

**A Survey of Researches  
Made on Arabic Music  
In the Middle East**

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# **Survey of Researches Made on Arabic Music in the Middle East**

## **General Introduction**

The word "researches" is used here to denote the various observations carried out from different points of view on the music of the Near East. The subject may be examined from different angles and interesting comparisons may be pointed out.

### **Why study and search at all?**

A person's receptivity for music may depend highly on the amount of knowledge he possesses; this is true both of the performing artist – the more he knows about the music, the higher the quality of performance – and of the casual listener whose experience will be deeper if he had been trained toward it.

On the one hand, music may be regarded as one form of human expression along with so many other (painting, literature, etc.). On the other hand, it requires thorough knowledge of the complexity of factors that helps bring it about in its various structures: areas of circulation, social and religious background, literary content, meanings attributed to music, etc.

All these factors may be roughly classified into two categories: purely musical and non-musical factors.

It might be useful to bring here an example pertaining to the difference between Western and non-Western cultures: A Levantine was once asked about his impression of Beethoven's "Für Elise" after listening to it in a concert. Before answering, the man nostalgically recalled the opening fragment: He sang it with a faltering intonation, turning the half-tones into a more or less steady undulation on the E-sound.

**Near-Eastern music has been and still is  
an interesting research-matter. Why?**

This music is interesting both for its own sake and for the history of Western music; Western music and its cradle in the Middle East. But whereas this developed fast into a written, Concertante music with multiple, well-defined styles, the indigenous music of the area lived on in oral tradition; it is a music with only slight connection between theory and practice, with improvisation playing a major role, and with extremely slow, gradual and not well-defined stylistic changes.

The development of this music is an almost continuous line preserving many elements of the past. In Western music, too, there were certain periods when improvisation played an important role or even made up the whole musical material, e.g. the Jongleurs, etc. Thus, this music, in the way it lives on in the present can teach us a lot about the past, both its own and that of Western music. Moreover, we may understand, via their music – the cultural status held by Arabs among the nations of the world. A number of problems and questions arise in examining this music as actually performed, from various aspects and criteria. These are related to the following:

- 1) The proper criteria necessary in the discussion of Near-Eastern music.
- 2) The rules which lie beyond the intonation in a living world of music.
- 3) The traditional material: people who preserve tradition and those who introduce changes.
- 4) The factors influencing performances and the way they act:
  - Theoretical knowledge and study based on books;
  - Modern Arab music and folk music.
- 5) The relations between theory and practice and the kind of comparison that can be made between the two.
- 6) The possibility to project back into the past and, by considering the above, to shed additional light on the Byzantine music in the Middle Ages, concerning the character and properties of which we are only incompletely informed.

**General characteristics of non-European music**  
**(Where our subject-matter, i.e. Near-Eastern music belongs)**  
**As compared to European music**

- a) Stagnation: whereas Western music is mainly specified through its different periods and styles, non-European music has, on the contrary, been following a stern "do not change" rule, as its ideal.
- b) Functionalism: As opposed to Western music, mainly Concertante in its nature, non-European music has always been functional in its purpose. No halls were ever built just for the sake of music; instead music has always been performed to serve some other purpose in daily life, such as: festivals, dances, religious rituals, etc. In Japan, for instance, one can only talk about music in connection with the theatric arts.\*

We should mention the fact that recently Western influences have been abound in most non-western cultures, but these artificial and foreign elements do not concern at all our subject-matter, which deals only with the authentic music of the said non-European culture.

- c) Lack of Harmony and Melodic richness: It is a known fact that most of the non-European musical cultures lack the element of Harmony. Middle Eastern music lacks it totally.

As far as multiplicity of voices is to be encountered, these are of heterophonic type. In exchange, the melody is infinitely richer and more varied than its European counterpart. Complicated intervals of different size and organizational patterns are abundant and so are rhythmical patterns.

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\*I would like to point out here Bach's case: his music may be regarded as fundamentally functional since it was written for religious purposes and as such it carries in itself the element of spontaneity. On the other hand, its content is so self-evident that it stands its own ground even if detached from its functional frame. This combination of spontaneity and organizational skill provided European culture with one of tis highest peaks.

