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Among the Jasmine Trees: Music, Modernity, and the Aesthetics of Authenticity in
Contemporary Syria.

By

Jonathan Holt Shannon

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2001

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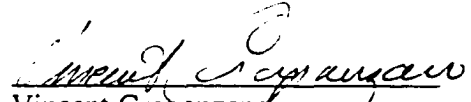
Jonathan Holt Shannon

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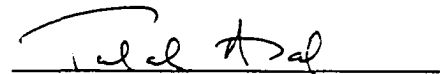
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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

Among the Jasmine Trees: Music, Modernity, and the Aesthetics of Authenticity in
Contemporary Syria.

by

Jonathan Holt Shannon

Adviser: Vincent Crapanzano

This work explores musical aesthetics as a domain of contestation related to broader debates within Syria over cultural modernity. Drawing on extensive field research in Aleppo and Damascus between 1996 and 1998, I argue that the performance and reception of the “classical” urban musical repertoire must be understood within the context of what I call “the aesthetics of authenticity.” This aesthetic sensibility complements a broader interest among Syrian intellectuals in formulating the guidelines for an “alternative modernity” that, while intimately tied to European modernity, would be at once modern and authentically Syrian. For these artists and intellectuals, “authenticity” (*asâla*) implies cultural practices that are perceived as having a relationship to “heritage” (*turâth*), however they may understand and define this heritage.

Chapters one and two explore the aesthetics of authenticity and debates over authenticity and modernity in music and the arts. Chapter three examines the

interrelation of European and Syrian discourses of modernity and their enactment in the contemporary Syrian art world. Chapter four discusses the temporal and spatial dimensions of authenticity in Syrian art and the role of conceptions of origins in debates over authenticity in Arab music. Chapter five explores processes of invocation, remembrance, and temporal transformation and their role in the construction of personhood in the Sufi *dhikr*. Chapter six analyzes the role of discourses of emotion and sentiment in the construction of authenticity in musical performance, while chapter seven discusses the concept of *tarab* or “musical rapture” as a metaphor for the social relations of performance that form the context of “authentic” musical and cultural experience in Aleppo. Chapter eight presents some reflections on the idea of closure, both in terms of the music that is the basis for this study and with respect to the process of ethnographic writing that attempts to capture something of the experience of listening to the music. I conclude that “authenticity” in Syria refers to a realm of emotion and spirit that, far from being backward looking, articulates the concern among Syrian intellectuals and artists for creating an alternative to both the perceived techno-rationality of Euro-American culture and to earlier attempts in Syria to imitate Western models of social modernization and cultural modernity.

Epigraph

The craft of singing is the last of the crafts attained to in civilization, because it constitutes (the last development toward) luxury with regard to no occupation in particular save that of leisure and gaiety. It also is the first to disappear from a given civilization when it disintegrates and retrogresses.

– Ibn Khaldun. *al-Muqaddima*.

At my bigynnyng first I yow biseche Have me excused of my rude speche.

– Geoffrey Chaucer. *The Franklin's Prologue*.

ومنزِل بات فيه العود يطرِبنا وأخيه قد فرَعنا وهو يرتعدُ
وخاض للأنس بحرَ فوقه سبحت أرواحنا، وله من فيضه مددُ
ولا سفينة نوم فيه نَحْرُجنا كما غرقنا، ولم يعلم بنا أحدُ
- قاسم أبو الحسن الكسبي

[... And a home in which the oud had come to the point of enchanting us, and all our worries fled us as he trembled:

For the sake of intimacy he embarked on an ocean made more expansive through his abundance, over which our souls swam:

If not for the ship of sleep in which we departed, we would have drowned, and no one learned of us.

– Qâsim Abû al-Hasan al-Kastî, 19th C.]

Dedication

To the memory of Fateh Moudarres (1924-1999), artist, teacher, and friend.

To the people of Damascus *al-Fayhā'* and Aleppo *al-Shahbā'* who allowed to me to share in their lives.

To my mother, Linda K. Shannon-Rugel, for never-ending love and support.

And to Hala.

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Professor Stephen Blum of the Ph.D. Program in Music offered insightful and trenchant criticism and encouragement from the project's inception. His deep knowledge of the musical traditions of the Near East helped me to hone my arguments and rein in some of my more flagrant prose (but certainly not all of it). Professor Martin Stokes of the University of Chicago provided encouragement on the project and helpful comments on the final draft of the work. I offer special thanks to Professor Louise Lennihan for her never-ending enthusiasm, wisdom, and moral support. She more than anyone is

responsible for sparking my interest in anthropology and for making sure that I navigated my way through the program. Professor Amal Rassam encouraged me to carry out my research in Syria when it might have been easier to go elsewhere. In addition, I want to acknowledge the support and encouragement of my many teachers at CUNY: the late Professors Eric Wolf and Delmos Jones, and Professors Shirley Lindenbaum, Leith Mullings, Ida Susser, and May Ebiara. They initiated me into the theory and craft of anthropology, though what I have done with their teachings is altogether another matter. Lila Abu-Lughod kindly agreed to serve on my examination committee and provided valuable feedback on the initial stages of the project. Thanks to Ahmed Ferhadi of New York University for cultivating my deep love of the Arabic language and encouraging me all along the way.

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In Syria I thank the many friends, acquaintance, teachers, and officials who made my research possible. I acknowledge the Syrian Ministry of Culture for permission to undertake my project and the staff at the Asad National Library for their assistance in finding materials. At the US Cultural Center in Damascus, Dr. Evelyn Early, Juliet Wurr, 'Abd al-Raouf 'Adwan, and the staff facilitated my work in every way. I especially thank 'Abd al-Raouf for his continued friendship and for coordinating my lectures in Syria. Hussein Nazik first welcomed me to Syrian music, and 'Adnan Abu al-Shamat was among my first teachers in Syria. Hussein Sabsabi has been a close friend and inspiring performer, and 'Ali Sabsabi provided me with excellent *'ūds*, fine repair work, and friendship. Special thanks is due to Muhammad Qadri Dalal, friend and master, and his family in Aleppo. Without Mr. Dalal's encyclopedic knowledge of Arab music and culture and his warm guidance, this project would have suffered greatly. I thank Sabri

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A Note on Transliteration

In this work I use a transliteration system adapted from that of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES)*. For Arabic text in the modern standard variety (*al-fushā*), I closely follow the *IJMES* usage with the exception of diacritical markings for the emphatic consonants (hence $\text{ح} = \text{h}$, not ḥ), and initial *al-*, which appears only in proper names and Qur'ānic verses. The transliteration of the different varieties of colloquial Arabic spoken in Syria presents numerous problems. I have aimed for clarity and in most cases have brought the transliteration in line with the standard variety so that readers unfamiliar with Syrian colloquial may identify the standard equivalents, if they exist. I use the standard Arabic plural forms (hence *dhikr*, pl. *adhkār*, and not *dhikr-s*), although in many cases I utilize colloquial plurals when the standard plural forms are seldom or never used (*nās muhtaramin*, not *muhtaramūn*). When Arabic plurals would prove awkward or unnecessary I have used the English -s (e.g. *jalabiyya-s*). Speech is transliterated in the closest approximation to the variety used. Qur'ānic text is fully articulated and inserted in brackets; citations refer to the Arabic original and translations are adapted from N. J. Dawood's translation (1991). I give proper names full articulation only in their first appearance and use European spellings for commonly used proper names (George and not *jūrj*) and non-*IJMES* transliterations when individual artists use them in their own publications or recordings (Moudallal and not Mudallal).

The transcription of Arab music presents unique challenges of its own. I have again aimed for simplicity, using capital letters to indicate all pitches. The neutral second interval ("half-flat" or "quarter-tone" interval) is indicated by $\flat$ and the "half-sharp" by $\sharp$.

Contents

Abstract	iv - v
Epigraph	vi
Dedication	vii
Acknowledgements	viii - xi
Note on Transliteration	xii
Chapter One: Introduction Music, Modernity, and the Aesthetics of Authenticity	1 - 38
Chapter Two: Exploring the Aesthetics of Authenticity in Contemporary Syria	39 - 76
Chapter Three: The Question of Modernity and Authenticity in Modern Syria	77 - 118
Chapter Four: Constructions of Musical Authenticity in Contemporary Aleppo	119 - 151
Chapter Five: Memory, Temporality, and Transformation in the Sufi <i>Dhikr</i>	152 - 186
Chapter Six: Authentic Performances and the Performance of Authenticity	187 - 228
Chapter Seven: <i>Tarab</i> and Authenticity	229 - 267
Chapter Eight: Notes Toward Closure	268 - 284
Glossary of Selected Arabic Terms	285 - 289
Selected Bibliography and Discography	290 - 309
Autobiographical Statement	310

Chapter One: Introduction – Music, Modernity, and the Aesthetics of Authenticity

I) *al-Matla'*: The *Mutriba* and the Restaurant

Everyone has two homelands: the one in which they were born, and Syria.

– André Parrot

It seemed as if I had been preparing to go to Syria all my life. Partly as a result of some vague Syro-Lebanese heritage (my maternal grandfather having emigrated to the United States in the early twentieth century from what was then Syria and is now the northern part of Lebanon), and partly as a result of growing up amidst a large Arab-American community in Dearborn, Michigan, I had a strong urge to visit Syria and Lebanon and to learn the Arabic language. So when I found myself in a doctoral program in cultural anthropology, a sort of compromise refuge between my former literary and scientific studies, it seemed somehow natural that I would choose the Middle East as my area of interest. Syria, where relatively little ethnographic research has been conducted in the last four decades, had a dual attraction as an unknown entity and as a pseudo-homeland – but more the latter. When in the summer of 1994 I was able to take vacation from my Arabic studies in Cairo and travel to Syria, the seeds of my personal curiosity took deeper root and began to sprout into the beginnings of a professional interest.

Flying to Damascus in June of 1995, I arrived to find the preparations underway for the second Syrian Song Festival (*mihrajân al- 'ughniya al-sûriyya*), held in Aleppo, Syria's second largest city and traditional music capital. The local newspapers were full

of information about the festival as well as biographies of famous and not so famous local musical personalities whose names I had seldom if ever heard discussed in the Cairo music scene. During this trip Syria seemed to be full of music, from the festivals to the glimmering new conservatory and rising Opera House, to the numerous restaurants in the Old City of Damascus that feature live music, to the sounds issuing from the countless cassette stands on the city streets. My fate was decided: I would return to study the music.

I returned to Damascus on November. 16, 1996, almost a year and half after my last visit. A Fulbright-Hays grant in my hand and André Parrot's slogan in my mind,¹ I stepped off the plane that November evening to find Syria awash in banners celebrating the 26th anniversary of the "Great Corrective Movement" (*al-haraka al-tashîhiyya al-majîdu*), a national holiday marking the coming to power of Hâfiz al-Asad in 1970. Every plaza in the city center was strung with banners, every fountain alit with colored lights, and at every major intersection nationalist jingles could be heard crackling from battered speakers dangling from light posts or the facades of buildings. No one seemed to be in a festive mood, however. When I asked my driver what it was all about, he turned down his radio, took a glance at me in the rearview mirror, then turned the radio back up and continued driving to the hotel.

Later in the evening, as I settled into my hotel bed for some needed rest, a young *mutriba* (woman vocalist) began to sing from the roof-top garden of a nearby luxury

¹ The statement, whose original reference I cannot trace, most likely appeared in an introduction by Parrot to a manuscript on Syrian archaeological treasures. I found it oft repeated in tourist brochures, official publications, and now even on official and unofficial Syrian web sites, including that of the Syrian Ministry of Tourism (<http://www.syriatourism.org>; accessed August 15, 2000).

hotel, filling the night air with the latest Arab pop hits. Her high volume vocals was accompanied by the inimitable sound of the modern pop orchestra: the ubiquitous *org* or synthesizer, with its uniquely noisome sound – sort of a mixture of an accordion and the reedy folk instrument known as the *mijwiz* – and the omnipresent *tabla* (goblet drum) beating out the fast and repetitive *baladī* beat.² There may have been an electric guitar and bass to round out the ensemble, as is common in hotel lounge bands in Syria,

Lebanon, and Egypt.

