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# Music in the World of Islam

## A Socio-cultural study

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## 10 Improvised and Compound Compositions

### Improvised pieces

Most of the improvised types or styles refer to a scheme or model on the macro level, in which framework the micro details are left to the performer's choice and decision. Thus the performer enjoys a degree of freedom but is nevertheless restrained from permitting his imagination to run rampant; on the whole he continues to rely on culturally conditioned structural notions. However, within the imposed limits, the performer still has a great deal of leeway – especially in the non-metric pieces – for demonstrating his talents and creativeness; he can also convey long-established ideas in his own way and from his own point of view. The Oriental artist has a penchant for the details that constitute a work. Therefore on the micro level, in the course of remoulding the idiomatic vocabulary, the artist allows the model-bound structure, which is usually organized around tonal areas, to emerge empirically in accord with his own personal outlook.

### *The taqsim*

In the Turco-Arab cultural sphere, *taqsim* refers to an improvised form for a solo instrument. The term means 'division', probably referring to the high degree of sectionalization that characterizes the form. The improvised material of the *taqsim* is divided into a chain of sections, the number, shape, and length of which depend largely on the musician's individual abilities, state of mind and, to some extent, the circumstances surrounding the performance. The sections may be delineated by rests or by concluding contours similar to cadences in the sense of typical melodic flow toward the *finalis* with which a musical section ends. The cadences appear several times in the sections of the *taqsim*.

The sections almost always proceed in an ascending direction: as a rule,

they are short at the beginning of the *taqsīm* and increase in length as the piece develops. However, the gradual expansion of range and the temporal extensions, as well as the return to the modal home base, rarely proceed in a straightforward curve from beginning to end. There are indeed several retreats on the way to the *finalis* which create moments of relaxation enabling the performer to regroup forces and permit the tension to grow gradually, several climaxes being produced along the way.

The sections correspond to phases in the development that are centred on a number of focal tones determined in turn by the modal frame of reference. As a rule, there is no thematic development; the melodic elements are essentially the result of stress on central pitches. Thus, the various centres play an important role in the structural design of the *taqsīm*. Central tones can be musically identified in any of the following ways:

1. The tone is heard repeatedly and successively;
2. Its rhythmic value is lengthened;
3. A given tone is used in such a way that it assumes the function of a temporary *finalis*;
4. A centre is created through the use of secondary *maqāmāt* in which the tone is the *finalis* or the first in the tetrachord.

This indicates an important aspect of the *taqsīm* which refers to the possibility that the performer use a given central tone of the basic *maqām* as the point of departure for what we may call a 'modulation' (Marcus 346).

From this it transpires that, on the whole, the development of a *maqām* presumes a shift to one or more secondary *maqāmāt* and a return to the basic *maqām*. The process can be repeated a number of times within the same *taqsīm* on condition that the performer does not remain in any secondary *maqām* too long, thereby obscuring the main *maqām*. There are two schools of thought concerning the modulatory progressions in the *taqsīm*: one sets great store by an artist's ability to properly and frequently move away from the basic *maqām* and then return to it; the other considers it more appropriate for the artist to exhaust the potentiality of the basic *maqām* with almost no deviation.

In conclusion, it should not be assumed that the musician playing a *taqsīm* improvises his material *ex nihilo*; rather, he remakes a cultural tradition which incorporates the cumulative vocabulary of generations of musicians, a tradition that favours recomposition rather than original development – whether compositional or improvisational.

Generally speaking, the rhythmic component can be described as free; the *taqsīm* is not confined to periodic accents (articulation) or to the periodicity of fixed rhythmic formulae, and therefore it may be said to lack meter. However, different levels of rhythmic freedom can be noted in the *taqsīm*,

ranging from rhythm that gives the effect of an even pulse to a state wherein the feeling of pulse is totally lacking (Gerson-Kiwi 287; Elsner 288; Spector 289; Olsen 291; Nettl 296; Touma 299 and 333).