- d) Oral tradition: In most non-European cultures and the Middle-Eastern culture in particular, the majority of the musical material is handed down from generation to generation by way of oral tradition. Such a tradition may result in different stylistic development at different places. In contrast, written music gives less liberty to the performer, thus enabling a more uniform rendering of a given melody by different performers.

This paper deals with the Arab music in the Near East. I will try to sum up its various characteristics; enumerate the specific problems concerning its research; name some of the most important scholars who have done work in this field and survey their findings.

A list of sources can be found at the end.

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## **Part One: Music in the Middle East. Its Contents**

Any research should tackle its subject-matter from all possible angles. It is important to go into as much detail as possible, since a large number of factors can prove relevant for a given period, place or culture. We have mentioned above the connection existing between music and theater in Japan. We should add now a couple of other examples: The connection between music and speech in the African tribal cultures and with regard to our subject: The close connection between music and church.

Music is always part of a general cultural tradition along with painting, sculpting, literature, etc. Among the chief factors contributing to its formation we should first mention the geographical setting, i.e. the area of circulation. Next we should examine the social-cultural background per given life-unit (that of the same geographical setting).

Middle-Eastern music is extremely varied. It sprawls over a great number of different areas, nations and traditions. It should be of great interest to point out what is common and what is different in the various groups.

Now I will proceed to describe the component of Middle-Eastern music as viewed from the different angles mentioned above.

### 1) Geographic areas

Near Eastern music belongs geographically to the larger unit of non-European music (i.e. non-western music). Some scholars (e.g. Lachmann) regard the Near-East as a unit in itself with enough common features to provide for a common cultural tradition. The opinions as to its geographic size vary from one scholar to the other. The case of North Africa, for example – is it a cultural unit in itself, or a sub-unit of the Middle-Eastern culture – is still under discussion. For the purposes of our survey, we will regard the Middle East as covering roughly the areas of the following countries: Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Israel.

### 2) Nations

Each of the abovementioned countries is populated by a large number of nations and ethnic communities, greatly different in tradition. Without going into the

complex problem of defining a nation, I will try to describe the different cultural traditions as crystalized by the multiple factors mentioned above (geographical surroundings, conditions of life, etc.).

First I will name the main populations\* to be followed by a few comments on their geographic dispersion.

- (1) Semites:   Arabs  
                  Arameans  
                  Hebrew: sub-groups:   Ashkenazic-Western  
  Ashkenazic-Eastern  
  Chassidic, Balkanian, Near-  
  Eastern, Morrocan, Yemenite,  
  Babylonian, Persian, Dagestni,  
  Buchara

Some of the sub-groups were at certain times in close relationship with the surrounding Arabs, Yacobetes and Samaritans.

- (2) Persians
- (3) Turks
- (4) Armenians
- (5) Greeks
- (6) Druse

Quantitatively, the Arabs are the largest nation in the area, covering the surface of most countries neighboring Israel (Egypt, Syria, Jordan and most of Lebanon where there is also a large minority of Christians of European provenience). Persians come next, occupying the easternmost parts of the area.

### 3) Religious music

Religious music may be regarded as a function of the ritualistic activities required by each religion.

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\*Idelsohn calls them "races"; the following classification is also listed in his research.

The only religion of the area which has completely banished music from its sanctuaries is the Islam. The Islam knows no other music than the cantillation accompanying the text of Koran – which is to be regarded more as a version of prayer than "music" in the accepted sense.

Let us see the various musical "blocks" as pertaining to the various religions:

(1) Christian music

There is a close connection between the Christian ritual and the music of its surroundings. Christian music includes mainly traditions related to the Eastern Church:

- Maronite tradition (mainly in Lebanon and Syria)
- Local-(Neo)-Byzantine (mainly in Lebanon and Syria) (Greek Catholic and Greek Orthodox)
- Eastern Syrian tradition
- Armenian tradition
- Coptic and Ethiopian tradition

(2) The music of the various Jewish communities in all countries.

(3) Persian religious music.

