reason I started the cello.”

The Edward Said Conservatory was interested in training cellists because they “had a bigger plan to start a youth orchestra that... could lead into a national orchestra and eventually all these musicians would also live in Palestine, play in the orchestra, and teach music there. They had this plan of building a musical community.” As one of the only cello students, Naseem was given extra support by the conservatory and invited to play with ensembles from Ramallah to Jerusalem. One of these ensembles was the conservatory’s *takht* called *Maqām*. It was in this *takht* that Naseem picked up the basics of *tāqāsīm*, or improvisation. Although Naseem’s first cello teacher introduced the instrument to him by playing both a Beethoven melody and an Umm Kulthum song, Naseem focused primarily on Western classical music. As he shared, “The understanding was that a cellist plays Western music.”

The Edward Said Conservatory program focused on Western classical music and technique, but Naseem also took lessons in Arabic percussion and *maqām* (Arab music theory) and played with Arab music ensembles at the conservatory. Outside the conservatory, Naseem played Arab music in gigs: “Early on I started playing Arab music because it was around, but I had not officially studied it. I had a couple of *maqām* lessons, but I wasn’t in the Arab music branch of the conservatory. All the *qānūn* players, *ūd* players, percussion players... They have a different curriculum.” By the age of 17, Naseem advanced to a high level of cello-playing and moved to Germany to continue his studies. His career path took an unexpected turn in 2010 when he received an acceptance email and full scholarship from Berklee College of Music: “At the time, I was starting to get frustrated in Germany just because maybe I always had it in me that I wanted to improvise and... be a different type of

musician... so I took the big decision to leave Germany and to move to the US in 2010 to study at Berklee.”

At Berklee, Naseem continued to study Western classical music and began studying improvisation, extended techniques, and jazz. In his second year at Berklee, world-renowned Palestinian violinist Simon Shaheen (*Sīmūn Shāhīn*) was hired as full-time faculty and Naseem began studying with him intensively. Ironically enough, it was in Boston that Naseem began to study Arab music seriously. He shared: “It was the first time in my cello playing that I got an explanation of *maqām* in terms of how to play certain phrases, how to modulate, how to do all these things.” Under the direction of Simon Shaheen, Naseem began to study Arabic repertoire and *tāqāsīm* while continuing his studies in jazz and Western classical music.

Since graduating from Berklee, Naseem has been involved in many collaborative projects, traversing multitudinous genres and styles. He plays with Amir ElSaffar’s (*‘Amīr al-Ṣaffār*) *Rivers of Sound* ensemble, a seventeen-person ensemble that combines many musical “traditions,” contesting the idea that music “belongs” to any particular cultural group or place; *The Global Messengers*, a small ensemble led by jazz pianist and UNESCO Artist for Peace Danilo Pérez; the National Arab Orchestra, a Detroit-based Arab music ensemble and nonprofit; duo with Greek singer Irini; and with world-renowned *ūd* player and violinist Simon Shaheen. He is also part of RagaMaqam, a 15-person ensemble that “explores the shared threads of Indian ragas and Iraqi maqam, the venerable tradition of structured-improvisatory composition.”<sup>191</sup> Like many performing artists, Naseem expanded his teaching load in response to the pandemic, offering online lessons and workshops through Circle

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<sup>191</sup> <https://www.brooklynragamassive.org/ensemble-pages/raga-maqam>

World Arts [see Figure 22], an organization that offers classes and workshops in many musical traditions, and CelloBello, a website with free master classes by world-renowned cellists, instructional videos, interviews, and other resources for cellists. Naseem currently serves as the director of the Middle East Ensemble at Tufts University in Boston, and he was recently hired as the cellist for the Turtle Island String Quartet, an ensemble known for embracing many genres of music including classical, jazz, rock, and folk.

After attending two of his online workshops, I reached out to Naseem for lessons in *tāqāsīm*. Before COVID-19 hit, a week in the life of Naseem might have included performing an Indian *raga* in a fusion band, making a studio recording with a Greek singer, and working on a composition that combines Western art music, jazz, and Arabic styles. Amidst the cancellation of tours and performances at the hands of COVID-19, Naseem describes shifting his focus back toward Arab music:

[COVID] has given time for reflection... has somehow pushed me to go to the roots and get closer to Arab music. I had been doing a lot of collaborations across genres, but somehow during COVID I found I was going back as far as possible and sticking to the roots.

A through-line in all Naseem's endeavors is his interest in improvisation:

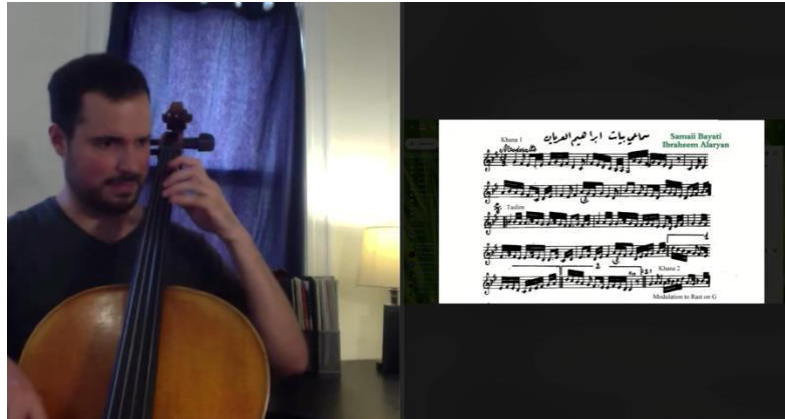
My goal is to give the cello a leading role in improvised music, or improvised world music. It doesn't have to be just Arab music. Part of my vision is the idea of 'comprovising.' This means giving importance to improvising... the improvisation leads the way for composition.

He is also interested in bringing the cello "to the forefront" as an instrument of Arab music. He shared: "One of my goals is to really create repertoire, develop the idea and the concept of Arab music on the cello and using the cello across different genres that are here in the U.S." (National Arab Orchestra Interview, Apr. 28, 2020). He added later in the interview that the cello has the capacity to introduce new audiences to Arab music: "The instrument itself can reach audiences that may not otherwise be interested in Arabic music" (21:00).



Finally, he shared his vision: “I believe cello can be one of the most important instruments in Arab music if we keep building the repertoire for it” (28:00).<sup>192</sup>

**Figure 22:** Naseem Alatrash’s online workshop through Circle World Arts (July 2020).



### Kinan Abou-afach

Kinan Abou-afach (b. 1977) was born in Damascus and began studying music at age seven at the Arabic Institute of Music in Damascus. In Syrian music schools during that period, students studied *solfeggio* and learned to read music for a few years before being entrusted with an instrument. For that reason, Kinan first began to play ‘ūd outside the Institute of Music: “According to the rules, it was too soon to pick up an official instrument, but someone asked if anyone wanted to play ‘ūd or qānūn and I signed up” (interview with author, Dec. 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2020). Kinan’s father was an amateur ‘ūd player and a poet, part of the artistic circle in Damascus. Kinan remembers being surrounded by painters, poets, filmmakers, and musicians as a child and recalls listening to many genres of music, from

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<sup>192</sup> Arab music has not traditionally conceptualized instrument-specific repertoire (p.c. with Scott Marcus, Dec. 2021), but Naseem feels that by creating cello-specific repertoire it is possible to “develop” an instrument-specific idiom for playing Arab music on the cello.

Antonin Dvorak to Miles Davis. His father played *‘ūd* in the “village style,” with just two fingers but “with more soul than an accomplished *‘ūd* player.”

During his *‘ūd* lessons, Kinan mostly worked on Arab music. His teacher notated music for Kinan to study from rather than teaching him by ear, and Kinan recalls reading sheet music from a book of Umm Kulthum songs.<sup>193</sup> Only the instrumental sections (*muqādimma*-s) and fillers (*lazima*-s) were notated in the book, so he had to learn the vocal melodies by ear. Ear training was not part of the curriculum, however, and he did not study *maqām* during these years. Kinan shared:

I was fed [quarter tones] without knowing all the technicalities. The taste of microtones, it was given to me [...] in a more natural way than when I studied them later [at] 20 or 30 years old. Actually, playing *sama* *i*-s teaches you automatically how [go from *maqām* to *maqām*]. (Interview with the author, Dec. 2020)

A year after beginning to study *‘ūd*, one of the well-known music pedagogues in Damascus came to Kinan’s house. His mother asked if the *‘ūd* was an appropriate instrument for Kinan and this teacher picked up his hand: “I remember, he held my hand like this! Like an expert. I think he was looking at my fingers and he said, ‘Cello.’ I didn’t even know what [the] cello [was].”<sup>194</sup>

At the suggestion of this teacher, Kinan began studying cello the following year. At 17 years old, Kinan joined the Higher Institute focusing on cello as his main instrument. He studied first with a Russian teacher, then with an Azerbaijani teacher, and with another Russian teacher. Each of his teachers taught him different skills—one taught him technique, one gave him stamina, and one was a “fanatic for sound.” In addition to his cello studies, Kinan studied Arab music theory. He took *maqām* theory classes with an Iraqi teacher, so he

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<sup>193</sup> These songs are published in volumes by ‘Abdul Rahman Jabaqji (*‘Abd al-Raḥman al-Jabaqjī*), along with reduced versions of the rest of the song (mainly the instrumental *lazima*-s) (p.c. with Scott Marcus, Dec. 2021).

<sup>194</sup> Kinan is not sure why this teacher came to this conclusion; he never asked.

mostly learned Iraqi *maqām* and what he calls “micromaqams” (“smaller” *maqām*-s within a family [*faṣīla*] of related *maqāmāt*). Kinan shared: “Some things I *lived*. I lived *rast*; I lived *bayyātī* [...] but the microdetails and [subtle differences in intonation...] it was him who taught us [these things].”

As a student, Kinan was encouraged to memorize a couple of *tāqāsīm*-s, but he refused. To this day, he believes in the freedom of Arab music and finds it hard to teach “traditionalism” because there is no methodology, curriculum, or standard pedagogical techniques in Arab music. Kinan never studied improvisation or *tāqāsīm* per se and recalls getting into debates with his friends who played Arab music and performed virtually pre-composed *tāqāsīm*-s: “Some of my friends used to always play the same *tāqāsīm* [and it was] 99.9% perfect unless they [made] a mistake, and then it really collapsed.” In his own improvisations, Kinan was less interested in perfection and more interested in doing something fun in the moment. He still feels this way about *tāqāsīm* but respects people who want to prepare and play “perfect” *tāqāsīm*.

On the cello, Kinan studied Western classical music exclusively. He recalls that if he played a phrase in a funny way, Syrian classical musicians would say, “What—are you playing Arab music or something?” Kinan was interested in improvising and playing Arab music on the cello, but he never had an interest in studying it formally or copying the prominent Arabic violinists in Syria. He shared: “I was happy with doing something that was really in-between.”

During this time, he continued to study *ūd* as a secondary instrument. The *ūd* teacher at the Institute was Azerbaijani and essentially played without quarter tones. Under his instruction, the students learned Western classical compositions on the *ūd* (e.g., by

Beethoven or Mozart) and performed with piano. Kinan graduated from the Higher Institute of Music with a bachelor's degree in cello and *'ūd* performance. During his time in Damascus, Kinan played with the National Syrian Symphony orchestra as a member of the cello section and performed the Dvorak Cello Concerto as a soloist.

Kinan has always loved to improvise, even in the context of Western classical. While in Syria, he performed a C.P.E. Bach concerto transcribed for cello and insisted on playing two *cadenzas* that were “fluid” or “semi-written” rather than pre-composed. He shared: “I liked the idea of the imperfection of having something semi-improvised.” Kinan also remembers being a “trouble-maker” in the back of the cello section as a kid when he would improvise his own harmonies for fun until a nearby bass player caught him. Reflecting on that time, he wonders if he was improvising, composing, or if it was “really just musical troublemaking.” He remembers notating some of the musical ideas he came up with after rehearsals. Later in life, he used one of the melodies he improvised in his youth as a motif in his composition “White Dream” for eight cellos.

In 2000, Kinan moved to the United States to study at DePaul University with Steve Balderston whom he had met at an orchestra festival in Germany. Steve took Kinan under his wing, both as a cellist and as a person, and taught Kinan to make musical decisions by asking questions such as, “Could it be better? Could you do something different? What do you think?”

After graduating from DePaul, Kinan took gigs in Western classical music and began to play jazz, learning to improvise with a fake book and eventually forming his own band. Comparing improvisation in Arab music and jazz, Kinan stated: “One is reaction, one is anticipation.” In other words, in Arab music an improviser can react to what is happening in

a *maqām* whereas in jazz, an improviser must anticipate the chord changes. In addition to his career as a cellist, Kinan has composed many works in a variety of styles and contexts. He is currently based in Philadelphia and has worked on regular projects with Al-Bustan: Seeds of Culture, a Philadelphia-based organization that supports Arab-American cultural identity through arts-based educational programming, and in several groups including an avant-garde improvisation duo with cellist Tom Kraines (Daedalus string quartet) and his own jazz ensemble.<sup>195</sup>

As a composer, Kinan mixes jazz, classical, and Arab music and often leaves space for improvisation with “boxes” inspired by aleatoric or “chance” music, a genre that combines composition with improvisation on the part of the performer. Kinan sometimes uses traditional Arab music forms such as the *muwashshah* but bends the “rules” of the form in his compositions. In an interview about one of his compositions, he shared: “Then with the next poem, I began breaking the rules. I let go of the rules and just [did] something that I can hopefully still call a *muwashshah*. They broke a lot of rules, the old timers [early to mid-twentieth century musicians in Arab music], so why not break more rules and do something different?” Kinan lives by this philosophy in his music-making, as a cellist, improviser, and composer.

### Peter Abadier

Peter Abadier (b. 1982) had a long-term career as a professional cellist in Cairo before moving to the United States. Peter began studying cello at the Cairo Conservatory in 1989 at age seven and received his Bachelor of Music in 2002. He played with the Cairo

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<sup>195</sup> In the section, “Composing and Performing Diasporic Identity,” I will describe several of Kinan’s works in detail.

