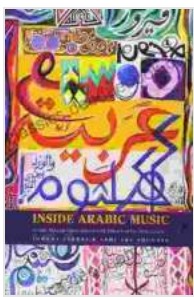


Arabic Maqam Performance and Theory in the 20th Century: A Journey of Innovation and Revival

Arabic maqam, a complex system of melodic modes and improvisational practices, has played a pivotal role in shaping the musical landscape of the Middle East for centuries. In the 20th century, maqam underwent significant transformations, influenced by both internal and external factors. This article delves into the evolution of Arabic maqam performance and theory during this period, exploring the key figures, innovations, and debates that shaped its trajectory.

The Early 20th Century: Revival and Rediscovery

The early 20th century witnessed a renewed interest in traditional Arabic music and a desire to revive its classical heritage. Figures such as Mohammad Abdel Wahab and Riyad al-Sunbati played a crucial role in repopularizing maqam through their compositions and performances. They drew inspiration from the works of legendary musicians of the past and infused them with contemporary sensibilities, creating a new generation of maqam-based songs.



Inside Arabic Music: Arabic Maqam Performance and Theory in the 20th Century by Johnny Farraj

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At the same time, scholars and musicians began to document and analyze the vast body of maqam knowledge. The work of Muhammad al-Mahdi, a prominent music theorist, laid the foundation for a systematic understanding of maqam. His treatise, "Kitab al-Adwar," provided a comprehensive categorization of maqams, their melodic structures, and their use in improvisation.

The Golden Age of Maqam Performance

The middle of the 20th century marked a golden age for maqam performance. Legendary singers such as Umm Kulthum, Abdel Halim Hafez, and Fairuz captivated audiences with their mastery of maqam and their ability to convey deep emotions through their singing. They introduced new techniques and extended the boundaries of melodic exploration, inspiring a generation of aspiring musicians.

Accompanying the vocalists were virtuoso instrumentalists who provided the rhythmic and melodic foundation for their performances. The oud players Farid al-Atrash and Munir Bashir, the violinist Samuel al-Taweel, and the percussionist Ahmed al-Sharkawy were among the most celebrated musicians of this era, their improvisations adding depth and nuance to the maqam repertoire.

Theoretical Developments and Innovations

During this period, scholars and musicians continued to explore the theoretical underpinnings of maqam. The work of Ahmad Fuad Negm, a prominent musicologist, provided fresh insights into the relationship between maqam and microtonal scales. He developed a system for classifying maqams based on their melodic contours and melodic intervals.

Another significant development was the use of electronic instruments, particularly the electric guitar and keyboard. Musicians such as Omar Khorshid and Amr Diab experimented with incorporating these instruments into their maqam performances, creating new sonic possibilities and expanding the range of musical expression.

The Influence of Western Music

The 20th century also saw the increasing influence of Western music on Arabic maqam. Popular genres such as jazz and rock found their way into the musical landscape of the Middle East and influenced the compositions and improvisations of maqam musicians.

The blending of maqam with Western elements led to the emergence of new hybrid genres. In Egypt, for example, the "Electro-Sha'abi" subgenre combined traditional maqam scales with electronic beats and instrumentation. In the Gulf region, the "Khaleeji" style incorporated influences from Western pop and rock music.

Contemporary Trends and Challenges

In recent decades, maqam has continued to evolve, reflecting the changing musical tastes and technological advancements. While the traditional forms of maqam performance have been preserved by a dedicated group of

musicians and scholars, new approaches have emerged that embrace innovation and experimentation.

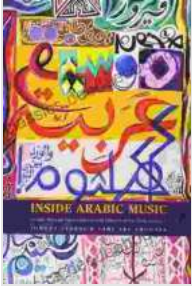
One notable trend is the use of digital technology to create new interpretations of maqam. Composers such as Kareem Wasfi and Maurice Louca have employed electronic synthesizers and computer software to explore the sonic possibilities of maqam beyond the limitations of traditional instruments.

Another important development is the increasing emphasis on music education and preservation efforts. Institutions such as the Arab Academy of Music in Cairo and the House of Arab Music in Damascus have played a vital role in teaching, documenting, and promoting maqam to new generations of musicians and listeners.

However, maqam also faces challenges in the contemporary musical landscape. The commodification of music and the dominance of popular music genres have made it more difficult for maqam-based music to reach a wider audience. Moreover, the loss of traditional performance spaces and the erosion of traditional music education systems have threatened the sustainability of maqam as a living art form.

The Arabic maqam system underwent profound transformations in the 20th century, influenced by both internal and external factors. The early 20th century witnessed a revival and rediscovery of maqam, followed by a golden age of performance in the middle of the century. Theoretical developments and innovations expanded the understanding and application of maqam, while the influence of Western music led to new hybrid genres. In recent decades, maqam has continued to evolve,

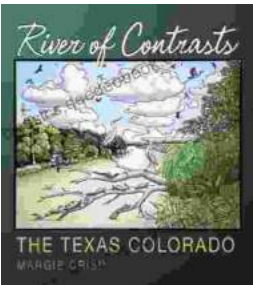
embracing digital technology and facing new challenges. Despite these challenges, maqam remains a vibrant and evolving art form, a testament to the enduring power of Arabic musical tradition.



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