4) Types of music and different functions related to them

- (1) As mentioned above, most of the music we are dealing with is functional, i.e. born out of the experience and needs of everyday life. In this context, Arabic music presents the following major types:

Wedding music

Café (entertainment) music

Peasant songs

Bedouin songs

Shepherd songs

Drinking songs

Marches

Reaper songs

- (2) A whole series of music types may be pointed out as "contrasting pairs" (all these in secular music), such as:

- Vocal music vs. Instrumental music (Vocal music appears under three aspects: solo, chorus, and antiphonal singing)
- Town music vs. Village music
- Men's music vs. Women's music
- Folk music vs. Art music, although the term "art music" may not be exactly in place, as stated above (see also below, part two).

## **Part Two: Problems Faced by Researchers of Middle-Eastern Music**

As stated above, each type of music presents a number of specific problems that need to be understood. In order to absorb these problems, one has to be acquainted with the various components of the given music. Thus, in case of Western Music, for example, the problem of "style" cannot be discussed without a fair knowledge of Harmony, as this is a basic component of the musical material.

### The specific problem

The major problem is that most of the music is passed on by way of oral tradition and the performance is playing an active role in shaping the composition. Hence, the important role played by improvisation, a tradition of change, so to speak, with a tendency towards non-finite variations rather than closed forms. It is a totally different musical reality if we compare it with Western compositions whose authors aimed at perfect and closed forms (nevertheless, improvisation sometimes played an important role in Western musical life), such as the Sonata form, Rondo, Concerto, etc.

In the music we are dealing with, one of the most important questions is: what is the actual composition?

This music, including the so-called "Art-Music" is in its tonality functional. Therefore, extra musical factors have an overpowering influence on the very style of the composition. These factors must be given full consideration during the research.

Another problem arises just because of the oral transmission. We are faced with a continuous line where many of the elements in the present usage may be identified as ancient. At first sight this stagnation might look as proof of the primitiveness of such music. However, it would be interesting to find out what exactly makes the performers (many times the "co-authors") stick so stubbornly and enthusiastically to these "stagnating" elements passed on to them by oral tradition, without ever feeling the need to search for new "styles" (even if not in the European sense).

Any research has, of course, to be based, to a certain extent, on precise theoretical knowledge in order to be able to define its findings in an acceptable terminology, and be able to provide a clear picture of the musical components and of the specific musical

reality it claims to uncover, while consciously detaching it from both its total and direct impact on us and its functional framework.

#### Extra-musical and musical factors and the mutual relationship between them

We have realized the importance of these factors for understanding and appreciating this music. This is due to both its functionalism and the fact that the performer has direct influence on the composition. Therefore, we must look for complete information about the qualities of the informant: Is he musically trained or not, does he live in isolation from his cultural surroundings or not, does he live in town or in the country (which in our area can be most relevant), is he literate or not? We should not forget to ask about his relations to the church.

As for the group of Arabs whose signing is to be examined on one hand, it may be regarded as a homogeneous group and the common features of its musical expression may be found and should be clarified. On the other hand, if it is large enough, it can be divided into subgroups and questions may arise: Which factors do influence the performance of each one of them and in what way? What is the influence of theoretical knowledge and study from books – i.e. what are the musical elements that differentiate the performance of someone highly conscious and self-critical of his singing from that of the same song performed by someone who has absolutely no knowledge at all and who is not aware of music as a composition composed of different components but regards singing as a natural language? (By the way, this question may have interesting projections on the problem of creating folk music, as well as on that of the relationship between theory and practice); which performers stick rigidly to the established tradition and which prefer to change; what external factors bring this about? What is the influence of modern Arabic music, folk music and instrumental music? Are the rules of religious music also valid for secular music? Is there any relationship between the different frameworks outlining the different kinds of music? (modes for liturgical music and Makamat for folk music).

The clarification of all these influences may, no doubt, help understand more accurately the musical expression of the discussed group. It may also help understand influential processes in general.

The musical material under discussion undoubtedly raises further problems due to its ties to the liturgical music of the Eastern Church in general and its Neo-Byzantine theory on the one hand and to folk music and its theory – the Makamat – on the other.