*The layālī – vocal improvisation*

*Layālī* (pl. of *layla*) is one of the terms designating vocally accompanied improvisation; literally translated the term means 'nights' and is connected with the fact that the singer takes the word as his phonetic base for improvisation. The word is used in invocatory form : *ya leyli* (O my night!) which is occasionally interchanged with *ya 'eimī* (O my eye!). This as well as other expressions that serve as meaningless syllables for vocalization, are common in other styles of the region and probably gave birth to the *ay* and *leyli* in certain introductory types of Andalusian *cante bondo*. The treatment of vocalization syllables varies from syllabic (repetition in repeated passages), to melismatic (giving each syllable several notes).

Vocal improvisation is always accompanied by the 'ūd or some other instrument intended to keep the singer in pitch, to reinforce important tones (especially drones) and to play interludes that enable the singer to rest and marshal his creative imagination, inspiring him to develop his improvisation further. The *layālī*, therefore, interspersed vocal and instrumental parts that evolved according to the principles of the *taqsim*, which in turn may have adopted vocal material for an instrumental idiom.

*The mawwāl*

This vocal genre falls between the *layālī* and subsequent metrical rhythmic forms. It is usually improvised on a strophe of varying length which belongs to a genre of folk poem also called *mawwāl*. Such a text may be declaimed in cantillation style or may contain improvised melismatic portions; the overall rhythmic concept, however, is free. This is particularly apparent when one hears the song accompanied by the full ensemble, including percussion, that follows the *mawwāl*. This improvised vocal section is fairly similar in nature to the *bitain* or *muwwāl* of the Moroccan *nūba*. *Bitain* means two isolated verses that serve as the base for highly melismatic improvised passages which constitute expressive climactic moments in the performance of a *nūba* (see below).

**Individual and compound compositions**

*The muwashshah*

The *muwashshah* is a prestigious vocal form based on the classical

Andalusian strophic genre (see Chapter 6), from which its current name *muwashshah andalusī* is derived. Based on the structure of the classical Andalusian *muwashshah*, the vocal art form practised in some major Near Eastern centres has the following components: a prelude of a line or two called *badaniyya* or *dawr* (Andalusian *madhhab* or *ghusn*) with a rhyme scheme:

\_\_\_\_\_A      \_\_\_\_\_B (or x2)

a varying number of two-line strophes with rhymes other than those of the *dawr*, called *khāna* or *silsila* (Andalusian *dawr* or *ṣimt*) with rhyme scheme:

\_\_\_\_\_c      \_\_\_\_\_c  
 \_\_\_\_\_c      \_\_\_\_\_c or  
 \_\_\_\_\_c      \_\_\_\_\_c  
 \_\_\_\_\_d      \_\_\_\_\_d

and a concluding line called *qafḥa* (Andalusian *quṣṣa*) that has the same rhyme as the prelude but a different text. Then again, instead of the *qafḥa*, the first line or lines are sometimes repeated.

The musical setting follows the general structure of the poetic text. The first line of the *muwashshah* became a refrain that was repeated after each *khāna* or *silsila*. As regards the strophes, the *silsila* corresponds to the low pitch range of the *maqām* in which the *muwashshah* is sung; the *khāna* corresponds to the high pitch range. The range increases gradually from strophe to strophe and, as it develops, is permitted to shift to a secondary, related *maqāmāt*. The *muwashshah* rests on an isorhythmic texture deriving from one of the established rhythmic modes. The characteristics of these modes are indicated by two types of drums, part of the small instrumental ensemble which also includes the *ūd* and the *kamandje* (a spike fiddle, eventually a violin). The vocal part is provided by a soloist and one or two male or female choirs singing antiphonally; both soloist and choir frequently add nonsense syllables to the text – a distinguishing characteristic of the *muwashshah*. At given interludes, the instrumentalists play short passages called *lāzima*. The text of the *muwashshah* has no impact on the nature of the music; the latter is rather determined by the nature and possibilities of the *muwashshah's* *maqām*. Consequently, different texts can be sung to the same music, as one *muwashshah* text can be set to different musical compositions (Faruqi 336).

