

## **Introduction**

### **“Arab” + “Avant-Garde”**

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In the early nineteenth century, the term “avant-garde” began to capture greater semantic territory. Once purely a military phrase used to distinguish crack troops, it then assumed a high-ranking position within cultural expression, marking out art work that forged ahead and broke new ground. What can it mean to conjoin this French phrase with the word “Arab”? French forces, along with other imperial intruders, are no strangers to Arab terrain. The colonisation of Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco and Greater Syria followed in the wake of the brief Napoleonic “mission” to Egypt between 1798 and 1801. It was during this military foray that some of modern Europe’s most expansive data on Egyptian music was collected, information that comprised two whole volumes of Guillaume André Villoteau’s *Description de l’Egypte*. The Napoleonic campaign gathered not only military, but also cultural intelligence, if the two can be so easily separated.

Since then, the world has witnessed new conjunctions between music, warfare and the Middle East. Reliable reports have been spilling out that detail the sustained musical and sonic torture inflicted upon detainees within American prison camps in Iraq and Guantanamo. Noise has been drawn in as a ground-clearing and disorienting tactic in urban conflict at various sites during the “war on terror.” To date, the use of music in these ways does not contradict international law (see Cusick 2006 for a fuller account).

Other noises of war ricochet through the music we might nominate as the Arab avant-garde. Let us take, for example, the compositions of Aida Nadeem, a contemporary Iraqi performer currently living in exile in Denmark. In her track “Risala,” acid “stabs,” reminiscent of synthetic computer game gunshots, perhaps space invader weaponry, pierce

the soundscape. The vocal track is tightly compressed and dryly recorded, but, at the same time, expansive because of her melodic range and the enduring studio-produced reverberation that trails it. Confined yet diffusive, conjuring up a bombed-out city, but also disassembling of such easy connotations, “Risala’s” disrupting constitution speaks of its writer-performer’s history within conflict: one that started in highly cosmopolitan Baghdad and has encompassed musical training in Europe. The forward thrust of avant-gardism in the work of this experimental artist draws not only on the Iraqi musical archive (a heavy casualty, in its recorded forms, in the current invasion), but also on influences, ranging from Karlheinz Stockhausen to Talvin Singh, accumulated on her many fugitive journeys beyond her homeland. More than simplistic eclecticism, her music registers the diverse inspiration present at the politically-charged flash-points where avant-gardism meets military intervention. For these reasons and more besides, Aida Nadeem’s oeuvre will supply this introductory chapter with material through which to test its principal theoretical suggestions. She is not alone in recruiting conflict into her work. To name but a few others, there are Halim El-Dabh’s *It is Dark and Damp at the Front* (detailed in Michael Khoury’s chapter) and Mazen Kerbaj’s *Starry Night* (see Thomas Burkhalter and Marina Peterson’s contributions).

Other narratives about invasion and music in the Middle East are more readily told than these. How, for example, the opening of the Suez Canal, that direct European imperial-financial imposition in the Arab world, was celebrated by the building of the Cairo Opera House, which opened, in 1869, with a performance of Verdi’s *Rigoletto*. How Arabic music was transmogrified by its absorption of European educational models and notational strictures (see Saed Muhssin’s chapter for further details). There are also the anti-orientalist arguments against the biased depiction of Arabs in, say, Saint-Saëns’ *Samson and Delilah*, or the perceived looting or corruption of Arab intellectual property, from Rimsky-Korsakov’s

*Scheherazade Suite* to, in the visual arts, Matisse's paintings of "odalisques." European and American adventures to a highly phantasmagoric and partial "east" have proven central to the development of the western avant-gardes, as Kamran Rastegar's interview with Amir ElSaffar in this volume testifies. In the hands of composers as diverse as the early Arnold Schoenberg or Sun Ra, modernism has been fundamentally defined through an expansion of tonality beyond the typical western scales. Certain figures, inquisitive about alternative modes and microtones have wandered from this tradition towards the Arab world for inspiration. Other prized booty here is the transcendental, something promised by the ecstatic potential promised by the Arab genre of *tarab*. In such exchanges, the flow of ideas might be read as the European-American avant-garde arming itself with fresh new weapons for combating its own culture's bourgeois stagnancy. However, by naming, extracting, fetishizing and leitmotifying "the east's" musical heritage, these adoptions can simultaneously fix and dehistoricize Arab music in detrimental ways. They might also obscure a restless and complementary current of reinvention that is just as curious as they are.

This book is about those very artists, figures who readily invoke the terms "Arab" and "avant-garde" in their self-descriptions. Given the avant-garde's violent colonial-linguistic overtones, what are the advantages of grafting these two concepts together? For one, thinking about this conjunction demands that we beam an intense searchlight on that very history detailed above. Other adjectival genre monikers, such as "experimental," rarely arouse such scrutiny, cannot trumpet an asymmetrical and unjust recourse to "the new," or help quash as effectively the paradoxically conservative insinuations of a dominating European or American claim on vanguardism. From here, Aida Nadeem's work speaks back to, inflects, deterritorializes and, crucially, expands the exclusive canons of the avant-garde. The blatant European etymology of the term "avant-garde"—flagged as foreign even in English—exposes the geopolitical investments in "the new" that have already been undertaken and

might possibly be delivered in its much-contemplated future. Is the label “avant-garde” a marker of globalization, an ill-matched infringement of European-derived bohemian subjectivity? And what of the avant-garde’s frequent marshalling of “otherness” (from whatever corners of the world) as riposte to its antagonizers? Is this necessarily retrogression, cultural pillage or unthinking mimicry? By pegging our anthology to this word, we hope to critically investigate all these conundra, paying careful attention to the possibilities and limitations the avant-garde can produce. In this way, polemics about innovation and aesthetics are conscribed into urgent debates over culture’s role in global exchange and supremacy.

Similarly, our chosen title opens up the definition of “Arab” to a space beyond its usual geographical or stereotyping cordons. It is a term we invoke precisely because it bears a complicated history: always contested within the region by those feeling that it does not describe them (even if Arabic is their first language); central to twentieth century independence movements, especially pan-Arab nationalism; saturated with the racist interpellations of the contemporary “war on terror”; and a force for unity once more amidst the highly divergent uprisings that cluster together as “the Arab Spring.” Tellingly, the one record label that has perhaps most supported the hip hop scene’s rapid response to the 2011 uprisings – from artists such as Arabian Knightz and M.C. Amin – humorously appropriates the name of that most bureaucratic of international(ist) organisations, the Arab League. The label’s motto: “it’s not just hip hop, it’s a movement.” All these adoptions, impositions, equivocations and denials figure in how we exercise the word “Arab”, with a particular focus on twentieth and twenty-first century materializations, as this is when “Arab” has run up against the avant-garde. Most particularly, dialectically engaging “Arab” with “avant-garde” complicates trite yet damaging binaries such as east-west, south-north, traditional-modern,

backward-advanced, rooting out the motivations that can pinion certain performers and populations to the less empowered enclaves of either side of the dichotomies.

