“TARAB OCCURS WHEN I, AS A PERFORMER, AND THE AUDIENCE ARE IN TUNE TOGETHER. IT’S A HARMONIOUS EXCHANGE.”

—SIMON SHAHEEN

or more than a thousand years, performers, listeners and scholars have recognized *tarab* as one of the most important esthetics in Arab music. It has no English equivalent, explains A.J. Racy, author of *Music and the Myth of the Arab*. A term full of subtlety and layered meanings, both historical and regional. At its heart, *tarab* is about musical affect and relationship: a deep emotional response by a listener that leads to a feeling of connection between listener and performer. In this way, he says, *tarab* evokes “intense emotions, exaltation, a sense of yearning or absorption, feeling of timelessness, elation or rapturous delight.” In short, “ecstasy.”

*Tarab* appears to have come into use first in reference to early Arabic poetry recitation. After the seventh century CE, it came to be associated also with recitation of the Qur’an, which today endures as a highly popular virtuosic vocal art form. Music historian George Sawa notes more than 300 mentions of *tarab* in the Qur’an, including instances where listeners wept, laughed, danced and tore their clothing.

Far more recently, for decades during the mid-20th century across the Arab world, listeners would gather around radios on the first Thursday of each month to tune into live radio broadcasts of concerts by Um Kulthum, the famous Egyptian vocalist and *tarab*—“one who elicits *tarab*.” Those lucky enough to be inside the Cairo concert hall often wept openly, shouted and begged her to repeat verses. The tools of *tarab* are, of course, musical instruments, from the simplicity of the human voice and percussive hand clapping to hand drums, end-blown woodwinds and stringed instruments that are both plucked and bowed.

As Islam spread west and east, both instruments and musical ideas flowed along trade routes, and they were assimilated, adapted and often locally renamed. Even though the term “*tarab*” is used primarily in the Arab world, similar concepts are present from Morocco and Spain in the

THE HIJRI CALENDAR

In 638 CE, six years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, ‘Umar, Islam’s second caliph, recognized the necessity of a calendar to govern the affairs of Muslims. This was first of all a practical matter. Correspondence with military and civilian officials in the newly conquered lands had to be dated. But Persia used a different calendar from Syria, where the caliphate was based; Egypt used yet another. Each of these calendars had a different starting point, or epoch. The Sasanids, the ruling dynasty of Persia, used June 16, 632 CE, the date of the accession of the last Sasanid monarch, Yazdagird III. Syria, which until the Muslim conquest was part of the Byzantine Empire, used a form of the Roman “Julian” calendar, with an epoch of October 1, 312 BCE. Egypt used the Coptic calendar, with an epoch of August 29, 284 CE. Although all were solar calendars, and hence geared to the seasons and containing 365 days, each also had a different system for periodically adding days to compensate for the fact that the true length of the solar year is not 365 but 365.2422 days.

In pre-Islamic Arabia, various other systems of measuring time had been used. In South Arabia, some calendars apparently were lunar, while others were lunisolar, using months based on the phases of the moon but intercalating days outside the lunar cycle to synchronize the calendar with the seasons. On the eve of Islam, the Himyarites appear to have used a calendar based on the Julian form, but with an epoch of 110 BCE. In central Arabia, the course of the year was charted by the position of the stars relative to the horizon at sunset or sunrise, dividing the ecliptic into 28 equal parts corresponding to the location of the moon on each successive night of the month. The names of the months in that calendar have continued in the Islamic calendar to this day and would seem to indicate that, before Islam, some sort of lunisolar calendar was in use, though it is not known to have had an epoch other than memorable local events.

There were two other reasons ‘Umar rejected existing solar calendars. The Qur’an, in Sura 10, Verse 5, states that time should be reckoned by the moon. Not only that, calendars used by the Persians, Syrians and Egyptians were identified with other religions and cultures. He therefore decided to create a calendar specifically for the Muslim community. It would be lunar, and it would have 12 months, each with 29 or 30 days.

This gives the lunar year 354 days, 11 days fewer than the solar year. ‘Umar chose as the epoch for the new Muslim calendar the *hijri* year 1 (CE 622), the emigration of the Prophet Muhammad and
TAQSIM and TARAB

Ethnomusicologist Jonathan Shannon notes that one particular way Arab musicians create tarab is by improvising outside rhythm or meter, and then returning to it. This improvisation is elemental to Arab music, and it is named taqsim in Arabic (pr. tahk-SEEM; plural taqsim). A musician can play a taqsim almost anywhere in a piece: at the beginning to introduce it, in the middle between verses or at any time players take turns playing solos.