The *muwashshah*, now in decline, is still considered one of the most important musical genres. In his treatise *Safinat al-mulk . . .* (The Royal ship . . .), Shihāb al-dīn al-Ḥidjāzī (1795–1857) devotes an extensive section to it, including 350 *muwashshahāt* arranged in 30 sections which in turn

illustrate 12 *maqāmāt*; the author also gives the rhythmic mode for each composition. In an anthology with musical notations published in 1965 in Beirut, the Lebanese author Salīm al-Filū provides 115 known *muwashshahāt* (Fīlū 328). Finally, mention should be made of the religious *muwashshah* called *tawshih dīnī*. It is usually performed as a solo; the rendition being quite unlike the rendition of an art *muwashshah*.

### Compound and cyclic genres

Multisectional forms consisting of several related vocal and instrumental parts are prevalent in the music of Central Asia and the Near East. They are all based on modal unity and conceived as an artistic unit in which musical and prosodic aspects intermingle (Faruqi 343).

#### *The shashmaqom* (six *maqāmāt*)

The *shashmaqom* in the traditional art music of the Uzbeks and Tajiks was codified in its present form during the eighteenth century. The six *maqāmāt* according to the standard order are *buzruk*, *rast*, *nava*, *dugah*, *segah* and *iraq*; they all have the same basic internal structure emphasizing the cyclic principle. Each *maqām* consists of two main divisions: one is instrumental and called *mushkilot* (lit. difficulties); the second, considerably larger than the first, is vocal and consists of an extensive set of accompanied songs; it is called *nasr* (Arabic *nathr* meaning lit. prose or scattering). The instrumental section with which each *maqām* begins consists of five parts called *tasnif*, *tarje*, *gardun*, *mukhammas* and *saqil*. With the exception of the *gardun*, all parts of this section have a rondo-like structure consisting of a varying number of *khanas* (episodes) and a recurring phrase *bazgui*. The *gardun* is characterized by a rhythmic formula of irregular and changing metre and contains only *khanas*. The vocal division has a complex internal structure including large subdivisions or groups of *sho'ba* or *shu'ba* (branches), usually between three and four. The first *sho'ba* has a unique configuration containing four extended vocal parts, *sarakhbar*, *talqin*, *nasr*, and *ufar*, the last in dance rhythm. The *sarakhbar* (lit. major information) was referred to as 'maqām' until the nineteenth century, probably because this part, placed at the beginning of the important vocal section that immediately follows the introductory instrumental section, is said to introduce the essential tonal-melodic characteristics of the cycle as a whole. Its internal subdivisions, which correspond to the stanzas of the poem being sung, depict an asymmetrical arched contour starting with the low register, rising higher and higher until they reach the climax (*auj*) and then again descending to the low register. The gradual extension of the tonal range and the return to the initial pitch level also underline emotional tension and relaxation. This prin-

ciple reaches its highest expression in the *sarakhbār*, but is also characteristic of other parts of the *maqām*, although to a lesser extent. Lighter compositions called *tarona*, which may be based on folk texts and rhythms, are inserted between the four parts of the first group. The subsequent groups of *sho'ba* invariably have five songs, the fifth being an *ufar*, a finale in dance rhythm (Veksler 272; Jung 316; Matjabukov 317).

#### *The Andalusian nūba*

The Andalusian *nūba* has survived in several North African centres; various old Andalusian styles are still extant in Fez, Tlemcen, Algier and Tunis. These *nūba* repertoires are called respectively 'āla, *gharnāfi*, *ṣan'a*, *ma'lūf*. Some differences notwithstanding, they are very similar in spirit and structure. The individual *nūba* is named after the mode or *ṭab'* (nature or temperament, alluding to its cosmological connotation); for example, *nūba raml-māya*, *nūba dīl*, *sbihān*, *'ushshāq*, *raṣd*, *zidān*, *ḥsin*, and so on.