Opera Orchestra from 2001 to 2010, occasionally subbing with the Cairo Symphony Orchestra. Peter moved to the United States in 2010 after receiving a green card. He had toured to many countries with the Cairo Opera Orchestra, including France, Germany, China, Greece, Mexico, Russia, and the UK, but had never visited the United States. After six months of struggling to find work, he decided to return home to Cairo and bought a return ticket for February 2011. His plans were waylaid when the revolution began on January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011, and air travel was restricted. He lost touch with his family for an entire month and took this as a sign from God that he was meant to stay in the United States.

For the next year and a half, Peter continued to audition for orchestras and contacted many conductors, but eventually decided to enroll in an Associate in Arts program in recording arts at the Los Angeles Film School. Since then, he has worked as an audio engineer and event technician, initially learning to do lighting by watching YouTube videos.

Peter mainly played Western classical music while living in Egypt. The few times he played Arab music professionally was for studio work, recording with artists such as Hakim (*Hakīm*), Mahmoud Ellithy (*Maḥmūd al-Laythī*), and Boussi (*Būsī*). Many times, he did not know which singer he was recording music for, sharing: “Most of the time you just go, record, and leave” (6:30). Peter did not study Arab music in the conservatory and instead learned to play *maqām* “by heart”:

All the songs I hear in the street or at home [use] *maqām*, so I can feel it. I don’t have to study it. I have no problems with the *maqām*-s. When [colleagues] said, *let’s play this song from maqām whatever*, I was like *I don’t know what you’re talking about... Just give me the score!* (Interview with author, April 2021)

Peter knows *maqāmāt* musically but not conceptually. In the quotation above, he describes knowing the sounds of each *maqām* and having no problem performing the various *maqāmāt*

when presented with sheet music, but he acknowledges that he does not know the *maqāmāt* by name having never formally studied them.<sup>196</sup>

Many of the gigs Peter has played in the United States have been Arab music concerts, such as several concerts with the National Arab Orchestra. When the superstar Emirati singer Ahlam (*Ahlām*) performed at Disney Hall and Dolby Theater on two separate tours, Peter was invited to play with the touring group and humbly surmised that the main reason he was hired was to avoid the cost of airfare for a cellist from the Middle East.<sup>197</sup> Peter played with the Layali Zaman Academy Orchestra (*Layālī Zamān*) in Los Angeles for six years, an ensemble led by his friend violinist ‘Adel Eskander (‘*Ādil* Askandar) from Cairo.

Upon coming to the United States, Peter mentions that other musicians were often surprised by his lack of familiarity with the names of the *maqāmāt*: “Everybody was like, [*You’re*] Egyptian, right? You should know it. No, I should not. Just give me the score, and I’ll play it!” (ibid. 9:18) Peter admitted that he would rather be playing Western classical music, but he has struggled to find gigs in Western classical music because of his lack of connections in the scene. He does not personally like listening to or playing the “classics” of Arab music that the National Arab Orchestra and Layali Zaman often perform (Umm Kulthum, Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab, Farid al-Atrash, etc.): “I’m just playing. I don’t like it. I don’t like our old music” (ibid. 35:00). Though he shared that has deep respect for the music, he prefers playing and listening to contemporary Arab music such as singers Angham (‘*Anghām*, b. 1972) and Sherine (*Shīrīn*, b. 1980).

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<sup>196</sup> Kristina Nelson notes that *Qur’ān* reciters often did not know the names of *maqāmāt* despite competently rendering them (2001).

<sup>197</sup> At one of these concerts Peter played alongside his brother, cellist Jan Abadier, who had traveled from Cairo with the touring ensemble

When I reached out to Peter, I was interested in hearing about his recent music video called “The Gift” (2020) which featured him on cello along with Syrian-American ‘ūd player Afif Taian (‘*Afif Tayān*).<sup>198</sup> The music video was shot outdoors in several iconic locations in Los Angeles, featuring shots of Peter on both acoustic and electric cello. When I asked Peter about this recent video clip, he shared that the audio in the video was recorded almost a decade ago, shortly after moving to the United States. The song was written by world music composer Raul Ferrando and the original album, *Infatuation*, featured Orientalist themes with tracks such as “Trance-Formation,” “Secret Rituals,” and “Gulf Winds” with a belly dancer on the album cover.

I asked Peter why they had created a music video for this song so long after the original recording. He explained that a friend of his at Media Ave. Studios wanted to feature Peter in a video clip and asked which song he might want to play. The original track on *Infatuation* had recently been released on Spotify and Apple Music bringing it back to Peter’s attention. When he asked the original ‘ūd and *tabla* players if they would like to take part in the video clip, they declined. Instead, he asked two of his musician friends to be actors for the video, miming the recording.

Peter used an electric cello and acoustic cello in the video even though the soundtrack for the video only includes an acoustic cello. He explained candidly: “I don’t like the sound [of the electric cello]; I just got it because it looks nice!” (14:00). He explained that he has a cheap version of the higher-quality NS electric cello. The aesthetic of the video, directed by Peter’s friend, is completely different from the aesthetic of the original album; there is no Arab or Orientalist bent in the high-production video. Media Ave. Studios advertised the

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<sup>198</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/MediaAveStudios/videos/296060724967884/>



music video as “Relaxing Cello Music” rather than emphasizing connections to Arab music or culture.

This sequence of events is an interesting example of the reappropriation of a sound object. Peter had taken on the original recording gig without much thought when one of his colleagues asked him to fill in. He admits that he completely forgot about the recording until Raul Ferrando, the composer, reached out to him saying that the album had been released on Spotify and Apple Music in 2020. When he was given the opportunity to make a music video with his friend, using this recording seemed like an obvious choice. Peter and Media Ave. Studios reappropriated and rebranded the original track to suit their own visions. Although the recording is the same, the song is separated from its original exoticized context as part of a semi-Orientalist world music album, and localized as part of iconic Los Angeles culture, with shots at the Griffith Observatory, Hollywood Sign, Huntington Beach, the Santa Monica Pier, Marina del Rey, and downtown LA.

Part of the reason Peter chose to use this old recording for the 2020 music video was because he had stopped playing cello professionally, only practicing at home. He frankly shared that he no longer considers himself a cellist; even if he were to return to Cairo, he would work as an audio engineer because he feels that has been out of practice for too long to resume his career as a professional cellist. Peter’s older brother Jan Abadier (*Jān ’Abādīr*) is a professional cellist in Cairo, leading a well-known string group that has been hired to record for many videos produced in the Gulf, performing both Western classical and Arab music. Should he return to Cairo, he expects that his brother Jan would find him work as an audio engineer rather than a cellist. He explained: “I cannot go back [to Egypt] as a cello

player. I'm not the same [anymore]. It's been like 11 years [since I played] anything professionally [...] I'm not that good anymore" (22:30).

Peter is an example of a cellist who grew up in Cairo but has played more *al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya* since moving to the United States, although his true passions lie in classical music, contemporary pop, and in his current career as an audio engineer based in Dallas, Texas. Peter provides a valuable perspective as a cellist who has performed Arab music but has not committed his life to playing this music professionally. Despite not having received formal training in *al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya*, Peter has played songs based in *maqāmāt* by ear on the cello, having been steeped in Arab music in Cairo. Though he no longer works as a professional cellist, Peter is still active in the Arab music scene, currently working as a live sound engineer and audio-visual technician.

### Ashraf Hakim

Like Peter Abadier, Ashraf Hakim (b. 1964) came to the United States after a long career as a professional cellist in Cairo. Ashraf began playing music at five years old, learning the theme from the film "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly" by ear on the xylophone. When he got the xylophone as a gift, he thought: "*This is my whole world!* I was flying in the sky, jumping, and singing." After his foray into playing the xylophone, Ashraf begged his parents for a set of bongos. He became fascinated by harmony and asked for an accordion. His family could not afford a piano, so he learned to play on his neighbor's piano.

At age 16, Ashraf enrolled in the Higher Institute for Arabic music in Cairo, passing an audition led by dean Dr. Ratiba al-Hifni (*Ratība al-Ḥifnī*).<sup>199</sup> He began his studies on the

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<sup>199</sup> Ratiba al-Hefny (1931–2013) was an Egyptian and international opera singer before becoming dean of the Higher Institute for Music in Cairo in 1962 after it became a subsidiary of the Ministry of Culture. In 1988, she became the President of the National Cultural Center (Cairo Opera House), the first woman to hold this

double bass, working with a Bulgarian teacher. Recalling the first time he heard the cello, Ashraf shared:

By September 14<sup>th</sup>, we had to go back to music school. This was my second year on bass. I heard something incredible. Unbelievable. Super magical. *My heart!* I had never ever felt this with double bass. My heart filled [...] It took my breath away. I looked for the sound.

I could hear sounds from outside the room. I stood outside the practice room for an hour, hiding. I could hear everything. It turned out it was my great friend. He said, “Why didn’t you come in? I was just practicing.” I asked, “what is this instrument?” I didn’t even know [what the] cello [was]. I was [like] someone flying in the sky. I just fell in love.

Ashraf shared that in that moment, he wanted to “take the instrument, the bow, and run!” He immediately decided to switch from the double bass to the cello. That summer, he stayed overnight with his father at the radio studio where his father worked as a manager. He woke up to the sound of Mahmoud al-Hifnawi (*Maḥmūd al-Ḥifnāwī*) playing the cello.<sup>200</sup> al-Hifnawi let Ashraf play his cello and encouraged him to switch from double bass to cello. That fall, Ashraf began studying with Magdi Boulos, one of Umm Kulthum’s primary cellists.<sup>201</sup> He specifically remembers studying the Édouard Lalo Cello Concerto (1876) with Boulos who was exacting about every detail of the piece.

Ashraf was appointed first chair cellist in one of the Arab music ensembles at the Cairo Opera House, a position he held for 16 years. He also performed with the National

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position. She helped found the first children’s choir in Egypt (Cairo Governorate), the Umm Kulthum Ensemble for Arab music and the Religious Ensemble (Academy of Arts), and the National Ensemble for Arab music and Opera Children’s Choir (Opera House). She also was a major radio and TV persona, supervising a radio program and several TV programs introducing the audience to Arab music. Her father, Mahmoud Ahmad al-Hifni (*Maḥmūd Ahmad al-Ḥifnī*) wrote more than 45 books on music.

<https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/5/33/81775/Arts--Culture/Music/Renowned-Egyptian-opera-singer-Ratiba-ElHefny-pass.aspx>

<sup>200</sup> Mahmoud al-Hifnawi’s brother is Ahmad al-Hifnawi (1916–1990), the most famous Arab violinist of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and the first violinist in Umm Kulthum’s ensemble.

<sup>201</sup> See Part I.

Folk Music Ensemble (*Firqat al-Qawmiyya l-il-Funūn al-Sha 'biyya*) for 15 years and appeared as a soloist under Maestro Salim Sahab with *Firqat al-Qawmiyya l-il-Mūsīqā al-'Arabiyya* and with the Arabic Symphony Orchestra. During his career in Egypt, Ashraf performed in over 30 countries on six continents for presidents, prime ministers, kings, queens, and ambassadors. He also played on film scores and with classical ensembles at five-star hotels including the Mena House Oberoi by the Giza pyramids outside of Cairo. He also recounts improvising at the Pyramids and Sphynx for Egyptian television.

Ashraf was always interested in moving to the United States. There were seven American families in his neighborhood, and he played the piano at the home of one of his American neighbors. He described his father as “pure Egyptian,” working closely with the Egyptian government and helping organize the inauguration parade for the transfer of power from King Fu’ad I to King Farouk I in 1936. At one point, his father was invited to work in Hollywood, but he turned the offer down wanting to stay in Egypt.

Ashraf’s father noticed that he was interested in Euro-American culture and remembers him saying, “Ashraf, I know that you’re gonna do it [move to the United States]. You love America and Europe, and you won’t stay here.” The radio and television were always on in Ashraf’s home, instilling his love for Hollywood. He shared, proudly, “I was the first one to play the [American national anthem] in the Cairo Opera House.” He added, “I love America more than anything and I respect it. I choose to be here. I am in love with the U.S. and the things that have happened in my life here have proved it.”

Ashraf struggled to make a living in his first years in the United States in the early 2000s, struggling to find employment. During this period, he earned the nickname “Beethoven” which referred both to his musical genius and his struggle to find acceptance in

society. Ashraf began playing with Don Baragiano, a guitar player, in the Seattle area. Together they produced an album together *Hejira: Not of this World* (2011) of eleven original songs and one traditional song (Miserlou) with world music and jazz influences. The album begins with a song called “Karshlama,” named after the Turkish nine-beat rhythm and the other songs include “Hejira,” “Love is a Miracle,” “Under a Crescent Moon,” “Moroccan Roll,” “Maksum Jam,” “Garoon,” and “Trance Dance.”

Ashraf uses many playing styles in the album, approaching the cello in novel ways. This is true of his live performances as well. In an Egyptian belly dance (*raqs sharqī*) show at a nightclub in Ithaca, New York in 2016, Ashraf performed a drum solo on the cello, percussively beating different surfaces of the instrument in dialogue with a dancer.<sup>202</sup> In the drum-cum-cello solo, Ashraf begins by tapping the fingerboard of the cello with his left hand, reminiscent of a bass slap. Setting the bow down, he adds his right hand to the mix, beating out a pattern on the fingerboard. He then taps different parts of the face of the cello to achieve different sounds. The closer he taps to the frame of the cello, the higher the pitch, creating a *takk*-like sound. By tapping the center of the face of the cello, he achieves a lower pitch because of the deep hollow space below the wood, reminiscent of a *dumm* sound on a drum. In the middle of the solo, he switches to beating out a rhythm on his thighs before returning to different parts of the face of the cello, including the area near the bridge where the sound is most resonant. At this point in the drum solo, he also uses the sides of the cello, moving up and down for different timbral effects. He goes so far as to use the scroll of the cello and the tuning pegs as percussion instruments and ends the solo by adding a few syncopated handclaps before picking up his bow and returning to the melody.

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<sup>202</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ryzC55QMMYs>.

This novel technique of using the cello as a percussion instrument is unique to Ashraf's playing; it is not part of the tradition but is his personal adaptation of a drum solo to the cello, using different parts of the instrument to achieve different sound. There are few recognizable eastern Arab rhythms in this drum solo, though there is a clear *baladī* toward the end (D D - T D - T -).<sup>203</sup> What is particularly fascinating about this impromptu drum solo is that sitting directly behind Ashraf is a *tabla* player, who had been playing *wahda* until Ashraf's "drum" solo (D - - T - - T -). In other words, Ashraf did not adapt this drum solo for lack of a percussionist but for artistic reasons.