This unpleasant noise kept me awake until well into the morning as I sat up in my bed recording my first impressions on my notebook computer:

So here I am at the *Burj 'Alū' Hotel* ("Aladdin's Tower" – four stories, some tower!), paying \$41 a night because they screwed up the reservation and didn't reserve a single room for me. Oh well. I hope it won't be for too many nights (like 2 or 3!). And to think I could be at the other place paying 5 bucks a night, but I went along with the Fulbright program recommendations, and here I am. At least it's pretty comfortable. They have these funny stickers on the mirror showing the direction to Mecca, the *qibla*, though I guess you'd have to stand on the mirror to really get it right! ... Time to power down and go to sleep – I don't trust the electricity here to charge the computer battery. And I have a million things to do tomorrow... [a few minutes later, written in my pocket notebook]

But how can I sleep with that noise from the hotel next door?! Some so-called

² *Baladī* is a simple 4/4 meter common in Levantine folk music and has become a staple of the Arab pop song, especially when played on the *tabla*.

“*mutriba*” is shouting away at full volume from the roof garden of this fancy place ... and it’s 2 am! It is so loud that even with my head under the pillow I can still hear it and the windows are closed! I can’t see who’s up there but I can hear the usual crowd: org, tabla, and people clapping (or is that just the org too?) ... What a nightmare! Is this what I came for?

Two years later, while doing research in the New York Public Library, I would come across the following passage from an eighteenth-century doctor’s memoirs describing the music of Aleppo:

Their chamber music consists of a dulcimer (santeer), guitar (tamboor), dervishes flute (nail), blown in a very particular manner; Arab fiddle (Kamanjee), a couple of small drums, and the diff, which serves chiefly to beat time to the voice, the worst of all their music; for they bellow so hideously that it spoils what without it would be in some degree harmonious (Russell 1756: 93-94).

I guess some things haven’t changed in 250 years – like the attitudes of foreigners to unfamiliar forms of popular entertainment.... At any rate, the *mutriba* and her ensemble seemed a bad omen at the time: the music I was trying to *avoid* studying was to be heard everywhere, but where was the music that I had come to study?

The following evening I decided to avoid the well-microphoned *mutriba* and head to the Old City of Damascus for some “authentic” Arab music. I was also keen to dine on the long-anticipated Syrian cuisine after many months of patient resignation with Egyptian food. My guide book to Syria described the “Omayyad Palace” restaurant as

offering “delicious Syrian food in an authentic atmosphere,” adding that the restaurant featured a live band playing “traditional” music, so I decided to go. Located just steps from the seventh-century Umayyad Mosque, one of the glories of Islamic architecture, the Omayyed Palace Restaurant takes its name from the Umayyad Dynasty that ruled the early Islamic empire (661-750 AD). The restaurant is said be located on the site of the grand palace of the first Umayyad prince, Mu’awiyya Ibn Abi Sufyân. All that remains of the palace is its large cellar (*qabû*), occupied by the present restaurant.

* * *

Descending the narrow staircase to the restaurant, I find it to be the very picture of authenticity. Stepping through a beaded curtain, I am greeted by a waiter dressed in a fancifully embroidered vest and billowy black pants reminiscent of the folksy *shirwâl* that peasants wear. As he leads me across the main room to a table, I take in the scene. The walls are constructed of thick black and white blocks of marble reminiscent of the local *ablaq* (“striped”) style. Various items of “authentic heritage” adorn the walls – large engraved brass saucers, Damascene swords in their bejeweled scabbards, small inlaid wooden frames and mirrors, black-and-white photographs of the Old City. A number of shelves and display cases also exhibit old-style coffee pots, *nargîlas* (water pipes), and assorted items such as old glass perfume bottles, ancient oil lamps, miscellaneous old ceramic bowls, and odd trinkets. A sign in English and Arabic reads, “For Display Only” (*lil-‘ard faqat*) – suggesting that it is a “truly” authentic place, like someone’s home. You can’t buy the décor; in a sense it isn’t even “décor.”

My table is a low wooden stand inlaid with mother of pearl supporting a brass saucer much like those hanging on the walls. The paper napkins stuffed in a faux inlaid box labeled in English “Damascus” seem to detract from the scene, but I am soon enough distracted from any thoughts of “inauthenticity” by the waiter’s invitation to go ahead and fill my plate at the expansive buffet. I rise to get my food and notice a dwarf-like man going from table to table with a pot (*ibriq*) of *qahwa sâda*, unsweetened coffee served in small ceramic cups on special occasions such as weddings and funerals when large groups of people will be drinking coffee and the host cannot prepare a fresh pot all the time. Returning to my table with a plate piled high with *kibbeh* (ground lamb and cracked wheat), *tabuleh* salad, *fatteh* (a Damascene dish made of chickpeas and bread), a stack of *zaytûn* (olives), *hummus* (puréed chickpeas), *khubz* (pita bread), and a bowl of *shurbat ‘adas* (lentil soup) balanced precariously in my hands, I sit and contemplate this culinary paradise. Looking around me, I find a number of families and a small group of tourists who are also eating, their guide books jutting out of their jacket pockets (mine is safely hidden in my bag), and, like me, ogling the place. However, most of the clientele do not seem to me to be “tourists,” or at least not in the usual sense of foreign visitors. Some seem to be locals, and many in fact are carrying on in Arabic. Over the course of the coming year and a half I will have recourse to come to this particular restaurant on numerous occasions with guests and friends, and learn that the patrons consists largely of Lebanese and elite Damascenes and their friends coming to eat good food and experience an “authentic” atmosphere – just as the guide book says.

But on this first visit I am there for two things: the food and the music. Having cleaned my plate and gone back to the buffet for seconds, I return to my table and settle in

to hear the music to which I will be devoting my research. My notepad and pen feel itchy in my jacket pocket, but I decide to set anthropology aside and try to absorb the experience. A group of five young musicians are seated along the back wall before an enormous and gorgeous inlaid wooden chest, a number of swords, and a large golden tapestry depicting a scene of Arab horsemen hanging from the wall behind them. The musicians are dressed in “traditional” clothing, each wearing an embroidered white ‘*abāya* or woolen robe, and playing “traditional” instruments: the so-called *takht* ensemble consisting of *qânûn* (lap zither), ‘*ūd* (Arabian lute), *nây* (end-blown bamboo flute), *tabla* (goblet drum), and *mutrib* (singer). Notwithstanding the garish banner hanging to one side announcing in red and yellow letters *Happy New Year* and *Merry Christmas* [sic], the scene is entirely “authentic.” To the other side of the ensemble sit two men dressed in flowing white robes and elongated conical brown hats on their heads: they are the group’s *mawlawî* or “whirling dervish” dancers, named after the Mawlawiya Sufi order of the thirteenth-century Muslim mystic Jalâl al-Din Rûmî.

The musicians are performing a *samâ’î* (pl. *samâ’iyyât*), one of the basic instrumental genres of the traditional Ottoman-Arabic repertoire.³ I have already learned several *samâ’iyyât* and recognize that they are playing one of the “standards” – *samâ’î râst tatyûs*, named after the famous nineteenth-century Ottoman composer Tatyus Effendi. However, I am a little dismayed at the somnambulant performance. The musicians look as if they are asleep and their playing seems mechanical to me, but still it beats hearing the loud *mutriba* and her *org* accompanist. After the *samâ’î* the ensemble

³ Definitions of selected Arabic terms can be found in the Glossary.

begins to perform a slow *muwashshah*, classical poetry set to music. The *mawlawi* dancers rise and begin their unique dance: twirling slowly counterclockwise, their heads tilted to the right, their right arms raised and left lowered at an angle to their bodies. Their loose skirts billow as they spin, faster and faster, while the ensemble plays a steady beat behind them. Yet the dancers too seem tired – bored, even – and I, though fascinated, wonder what on earth a Sufi dance is doing in a Damascus restaurant.

The other patrons, soaking up the sounds like so much sonic décor, busily attend to their dishes and conversations. Every once in a while someone pauses to nod a head or shout a feeble *Aywa!* (Yes!) or *Ah!* in the direction of the ensemble. Some of them seem enraptured by the atmosphere, while others are apparently less moved. The gurgling of *nargilas* can be heard coming from the corner where a bunch of men sit and stare off into space listlessly.

Sitting alone watching this parody of “tradition,” I feel depressed. Did I come all the way to Syria to conduct my fieldwork in restaurants listening to this mechanical stuff?! But whose parody? Whose tradition? What is “authentic” and “authenticity” after all? What sorts of aesthetic sensibilities do these particular performances and venues – the *mutriba* and the heritage ensemble – suggest? Moreover, what can we learn about contemporary Syria through a study of its music?

* * *

These are some of the questions that I addressed in my field research on music and musicians in contemporary Syria. As will become clear in the following chapters, my

research was as much about revealing my own conceptualizations and ideologies of authenticity as about discovering Syrian and, especially, Aleppine attitudes toward music, culture, and authenticity. This work investigates the particular aesthetic sensibilities through which my Aleppine, Damascene, and other Syrian and Arab teachers, friends, and acquaintances listen to and enjoy music. I argue that the concept of authenticity (*asāla*) plays a special role in contemporary Syrian aesthetics as an index of what many consider to be valuable and good in their culture. The concern of certain Syrian artists and intellectuals with authenticity must be understood as an expression of some of the contradictions of the experience of modernity in Syria today. Moreover, firmly believing that music partakes of a larger realm of experience, I situate discourse about authenticity and music in the context of the other arts in Syria, as well as in the general context of daily life in a changing and complex cultural landscape. My intention is as much to raise questions as to provide an outline for examining how Syrian intellectuals and artists of diverse backgrounds articulate their understandings of modernity and authenticity.

II) The Aesthetics of Authenticity: Heritage and Authenticity

Walking the streets of Damascus soon after my arrival I came across a most curious advertisement for a computer company. Computers are readily available in Syria, hardware and software surprisingly inexpensive (much of it bootleg), and computer advertisements widespread in the major cities. However, this particular ad stood out because of its direct appeal to tradition. It depicted a computer tower case, keyboard, and monitor sitting on a glossy table top, but reflected in the table top were two large cuneiform tablets mirroring the computer and monitor. Above the image read the words,

“Building on the achievements of our forefathers ...” (*binâ 'an 'ala injâzât ajdâdinâ*) and the name of the company. The advertisement implied that the computer – icon of technological development – is an extension of early (*very* early) developments in Levantine civilization, or *hadâra*. In fact, some Syrian scholars claim that the earliest “computer” was developed in Mesopotamia, meaning a variety of the abacus and the concept of the zero, allowing for the eventual development of binary numbers and, 5,000 years later, the electronic computer.