Catalyzing the ingredients that might dissolve these structures is rarely a straightforward process. As authors, we have chosen to focus this activity around the following three core themes: norms and innovations; routes and roots; and political deployments of the avant-garde (each of which is allocated a separate section of this book). Firstly, though, this introduction will chalk out that ground plan, digging and laying some of the foundations necessary for the building of arguments that are to follow in the individual chapters.

To start with, Section One establishes how, stylistically, the avant-garde articulates its novelty and what it casts out as its opposite: the material it considers stale. Here newness, inspired by conceits often read as European in origin, resonates amidst forceful and reiterative incarnations of “Arab tradition.” This discussion has to be prefaced by an acknowledgement that, when one types “arab + music” into an academic search engine, it is rare not to find the results also clumped under the heading “traditional,” so closely do they co-habit, at least in English-language debate. Does the preponderance for “tradition” encourage conservative, limiting, liberationist or authentic discourse in relation to a “newness” that is just as complicated in its hermeneutics and sites of inspiration? “Tradition” might foster local pride and anti-imperialist nationalism or, alternatively, facilitate a projection of the region that is quaint, underdeveloped and ripe for invasions of cultural, as well as military hardware. Such geopolitical inquiry is furthered within Section Two, which scrutinizes the avant-garde’s interactions with space (the new cultural frontiers upon which it lays claim) and time (the *avant* or before, as it translates from the French). How is the avant-garde localised and re-localised? Newness is frequently pinpointed on the map, creating subcategories and pecking orders within how innovation and its imitation are understood.

Here we examine how the avant-garde forces particular schisms between past, present and future and enquire into its political or financial motivations for doing so. Lastly, Section Three investigates how the Arab avant-garde addresses some of these concerns through specific politicized actions, how complex artistic expression can coincide with and re-imagine anti-colonial or anti-governmental rhetoric. One stubborn characteristic often associated with the avant-garde is its up-front rebelliousness, allowing, for example, an alignment of music like Aida Nadeem's anti-war oeuvre with various revolutionary and resistance movements. At the same time, a range of governmental forces twitchily survey and regulate the avant-garde, actions which Benjamin Harbert's chapter about Egyptian heavy metal scandals and Marina Peterson's on the U.S. State Department's investment in Arab music concerts clearly reveal. As will become apparent, these debates and struggles are frequently fought on the battlegrounds of aesthetics and so it is towards matters of style that this introduction will head next, paying specific attention to how "newness" and "oldness" are politically figured within Arab music and the international avant-garde.

### **Norms and Innovations**

The *nahda* (renaissance) period in Arab history, which lasted from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, provides a useful historical starting point for this anthology. Most of the following chapters make necessary reference to it and unsurprisingly so, considering that its impact was felt in many areas of life, from the arts and politics, to translation and religious practices. Not only does the *nahda* era overlap with the birth of a clearly enunciated avant-garde sensibility around the world, it also precipitated many involved workings out of how the Arab regions might absorb overseas, particularly European, influence. As its name suggests, the *nahda* was intrigued by what could be mined from the Arab and Islamic past,

yet it was simultaneously fuelled by energetic new dealings with other regions of the world, set in motion by the decline of the Ottoman Empire and its replacement by European domination. From this position, *nahda* thinkers like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (a religious activist, deeply critical of western ascendancy), Rifa‘a al-Tahtawi (a translator, educator and proponent of Islamic modernity) and Qasim Amin (an advocator of women’s rights) formulated a productive paradox. It was one that cautiously learnt lessons, often at close quarters, about statehood from Europe, including its concepts of nationalism, in order to forge a unique anti-colonial regionalism. As prominent Egyptian *nahda* writer Taha Hussein put it, “I am pleading for a selective approach to European culture, not wholesale and indiscriminate borrowing... the preservatives of defense, religion, language, art, and history be strengthened by the adoption of Western techniques and ideas.” (Hussein, 1954:17-20)

These arbitrations took their musical form most concretely in the debates initiated by Cairo’s 1932 Congress of Arab Music (for a full account, see Racy 1993). One of the many objectives of this event was to rationalize Arab music according to certain standardized, European means of measurement and notation, thereby establishing a more cohesive, transportable sensibility. In order to churn around how this might be achieved, composers from Europe such as Béla Bartók and Paul Hindemith were invited, figures who were well-versed in documenting local folk idioms, but also in melding them with what we might consider to be proto-avant-garde art music. The ensuing formulations for the Arabic *maqam* systems have been hotly debated ever since. Likewise, the concomitant influx into the conservatoires of European teaching methods is regularly defamed as devaluing, perhaps even deskilling, local expertise. However, there is no denying that the mainstreaming of transnational dialogue which the Congress helped set in motion also launched some hugely popular twentieth century artists, including Farid al-‘Atrash, Mohammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab and Munir Bashir, as well as the fascinating liaisons between *maqamat* and European avant-

garde atonal and twelve-tone composition promulgated by the likes of Nouri Iskandar.

Ultimately, the Cairo Congress helped formulate an opposition between the self-proclaimed guardians of purist Arabic musical idiom and those wanting to acknowledge or experiment with ideas from outside.

How might we read these exchanges and divisions politically? For the Moroccan thinker, Abdelkebir Khatibi, techniques, models and applications not only institute “a certain rapport between man and fellow creatures, man and being,” but also “a dominating and imperial will to power,” particularly if they are judged to be imported (Khatibi 1983:36-7). This is the bind within which the Arab avant-garde can find itself. All the more so when it is cast in opposition to “tradition” in some sort of spatialised struggle for (aesthetic) autonomy between, on the one hand, colonial influence and, on the other, a preservation of localised heritage, if not religious belief or ethics. Quite a minefield to negotiate, particularly in terms of diverse audience and critics’ expectations, as Thomas Burkhalter’s chapter will outline. And so the disruptions to aesthetic convention laid down in this volume’s first section need to be understood in relation to the laboured stand-off between modernity and tradition. Fault-lines crack open repeatedly, so heavily pressured are they by enactments of and anxieties about transnational flows of power, resources, moral principles and finance. Impounded on one side of this (literally) guarded point of schism, we find British drum and bass DJ Grooverider, arrested en route to a gig at Dubai airport in 2007 for carrying two grams of cannabis, and then imprisoned for ten months. Through its exacting and harsh enforcement of tradition, as embodied in law, the case against Grooverider asks us, as do many of the avant-garde case studies in this book, to interrogate exactly what “the local” is in relation to experimental music. How should we read the avant-garde’s refusal of stasis or backwardness amidst these circumstances? Here we need to understand what is condoned or sacrificed in order to pointedly break with some particularly compelling inscriptions of regional customs



(the kinds that also sweep long-standing Arab world cannabis harvesting and usage under the carpet).

