

## **Intervention and reform of Arab music in 1932 and beyond**

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### **Introduction**

The 1932 Conference of Arab music was a landmark event that has shaped music education, scholarship, and cultural policy in Arab countries since that time. This event codified a category called “Arab music” and set forth a group of explicit objectives that have re-appeared regularly, in various forms, in subsequent conferences, including this one.

Reflecting this historical moment, the conference record reveals profound differences in thinking about Arab music between several distinct groups: Egyptian reformers, professional musicians, and foreign scholars (also discussed in Racy 1991). The often heated exchange between members of these groups in the conference record is a fascinating subject; however, in this paper I concentrate upon the Egyptian reformers whose idea it was to hold the conference and examine the assumptions that shaped their agenda. In addition, I will compare their intended results with the actual results of the conference and offer some remarks on the conference’s failure to achieve the specific results the organizers intended. Finally, as a counterpoint to the 1932 reform project, I observe how professional musicians in Egypt are undertaking change in the contemporary practice of Arab music.

### **Historical Background**

To interpret the socio-cultural context of this unique historical moment, one must first identify the different groups of Egyptian music specialists that were involved in and impacted by the 1932 Conference. Until the early twentieth century, the musical profession in Egypt (as in much of Ottoman territory) was organized by a variety of hereditary guilds. There were separate guilds for male and female singers and dancers, for players of each instrument, and most likely for musicians from the different ethnic and religious communities (Baer 1964). In general, the entertainment professions were among the “low-status” guilds, and members of these groups were marginalized in society (Nieuwkerk 1995). Although they were essential participants in the celebrations [xx] of many social classes, entertainers (including musicians, singers, and especially dancers) were held in suspicion for their profession’s association with illicit activities (Racy 1977).

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Victorian idea of music as a part of a cultured upbringing began to take hold among the Egyptian elite. The Khedive Isma‘il was a patron of music whose initiatives, including the construction of the Cairo Opera House and sending Egyptian singers to Istanbul for education in Oriental music, supported both Western and Arab music in Egypt. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century there emerged a generation

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of educated Egyptians, primarily of Ottoman heritage, referred to collectively as the *effendiyya*. From this group, a class of gentleman musicians, or *hawwin* emerged. These elite amateur musicians published instrumental method books and self-study manuals on music theory and notation. It was members of this group that founded *Nadi al-Musiqa al-Sharqiyya* (The Oriental Music Club) in 1914, which eventually developed into *al-Ma'had al-Maliki lil-Musiqa al-Sharqiyya*, the Royal Oriental Music Institute. This was the institute that hosted the 1932 Conference; the gentleman musicians that formed its staff comprised the “local arrangements committee” of the conference.

These gentleman musicians had an uneasy relationship with the professional musicians who made their living playing for social events, in concert halls and, since the 1910s, in Egypt’s popular musical theater. The professional musicians, who were now organized as a “Syndicate” that replaced the earlier guilds, were unschooled, played “vulgar” music, and continued to be held in moral suspicion.

Social and political historians including Armbrust, Gershoni and Jackson, etc. have discussed the role of the *effendiyya* in mediating Egyptian identity in a world that was seen to be divided between East and West, and this dynamic is a constant theme in the conference record. During the 1920s and 30s, Egyptian politicians and *litterati* struggled to define Egyptian identity in view of its ancient history, its recent status as an Ottoman province, the persistent British occupation of Egypt, and its own colonial ambitions in the Sudan. To many members of the *effendiyya*, things Western symbolized power and prestige; the conference record quite clearly indicates the mapping of this symbolism onto music.

### **Music in Need of Intervention**

His Majesty King Fu’ad I, patron of the 1932 Conference, expressed his wish that the conference “*would have as its result the revival of [Arab music’s] past, the safeguarding of its present, and advancement toward its future, on a foundation of preserving its nature and its distinguishing characteristics. [Through our actions] it is hoped that Arab music will reach the degree of refinement and perfection that Western music has reached*” (Kitab mu’tamar 1933:52).