These claims aside, the “cuneiform computer” advertisement illustrates some of the ways in which Syrians assert claims to cultural authenticity and legitimacy through an appeal to particular conceptions of heritage and the past – often the distant past (pre-Islamic, even prehistoric). Other examples include the use of the names of famous Muslim scholars and luminaries in the names of contemporary businesses. One finds an “Ibn Haytham Pharmacy” in every city, named after the great Muslim pharmacist. Likewise, “al-Râzî,” graces many a Syrian hospital, referring to the great Muslim doctor, while “al-Kindî” movie theaters are found in Damascus and Aleppo, though what the relationship between the philosopher and the cinema might be is unclear. In earlier decades, many theaters and establishments in Damascus and Aleppo carried European names, such the “Luna Park,” the “Dolce Vita,” and “Versailles.” The heritage names reflect both a modern nationalist sentiment as well as adherence to a recent law that requires all Syrian businesses to have an “Arabic” name, though what qualifies as “Arabic” is flexible. For example, the proprietor of the “Sham Dan” cassette shop in Damascus asserted that the words could mean something in Arabic, Persian, or Turkish, the three sources of the Arab-Ottoman musical tradition that the store features. In

Aleppo, musical ensembles carry such names as “*Firqat al-Turâth*” (The Heritage Ensemble), “*Firqat al-Kindî*,” and “*Firqat Urnînâ*,” referring to the famous singer and dancer at the Assyrian temple of Bal. One shop in Aleppo combines Aleppines’ taste for heritage and sweets: “*Hiluwiyyât al-Turâth*,” (Heritage Sweets).

These few examples illustrate some of the diverse domains in which Syrians assert claims to authenticity and cultural legitimacy through an appeal to particular conceptions of heritage. In addition to public culture such as advertisements, political discourse is full of references to the past as part of official practices of legitimization and authentication of state power (cf. Wedeen 1999). In the realm of the arts, concern with heritage, however it may be conceived, presented, and understood by artists and their audiences, expresses what I term the “aesthetics of authenticity” in contemporary Syrian culture. In conjunction with systems of patronage and cultural institutions, this aesthetic sensibility constitutes a Syrian “art world” (Danto 1964) in which artists and intellectuals debate and construct the meanings of “authentic culture,” “the past,” and “heritage.” Of course, different artists and audiences have different notions of authentic culture, the past, and heritage; indeed some reject the conceptions of others as “inauthentic.” Still others reject the discourse of authenticity as false and misleading, arguing for cultural and political forms distinct from – indeed, liberated from – heritage.

The contradictions of these views and discourses, as well as their articulation by particular cultural actors in particular contexts, form the material of my research into aesthetic discourse and modernity in contemporary Syria, where, as around the Arab world, the arts are an important arena for the struggle over visions of the future. These visions – always plural, sometimes incommensurate – increasingly evoke the concept of

authenticity, often through the discourse of a return to the Arab heritage. Yet, this turn to heritage, I argue, participates in a broader concern among Syrian intellectuals, artists, and politicians with articulating the contours of a society and culture at once authentically Syrian, Arab, and modern.⁴ The construction and evaluation of authenticity, then, engages with conceptions of culture, ethnicity, and the nation that are at the heart of postcolonial culture and aesthetics in a variety of contexts around the world (cf. Chatterjee 1993; Said 1994). By focusing on music and musicians in Aleppo and, to a lesser extent, elsewhere in Syria, and by investigating how they conceptualize and articulate their music, my aim is less to provide ethnomusicological detail about these traditions, though I do this as well, than to offer an interpretation of Syrian culture through its music, using the music as a window or rather as an “ear” on contemporary Syrian society and culture.

Contexts and Contradictions

Performing and listening to music in contemporary Syrian do not occur in a vacuum, isolated from the social and cultural contexts in which artists and audiences engage in aesthetic experiences. To a large extent, Syrian artistic production and reception occurs within the context of Syria’s relationship to the other Arab lands, especially Egypt. Egypt, long considered to be the cultural capital of the Arab world, dominates Syria and the other Arab countries in the total quantity – if not quality – of its

⁴ By this formulation I do not wish to imply that “Syrian,” “Arab,” and “modern” are either mutually exclusive or well-defined essences. Rather, they are cultural and political constructions that serve different interests.

artistic production. For example, whereas contemporary Syrian filmmakers may produce a maximum of two or three films annually, Egyptian filmmakers today produce ten times as many, and this number is far down from the 1960s, when production was much higher (Armbrust 1996). Egypt has long been a source of inspiration for a number of Syrian artists, both in terms of providing subject matter (for instance, themes from ancient Egyptian art) and as a center for study at Egypt's fine arts academies and conservatories. However, for others, Egypt symbolizes vulgarity and decadence. For example, the Egyptian star 'Amrû Diâb's hit song *Habîbî nûr al-'ayn* (Beloved, light of my eye), though extremely popular, is just one of a string of Arab pop music hits coming from Egyptian and, more recently, Lebanese and Arabian Gulf studios that many Syrians label as cheap (*rakhîsa*) and vulgar (*hâbita*).

Yet, a moment's reflection raises the question: If these songs are so vulgar, why do they remain so popular around the Arab world? Critics are quick to point out the general vulgarity and debasement (*inhitât*) of contemporary Arabic culture as the context for the production and reception of these "vulgar" songs. The overwhelming popularity of this music among the growing youth population in Syria – some estimate that upwards of 50% of the population is fifteen or under (cf. Collelo 1988) – suggests that criticism of popular culture reflects an Arnoldian bias against "low-brow" culture from the standpoint of "high brow" culture. Yet – as I noticed on many occasions – many critics of these so-called vulgar songs listen privately to what they may publicly excoriate (cf. Ghasoub 1996); the songs are popular not only with Syria's youth, but with a broader segment of society.

Adorno (1976: 69) writes that every genre bears the mark of the contradictions

that exist in society as a whole (cf. Stokes 1992: 3). Contemporary Arab popular music bears the marks of the many contradictions and ambiguities of contemporary Syrian society – in its uncertain search for authenticity, and in the often banal admixture of the old and the new, the local and the foreign. Seen in the light of contemporary cinematic conventions, clothing styles, architecture, and literature, which often borrow heavily from Western conventions even when cast in local idioms, it comes as no surprise that contemporary music too adopts freely from Western models. At the same time, much of the local pop music also manages to retain elements of local conventions, especially “folk” music and what in general terms is described as *sha’bi* or *baladi* music and culture, the popular music and culture of peasants and urban poor.

Moreover, the notion that the pure Arab musical tradition has been sullied by the incursion of Western music and popular culture, a common sentiment among Syrian intellectuals, does not accurately describe the rise of the modern pop song and the dynamics of the interaction of Arab and Western musical cultures. In light of these discourses of decline and corruption it is instructive to read mid-twentieth century criticism of artists who by today’s standards are considered exemplars of valued musical aesthetics but who in their own time were widely criticized as “vulgar.” A prime example is ‘Abd al-Halîm Hâfîz, decried in his early days as vulgar but later lionized as a valued propagator of the older musical aesthetics.

For example, in a 1954 editorial entitled “The Cheap Songs” (*al-aghânî al-rakhîsa*) that hints at ‘Abd al-Halîm and others, Râtîb al-Husâmî, then Director General of the Syrian Broadcast Authority, argued that the songs of his day were:

... of the cheap variety that has no meaning and no content and that the cultured

people might reject but which is requested by a large portion of the general population ... the majority are nothing more than paved words [i.e. lowly] drowning in love and desire and ardent love and passion!⁵

He goes on to excoriate what he terms love songs that have no connection with Arabic literature, especially poetry, and are little more than “unacceptable and unreasonable prattle” (*hurâ' ghayr maqbûl wa lâ ma 'qûl*) (al-Husâmi 1965:1). Yet, many contemporary listeners consider these songs to be “authentic,” especially when compared to what is heard on the airwaves today; the “prattle” of yesterday has become the cherished “heritage” of today.

Transnational Contexts

Matters of taste aside, the centrality of Cairo for contemporary Syrian arts problematizes the commonly held assumption of the predominant influence of Western European and American culture on the Arab world. Moreover, while many of Syria's prominent older artists studied at European academies, more recent generations of Syrian artists, writers, and musicians (not to mention engineers, doctors, and architects) are more likely to be graduates of institutes and universities in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Moscow, Budapest, Sofia, Prague, Kiev, and Dresden have been as important to the younger generation of Syrian artists and intellectuals as Rome and Paris were to an older generation. Of course, few would pass up the opportunity to study in Paris, Rome,

⁵ The original Arabic reads: *min al-naw' al-rakhîs al-ladhî lâ ma'nâ lahu wa lâ ma'fûm wa-l ladhî tamajjahu adhwâq al-muthaqqafîn lakin qadd tatlubu lahu fî 'a kabira min 'âmat al-sh'ab ... wa aktharahu 'abâra 'an kalâm marsûf yaghriqu fî al-hubb wa-l gharam wa-l 'ashq wa-l hiyâm.* (al-Husâmi 1954: 1).

Berlin, Florence, and Madrid, and many prominent Syrian and other Arab artists can in fact be found in these cities today. However, these opportunities have been relatively scarce while connections with Eastern Europe have been stronger as a result of military and economic cooperation between Syria and these countries. In fact, Eastern European conceptions of folklore, nationalism, and authenticity have had important influences on the visions of authentic culture of contemporary Syrian artists who studied at academies in Prague, Budapest, Bucharest, Warsaw, Moscow, and Sofia. New York and Los Angeles, for their part, draw few Syrian artists and intellectuals. For post-colonial Syrian artists and intellectuals, then, the “International” refers to a complex network of political, cultural, and intellectual centers ranging from Damascus, Beirut, Tunis, Istanbul, Cairo, and Tehran, to Budapest, Prague, Moscow, Kiev, and increasingly Tokyo, Beijing, and Bombay. Paris, Berlin, and Rome, though they may figure prominently in rhetorics of the International, are for most Syrian artists of secondary importance, while New York and Los Angeles hardly figure at all.

III) Informants and the Authenticity Debates and Discourses

Most professional or full-time musicians in Syria are not members of elite families, and many do not have a university education. Moreover, musicians, I found, are not always the most self-reflective artists and often have difficulty talking about their craft. Only those with considerable formal training in music talk about their music and music making activities in a systematic way; others prefer to just perform and let the music speak for itself, which it usually does more clearly than words anyway. Therefore, I often worked as well with those who would consider themselves to be intellectuals and

members of the artistic elite: writers, poets, dramatists, actors, architects, film and television directors, journalists, and art critics. Therefore my fieldwork sites, aside from lessons, recitals, concerts, and the homes of musicians, were the hang outs of the intellectuals: cafés in Damascus and Aleppo, the artists' club (*al-Riwāq*) in Damascus. intellectual and literary "salons," public lectures, and private gatherings. In other words, this is by no means a study of folk musicians or of working class artists (or not exclusively so). Rather, I focus on how a certain set of intellectuals and artists – cultural agents, many of them elites – create works of art, attempt to understand their contemporary culture and society, and articulate visions for the future. Hence I would not expect the aesthetics of authenticity that I describe here for these cultural agents – their "structures of feeling," to use Raymond Williams' phrase (1977) – necessarily to correspond to that of villagers, bedouin, or the urban working classes, or even of elites not engaged in these kinds of cultural practices and productions.

Moreover, my research was conducted almost entirely among men. I never met a single professional woman musician or composer, though there are several well-known female vocalists and many women study music and play instruments – just not professionally or publicly. This is in contrast to much of the history of Arab music, in which women instrumental performers and especially vocalists were not only common but highly valued (cf. Danielson 1997; Van Nieuwkerk 1995). I did have recourse to conversations with women journalists, writers, music teachers and other women interested in and knowledgeable about Arab music and Arab heritage in general, but all of my lessons and the majority of my research contacts were with men. This reflects conceptions of gender relations and appropriate conduct within Arab and Muslim society.

Other researchers might make fruitful studies of female vocalists, or of how women listen to and engage with Arab music.

Furthermore, my interaction with non-musicians often led to debates about my research project on “Arab music” and the question of authenticity. Many asked if there indeed is such a thing as “Arab” music? Is there a “Syrian” music? If so, how is it different from “Arab” music? What is authenticity? These questions and others upset many of my assumptions about authenticity and culture in Syria, and trying to answer them enriched my research.