The term *asala* is never far from any conversation about culture in the Arab world. With a core meaning of “authenticity,” *asala* is etymologically linked to words to do with lineage, but also to *asal*, which means root. Continuity is held firm, encased in the earth, an invocation of territory that is regularly played out, as Shayna Silverstein’s chapter illuminates, through recourse to musical space. According to this line of thinking, the cross-border exchanges enjoyed by the avant-garde are corruptions. For Habib Hassan Touma, a principal historian of Arabic music and author of the definitive text *The Music of the Arabs*, they represent “a monstrous distortion [that] has irresponsibly compromised the essence of Arabian music” (Touma 1996:143). Touma ventures little other analysis beyond this dismissal, refusing to countenance hybrid forms within his purportedly scrupulous taxonomy of music from the region. One wonders what he would make of Aida Nadeem’s “Baghdad,” a track that happily bundles together older Arabic modal violin flourishes with computer-programmed beats and Indian and Persian instrumental inflections. Nadeem is, surely, just as much an Arab as any of the composers and forms Touma elaborates.

To contextualize, predilections for authenticity like Touma’s can be seen to stem from a socially-specific configuration of history that simultaneously shapes what the avant-garde might stand for within the region. For Muslims, there is a deep-seated imperative to look to the days of the Prophet for model modes of governance and behaviour, for guidance on the most contemporary of dilemmas. The later one is born from this exemplary era, the harder it can be to maintain purity of thought and deed. The currency of *bid‘a* within Islamic doctrine also vigorously intercedes here in that it not only connotes sin, heresy and misguided transgression from the true path, but also novelty.<sup>1</sup> It features in the moralistic assertions of

the Egyptian government, Benjamin Harbert's chapter points out, who vilified heavy metal for infecting the country with, purportedly, harmful western and Israeli influence.

Newness, however, is framed in many ways within the Arab world other than through Islamic semantics. There is the undeniable tendency, as Andrea Flores Khalil notes, to indulge "a precolonial past, linguistic origin, or unchanged tradition [which] is a mythification that emerged as a response to cultural marginalization" (Khalil 2003:133). A similar impulse powers Aida Nadeem to avow:

You might force us to leave the country, you might set up a dictatorship, you might destroy the country, but our Iraqi heritage, the memories from my city won't die and I'll keep singing about it. Maybe in a different colour or different style, but it will always be there and that will keep it for generations on. This is my resistance.

(Nadeem 2010)

Shayna Silverstein identifies parallel nation-building aspirations in how her Syrian case studies draw upon established regional musical vernaculars. To indulge the qualities that modernity sweeps aside—such as folklore, or even most religion—is to expose just how restricted modernity can be. Anti-colonial rhetoric the world over, be it the *authenticité* of the Mobutu regime in Zaire or the Taliban's traditionalist inscriptions of everyday life, is quick to wield "tradition" as a defensive tactic. Similar preferential treatments are restaged, to a certain degree, in how particular definitions of Arab music become illustrative of the totality within book-length studies on the topic published in English. Here, the canonical English-language texts, such as Henry George Farmer's *Historical Facts for the Arabian Musical Influence*, Habib Hassan Touma's *The Music of the Arabs* and Ali Jihad Racy's *Making Music in the Arab World: The Culture and Artistry of Tarab* allege coverage of the entirety of

the field (save the last title), yet delve exclusively into the “traditional” and never the avant-garde.<sup>2</sup> Tellingly, Shireen Maalouf’s conception of “Arabic music theory” in her *History of Arabic Music Theory* ends, but for a nine page after-thought on the Cairo Congress, in the nineteenth century and her central figures of analysis hail largely from the medieval period. Her book fixes Arabic modes and tonalities, rather than discerning their historical and geographical mobility. Whatever the impulses that drive the fencing off of this material, such incremental intellectual gestures cement “Arab life” (and music) as suspicious of modernity and what lies beyond.

No wonder, if we are to heed Khatibi’s comments about the “imperial will to power,” or take seriously what post-colonial literature scholar Réda Bensmaïa portrays as “the great fear of having been body-snatched, so to speak, by European modes of thought and transformed into a simple cog in the system of reproduction of Western ideology” (Bensmaïa 2003:160). Within such readings, the modern almost always arrives from the outside, exploitative, dominating, universalizing in its claims. To withdraw into an idealized past is to seek flight from these impositions. Morocco’s Mohammed ‘Abed al-Jabri concurs, noting that modernity is all too frequently figured as something that “can only engage Arab culture from the outside, it thus pushes its adversary into withdrawal and confinement” (‘Abed al Jabri 1999:2). From this standpoint, modernity is less a right everyone can access equally (albeit perhaps, belatedly), but, rather, a globalizing endeavour spearheaded from elsewhere.<sup>3</sup>

By the same token, tradition, that strategic sanctuary, weapon, marker of self-determination and forthright evasion of influence from dubious sources and forces, is a bastion to be examined in its own right. The Syrian-born, Lebanon-dwelling Arab nationalist poet, Adonis, for instance, treats it with suspicion because of the vigour it leant the Islamic Caliphate’s long stranglehold on the region. So hell-bent was the Caliphate on maintaining the clarity of hereditary line that meanings, practices and values which conveniently and

potently privileged their rule were embalmed as true to the Prophet's vision (Adonis 1985, 75). Boxed in by such muscular assertions of tradition, the Arab avant-garde not only suffers the generalised ostracism heaped onto artistic experimentation the world over, but its typical adversaries—complacency, conservatism and reactionary sentiment—also hold particularly high social status within local anti-colonial activity. This body of music might thus have greater difficulty siding with classic European allegations such as this one from Theodor Adorno: “the return to peasant and folk art in a country that is in the midst of the industrialization process leads to costumings and concealments of all kinds, but never to compelling production” (Adorno “Why is the New Art So Hard to Understand?” In Leppert 2002:127-134, 129). “Tradition” of this order, to Adorno's mind, suffers equally from the fate of all commodified music: it is just as alienated and alienating because there are vast, disjunctive chasms between production and consumption settings. Worse off, misleading, in fact, because it does not even seem capable of openly admitting either this trait or the marked variance between older incarnations of music making and traditionalist forms which dominate now. From Adorno's perspective, only the new (read: avant-garde) can confront, perhaps even up-end, these estranging industrial processes.

Yet traditional and avant-garde Arab music, despite the polarizations, also share a lot, and these concurrences warrant analytical attention. After all, both practices take advantage of, as Adorno would be quick to point out, similar (if not the same) technologies of amplification and recording, similar global networks of promotion and distribution. Seen from this vantage point, tradition is a commodity fetish, as well as a social bond and some-time servant of certain master narratives which hold court via control and stagnation. The avant-garde is steered by hegemonic and capitalistic flows too, although progress is more the name of its game. For Argentinian theorist Néstor García Canclini in his *Hybrid Cultures*, binaries such as theirs collapse within a market economy, although labels like these are

extremely efficacious for negotiating the commercial placement of one's cultural production. As Thomas Burkhalter's chapter reveals, Arab avant-garde musicians have to play a careful game of box-ticking here if they are to garner success on the international market.

