Mary Gottschalk
Cultures of the Middle East 220
Professor Abdelrahim Salih
Final Paper

Music in the Middle East

The "Middle East" is a term to describe the areas of North Africa and East Asia, where there is a deep cultural history and diverse people, commonly grouped in this term for their cultural similarities. As with trade, information, and innovation, music and the arts moved and assimilated throughout the area. Music pervades the culture in aspects of religion, tradition, and entertainment, and differs according to various conceptions of music based within those religious and cultural ideals. This paper will discuss some of the similarities and differences in middle eastern music: in the instruments as they relate to location, conceptions as they are formed by Muslim doctrine, and traditions based in their respective time periods.

Instruments / Place

Musical instruments in the middle east range in the complexity, skill needed to play, and type. Broad classifications consist of percussion, bowed, plucked, and wind instruments (Touma 1996 109). A predominant stringed instrument is known as the 'ud, which literally means "wood", but it has many names and variations throughout the world (Miller and Shahriari 2006 204). The 'ud, or al'ud "…is a fretless, plucked short-necked lute with a body shaped like half a pear" (Touma 1996 109). Its history traces back to the eighth century BCE with changes in size and number of strings, and today is commonly seen with "…five 'courses' of strings, a course being a pair tuned in unison" (Miller and Shahriari 2006 204). The lack of frets allows the musician to articulate fine gradations of tone, strumming with either a plectrum or fingernails over the middle of the 'ud's body (Miller and Shahriari 2006 205). It is typically associated with

classical rather than village tradition, and is considered a prime part of Arabian culture (Touma 1996 110). Variations on the ‘ud include the kwitra, which is a short-necked lute with four courses of strings, played in Morocco and Algeria. The kwitra is similar to the ’ud, yet its body is about equal to the length of the neck and its tuning is different (Touma 1996 114). Also in Morocco is the two-to-three-stringed spike lute called a gumbri, jnbri, or gnbri, with a body of a wooden box or tortoise shell, covered in lambskin (Touma 1996 114). In Syria there is the short-necked lute called the nash’atkar, tuned the same as the ‘ud, but has wire strings and is often a solo instrument (Touma 1996 114). The sound is similar to the buzuq, found first in Turkey, and now is seen played by gypsies in Syria and Lebanon. It has three double courses of metallic strings upon which melodic passages are performed quickly and precisely, often to accompany a singer (Touma 1996 114). The musician plays the melody on one of the pairs of strings, while the other two pairs are strummed with the plectrum to create a droning background sound (Miller and Shahriari 2006 205). Another plucked instrument is the box zither, known as the qanun, and its relative in Iran known as the santur. The form of the qanun is of a trapezoidal box with a wooden surface that covers the body but for the section on the right side extending over the width, where the bridge rests over five rectangular pieces of skin (Touma 1996 121). The number of strings ranges from sixty-three to eighty four, and typically every three sections of strings produce the same tone (Touma 1996 121). The Iraqi santur is the same in shape as the qanun, and has ninety-two metal strings. The strings are tuned in groups of four to equal pitches, and are struck with wooden mallets. The Santur is found other places than Iran, but the instrument is not nearly important as it is, there (Miller and Shahriari 2006 208).

Bowed instruments in the Middle East include the kamanjah, which is the Arabian term for the European violin (Touma 1996 116). The Arabian kamanjah, before the introduction of

the violin, was built of half of a coconut shell and the skin of a sheep or fish, but the violin eventually replaced the Arabian kamanjah in use and popularity. (Touma 1996 117). Another stringed instrument, the rabab, is located in Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. It has a narrow wooden body and two strings, though there are some single-stringed variations. The single-string rabab, called the rabab ash-sha'ir ("the rabab of the poet") is played by impoverished musicians to accompany epic songs and poems (Touma 1996 117).

The nay, an end-blown flute, is part of many cultures, but is known as Arabian particularly for the refinement and performance techniques used to play it, there. The nay ranges in size and construction material, but is a fairly basic instrument (Touma 1996 128). It is played as a solo instrument, as well as part of an ensemble, called a takht, and the instrument is exclusive to men (Touma 1996 129). There are other wind instruments, such as the shabbabah, surnay, mijwiz, arghul, and qirbah, but they are not quite so prevalent as the nay (Touma 1996 129).