Often my interlocutors compelled me to choose sides in the debates I was addressing in my research about authenticity and vulgarity. As I relate in the following chapter, the late artist Fateh Moudarres challenged me to choose which of two worlds I would move in as a researcher, referring not so much to two social classes or two musical genres but to two visions of culture and modernity: a vision of a spirit-infused authentic *and* modern culture, versus a nostalgic vision of a traditional culture overrun with the excesses of vulgarity and banality. I chose the former, as will become clear throughout this work. Certainly, many of my own biases against much of what is produced in the contemporary musical market today were confirmed through my interaction with like-minded cultural agents, though some were nicely overturned as well. I fully recognize that my position put me at odds with the majority of Arab listeners, for whom the modern song is an integral part of daily life. Yet my views aligned nicely with those of many of my informants, for better or for worse, and allowed me to be accepted as “serious” (what “serious” person would devote a year and a half, indeed a doctorate, to studying the modern pop songs?). Yet my position also prevented me from addressing certain

questions or blinded me to certain ambiguities, though I hope at least some of these ambiguities will become apparent in this work.

IV) Art Worlds and Aesthetics

This study is concerned with identifying and exploring some of the discourses, assumptions, theories, and ideologies of contemporary Syrian artists for whom the question of authenticity is an important determinant of their artistic practices. Many but certainly not all Syrian artists are concerned with heritage and authenticity, and even for those who are, conceptions of cultural heritage and authenticity vary and there is little consensus on what is authentic. In fact there is more consensus on what is *inauthentic* culture, the most often mentioned example being the contemporary popular song. Likewise, for many artists the urge to work with heritage derives from its potential financial benefits as well as any innate interest in heritage preservation or authenticity. Heritage “pays,” both in terms of local and foreign consumption of heritage commodities (especially “traditional” handicrafts) and in terms of official sponsorship and patronage of heritage-related arts: paintings of the Old Cities, “classical” Arab music, “folkloric” dances, and so forth.

Given the diversity of opinion among Syrian artists and intellectuals regarding authenticity and indeed regarding the concept of “art” itself, it would be misleading to speak of a single Syrian “artistic community” of artists that share an overall artistic vision or whose practices create the appearance of there being an overall vision. In fact, many artists expressed to me that they feel no sense of shared mission or artistic vision in Syria, no feeling that they as artists are participating in an artistic movement (*haraka*), but

instead a deep feeling of isolation and frustration. I suggest that it is more useful to think of Syrian artists as constituting diverse and overlapping “communities of artists,” that is, practitioners in a variety of media (fine arts, music, cinema, dance, drama, etc.) who may have very different stylistic and thematic concerns: some “serious” (*jaddī*), others commercial (*istihlākī*); some officially-sponsored, others independent; some realist or impressionist, others abstract or experimental; and just as often combinations of these traits at different times. Communities of these artists form around venues and activities not always directly related to art: hanging out at the same coffee shops, which remain centers of intellectual life in Syria; drinking and gossiping at a friend’s apartment or studio; gathering at an exhibition or concert in order to be seen and, often, heard; or even participating in a group exhibition or public music, drama, or film festival, for example. Seldom do these artists work together and most would deny that there is some overarching artistic community in Syria.

Nevertheless, despite their sense of mutual isolation and their diverse stylistic and thematic concerns, I like to think of Syrian artists as participating in a series of loosely defined and overlapping art worlds. By “art world” I have in mind the sense that Danto (1964) and Becker (1982) have brought to the term, namely the theories, histories, and ideologies of “art;” aesthetic sensibilities and conventions; particular practices, techniques, and materials; forms of art criticism, sponsorship, patronage, and censorship; and especially educational and cultural institutions that make both the production of “art” in its different media and its reception by a public possible. Indeed, as Danto and Becker claim, it is the art world that makes “art” possible in the first place (Danto 1964: 581; Becker 1982: 34, 39; cf. Marcus and Myers 1995: 28).

In this sense, we can identify a number of diverse but related art worlds “in” contemporary Syria,⁶ each having distinct materials, techniques, institutional matrices, histories, and ideologies: for example, the art worlds of contemporary Syrian cinema and television production, contemporary popular music, “heritage” music, experimental theater, and abstract painting. These diverse art worlds are interrelated through the common social, political, and institutional matrices that condition artistic production and reception (aesthetics). These include, among others, political patronage and sponsorship through the Ministries of Culture and Information; numerous forms of censorship (including self-censorship); state-run institutes of music, the fine arts, drama, and cinema; museums, public and private galleries, and exhibition spaces; conservatories, cultural centers, and recital halls; publishing houses and presses; literary salons and public lecture halls; private patronage; and local, regional, and international festivals, exhibitions, and concert tours. We might add music shops, art supplies dealers, framers, set designers, sound and light managers, and so forth – all the technical and administrative support that allows art in its different forms to be produced and received. Becker acknowledges that the “artness” and the “worldness” of the concept of art world are problematic; the boundaries between “art” and “not art,” and between networks of artists and others not normally associated with art, are never clear (Becker 1982: 36-37). Rather, we must understand these and other boundaries as constructed within the context of the institutions and practices – the art worlds – that produce conceptions of art, aesthetics, and artistic communities or communities of artists in the first place.

⁶ As mentioned above, to talk of the arts “in” Syria means to be aware of the numerous regional and transnational connections that have made the practice of art in its different forms possible.

In this work I am most concerned with the art world(s) for which the questions of modernity and authenticity are of central importance. Of course, not all Syrian artists are interested in the question of authenticity in their works and lives. However, I would argue that the majority share an interest in the question of modernity and that their activities can be understood as contributing to debates about modernity in Syria, whether they would acknowledge this or not. Moreover, the question of authenticity is implicit even in the works of artists that are not normally considered (or which they themselves do not consider) to be “authentic.” The institutional basis for the various arts in Syria encourages, as argued above, an interest in heritage and authenticity as part of nationalist ideologies of culture and politics, and there are certain financial incentives both at home and abroad (especially abroad) to working with “authentic” material. As this work will explore, “authenticity” (*asāla*) plays an important role in debates among Syrian intellectuals and artists about the possible courses of modernity, even for those intellectuals for whom “authenticity” and “heritage” are icons of backwardness and impediments to the struggle for modernity. Adopting a dialectical approach to aesthetics in Syria reveals how conceptions of “authentic” and “inauthentic” in Syrian art worlds are mutually constituted (cf. Adorno 1997).

Ideologies of Art and Aesthetics in Syria

The Syrian art worlds concerned with heritage and authenticity presume distinct if implicit ideologies of art and aesthetics. With respect to the concept of “art,” Syrian artists use a distinctly modern notion of art (*fann*) and its relationship to other practices

such as craft (*mihna*), which they consider “traditional.” In the Arab world, as in pre-modern Europe, *fann* was closely tied to the concept of *mihna*. Indeed, *fann* still retains the connotation of a technical art, such as the military arts (*al-funûn al-harbiyya*). One dry-cleaning shop in Damascus carries the name *al-masbagha al-fanniyya*, the “technical” and not the “artistic” cleaners. Under the influence of European artists and ideologies of art, *fann* has come to mean what we understand today as “art,” that is, a medium of personal expression and not just a type of craft that reflects the natural or divine orders (Abouseif 1999; cf. Kühnel 1976 [1949]). In Syrian painting, according to Fateh Moudarres, this transformation occurred in three stages.⁷ First, beginning in the late nineteenth century Syrian artists adopted the styles and techniques of European realism. Canvases from this period depict landscapes, neo-classical portraits, and other subjects based on European artistic traditions of that period, including Orientalism. Second, in the first third of the twentieth century Syrian artists gradually emerged from the shadow of their European teachers and used European techniques and styles to depict local rather than European subjects. The ruins of Palmyra or scenes from the Old Cities of Damascus and Aleppo became common in this period, and remain so to this day. Finally, since Independence Syrian artists have struggled to find an independent yet modern artistic language based in indigenous traditions such as calligraphy, folk art, and the principle of the arabesque.⁸ Yet, a modern concept of “art for art’s sake” (*al-fann lil-fann*) has not rested well among a population more accustomed to literal and functional

⁷ Moudarres, personal communication, Damascus, Syria, 1997.

⁸ Wijdan Ali (1994: 72-74) similarly argues that modern Arab art went through the stages of “learning,” “self-discovery,” and “the search for identity.”

forms of expression, according to the late Arab writer and critic Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (Jabra 1974: 193-194, cited in Naef 1996: 19).

In terms of music, the rise of a concept of musical art distinct from the craft of music can be traced through a series of rapid developments in musical practice in the twentieth century. Most important among these was the development of institutes and conservatories for musical instruction, beginning with clubs in the 1920s to full-fledged institutes in the 1930s; this process began in Egypt but was followed soon after in Syria (al-Sharif 1991). In the same period we find the establishment of orchestras for the performance of Arab and European “classical” music and composers. In most Arab lands, official orchestras and venues dedicated to the performance of European music predated those for Arab music; in fact, “Arab” music ensembles could be formed only after the rise of a concept of “Arab” as distinct from “Ottoman” music, a change that took place, as I explore in chapter three, in the early 1930s. Another modern development in Arab music is the advent of the solo recital on traditional instruments such as the *‘ūd*, *violin*, and *qânûn*. Although the art of improvisation (*taqsîm*) has been a hallmark of “Arab” and other Near Eastern musics for many centuries (see Blum 1998), solo recital performances only became common in the 1960s, often under the influence of European musicians and composers. Such was the case with the late Iraqi *‘ūd* master Munir Bashir, who under the influence of the Hungarian composer Kodaly, with whom he studied in Budapest, began to present solo *‘ūd* recitals around the world at this time. Concomitant with the rise of these notions of art and performance practice was the spread of the use of the term *fannân* (“artist”) to refer to individuals associated with these endeavors.

With respect to aesthetics, it should be noted that any study of aesthetics

necessarily implies a study of the relationships between power, authority, legitimacy, and ideology – not the least being ideologies of art and aesthetics. Aesthetics has never been merely or primarily about conceptions of Beauty abstracted from its social context and reified as an ideal (Dickie 1997; Eagleton 1990). Rather, like standards and judgments of authenticity and inauthenticity, aesthetic valuations are socially constructed. All aesthetic judgments are “dependent,” that is, grounded in certain contextual conditions; there is then no “free beauty,” in the Kantian sense, nor can aesthetic experience be “disinterested” (Kant 1952 [1790]; cf. Dutton 1994). In Aleppo, judgments of musical authenticity are relative to the cultural context in which they are made and subject to changing tastes. No single standard suffices for determining any musical work’s or musician’s quality or authenticity.

Furthermore, the study of aesthetics and aesthetic judgments necessarily implies an ethics, for labeling an art form or cultural practice “beautiful” (*jamīl* or *hilū*) often is to associate it with ethically proper behavior, if not virtue. And, just as importantly, the opposite, to call something “ugly” (*bishaʿ*) is to equate it with the dangerous and morally suspect. In many ways the aesthetics of authenticity constitutes a moral discourse. In a similar manner a given aesthetics also implicates a politics, since all artistic productions and cultural practices occur within the context of relations of power and authority that, through systems of patronage and censorship, condition or limit forms of production and consumption. As Robert Plant Armstrong has noted, “it is more useful ... to think of the nature of the aesthetic as being more rewardingly approached in terms of relating to *power* than to *beauty*, for example” (Armstrong 1981: 6). Following Armstrong’s insight (1981: 6), it is perhaps more fruitful in this context to examine what a particular work of

art (whether oral or visual) *does* and not how it looks or sounds.