Consequently, this book overwhelmingly endorses a reading of "the Arab avant-garde" as mercurial and crossbred, reaffirming the very *inauthenticity* that the foreign taint of a French word exposes. The same composite qualities hold for "traditional" Arabic music. Ethnomusicologist Jonathan Holt Shannon's *Among the Jasmine Trees*, takes the lead here by thoughtfully and persuasively plotting out how "authenticity" is designated, unravelling its presiding logics, and convincingly arguing that the purity of form claimed by particular musical heritages comes with distinctly post-*nahda* priorities and political agendas (Shannon 2006:60). We should also routinely inquire into the extent to which historical consistency is created anachronistically and often with significant aid from colonial archives. Such historical fluctuations and particularities cause Adonis to be wary of hegemonic alignments to "tradition," but also quick to promote a more vibrant commitment to one's forebears. For him,

Authenticity is not a fixed point in the past to which we must return in order to establish our identity. It is rather a constant capacity for movement and for going beyond existing limits towards a world which, while assimilating the past and its knowledge, looks ahead to a better future. (Adonis 1985:90)

His sentiments are shared by many members of the Arab avant-garde who hold dear the licence to strike up a relationship with earlier musical iterations. Classical Iraqi poetry assumes a leading role in Aida Nadeem's *Out of Baghdad*, asserting a legacy endangered by war and displacement amidst other geopolitical signifiers which nourish, rather than

annihilate it. How, then, do her motivations for drawing on cultural history differ from those of, say, contemporary radical Islam, which often situates progress as a return to unsullied earlier values? For Mohammed ‘Abed al-Jabri, who sees history as continuity rather than rupture, approach and motivation are everything in the search for “a workable method to assume our relationship to *tradition*.” He continues, matter of factly:

the type of understanding of tradition that we construct will directly determine the type of investment that we will make of it. Similarly, the function that we would want to ascribe to it will in turn affect the way we construct our conception. (‘Abed al-Jabri 1999:120)

‘Abed al-Jabri’s insight reads well amidst the music in the air during the 2011 uprisings. Taxi stereos and impromptu concerts alike were awash with work made familiar by twentieth century protest singers, particularly Sheikh Iman and Mohamed Munir, or Arab nationalists like Mohammed Abdel Wahab and Oum Kalthoum. All four drew extensively on tradition (classical as well as folk) to craft a grounded and persuasive liberationist discourse, roused once more in these recent reincarnations. Likewise, the avant-garde has always quarried from musical history; the points of differentiation are dictated by determining which past, and why that one over others. Careful examinations of these choices are central to many of the essays in this volume. For example, Shayna Silverstein’s unravels how Shafi Badreddin’s *Quintete*’s prominent folkloric references insist upon an ancient multi-culturalism within Syria that other, perhaps dominant, traditionalisms might wish to obscure.

These are the ways in which both heritage and the avant-garde are reinvigorated or, as ‘Abed al-Jabri continues, how tradition solicits contemporary commitment in order “to serve modernity and to give it a foundation within our ‘authenticity.’” (‘Abed al Jabri 1999:7)

Acknowledging these moments, of course, should never discredit how difficult it is for musicians to blend their styles, to override the deep imprints of their trainings.<sup>4</sup> Along with Adonis and the Moroccan historian Abdallah Laroui, ‘Abed al-Jabri envisions the benefits of a dialectical, rather than oppositional, rendezvous between the tradition and modernity. All three writers posit tradition as mobile and adaptive, the urge to stall it as ideologically-driven and always coloured by the age in which this stand-still is executed. Caroline Rooney’s chapter adds to this endeavour. For her, authenticity encompasses the elements that cannot seem familiar elsewhere. They are then recast precisely as signifiers which *can* enter transnational debate, redolent with all the political potency of their primary sites. Similarly, Sami Asmar details how Ziad Rahbani conspicuously interwove familiar, local figurings into his more challenging pieces as a way of ensnaring a broader audience. And yet, as the work of *nahda* figures corroborates, balancing the values and significations of “tradition” and “modernity” is extremely tricky. ‘Abed al-Jabri, leery of the bumpy ride initiated by global projects of “progress” and “development,” cautions that “there are limits beyond which we cannot go in this investment process. What we can invest in today’s intellectual activity is not tradition as a whole but rather tradition as survival” (‘Abed al-Jabri 1999:120).

With this insight, ‘Abed al-Jabri admits how partial, desperate and pragmatic the adoptions of tradition and, by implication, modernity actually are. He reminds us of the lopsided access to “the modern” around the world and tradition’s ready, but not necessarily wholly logical, placement as an opposite and therefore (even less plausibly) a foil to it. The Arab avant-garde short-circuits the more debilitating outcomes of this routing. For all their promises, notions of “progress” over the last two hundred years have largely been, as any student of post-colonial thought or protester in Tahrir Square would point out, exploitative, determined by unjust and imperial divisions of labour, an excuse for further neo-colonial policy making (including, in particular, those of organs like the IMF and World Bank, who

stalwartly implement the rhetoric of development). Progress also becomes another name for increased commodification, igniting the allure of novelty to diversify the market. These are factors to consider when weighing up how the spread of the avant-garde can be classified as a globalising endeavour, a topic which the following section takes up in its investigations how space and time have been politically circumscribed. Where is artistic expression seen to stem from and under what conditions does it travel?

### **Routes and Roots**

This introduction has already sown the seeds of suspicion towards pure, local cultural form, but such claims demand the backing of historical specificity. As with all music, that which is filed under the category “Arab” is an intricate mix of other similarly complex labels: Persian, Kurdish, Turkish, Andalusian, Greek, Western. These terms, quite clearly, are also historically amorphous, hegemonic and subject to abrupt change. Various empires, both invading and expanding Arab territory, have added voices to this repertoire and, as early as such things were recorded, there are mentions of an international trade in musical ideas. Minglings and mergings like these are rarely smooth, necessitating multiple acts of *translation* of one order or another, translation itself being a political action and one that is never entirely simple, translucent or fully successful for all involved. Notably, the Arabic term for translation, *tarjima*, also encompasses what, in English, we would call musical interpretation. And, just as artistic colouring and improvisation spring from established repertoires, varied habits and social structures, so too do the understandings of Arab music history that this introduction will tease apart. One of the Arab world’s most influential music theory books, Abu Nasir al-Farabi’s *The Great Book of Music*, written in the tenth century, details Persian and Greek forms and was of significant influence to southern European music-



making in the Middle Ages. Therefore the enactment and investigation of exchange to which *The Arab Avant-Garde* contributes cannot be proclaimed as a modern phenomenon. Nor can the singular logics of local cultural contamination or delight in a presumed, effortless cosmopolitan hybridity lead particularly far along the path of comprehension. Amir Elsaif, in interview with Kamran Rastegar, puts pay to any such simplistic conceptions of source or assimilation. Drawing cogently on examples from his own training and family history of migration, he renders “influence” an ever-fluctuating and multivalent force. To appreciate the *processes* promulgating artistic and intellectual transactions (ones often highly bound up in commerce) is, we would argue, a much more revealing and fruitful aim.