A special place in the research of Arab music is taken by the study of the Makamat (singular MAKAM) – a kind of Modal framework for Arab singing; this Modal framework has an immense role in classifying the music, as it is much more than just a scale pattern. The different modes resemble melody types established under the influence of a complexity of factors, all of which need to be studied.

In order to understand correctly the meaning of music in the Middle East, both musical and non-musical factors should be studied in a joint, comprehensive research. The aim of such a research would be to shed light on the set of rules, i.e. the inner mechanism underlying the living functional music of a certain group, while taking into full consideration the overwhelming role of the performer; further, to clarify the significance of the specific frameworks delineating and characterizing the music, as well as the dependence of those frameworks of personal standards and local conditioning of the different performers.

The musical analysis should try to cover as many components as possible: musical motifs, ambitus, central tones, melismatic quality, intervals, absolute pitch, tempo, rhythmic patterns, etc.

One of the components for the examination of which electronic equipment is needed is exact intonation, i.e. the actual pitch of the sounds that make up the melody, as well as the exact intervals dividing them. Intonation plays a basic role in defining and characterizing most of the music in our area. However, the inability to precisely determine a complicated intonation by ear alone has always stood in the way of researchers in the Middle East. As a matter of fact, a methodical analysis of intonation was practically impossible for a large amount of material until recently when the Melograph has been constructed. A small number of Melographs are in use today in different parts of the world. The one in Jerusalem serves for the analysis of musical material of the Middle East.

### **Part Three: Major Researchers**

Most musical cultures differentiate between "art-music" (or classical music), i.e. which is based consciously on theory, and folk music which is based on other components. In our case, the difference is not always clear, but one thing is certain: That part of music in our area, which is not consciously based on any theory, is predominant. As researchers (not only of Middle Eastern music) generally refused to investigate a musical culture not based on any theory, it was quite a problem.

Based on the aforesaid, it happens that for many years researches in this field were carried out only on Arabic music of the Middle Ages\*. One of the greatest scholars in this connection is H.G. Farmer (see bibliographical list below) who leaned exclusively on medieval writings.

Work on the living music started relatively late and an inevitable gap showed almost immediately between inveterate theoreticians and so-called "practicists", i.e. those who concerned themselves with the living music.

In the following survey I will mention some of the most important scholars who have tried to discover the rules underlying the living music by way of actually listening to it, whether with or without the aid of medieval theories. This should be a summary of works done on the living music itself and not on medieval theories, although there is a close relation between the two.

#### **List of Researchers**

Following is a list of some major scholars in this field, the subject of their research, their approach and conclusions. This short survey is by far not comprehensive and does not include researches going on in the present such as those by Prof. Amnon Shiloah, Prof. Gerson Kiwi, Dr. Ruth Katz and Dr. Dalia Cohen.

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\*As known, the Middle-Ages represented a pinnacle of culture for the Arabs; indeed, many important works are based on theoretical writings of that period.

1) **O.H. Villoteau**

Villoteau gathered a large amount of material on Egyptian music (as a member in Napoleon's delegation at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century). He worked with informants from all ethnic groups of the country. An important part of his research deals with the exclusively vocal Greek religious music. He found that according to the theoretical writings, Arabs possess no less than 84 scales, but in practice they only use 12.

2) **J. Pariso**

Pariso examined in his "Rapport sur une Mission Scientifique" Syrian, Greek, Maronite Jewish and Arabic folk melodies. In his opinion, all the scales of the said material have a common source: **The Arabic Makamat** and that accounts for the difficulty of their notation. He classified the examined tunes into "simple" (having one tonal center) and "composed" (having several tonal centers).

