



Article de recherche

West-East on Arabic Music

Scheherazade Q Hassan

Université Paris Nanterre, Nanterre, France

ABSTRACT

This article examines how coloniality and Orientalism have shaped European representations of Arabic music and, consequently, affected the value attributed to the musical cultures of Arab peoples. Using the historical critiques of figures such as Winston Churchill and French orientalist scholars and musicians (including Villoteau and Christianovitch), the text highlights the racist assumptions embedded in their descriptions of Arabic musical practice—assumptions that stem from ignorance of Arabic language, history, and theoretical traditions. It argues that these judgments frequently resulted from a Eurocentric framework that evaluated non-Western music through Western canons, while overlooking the internal logics of *maqām*-based modal systems, heterophonic vocality, improvisation, and culturally situated rhythmic structures. The article also situates colonial influence within broader historical processes : European archaeological interest in Egypt, the institutionalization of Western opera and notation in Cairo, and the role of early twentieth-century international conferences in redefining “Arabic music” alongside the discourse of modernization and reform. Finally, it discusses ongoing hybridities in contemporary Arab musical spaces and reflects on the “double face” of modernity/coloniality, emphasizing that cultural exchange does not necessarily require cultural replacement, but can coexist with the preservation of local traditions.

KEYWORDS

Orientalism, Coloniality, Arab Music, Eurocentrism, Maqām

ARTICLE HISTORY

Published : 24 December 2025

Coloniality with its orientalist superiority and its racist expressions has dominated at least throughout the last two centuries, the political and socio-cultural spheres of the Arab world including its people and the music they create.

One of the numerous and flagrant examples of how Arab people were designated is the declaration by Winston Churchill, minister of colonies, who declared in 1947, when the Palestinians were in revolt against the British, that “I do not agree that the dog in a manger has the final right to the manger even though he may have lain there for a very long

time, I do not admit that right. I do not admit that a wrong has been done to these people by the fact that a stronger race, a more worldly race has come in and taken their place” (Churchill, 1937/1982). If a people are seen in this way, we can imagine how little their music is considered.

When Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1789, among those who went with him was Villoteau who was asked to document the music of the Egyptians. He described them as “barbarians, passive and lazy,” who “vegetate in an apathy and lack of worry,” without interest in the “genius of



Corresponding author :

Scheherazade Q Hassan | sch.hassan@gmail.com | Université Paris Nanterre, Nanterre, France

Copyright : © 2025 by the authors. | **Licensee** : Luminous Insights, Wyoming, USA.



This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

scientific progress” dear to westerners of the 19th century (Villoteau, 1826). The degree of racism in his text is based on their being Arabs and Muslims, compared to the non-Arab communities living at that time in Cairo like the Africans, Ethiopians, Armenians, etc., considered noble primitives contrary to the Egyptians who were cultural savages “not sensitive to the soft pleasures that elevates human beings beyond the animals” (Villoteau, 1826).

Influenced by the Enlightenment and the Encyclopaedists with ideas based on reason and rationalism, Villoteau—who studied philosophy and sang in a church choir and knew music—considered himself as a representative of civilization with all its moral and political implications among the barbarian savages.

During his presence in Egypt between 1809 and 1826, Villoteau worked on the two most voluminous texts we have on Arabic music, *De l'état actuel de l'art musical en Égypte* and *Description historique, technique et littéraire des instruments de musique des Orientaux*, that he finished once back in Paris with the help of Arabists who translated some of the manuscripts bought in Cairo (Villoteau, 1826). Like other Enlightenmenters, his judgments were based on the universal pretensions of the Eurocentric model, implying that appreciating good music does not require becoming a connoisseur of that music. For him, Egyptian music is contrary to what art is: “one hears from morning until night a revolting music that tears up our ears by its forced modulations, ornaments with its extravagant and barbaric taste, executed with an unattractive nasal and unassured voice accompanied with instruments with thin and highly shrilled sounds” (Villoteau, 1826). It is a music of “ignorance, bad taste, bad quality of voice, of instruments, with technique of ornamentations” (Villoteau, 1826). Curiously, as a musician he could not distinguish in their music the intervals of three-quarter tones (Villoteau, 1826). “Their technique is poor and defective though they have the vanity of considering themselves as knowledgeable. Entirely ignorant and deprived of education, their knowledge of music does not go beyond routine” (Villoteau, 1826). As for the well-known Arabic music treatises that he did not know then, Villoteau believed that they were certainly “nothing more than reflecting a form of the cultural fanaticism of Arab musicians who pretend to be scientific and knowledgeable” (Villoteau, 1826). However, as a paternalistic invader, he promised in exchange

for their collaboration, to teach them how to read music according to the European system.

