



## SOCIETY

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## Review

# Music in the Arab world: Performing Tarab

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*During the historical trajectory of the Middle East, music has been associated with an unexpected spiritual power that can transform the performers and the audience in a numinous way. This power has its locus at the concept of tarab. Tarab underpins the connection that the performer and the audience develop through songs or oriental dance, by sharing the same sentimental conditions. This condition is created through the emotional connection and aesthetic reactions that performance causes. Having this spiritual power, tarab has the ability to break the constructed cultural boundaries among mind and body, cognition and emotion, providing an empirical given reality that mediates in society.*

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## Performing tarab in the Arab world

Throughout the history and cultural development of the Middle East, music has been intertwined with an astonishing power, which has the ability to transfigure the performers and the audience on a spiritual level. This powerful aesthetic impact has its locus in tarab performances. For more than a thousand years, tarab was underpinning one of the most important aesthetics in Arab music, described as a conflation among music and emotion transformation, an ecstasy transcendence or enhancement. Social relations and emotional states are joining the musical aesthetic through songs and dance, that are inextricably linked with the concept of tarab.

In the Arab world tarab or "enhancement" does not have a ready translation. Tarab is used in Arab culture to describe the emotional effect of music and is also related with the Arabic traditional form of art-music.<sup>1</sup> Inside the classical Arabic music, the musical aesthetics and emotionality share a common ground. For the Arabs, tarab is not synonymous to music, but instead it goes beyond, expanded to an aesthetic concept referring to the musical emotions and traditional poetic resources that creates it. More specifically, tarab lies among the traditional system of maqam (melodic mode), which employs solo singing with evocative poetry through an improvisational manner.<sup>2</sup> This combination develops into an aesthetic concept, wherein an emotional exchange among performers and audience come to the surface. The performed music creates an emotional motivation, during which the listener is led to sense joy, sadness or excitement. The achievement of tarab signifies the originality and the aesthetic quality among the performer and the audience, wherein the musical ecstasy is produced.

According to Michael Frishkopf, tarab has been described -at least in the Egyptian culture- as the liaison of harmony (insijam) and balance (mucadala) among the performer and the audience. It represents the exchange of emotions among them (tabadul- al-shucur), the unity of their feelings (wahdat al-shucur) and their development into one (dhaeb).<sup>3</sup> Tarab underpins the musical concomitance of performer and listener or the connection of an individual with his/her feelings. The traditional features that were incorporated into tarab during the 30s, have been gradually dissipated from its concept, due to the rapid social, political and economic changes. Therefore, tarab illustrates a mean of personal and social depiction, operating a frame for the representation of the self, wherein the value of emotional states take a linguistic expression enforcing a cultural authenticity and an emotional transparency that changes according to the performer and the audience. This uniqueness has designated tarab as the main component of Arabic music, that it could be detected in different forms and types, as for instance its locus within the Sufi religion, representing a combination of social relation and musical performance.

While tarab and the classical music in the Arab world has been traditionally associated with songs, it has also expanded to another art form such as dance. Oriental dance or belly dance are highly connected with Music al-gadid, which developed during the 30s and 40s in a lot of areas in the Middle East such as Cairo, as an artistic and theatrical dance, commonly performed in night clubs and weddings.<sup>4</sup> The traditional Oriental dance is a progression of a lot of sets or dance numbers in which the body, the mind and the soul are interfered and are enhanced from the music and the rhythm, during which the dancers and the audience undergo a feverish emotional transformation.

## Tarab and its social context

In its social context tarab breaks the cultural boundaries that have been constructed among mind and body, cognition and emotion inner and outer are correspondently dissolving. Through songs and dance, the performers and the audience explore the values and the aesthetics of the mystical ecstasy experiences. The touch that is created among the performers and the audience is diffused by the songs and the dance, wherein the viewer feels and embodies the emotions, feelings and experiences that are performed.<sup>5</sup>

According to Dr. A. J. Racy's, tarab is in Arab culture the merger between music and emotional transformation.<sup>6</sup> The performers and the music lovers of the classical Arab musical repertoire link the cultural authenticity and the aesthetic quality with the ability of artists and their audiences to achieve tarab.<sup>7</sup> There is a lively exchange reaction during the performance. On the one hand, the audience is expressed and communicates with the performers, building up the emotional mood. On the other hand, the performers are encouraged by the responses creating a dynamic feedback loop that achieves the ecstatic state of tarab.<sup>8</sup>

Music is a social act that is inextricably linked with the people's aesthetics, therefore musical aesthetics are also social. By calling attention to performance and performers, music affords an excellent view of social processes while at the same time constitutes an expressive emotional ground for social identities.<sup>9</sup> Art has the power to lure humans away from their tight lives, by generating imagination and reveries. Individuals can express, feel and give meaning in life in a unique way, and art can transfer them to a transcendence world. Within this framework, music has been the main vehicle through which people share, express and transfer feelings, emotions and experiences and develop their social orientations. Taking into consideration all the above mentioned, tarab does not only constitute a mediator of art but also an empirical given reality that mediates in society, by creating new experiences and different social identities, providing explanations of its social conditions, and challenging us to discover them.

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