Percussion instruments are a common part of the musical culture in the Middle East. In a takht ensemble, three types of drums used are the duff, riq, and tabla (Miller and Shahriari 2006 213). "The duff is a small, single-headed drum sometimes having snares; the riqq is similar, but has pairs of small cymbals inserted into the frame that jingle when the head is struck…The tabla is a small, goblet-shaped single-headed drum similar to others with different names found throughout the Middle East and is not related to the Indian pair of drums of the same name" (Miller and Shahriari 2006 213). The riqq musician is known to be skilled and trained because he must perform the rhythmic patterns in a takht perfectly to earn the name of dabit iqa', which means "he who performs the rhythms exactly". The riqq player must have memorized all of the patterns and strokes into his repertoire in order to improvise with them as the music requires

(Touma 1996 132). On his website, musician Vince Delgado describes the tabla as traditionally made out of clay, and the membrane stretched across the top is freshwater fishskin from the Nile. He states that this Egyptian tabla is also known as the darabukkah in Turkey, durbki in Lebanon, as dombak in Iran, and as doumbek in Armenia. It is in the form of a goblet, and is held under the arm while standing, or is rested on the thigh while sitting. Both hands strike the head of the drum, with the principle dum beats in the center and the light tak beats near the rim (Touma 1996 136). Delgado states that the duff, as it is known in Egypt, is also called a bendir in Turkey, and a tar in Nubia. He also describes a goblet-shaped drum in Iran called a zarb, which is played in folk, pop, and classical music. Similar to the riqq in appearance but different in sound are the daire and mhazar from Turkey and Egypt, which make loud crashing sounds (Vince Delgado).

As is evident by this introduction of only a few instruments of the Middle East, there is a vast amount of shared instruments and various playing styles and instrument construction. This can be seen in the ‘ud and its developments throughout the Middle East, and the amount of instruments that branch off from its basic design. There too are the many drums and playing styles which are similar throughout the region, yet still maintain a certain aspect distinctive in a certain place.

Concept of Music / Religion

The ideas and ideals about music itself has a broad range in the Middle East, primarily in Islam. Miller and Shahriari state that:

…most branches of Islam are suspicious of music, which they view as overly sensual. In Islamic aesthetic theory, expressions that combine pitch and rhythm-- all of which would usually be classified as “music” in Western culture--are divided into a higher-level category called *non-musica* (non-music) and a lower- level category called *musiq* (music).

All categories of non-musiqa, including the call to prayer, are considered "legitimate"…Some musiqa is also legitimate, including familial and celebratory songs, occupational music, and military music, but the classical genres of musiqa as well as local types of "folk music" are considered "controversial"…At the bottom of this hierarchical scale is "sensuous music," such as American popular music, which is branded "illegitimate." (2006 203).

Therefore Muslim fundamentalists are prone to dislike any "music" that is not legitimate, or of God, whether it is reading from the Qu'ran, or singing the ahdan, which is the call to prayer. This sometimes leads to the disapproval of anything more sensuous, even if it still contains the amount or type of emotion the legitimate "non-musiqa" contains, unless it is for a special occasion. Wedding music and that of other celebrations is acceptable to fundamentalists, but there is a blurry line at the folk music, or traditional music from Arabian culture before Islam. Of course, each country is different in the state of fundamentalism and ideas of what is embraced or abhorred, and therefore the location is also part of the component of the ideas of music.

Egypt is one example of a place where different kinds of music is permissible, than in some other Middle Eastern countries. Takht ensembles are common, there, which perform religious, folk, wedding, and love songs (Miller and Shahriari 2006 212). Often seen with the takht ensembles throughout Egypt are belly-dancers. These dancers are different in style and dress than those seen in the United States, but they can perform a vast variety of moves and dancing to the accompanying songs for an audience to see. The dancers are sensuous, artistic, and are trained thus. This performance is clearly much more for the purpose of entertainment, than that of worshiping God that would define legitimate non-musiqa.

The Sufi sect within Islam also has a firm attitude toward music, though different than

fundamentalist Shiah beliefs. The Sufis are seen as mystics, and are regarded and treated differently based on their location and neighboring sects or religions. They regard themselves as part of the Sunni tradition, which is the mainstream branch of Islam, but their interpretation of the Koran permits different activities, especially pertaining to music (Miller and Shahriari 2006 215). In fact, while sensuous and overtly emotional music is suspicious to the Shiah, this music is a large part of Sufi practice and tradition. A fundamental philosophy of Sufism is becoming one with Allah "…through elimination of the ego, a belief rejected by orthodox Islam" (Miller and Shahriari 2006 215). Therefore some see the Sufis as devoted followers, while others consider them heretics. Sufi's believe in the importance of tarab, which is the Arabic word for a state of emotional transformation or ecstasy achieved through music (Miller and Shahriari 2006 215). The mood in most Islamic worship is grave, yet Sufi music is solemn in addition to cheerful. Sufi hymns are known as ilahi, and they vary in mood and instrumentation (Miller and Shahriari 2006 216). Commonly the ud, qanun, nay, and bandir are used for these hymns, in addition to other fiddles, cymbals, and drums, occasionally. The nay is focal in ceremonies because it is used often for solos. Voice is also an important aspect to the music in Sufi worship, and is comprised of three categories. Male vocal specialists, known as zakirler, perform metered passages in unison, with the melody rising and falling and shifting the tonal center, which creates a off-balance feel. The other two categories, kaside and chanting, occur simultaneously. The kaside vocal soloist chants rhythmically free passages, often accompanied by a few instruments that provide melodic pitches, allowing the vocalist to improves. The remaining instruments accompany the chanters of the dhikr, which is a "…ritual in which believers chant the name of God with the goal of entering an ecstatic state" (Miller and Shahriari 2006 216). The sound itself is thought to be a crucial link between the spiritual and physical worlds (Miller and Shahriari