The ethical and political dimensions of aesthetics are especially relevant in discussions of authenticity in Syria, for Syrian officials seek to cultivate a sense of a national culture that they project not only as ethically, politically, and culturally “authentic,” but also “beautiful,” that is, aesthetically pleasing – even if only to the state. What gets promoted as “beautiful” is often what certain cultural and political authorities consider to be “authentic;” after a time, what is presented as “authentic” then becomes construed as “beautiful” and hence desirable. In contemporary Syria, the Arab Socialist Reawakening (Ba’th) Party (*hizb al-ba’th al-‘arabi al-ishtirākī*), at the time of my research under the leadership of the late Syrian President Hafez al-Asad, plays a dominant role in national and local political and cultural life. It is not uncommon, for example, for an artist to invite local party bosses to an exhibition or recital. Most major artistic productions are sponsored or patronized (*taht al-ri’āya*) by the Ministries of Culture or Information, usually led by Ba’thist ministers, or by local party officials, especially outside of the capital. Through these avenues of official patronage (as well as via the darker alleyways of censorship), the Syrian state aims both to promote certain visions of Syrian and Arab society and culture and to frame or limit allowable discourse on culture and society.⁹

Therefore, a study of the aesthetics of authenticity in Syria necessarily seeks to uncover aspects of these relations of power and authority and the ideologies of

⁹ Wedeen (1999: 45) argues that state rhetoric and public symbolism “orients” permissible speech and behavior for Syrians, at least in public domains, and provides guidelines both for compliance and resistance to this rhetoric and ideologies and symbols of state authority. One result, she asserts, is the “killing [of] politics” (Wedeen 1999: 33).

authenticity that frame the very conception of artistic beauty as well as the production and consumption of art and forms of cultural practice. I address such issues as they arise in specific ethnographic contexts – arguments about the origins of Arabic music, forms of patronage of musical concerts, and so on – and argue that the aesthetics of authenticity is, on the one hand, a discourse on culture and tradition, and, on the other, a discourse of modern forms of power and privilege.

Performance and the Performance of Authenticity

Aesthetic concepts and the discourses of society and self that they engage do not exist independent of their particular performative contexts; that is, they arise or emerge in the context of performance. Moreover, aesthetic concepts and discourses are themselves performative, that is, they participate in the constitution of the contexts and performance situations in which they emerge and do not merely reflect them. In linguistic terms, we can understand aesthetic discourse as a meta-language that refers to the indexical and pragmatic processes of context marking, framing and creation (Silverstein 1976; Crapanzano 1992). Therefore, performance serves as a central organizing motif in this work and I strive to discuss aesthetic practices and discourses as they arise in specific performance situations. Yet, performance can mean a number of very different things: specific instances of cultural practices such as music-making, events such as concerts or poetry readings, or colloquial speech acts and genres. Beyond the particular acts and events of performance, I address performance as a mode of being and as a strategy of framing and differentiating diverse modes of practice and being (Bell 1993, 1997;

Bateson 1972; Goffman 1959). Therefore performance, when understood as a particular strategy of acting, can include a much wider range of behaviors and contexts than what we normally understand as “performance.”

V) The Context of Research

My marriage to a well-known artist and daughter of an elite Syrian family both facilitated and complicated aspects of my research. On the one hand, I had almost instant access to a wide network of artists and intellectuals throughout Syria. I was on friendly terms with a large number of the leading players in the Syrian cultural scene through my wife’s introductions and because of her own position in this scene as a major player in her own right. Indeed, it was my contact with a wide variety of artists that most enriched my fieldwork experience, making my life in Syria far richer than what I had expected it would be, and richer in many ways than what I had known previously in both New York and Cairo. Moreover, being married granted me access to realms of social and family life (weddings, funerals, engagements, parties, and so on) that allowed me to experience Syrian culture in ways that I might not have had I been single.

On the other hand, my marriage complicated my research in some ways. My interaction with an exclusive class of artists, intellectuals, and elites meant that I was at risk of assuming many of their biases (class and otherwise) regarding art, culture, and society; no doubt I unconsciously reproduce some of their ideologies in this work and fail to interrogate certain assumptions that I may share with them regarding authenticity in music and culture. Though my wife’s family accepted me and respected my research, I remained nonetheless a somewhat odd character undertaking a study that they would or

could never do; in their view music was not a “serious” discipline like medicine and engineering. Likewise, my involvement in a nexus of social relations based on marriage meant social obligations and expectations that hindered certain avenues of research (such as, say, attending cabaret performances). Also, my wife often attended concerts and interviews with me, so that her presence may have affected the responses of people with whom I spoke, or her own interests taken the forefront in the questioning, since discussion of art sometimes led to the discussion of her art. As an artist she has her own interests in and interpretations of Syrian culture and the question of authenticity, and these have no doubt influenced my own thinking on such matters.

Nevertheless, most of the material on which I base this manuscript was collected through long-term association with a large number of artists and intellectuals as well as through the study of performances at which I was alone or in the company of musician friends. Anthropology has largely dispensed with its earlier (and naïve) claim to objectivity in ethnographic representation. Through this brief “genealogy” I merely wish to make clear some of the assumptions and conditions of the research that significantly influenced my fieldwork experiences and hence the results of my research.

VI) Writing Strategies

This work explores themes in contemporary Syrian culture as presentations and variations of one central theme, what I term the “aesthetics of authenticity.” In the aesthetics of authenticity, aesthetic judgements are based first and foremost on the degree to which any given cultural object is considered to be “authentic,” or, in Arabic, *asîl*. Criteria of authenticity (*asâla*) include an object’s relationship to the Arab cultural

heritage (*turâth*) and to commonly held notions of modernity (*hadâtha*) and, often, crisis (*azma/ma'ziq*). The criteria are understood through such dialectics as the local and the international, the city and the country, center and periphery, the modern and the traditional; conceptions of the self, the emotions, creativity, and the imagination; discourses of religion, language and identity; and the reality of politics and patronage. It is this complex web or manifold of interrelated discourses and practices that I explore through analysis and interpretation of important currents in contemporary Syria. Modeled in some ways on a musical mode, which allows modulation to related modes, this ethnography “modulates” to themes that elucidate the depth and potential of the primary theme of authenticity – modernity, emotion, memory, and temporality are among the collateral themes.

Borrowing from the conventional structure of instrumental improvisations called *taqâsim* (sing. *taqsîm*), I open each chapter with a *matla'* or opening evocation of the main theme of the chapter. These evocations are meant to provide a sense of the place of research, my positionality with respect to my interlocutors, and some of the central questions of the research – and just as often the assumptions that my research overturned or qualified. I conclude each chapter with a *qafla* or closing statement, much as a musician will close a *taqsîm* with a *qafla*. The *qafla* reflects on the themes explored in the body of the chapter and invites the reader to pursue related themes in the following chapters. In this fashion the separate chapters are linked not so much by a single recurrent theme as by sets of themes related montage-like through what Wittgenstein (1953) termed a “family resemblance” to the main problematic of authenticity and modernity in Syria. And like the music, in which musical process reflects both the

inherent potentiality of the given mode but also the artist's mood and motivations, this ethnography reflects my own personal experiences and moods and motivations as an enthusiast of the music and culture and as an ethnographer.

In writing I have adopted a number of strategies that suggest some "native" forms of cultural expression. These include a heavy reliance on anecdotes, for much of what I learned about cultural life in Syrian was taught to me by my friends and acquaintances through the medium of the well-phrased anecdote. "Let me tell you a story..." (*bahkilak 'issa...*) was a common way for people to tell me about certain customs or practices, musical or otherwise.¹⁰ I will have recourse throughout this work to tell a number of my own anecdotes as well as stories others told me in an attempt to capture this important mode of cultural transmission. Another strategy is the use of linguistic and etymological evidence for certain claims and interpretations. Etymological and linguistic evidence is certainly important in Arab-Islamic culture generally since it goes to the heart of such matters as the interpretation of sacred texts (*tafsir* and *ta'wil*) and conceptualizations of pan-Arab nationalism based on linguistic unity (cf. Hourani 1983 [1962]). Yet, Syrians also use such evidence in the context of play and humor, and with a certain amount of irony, especially in non-sacred domains. The richness of the Arabic language, its combination of classical, standard, and colloquial dialects ("diglossia" seems to me too limited a term in the case of the Arabic language), allows for continuous invention, metaphor and word play, despite or even along side more literalist (even

¹⁰ Cf. Stefania Pandolfo's use of the Arabic *qila*, "it was said," to frame story-telling in her ethnography of forms of memory in a southern Moroccan village (Pandolfo 1997).

“fundamentalist”) interpretations and interpretive stances.¹¹

In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said remarks on what he terms the “citationary nature” of Orientalist discourse, that in addition to its political dimensions, Orientalist thought survives and reproduces itself through the practice of citation to “authorities.” How different is the traditional “literature review” of many ethnographies from this type of discursive practice? Literature reviews and background summaries often seem to be little more than dry academic rites of passage. Another such rite is the pretext of carrying out the study using some “scientific” methodology, usually proclaiming the deficiencies and shortcomings of the works cited in the literature review, which are more often than not propped up as so many straw men. Often the introductory chapters of contemporary ethnographies are so laden with citations that the text is hard to distinguish from the citations. A more serious dilemma is that excessive citation may prevent thought rather than encourage it: placing endless names and dates in what I term the “head-cuffs” of parentheses may stop readers (and writers) from thinking through issues as much as provide them with some basis for critical evaluation. Such chapters or sections in a manuscript end up being at best redundant since the author’s argument will be clear throughout the work; at worst they are awkward and perfunctory reviews that might easily be excised. And they are more often than not boring to read. Rather than “set the scene” with unnecessary citations and references to the historical background of the field site, this work attempts to evoke a sense of the time and place of my research through the analysis of specific ethnographic contexts.

¹¹ Crapanzano (2000) explores the lack of such a humorous stance regarding language among Fundamentalist Christians and literalist legal scholars in America.

Ethnography itself can be understood as a form of memory-making, remembrance, and forgetting. The act of writing ethnography is supremely an act of memory, for even with the most meticulous fieldnotes, the ethnographer relies as much if not more on memory, the scattered thoughts that accumulate during late night bus rides, the minor epiphanies that reveal themselves in the midst of the market place or in a cramped taxi with the radio blasting. Organizing one's experiences and findings coexists with the process of organizing one's thoughts and recollections of a time and place removed, in most cases, from the time and place of writing and the enactment of ethnography. Ethnography is thus a variety of remembrance (*dhikrā*) of people, places, and experiences. It also constitutes, in its final form, a repository of memory (*dhākira*) and a record, however incomplete and marginal, of a past time and place recreated, indeed reenacted (in a detemporalized form) in the present. In this sense ethnography is also a type of *dhikr*, a ritual invocation.

The act of writing also entails a forgetting of the lacunae of fieldwork – the missed opportunities, the over-sights and bumbblings in the field – in order to fashion from this mess a coherent record of “the field.” Paradoxically, writing these pages has also meant for me a forgetting – of the sharpness of my experiences, of the myriad details that flooded my mind in Syria and which no form of ethnography however efficient could ever hope to record faithfully. I had to forget some (much?) of the richness in order to be able to categorize people and experiences, to abstract and summarize the music, the musicians, and my – our – experiences together. This may sound self-evident, but what does it say about the ethnographic process?

Finally, it is worth remembering that ethnography is the result of a largely

collaborative process of research. I was not in Syria only to receive knowledge from informants but to engage in scholarly debate and research with them. Many of the musicians with whom I studied and performed also consider themselves to be scholars and researchers; many present papers at international conferences and write articles that are published in local and international journals. Acknowledging the mutual constitution of knowledge in fieldwork helps overcome the tendency in anthropological (and ethnomusicological) research to construe the informants as Others residing in some Other time, namely, “tradition,” even when they are engaged in what we characterize (caricature?) as a “struggle for modernity” (Blum 1990: 417-419; cf. Fabian 1983). My participation in this process was as a co-researcher and lover of the music and certainly as a junior partner in the overall efforts of a certain group of artists and intellectuals to understand and document the richness of their music. Nevertheless, I participated as one who might potentially “discover” something, and so many of my interlocutors exposed this expectation – or ridiculed it – by asking me, “What have you discovered?” (*shu iktashaft?*). My simple performances and demonstrations on the *’ūd*, my interviews and public lectures, and my lessons and interactions with so many musicians attests to the mutuality of this process. I mention this not to trumpet my own achievements – modest as they were – but rather to raise the question of how our complex and compound identities as researchers imply a different sort of practice of anthropology, one closer to the practices of artists and musicians themselves, who often stress “complementarity” (Turino 1990: 409-410; Blum 1990: 418) and not the subject-object division common in so much traditional ethnography.