One of the reasons Ashraf decided to emigrate to the United States was in pursuit of greater artistic freedom. In an interview with the Kirkland Reporter, Ashraf shared:

The cellists over there were like employees. I told them I'm not an employee. I'm full of power, I'm full of energy – I want to fly with my cello into the sky... My cello is my religion. My cello is my humanity. My cello is my dignity. My cello is my art, my love—everything. (Rodriguez 2008)

Currently based in the Greater Seattle area, Ashraf continues to perform many genres on cello, from Latin to jazz to classical to Egyptian Arab music and he shared that he has written over 184 compositions since 2016 including tangos, ballads, waltzes, and other genres. He has not notated these compositions; they are "in his head and his heart" (p.c. Dec. 2020).

Ashraf has always had a powerful memory with the ability to remember specific license plates, telephone numbers, dates, places, and times. Ashraf also has a strong memory for music. He shared: "I am humble and simple but enormously confident in music." From the time Ashraf became enamored of the cello, to his career playing with *al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya* ensembles in Cairo, to his life as a multi-genre cellist in the United States, Ashraf

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<sup>203</sup> D stands for *dumm* (the low pitch) and T stands for *takk* (the higher pitch). These sounds are made on percussion instruments ranging from the *tabla* to *riqq* to *daff*. Generally, there is a single *dumm* sound while there are many *takk* sounds.

has maintained a deep love and commitment to Arab music but, more importantly, to the cello. For him, the cello is associated with both his lifelong dream of living in the United States and his connection to Arab music and home. The cello is an instrument of his artistic expression, allowing him to engage in many musical styles, genres, and scenes.

### Borg Ibrahim Muhammad

Borg Ibrahim Muhammad (b. 1979) grew up in Cairo and began playing music at 16 years old, starting on *‘ūd* and *nāy*. As a child, he loved listening to artists such as Umm Kulthum and Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab, but he did not study music formally until his 16. At age 20, Borg began studying cello at the College of Education (*Kulliyyat al-Tarbiyya al-Naw‘iyya*) and continued his education at the College of Music Education (*Kulliyyat al-Tarbiyya al-Mūsīqiyya*) where he studied with Hisham Qatra (*Hishām Qaṭar*), Mahmoud Saleh (*Maḥmūd Sālīḥ*), and Dr. Ashraf Sharara (*Ashraf Sharāra*). His teachers were primarily interested in Western classical music, but Borg studied Arab music with Mahmoud Saleh and “fell in love with the feeling of Arab music.” He has made a career playing Arab music with several government ensembles including *al-Firqat al-Qawmiyya li-l-Funūn al-Sha‘biyya* (National Folklore Ensemble), *Shāri‘ al-Fann* (Street of Art), and a touring Arab music group associated with the Cairo Opera House.<sup>204</sup>

Borg prides himself on being a great ensemble musician and shared, “I am not a soloist. I play cello in my group [and I only play] *written* cello solos.” In some of the pieces he performs with ensembles, there are 10-measure or 15-second cello solos, and Borg admitted that he gets nervous even for these short, composed solos. Borg is confident in his

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<sup>204</sup> During my time in Cairo, I travelled with Borg and this ensemble in the tour bus from the Cairo Opera House to the Alexandria Opera House where they performed with Jordanian superstar singer Nada’ Sharara at the Sayyid Darwish Theater under Maestro Ehab Abdel Hamid (26 August 2021).

role as an ensemble musician and pedagogue, however. He teaches twenty cello students in Cairo, some of whom focus on Arab music and some on classical. Five of his former students are now pursuing doctoral degrees in music, on track to become music professors. These former students are now his friends and colleagues. Borg is interested in further developing his teaching skills and hopes to pursue a master's or doctoral degree at the College of Music Education in Cairo.

Borg has faced struggles in his career. During the 2011 revolution many concerts were cancelled, putting his career on hold, and the same has been true during the COVID-19 pandemic. He shared:

I used to play with my group two concerts a week, but during the pandemic and during the revolution a lot of bad things [happened] in our lives in music. No concerts. Everything stopped; it stopped our life. But now the big problem is Corona, COVID-19. We are still playing concerts, but not two concerts a week. Every three weeks we do one concert—live concerts, but not at full capacity. If the theater [typically admits] 100 people, [now] they take [only] 50.

Many of Borg's students stopped taking cello lessons during the pandemic. He taught three students over Zoom, but lessons have been irregular. He met with one student face-to-face periodically in 2020 but shared that he was afraid of COVID-19 and avoided in-person meetings during the surges in COVID cases. He noted that it was necessary to meet this student in person: "He is a beginner so if he plays a [wrong] note, I must physically adjust his hands to [fix it]." Though he invited other students to take lessons at his home, several were afraid of his large and somewhat aggressive German Shepherd. Commenting on the state of music in the pandemic economy, Borg noted:

Nobody in Egypt has money for concerts [now], just the Ministry of Culture. [The Ministry of Culture] help[s] artist[s] and make[s] us happy [so] that we can live in this time. Now the famous performers from Egypt play in Kuwait and [the United Arab Emirates]. In one concert, they pay \$5,000 dollars for everyone. Now, there are



no concerts in Dubai, so the Ministry of Culture gives these Egyptian artists support to continue when they return during the pandemic.

Before the pandemic Borg played gigs internationally. He traveled to Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Armenia, Ukraine, France, and other countries for performances. He particularly missed traveling over the pandemic and was grateful to return to concerts with *al-Firqat al-Qawmiyya li-l-Funūn al-Sha‘biyya* and other groups, as well as in-person lessons and tours. He expressed his gratitude for the Ministry of Culture’s support during the pandemic and for his health sharing, “Our God will do anything He want[s], we just have to thank [Him].”

#### Respected Cellists in the Arab Music Scene in Cairo

The five cellists I worked with shared their thoughts on the most widely respected cellists in Arab music. Notable cellists included Yehiye Mehdi, Emad Ashour, Ayman al-Hanbuli (*Ayman al-Ḥambūlī*), and Hassan Mo‘ataz (*Ḥassan Mo‘ataz*). There was consensus that Yehiye Mehdi is one of the top three cellists in Egypt, in both Arab and Western classical music. Peter Abadier described Yehiye Mehdi as “the most amazing cello player you’ll ever hear in Arab music.” Peter was Yehiye Mehdi’s peer at the conservatory in Cairo and shared, “He’s different. It’s a gift. Not from practicing or anything. [When] I knew him, he [didn’t] practice a lot! He’s so talented; he has a gift.” Yehiye Mehdi started playing in professional recordings when he was 15 or 16 and was already playing Arab music professionally while at the conservatory with Peter.

Mehdi studied with Ayman al-Hanbuli, who Peter described as the “#1 cello player in Egypt when we [Peter and Yehiye] were kids, before Hassan Mo‘ataz and Yehiye Mehdi came on the scene.” Yehiye Mehdi, Hassan Mo‘ataz, and Peter Abadier all studied with

Ayman al-Hanbuli as did Peter's brother, Jan Abadier. Peter shared: "There weren't a lot of cello players at that time, so he was teaching all the cellists at the conservatory. Maybe 20 total." Borg, one of my cello teachers, also listed Ayman al-Hanbuli as a "world-famous cellist" and one of the best cellists in Egypt in both Western classical and Arab music. Both Peter and Borg mentioned his prowess as a performer and pedagogue, teaching the next generation of successful cellists. Ayman al-Hanbuli has been featured on over twenty albums since 1983, including Angham's album '*Umrī Ma 'āk* mentioned previously.<sup>205</sup>

Along with Yehiye Mehdi and Ayman al-Hanbuli, three of the five cellists consider Emad Ashour one of the top cellists in Arab music. As mentioned in Part II above, Ashour was featured in the annual Arab Music Festival and Conference as a soloist [see Figure 18]. Borg praised Ashour for his tone and phrasing: "Emad Ashour is like a singer. [When] you hear him [play], you can hear the words [...] You can listen [to] the words [as if he were] a singer."

Emad Ashour studied Western art music in undergraduate and graduate school, but he has mostly performed Arab music in his career as a cellist. In a press interview, Ashour shared:

In order to reach a good level, I had to sit for ten hours at the cello and study. My whole life was musical exercises and, thank God, after that I [had] a very high [level of] technique. Despite the fact that I studied Western music, Eastern playing took me; it was in my blood. My Western studies contributed to acquiring advanced technique and my love of Eastern [music] made me mix the two.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> See page 116, above. <https://www.discogs.com/artist/3013096-أيمن-الحنبولي>

<sup>206</sup> ولكي أصل إلى مستوى جيد كنت أجلس 10 ساعات على الآلة، وأذاكر دون فهم، حياتي كلها كانت تمرينا، وسبحان الله بعد ذلك وجدت نفسي لدي تكنيك عال جدا، ورغم أنني درست غربي ولكن العزف الشرقي اخذني، كان في دمدي، ولذلك ساهمت دراستي الغربي في اكتساب التكنيك العالي بالعزف، وحيي للشرقي جعلني أمزج بين الأمرين. <https://www.copts-united.com/Article.php?I=3760&A=466138>

Ashour attributes his technical prowess to his training in Western art music,<sup>207</sup> but adds that Arab music (or “Eastern” music, in his words) is part of his blood. In other words, he applied his training and technical development in the Western classical tradition to his passion for Eastern music. Ashour’s statement is reminiscent of Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s statement: “I take from the West all the means that help me fulfill my musical ideas as an Egyptian and Middle Easterner” (Azzam 1990:329). In these statements, both Ashour and ‘Abd al-Wahhab position Western art music and technique as a tool that can be used to enhance composition and performance in Arab music.

Ashour noted the influence of other music cultures in his playing. During his time in Kuwait, for instance, he was influenced by music from the Gulf, Turkey, and India. Like many other instrumentalists, Ashour left Egypt for a while to pursue a career in Kuwait where musicians’ salaries are generally much higher. Ashour is extremely well-connected in the Arab music scene in Egypt, having worked with many of the top stars of Arab music history including ‘Abd al-Halim Hafiz (*‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Ḥāfīz*), Riyad al-Sunbati, Wadi‘ al-Safi (*Wadī‘ al-Ṣāfī*), and others. Even for a cellist of Ashour’s caliber, however, it is difficult to make a living performing in Cairo.

In October 2010, 500 musicians from Arab music ensembles at the Cairo Opera House staged a sit-in demanding an increase in wages and contracts guaranteeing pension and insurance (Mahjub, *Ṣawt al-Umma*). Their primary goal was to equalize their wages with that of the Western music-ensemble musicians, who were receiving wages four times higher. Maestro Salah Ghobashi (*Ṣalah Ghobāshī*), director of the ‘Abd al-Halim Nuwayra Ensemble, and Maestro Salim Sahab, director of the National Arab Music Ensemble, both

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<sup>207</sup> In violin, cello, and bass performance theory and overall music theory pedagogy for all instrumentalists, students begin with Western classical music before studying Arab music (p.c. with Scott Marcus, Dec 2021).

participated in the sit-in and some groups threatened to not participate in the Arab Music Festival if their demands were not met. They submitted their complaints to President Hosni Mubarak, Minister of Culture Faruq Hosni (*Fārūq Husnī*), and the director of the Cairo Opera House at the time. Although much has changed since the revolution, musicians in Arab music ensembles continue to struggle to make a living in Cairo and many pursue careers in the Gulf, like Emad Ashour.

### Composing and Performing Diasporic Identities

*“Musicians often live in conspicuously trans-local cultural worlds. They travel; their social skills are those of people capable of addressing varied and heterogenous groups, and their value in a locality is often perceived to be precisely their ability to transcend the cultural boundaries of that locality”* (Stokes 1997:98).

Ethnomusicologists have written about eastern Arab art music outside the Middle East in the *mahjar*, using diaspora as a framework (Rasmussen 1996; Moser and Racy 2010; Espinosa 2019).<sup>208</sup> Espinosa has written specifically about the varying generation-based conceptualizations of “traditional” Arab music according among the diasporic community in Argentina and the “particular subjectivities that manifest from a distinct migratory time and experience” (2019:141). She shifts focus away from the homeland itself, and toward temporal and corporeal experiences of *diasporicity* or the relative strength of a diasporic groups’ connection or identification with an ancestral homeland and/or with the diasporic group (Tsuda 2016). The cellists living in the United States whom I interviewed show

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<sup>208</sup> “*Mahjar*” is defined as “place of emigration” and “*al-Mahjar*” is defined as “the Arab diaspora, Arabs living abroad, specifically in the New World” in the Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Standard Arabic. From the same root, the word *muhājir* (emigrant) has a specific meaning in the context of South Asia; the term *muhajir* (also spelled *mahajir* and *mohajir*) refers to “Muslim immigrants and refugees of multi-ethnic origin, and their descendants who migrated from various regions of India after the Partition of India [1947] to settle in the newly created state of Pakistan” ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhajir\\_\(Urdu-speaking\\_Pakistani\\_people\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhajir_(Urdu-speaking_Pakistani_people))).

various levels of diasporicity and their relationship to “traditional” Arab music is informed by their subjective temporal and corporeal experiences of diaspora.

Naseem Alatrash and Kinan Abou-afach have both composed works that relate directly to “the homeland,” exhibiting diasporicity. Naseem’s music video “Lifta” (2019) is filmed in Liftā, a former Palestinian Arab village built on a slope on the outskirts of Jerusalem.<sup>209</sup> The village was depopulated during the *Nakba* from 1947–1948, but 55 of the 450 pre-1948 stone houses remain standing even after the Israeli government blew the roofs off the remaining houses in 1967 to deter squatters. Lifta is considered the “last deserted pre-1948 Palestinian village” and is located less than 20 kilometers from Beit Sahour, where Naseem grew up (Al Jazeera 2014, Haaretz 2017).