In a taqsim, a musician creates a melody that explores a sophisticated network of modes or scales called maqamat (pr. mah-kah-MAHT; singular maqam). Many maqamat feature microtones, notes that occur between neighboring notes in Western scales. A great player must know how to play a wide, creative variety of taqsim within any given maqam, and how to transition among several maqamat.

To end a taqsim, the performer must resolve it masterfully, often with a tarab—creating burst of energy that can be subtle and tender or expansive, even showy.

On the cover: The pear-shaped, fretless ‘ud was popular in Arabia from the seventh century and remains the “Prince of Tarab,” centerpiece of any Arab ensemble. Ancestor of the modern-looks guitar, the ‘ud was used in Arab music for more than 1,400 years. History.

Kay Hardy Campbell (kayhardycampbell@gmail.com) writes frequently on Middle East cultural topics. In 1997 she founded, with Simon Shaheen, the annual Arabic Music Retreat, which she continues to co-direct. She also plays the ‘ud.

The late Paul Lunde was a senior research associate with the Civilizations in Contact Project at Cambridge University and author of more than 70 articles for AramcoWorld.

CONVERTING Years and Dates

The following equations convert roughly from Gregorian to hijri and vice versa. However, the results can be slightly misleading: They tell you only the year in which the other calendar’s year begins. For example, 2018 Gregorian begins in Rabi’ i, the fourth month of hijri 1439, and ends in that same month in hijri 1440.

Gregorian year = \[(32 \times \text{Hijri year}) + 33\] + 622
Hijri year = \[((\text{Gregorian year} - 622) \times 33\] + 32

Online calculators can be found by searching “Gregorian-hijri calendar calculator” or similar terms.
Hand clapping is an important percussion instrument in folk music styles across the Arab and Islamic world. In Morocco and the Arabian Peninsula, clappers create a loud resonant popping sound called tasfiq or safqa. Tasfiq accompanies the performances of the Gulf art music style called sawt. During music interludes in sawt songs, a lead clapper starts and stops a chorus of clappers that create lively syncopation.
On the front top register of the British Museum’s 4,500-year-old Standard of Ur, a box ornamented with lapis, shell and red limestone mosaic found at the Mesopotamian city of Ur, south of Baghdad, Iraq, a man plays a finely crafted lyre decorated with a bull’s head. He performs at what appears to be a court occasion, and behind him stands a woman, perhaps a singer. The box was discovered in 1927 and 1928, and the site also yielded four actual lyres—including one much like this one—that are considered to be the oldest existing string instruments. Today, numerous local and regional variants of lyres are played in East Africa, Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula.
Plucked and hammered zithers—lap harps built on a wooden box—like the qanun in the Arab world and Turkey, and the santur in Iraq and Iran, have deep roots in the region and are key instruments in art music ensembles today. The qanun has 75–78 strings, with three strings tuned to each tone. The player plucks the strings with his or her index fingers using tortoiseshell picks, or plectra, held in place on the fingers by metal rings. Microtones are achieved using small, moveable metal bridges called ‘urab in Arabic and mandal in Turkish. Moving these bridges allows the qanun player to transition a new maqam in an instant.
One of the most versatile percussion instruments, a riqq (or its larger variant, a daff) can hold its own as the sole drum in an Arab art music ensemble. With its delicate skin, traditionally made from fish or goat, and its lightweight cymbals of brass, in the hands of a skilled player a riqq can produce both complex classical rhythms and rousing folk beats. This image of a wooden-inlaid riqq is depicted amid the traditional architecture of Chinguetti, Mauritania, once a vibrant trading hub of West Africa and a center of culture and scholarship.
The single-string rababa of the Arabian Peninsula, with its square or rectangular wooden frame, accompanies poets, singers and storytellers, tracing the singer’s tune with intervallic instrumental solos. There are several similar bowed instruments and spike fiddles played throughout the Islamic world. The Egyptian rababa is a vertical spike fiddle. The jawzah of Iraq uses a coconut shell as its base, and the Persian fiddle is a kamanche. Malaysia’s three-stringed rabab often features an ornately carved bow.
Today’s Western oboes descend from a family of loud, double-reed instruments usually played outdoors, including the shawm of medieval Europe and the zurna or surunay of the wider Islamic world. The zurna was an integral part of the Ottoman mehter marching bands, and it is still played at celebrations across the Arab world, Turkey, Greece and the Balkans. In Malaysia, the ornately carved and painted serunai, a cousin to the zurna, accompanies shadow puppet performances that remain popular today.
This painting is based on an original gold luster-glazed dish produced in 11th-century Cairo during the Fatimid period, a time when ceramic objects were often decorated with scenes and activities. This dish portrays a female musician playing a two-stringed instrument without a plectrum. While many other music-related designs from the period feature the larger, pear-shaped 'ud, this instrument’s compact, tulip-like design is reminiscent of the rabab of East Tajikistan in Central Asia—evidence of how both music and instruments flowed freely along the Silk Roads.
Military and ceremonial bands of the Ottoman Empire, called mehter, featured ranks of kettledrums and large, hand-held crash cymbals. The largest drums were played on camelback, and their deep booms inspired the troops and intimidated their enemies. These instruments so fascinated Europeans visiting the Empire that European composers adopted the instruments during an 18th-century craze for everything Turkish. By 1825 kettledrums and crash cymbals were integrated into both the European orchestra and marching band. Today descendants of the mehter band can be found in nearly every large American high school and heard during nearly every holiday parade.
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**NOTES:**