Therefore I strive to keep the voices of my interlocutors in the foreground in order

to emphasize the collaborate nature of the research. As I have written this manuscript, at each turn I asked myself, “What would so-and-so say?” “Is this in line with what I learned in Aleppo?” and so on. At the same time, we need to follow Václav Havel’s advice (cited in Blum 1990: 418) to “distrust words,” especially when they come from those occupying positions of power who construe themselves as centers of truth. Certain of my interlocutors occupied positions of authority and had strong connections to local centers of political power. Others less well-connected also occupied certain positions within Syrian society that conditioned their forms of discourse and practice. All of them articulated ideological stances that need to be taken into account. So it is not merely a matter of giving voice to a multiplicity of actors but of contextualizing these voices in the overall fabric of Syrian society in which musical and other cultural practices are made meaningful.

What about contemporary Syria allows for discourses of authenticity to flourish? My writing attempts to answer this question, but does not do so by focusing entirely or even primarily on politics. This may come as a surprise (or relief) to those familiar with research on modern Syria, most of which has favored political and economic over cultural analysis. While being sensitive to the placement of my study in the wider context of American and European scholarship on the Arab World, in writing this study my aim has been to portray the human dimensions of contemporary Syria, what the majority of scholarship has neglected. Of the works written on contemporary Syria, most deal with politics, political history, the French Mandate period, Syrian authoritarianism, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and similar topics (for example, Heydemann 1999; Thompson 2000; Van Dam 1996; Wedeen 1999). While certainly these issues are important, they are not the

only things that can be studied within Syria. In fact, I believe that focusing primarily on politics leaves us blind (and deaf) to the richness of Syrian culture in its many forms. It may also make it even easier to demonize a country and its people when we do not recognize that it is home to wonderfully creative artists, a centuries old poetic and musical tradition, and ordinary people who strive to bring order and meaning to their lives in ways that are often far from the so-called “political realities” of the day, which are often more relevant to Western analysts than to “natives.”

Some readers may argue that by focusing on musical aesthetics I ignore authoritarianism and oppression in Syria, that I have not attended closely enough to forms of institutional power, or that I have been blind to the very real suffering of the Syrian people. Nothing could be farther from the truth. My associates and friends included many who have borne and continue to bear the weight of an oppressive regime. Yet, despite all of this, Syrians in a wide range of lifestyles continue to raise children, work, seek pleasure, solace, and meaning in their daily lives ... and to listen to music. They often do so with a great amount of grace, humor, and charm – qualities lost, it would seem, on most contemporary researchers.

VII) *al-Qafla*

In what follows I explore the question of modernity through analysis of discourse about authenticity in contemporary Syrian music. Chapter two provides an overview of the importance of Syria, and especially the city of Aleppo, in the development of Arab music, and outlines the major genres of Arab music performed in Aleppo today as well as the primary performance venues. I discuss some of the contexts and strategies of learning

music in Syria and show how the Syrian “cassette culture” plays an important role in defining conceptions of musical and cultural authenticity. In chapter three I trace a genealogy of some of the keywords in the aesthetics of authenticity in contemporary Syria, namely modernity (*hadâtha*), authenticity (*asâla*), and heritage (*turâth*), and argue that these terms help define the contours of different visions of “alternative modernities” in Syria. In chapter four I discuss some of the temporal and spatial dimensions of the aesthetics of authenticity in contemporary Syrian art worlds. I then examine how the idea of origin (*asl*) operates in constructions of tradition, heritage, identity, and authenticity (*asâla*) in four narratives of the origins of Arab music. In chapter five I continue the discussion of musical origins begun in chapter four with an exploration of a domain that many Aleppine musicians asserted was an origin of both their musical traditions and their own involvement with the music: the Sufi *dhikr*. In this chapter I analyze the Sufi *dhikr* both as a ritual context and as an art world in which conceptions of authenticity and personhood are conceptualized, invoked, and enacted. Moreover, I examine the role of temporality in structuring the experience of transformation and transcendence in the *dhikr* and suggest how this relates to the construction of musical authenticity in Aleppo.

In chapter six I explore the *wasla* or musical suite as the paradigmatic “authentic” genre of secular Arabic music in Aleppo. I discuss three key terms in the critical aesthetic lexicon of “authentic” Arab music – melody (*lahn*), words (*kalimat*), and voice (*sawt*) – and show how these critical-musical terms gloss emotional states such as sincerity (*sidq*), oriental spirit (*rûh sharqiyya*), and musical rapture (*tarab*) that play a defining role in the constitution of authentic aesthetic experience. In chapter seven I further explore the concept of *tarab* and argue that *tarab*, like other terms in Aleppine discourses of music

and emotion, serves as a metaphor for the social context of performance and is one strategy for the presentation of positively valued conceptions of the self in the context of performance. Finally, I end this work with an examination of the concept of “Oriental spirit” in Syrian aesthetics and how spirit and emotion articulate visions for an alternative modernity in which emotionality and sentiment are seen to have an important role. I conclude with some thoughts on the notion of closure in Arab music and ethnographic writing.

Chapter Two: Exploring the Aesthetics of Authenticity in Contemporary Syria

I) *al-Matla'*: Among the Jasmine Trees

Soon after arriving in Damascus I met the late Fateh Moudarres (1924-1999), one of modern Syria's – indeed, the Arab World's – greatest artists. “Ustâz Fateh,” as he was known to his students and friends, was famous as a painter of powerful paintings that evoke the Syrian countryside with their rich colors and characters drawn from rural life. A graduate of academies in Rome and Paris in the 1950s and 1960s, Moudarres advocated both modernism and authenticity in his art, arguing that authentic Syrian art in any medium should evoke a strong sense of place, of local geography, the smells and sounds of the countryside, the animals and plants, the very soil. His works convey geographical specificity through the use of strong colors, natural pigments (*alwân turābiyya*), abstractions of simple themes from folk life and mythology, and an acute awareness of temporality – that is, of timelessness. His paintings, which have hung beside the works of Miro and Picasso, won several international prizes. Yet, he claimed that Syrian artists had not yet managed to achieve an authentic modern vision despite a few individual efforts, his own included.

In addition to his painting, Moudarres also published several collections of stories and poetry and recorded some of his own compositions on the piano. Indeed, Ustâz Fateh claimed to me to be a musician at heart but to prefer painting because music is, as he put it, “too noisy” for his tastes. Yet, he playfully suggested that one could find what he called “silent music” (*mûsîqâ sâmita*) in his canvases. Some of his works include portraits of peasants playing on simple reed instruments or carry titles that suggest a

relationship to music.

Entering his studio for the first time, I find it dark, almost cave-like, its rooms cluttered with canvases, paint supplies, and shelf after shelf of books in several languages. Ustaz Fateh is seated in the main room at a table cluttered with small tea glasses, ashtrays, books, pens, and various papers. He is conversing with a young artist who gives up the seat of honor across from Moudarres when I arrive so that I can sit and speak with him. Small of stature and frail with illness, Moudarres nonetheless is a powerfully charming and charismatic man – his bushy eyebrows arch as his eyes gleam with brilliance and mischief. His voice, soft and gravelly, commands attention, like that of an ancient sage: no matter what he says, you simply must listen.

He has just finished another of his aphorisms, written on a blank sheet of paper and signed, “Fateh.” I look around me and find them hanging here and there around the main room of the studio like so many manifestos. Some are obscure – “That brigand paints the mountains with his voice” (*hâdhâ qâti’ al-turuq yarsum ‘l-jibâl bi-sawtihi*) – others profound – “with one painting a man is able to found an entire nation” (*bi-lawha wâhida yastati’ al-insân an yada’ ummatan kâmilatan*).

After introducing myself, we begin to speak about my research on Arab music and I ask him his opinion of Arab music today. Leaning back in his chair, he replies, “The music today is mostly rubbish (*zibâla*) ... there’s a lot of rubbish out there. It is the music of the “mob”(using the English word), not serious. Oriental music (*al-mûsîqâ al-*

sharqiyya) is serious, thoughtful, meditative. But today it is mostly lost. If you want to study it you must go and search for it. You must go to Aleppo, to the old buildings and neighborhoods, to the orange and lemon trees. You must hear the birds Go to the old quarters of Damascus, listen in the courtyards of the old Arab homes. There, among the jasmine trees, you may find it” Then, sounding like an old Sufi master – his bushy brows raised and a wry smile traced on his mouth – he proclaims: “You must choose between them.” Pausing to roll a cigarette, he turns to an artist friend who has just joined us and asks him. “How was your exhibition?” leaving me to ponder his remarks....

What choice must I make?

Fateh Moudarres was challenging me to make a choice, I believe, between two worlds, the first the world of the older music – in his view associated with authenticity, truth, history, and memory – the second the world of the contemporary Arabic pop song – in his view one of inauthenticity, Westernization, corruption, vulgarity, and cheapness. While music is by no means the only domain in which the tensions of modern life are expressed in the Arab world, and Ustâz Fateh had similar observations concerning contemporary literature and painting, it has become one of the most important in recent debates over the trajectory of contemporary culture in Syria as throughout the Arab world. Partly in response to the rise of new, “inauthentic” forms of culture, calls are heard for the preservation of the old, “authentic” culture. Both are manifestations of

deeper processes of modernization and cultural modernity that I explore in chapter three. In this chapter I explore why someone like Fateh Moudarres would advise me to seek authenticity in the Old City of Aleppo. Furthermore, this chapter aims to outline the principle musical genres that are performed in Aleppo as well as the practices through which Syrians cultivate habits of listening to and evaluating music.

II) The Importance of Syria and Aleppo in Arab music

What would account for Aleppo's importance both in discourses of authenticity and in the history of Arab music,¹ past and present? Although, as we shall see in chapter four, some Syrians questioned my interest in Arab music and even the existence of "Arab" music altogether, almost no one questioned my desire to study that music – of whatever origin it might be – in Aleppo. Many people I encountered in Aleppo and elsewhere in Syria mentioned Aleppo's status as an important musical capital and the great preserver of Arab musical traditions (Saadé 1993). For many residents of the city, Aleppo's strong and venerable musical traditions are a source of pride along with the city's fabled architectural, literary, and culinary legacies. Although Damascenes, as a result of the traditional rivalry between the two ancient cities, might challenge Aleppo's claims to fame in architecture, literature, and cuisine – to name a just few domains – and instead emphasize the superiority of Damascene traditions, few would challenge Aleppo's role as a great center for music. Indeed, Damascenes and others from elsewhere in Syria commonly assert their musical identity by praising Aleppo's

¹ I follow the ethnomusicological convention of using "Arabic" to refer to the language and literature of the Arabic speaking peoples, and "Arab" to refer to their music, while acknowledging that these are not unproblematic distinctions.

achievements, especially in contrast to the more often recognized achievements of Egyptian musicians. Aside from recognizing the “Big Three” of contemporary great Arab musicians – the Egyptian artists Umm Kulthûm, Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhâb, and ‘Abd al-Halîm Hâfiz – many Syrians argue that “true” Arab music is found in Syria, not Egypt. Some even claim that Egyptian music is at best over-rated, at worst the root of contemporary depravity and vulgarity in Arab culture.