“Lifta” shifts between aerial shots of the remains of the village and sepia-toned shots of the interior of one of the abandoned homes. Naseem wears all black, seated at the cello in front of what appears to be a door frame with arched windows on either side in the remnants of one of the homes. There is a small, framed photo of a man and woman in traditional Palestinian attire on one of the stone shelves, mirrored by artful graffiti of a man and woman on the wall. The music video ends by panning from Naseem to the graffiti to the photograph. As Naseem’s only official music video, the choice of this composition and location is particularly significant as it highlights his Palestinian identity and deals directly with the Israeli occupation. Naseem’s biography parallels this emphasis on his Palestinian identity and begins by stating, “Naseem Alatrash is a Palestinian cellist.” The “About” section at the top of his Instagram account begins with the Palestine flag emoji, reading “Palestinian cellist.”

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<sup>209</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3mo2gAe\\_COQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3mo2gAe_COQ)

His personal identity extends into his professional identity, self-identifying as a *Palestinian* cellist.

Like Naseem, Kinan Abou-afach expresses diasporicity in his performances, compositions, and identifications. Kinan’s composition “A Letter from Syria” is a musical expression of his recollections of Syria before the start of the Syrian Civil War. In an interview, he shared:

Damascus was a huge influence on me—a place where you can hear the Muslim call [to] prayer mixed with church bells. Mosques and churches playing simultaneously. That sweet sound was my first lesson in polyphony and harmony.

In a recorded performance of “A Letter from Syria,” Kinan plays cello and ‘ūd, leading a small ensemble including piano, electric bass, and percussion (*riqq*, drum kit).<sup>210</sup> The composition combines “freely constructed jazz” with Middle Eastern-influenced modes. The piece consists of nine movements, including movements with personal titles including “My Grandmother” and “Something I Remembered.” With this blend of musical aesthetics, Kinan “look[s] to the future while paying homage to the past.”<sup>211</sup>

Kinan’s 2018 composition “*Of Roads and Homes*,” which he recorded with the Al-Bustan Ensemble, deals with the experience of diaspora and migration. The movements are titled “Of Men Without Home,” “On the Road,” “Displaced,” “Hurub/Escape,” and “Rahil/Departure.”<sup>212</sup> This piece was commissioned by Al-Bustan: Seeds of Culture and was premiered at Al-Bustan’s concert (DIS)PLACED: Music & Tales of Home (2018) which featured the music of Syrian composers and musicians overlaid by twelve stories of

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<sup>210</sup><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTLkFezOvyY&list=PLpEuKZakHswMI7PtYB8w5qPjbeZoV0Uhl&index=1>

<sup>211</sup> <http://www.kinanmusic.com/biography/>

<sup>212</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/album/0y2T5uZHfFiSiZJA4rydjV?si=naE3RwRhROSVY1LCLV16QQ>

(dis)placement. This concert took place within a larger 18-month project called (DIS)PLACED: Philadelphia, commissioning multimedia works.

Kinan based his composition on the stories of twelve Syrian refugees living in Philadelphia. Reflecting on his compositional process, he shared:

I was mainly struck by how all twelve stories were vividly pictorial. After a while, I felt I [was] writing a soundtrack for a movie that has twelve characters. Those stories also ignited many other memories of mine, recent and old—memories of home, family, war, gunshots, destruction...

Kinan composed music to bring sonic life and connection to these narratives, *emplacing* each personal narrative in an imagined conversation and shared set of experiences. Although Kinan is not a refugee or displaced person himself, he nevertheless reconnected with his own memories and experiences of Syria before the Civil War began in 2011 while composing this piece. Reflecting on the stories of refugees, he shared:

Sometimes it's hard to see the beautiful part of their lives. I'm continuously living in this world of worry and [thinking about] stories of my homeland, Syria. I'm interested [in hearing] stories about being on the beach or having a family meal.

Kinan is often commissioned to compose works related to Arab and Middle Eastern musics and topics. With his multiplicitous musical identities, Kinan emphasizes certain influences or aspects of his musical identity depending on the situation. In these commissions and compositions, he uses identity strategically, whether indexed musically or linguistically.

For Naseem Alatrash and Kinan Abou-afach, diaspora is a “category of practice” as much as a category of identity (Brubaker 2005:12). Their musical *activities* are defined by diasporicity in terms of the claims they make, the projects they pursue, and the expectations they face. The compositions “Lifta” and “A Letter from Syria” are musical *doings* that express diasporicity in terms of both home and displacement sonically, visually, and affectively.

Ashraf Hakim has a different relationship with his home country, Egypt. He continues to play Arab music in the United States, but he highlights his patriotism for the United States more than his Egyptian identity in his music-making. He shared:

I love America more than anything and [I] respect it. But I cannot [throw] my old country in the dumpster. I choose to be here. I am in love with the U.S. The things that have happened in my life here have proved it. (January 17, 2020)

Ashraf expressed his American patriotism through music even before immigrating to the United States. He proudly shared that he was the first person to play the American national anthem in the Cairo Opera House. Upon moving to the United States, one of Ashraf's first regular gigs was playing music at a coffee shop. Whenever he performed, he played the American national anthem. The owner of the coffee shop asked him to stop playing the national anthem, saying it was inappropriate in that setting, but Ashraf could not understand his lack of patriotism and continued to play the national anthem, exercising what he understood as his musical freedom. Eventually this became a deal-breaker, and the owner of the coffee shop gave Ashraf an ultimatum. He either had stop playing the national anthem at the coffee shop or lose the gig. Although he had very few other gigs lined up, Ashraf decided to quit.

In many of his performances, Ashraf wears the pattern of the American flag or displays the flag itself, openly declaring his love for the United States. Very few of his performances are posted online, but a video of a duo from 2012 shows him wearing a baseball cap with the patterns of the American flag and a T-shirt with the American flag.<sup>213</sup> In a video from 2016, he plays in front of two small American flags that he has hung up on

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<sup>213</sup> <https://fb.watch/9XkipY9PiT/>



the wall. Throughout our conversations and interviews, Ashraf expressed his patriotism for the United States: “I love America. I love this country. I would do anything for this country.”

Studying the cello and cellists who perform the *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* repertory demands a framework inclusive of “musical multiplicity” (Slobin 2007). Extending Mark Slobin’s concept, Amanda Scherbenske calls for a “politics of multiplicity” that acknowledges the racialized and gendered history of musics and musicians in the United States (2013). A politics of musical multiplicity can counteract racial essentialism and ethnic particularism wherein heritage alone is considered the source of both musical expression and motivation. Essentialist expectations and implicit biases have emotional, psychological, and material consequences for musicians.

Naseem and Kinan express their diasporicity at times in their performances and compositions, but they refuse to be singularly defined by these identifications. Ashraf emphasizes his American patriotism much more than his Egyptian or Arab identity, both in his performances and conversations. Multiplicity accounts for the eclectic music styles, tastes, and motivations of performers, removing the expectation that musicians are cultural bearers of their heritage by default. Categorization along the lines of ethnicity, national identity, and musical genre can be restrictive and counterproductive. Especially among improviser-composers, the concept of genre itself is more common in institutional settings than in “ground-level music-making” (ibid). In the improviser-composer networks that Kinan and Naseem are part of, the imperatives of collaboration and “boundary erosion” challenge the significance of “Arab music” as a reified category.

Even with this “boundary erosion,” however, Naseem, Kinan, and Ashraf all create “cultural intimacy” in their music, a concept that refers to “the practices and structures of

feeling that assure people of their common sociality” (Michael Herzfeld 2005). Their musical practices and structures of feeling bring them together in terms of sociality even though they may diverge from one another musically in terms of genre, playing style, and technique. In terms of identity, cultural intimacy has been described as “a collective space of communicative acts that exposes the tensions between official narratives of (national) belonging and the creative presentations, or ‘social poetics,’ of individual selves” (Belkind 2021b:115). The tensions that exist between national and ethnic identity, music, and self-presentation are exposed through cultural intimacy in the coming together of musical and personal identifications (Hall 1996).

*In Tehrangeles Dreaming: Intimacy and Imagination in Southern California's Iranian Pop Music* (2020), Farzaneh Hemmasi demonstrates how the popular music culture in Tehrangeles “intersects with and preserves history, mobilizes affect and intimacy, and engenders conversation and sociality across transnational Iranian space” (37). The same can be said about *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* which also creates cultural intimacy in a transnational sphere and holds spaces for tensions in identification. As a form of expressive culture and as a series of communicative acts, music and musicking have the power to create cultural intimacy, tie transnational and diasporic communities together, and even reveal such disjunctures between identity narratives. Through their compositions and performances, these three cellists create affective connections to their local regions, countries, and transnational communities while integrating their own experiences and influences of living in the United States.

## Cello Technique in Arab Music

Having presented short biographies of the five cellists I worked with, introduced the most respected cellists in Cairo, and discussed diasporicity and musical multiplicity in the context of composition and performance, I turn to a description of the cello's roles and techniques in Arab music ensembles. Drawing on these five cellists' perceptions as well as my own observations as a cellist, I describe specific facets of the instrumental idiom of the cello in Arab music ensembles (*firqa*-s) including bowing (*arco*) versus plucking (*pizzicato*), ornamentation, portamento, instrumental idiom, melodic versus harmonic lines, timbres, mediation between rhythm (*īqā'*) and melody (*lahn*), and issues of tuning and intonation. After this technical section, I turn to an extended discussion of improvisation and *tāqāsīm* on the cello, referencing some of the technical features listed above.

In Arab music, each instrument renders the melodic line according to its specific instrumental idiom. Thus, the *'ūd*, *nāy*, violin, and *qānūn* each have specific techniques that result in unique renditions of the same melodic line. There is a specific technical vocabulary used to play Arab music on the cello. Instrument-specific idioms have to do with both technique and musicianship (i.e., knowing which role to fill and when). In his dissertation, Hanna Khoury recounts an Arab music performance in which a bass player with no background in Arab music alternated between playing *pizzicato* and *arco*. After the concert, a connoisseur in the audience approached the bass player and asked, snarkily: "Who asked you to use bowing techniques in this composition? You are not supposed to use the bow in Arab music" (2018:56). Like the bass, the cello has a specific role in the *firqa* that requires a particular set of techniques and competencies. When Umm Kulthum's *firqa* had two cellists,

for instance, one of the cellists played *arco* for the entire song while the other played *pizzicato* during the verses and *arco* during the instrumental interludes.

In a *firqa*, one or two cellists typically play with the bow (*arco*) while one cellist plucks the strings (*pizzicato*) during the verses of a song. With the bow, it is possible to play more ornaments (*zakhārif*) than when playing *pizzicato* because of the potential for sustained sound. The cellist playing *pizzicato* tends to play a simple, unornamented outline of the melody or an *ostinato* pattern. Borg described playing a *pizzicato ostinato* in terms of *dumms* (the strong, lower-pitched beats in a drum’s rendition of a given rhythmic mode) and *takk-s* (higher-pitched drumbeats): “When I play *maqsum* in *pizzicato* [in *maqām rast*], the *dumms* are *sol* and the *takk-s* are *do*.”<sup>214</sup> Even with a bass player in the ensemble, this division of labor remains the same, with one or two cellists playing *arco* and another playing *pizzicato*. The cellist playing *pizzicato* often shifts to *arco* during instrumental introductions (*muqāddima-s*) and extended instrumental interludes, but the bass player plays *pizzicato* almost exclusively. In one of our lessons, cellist Naseem Alatrash explained:

If you’re playing *pizzicato* as the cellist, you have more freedom than the bass player. You can either “*pizz*” the rhythm, outline the melody, or add syncopation on the upbeats of the melody. You can also add a harmonic outline, but this will make it sound more Western.

Many of the techniques used by cellists in the *firqa* are also used by other instrumentalists in the ensemble. In the spaces between vocal phrases, instrumentalists commonly play *lāzima-s*, short instrumental responses to the singer which are generally played at a louder dynamic than the rest of the instrumental melody line. During the vocal

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<sup>214</sup> In the *solfege* system, “*do*” refers to the tonic or first scale degree and “*sol*” refers to the dominant, or fifth scale degree. In Arab music, *do* refers to C and *sol* refers to G. With *rast* based on C, and playing *sol* in the lower octave, the ostinato would be GG C – C GG – C –.

sections of a song, the melody instruments might quietly play an outline of the vocal melody, a technique sometimes referred to as *tawrīq*, though more often they play the entire melody (Racy 1988:145).<sup>215</sup> This heterophonic outline of the vocal line is similar to the concept of *tarjama* [literally “translation”] which refers to the ornamented instrumental version of the melody or *lahn* (El-Shawan 1984). El-Shawan explains that “much of the *tarjama* was undertaken by the violinist” in a *takht*:

Several musicians explained this phenomenon by pointing out that the violin has a wide range which can parallel both male and female solo vocalists, that intricate ornaments and subtle pitch differences can be easily performed on the violin, and that the violin’s sound quality enables violinists to imitate the human voice effectively. (273)

Musicians saw the violin as particularly suitable for playing *tarjama*. Sharing many of these characteristics, the cello seems equally well-suited to *tarjama*.

### Ornamentation

Ornamentation (‘*urab*) is considered essential in Arab music.<sup>216</sup> Ornamentation differs depending on instrument, region, era, and personal taste, but there are certain types of ornamentation that are standard throughout *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya*. In general, cellists use ornaments less frequently than violinists. In a lesson on ornamentation, Naseem explained:

When you’re playing cello in an ensemble, you can’t really add too much ornamentation because of the register. If a cellist isn’t tasteful, they can make the whole ensemble sound bad by adding too many extra notes! (Dec 2020)

There is a set of ornaments commonly used among cellists playing *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya*, particularly in small *takht*-s or solo performances of *tāqāsīm*. In this section, I describe the

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<sup>215</sup> “*Tawrīq*” is the verbal noun of a Form II verb which can also mean to “put forth leaves” or “leaf through a book” (Hans Wehr). In this case, the term refers to ornamentation. Ornaments are often called “*zakhrafa*, pl. *zakhārif*.”

<sup>216</sup> Ornamentation is also called *zakhrafa* or *hilya* (Hind/Badawi dictionary, 223).

use of the following ornaments, based on private lessons, public talks, and performances: *portamento/glissando*, trills, turns, mordents, grace notes, *tremolos*, and vibrato.