More than a half century later, a number of French musicians came to Algeria, then a French colony, in order to develop local music by introducing piano and European music. One of them was Christianovitch (1835–1874) who wrote about Algerian music in 1867. He was full of scorn. For him, the “denaturalization” and the low level of Arabic music that differs from the canons of western music was due to Islamic religion (Christianovitch, 1863). Like many others he had no knowledge of the language or the musical treatises. After listening, in a coffee house, to some songs from the Algerian classical music, the Noubas, he wrote that “it was nothing else than an endless flow of scales and ornaments” (Christianovitch, 1863). He was very upset and in a bad mood for not being able to discern the melody to be able to write it down, because it was enveloped with all sorts of un-useful sounds (he transcribed 40 melodies and harmonised them). Like Villoteau, and many others after him, it is the complex rhythmic accompaniment and the ornamentation that prevented Christianovitch from hearing its basic melody. He had to ask the singer to repeat for him every section and sing them without ornaments. This procedure helped him to write down the melody. When he came next day to verify what he wrote with another singer, he still could hardly distinguish the basic melody. He wrote that “the oriental musician did not know what simplicity was like or even did not want to know it” (Christianovitch, 1863).

All this clearly shows that it was common to consider western music as the unique universal totalitarian expression with elements and rules supposed to be applied to all world musics, regardless of the fact that traditional musicians express themselves in their musical idioms—languages. But as I have mentioned, those who judged Arabic music knew neither Arabic language nor its history with its rich historical references on every possible musical aspect. So what is Arabic music?

Arabic Music refers to a territory and to a language. It is the music practiced in all Arab countries from Iraq to Morocco and southward towards the Gulf up to Yemen by all the inhabitants who use the Arabic language, whatever is or was their ethnic origin or confessional beliefs. Historically, culturally and musically it has an extended prolongation

outside the borders of the Arab World, which explains the extremely vivid inter-influence between Arabic Music and that of Persia and Turkey, extended to Central Asia on the one hand and to Africa and Spain on the other.

The geographic extension of the Arab World naturally favoured the emergence of many musical dialects, noted since the 9th century by the Arab philosopher and musicologist al-Kindī. According to their different geographic situations, opened more or less outward, their classical traditions flourished with diverse stylistic tendencies while sharing theoretical bases. This is also true for their folk music and popular music that enrich each other with new mutual elements.

The characteristics of Arabic music is also known in the music of other Islamic cultures : modal music based on a system designated as *maqām*; dominantly heterophonic and vocal related to poetry as its inseparable twin, with basic relations to rhythmic cycles, both poetical and musical. The importance given to improvisation, which is expected from the performer, is a fundamental and essential characteristic of this music, that has always been an important part of society, where audience and performers are in communion, they can express loudly their feelings, ask for repetition as much as they want; appreciating the performer, who, with his advanced techniques, could act as a composer.

What is important to mention here briefly is that all the constitutive elements of Arabic music had been written and documented by the Arabs since the 8th–9th centuries. Its modal-tonal and rhythmic modes, melodic and poetics, are described in details over time. Its different musical forms and genres with their constituent parts and sections, known throughout the vast geographical regions are written in details and in verbal transcription. It has a specific transcription system, unlike western notations based on indicating the names of degrees, intervals, the rhythmic modes. The succession of intervals is indicated in such a way that it could be performed literally. The example of an instrumental piece played literally in the 9th century on the *ūd* is well-known, while vocal pieces follow the same rules, which are known by heart by the performer who can improvise with additions and ornamentations. In all its elements, all aspects of Arabic music have been documented in manuscripts throughout time.

As seen by both sides, the East and the West, the questions and responses of each side on their relation to Arabic music, are multifarious.

Since Napoleon's invasion, Egypt with its central geographical position remained a core interest of Europe, and the continuous fascination of French archaeologists in the ancient pharaonic history did not diminish even under the British rule that followed the three years of Napoleon.

In 1869, for the occasion of the opening the Suez Canal, in agreement with the ruler Khedive Ismael, who was an amateur of lyric arts, the well-known French archaeologist Mariette proposed inaugurating an opera house in Cairo and asked Verdi to write an opera for the occasion (*Aida* was supposed to be presented but was not ready, so *Rigoletto* was presented instead). From the latter 19th century well into the 20th, Cairo became an important centre of European culture, where a large number of Europeans lived surrounded by all possible aspects of their cultural institutions including western music that since became an important part of the city and where Western opera singers, ballets, and great 20th century musicians among them Menuhin, Rostropovich, Aram Khachaturian performed and where Egyptian singers started to be trained in opera technique.

After the fall of the Ottoman empire, nationalism dominated the Arab world simultaneously with the challenges for development and modernity. In 1932, the very first international conference on Arabic music, which is very first on non-European music was organized in Cairo. Well known European composers, musicians and musicologists of their time, who had different positions than the previous generations, like Béla Bartok, Hindemith and Alois Haba (composers), Henri George Farmer (historian of Arabic music), Hornbostel (ethnomusicologist and historian), Curt Sachs (historian), Lachmann (ethnomusicologist), Cara de Vaux and Egon Wellez, were invited together with Arab musicians and musicologists from different Arab countries (Congrès de musique arabe du Caire, 1932).