Historically the musicians of Syria have contributed significantly to the development of Arab music in terms of both theory and practice, with Aleppo enjoying a particularly prominent place (Shiloah 1995: 72; Touma 1996: xix). Known in local discourse as “The Cradle Of Arab Music” (*mahd al-mûsîqâ al-‘arabiyya*) and “The Mother of *Tarab*” (*umm al-tarab*²), Aleppo has been home and host to many of the Arab world’s greatest musicians, composers, and theorists. The great tenth century philosopher and music theorist al-Fârâbî wrote much of the *Kitâb al-mûsîqâ al-kabîr* (The great treatise on music) while resident in Aleppo at the court of Sayf al-Dawla al-Hamdani.³ While resident in Aleppo in the same period, al-Isfahânî wrote sections of the monumental *Kitâb al-aghânî* (The book of songs), the first great encyclopedic reference on Arab music and poetry (Shiloah 1995: 72). An enlarged copy of the index to this work can be found on the wall above the card catalogue in Aleppo’s National Library, indexing not just the great work but also its importance in Aleppo’s musical-cultural consciousness and memory. Aleppine artists also played a significant role in reviving and preserving the Andalusian *muwashshah* genre in the eighteenth and nineteenth

² *Tarab* refers to the special emotional state experienced by listeners of this music and is variously translated as “musical rapture,” “enchantment,” and “ecstasy” (Racy 1998).

³ Some Aleppines fancifully claim that he invented the *qânûn* (table zither) there as well, though there is little evidence for the existence of the instrument prior to the nineteenth century (Poché 1984).

centuries (Touma 1996: 83); the *muwashshah* remains the staple of the Aleppine *wasla*, the premier “authentic” performance genre.⁴

In the modern period, Aleppo has been home to a large percentage of the Arab world’s leading vocalists, performers, and theorists. Perhaps Aleppo’s most famous musical son in the modern era is ‘Ali al-Darwish (1872-1952), who is remembered today as a skilled composer of instrumental works and *muwashshahât*, performer of the *nây* (reed flute), and an important musical theorist and teacher.⁵ ‘Ali al-Darwish taught such Egyptian masters as the great Umm Kulthum, ‘Abd al-Wahhab, and Riyâd al-Sunbâtî while an instructor at the King Fu’âd Conservatory of Music in Cairo (Mahannâ 1998: 124-128; Ibrahim al-Darwish, personal communication, 1997). In addition, al-Darwish worked with the French Orientalist and music scholar Baron Rudolphe D’Érlanger while resident in Tunis from 1931-1939, helping him compose his important treatise *La musique arabe* (D’Érlanger 1930-59; Mahannâ 1998: 128-129; al-Sharif 1991: 105). al-Darwish was likewise an important presence at the first *Congress of Arab Music* (*mu’tamar al-mûsîqâ al-‘arabiyya*), held in Cairo at the behest of King Fu’ad in 1932. His sons Ibrahim, Nadim, and Mustafa have continued in his footsteps to make important contributions to the field of contemporary Arab music education. For example, Nadim al-Darwish compiled and notated *Min kunûzinâ* (*From our treasures*), a standard source book containing twenty-three suites of *muwashshahât* performed in Aleppo (Rajâ’i and

⁴ The *muwashshah* (pl. *muwashshahât*) is a genre of classical poetry of putative Andalusian origin set to music. Aleppo became a center of the composition and performance of the *muwashshah* in the eighteenth century (Touma 1996: 83). The *wasla* is a suite of instrumental and vocal genres including the *muwashshahât*.

⁵ Yet his major work, *al-Nazzariyyât al-haqîqîyya fî al-qirâ‘ah al-mûsîqîyya* (*The true theories about musical reading*), remains unpublished because the Egyptian authorities who acquired the rights to the manuscript over 50 years ago have yet to publish it. Sources close to the issue claim that this is due to Egyptian reluctance to publish the work of an important Syrian author.

al-Darwish 1956).

The Aleppine composer and musician Kamîl Shambîr (1892-1934) helped to found the musical theater in Cairo, where he worked along side the famous Egyptian musician Sayyid Darwish (1892-1923), for whom Shambir notated a number of works. Sayyid Darwish is largely credited by Egyptian scholars with inventing the musical theater and the Arabic operetta, which he introduced to Cairene audiences in the early twentieth-century. Yet Shambir wrote some 27 musicals while working for the theatrical troupes of Najîb al-Rihânî and Amîn 'Atâ' Allah in Cairo, and some of these, according to Syrian sources, were later attributed by Egyptians to Sayyid Darwish (Mahanna 1998: 149-151).⁶ Shambir also composed a number of light tunes and instrumental dances (*raqsât*, sing. *raqs*) that are still performed today, such as *Raqs al-hawânim* (Dance of the ladies) (Mahanna 1998: 150; Muhammad Qadrî Dalâl, personal communication, 1997; Kamâl Sabbâgh, personal communication, 2000).

With respect to composers and performers of the *muwashshah*, few names stand out as much as that of 'Umar al-Batsh (1885-1950), the great Aleppine *munshid* (pl. *munshidûn*, religious singer) and *washshâh* (pl. *washshâhûn*, composer of *muwashshahât*). According to Syrian music scholars, al-Batsh was almost solely responsible for reviving the *muwashshah* genre in the Arab East and giving it renewed vitality (Mahanna 1998: 137-144; al-Sharîf 1990: 132-33). Of his more than 130 *muwashshahât*, some 80 were notated and survive today. al-Batsh moreover revived older *muwashshahât* and "completed" those that had been inherited with certain sections

⁶ The claim that Sayyid Darwish invented the musical theater also ignores the important earlier work of the Damascene Ahmad Abû Khalîl al-Qabbânî (1832/5? - 1904), who took his theater troupe from Damascus to Cairo in the 1880s, and even performed at Chicago's Columbian Exposition in 1893 (Mahanna 1998: 76; Bin Dhurayl 1989: 27-28).

(*khânât*) “missing,” including many by Sayyid Darwish (Mahanna 1998: 140).⁷ In addition, al-Batsh trained the majority of Aleppo’s major singers of the last 50 years, including Sabri Moudallal, Mustafâ Mâher, Muhammad Khairî, and Sabâh Fakhri.

Other important names from among Aleppo’s musical progeny include the composer and vocalist Bakrî al-Kurdî (1909-1978); Sabri Moudallal (b. 1918); Sabah Fakhri (b. 1933), arguably the greatest living Arab vocalist; the late Muhammad Khairi (1935-1981); Nouri Iskandar (b. 1938), director of the Arab Music Institute in Aleppo, noted composer, musical modernizer, and researcher of Syriac and other ancient Levantine melodies; Muhammad Qadri Dalal (b. 1946), a music researcher and among the finest contemporary ‘*ud* performers in the Arab world (and my main teacher); Saad Allah Agha al-Qala’ah (b. 1950), Professor of Engineering at Damascus University and a respected *qânûn* performer and music scholar; Mayada al-Hinawi (b. 1958), among the Arab world’s leading female vocalists; and others.

Just as important as its reputation for distinguished scholars and performers has been Aleppo’s reputation for its knowledgeable and cultivated listeners, the fabled *sammîa’ a* (cf. Racy 1998). The *sammîa’ a* are those who claim a high degree of musical taste (*dhawq mûsîqî*) and, at least traditionally, functioned as the arbiters of musical taste and aesthetics in Aleppo. Aleppine musicians often claim that no major Arab artist, including Umm Kulthum and Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab, achieved fame without having first earning the approval of the Aleppine *sammîa’ a*. Numerous stories – nay,

⁷ Whether these sections were actually missing is less important than the idea that Aleppine composers serve as “completers” or fulfillers of a venerated tradition. Outside of Syria, most of these *muwashshahât*, when performed at all, are performed without al-Batsh’s additions. For example, al-Batsh added a *khâna* to the *muwashshah* *Yâ ‘udhayba* (in *maqâm sâz kâr*), thought to have been composed by Sayyid Darwish, though *Min kunûzinâ* attributes it to an anonymous composer and does not include al-Batsh’s “missing” *khâna*.

legends – abound of the importance of Aleppo's *sammî'a* in determining the course of contemporary Arab music. One oft-told legend states that in the 1930s the then rising Egyptian star Muhammad 'Abd al-Wahhab came to Aleppo to perform. On the evening of his first concert, only a small number of Aleppines came to hear him – perhaps as few as seven in a theater that would hold 2,000 (often said to have been the famed “Luna Park” theater, now long-since demolished). 'Abd al-Wahhab was stunned and disappointed but nevertheless gave a strong performance. On the second night the audience overflowed the theater onto the streets, with over 2,000 people showing up to hear him inside the theater and some 2,000 standing outside the theater. After this second show 'Abd al-Wahhab asked the stage manager, “Why were there only a few people the first night and an overflow crowd tonight?” He was told. “Ah! Those who came the first night were our *sammî'a*. No one in Aleppo will go to a concert unless the *sammî'a* say the artist is good. You did well and therefore everyone came on the second night!” In other words, 'Abd al-Wahhab passed the test of Aleppo's *sammî'a* and this allowed him, in the eye's of the Aleppines, not only to succeed in Aleppo but to succeed in the Arab world at large. He got their coveted “seal of approval” (*khâtima*).

Another legend involving 'Abd al-Wahhab and told in numerous versions, as most legends, says that the great artist wanted to meet with Aleppo's musicians and learn what he could from them. In an evening *jalsa* (gathering) with 'Umar al-Batsh, 'Ali al-Darwish, and others, 'Abd al-Wahhab asked if they knew any *muwashshahât* in the *maqâm sîkah*; there were no known *muwashshahât* in this *maqâm* in Egypt or Syria at the time of his visit. Nevertheless, 'Umar al-Batsh replied that, of course, they have a full *wasla* or suite of *muwashshahât* in that *maqâm*. When 'Abd al-Wahhab asked to hear

them, al-Batsh replied that the time of day was not appropriate for singing that *maqâm* and that therefore he should come back the following morning when the stars would be more favorable, evoking the neo-Pythagorean theory of the correspondence between the different modes, the times of day, and particular moods. When ‘Abd al-Wahhab departed ‘Ali al-Darwish turned to al-Batsh and said in surprise, “*Khayyo!* (Brother!), we don’t have any *muwashshahât* in *sikâh*! What are you going to do?!” al-Batsh replied, “Well, it’s not appropriate for a city of Aleppo’s stature *not* to have any *muwashshahât* in this *maqâm*, so I will compose some!” and that same evening he composed three and taught them to a chorus of singers. When ‘Abd al-Wahhab returned the following morning, to his astonishment, and the astonishment of everyone else, al-Batsh and his chorus sang a complete suite of *muwashshahât* in that *maqâm* (cf. Mahanna 1998: 139-140; al-Sharîf 1991: 131-32).

Many Aleppines attribute the city’s musical and cultural strength to its historical importance as a center for commerce, learning, and industry. Located in northwestern Syria on the western end of the famous Silk Road, Aleppo served since the rise of the Ottoman Empire (in 1516) as the major center in the Levant for the overland textile and spice trade between Europe and Asia, via the port city of Alexandretta (Iskandarun) (Faroghi 1987: 315; Inalcik 1997: 244; A. Marcus 1989: 146-148). Throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, Aleppo had extensive and sustained contact with European powers, especially Venice, France, and England, whose merchants bought large quantities of raw silk in exchange for gold, silver, and woolen and silk cloth, much of which was later redistributed to cities in the North and East (Faroghi 1987: 337; Inalcik 1997: 244-245; A. Marcus 1989: 148). Trade with Europe was never stable, but

Aleppo remained an important center until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, growing to be the third largest city in the Ottoman Empire after Istanbul and Cairo, with a population topping 100,000 (A. Marcus 1989: 337-41). By the middle of the eighteenth century European textile trade began to shift to Izmir and Istanbul (A. Marcus 1989: 152) and by the nineteenth century Europe had come to dominate world textile trade, especially after British cotton “invaded” the region (Inalcik 1987 381-383; Mitchell 1991: 15-16).