Both cellists and violinists use *portamento*, the technique of sliding between notes. *Portamento* is commonly used on the *'ūd*, but *'ūd* players occasionally slide between notes for a particular effect. *Portamento* or *glissando* is achieved either by leaving weight in the fingers of the left-hand while shifting to a new note, or by shifting early to lengthen the time spent moving between positions. In lessons, I have been given contradictory advice about *portamento*. One of my teachers felt I overused *portamento* in my *tāqāsīm*-s and that this technique must be used judiciously. Another noted that it is a common stereotype among Western classical string players that Arab music requires *portamento* and *glissando* on every note and bemoaned the fact that many newcomers to Arab music try to achieve an “Arabic sound” by indiscriminately sliding to every new note. This teacher cautioned me against using *glissando*, instead encouraging me to master other ornamentation styles and phrasing. One of my other teachers, however, repeatedly stated that in Arab music, you must slide between *every* note, making the slides more audible in some places than others. From one perspective, *glissando* is an ornament and should be used sparingly and in playing whereas from the other perspective, *glissando* is an integral aspect of Arab music and should be used frequently.

In one of his presentations, Nasseem Alatrash explained that *glissando* is a powerful tool that gives a mournful, sad, and expressive quality to cello playing, but that it must be tastefully presented (2021 Presentation with Center for Arabic Culture). When *glissando* is overused, he explained, the playing style is no longer authentic. Nasseem also warned students that it is easy to sound out of tune when using *glissando*. He recommended studying the

intonation of *maqām*-s without any *glissando* to begin with. Interestingly, Naseem has recommended putting *glissando* between certain notes and not others depending on the *maqām*. For instance, in *maqām bayyātī* he recommends sliding between F and E half-flat and C and B half-flat (but not from E half-flat to D, or B half-flat to A). In general, he advises sliding to a quarter tone from a higher pitch rather than a lower pitch

In these presentations, Naseem has also given information about using trills, turns, mordents, and grace notes in Arab music. Trills are very common in Arab music and must be “quick and energetic.” They are especially potent when used in an augmented second, such as from Eb to F# in *maqām hijāz*. Naseem mentioned that it is common to end a trill with a lower neighbor tone before returning to the original note, thus ending the trill with a turn. He recommended using Cossman exercises to develop dexterity for trills.<sup>217</sup> Turns are often used in combination with trills, occurring either before or after a trill as Naseem suggested above. Turns typically consist of the upper neighbor and lower neighbor tones surrounding the main pitch, for example GAGFG. Naseem advised that in Arab music, both trills and turns should be played very quickly and can be played in succession.<sup>218</sup> Grace notes are also used frequently on the cello in Arab music, often in quick runs. They typically occur before a note, but occasionally they are used after. Naseem demonstrated muting the grace notes that occur after a note by stopping the bow momentarily and lightly hammering the finger on the string.

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<sup>217</sup> Bernhard Cossman’s *Studies for Developing Agility for Cello* (c. 1876) is one of the common method books in Western classical pedagogy for cello. The book presents a series of technical exercises, each focused on strengthening a particular finger or developing a certain technique. The book begins with a series of “Etudes du Trille,” mechanical exercises designed to practice trills. This is a clear example of the Western orientation common among Arab cellists, and the use of Western classical technique and exercises to improve technique in Arab music.

<sup>218</sup> An example of a turn following a trill is GAGAGAGA ... GAGFG.

He explained that this is typical of the Egyptian style, especially in *qafla*-s and in stepwise descending phrases.<sup>219</sup>

In his workshops, Naseem presents *tremolo* as a type of ornamentation on cello but notes that this technique is more common on the *'ūd* and *qānūn*. This is one of several techniques that are idiomatic of the *'ūd* and not as common on cello, another being drop-notes (playing a pitch and echoing that pitch one octave below). Perhaps this is one of the reasons that the *'ūd* has not been entirely replaced by the cello in *firqa*-s in that it is appreciated for having its own unique instrumental idiom. Conversely, some musicians have suggested the use of cello techniques on the *'ūd*, particularly finger extension technique (see al-Bal'awi et al 2018).

I have not identified many ornamentation techniques that are unique to the cello, but there are practical techniques used specifically among cellists to improve fingering and shifting. Because the cello's fingerboard is larger than the violin's, cellists must change left-hand positions more often to play ornaments.<sup>220</sup> To make ornamentation easier, Naseem recommends playing ornaments in higher positions for two reasons: first, it is more difficult to ornament using open strings; second, the left-hand fingers are closer together in higher positions, facilitating quick ornaments.

There are several string-specific ornaments in Arab music. One ornamentation technique common among string players is the use of *hammer on-s*. For bowed strings, Naseem describes hammer on-s as a specific technique in Arab music that involves stopping the bow and using a finger to dampen the sound (Dec. 3, 2020). *Arpeggios* are common

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<sup>219</sup> This technique is used on other instruments and with the voice (p.c. with Scott Marcus, Dec. 2021).

<sup>220</sup> Bassists play far fewer ornaments than cellists, especially because they serve as the registral foundation of the *firqa* and, in this low register, ornaments may make the main pitches of the melody less clear.



among string players in the Gulf but are used sparingly in the Levant and Egypt, according to Naseem and Borg.

All the cellists I worked with noted that the speed and width of *vibrato* in Arab music is slower and wider than that of Western classical music. This is widely agreed upon among bowed string players who play Arab music. In her study of violin performance and pedagogy in Cairo, Lillie Gordon observed: “The presence of slower vibrato in Arab music is one of the most audible and commonly discussed differences in playing style between it and Western classical music beyond differences dictated by the playing of *maqāmāt* in general” (2014:190). Gordon also mentions that increasing the speed of *vibrato* can be used as a form of intensification in *tāqāsīm*. In other words, a faster *vibrato* can create more energy in the same way other ornaments can (e.g., trills, mordents, turns, *glissandi*).

Naseem sees *vibrato* as an ornament which must be used sparingly and intentionally on specific notes in a *maqām*. In *maqām bayyātī* on D, for instance, he suggests vibrating the F, C, and occasionally A. Naseem thinks the pitches immediately above microtones should be played with wide *vibrato* while other significant notes in a phrase should be vibrated to a lesser extent. In *maqām bayyātī*, for example, the F receives the most *vibrato* because it is the pitch about E half-flat whereas the C and A receive slightly less *vibrato* as pitches of secondary importance in the *maqām*.<sup>221</sup> The other notes in the scale are not vibrated. Naseem explains that vibrating the notes above the microtone makes the microtone itself stand out, creating an “Arab sound” and a “*tarab* feeling.” He notes, “You reach a certain place in the music when you have the right vibrato in the right places” (Alatrash 2021). Although the pitch A is not above a quarter tone in *maqām bayyātī*, Naseem sees it as a significant pitch in

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<sup>221</sup> Similarly, the C and F are given a wide *vibrato* in *maqām rast* on C because they are the notes above the quarter tones in that *maqām*.

the *maqām*—one that is frequently emphasized in common *bayyātī* phrases—and should therefore be vibrated. He suggests playing all other pitches in *bayyātī* without *vibrato* to maximize the impact of the wide *vibrato* on F, C, and A. In *maqām*-s without microtones, Naseem suggests vibrating the most significant notes in each phrase. These ideas are probably somewhat idiosyncratic, as none of my other teachers expressed similar ideas about *vibrato*.

In one of my first lessons with Naseem, he noted that narrow, fast *vibrato* sounds “nervous” and is not conducive to *salṭana* or the state of “modal ecstasy” that performers must reach to move their audience emotionally (Racy 1988:146; 1991b:13). In our lessons, he suggested placing the “meat” of the fingers on the string; in other words, holding the string down at a slightly flatter angle so each finger covers a larger surface area on the string. With this technique, it is possible to achieve a wider *vibrato*. Kinan made the same comment, suggesting that a pronation or slight rotation of the left hand allows one to achieve a wider *vibrato* than using the European style “square” left hand technique, which often leads to a narrow sounding *vibrato*. With a “violin-style” pronation, he noted that it is possible to put  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the last finger bone on the fingerboard, spreading out the meat of the finger and facilitating a wider *vibrato*.

The style and degree of ornamentation differs according to era, region, instrumentation, and personal taste. Naseem mentioned that ornaments can be part of a particular national vocabulary; he notes that instrumentalists in Egypt, for instance, ornament melodies in a particular way. Kinan often told me that my ornaments sounded Turkish rather than Arab or, if Arab, in a “northern style” rather than a “Southern/Egyptian style.” This shows an attunement to regional styles. Ornamentation also differs from artist to artist; for

example, Naseem distinguishes “Farid-style ornamentation” [referring to the famous *ūd*-player, singer, and composer Farid al-Atrash] from other styles. Ornamentation can even change over the course of a musician’s career. According to Naseem, Umm Kulthum’s style of ornamentation changed significantly in her lifetime; early in her career, Umm Kulthum and her *firqa* used quicker ornaments whereas at the culmination of her career, ornaments were much slower. In the early to mid-twentieth century, musicians in a *firqa* often played different ornaments, creating a heterophonic sound. In contrast, many contemporary Arab music ensembles attempt to unify ornamentation by writing ornaments in the sheet music, especially for large string sections.<sup>222</sup>

There was general agreement that ornaments should be used deliberately and methodically in Arab music. One cellist stated, “Ornamentation is where you can add Arabic flavors” and another made an analogy to cooking Indian food, when spices are added at the end to enhance the underlying flavors. In other words, it is important to focus on the “plain ingredients” such as intonation, tone quality, and phrasing before adding the “spice” of ornamentation: “It’s more about the way you cook the plain ingredients than just dumping a lot of curry powder in!”

### Shifting and Fingering

The issue of shifting between positions is connected to ornamentation, especially in terms of trills, turns, grace notes, and mordents. Cellists refer to their index finger as the “first finger,” middle finger as “second finger,” ring finger as “third finger,” and pinky as “fourth finger.” To play ornaments, it is useful to shift and play a note with the second or

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<sup>222</sup> This is part of a general shift away from heterophony and toward monophony, commonly attributed to Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab (p.c. with Scott Marcus, November 2021).

third finger, which makes it easier to play ornaments from above or below because both upper and lower neighbor tones are accessible. One of the teachers I worked with calls his second finger a “shifting mechanism” or “captain” and lauds the practicality and good ergonomics of shifting on the second finger.<sup>223</sup> This teacher states that the “second-finger shifting technique” is cello-specific; violinists can reach notes relatively easily due to the smaller fingerboard, but cellists must make a full shift to execute certain ornaments.

Though most cellists agreed that the second finger was the most practical for playing ornaments, there were differing opinions about which fingers should be used to play quarter tones. One teacher advised using the third finger rather than second to play some quarter tones<sup>224</sup> while another suggested the second finger. The latter stressed that the intonation of the quarter-tone changes from *maqām* to *maqām* and it is easier to adjust the intonation of the second finger than the third.<sup>225</sup> Both teachers were adamant that their approach was more suitable to good intonation and ergonomics.

### Tuning

Three of the cellists I worked with felt that the issue of tuning the cello in Arab music was not a topic of debate—the cello is simply tuned C2 G2 D3 A3, as in Western art music. Two, however, recommended tuning the cello to C2 G2 D3 G3 for certain *maqām*-s, the top string a whole step lower. One cellist referred to this tuning as the “Arab tuning” and

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<sup>223</sup> Ergonomically, it is easier to extend between the first and second fingers rather than between third and fourth fingers.

<sup>224</sup> For example, the F half-sharp in *maqām rast* on D.

<sup>225</sup> I agree with this perspective; I find it much easier to adjust my second finger than my third perhaps because I was trained in the Western classical music where students are taught to only “extend” or “stretch” between the first and second fingers.

recommended it for *maqām*-s such as *huzām/sīkā* and *bayyātī* on G. Another teacher told me point-blank, “That tuning is never used in Arab music.”

The rationale for using “Arab tuning” is multifaceted. The main reason to use this tuning, one of my teachers explained, is to facilitate playing G-based *maqām*-s or tetrachords. It is more difficult to play A half-flat with the pinky on a D3 string than to with the first finger on a G3 string. This teacher also encouraged using open strings whenever possible in Arab music, made easier by tuning the top string down to G in some *maqām*-s.<sup>226</sup> Finally, “Arab tuning” enables cellists to easily create an octave echo on the low G string because it the same fingering is used on the high G string. The downside to “Arab tuning,” one cellist noted, is that it can negatively affect the string’s tone quality causing a “nasal sound.” Another downside is that the string does not project as well when tuned to G due to reduced string tension. To retain good tone quality, this teacher recommended using medium gauge strings for “Arab tuning.”

“Tuning strings down” is common in Arab music. Many ensembles use “small tuning” (*ṭabaqa ṣaghīra*) and “big tuning” (*ṭabaqa kabīra*). “Big tuning” is a whole step higher than “small tuning” (p.c. with Scott Marcus, Nov. 2021). According to one of the cellists I worked with, “small tuning” was common in the mid-nineteenth century for several reasons. The main reason, as he stated, was that singers needed to adjust the pitch of a composition to better suit their voice. Successive down tunings happened over the course of Umm Kulthum’s career, for instance, when her vocal range (*tessitura*) changed. Rather than transposing a composition to another tonic, which could be difficult for musicians who had learned *maqām* on a specific pitch, it was easier to change the tuning of instruments and

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<sup>226</sup> Another cellist I worked with advised me to avoid open strings whenever possible, however.

retain standard fingerings. Scott Marcus notes that the FMA performs exclusively in the “small tuning” which speaks to an “aesthetic choice” that privileges a lower sound, rather than merely an adjustment made to accommodate the needs of singers (p.c. Dec. 2021).<sup>227</sup> Echoing this point, another cellist noted that the “small tuning” may be used to achieve a “warmer” quality of sound. Some songs are simply played on another tonic to avoid having to retune strings more than a few steps.<sup>228</sup>

### Arco and Pizzicato

The cello and bass often serve as mediators between rhythm (*īqāʿ*) and melody (*lahn*), bringing out important notes in the melody while emphasizing the main beats of a given rhythmic mode. *Pizzicato*, or plucking the string, creates a rhythmic effect whereas playing *arco*, or with the bow, is better suited to playing the melody because of the potential for sustained sound. In his dissertation “Musical Imaginaries and Nationalism in the Arab World,” Hanna Khoury insightfully describes the role of the cello and bass as “mediators between the skeletal melody and the skeletal rhythm” (2018:43). I would add that the bass player generally plays a much more skeletal version of the melody than cellists. Jonathan Hammonds, the bass player in the National Arab Orchestra (Detroit) explains this point in an interview: “The bass line simply just outlines the melody, but you have to learn to make it innovative. You have to kind of know how the structure works in order to be able to play

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<sup>227</sup> Scott Marcus notes that Turkish *ūd*-s are tuned a whole step higher than Arab *ūd*-s, i.e., a step above the “big tuning,” another indication that “small tuning” is more of a cultural aesthetic than simply a way to accommodate singers (p.c. Nov. 2021). In Turkish music, *maqām*-s are played a step higher than in Arab music (for example, *rast* is played on D rather than C, a whole step above the regular “big tuning” Arab position) (p.c. Dec. 2021).