El-Shawan and others have discussed the transformation of the category “*al-musiqa ash-sharqiyya*” to “*al-musiqa al-Arabiyya*,” a move which both created an artificial grouping of cultural traditions among Arabs (itself an emergent category) and emphasized a distinction from non-Arab musical traditions, including Turkish and Persian musics. Moreover, the 1932 Conference of Arab music was planned not simply to survey and document Arab music, but to make recommendations and to intervene in the course of its development. In order to do this, Arab music needed to be submitted to the scrutiny of the invited scholars for a thorough examination and diagnosis.

Mustafa Bey Reda, director of the Oriental Music Institute, published an article a month before the conference’s opening session in which he announced: “*There will be seven artistic committees and each committee will be assigned a particular subject of research. And the decision that these committees will publish will be like the judgment of a Court of Cassation that will be imposed on our Arab music*” (Rida 1932).

For what crime was Arab music on trial? Why did this crime call for foreigners to serve on the jury?

European visitors to Arab lands had for years offered their judgment of the local music they heard on their visits. Edward Lane, who resided in Egypt long enough to

become an aficionado, wrote in his *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*: “*I must confess that I generally take great delight in the more refined kind of music which I occasionally hear in Egypt; and the more I become habituated to the style, the more I am pleased with it; though, at the same time, I must state that I have not met with many Europeans who enjoy it in the same degree as myself*” (Lane 1966 [1836]:354).

Confirming Lane’s observation about his compatriots, a female traveler to Egypt published a quite different report in 1827. Awakened by a band of musicians in the street, she wrote: “*I ran to my window, fearing at first that some insurrection had broken out, and that they had come to besiege us in our European quarter; an event by no means surprising in the East, where people’s minds are so fickle, and fanaticism so easily excited. What was my surprise, at beholding a band of a dozen Arab musicians sitting before the door of the Okel, and straining, with all their might to execute this truly infernal music... It appears from this, that the Orientals entertain notions very different from ours on this subject. With them noise takes the place of harmony...*” (Minutoli 1827:32-34).

The Arab music this traveler experienced was noisy – a complaint commonly lodged by those in power against any style of music that is perceived to threaten the social order – and therefore suggestive of “insurrection.”

Almost certainly acquainted with European assessments like these of their local music, Egyptian musical reformers of the 1920s and 1930s had developed a brand of musical chauvinism that relied upon unrelenting comparison of Arab music with Western music. Arab music’s shortcomings were explained in contrast with Western music’s strengths. Reformers applied evolutionary principles to music. Since Arab music did not use harmony, its instruments were less expressive (in their estimation) than those of Western music, and it was not well known throughout the world, they concluded that it must be less evolved than Western music. They deduced that in order for Arab music to progress, it should follow in the footsteps of Western music.

Like the European traveler I have just quoted, conference organizers believed that Arab music was disordered. However, to them, the disorder was not an essential quality of Arab music, but the result of degradation caused by contemporary musicians’ laziness and neglect. Writing about singers in Egypt, Mahmud al-Hifni complained in 1936 that the ignorance of these “parrots,” in comparison to a previous generation of Egyptian musicians, had undermined their country’s reputation in the rest of the world:

Egypt has taken the lead in artistic culture for the last forty years to the extent that has made her the leader of the Orient and the object of its admiration. So, shame on the inheritors [of this culture] to destroy by their foolishness, conceit and ignorance what their fathers have established by their talent and their genius. And the crime that these fools have committed, it is not only a crime against themselves, but rather a crime and aggression against the artistic reputation of Egypt and her musical majesty (al-Hifni 1936).

Here we get a sense of why Arab music was on trial. Given that European travelers were prone to fear insurrection upon hearing “noisy” street music, the effendiyya feared that musicians’ non-musical “parroting” undermined the nation’s ambitions to join the march of modern nations. In other writings, al-Hifni suggests that singers should be required to attend the music institutes and receive a card to be allowed to perform publicly -- in effect a “license to sing”. In this way, reformers such as al-Hifni concluded that it was up to them to rescue Egyptian music from the hands of its own

practitioners. Only through reform would Arab music claim its rightful position among other national and international musics.