Philosophers like Mohammed ‘Abed al-Jabri have turned their attentions to such eclecticism, grappling with the political quandaries initiated by cross-border encounter and refusing to quarantine off any isolated notion of “the Arab past.” In his *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History*, Ibrahim Abu-Rabi‘ dubs the thinkers who live these hybridities and contradictions “migrating intelligentsia,” observing how they waft “from one plane of thought to an antithetical; from the rational to the irrational, from the scientific to the metaphysical, and from the mystical to the philosophical.” (Abu-Rabi‘ 2004:266) The outcomes of these peregrinations are, to his mind, dislocation and alienation.

Yet are not dislocation and alienation, at one and the same time, two of the most profoundly affecting qualities associated with the historical avant-garde? In Arab hands, neither of these sentiments can be deemed idle mimicry of Eurocentric form; these modernist preoccupations are also intrinsic to and differentiated in Middle Eastern experience, with disenfranchisement, along with migration, war and exile sharply sensed across the region. Aida Nadeem’s album *Out of Baghdad* details forced flight from her country of birth. References to genres from classical *maqamat* to European underground dance recount a

highly politicised experimentalism, one that speaks of displacement, but also an insistence on the principle of (creative) freedom. “Identity can’t be a barrier,” she asserts, linking territorial concerns straight back to the military-industrial complex:

I’m not nationalist, not at all; we’ve been a mixture in Iraq for thousands of years... After the fall of Saddam, they started talking about federalization. It won’t work, we used to live together; we need to keep living together tomorrow. Small countries and many borders make more money for the weapons industry, more troops to guard them. (Nadeem 2010)

And so solid signifiers of location are ripped apart and reorganized, organically fused, muddling geo-political certainties and national boundary-lines. To consider Iraqi music is frequently to find it in the diaspora. Nadeem’s reverberating vocal lines haunt all these spaces, returning to mark territory, but also to lose it. An other-worldly quality persists, reminding the listener of *tarab*’s sought outcomes with the emphasis here on asking the question of where, exactly, one might be transported? Such journeys characterize the bulk of the music discussed in this volume, journeys such as Halim el-Dabh’s from Egypt to America, as presented in Michael Khoury’s chapter. Complex cultural geography also distinguishes much of the more experimental musical responses to the 2011 protests, with tracks like Omar Effendum et al’s “#Jan 25 Egypt” and the Arabian Knightz’ “Prisoner” (which samples Martin Luther King) acknowledging the potency of English as a global language in the urgent *modus operandi* of these political raps. Such concessions are not always effortless, uninterrupted or entirely determined by the artists’ whims. As Marina Peterson’s essay in this volume elaborates, with reference to a tour of America by Lebanese avant-gardists, the strong currents of border policing, nation-state security, colonial

cartographies and anti-imperialist aspiration exert considerable force within these circuits of culture. This instance, along with many others detailed in this book, expose the unevenness of access to the avant-garde.

What can an analysis of the mobility, prejudicial re-routing and door policies governing avant-garde people and their principles reveal? The acceptance of particular styles into the inner sanctum of the avant-garde is similarly policed and shuts out various aesthetic formulations. In a discussion of the difficult transposition of modernities outside the European ambit, one that bears equal applicability to the Arab avant-garde, post-colonial and Subaltern Studies thinker Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that

seeming ‘incommensurabilities’ [produce]... neither an absence of relationship between dominant and dominating forms of knowledge nor equivalents that successfully mediate between differences, but precisely the partly opaque relationship we call ‘difference’.... [We should] write narratives and analyses that produce this translucence—and not transparency—in the relation between non-Western histories (2000:17)

Here Chakrabarty urges an investigation of how and why local enactments of global trends exhibit similarities and divergences. This is exactly the work carried out in Saed Muhssin’s chapter where he dissects what, precisely, made Sayyed Darwish’s compositions innovative within the specific context of twentieth century Egypt. Complementary arguments are to be heard in Sami Asmar’s reading of the Rahbani family lineage and their negotiations of the tides of twentieth century Lebanese politics. All three of the chapters in this section concentrate on single figures, allowing for in-depth investigations of specific spatial and historical currents. What conclusions can then be drawn from mapping out these patterns? If

a musical style appears to concord with another elsewhere in the world, the imperative is to dissect the webs of power that can, variously, classify it as inextricable planetary hybridity, theft, compliance, degraded copy, solidarity or happenstance. Each outcome bears its own value. As has already been noted of European and American appropriations of Arab cultural conventions, *ownership* claims render such overlaps distinctly political. And, when the “avant” within the avant-garde makes its presence felt, negotiations of artistic globalisation, origin and imitation are readily warranted.

Cultural echoes can be interpreted in all manner of ways. One perspective propounded, as has been elaborated, by a good deal of Arab thinkers is that phenomena like the avant-garde, alongside other modernising tendencies, were born outside the region and have then been latterly refashioned within it. While the threat to notions of tradition has been assessed, it now makes sense to ponder how Arabs have also interpreted the flows of influence in an almost apologetic manner. In the realm of cultural critique, this view is elegantly explored by Adonis. He identifies the trait of “double dependency” within the Arabs: a bolstering, conservative and retrogressive cleaving to the past that also locks itself to incompatible models of western imperial modernity (Adonis 1990:80). Shayna Silverstein elaborates further upon the impact of the “double dependency” idea in her contribution to this anthology. Yet Adonis’ pessimistic conclusion is only the tip of a particularly enduring iceberg. Writing around six hundred years earlier, in disparagement of the impulse for derivative behaviour, the famous North African medieval proto-sociologist Ibn Khaldun pronounced:

The vanquished always seek to imitate their victors in their dress, insignia, belief, and other customs and usages. This is because men are always inclined to attribute perfection to those who have defeated and subjugated them... Hence, arises the

further belief that such an imitation will remove the causes of defeat. (Ibn Khaldun 1958:53)

The Congress of Arab Music pivoted on similarly deprecating principles, argues Jihad Racy, with the Arabs understanding themselves as long past their zenith and racing to catch up after centuries of decline. The important lessons were to be learnt from Europe (Racy 1993).

