

Tarab in Arab music

Interview with: Fayrouz Karawyia

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The research team which was part of Napoleon's scientific mission in Egypt (1798-1801) described, in *Description de l'Égypte*, several music performances which they attended. The performances were made by Egyptian singers and included the repetition of couplets upon the request of the listeners. They also noticed how the melodic creations overflowed with an abundance of embellishments. They noted that such responses were incomprehensible for them as outsiders and believed them to be inherent to the overall temperament of the Egyptians.

Arabic music relies on the evocation of intense emotions. It places emphasis upon the effect invoked in the listener and the interaction between performers and audience. The merging of music and emotional transformation is articulated in the concept of *tarab*. Tarab, in the Arab culture, refers to traditional forms of Arabic music which are capable of inducing an emotional effect. Tarab has often been referred to, by ethnomusicologists, as synonymous with ecstasy.

About the concept of tarab and its relationship to both ecstasy and creativity, we interviewed the Egyptian artist Fayrouz Karawyia. Fayrouz is a prominent singer, songwriter, and record producer. She has always been interested in fusing Egyptian local music (Sha'abi) with Jazz rhythms and music from around the world.

Sarah Nagaty: How would you explain a concept which has no direct translation in any other language such as tarab? And what distinguishes it from other musical experiences?

Fayrouz Karawyia: The verb "Tarrab" in the classical Arabic lexicon encompasses the meaning of 'deviated' from a delineated route. This understanding helps to essentialize the improvisational nature of 'Tarab' identified in the Nahda music of the nineteenth century. The maqam system that characterizes Arab music is based on an enriched ensemble of music scales where the formation of crooners/ performers focuses on the mastery of navigating the way from a maqam to another skillfully and beautifully. The rich diversified melodic garden is the foundation of composition in Arab music, compared to the strong structural and harmonic elements in occidental music for example.

S.N.: There has always been a link between ecstasy and tarab. How would you describe this ecstatic experience?

F.K.: It is important to refer to the origins of the practice of singing in the Arab history; the origin enrooted in the religious sufi traditions, Quran recitation and later in theatres. The Egyptian school in Quran recitation infused the singing tradition with a multiplicity of performance stylistics that combined the pronunciation of the Arabic words and their intonation. It created the foundation of singing and improvisation deploying the Arab maqam and tailoring it to the syntax and phonology of the Arabic language. This transition (again in the 19th century), inspired the collective religious rituals in sufi celebrations and Mawalid, where the collective's bodily movements are enmeshed with singing in an ascending elation mood to reach out for a melancholic state were the body abstain in favor of the 'spirit'; the trip to find god. Later on, solo performers inspired by this knowledge, adapted their singing and improvisational styles that we recognize as Tarab.

S.N.: Tarab as a concept entails the involvement of the listener in the musical experience. We have, for example, Said al-Tahan, the famous listener of Om Kalthum who used to be

among the loudest, most frequent commentators on her singing, and who used to yell out 'greatness, greatness, greatness' when Um Kalthum particularly excelled in a couplet. As a singer, how do you sense the engagement of listeners in the tarab experience?

F.K.: The engagement of listeners is based on the deployment of ornamentation and reiteration that are part and parcel of performance in the classical era of Arab music. A tradition that was reinforced in Um Kulthum's concerts as the woman who conserved the traditional esthetics of Tarab through modern ages. It is part of the encouragement to repeat a phrase many times where none of them resembles the other; a challenge to the creativity in improvisation, where the singer 'deviates' from the melodic structure and liberates herself from the rhythmic structure to start an improvisational reiteration of the lyrics. The listener is her thermometer through which she controls the atmosphere and measures to what extent the hall is heated up and affected. This interaction is inherited by singers and listeners still to our days, in lighter forms of course, as excellence in performance becomes more attributed to many other factors.

S.N.: Artists involved in producing tarab are expected to have a deep knowledge of Arab music tradition and should be able to draw on that tradition. This may bring up the question of what then is creativity in tarab especially when modifying tradition is not very well-received in Arab cultures?

F.K.: I think evoking Tarab as a sole identifier of Arab music is no more valid since the fifties of 20th century, where many other forms of lyrical song started to expand and find their way to mass production and distribution. The role of Muhammed Abd Elwahab is crucial in this turn to cinematic short song (in the 30th and 40th), then the emergence of a new generation of composers and singers that gave birth to the Arab pop after the propagation of national radio stations and TV. The formation of Arab singers became less dependent on mastering Tatrib as the main performance style; it is reduced and integrated in a more structure-bound song, diffusible in new media and appealing to youthful generations.

S.N.: The artist has to possess the 'sensitivity' for tarab before learning its techniques. The sensitivity allows for the slightly magical, slightly ecstatic tarab experience to take place, would you say that the artist has to be native to the Arab tarab culture to be able to create tarab? Similarly could tarab be equally appreciated by listeners who aren't native to the tarab culture?

F.K.: In many eastern traditions like Turkish, Persian, Kurdish and Armenian singing, forms of *Tarab* are present. *Tarab* as a performance way is not tied to the Arab language or culture per se, it is a cultural state of course, and may be related to the religious rituals as the classical occidental music traced its roots partly in the choirs of churches. However, it is also a musical form that can find its way to the hearts of listeners attuned to the eastern *maqam* systems. In my experience, there are thousands of them.

S.N.: Would you say the concept of tarab has changed over time? After all, it has rules, techniques and a long tradition, does it look different now?

F.K.: Tarab is an idea in the essence; a way to stimulate imagination and creativity, and a liberation from a premade structure to reinvent the song in every new performance. It is also a freedom granted to the performer to become part of the synthesis of the song, introducing his/her point of view. The essence would of course acquire tastes and novelties with time, and is not supposed to turn into a rigid conception of performance, the case of Tarab fundamentalists who essentialize a certain moment and pattern of Tarab. However, the contemplation of the concept from a more progressive angle inspires us with its openness to experimentation and transformation.

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