### **The Reform Agenda in 1932**

The remedy for ignorance and disorder, reformers thought, was to enforce a more scientific approach to music. The agenda for the 1932 conference was assembled primarily from the work of three scholars, two of them European and the third Egyptian. German comparative musicologist Curt Sachs had been invited to Egypt in 1929 to write a report on Egyptian music. His report, in which he upheld the nobility and purity of rural traditions in comparison to urban music and the Western-leaning musical theater, was taken as an insult by Egyptian professional musicians. In a similar vein, the French Orientalist scholar and long-time resident of Tunisia Baron Rodolphe D'Erlanger believed music in Tunisia had suffered from the decadence of its practitioners, the corrupting influence of European music, and the neglect of serious scholars and musicians (Davis 1997:73). D'Erlanger aimed both to sustain *ma'luf* practice and to protect *ma'luf* repertory by transcribing it in text and systematizing its music theory. D'Erlanger was prevented by illness from actually attending the conference. Educated in Berlin, Mahmud al-Hifni was the first Egyptian to receive the Ph.D. in music. During the 1920s, al-Hifni had worked with German musicologists on a translation of al-Kindi's treatise and had also been involved in researching Pharaonic music. Upon his return, al-Hifni was appointed as music inspector for the Ministry of Education and set about implementing a complete music curriculum in Egypt's public schools.

In line with the interests of these three scholars, the conference agenda emphasized historical research, education, and the collection and organization of musical samples and their component elements. Seven working groups were convened, each charged with a different task. One group was to record samples of Arab music, another was to document the maqams and rhythms in use throughout Arab lands, and another to experiment and make recommendations on the use of an equally-tempered 24-tone musical scale. The largest committee was charged with developing a comprehensive curriculum for music education in Egypt. The musical instruments committee was to determine which European instruments could be appropriately used in Arab music. A committee was formed to examine existing historical manuscripts relating to the history of Arab music and to explore the publication of additional scholarly works. The General Issues committee was to summarize the contemporary state of Arab music and to make recommendations for its future development.

The conference agenda – developed in planning sessions that deliberately excluded many of the professional musicians from participation – demonstrates the reformers' priorities. In each group, the objective was to collect information that somehow encompassed or applied to the totality of Arab music, and then to intervene based upon this encompassing knowledge. They sought to develop strategies that would direct musical change for years to come. They held to a belief that theory should generate practice, not the other way around – after all, musicians' practice was the source of the disorder that held Arab music hostage. Redemption lay in the systematization and organization of Arab music in accordance with what were understood to be the habits of modern nations (such as calculation, reason, and discipline, as explored by Timothy

Mitchell and others). With this systematization they would stamp out the disorder rampant in Arab music and the lack of discipline among its practitioners.

### **Results of the Conference**

In a biographical memoir about Mahmud al-Hifni, Samha al-Kholy (2002:158) summarizes the assessment of the day that of the seven committees at the 1932 Conference, four of them succeeded in their duties, while three were inconclusive and required further research. While the music reformers were enthusiastic about the conclusions offered by the Recordings, Music Education, Music History and Manuscripts, and General Issues committees, they were disappointed that no consensus was reached in the Musical Scale, Rhythmic and Melodic Modes, and Musical Instruments committees.

At the root of these so-called failures was the scholars' inability to isolate theoretical principles that could be generalized to account for everything that occurred, or should occur, in practice. Their discussions of theories of intonation bore this out. Conference attendees could not agree whether the maqams of Arab music could be derived from a master scale consisting of 24 equally-tempered quarter-tones. The Musical Scale committee ran experiments in which scholars and musicians listened to maqams generated by a piano manufactured to produce these 24 quarter-tones and were asked whether these versions of the maqams were acceptable to the ear. The conference attendees could not agree on whether the temperament was a close enough approximation to produce the Arab maqams, and the issue had to be tabled for further research. The lack of consensus on this issue also made it impossible for the Musical Instruments Committee to definitively determine which other European instruments were appropriate for Arab music.