Arabs decrying their own backwardness? This is but one position, an assertion that, arguably, reaffirms geo-political dualisms and a somewhat facile timeline of “progress.” Consolidating this take on belatedness, however well-intended, can also undermine the very sorts of dialectical possibilities kicked up by the traffic between “Arab” and “avant-garde.” Backwardness, after all, is the time-worn reasoning of many agents of (neo-)colonial expansion. By concentrating on “underdevelopment” alone, the economic exploitation and the effaced labour that imperialism has undertaken to fund its supposed advancement can be obscured. It is not hard to read the European avant-garde’s toying with “the primitive other” to generate its shocking novelty as, ultimately, playing by similar rules to those of colonialism’s historical imperatives, whether or not this was its aim. For anthropologist Lisa Rofel, speaking of modernity within China, but with clear relevance to the formations of the European and American avant-garde, “These endeavors both encompass and abandon the subalterns they create, leaving them to maneuver along the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion” (Rofel 1999:13). For her, something like the avant-garde can never be an evenly spread universal practice, nor a locally self-contained one; instead it is an interaction with emphatic designations of dominance and subordination. In the sharpest of terms, Marina Peterson and Thomas Burkhalter’s chapters expose how the European-North American matrix is still largely the border authority for entry to much of the global avant-garde,

controlling, as it often does, the most compelling and powerful means of dissemination via, for example, record labels or concert bookings.

Geographically-related forces also direct how time is framed and prioritized. The avant-garde's forward-thrusting teleology finds its inspiration nowhere more strongly than in a relatively recent conception of time, one that rose to prominence in sixteenth century Europe (Gray 2003:101). With this temporality came a political perspective, an understanding of the self, a set of priorities, a social hierarchy, a belief that those not signed up to it must hurry along obediently in its wake or submit to its superiority. Johannes Fabian famously labels this over-determination of time chronopolitics (Fabian 1983:144). For sure, astute thinkers such as Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh have taken to task the European avant-garde's "fantasy that one could invent a new musical language without reference to other musics, without recourse to syncretism, stripped of representational intent, and through a process of pure conceptual invention" (Born and Hesmondhalgh 2000:16-17). Yet the magnetism of originality, the erasure of outside aid in achieving it and the arrangements of domination and subordination it weaves through history are potent. Nevertheless, through its own situated drive for novelty, the Arab avant-garde refuses a consignment of its homelands to backwardness, confounding a narrow European chronopolitical genealogy via its divergent investments in futurity. By charting out how, within Egypt, Sayyed Darwish might have been "ahead of his time," Saed Muhssin's chapter underscores all these issues.

Highlighting the inequitable rights of admission to "the new" tells only a fragment of the story. There is an urgent obligation to investigate the economics of modernization in the Arab world. Initiatives such as those unveiled by Muhammad 'Ali Basha in Egypt in the nineteenth century looked to Europe to create infrastructures of transportation (including the Suez Canal), communication, education, industrialization and urbanization, all the while

running the country into insurmountable debt to those self-same quarters of the world who had been holding aloft the enticing beacon of (their) modernity. Unpaid loans soon became the excuse for a permanent British military presence in the country, making “progress” a high stakes game in Egyptian history – an unfinished narrative when we take into account the role the IMF structural adjustment programs have played in the discontent that prompting the Tahrir Square demonstrations. Analogous gaps between capitalist and aesthetic modernities are explored by way of Syrian experimental composition in Shayna Silverstein’s chapter.

The Arab avant-garde places a different, more critical accent on the “not quite there yet.” As Caroline Rooney’s chapter reveals, Palestinian hip hop artists pin their progress on the contingent dissolution of the Israeli occupation. Just as a recently revitalised state formation has hindered Palestinian self-determination, so too have Palestinians been failed by the supposedly modern infrastructures of international law, justice and human rights. At one and the same time, she contends, Palestinians are “at the forefront of the very question of our repressed, denied and ignored human connectedness,” which positions them centrally in negotiations about our future.

Another tactic for interrogating prevailing “first past the post” appreciations of history is to shuffle that history’s established order. This is exactly the type of work Michael Khoury’s chapter undertakes with its precise detailing of how Halim El-Dabh experimented with tape composition in advance of Pierre Schaeffer’s supposed invention of the technique. In both *The Permanent and the Changeable* and *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, Adonis nudges this imperative further, painstakingly itemizing consistent instances of Arab innovation in the early Islamic period, ones that pre-date European equivalents. Artistic invention, he stresses, has always responded to historical change where “the articulation of ‘content,’ therefore, calls for a modification in ‘form’” (Adonis 1978:Book Three 40) Writing in the mid-twentieth century, Sayid Qutb, the leading theorist of the Muslim Brotherhood,

formulated the phrase “Islamic vanguard.” For him, this involved proceeding towards a pure and total Islam, beyond the ignorant, underdeveloped state of secularism and the ill-conceived faith in which we presently reside. Such entreaties to reach forward into an unsullied future recur within the discussions about what a new, post-uprising Arab world should be.

Yet, like other thinkers, Sayid Qutb also respectfully bows down to the weighty pervasiveness of “tradition,” which, as has already been argued, beats out a particular rhythm upon the experience of time in many Arab social milieux. If one reads tradition within the rubrics of chronopolitics as sustained cultural achievement, then asserting a rich, documented history in the region also acts as a rejoinder to the European avant-garde’s simplistic recourse to the primitivism of its geopolitical and colonial others. Take, for example, Behiga Hafez’s piano composition “Karnak,” specially written for the February 1929 edition of the nationalist-feminist (and French language) journal *L’Egyptienne*. Here, reference to a Pharonic temple conjures up the glory days of Egyptian dominance, lionizing a pre-Abrahamic past, and deliberately side-stepping the factional religious affinities of more contemporary figurings. In these ways, the Arab avant-garde compels an alternative evaluation of temporality, one that stands alongside Andreas Huyssen’s aspiration that “rather than privilege the radically new in Western avant-gardist fashion, we may want to focus on the complexity of repetition and rewriting, *bricolage* and translation, thus expanding our understanding of innovation” (Huyssen 2005:15).

### **Political Deployments of the Avant-Garde**

As is apparent from how avant-garde compositions like “Karnak” represents the past, present and future, this is a body of music carrying aloft a strong political agenda, frequently in



collaboration with larger post-colonial or liberation movements. If the definitions of avant-gardism worldwide are overwhelmingly pegged to aesthetic, rather than social preoccupations (much to the chagrin of significant European theorists of modernism, like Theodor Adorno<sup>5</sup>), then their Arab champions readily reassert the urgency of plotting revolution within culture through means beyond formalism alone. Anti-imperialism, asymmetrical access to resources, political independence, state corruption, community solidarity and outright revolution (be that through pan-Arabism, pan-Islamism or other groupings) are all regular concerns, as the chapters in this book's final section will attest. Calls such as Aida Nadeem's to foster "contra-globalisation struggle, an international front... to create a different world" (Nadeem 2010) are commonplace. Musicians have been at the forefront of the 2011 uprisings from M.C.Deeb in Tahrir Square to Tunisia's El Général, who released "Rais LeBled" – a direct address indictment of the President and his mismanagement of the country – in the first days of the protests and who was immediately incarcerated by the then-ruling regime. In order to gain a sense of how these issues are raised, read and controlled, it is first necessary to understand the ground the Arab avant-garde holds or hopes to share—where it is *placed* when it makes political declarations.