3) **T.B. Thibaut**

L'Harmonique chez les Grecs Modernes deals mainly with Neo-Byzantine singing and a precise measuring of its intervals. Here is an example of an intonational skeleton according to his findings:

The "Sixth Mode"

Ascending

D	C	B	A	G	F	E	D	
330	333	400	432	488	503	600	640	Length of chord
$\frac{333}{330}$	$\frac{400}{333}$	$\frac{27}{25}$	$\frac{122}{108}$	$\frac{503}{488}$	$\frac{600}{503}$	$\frac{16}{15}$		Seconds in their frequency ratios
$\frac{3}{4}$	16	$6\frac{1}{2}$	$10\frac{1}{4}$	$2\frac{1}{2}$	16	$5\frac{1}{2}$		Seconds in 10 <sup>th</sup> of tones

Descending

D	C	B	A	G	F	E	D	
330	333	424	433	500	503	620	640	Length of chord
$\frac{333}{330}$	$\frac{414}{333}$	$\frac{24}{23}$	$\frac{125}{108}$	$\frac{503}{500}$	$\frac{620}{503}$	$\frac{32}{31}$		Seconds in their frequency ratios
$\frac{3}{4}$	19	$3\frac{3}{4}$	$12\frac{1}{2}$	12	18	$2\frac{1}{2}$		Seconds in 10 <sup>th</sup> of tones

The author seems to have been greatly influenced by Western research terminology: he divides the 8 modes into 4 pairs each one containing an authentic and plagal mode (just like in the case of Western church modes); the intonation in the ascending scale is not always identical to that in the descending scale; the mode is made up of stable and unstable tones, exposed to the action of certain gravitational powers.

4) **J. Jaanin**

Jaanin worked on the Syrian liturgy (he stood close to the community of Sharafe being a confessor of their theological seminar). His research is largely based on oral information. He found that Syrians too possessed 8 modes but he did not concern himself with the exact notation of their intervals and intonation. He defined the final tones of each mode and pointed out some characteristic features of the Syrian melodies ("un-diatonic" intervals, small ambitus, typical ornaments, melisma; the importance of the central tone, abounding repetitions). He also defined some of the influences acting on Syrian intonation – mainly Turkish and Arabic.

5) **J.B. Rebours: "Traite de Psaltique"**

Rebours studied the modes of the living music of the Neo-Byzantine liturgy but considered its details on the ground of theory. His approach was idealistic with regards to preservation of the sources. According to his findings each theoretical mode is characterized in practical usage by: its central tone, types of the second degree of diatonicism. Performances vary continuously and this makes difficult the task of establishing commonly valid rules. He found that "trills were much more common in the East than in Northern Africa or in Spain!" Arabic musical types gradually started penetrating into the liturgy and Arab modes mingled freely with the original Greek ones (an "artificial overlapping" according to Rebours), the language of liturgy became exclusively Arabic, and all this resulted in a complete mixture of Greek and Arabic melodic types, the boundary between their frameworks vanishing almost completely.

6) **A.Z. Idelsohn: "Otzar Neginot Israel" – 20 volumes**

Conclusions compiled and published in – **"Toldot ha Neginat ha Ivrit"**

He studied the development of Hebrew music and classified the collected songs according to a double criterion: the one of their function (i.e. cantillation of the Torah, poetry, etc.) and the one of their community or area of provenience, covering all "races" of the Near East\*. He defined the various Makamat according to order of intervals in the scale, central tone, absolute pitch of the scale, typical musical motifs and sometimes even rhythmic patterns. He found that the Makamat had developed from earlier versions widespread in the folk music of Arabs, Persians\*\* and Turks and that the Islam had gathered them into a series of "rings" and gave them names. He pointed out the following stages of development: from early pentatonic, via the fifth and the octave to tetrachords.

He also tried to determine the nature of Oriental music in general according to a few predominating features: monophony, microtones, trills and vibrati, compositions formed by short motives, blurring of boundaries between the "venerable" artistic music (recitatives, for example) and folk music ("mole music", simple and rhythmical).

7) **Robert Lachmann**

Lachmann covered a larger ground than any other scholars before him, from both the geographical point of view (from the Far East, via the Near East to North Africa) and the quantitative point of view of musical material examined along with the respective social-cultural background.

Here is a list of his major findings:

- a) In vocal music, the rhythmic elements are prevalent, sometimes accompanied by movements of the body, as well as the close following of the words, which gives rise to relatively free melodic structure.

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\*For his interpretation of "races" as well as for his geographical/ethnological division of the area, see Part One § 1&2.

\*\*The Persian and Turkish Makamat are considered more skillful and complicated than the Arabic ones. Here are some of the Persian Makamat: Nahuand, Rast, Buslik, Aegean, etc.