<sup>228</sup> For instance, Umm Kulthum’s songs “*Inta ‘Umrī*” (1964) and “‘*Amal Hayātī*” (1965) were placed on AA (*kurd*) rather than lowering the tuning of the string instruments by a fourth (p.c. with Scott Marcus, November 2021).

around with it” (Sep. 1, 2020). Hammonds describes picking up playing techniques from the percussion section and *‘ūd*. He also admits to occasionally using harmonic chordal outlines because of his Western musical influences (classical and jazz).

Like the bass, the cello plays a mediating role between *īqā‘* and *lahn* in *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* ensembles. In an interview with Michael Ibrahim, the founder and conductor of the National Arab Orchestra, Naseem noted that *pizzicato* bass lines are more syncopated and complex on cello than on bass (NAO Live Tuesdays Apr. 28, 2020: 8:08–9:01). While a bass player might be limited to whole or half notes on down beats, cellists can play highly intricate bass lines, in dialogue with the *riqq* player. Naseem also explains that having a cellist play bass lines in an ensemble frees the *‘ūd* player to play more melodically in the higher registers:

Having a cello in the ensemble will free the *‘ūd* player from always playing rhythmically and filling the lower range. The *‘ūd* player will have the freedom of playing in the higher range of the *‘ūd* and really complementing what the singer is doing... The cello will be taking that responsibility.” (10:46–11:20)<sup>229</sup>

Because the *‘ūd* and cello share the same pitch range, Naseem mentioned, they must be in sync to avoid interference with one another. Naseem described this as “a continuous bargain” between the *‘ūd* player and cellist—a “spontaneous arrangement” that requires constant listening (11:54). Kinan echoed Naseem’s statement:

Funny enough, we don’t have orchestration [in Arab music] but some orchestration rules apply. In my opinion, the cello—sonically—was a complement to the *‘ūd* and to the general “bass idea” [in Umm Kulthum’s *firqa*].

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<sup>229</sup> Scott Marcus notes that the *‘ūd* player has a distinct role in the ensemble, beyond the “dual roles” of melody and rhythm as with the bass and cello. Rather, the *‘ūd* “renders a melody rhythmically in that each note is plucked,” but *‘ūd* players are not deliberately thinking about which notes of the melody fall on the main beats of the *īqā‘* (p.c. Nov. 2020).

Following a similar logic of orchestration, Naseem noted that if there is just one cellist in an ensemble, the *'ūd* player must fill the lower register whenever the cellist plays the melody with the bow.

Offering a unique understanding of the relationship between the cello and the *'ūd*, Kinan feels that the cello was initially added to *firqa*-s to complement the *'ūd* registrally and by plucking. He shared:

Necessity is the mother of invention... The *'ūd* needed some support. The *'ūd* is nice by itself, but [you can add] some sprinkles to [make it] sound better. Back then... the *'ūd* was not really audible in general. The [violin] was the most prominent [instrument]. [Listening to old recordings,] I [can] only hear the “k-k-k” [consonant sound] of the *'ūd*.

Perhaps the addition of the violin necessitated the addition of the cello in *takht*-s to bolster the sound of the *'ūd* with *pizzicato*.

Kinan recalled that the cello gained recognition as an Arab music instrument in Syria by the 1980s and 1990s, but at this time cellists were mainly restricted to *pizzicato*:<sup>230</sup>

I think the courage to do something on the cello probably [began between the] '80s and '90s. I started in the '80s. And there was a few [before that...] Umm Kulthum had her own cellists that play this kind of style [*Kinan demonstrated pizzicato*] and the father of my friend from Aleppo played [cello] with Sabah Fakhri. Back then there was a scene in Aleppo. I mean, he was a gigging musician on the cello! So, it did exist, but back then I think it was misunderstood as an instrument because [cellists] play[ed] 90% like this [*Kinan demonstrated pizzicato again*] and maybe a couple of notes like this [*Kinan demonstrated arco*] for some reason! [That was] sarcastic. “Why would they think we need to play [with] the bow?!”

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<sup>230</sup> See an example of a cellist playing *pizzicato* in a live Sabah Fakhri performance in 1965: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3r9RQilpjrs>.



There are few types of *pizzicato*, at least terminologically, but there are many terms for various bow strokes.<sup>231</sup> Naseem described a technique commonly used among bowed string players in Arab music. He could not think of a term for this technique, but described it as related to *flautando*, when the bow is “floated” over the strings to create a raspy, breathy sound. Naseem described this timbre as “folkloric” and mentioned that it reminds him of the *rabāb* or *nāy*. He also said that this sound is best used in *maqām-s hijāz* and *ṣabā*. I asked one of my other teachers, Borg, to explain how to execute this technique. Borg said the sound was created not through the bow but through the left-hand by putting almost no weight in the fingers, leaving the string only “halfway” down.

When I met with Naseem a few weeks later, I asked about this left-hand technique and Naseem stated that his left hand does not do anything differently than it normally does. If anything, he stressed, he adds *more* left-hand articulation to make the notes speak clearly because the timbre is so grainy. Naseem described this technique as being “entirely about the bow.” According to Naseem, playing *close* to the fingerboard, but not over the fingerboard, works well for this sound; playing close to the bridge produces a different timbre, with more overtones in the sound. The *nāy*’s version of this timbral effect produces a note in two octaves at the same time and is called “*migwiz*” (*mijwiz*) meaning “doubled or dual,” an “especially evocative component of the *nāy* player’s timbral repertoire” (p.c. with Scott Marcus, Dec. 2021). Similarly, the *rabāb* is prized for its grainy sound effect, rich in overtones. The effect on the cello, whether executed with the left-hand or with the bow, is

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<sup>231</sup> Common bow strokes include *legato*, *staccato*, *détaché*, *spiccato*, *martelé*, *sautillé*, and *ricochet*. However, the only terms that came up in my lessons were *legato*, *staccato*, and *détaché*. Cellists did talk about detached or “separate” bow strokes versus slurred or “connected” bow strokes, however, when discussing phrasing.

reminiscent of similar effects on the *nāy* and *rabāb*. As with these instruments, this timbral effect is prized when added sparingly in performances of *tāqāsīm* on cello.

### Regional Styles of Cello-Playing

Having described cello technique for cellists in *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* in the previous section, I turn to regional differences in style and technique. Of all the cellists I worked with, Kinan Abou-afach most articulately described regional stylistic and technical differences. Kinan distinguishes between two schools of playing in Syria. The Northern Syrian or Aleppo school is marked by Ottoman-Turkish influence and Iraqi ornamentation whereas the Damascene school is more Levantine, connected to Simon Shaheen’s school of playing. Kinan received his musical training in Damascus and was surrounded by instrumentalists that played in the Damascene/Levantine style. He compared the Syrian schools of playing to the Egyptian school in terms of ornamentation, phrasing, and intonation:

I think in ornamentation we share the Egyptian style [*Kinan demonstrated a turn on the cello*] even though the phrases are more North Syrian. But in general, the style is more solid [...] you don’t jump around.<sup>232</sup> [In] North Syria and Turkey, it really becomes a different approach, even technically.

Although Kinan was surrounded by the Damascene/Levantine school of playing, he incorporated styles from other schools. Kinan used the word “*‘an*” to describe a particular sound that some Arab vocalists use, and which he has incorporated in his playing.<sup>233</sup> Kinan recalls a prominent Arab singer in New York telling him that he used a lot of *‘an* in his

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<sup>232</sup> By “jumping around,” I believe Kinan is referring to both the speed of ornaments as well as the speed in which musicians move from phrase to phrase in *tāqāsīm*. In the Egyptian style of playing, ornaments are rendered more slowly, and instrumentalists take more time moving from phrase to phrase and modulation to modulation in *tāqāsīm*.

<sup>233</sup> The word *‘an* is also used to imitate the sound of a car engine, the equivalent of “vroom vroom” in English.

playing, with *glissando* and *portamento*. This is *not* typical of the Damascene style and

Kinan laughed, saying:

I'm correcting myself because five minutes ago I described myself as more Damascene. But this [*'an*] doesn't happen a lot in Damascus. I really don't know how to describe how I play. I try not to play [in the] Turkish [style], like if someone [were to] listen to me and say: "Are you Turkish?" At the same time, I try not play something that [...] sounds like Aleppo, like Sabah Fakhri. I try not to sound like the extreme geographic [poles of] Turkish and Egypt. I try not to be 100% flavored with this. No offense to both, of course; I love both.

Maybe I was of the generation [that] just got bored of all these cliches... The more you go north, the more you get '*an* [demonstrating a lick commonly played in northern Syria and Turkey]. Phrasing-wise, the Kurdish, Turkey, Iraqi region, they have very distinct music; if you listen, you know that [the music] is Kurdish or from that area. Even when they improvise or play *tāqāsīm* [...] you know it's from that region, based on phrases that [are] very common in their singing repertoire.

While Kinan explained these regional differences, he played standard phrases from each region on his cello with examples of ornamentation. He played an example of a standard Egyptian *qafla* and shared: "Maybe 50% of Umm Kulthum songs and [other songs from] that era used that lick" to demonstrate the idea that certain phrases, including some *qafla*-s, are region-specific rather than *maqām*-specific.

In his own playing, Kinan draws on multiple styles to avoid being "boxed" into any specific regional category. Rather than committing to any single style or tradition, he picks up phrasing and ornamentation that pleases him musically and incorporates a variety of sounds and techniques in his playing. That said, when he is asked to play *tāqāsīm* before an Egyptian singer or Syrian singer, he plays in their respective style. Other cellists made similar distinctions between regional styles, though they generally referred used adjectives referring to broader regional areas such as "Levantine" or simply "Northern" rather than referring to specific countries or cities. Cellists tended to agree that more "northern" styles are characterized by a greater use of ornaments as well as a faster style of ornamentation.

Two cellists also noted that certain phrases in *tāqāsīm* are characteristically “Egyptian” phrases. One cellist mentioned that the speed of vibrato is faster in “northern” styles of playing. It was generally agreed upon that an “Egyptian style” of playing involves playing quarter tones at a slightly lower pitch, though two cellists agreed that there is variation in placement of the quarter tone even within Egypt and the cellist must match whatever the ensemble does. In these discussions, there was no mention of regional variation in bowing technique.

### The Cello’s Changing Roles and Techniques in Arab Music Ensembles

The cello’s roles and techniques in *firqa*-s have not remained static over time, nor has the perception of the cello in these ensembles. Kinan observed the increasing prominence and acceptance of the cello in Arab music ensembles:

[Recently] I’ve seen and [have] been in groups where the cello is the main instrument. The definition of *takht*, I think, is changing for the better. You know when old timers say “*takht*” it means percussion, ‘*ūd*, violin, [*nāy*], and *qānūn*. And if you say to that old timer—some of them are still alive, doing their own thing—if you say, “How about we bring a cello?” it’s almost as offensive as harmonizing [Arab] music. But I think that generation is loosening up [now], the old timers. The younger generation is very hungry to experiment. And the mid-generation, like myself, we already experimented. For most of that generation, it’s okay to add [the cello] and change the definition of the *takht* that the old timers had. (Interview with author, Dec 2020)

In terms of the role of the cello in Arab music ensembles, it is increasingly common for artistic directors of *firqa*-s to compose separate cello parts for *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* ensembles, whether for an entire composition or for sections of a piece (interviews with Borg Muhammad and Peter Abadier). Palestinian violinist, ‘*ūd* player, and composer Simon Shaheen describes his use of the cello in one of his compositions performed at the Arab Music Festival in Cairo (1997):

The violins have a theme, and I am playing some broken chords in the form of a melody, the flute has another line, and the cello has another line. You did not hear the cello used as it is usually used in Egyptian compositions, either played *pizzicato*, or in unison with the violins; no, you hear a distinct cello part in this piece. (Shaheen 1998:160)

These compositions redefine the way the cello has been used in eastern Arab music ensembles, restructuring *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* as a whole, with separate and simultaneous melodic lines. Michael Ibrahim, the leader of the National Arab Orchestra in Detroit, Michigan, makes his own arrangements of standard repertoire, sometimes adding distinct melodic lines for the cellos that do not seem to exist in the original recordings. Borg also noted that in many of the ensembles he performs with in Cairo, the director occasionally asks the cellists to write in a short harmonic line under the melody in the sheet music.<sup>234</sup>

### ***Tāqāsīm* and Improvisation**

Improvisation is considered a fundamental competency in eastern Arab music and instrumentalists are generally expected to be able to improvise (Marcus 1993; Blum 2001). The traditional form of solo, melodic instrumental improvisation in Arab music is called *tāqāsīm*. Up to the 1930s, most urban-based performances were structured in suite forms (*waṣlāt*, sing. *waṣla*) consisting of a variety of songs and instrumental pieces and interspersed with solo instrumental improvisations, *tāqāsīm*-s. With the expansion of ensembles and the growing importance of the composer in *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya*, these suite forms and their associated improvisations (*tāqāsīm*-s) fell out of favor, replaced by longer pieces written by a single composer.

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<sup>234</sup> In this case, all the melody instruments receive the same sheet music written in treble clef.