Firstly, the Arab avant-garde espouses the shared directive of its overseas relatives: to question authority and to rebel. Yet, while much of the European avant-garde's defiance targets the institutions of art itself, Arab musicians often prefer to target the very foundations of ruling parties or invading nation-state forces. Many of these artists are under direct threat for the work they produce or, like Aida Nadeem, have had to flee their countries of origin. Tragically, the sound artist Ahmed Basiony became one of eight hundred-plus victims of counter-revolutionary retaliations in Cairo, losing his life to a sniper bullet on the 28<sup>th</sup> of February 2011.

The networks of the avant-garde, as Benjamin Harbert's chapter reveals, can also provide a trans- or post-national security through publicity for musicians in the face of an oppressive local government. In moments of convergence and translation like these, the Arab avant-garde can simultaneously speak the same broad language as parallel avant-gardes whilst also clarifying and specifying through its own vernaculars. As has been noted, the *nahda* period set into play a localized nuancing of European concepts of nationalism that better served the liberationist ideals of the day. Before then, *musiqa sharqiyya* (Eastern music) was the more typical label in use in the region. "Arab music", however, promotes another organizing principle, under the category which was to become a central rallying ground for revolutionary and post-revolutionary action throughout the twentieth century and now, again, beyond the 2011 revolts. The politics imbued in opening out how this "Arabness" is expressed and what it can stand for has long consumed the region's avant-garde. It is not without major significance, Sami Asmar notes, that performers like Ziad Rahbani elect to compose lyrics in the vernacular, eschewing the elitist connotations of high Arabic for a populist pull. Unity and empowerment systematized under such nationalistic emblems have been common within the musical avant-garde, particularly with regard to Palestine, as will become apparent (and then expanded) within Caroline Rooney's chapter. Something similar happens when Aida Nadeem chooses to sing in Turkmenelian, an often suppressed minority language within Iraq, and compatible tactics are played out within other dimensions of style. One wonders what the music following the revolutions in Tunisia and Libya, whose emphasis on "ethnic minority" rights is strong, will bring.

Then there are the cross-border allusions within the music to consider. Egyptian heavy metallers and Palestinian hip hop artists latch themselves into previously-established musical genres. How should the assumption of these references be fed back into the politics of capital flows? Can we, for example, think of the avant-garde's impact in idealist

internationalist terms, a networked fraternity that allows for fruitful exchange, as the artists featured in Caroline Rooney's, Benjamin J. Harbert's and Thomas Burkhalter's chapters might? These musicians certainly establish transnational camaraderie and exploit well-worn distribution networks, as well as demanding that the genres in question reconfigure exactly how they constitute such attitudes as "rebellion" and "activism" so that they can include Arab struggles for freedom. This final injunction is also encouraged when more overtly "Arabic" musical or linguistic inflections are welcomed into styles felt to belong outside the region. With the stress on global solidarity, the chain of influence that sees Arab creativity as following in the wake of "the west" is downplayed in favour of an experimental community that Aida Nadeem's summons when she declares: "I don't believe in local change, it needs to be international" (Nadeem 2010).

Such examples also perform what Abdelkebir Khatibi, in *Maghreb Pluriel*, calls a "double critique." Simultaneously inhabiting two or more subjectivities (the lived vocabularies of the oppressed and the oppressor), double critiques, just like these musicians, point out the impossibility of fully engaging anything in such a binary, all the while revealing the damage that the effort to instigate such divisions enforces. By refusing to come down on one side or another or accept such a divorce, by extending the parameters upheld at either extreme of these camps, these musicians take part in what Khatibi identifies as "an other thinking." This is a politicised rhetoric which is painfully aware and condemning of oppressive governance, yet can move beyond without forsaking what is useful from these pasts (Khatibi 1983:47-111). Ultimately, a movement towards an altered, hopefully ameliorated future is implied here, a goal compatible with those of vanguardism. In these musical double critiques, stylistic colonisation might one minute stand set centre stage, then weather critique, irony, absorption, the dubious property rights held over it presented for scrutiny. At other times, eclecticism asserts the diversity of oppositional voices worldwide,

binding them together and working to dissolve the impact of difference in an imagined future. In articulations like these, otherness is revealed as bearing a more complicated geographical ancestry than is often presumed. For instance, Aida Nadeem's concurrent insistence on Iraqi identity and lost subjecthood through ecstatic rendition offers a means not unfamiliar to the transnational avant-garde of complicating debilitating designations of history and geography. In these ways, her music's content and mode of delivery intertwine in order to advocate and embody a particular political imagination. But there are forces afoot that foil these aspirations and seek to quell political division wrought through aesthetics. As the previous section argued, intellectual property claims loom large and are implemented by a particular teleological regime: similarity is frequently inscribed as pale imitation when Arab ideas overlap with European or North American ones. A parallel disparagement rarely surfaces when this happens the other way round. One of the actions of a double critique, then, is to weigh up the qualities that have been unequally apportioned to each (always already hybrid) agent in this encounter. What are the limits of each's political capacity and intensions?

Arab cultural activists are well practised at tripping up and catching out the elitisms and inadequacies of dominant European avant-garde paradigms. Certainly, Egypt's Art and Freedom Movement of the late 1930s explicitly declared their solidarity with European artists fighting against fascism in their first manifesto, but they were just as quick to expose what they perceived as the bourgeois complacency of their western counterparts. (Khalil 2003, 84) This accusation must also be fed back into an understanding of the Arab avant-garde. That very same cosmopolitanism that spreads experimental tenets around the world is, evidently, the result of both violent population dispersals *and* the privilege of international travel, often for expensive educations overseas. Aida Nadeem's case again comes to mind here, but so do the majority of the artists discussed in Thomas Burkhalter's chapter. As Marina Peterson's chapter persuasively contends, cosmopolitanism can also be co-opted, with the U.S. State

Department utilizing the concept to promote a particularly American hegemony of freedom and democracy in its funding of improvisational performances with Arab and American line-ups. Moreover, those from less elite classes are—and this goes much more for “traditional” rather than avant-garde musicians—quite evidently, not as likely to fall into the category of “the cosmopolitan” or to have spent time training abroad.

And, whatever their prior learning experiences, avant-garde musicians rarely attract a large paying audience. If they cannot depend upon certain structures of support like family wealth or a national welfare system, populous demographics are easily excluded. Instability around funding sources has been central to the avant-garde’s make-up the world over. Yet the multiple contributing causes behind this state of affairs can vary considerably and these discrepancies warrant our attention if we aspire to grasp the political and aesthetic priorities of the Arab avant-garde. The rise of the avant-garde in Europe should be situated amidst a drastic decrease in secure patronage for the arts because of a decline in aristocratic and church influence. Rapid industrialisation, urban migration and the rise of the middle class must also be factored in, as should later developments in state support for those on low incomes. The Arab world does not share an entirely analogous legacy. True, Adonis notes a similar social rift in Arab history, this time between the caliphate, hungry to shore up their power base through blood lines to the Prophet, and artists, often of mixed parentage and therefore not considered fully “Arab.” (Adonis 1978, Book Three 9-11) But a comparably pervasive divorce from religious faith has not happened. What, then, of the deeply felt schism from the past, of the implied post-Christian secularism of Europe’s canonical avant-garde hegemony? Its figuration of the autonomy of art is highly dependent on such circumstances, as are the frequent rejections of commercialism (such as those famously articulated in Clement Greenberg’s essay “The Avant-Garde and Kitsch”).