2006 217). Rather than believing that music tempts the soul away from Allah, as many orthodox Muslims assert, they have faith that music is good and strengthening for a people and their spirits. The dhikr, meaning “remembrance” differs between Sufi orders, but one well-known practice is that of “whirling” dances of the Mevlevi sect founded by Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi. These dancers spin on one foot for an extended period of time and at various speeds during these ceremonies, while chanting the ninety-nine divine attributes of Allah and entering a trance-like state (Miller and Shahriari 2006 217). Miller and Shahriari describe the ritual as such:

> As the musicians play, the dancer rises and removes his black outer garment, which symbolizes the darkness of the secular world. Beneath this outer garment are inner white robes that symbolize the purity of Allah. As the dancer spins, he raises his right hand toward the sky and lowers his left hand toward the earth. his action represents Allah handing down his divine grace to all humanity. The pinning motion symbolizes the movement of the heavenly bodies--i.e., the earth and the moon--and helps the dancer to detach himself from the material plane and achieve a heightened sense of spiritual awareness (2006 217-18).

This is a stark contrast to the fundamentalist practice and ideas of music and appropriateness in music, as well as proper worship and obedience to Allah. The emotionally stirring, climactic music demonstrates a devotion and spiritual belief that is different to the pious, melodic adhan calling its devotees to bow and not dance that is practiced equally as earnestly. Both are for strong and spiritual reasons and beliefs, yet the practices are very different.

Traditions / Time period

There is no doubt that the establishment and spread of Islam as a religion and set of laws

had a profound effect on the cultures in the Middle East. This is evident in musical practices as can be seen in historical documentation of the area. One difference is that of the context in which music was performed. While presently music is allowed at weddings and familial celebrations, in the past there are records of music played for spiritual reasons for gods and goddess worship, erotic entertainment, in royal courts, in folk music in villages, and the like (Doubleday 2006 111). As mentioned before, orthodox Shiah Muslims believed that music was liable to tempt men to sin and disobey Allah, and therefore was not desirable. With the decrease in musical practice went also the prominence of women in musical performances. Men were left with the spiritually and politically important roles, while women played a part increasingly less and less. Aside from wealthy women who could play a variety of instruments, women were either limited to the hand drum, or not permitted to play the hand drum, either because it was deemed inferior for being a woman's or child's instrument, or was made more complex in design and playing style in which only men could go to school to be trained (Doubleday 2006 116-17). Today in much of the Middle East, women are permitted to perform in limited circumstances (such as a wedding or among other women) but still only on certain instruments and with none exclusive to them. This demonstrates a correlation possibly to the rights of women, specifically in the arts, as it relates to Muslim law that may or may not have been listed in the Qu'ran, but rather that of high spiritual (male) officials (Doubleday 2006 118).

Conclusion

There are many ways in which the music can explain or illustrate a culture and its aspects, and this is true in the Middle East. There, the music pervades the culture in its instruments and creations, which are similar to each other yet unique to their own locations. Also, the music is

considered differently, according to differing spiritual doctrine within Islam. Finally, music shows a history of change through the change of cultural norms and belief changes within the society. These demonstrate a deep connection of culture and the music it creates, and in turn is defined by, in an area as vast and rich as the Middle East.

Bibliography

Doubleday, Veronica. "'The Frame Drum in the Middle East': Women, Musical Instruments, and Power." In *Ethnomusicology: A Contemporary Reader*, edited by Jennifer C. Post, 109-133. New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2006.

Miller, Terry, and Andrew Shahriari. *World Music: A Global Journey*. New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2006.

Touma, Habib. *Music of the Arabs*. Portland: Amadeus Press, 1996.

Vince Delgado. "The Drum Page." http://www.vincedelgado.com/drums2.html (accessed April 8, 2008).