The addition of the cello in *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* ensembles coincided with the shift away from improvisation. The small *takht* ensemble had afforded a heterophonic “improvisatory aesthetic” in which instrumentalists added ornaments to the melody and played the melody at slightly different times. The larger, orchestra-like *firqa*, could not afford this heterophonic, improvisatory aesthetic; it was more difficult to tease apart each melodic line with more instrumentalists in the ensemble and improvisational heterophony was less desired.<sup>235</sup> As the *takht* expanded into the *firqa*, this shift in texture meant that improvisatory renderings of the melody were no longer as desirable. The shift away from heterophony and an improvisational style coincided with a shift away from *tāqāsīm*.

Although *tāqāsīm* became less common after the 1930s, several members of the expanded *firqa* were still expected to be able to play *tāqāsīm* (principal violinist, *‘ūd*, *nāy*, *qānūn*). Yet when we listen to recordings of the cello in Arab music ensembles over the course of the twentieth century, we find that the cello was only rarely featured as a solo instrument in the way other instruments such as the *qānūn*, *nāy*, *‘ūd*, and violin were. In an interview with Naseem, I asked why he thought the cello was not an improvising instrument historically in Arab music. Laughing, he mused: “I always wonder why the cello was not treated fairly!” He surmised that it could be for three reasons: 1. The low register of the cello, which was not easily picked up by mics in the 1930s; 2. A lower level of playing among cellists as compared to violinists; 3. A dominant view of the cello as a bass [percussive] instrument rather than a melodic instrument that could be used to support the ensemble.

Although the cello was not treated as a soloistic or improvising instrument in *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* historically, today cellists are featured as soloists and frequently perform

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<sup>235</sup> Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab is often cited as having led the shift away from heterophony as a desirable aesthetic (p.c. with Scott Marcus, Nov. 2021).

improvisation (*tāqāsīm*). In the last five years, for example, two cellists have taken center stage as soloists at the Arab Music Festival (*Mahrajān al-Mūsīqā al-‘Arabiyya*), a hugely-prestigious annual re-creation of the 1932 Congress held at the Cairo Opera House.<sup>236</sup> In my own work with cellists who perform *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya*, including *tāqāsīm*, I have found a range of philosophies, styles, and approaches to playing improvisations on the cello, from more traditional *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* approaches with the genre called *tāqāsīm* to styles that move beyond the realm of *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya*.

Until this point, I have used the term *tāqāsīm* loosely, translating it simply as “improvisation.” In the next section, I will both complicate the term and interrogate what it means to perform *tāqāsīm* on the cello. In its broadest definition, *tāqāsīm* is “a form, encompassing all melodic instrumental improvisation in traditional Arab music...[and] anchored in *maqām*” (Abu Shumays 2019). Yet *tāqāsīm* is not simply free-form improvisation; instrumentalists improvise “according to a complex set of pre-established rules and conventions” (Marcus 1993).

Ethnomusicologist and multi-instrumentalist A.J. Racy notes that *tāqāsīm* “combine[s] freedom with adherence to established and somewhat predictable modal patterns” (2000:305). Racy demonstrates how “freedom” and “tradition,” while part of an *apparent* dichotomy, work in tandem. As he describes it, a successful performance of *tāqāsīm* includes both an “aesthetic home-base” [“tradition”] and a “soaring spirit” [“freedom”]. Racy argues that an “aesthetic home-base” is created in the following ways: 1. Use of an “indigenous musical idiom,” 2. Use of “correct melodic intervals,” 3. “Proper

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<sup>236</sup> See Part II: Arab Music Festival and Conference (1992–present). Notable cellists who frequently perform *tāqāsīm* include Emad Ashour (Egypt) and Bashar Sharifa (Syria) as well as Muhammad Ghnia, Muhammad al-‘Uthaimin, Ahmad Taha, Salah Namek, and Fahd Abdullah to a lesser extent.

rendering of cadential patterns [*qaflāt*],” 4. Basis in the modal framework of *maqām*, and 5. Feeling of *salṭana*, an overpowering state that “inspires affective music making” (Racy 2003:120).

Using Racy’s criteria, is it possible to create an “aesthetic home base” for *tāqāsīm* on the cello? The instrument is embedded in ideological, aesthetic, and affective associations that often position it as an “outsider” to *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya*. Directly tied to colonization and occupation, the cello is clearly not an “indigenous” instrument, but can it still mediate an “indigenous musical idiom” within a transnational, postcolonial context? Here my task is not to determine the authenticity of performing *tāqāsīm* on the cello, but to understand how cellists might construct an “aesthetic home-base” to perform this traditional genre on what might be understood as a nontraditional instrument.

Here I will turn to my lessons and interviews with Naseem Alatrash. Naseem has been featured as a soloist with *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* ensembles across the U.S. and Middle East, frequently performing *tāqāsīm*. When teaching *tāqāsīm*, Naseem uses the five criteria Racy describes to create an “aesthetic home base” on the cello. In our lessons, Naseem teaches the “indigenous idiom” or “common practice” of *tāqāsīm* including standard phrases, ascending and descending progressions, and consecutive sections of improvisation separated by cadential sequences (*qafla-s*) and silences. Naseem begins each lesson with ear training exercises focusing on intonation, particularly of quarter tones. Next, he teaches common practice phrases by ear, demonstrating a variety of cadential phrases (*qafla-s*). He teaches *maqām* by describing the unique characteristics of each *maqām* and demonstrating common phrases and modulations [see Figure 23].<sup>237</sup> Finally, Naseem assesses musical decisions

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<sup>237</sup> In my dissertation, I plan to include an extended analysis of *maqām*-specific phrases commonly used by cellists in Arab music.



based on whether they induce *saḷṭana*, or emotional power over the musician. In *maqām ṣabā*, for instance, he recommends moving the bow closer to the bridge to create a “grainy” sound reminiscent of the traditional two-stringed instrument, the *rabāb*, to maximize *saḷṭana*, or the feeling of being “captivated by the mode” (Racy 2003:120).

**Figure 23:** Common phrase in *maqām rast*. Ascent to the *ghammāz*<sup>238</sup> of *maqām rast* on G, taught by Naseem Alatrash (Nov. 2020).



It is worth mentioning here that in my own training in *tāqāsīm* at UC Santa Barbara, Dr. Scott Marcus has taught me *maqām*-specific phrases, progressions, *qafla*-s, and accidentals, with attention to specific instrumental idioms. Dr. Marcus dedicated several ten-week quarters to a particular *maqām* in private lessons, demonstrating common phrases and their variations. The phrase in Figure 23 is very similar to a phrase I learned from Dr. Marcus<sup>239</sup> and I was quickly able to pick it up in this lesson with Naseem having learned it first in lessons with Dr. Marcus. This speaks volumes to the use of an “aesthetic home base” and “common practice” in *tāqāsīm*, with common, *maqām*-specific phrases.

In addition to an “aesthetic home-base,” Racy notes the importance of a “soaring spirit” in *tāqāsīm*; that is, the freedom to innovate and extemporize within the style. Racy delimits this “soaring spirit” as “innovation within the bounds of tradition” (2000:310). He

<sup>238</sup> The *ghammāz* refers to the pitch which begins the second most important *jins* [trichord, tetrachord, or pentachord] of the *maqām*. In this case, the pitch “D” is the *ghammāz*, beginning the next *rast* tetrachord [D E F≠ G].

<sup>239</sup> Scott Marcus notes that in the *adhān* and a number of Arab songs, ascents from the tonic to the *ghammāz* in *rast* skip the second scale degree [C E-b- F GAGFG---] (p.c. Dec. 2021).

notes that several of the most celebrated performers of *tāqāsīm* were known for integrating other genres into their improvisations, be it Western classical or popular music, jazz, or North Indian raga (ibid). In this sense, “soaring spirit” could mean *pushing* the “bounds” of tradition and opening the door for more cosmopolitan renderings of *tāqāsīm*.

Naseem’s performances and teaching of *tāqāsīm* are marked by both the “aesthetic home base” and “soaring spirit” that Racy describes. Drawing on his many musical influences, from his early training in Western art music to his studies of jazz, Arab music, Indian music, and fusion at Berklee College of Music, Naseem’s *tāqāsīm*-s show a musical “spirit” that improvises across the “bounds” of tradition with audible influences from these cross-genre collaborations. Naseem combines “common practice” phrases of *tāqāsīm* with influences from other genres.

Even in his performance of pre-composed *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* pieces, Naseem uses an improvisatory aesthetic that is influenced by many genres and traditions. In a lesson focused on Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s piece *Samā‘ī Huzām*, for instance, Naseem taught an Iraqi-style ornament, identified a phrase that he heard as being reminiscent of Greek music, recommended using Turkish intonation for one phrase, and encouraged me to show off my “classical chops” by using “double-stops” to harmonize a section. Naseem recognizes that *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya*, despite its essentializing name (“*Arab music*”), has always been a pluralistic tradition [though, in making this statement, he relies on the essentializing categories of “Greek,” “Turkish,” and “Iraqi” styles]. In his *tāqāsīm*-s and improvisatory renderings of standard *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* repertoire, Naseem combines common practice with his own eclectic musical influences and interpretations.

In addition to performing *tāqāsīm*, Naseem teaches many of his cello students to play *tāqāsīm*. This is somewhat unusual as most of the cellists I have worked with play *tāqāsīm* but do not conceptualize it as something that can be taught. This stance is not particular to cellists. Because there is no established pedagogy for teaching *tāqāsīm*, many instrumentalists argue that it is something that is learned by listening and cannot be taught. In a description of his lessons with *ūd*-player George Michel, an “acknowledged master” of *tāqāsīm*, Scott Marcus describes the “frustrating endeavor” of trying to study *tāqāsīm* with a teacher who insisted that it could not be taught and must be played from the heart (2001:75). George Michel, like many other masters of *tāqāsīm*, was comfortable teaching modulations between *maqāmāt* but he did not “teach how to build individual phrases or how to structure a given *tāqāsīm*” (ibid). Scott Marcus adds that “musicians of Cairo conceptualize with great specificity about modulations among the *maqāmāt* 'modes', though much less so about movement within a single *maqām*.”

I have had a similar experience in my own endeavors to learn *tāqāsīm* from these five cellists. When I asked Borg if many cellists play *tāqāsīm*, he responded: “*Tāqāsīm* is a gift. Especially in the Middle East, we make *tāqāsīm* by feeling. Just what I feel. In my thinking, [it doesn’t matter whether you] learn *tāqāsīm* or not, but it is very important to read notes.” Borg taught *tāqāsīm* by introducing *maqāmāt* as scales and asking me to improvise on the notes of the scale, modulating from one to another. When I asked if there were characteristic phrases for each *maqām*, he always responded with the phrase: “It’s a feeling!” In other words, I was free to play anything that fell within the scale as long as the phrase had the right feeling for the *maqām*. This “feeling” was not so much an emotion as intuition. Borg asked me to present different emotions in a single *maqām*. First happy, then sad, then “ready to

dance.” The correct “feeling” of the *maqām* superseded these specific emotions; an overarching feeling that could encompass many moods.

For Naseem, however, the “feelings” required to successfully perform *tāqāsīm* involved a single group of specific and related emotions. He described each modulation in a *tāqāsīm* as having a particular mood, depending on the *maqām*. He described *maqām rast* as majestic, bright, and happy; *bayyātī* as romantic; *huzām* as spiritual; and *nahāwand* as dark and tearful.<sup>240</sup> Many of the techniques Naseem described were *maqām*-specific. In *nahāwand*, for instance, he prompted me to “make the sound of crying” by using a wider *vibrato*, more *glissando*, and more “air” in the bow strokes (December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020). To evoke the “sad” and “longing” qualities of *maqām šabā*, he encouraged me to produce a grainier sound on the cello mimicking the *rabāb*.<sup>241</sup> In a lesson, he shared:

You have to feed the audience like babies. Overemphasize the important notes in a phrase. Demonstrate the feeling of a *maqām* to people who may not have the same musicality or trained ears. (December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020)

Naseem believes that *tāqāsīm* can be taught. He conceptualizes *tāqāsīm* in a way that allows him to deconstruct phrases to teach to students and that helps him guide his audience through his performance. As a former student of Simon Shaheen’s, Naseem learned *tāqāsīm* in a teacher-student framework and takes this approach in his own pedagogy by teaching *maqām*-specific phrasing, accidentals, and modulations for *tāqāsīm*. He also teaches *tāqāsīm* within its performative context. His approach to *tāqāsīm* depends on whether the *tāqāsīm* is

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<sup>240</sup> Naseem’s “extra-musical associations,” connecting *maqām*-s to specific emotions and characteristics, suggests a return to older ways of thinking about *maqām* that predated the modern period. “Extra-musical associations” for each *maqām* were significant in the pre-modern period, but by the beginning of the modern period, many of these associations were “forgotten or consciously rejected” (Marcus 1989:747).

<sup>241</sup> In his 1989 dissertation, Scott Marcus noted that the most acknowledged mood/emotional association in the modern period, both in recent literature and among his informants in Cairo and the U.S., is the association of Saba with “feelings of sadness” (*huzn*) (749).

played at the beginning of a piece or song, in the middle, or independently (NAO interview 2020 30:00).

Kinan was hesitant to “teach” *tāqāsīm*. On the one hand, he shared that it was difficult for him to tease apart “common phrases” in the style of master pedagogues Scott Marcus at UC Santa Barbara and Simon Shaheen at Berklee. Additionally, he shied away from teaching *tāqāsīm* as a matter of principle, feeling that improvisations should arise naturally from listening to classic recordings and absorbing *maqām* aurally. Peter Abadier expressed a similar sentiment about the concept of “studying” *tāqāsīm*, feeling strongly that it is something learned but not taught:

How do you study it? You’re supposed to improvise. It’s not something to study; it’s just feeling, not something to study or practice. On that *maqām*, and you play with it. You just need to know the *maqām* you’re [going to] improvise on... That’s it. (Apr. 2021, 38:00–39:00)

For cellists who have not been surrounded by *maqām*, the idea of improvising according to the “feeling” of the *maqām* alone can be challenging. Cellist Jon Silpayamanant of the National Arab Orchestra began playing *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* as an adult with no background in Arab music or culture. He reports that the two principal challenges of playing Arab music are playing quarter tones and playing *tāqāsīm* (2019). Though the cello was not considered a solo improvising instrument for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in recent years cellists have increasingly begun to play *tāqāsīm*.