- b) Rhythm is much freer in human singing and stringed instruments than in instruments incapable of producing prolonged sounds (percussion, plucked instruments).
- c) Modes do not represent clear and fixed units but rather a mixture of patterns. They all belong to one scale-system.
- d) Performance through oral tradition is responsible for the fact that Orientals, using only their auditory memory, are able to see music as a whole but not to separate its different components.
- e) Notation. Lachmann tried to find the common line that should link all modes into one scale-system. He tried to make a list of melodic formulae common to all modes and thus arrive at a uniform notation – but no ideal solution was found.
- f) An important part of his research deals with the poetic singing (folk music) of Arabs in Palestine.

8) **G.H. Dahlmann**

Dahlmann studied the Arab music of Palestine according to two criteria:

- a) Function (peasant songs, pastoral songs, etc.).
- b) Way of performance (solo, chorus, antiphonal singing).

9) **Dalia Cohen** of Jerusalem carried out a vast and comprehensive research on the living music of the Arabs in Israel and here are some of her findings:

- a) She shed light on the specific lawfulness inherent in the living music transmitted also by oral tradition.
- b) She determined the meaning of the modal framework and found a clear definition pertaining to its essence.
- c) With the aid of the melograph she has discovered laws of intonation, different from those known so far. These laws classify intonation in living music in general and at the same time raise serious doubts about some of the accepted theories regarding "natural", "universally known" intonation.
- d) She clarified the nature of various influences on the performance: theoretical knowledge and study based on books; the influence of modern Arabic music and that of secular folk music on liturgical music.
- e) She examined the mutual relationship between theory and practice.

## Summary of the major ideas found by the above researchers

### Regarding internal organization and laws of the music as performed

Opinions on any universal laws commanding the complexity of modes largely differ. The only "universal" law regarding human singing seems to be that coming from his throat. Beyond this, all other laws seem to be valid only in part:

**Idelsohn** points out the hierarchy in the development of scales.

**Jeanin** limits the meaning of a "universal lawfulness" to the diatonic scale.

**Lachmann and Villoteau** limit the same to certain types of instrumental music only.

**D. Cohen** found that the multiplicity of variations and changes in intonation follow certain well-defined patterns (contrary to the accepted "intonation-class" theory held by most scholars). So, for example, the changes in the size of seconds are defined by:

- 1) The characteristic "scatter" of each second;
- 2) The "tonal skeleton";
- 3) The type of skeleton.

Furthermore, she found that there was little – if any – evidence of "natural" intonation. Fourths and fifths were different from the so-called "pure" intervals. She also found the modes to be determined not only by a group of characteristic motifs, central tones and characteristic intervals, but also by the tempo, the amount of melisma, the ambitus and even, to a degree, absolute pitch. Each mode was found to be defined by one or several "types of skeleton" and sometimes the same "type of skeleton" is common for several modes.

### Regarding performance

All agree that it holds a leading role in the Middle Eastern practice. All have pointed out changes and improvisations as shaping the composition but no comprehensive research has been done yet in this field.

### Regarding relations between theory and practice

All agree that the two do not overlap. **Villoteau**: Regards the theoretical writings as the only "legal" source, because laws are more evident there than in living music.

**Pariso:** There is something artificial about laws of intonation and this provides for many aberrations from them.

**Jeanin:** Compares seconds of various sizes and asks himself why they do not conform themselves to the "true" diatonic scale.

**Rebours:** Holds that the aberrations of practice from theory are due to external influences. He reaches a conclusion that all oral traditions are exposed to external factors.

**Lachmann:** The theory is closely influenced by the construction of the instrument, therefore vocal music is conditioned, at least theoretically, by the existing relationship between instruments and human voice.

## **Part Four: Bibliography**

The list of works below is a selection. All works can be found in the library of the Dept. of Musicology of the Hebrew university in Jerusalem.

The list is arranged in two groups according to subject-matter of the different works.

- (a) Works treating researches in theoretical writings;
- (b) Works treating researches directly concerning living music.

### 1) **Works treating researches in theoretical writings**

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