When the avant-garde politicizes itself it does so in relation to coordinates such as these, and never less so than when it stakes its claims of rebellion. In Europe, avant-garde dissent has primarily agitated against the conservative bourgeoisie, eager to provoke and change it, often from the position of the loner or outcast. Observations about these tactics form the core of respected texts on the subject, such as Renato Poggioli's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Matei Calinescu's *Five Faces of Modernity* and Peter Bürger's book, also called *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. European overviews of the avant-garde, particularly Peter Bürger's, stress how antipathy towards authority is primarily railed against the institutions of art and culture themselves. Although Bürger never explicitly states that he has set his definitional boundaries squarely around Europe, he makes no mention of avant-gardists from Asia or Africa, an unfortunate universalizing act typical of the texts on the subject available in English. Even within the *nahda*, when art began to claim most vociferously a status separate from craft, social praxis collectively lived out by the community, if not the nation, was central (Shannon 2006:60). In contradistinction, the ascendancy of the European brand of committed musician is so often achieved through these artists' prolonged removal from or disdain for all manner of apparati of the greater social body. Frequent victims are family and kinship ties, which are of enormous significance within the Arab world not simply to one's social standing and sense of belonging, but also one's sense of ethics. To sacrifice them at the altar of individualism is, arguably, an easier action within more Eurocentric formations of the self. It is from within this crucially-important context that Sami Asmar's analysis of the Rahbanis *as a family* engaging with avant-garde springs. Within the thrust of current dissent in the Arab world, collectivity, not individualism, is paramount. Before his untimely death (many would say martyrdom), Ahmed Basiony had dedicated years to group-created art works. Collaboration was a driving force, manifest in interactive reception environments and compositions like "City People" and "Cairo Sound" which refract found noise that,

ultimately, has been multiply-authored by a metropolis in which he was merely a single citizen. Methods such as these deliberately dissolve the myth of the solo artist's unique capabilities, sharing ownership with larger public assemblages. One of the earliest and most potent documents of the 2011 uprisings is the *Khalas Volume One Mix Tape* entitled *Mish B3eed* (which translates as "not far") featuring material from Tunisia, Algeria, Libya and Egypt. The very format of the compilation stresses the commonality of revolutionary experience, the exigency to come together in joint struggle. The socio-historical particularities that brought about these musics have also encouraged populisms that other experimental artists might view askance. Ahmed Basiony's own recourse to the *sha'bi* genre, Ziad Rahbani's enjoyment of comedy (see Sami Asmar's chapter) or Halim El Dabh's harnessing of widespread pro-Palestinian sentiment (upon which Michael Khoury extrapolates).

Just as the lone mutineer loses ground to a more socially inter-connected ideal, so too is the Arab avant-garde outsider frequently cast, or casts themselves, in resistance to something different to their western counterparts: namely, despotic leadership, contemporary G-8 foreign policy, racism and the various "wars on terror" where Arabs truly are dangerously marginalised. The myth of bohemian otherness is thus reacquainted with the realities of whether or not certain artists can or cannot elect to live at a remove from the social mainstream, geopolitically plotting out the palpable mobilities of alienation. Hassan Khan, a contemporary visual and sonic artist, also sees promise in the very "otherness" and obliqueness of experimentalism:

What I find interesting in art is the fact that there is always a "surplus of the unexplainable" that is absolutely necessary for it to function in the first place, in a sense the market itself needs to become something that is not 100% commodifiable.

To resist total commodification, it is necessary to never make the claim of resistance and instead just allow a condition to occur in spite of itself. (Khan in Fattouh, 2011)

Accordingly, often brutal, largely capitalist-motivated urges are undone, although through tactics that more abrasively activist musicians would reject. With all these arbitrations over or evasions of semantics in mind, how, then, are we to approach the US State Department-funded tours by Lebanese avant-garde artists that are so carefully examined in Marina Peterson's chapter? What happens when these institutions deploy the "freedom" of avant-garde improvisation for the purposes of state-building, international diplomacy and foreign policy justification?

The struggle for meaning, its erasure and its over-writing constantly trouble the stability of the Arab avant-garde, and the present volume cannot exempt itself from these machinations. Nor does it wish to. All its contributors hope to maintain the open-mindedness and generosity also implicit in a double critique in order to re-energize and focus with more historical complexity on music-as-institution. The various essays in this book will go into the greater details of training, status, organs of support, distribution, audiences and the like, all the while proffering certain broader proposals about how musical aesthetics are tied to social formation – not to fix a single, stultifying definition, but to imaginatively proliferate feasible understandings. They do so from a wealth of different positions (geographical and political), divergent disciplinary perspectives (from critical theory to ethnography to musicology) and disparate registers (biographies, an interview). In this way, the eclecticism and dialectical prerogatives of the Arab avant-garde are honoured. Whatever one's conclusions by the end of this anthology to the many quandaries set down within this introduction, the placement of "Arab" next to "avant-garde," we would all strongly argue, involves clearing space for some



crucial debates about how values, knowledge, creativity and cultural economies circulate around our world.

## Endnotes

Many thanks to Lee Grieveson and Andy McGraw, along with my co-editors and contributors, for their helpful suggestions on how to improve this essay.

<sup>1</sup> Adonis recasts this in damning socio-cultural terms: “Arabs, influenced by the prevailing cultural structure, understand everything in light of their heritage – what it fails to illuminate becomes valueless. They feel that the unknown threatens both their capacity to understand and their inheritance, which represents perfection and infallibility in their eyes. What lies beyond the limits of their acquired perception, particularly as regards religion, concerns and confuses them, leading them, so they believe, astray.” (Adonis 1978, Book One 59)

(translation my own)

<sup>2</sup> Welcome rejoinder texts like the *Colors of Enchantment: Theater, Dance, Music, and the Visual Arts in the Middle East* anthology or Walter Armbrust’s *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt* offer respite from this blinkering, but they do so by spotlighting the popular, rather than the avant-garde.

<sup>3</sup> Frederic Jameson is mindful of understanding these distinctions in the uneven and biased assumptions of modernity around the world. (Jameson 2002, 12-13)

<sup>4</sup> Aida Nadeem talks about how hard it can be, in the Arab world, to find musicians with suitable experience of all these different approaches to musical structure and performance. The same is very much true of European and North Americans, who find the *maqamat* challenging to absorb.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, his essays “Difficulties” and “Why is the New Art So Hard to Understand?” (both anthologized in Leppert 2002), which call for music to play a central role in social critique and change.

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