I asked some of the cellists I worked with when they thought cellists began to perform *tāqāsīm* or solo improvisations. Kinan recalled the first time he remembers hearing the cello play *tāqāsīm*. Interestingly, it was not in an *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* setting, but rather in Arab pop:

In the '90s, suddenly the cello was more prominent in Arab pop music... Maybe late '90s you begin hearing solo cello in Arabic pop.<sup>242</sup> Instead of the *'ūd* or *nāy*, a cello is allowed to play a *tāqāsīm* before a singer. I've never seen a [true] solo cello. It might exist, but maybe it's something they threw in the garbage. In the beginning of my cello playing, I was never asked to play a solo. (Interview with author, 12/22/20: 25:00)

The *tāqāsīm*-s Kinan remembers hearing in Arab pop music beginning in the 1990s were not “black or white,” but existed in a gray area between traditional *tāqāsīm* and free improvisation.<sup>243</sup> While many cellists play *tāqāsīm* “within the tradition” today, perhaps even more cellists play in this “gray area,” combining elements of *tāqāsīm* with improvisational styles that extend beyond *al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya*. Here I do not intend for the terms “within” and “beyond” to be mutually exclusive. I use these terms to echo how the cellists I have worked with describe phrases or techniques as “within the tradition” of *al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya* or not. I do so recognizing that the temporal and spatial bounds of “tradition” itself are ever shifting. As Jonathan Shannon describes it, “tradition and innovation are not mutually-exclusive but mutually-implicated domains” (2006:202). While *tāqāsīm* affords a certain degree of innovation and influence from other genres, the form is still rooted in aesthetic and structural norms or “common practice” (Marcus) that differentiate it from free improvisation or *irtijāl*.

The term “*irtijāl*” means “improvisation” in a general sense in music as well as other fields. The word can mean “improvising” in life or working things out on-the-spot. *Tāqāsīm* is a particular type of *irtijāl*; it is a specific genre and style of playing under the umbrella of

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<sup>242</sup> Kinan recalled his first studio recording gig in 1993 at age 15 or 16 when he recorded solo cello for a Syrian soap opera with the Lebanese music director and composer Karīm Kabbāra. He shared, “This was around the era when people began hearing cello and thinking it's something that could be solo. Soap opera[s] began [using] cello because they discovered that it *does* have a place sonically and in the taste of the audience” (interview with author, 12/22/20: 27:00).

<sup>243</sup> Free improvisation refers to the technique of improvising without any rules. Free improvisation was classified as a genre of music in the 1960s, associated with free jazz and modern classical music.

*irtijāl* (Naseem). In an interview with Naseem, I asked whether there is a dividing line between *irtijāl* and *tāqāsīm* or if they could both be used within a composition or performance. I also asked at what point a *tāqāsīm* extends so far beyond common practice that it becomes *irtijāl*. In other words, if you incorporate jazz or Western elements into a *tāqāsīm* is it considered *irtijāl*? Naseem said that there is no rule defining what *tāqāsīm* is; if the general shape of an improvisation fits within the traditional arc of *tāqāsīm* and uses the “colors” of the *maqāmāt*, it can be considered *tāqāsīm*. He spoke about the importance of sections (*qism*, pl. *aqsām*)<sup>244</sup> in *tāqāsīm*, each separated by silences, and considered this more important to rendering *tāqāsīm* than keeping “pure” melodies without jazz or Western influences.

Cellist Kinan Abou-afach performs *tāqāsīm* and *irtijāl* in *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* and transnational *avant-garde* scenes. In an interview, he stated his preference for playing free improvisation (*irtijāl*) over *tāqāsīm*:

I resisted studying *tāqāsīm*. It felt for me like I’m gonna go to the Omnibook of Charlie Parker and play his solo as my solo. They called it *tāqāsīm*; I always called it *irtijāl*. (interview Dec. 17, 2020)

As he spoke, Kinan repeatedly put the term *tāqāsīm* in air quotes to emphasize his arguable point that today *tāqāsīm* is often rendered the same way in every performance: “Some of my friends used to play always the same *tāqāsīm* like up to a note and it was 99.9% perfect unless if they do a mistake and then it really collapsed” (ibid). Despite Kinan’s professed resistance to “studying,” teaching, and performing *tāqāsīm*, he is frequently called upon to teach and perform *tāqāsīm* in his career. Al-Bustan: Seeds for Culture recently commissioned Kinan to release a series of *maqām* lessons on cello, each of which include a brief *tāqāsīm*

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<sup>244</sup> The etymology of the word “*qism*” comes from the idea of division or splitting up sections of the improvisation with silence in between. “*Qism*” and “*tāqāsīm*” share the same trilateral root [q-s-m].

(Mission Statement). Working with various granting agencies and culture-based organizations, Kinan must negotiate his own artistic visions with those of the organizations he works with. His versatile improvisations on cello, from what he calls “old-school Egyptian style” *tāqāsīm* to the *avant-garde*, allow Kinan to improvise an eclectic career in music, adjusting to meet the goals and demands of the various organizations he works with.

Drawing on Amanda Weidman’s conception of *instrumentality* (2006:14), I argue that just as the cello is an instrument of Kinan’s artistic expression, the many styles or “schools” of improvisation he plays are instruments that help *produce* his career in music. He is not confined to working *within* these styles but agentially moves *through* them, instrumentalizing them as discursive tools for moving within and beyond *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya*. The cello, then, can be understood as a site of negotiation or “in-betweenness,” to use Lillie Gordon’s term. Drawing from Homi Bhabha’s argument that “‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood” (Gordon:7, citing Bhabha 1994:2), Gordon uses the concept of “in-betweenness” to analyze the Egyptian violin as a site in which violinists “carve out musical and social identities infused with multiple, significant influences” (12). Combining Gordon’s concept of “in-betweenness” with Amanda Weidman’s concept of *instrumentality*, I understand improvisation on the cello as a *mechanism* of the “in-between” that enables spatial, temporal, and categorical crossings from within and beyond *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya*.



## Conclusion

In this thesis, I have documented and analyzed the history of the cello in Arab music over the last century. In Part I, I begin by presenting an account of the history of the cello in Arab music. I provide a brief account of the history of bowed string instruments in the Middle East, such as the *rabāb* and *kamanja* which were used as early as the tenth century. I demonstrate the circulation of these instrumental forms and show their historical link to the “violin family.” From there, I describe the inclusion of the cello in early *takht* ensembles beginning in the late 1920s. I note several theories about how the cello came to be part of the standard instrumentation of *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* ensembles, including speculations as to which singer was the first to include the cello in their *takht*.

Using Umm Kulthum’s ensemble as a case study, I analyze the changing role of the cello in Arab music ensembles from the late 1920s to the 1960s, especially in terms of the expansion of the cello section of her ensemble to include a fixed number of three cellists by 1964. In this section, I present a discussion of the development of cello-specific techniques for the idiom of Arab music by analyzing the playing styles of the cellists in Umm Kulthum’s *firqa*. To my knowledge, this is the first scholarship to present a comprehensive history of the cello’s introduction to Arab music, tracing the first uses of the instrument in the 1920s to its establishment as part of the standard instrumentation of Arab music ensembles.

In Part II, I transition to a presentation of three case studies to analyze shifts in the perception of the cello and the status of the instrument in policy recommendations for Arab music. Beginning with the First International Congress of Arab Music in 1932, I argue that the debate over the inclusion of the cello in *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* was metonymic of broader discourses of modernization and preservation taking place in colonial Egypt

(Castelo-Branco 1994). The congress was organized with the goal of “bringing Egypt up to par with the modern, ‘civilized’ world,” yet this modernizing attitude was countered by a preservationist attitude held by many of the foreigners and some Egyptian elites present at the congress (Racy 1991a). In the Musical Instruments Committee, Curt Sachs and Erich von Hornbostel led the “protectionist” group that was concerned that Western instruments like the cello would “disfigure the beauty of Arab music” (El-Shawan).

The committee’s published policy recommendation advised against the cello’s inclusion in Arab music ensembles with an argument that rested on affective grounds. Throughout the committee discussions, the issue of the cello’s sentimentality came to the fore. Here, I argue that the debate over the cello signified a larger debate about emotion and sentimentality in Arab music. There was consensus that the cello was a highly affective and sentimental instrument; the debate was whether this sentimental quality was desirable or not. The debate over the cello’s use in *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* reflected socio-political debates about affect and aesthetics that marked Egypt’s post-independence period in the 1920s, with the continued British colonial presence. In this period, the cello was simultaneously treated as a symbol of sentimentality, Westernization, and modernization.

In my second case study, I focus on the founding of the first state-funded Arab music ensemble in 1967. I show that the question of whether the cello should be included in Arab music ensembles resurfaced in 1967, several decades after the 1932 Congress, after the infamous 1967 defeat. Although the published policy recommendation in 1932 had advised against the inclusion of the cello in Arab music ensembles, performing artists of the day nevertheless continued to include the cello in their ensembles and by 1967, the cello was part of all the superstar singers’ ensembles. Initially, the 1967 committee decided to exclude the

cello from the national Arab music ensemble. I speculate that perhaps this had to do with Nasserist decolonization projects and the desire to create a pan-Arab national ensemble that presented Arab musical heritage, downplaying colonial influence. The committee reneged on their decision a year later and the instrumentation of the national Arab music ensemble came to include two cellos.

My third case study concerns the founding of the international Arab Music Festival and Conference in 1992, a modern large-scale re-creation of the 1932 Congress. I chose to focus on this annual festival because of the way the cello has been spotlighted in festival programming, featured as a solo instrument performing covers of well-known *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* songs and Arabic pop songs as well as traditional performances of *tāqāsīm*. I discuss these festivals in the context of neoliberalism in Egypt in the 1990s.

After presenting these three case studies, I turn to the issue of cultural security and cultural security discourse in Egypt. I use the concept of cultural security discourse to explain how the cello was treated as a “threat” to Arab music in 1932 and the general ideology of “securing” or “protecting” Arab music heritage. I also present examples of how cultural security discourse is used by the Egyptian Musicians Syndicate and Ministry of Culture today in the context cultural policy documents, international music festivals, and interviews with the press. Finally, I discuss cultural security in practice, with police force used to enforce policies targeting musics that purportedly threaten Egyptian national security or public morality.

In Part III, I present ethnographic research from 2020–2021 including short biographies of five cellists who perform *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya*. Of these five cellists, four are living outside their home countries and for this reason I include a discussion of

diasporicity. Drawing on interviews and lessons, I provide a detailed description of cello technique in eastern Arab music in this chapter, accounting for the nuances in the five cellists' perspectives. Building on interviews, performance observation, and historical research, I document the changing role of the cello in ensembles and the musical negotiations between the cello and other instruments, particularly the *'ūd*. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of cellists beginning to perform *tāqāsīm*, a traditional form of Arab improvisation typically performed on instruments such as the *'ūd*, *nāy*, violin, and *qānūn*. Throughout the final chapter, I forefront the perceptions, experiences, and analysis of the five cellists I worked with.

My research with cellists from Egypt, Palestine, Syria, some of whom currently live in the United States, provided me with a comparative lens for my research. My experiences working with cellists from multiple locations has allowed me to see patterns and divergences in perspectives among cellists from Egypt, the United States, and other Arab countries. Though I focus primarily on Egypt in this thesis, my work involves regional and transnational flows in Arab music and working with cellists living in different locations was crucial to understanding the contemporary uses of the cello in Arab music. All the cellists I worked with are male and this demographic is representative of the scene. From what I have observed in Cairo and seen online, there are very few female cellists in *al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya* ensembles. In future work, I hope to explore the issue of gender in these ensembles.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> I noted in my research that FMA included a female cellist in 1977—one of two women in the entire ensemble (El-Shawan 1980a:205). El-Shawan notes that at that time, the choirs of *firqa*-s included women, but the “instrumental segments [...] are either entirely male or include only one or two women” (ibid).

In my research, I decided to focus on Egypt for several reasons. First, the category of *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* first emerged in Cairo, replacing the term *al-mūsīqā al-sharqiya*, and spread to other Arab countries. Second, the addition of the cello to the *takht* happened concurrently with the emergence of *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya*. Finally, even as *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* circulated among the countries of the eastern Arab world, Egypt was considered the cultural center of the Arab world throughout the mid-twentieth century and the entertainment and media hub of the Arab world. Although the history of the cello in Arab music is by no means restricted to Egypt, the cello became a standard part of the instrumentation of *al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya* in Cairo and spread to other Arab countries through the prominence of Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab and Umm Kulthum and the regional significance of their having embraced the cello.

Early ethnomusicological scholarship on Arab music focused on issues of heritage, tradition, nationalism, and modernity (El-Shawan, Racy, Danielson, Marcus, Armbrust). More recent ethnomusicological scholarship on Arab music has focused on resistance, revolution, popular music genres, cultural politics, music and conflict, festivalization, and related topics (McDonald, Belkind, Frishkopf, Rasmussen, van Nieuwkerk, Aidi, Sprengel; Swedenburg), though many scholars have continued to focus on topics of earlier ethnomusicological scholarship. My own research draws on earlier topics as well as more recent topics, using the concept of “cultural security” to examine how government-affiliated policy makers have tried to define and “secure” Arab music by using policies and policing tactics in “traditional” Arab music (*al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya*) as well as in the popular music sphere. In this process, I hope to show the blurred lines and mutual influence between the

“traditional” or “classical” spheres and the “popular” spheres in Arab music, a binary which remains entrenched in much ethnomusicological scholarship on Arab music today.

This project is relevant not only for ethnomusicology and music studies but also for cultural policy studies, post-colonial studies, critical security studies, and related fields. I have sought to use the history of the cello in Arab music to provide insights into cultural policy shifts in Egypt, from the post-independence period in the 1920s to the post-revolutionary Nasserist period of pan-Arab nationalism, to the neoliberal period and the emergence of the human-security state in the 1990s (Amar 2013b). I have analyzed music as a form of expressive culture connected to collective identity formations and representations, and nation and state-building projects (Stokes 1994). My research engages local, national, and international communities and I understand my work to be innovative in approaching to the issue of national cultural policy from the level of state-funded performing arts ensembles and individual musicians’ perspectives. While dealing with musical instruments, performance practices, and repertoires, the scope of my project is innovative in its cultural policy dimension, analyzing the state support of the genre as a sonic representation of Egypt.

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