The overall physiognomy of the *nūba* in all centres is more or less alike: it comprises an instrumental prelude or preludes and a series of pre-composed vocal pieces that represent autonomous phases of the *nūba*, each having its own set of poetic texts as well as melodic and rhythmic characteristics. Most of the poems sung in this repertory consist of *muwashshahāt* interpreted by a chorus and soloist or soloists. In this fundamentally choral genre the soloist, an octave higher, leads the chorus and instrumentalists and also performs the free-measured pieces that intersperse the various phases. The overall structure and the individual phases as well are governed not only by modal unity but also by rhythmic acceleration that reaches its peak toward the end of the *nūba*. Indeed, the emphasis is on accelerating rhythms rather than on modulation. A number of vocal features distinguish the *nūba*: voice timbres, technical vocabulary, use of nonsense syllables and a wealth of melismatic arabesques.

#### *The Moroccan nūba*

The Moroccan *nūba* begins with the *mishālia* or *bughya*, two non-metric semi-improvised instrumental preludes in which the instrumentalists set forth the characteristics of the given mode. It is followed by the *touchia*, a rhythmic piece played by the instrumental ensemble. There are numerous *touchias* in the repertory; about 90 of them are known and serve as preludes to the five parts of the *nūba*. The five parts reflect rhythmic phases: *mayāzīn* (pl. of *mīzān*, lit. metre), followed by *bsūt* with the rhythmic pattern  $2/4+2/4+2/4$  or  $6/4$ ; *qā'im wa-nuṣṣ*:  $8/4$  or  $4/4+4/4$ ; *btaiḥī*:  $3/4+6/8+2/4$  or  $3/4+3/4+2/4$ ; *quddām*:  $3/4$  or  $6/8$ ; *draj*:  $8/4$ . Each *mīzān* includes a variable number of *ṣan'as* designating songs of the *muwashshahāt* genre. The term

probably implies the art used in the performance of these songs which reached its zenith in the *ṣan'a mashkūla*, that is, ornate artistry, making frequent use of nonsense syllables for embellishment. Each of these phases is conceived as an autonomous unit in which the sequence of songs is arranged in a predetermined order, progressing with occasional lapses from a heavy, slow movement to a light, rapid one; acceleration is greatest in the songs of the *inṣirāf* which are performed in a rapid tempo and conclude with the finale *qufl*. Between the highly regulated *mizāns*, the skilful soloist called *munshid*, discreetly accompanied by the *'ūd* and the *kamandje*, intones virtuosic vocal improvisations: *bitāin* (distich) or *muwāl*, constituting a highly expressive transition that contrasts with the measured choral songs of the *mizāns*.

#### *The Algerian nūba*

There are two distinctive traditions, one associated with Tlemcen and which has been open to exchanges with those of Oujda, Fez and Tetouan in Morocco; the other is associated with Alger. Proceeding according to the aforementioned principles, the Algerian *nūba* begins with the *dā'ira* – a short, free, rhythmic vocal prelude consisting of vocalised nonsense syllables followed by *mustakhbar al-ṣan'a* (Algiers) or *mishālia* (Tlemcen), a free rhythmic instrumental prelude. It is followed by the *touchia*, a rhythmic piece played by the instrumental ensemble. The five phases of vocal pieces are *mṣaddar*: 4/4; *bṭaiḥ*: 4/4; *draj*: 4/4; *inṣirāf*: 5/8; *khlās*: 6/8.

#### *The Tunisian nūba*

This *nūba* begins with an instrumental prelude called *istiftāḥ* (overture) played by the musicians without the support of the percussion, but over a precise rhythm. The *istiftāḥ* provides an exposition of the mode's characteristics. It is followed by a *muṣaddar*, a measured instrumental overture with a 6/4 slow rhythm accelerating to 6/8 and then to 3/8. The *muṣaddar* is conceived in the same style as the *basbraf* of Ottoman origin (see below). It is followed by another short instrumental prelude introducing the *abyāt*, choral songs with instrumental intermezzi: 2/4+4/4. Another set of songs, *bṭaiḥ*: 4/4 is followed by an instrumental *touchia*, an *'ūd* improvisation, some folk songs, and then the *barwal*: 2/4; *dardj*: 6/4 and the *kbatm*: 3/8 (Erlanger 51: VI; Rouanet 93: 2845–2866; Chottin 155; Guettat 185: 186–232; Pacholczyk 258).