All of these areas in which the Conference "failed" in its goals were areas in which reformers were attempting to formulate a universal model to be re-universalized in practice. We can compare their efforts to the musical intervention Ruth Davis documents in Tunisia, where members of the Rashidiyya Institute led by Mohamed Triki sought to establish by consensus authoritative, notated transcriptions of the *ma'luf* repertoire (Davis 2004:52-54). Transcriptions compiled by Triki then became the basis for performance in the enlarged *ma'luf* orchestra. The goals of the 1932 Conference, however, were much more ambitious. Scholars were attempting to reach consensus on multiple issues within a much broader musical realm, the whole Arab world. In addition, the Conference had alienated itself from many of the practicing musicians by not inviting the Syndicate of professional musicians. The reformers did not have the necessary support of the musical community to implement universalizing reforms in the areas of maqam theory, intonation, or restricting the use of European instruments.

The areas in which the Conference achieved greatest success were those which depended least upon the cooperation of the practicing musicians. The recordings committee, charged with documenting the most authentic representations of Eastern melodies and forms by carefully selected musicians, recorded over 175 discs of great importance to researchers and scholars. The Historical Manuscripts committee engaged in fruitful discussion and their report was well received. However, the most far-reaching accomplishment of the conference was the development of a comprehensive music education curriculum in Egypt, which was soon replicated in other Arab countries. The report of the music education committee published in the Conference book includes

extensive curricular guidelines for teaching students of different levels of talent and musical engagement. These guidelines formed the basis for curricula implemented in Egyptian public education as well as in the newly-renamed Arab Music Institute and new institutes for music education founded shortly after the conference. It should be noted that the new teachers of music for Egyptian public education were not to be recruited from among the professional musicians, but rather from a group unassociated with the corrupt milieu of professional music – that is, women. The first of the music education institutes to open in 1936 was the institute for women; a similar institute for men was not opened until the 1950s.

The results achieved by the Conference, convened as an intervention by music reformers to systematize and rationalize the performance of Arab music, succeeded in precisely those areas which, by virtue of their independence from entrenched musical practice, gave reformers the opportunity to implement what was essentially a new system. New institutions and curricula provided opportunities for reformers to determine both the content and the personnel of this new field of knowledge. And, in fact, the music education system in Egypt has been successful at instructing students in a standard music theory that utilizes (at least on paper) the equally-tempered 24-tone scale.

### **Arab music reform in the present**

I would like to offer now my observations of some current efforts to reform musical practice in the Arab world. In Egypt, where I conducted the majority of my recent research (in 2002-03 and again in 2005), I noticed that most of the musicians I spoke with had very clear opinions about the need for reform in contemporary Arab music pedagogy.

Seven decades after the 1932 Conference, musicians express a great deal of concern about the low standard of instrumental instruction offered in the music institutes. They report that these institutes do not devote enough time in the curriculum to instrumental instruction. In addition, because performers can earn much more money working in studios, touring with pop music stars or teaching abroad, the best instrumentalists tend not to be employed at the institutes. Finally, musicians charge that there is a pervasive lack of discipline in the institutional system among teachers and students alike – an ironic complaint, since this is exactly the charge that reformers of 1932 made against the professional musicians of that time!

Because the standard of performance instruction in the institutes is not high enough to train top-notch musicians, instrumentalists who desire to be professional musicians must develop their skill through other means, including seeking out better teachers outside of the institutes as well as self-study aided by recordings of past and present masters. By these means, musicians are cultivating new levels of virtuosity and creating new instrumental techniques. Several musicians I spoke with are quite keen to make Arab music more widely known internationally – a goal they share with reformers of 1932. Performing throughout Europe, Africa, and elsewhere in the Middle East, it seems that some of these musicians are realizing this goal.

The success of these musicians in improving their own musicianship and enhancing the global visibility of Arab music seems to confirm the shortcomings of the theory-based reform agenda that the 1932 conference hoped to realize. Emphasizing music theory and requiring institutional credentials will not ensure a thriving musical tradition.

A vibrant music-culture that is meaningful to a society and inspiring to young musicians is more likely to result from encouraging creative exploration by individual musicians than from the enforcement of scientific musical rules.

As scholars, administrators and cultural policy-makers like ourselves give our analysis and make suggestions, we should keep in mind lessons learned from the reform project of 1932. We should strive for dialogue that includes the perspectives of diverse groups. We should not try to force the norms of one musical style to apply to another. Finally, we should understand that in the world of musical practice, directed change is far less common and generally less effective than change that results from the quotidian creative activities of musicians practicing their craft.

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