- Mexican American actress Salma Hayek born 1966
- Al-Biruni, “Father of Geodesy,” born 973
- Algerian Amir Abd el-Kader born 1808

**AUGUST 2018**

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The world’s oldest and most universal instrument—the human voice—is also considered the most powerful vehicle for inducing tarab. In modern times, Egyptian vocalist Um Kulthum, who was born in 1904 and lived until 1975, is most often cited as a preeminent vocalist with the power to lead her audiences to profound, sustained tarab. Born the daughter of a Qur’an reciter, she was a masterful interpreter of poetry in song. Two of the many other leading tarab vocal artists include Egyptian musician Abd al-Hamuli (1838–1901) and Syrian singer Sabah Fakhri (1933–).
In the 13th century CE, King Alfonso X of Castile in Spain produced a book of more than 400 songs in praise of the Virgin Mary. Known for his patronage of music, Alfonso assembled court musicians that included Muslims, Jews and Christians. The manuscript illuminations are one of our most vivid sources depicting musical contact between Hispano-Arab and European cultures. The woodwinds, like the shawm, or double clarinet, and bagpipes, resemble the zurna, mijwiz and habban of the Middle East. The illustration of an Arab and European musician playing long-necked lutes, top left, particularly captures the era’s storied cross-cultural music-making.
When the violin, viola, cello and bass appeared with Western musicians in the 19th century, Arab and Turkish musicians adopted them. Today, they are found throughout the region. In some Moroccan ensembles, including those specializing in Tarab Andalusi, music said to have roots in al-Andalus, violinists and violists play their instruments on one knee, the way their ancestors once played the smaller, two-stringed rabab. In the rest of the Middle East, the viola and violin are played under the chin, Western-style.
The tar, or frame drum, is made from animal skin stretched over a wooden frame, and it is played across the Islamic world. Women have played this instrument to accompany singing in celebration for centuries. In some areas, such as Iran, Pakistan and India, metal chains or small “jingle” bells are attached to the inside for more complex sounds and opportunities to display virtuosity. In the Arabian Peninsula, folk groups use tars in a range of sizes to produce different tones and to add depth to syncopated rhythms.
In November 1949, the Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco) published the first issue of an interoffice newsletter named Aramco World. Over the decades that followed, as the number of Americans working with Saudi colleagues in Dhahran grew into the tens of thousands, Aramco World grew into a bimonthly educational magazine whose historical, geographical and cultural articles helped those American employees and their families appreciate an unfamiliar land.

Today, AramcoWorld continues to be published on digital and print platforms by Aramco Services Company in Houston, Texas, on behalf of Saudi Aramco, since 1988 the national energy company of Saudi Arabia. Our mission remains education, the fostering of cooperation and the building of mutual appreciation among the increasingly interconnected cultures of East and West.

All back issues are searchable and downloadable without charge, and selected photographs from past issues are also available, at photoarchive.saudiaramcoworld.com.