#### *The nūba or nawba in Eastern traditions*

The Eastern *nawba* made its appearance as far back as the Umayyads, but at

that time it meant musicians playing or singing in turn (Farmer 95: 153–154; Erlanger 51: IV, 236–239). Only later on does one find the term used to designate the compound form. As such it is mentioned by the fifteenth-century author Mawlāna Faṭḥ Allah al-Shirwānī, who refers to it in several different kinds of compositions. Anonymous XIII, in *Fann al-anḡhām* (The Art of Modes), states that the *nawba* of the masters includes four sections or genres, *qawl*, *ghazal*, *taran*, and *farūdast*, adding that the *ghazal* is always in Persian while the other pieces are in Arabic, and that this *nawba* is a set work composed by known musicians and based on strict rules. Anonymous XXVII, in *Madjmū'a fī 'ilm al-mūsiqī* (A Collection Concerning the Science of Music), provides information on various forms of vocal and instrumental music and enumerates ten *nawbas* named after their accompanying *maqāmāt*. Among other forms mentioned as preceding that of the *nawbāt* are the *silṣila*, *khāneh*, *samā'ī*, and *bashraf*; the first two are parts of the *muwashshah*, the others are parts of the *faṣil*, discussed below.

### *The faṣil*

In contrast to the well-conceived and articulated compound form of the Andalusian *nūba*, the Turkish multisectional *faṣil* (lit. section) seems to have grown from the Eastern *nawba*. The *faṣil* was described by D. Cantemir as early as *circa* 1700. At a concert it was customary to perform a fixed sequence of pieces of different genres, allowing a certain amount of freedom to introduce new combinations and compositions in accordance with accepted models. Two restrictions had to be observed – the order of the pieces and modal unity. The *faṣil* begins with one or more *taqsīm* (instrumental improvisation), thereby introducing both performers and listeners to the feeling of the *maqām*; the *taqsīm* is also woven into the middle of the *faṣil*. The following instrumental piece is either a *pešrev* (lit. prelude) or a *sāz semā'ī*. The *pešrev* is composed of three or four parts called *khāne* (house). Each *khāne* is followed by a refrain called *teslim* – also added after the last *khāne* as a finale. The *pešrev* is a rhythmic composition and allows modulation in the second *khāne*. The *sāz semā'ī* has a similar form but with an *aksak* rhythm of 10/8 (3+2+2+3). The *sāz semā'ī* is usually played at the end of the *faṣil*. Between the two imposed instrumental pieces are five song genres: *kar*, *beste*, *agir-semā'ī*, *şarki*, and *yürük-semā'ī*. There are many pre-composed pieces in one or other genre made to fit the different *maqāmāt*, including the recent light instrumental forms of foreign importations: the Greek *sirto* and the Rumanian Gypsy *longa*. The performer is permitted to either skip or multiply one or more genres in selecting pieces of his choice. The vocal part is rendered by a soloist and chorus, the instrumental part by a small ensemble of musicians.

*The wasla*

The Egyptian *wasla* (lit. link or sequence) is another example of a compound form that flourished in the past but tended to decline after World War I. It was performed by a male vocal soloist *muṭrib* accompanied by a chorus of four or five men, and a *takbt*, a small group of instrumentalists who played the *qānūn* (zither), *ūd* (lute), *nāy* (flute), *riqq* (small frame drum) and *kamandje* (a spike fiddle, which in the late nineteenth century was replaced by the Western violin) (Shawan 408).

