

An Introduction to Arabic Music:  
Part One—The Metric Modes

by

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Music is a central part of Arab life. It crosses borders to unite people from different social, cultural, and political traditions to create shared connections through sound. People from Morocco to Lebanon wake up every morning singing the songs of the great singer Fairuz, and she is only one example among many artists whose work is loved throughout the Middle East.

The history of Arabic music, its many styles, its complicated theory, and its role in society are very important for every student of the region to understand. Just as knowing about the Beatles' influence on English and American society, so too does knowledge of the life and music of the singer Oum Kalthoum help us understand Egypt's place in the context of Arabic cultural history.

Arabic music is too large a subject to examine in detail in a short article, but there are some basic concepts and vocabulary that students of the language should learn as they become familiar with this part of Arab life. First, the differences between classical and popular music are less clear than in the Western tradition. A better way to think of it is to recognize older and newer forms of music as a continuum, rather than as separate genres. While Arabic popular music today is influenced by Western music, the earlier forms it is built on are structured very differently. Also, there are many different musical forms, instruments, and artists in different parts of the area, so the music theory and instruments discussed here are only the outline of a much larger study.

The three components to traditional Arabic music theory are the words, the melodies, and the metric modes. Poetry and song forms are the foundation of vocal music, but different musical instruments also create the melodies and rhythms. We will examine the words and melodies more deeply in other articles, but we will define them, then move on to the subject of rhythm.

The words of a song are the basic structure around which the scales and rhythms shape themselves. There are more formal structures in Arabic poetry than there are in English. These verse forms define the meter once they are set to music.

One of the most important structures in Western music is missing here: harmony. While Arab musicians can and do play harmony in popular music the traditional forms are modal, that is, based on scales, called *maqamat*, rather than on harmonic progressions. In the *maqam* system the music progresses by moving thru different registers of the scale and through transposition from one *maqam* to another rather than being driven by chord progressions.

The mood of the poem indicates which *maqamat* are employed to recreate the emotions of the words. The melodies are created within the *maqamat*. These are structured differently than the western scale system and uses some pitches that fall between the notes of European music.

The word *iq'a'a* is usually translated as rhythm, but it is better understood as a metric mode. The *iq'a'a* defines the tempo, the number of beats, and the beat subdivisions in a measure. Within these the musician can play many different rhythms. These *iq'a'at* are not just for drummers. Every musician in the group plays the rhythms and melodies within the *iq'a'a*. This is a hard concept for Western musicians to grasp since we do not think of rhythm in terms of metric modes.

Musicians use a system of spoken onomatopoeias to teach the *iq'a'at*. *Dum* is a low, open pitch that defines the strong beats in a measure. *Tak* is a high pitched sound that creates complimentary up beats. *Es* indicates beats that are not part of the basic *iq'a'a* but that are sometimes played to create variations.

There are many *iqa'at*. Some are well-known and recognizable to the Western ear. *Baladi* (meaning “of the country” or “traditional”) is a four-beat cycle that sounds: *dum-dum tak dum tak*. *Fax* (named after the Foxtrot) is a simple two-beat pattern: *dum tak dum tak*. From here the *iqa'at* become increasingly complicated, growing into long cycles of many beats. These cycles often in a compound meter created by combining metric groups of two, three, or four beats into longer patterns. This is rare in Western music and sounds odd to the Western musical ear, but it is one of the most interesting parts of Arabic music theory.

Percussionists play the *iqa'at* along with the other musicians. There are many percussion instruments in Arabic music but there are a few that are played in every country.

The *riqq* (also called *daff*) is a small frame drum with cymbals (called *sajalat*) built into the frame. This instrument is difficult to play well, so those who can play the *riqq* with skill are among the most respected musicians.

The *tabla* (also called *darbuka*) is an hourglass-shaped drum. It has a large range of sounds and is louder than the *riqq*, so it is often played in larger musical groups and for dancers.

The *tar* (also called *bendir*) is a larger frame drum without cymbals that produces a gentle tone when played softly alone, but it is often used with other drums to play basic rhythms for the improvisations of the *riqq* and *tabla*.

The *riqq*, *tabla*, and *tar* form a common rhythm section in the classical Arabic ensemble called a *tabkt*. This group is usually comprised of an *oud* (a stringed instrument that is the forerunner of the guitar), the *ney* (a cane flute), a *kanun* (or zither), and a violin, among other instruments.

These are just a few of the many different instruments played in various types of Arabic music. Also, the Arabs share many musical traits with the Turks, Iranians, and other people of the region, and they all know more about our music than we do about theirs. The more we understand about their arts the more we will understand about their hearts.

Time is the foundation of the art of music. It creates the spaces through which melodies rise and fall and through which pulses move the beats, both faster and slower than those of the clock. Rhythm is the skeleton to which the beauty of the melody and the meaning of the words cling as they express the love and hate, the fear and courage that musicians share with us in the magical gift of sound.