The organizer's twofold aims included first : to document the actual state of Arabic music as represented in the conference. This is where the term Arabic music started to be used besides what continues to be known as oriental music. The second important aim was to improve, develop, reform and modernize Arabic music, with ideas inspired from

European music. At that time those among the European musicians and musicologists present at the conference who had the occasion to discover and hear the performances of traditional Egyptian music admired it and tried to persuade Egyptians authorities to keep their beautiful music. The Egyptian answer was : “you have been considering us as underdeveloped and backward, and now you don’t want us to modernize and improve ourselves?” (Hassan, 1992).

The way colonial Europe represented the Arab world, and the way the Arab Middle East saw its interest in western development in the name of progress and modernity, lead to the conflicted question as to whether it was possible to reject foreign colonial domination while accepting western technology, science, medicine and other manifestations of advancement. Was it possible to keep the authentic cultural traditions of a nation alive after the racist, arrogant attitudes towards traditional societies and their arts including music that came along with the foreign colonial domination?

In the struggle for independence, the rise of nationalism, the search of modernity, and opening to international humanism, the intellectual reaction in the Arab world was that exchange between civilizations is as old as history, and all cultures that have sought progress and modernity and a place in the world space, were influenced. In this context, in the Arab world, arts and literature and music have not been part of the rejection of colonialism. World literature had an important place in the Arab world together with the plastic arts, while classical music was tremendously appreciated by many groups of intellectuals. The point was that none of the foreign expressions should replace local traditional and instead should exist side by side.

With time, to evoke music, different modalities and forms of influence emerged and took place starting with cosmopolitan cities like Cairo. Besides the separate and parallel coexistence of Western classical music and Arabic traditional music, different forms of hybridity started to develop in traditional contexts; for instance, the traditional Arab ensembles, influenced by the size of symphony orchestras, began to take on a bigger size, and many European instruments like the cello and contrabass and a bigger number of violins and other instruments were introduced.

At different Arab musical institutes, European notation, Western music theory and terminology were also taught.

At the same time and despite the continuous complex relationship between East and West, due to different aspects of colonial influence and the continuity of racism, today in Europe, interest in Arabic music is present at universities and research centres. In the Arab world, in addition to the three spaces of music : Arab music in its traditional form and the numerous in-between hybrid currents, a new space of influence has developed among a great number of small groups who in the mass media perform western pop, Rai, Rapp, etc., genres with mixed instruments though usually sung with new Arabic lyrics.

The long history of cultural interpenetration is repeated, exchange has always existed historically between civilizations, from time that Greeks and Romans were influenced by Mesopotamian cultures and modern Arabic music is another example of such fusion. This dilemma was expressed by Walter Dignolo, the postcolonialist scholar, as the double face modernity/coloniality (Dignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 192).

Remerciements

Article adapted from a presentation at The Edward Said Days, Barenboim–Said Academy, Berlin, 26–27 August 2023.

Note de l’éditeur

Cet article est publié par Luminous Insights en partenariat avec l’Université Antonine. Son contenu a été préparé, évalué par les pairs et accepté conformément aux politiques et aux normes de l’Université Antonine en tant que partenaire institutionnel d’origine. L’article n’a pas été publié ailleurs, et Luminous Insights est l’éditeur en ligne de référence pour cette version.

Note d’écriture inclusive

Dans cette revue, la forme masculine désigne, lorsqu’il y a lieu, aussi bien les femmes que les hommes. L’emploi du masculin a pour seul but de faciliter la lecture du texte et n’a aucune intention discriminatoire.

Cite as

Hassan S. (2025). West-East on Arabic Music. *Revue des Traditions Musicales*, 19(1), 1–7. 10.51300/RTM-2025-145

Références

- Chritianovitch, A. (1863). *Esquisse historique de la musique arabe aux temps anciens*. Hachette.
- Churchill, W. (1937). *Testimony before the Peel Commission on Palestine*. PALCIT archives (published in 1982).
- Congrès de musique arabe du Caire. (1932). *Recueil des travaux du Congrès de musique arabe du Caire (1932)*. Le Caire : Imprimerie de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale.
- Hassan, S. Q. (Ed.). (1992). *Musique arabe : Le Congrès du Caire de 1932*. Le Caire : Centre d'études et de documentation économiques, juridiques et sociales (CE-DEJ).
- Mignolo, W. D., & Walsh, C. E. (2018). *Decoloniality : Concepts, analytics, praxis*. Duke University Press.
- Said, E. W. (1975). *Beginnings : Intention and method*. Basic Books.
- Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.
- Said, E. W. (1994). *Culture and imperialism*. Vintage Books.
- Shlaim, A. (2021). On British colonialism, antisemitism, and Palestinian rights. In *Middle East Eye*. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/big-story/uk-palestine-israel-policy-balfour-johnson-antisemitism-colonialism>
- Villoteau, G.-H. de. (1826). De l'état actuel de l'art musical en Égypte. In *Description de l'Égypte*. Imprimerie de Panckoucke.