The *wasla* was a sequence of then popular genres combined in an organic unit, although each genre could be used interchangeably in the same *maqām*. To ensure the unity of the *maqām*, all component genres had to begin and end in the *maqām* of the *wasla*. The sequence of genres opens with a *taqsīm* on the *ūd*; it is followed by a precomposed metric instrumental introduction, either a *dūlāb* or a *samā'i*, played by the ensemble. Then there is a *taqsīm* on other instruments followed by a *muwashshah* rendered by the entire chorus. After one or more *taqsīm* the *muṭrib* (vocalist) performs the *layālī* and *mawwāl*, two improvisatory non-metric genres. The *wasla* ends with the precomposed metric genre *dawr* performed by the entire ensemble. In this final and most crucial phase, the long middle section of the *dawr* allows for considerable flexibility; it presents episodes called *hank* in which the solo singer improvises short passages. Here the coordination and cohesion of the entire ensemble achieves its highest levels (Racy 341).

In a *wasla* or a *fāṣila* (similar to the Turkish *faşil*) other vocal and instrumental genres can be represented. One of those is the interesting *taḥmila*, an instrumental genre comprising two parts. The first, light in character, is played in unison by the ensemble at the beginning of the performance and recurs at given moments in the course of the second part. The latter is an improvisation on a theme in which two instrumentalists compete: they demonstrate their skill and virtuosity in creating variations, modulations, transpositions, glissandi and other striking artifices. As the stabilizing and unchanging element, the first part plays a supporting role, so to speak, to the second; hence the name *taḥmila*, which literally means 'to carry a burden'.

*Al-maqām al-'irāqī (The Iraqi maqām)*

The term *al-maqām al-'irāqī* has unique implications which do not, however, supersede attributes previously ascribed to the *maqām*. It refers to a complex, highly structured genre belonging to types of the compound form, and is usually performed by a specialized group known as *tchalḡī Baghdād* (the Baghdad ensemble). The group comprises four instrumentalists who

play on the *djawza* (lit. coconut), a spike fiddle with a resonator made of coconut shell covered with sheep skin; the *santūr*, a trapezoidal hammered dulcimer which has twenty-three quadruple metallic courses; the *dumbuk*, a single-skinned drum; and the *daff al-zanjārī*, a tambourine with small cymbals. The central figure is the vocalist known as *qārī' al-maqām* (*maqām* reader). The term *qārī'* is usually reserved for the *Qūr'ān* reader; hence its use in this context implies the great privilege and respect the genre enjoyed and the seriousness ascribed to its rendition. The *qārī'* was often assisted by a singer of secondary importance, the *pastadjī*, who performed the *pasta* (a light, metric syllabic song) between one *maqām* and the next, while the *qārī'* rested.

As to the general structure, it consists of an instrumental introduction played by the ensemble followed by the first section called the *tahrīr* (not to be confused with the Persian *tahrīr*, a type of vocal ornament). In this section, the vocalist introduces the *maqām* by using characteristic syllables and expressions that differ from one *maqām* to another and serve as distinguishing marks; the stock phrases are usually in Arabic, Turkish, Kurmanji (the language spoken by the Kurds) or Persian, and even in Hebrew which indicates active Jewish participation in the performance of this genre. Here, as well as in other parts, the vocalist is expected to demonstrate the rich ornamental devices (glissando, portamento) which are considered an integral part of the performance. The section that develops the low range pitch of the *maqām* includes several vocal sequences, some of which are presented as a kind of dialogue with instrumental responses. This dialogue between the vocalist and the instrumentalists is known as *muhāsabāt* (sing. *muhāsaba*). The section of the *tahrīr* closes with the *taslīm*, a short cadential passage descending to the finalis. The central section that follows is sung on a higher pitch level and usually includes modulation to other related *maqāmāt*; popular folk verses of the *'abūdhīyya* type may be inserted (Wegner 340). The following *miyāna* section evolves in a higher octave, sometimes reaching the double octave; it demands great ability from the vocalist. The performance concludes with the *taslīm*. A *pasta* in the same *maqām* is usually rendered either to end the performance, or as a transition to subsequent *maqām* performances. Finally, it should be noted that the rhythmic component is important for the definition and character of any given *maqām*. The appropriate rhythmic mode may be performed either continuously or in specific portions (Rajab 271; Hassan 262; And 379: 109–110; Tzuge 334).