Like other cities in the Mediterranean Basin, Aleppo’s commercial wealth spawned an active artistic and cultural life in the city (cf. Abu Lughod 1989). Aleppo developed strong traditions in music, literature, popular arts such as shadow plays and storytelling, and religious and other forms of intellectual scholarship (A. Marcus 1989: 227-37). Numerous scholars and local inhabitants refer to the Ottoman period as one of decline. Yet, Ottoman influence stimulated the culture of the Aleppine elites, some of whom did not even speak Arabic because of their Turkish provenance, and as a consequence the arts and culture of the city proliferated. Aleppo’s participation in pan-Ottoman culture can still be felt today in the city’s architecture, cuisine, music, and even dialects, which use many Turkish words.⁸

Because of its commercial prominence, Aleppo was a magnet for traders from near and far, thus serving as a meeting point for people of diverse cultural traditions. Gathering in the numerous caravansaries after a day’s labor, as locals like to narrate their history, these traders had no concern other than to sit back and relax, enjoy a fine meal,

⁸ In modern Syrian constructions of cultural authenticity, Ottoman and Turkish cultural influences may be dismissed as inauthentic by those holding stronger Arab nationalist sentiments, while others may link their notions of authenticity not so much to Arab versus non-Arab ethnicity but rather to political authority, Arab or otherwise. See chapter four.

and listen to some music as a reward for their efforts. Soon Aleppo boasted a cosmopolitan mixture of musical and culinary styles – two areas of local culture of which many Aleppines are fond and proud. The Aleppine *qadd halabî* genre of popular music includes songs of Iraqi, Egyptian, Turkish, and Kurdish as well as Syrian origin (cf. Qala‘hji 1988: 165-74).⁹ Even today these songs, most of which probably date from the eighteenth through the early twentieth century, are sung in approximations of their original dialects: Aleppine, Iraqi, and Egyptian, for example. Aleppo’s culinary traditions are also unique in Syria, especially its emphasis on grilled meats such as kababs and zesty dishes such as the spicy *muhammara*. All of these factors grant the city and its cultural practices a special *nakha* or scent, as locals continually reminded me during my stay, referring to that intangible quality that distinguishes Aleppo from Damascus or any other city.

Despite Europe’s advances in world trade, Aleppo remained an important regional center for commerce and industry into the late nineteenth century, producing quantities of raw materials, textiles, soaps, agricultural products, and other commodities for regional and world markets. However, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 undermined Aleppo’s position as European merchants took advantage of sea-based routes to India and the Far East. The shift from overland to sea-based trade coincided with a series of Ottoman reforms that had the effect of further marginalizing Aleppo from the growing global economy in textiles, its major export, while burdening the city with a flood of migrants from rural areas fleeing onerous taxation and seeking employment opportunities

⁹ The word *qadd* (pl. *qudūd*) is used in the sense of “the same as” or “equivalent to,” *‘alā qadd* (something). Musically it refers to a song in which the lyrics of one song, either secular or profane, are set to the melody of another song; for example, religious lyrics sung to a popular tune, or vice versa. The lyrics would thus be set to an equivalent melody, *‘alā qadd al-lahn*.

(McGowan 1988: 18).

The period of the French Mandate (1922-1944¹⁰) saw an expansion in Aleppo's economic position as new lands were claimed for agricultural development. At the same time the center of commercial and administrative power began to shift to Damascus, site of French colonial authority. Syria's rapid economic growth lasted through the 1940s and 1950s because of a series of economic reforms that gave Syria one of fastest growing economies among developing countries at the time (Mason 1988). Yet, political instabilities and changing global patterns of trade in the postwar era challenged Syria economically and adversely affected Aleppo and its position as a commercial entrepôt. The city's economic position was further undermined by a prolonged drought in the late 1950s and the nationalization of Aleppine textile and agricultural industries under the ill-fated union (*wahda*) with Egypt (1958-1961), leading to major capital flight to nearby Lebanon, Europe, and the Americas, drastic declines in production, and the virtual decimation of Aleppo's merchant class. The decline of the city's merchants and urban bourgeoisie precipitated a decline in the context of much music making: the *saharât* or evening soirées of song, food, and merriment held in the homes of the bourgeoisie, which epitomized early twentieth-century urban musical aesthetics in the Levant (cf. Racy 1998).

The city's economic fate was sealed with the rise of President Hâfiz al-Asad in 1970 and the centralization of political and commercial power in Damascus, especially after the "events" (*ahdâth*) of 1982, when Islamist insurrections in Aleppo and Hama

¹⁰ French occupation of Syria and Lebanon began in 1920 and ended in 1946. The League of Nations granted France a charter ("Mandate") over Syria-Lebanon in 1922. France ceded administrative government to a Syrian nationalist government in 1944.

were violently repressed (Van Dam 1996: 89-94, 111-117). Compared to Damascus, Aleppo, which has nearly as large a population as the capital, has not received as much investment in infrastructure or its fair share of development programs, according to many Aleppine intellectual figures who claim that this is a form of “punishment” for the events of the early 1980s. Where the city has received attention, it has not been so benign: the destruction of an entire neighborhood for the purpose of building an ugly “park” featuring a statue of the president; the routing of major thoroughfares through older parts of the city, often bisecting entire neighborhoods and even individual buildings; and the diversion of the city’s primary water source, the Quwaiq river, for rural agricultural development, leading to chronic water shortages and transforming the river that once meandered through Aleppo’s magnificent public gardens into a smelly creek. Today, as Syria struggles to steer an economic course of development into the twenty-first century, increasing divisions between rich and poor, the evaporation of the middle class, and the increasingly Western cultural orientation of the elite means that the chances for the revival of the culture of the *saharât* – what some Aleppines artists today advocate – seem small.

Aleppo Today

Although its star has faded with the rise of Damascus as the political and economic center of Syria, Aleppo is still considered Syria’s musical capital and retains an active group of musicians and numerous ensembles that perform the urban art music

traditions that many refer to as “classical” (*klasiki*) Arab music.¹¹ Each of these groups is based on the *takht* ensemble or some variation of it: *qânûn*, *‘ûd*, *nây*, *riqq*, *kamânjah* or *kamân* (violin), and *nutrib*. Some add other instruments such as the *tabla*, *daff* (frame drum), and less often the *org*. So-called classical music today tends to be performed in restaurants and night clubs, venues considered less reputable – from the standpoint of the cultural elite and many musicians as well – than the private *saharât*, which are fondly remembered by older musicians and even memorialized in television serials today.¹²

The “classical” tradition of urban art music in Aleppo consists of the genres of the *wasla* or suite of *muwashshahât*; as mentioned, Aleppo has been an important center for the composition and performance of the *muwashshah* since at least the eighteenth century (Touma 1996: 83). More than any other city in the contemporary Arab world, Aleppo has made the *wasla* the staple of the *sahra* or evening entertainment. Aside from the *muwashshah*, the *wasla* includes instrumental pieces such as the *samâ’i*, *bashraf* and *dûlâb*, instrumental improvisations (*taqâsim*), the *layâlî* (improvisation on the words *yâ layl yâ ‘ayn*, “O night O eye”), the *qasîda* (classical poetry sung to an improvised melody), the *mawwâl* (colloquial poetry sung to an improvised melody), and the *qudûd halabiyya* (“Aleppine” light songs) and other light songs from the Arab urban repertoire. These genres share elements with a pan-Ottoman musical culture that arose in the important administrative and commercial centers of the Ottoman Empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including Cairo, Damascus, Homs, Hama, Beirut,

¹¹ The term *klâsîkî* has come in the modern period to be applied to the older urban music repertoire such as the *muwashshahât* and *qudûd*. Precisely when *klâsîkî* came to refer to the older repertoire is not certain though it is likely that it became common after 1908, when the same term began to be used in Turkish music (see O’Connell 1997; personal communication 2000).

¹² See, for example, the serial *Khan al-harîr* (*The silk market*: 2 parts, 1995 and 1997-1998), directed by Haytham Haqqi and written by Nihad Sirees.

and other important Levantine cities.

The periodization of Arab-Ottoman music is not precise and it would be misleading to apply the categories of European music to Arab music (cf. Danielson 1997: 14). In some ways the use of the term *klasikî* reflects modernist concerns for classifying the music and culture and differentiating various genres: popular (*sha'bi*), folkloric (*fûklûrî*), bedouin (*badawî*, *mûsiqâ al-bâdiya*), classical (*klasikî*), and the now ubiquitous contemporary pop song (variously termed *haditha*, *mu'âsira*, etc.). “Classical” implies music commonly thought of as deriving from the Arab heritage (*turâth*) and therefore of anonymous or very ancient composition; contemporary compositions by known artists in the same or similar styles might also be labeled “classical,” such as the works of ‘Umar al-Batsh.

The “classical” repertoire derives most of its authority and authenticity from its opposition to the contemporary pop song, which is considered by defenders of tradition to symbolize inauthenticity. These songs, which borrow extensively from the instrumentation and style of Western music, are commonly heard on radios and in taxis and buses around Syria. As the new songs overwhelm the airwaves and cassette shops, they provoke an emotional response among critics that is second in fierceness, it would seem, only to reactions to Israel. Antagonists refer to the contemporary songs variously as vulgar (*hâbita*), banal (*mubtadhila*), cheap (*rakhîsa*), or – less judgmentally – youthful (*shabâbiyya*). One publisher asserted that they are not only bad (*say'a*), they are dangerous to one’s health (*qâtîla*, lit. killer); “they might cause you to have a heart attack due to their quick, repetitive tempos,” he claimed. In many regards the contemporary pop song has become the foremost symbol of cultural decline and decay among Syrian

and other Arab intellectuals; it also has come to serve rhetorically as a negative pole in their aesthetic evaluations of authenticity as the prime exemplar of *inauthentic* culture – although in practice many do in fact listen to and enjoy this music.

Closely related to the “classical” repertoire is that of sacred music. Aleppo has served as an important religious center for Sunni Islam as well as for a variety of Sufi brotherhoods (*turuq*, sing. *tariqa*), and it is home to number of Syria’s leading religious singers (*munshidūn*, sing. *munshid*). Groups of *munshidūn* perform varieties of religious song (*inshād dīnī*) at weddings and other celebrations in Aleppo. They also perform at weekly *dhikr* rituals¹³ at Aleppo’s numerous Sufi lodges (*zawāyā*, sing. *zāwiya*) and in private homes throughout the city. The repertoire of the *wasla* and *dhikr* overlap to an extent, and indeed many *munshidūn* perform “sacred” music in the *dhikr* as well as “secular” music in concerts of the *wasla*. The close relationship between the two musical domains suggests that the distinction between “sacred” and “secular” is not so clear-cut in Aleppo. Moreover, the majority of Aleppo’s major vocalists and musicians have had strong training in religious song; it is commonly argued that training in the *dhikr* and other varieties of *inshād* is the best preparation for singing the “secular” repertoire (cf. Danielson 1997: 21-27). This observation holds true for Aleppo’s large Christian population as well, which has produced a number of fine vocalists and musicians who are skilled in the “classical” repertoire as well as the liturgies of their various congregations. Some Christian artists have also studied Islamic *inshād* to further their musical training.

Aleppine musicians claim that the contemporary musical scene is far less active than it was even fifteen or twenty years ago. Yet, many are proud that at least some

¹³ The *dhikr* is a form of ritualized invocation of God accompanied by a repertoire of songs, chants, and bodily motions. See chapter five.

groups still preserve the tradition through performances and teaching of the “classical” repertoire. Damascus has a far richer cultural scene in terms of overall numbers of concerts, shows, recitals, and exhibitions. Most of the major recording studios are located in Damascus, as well numerous night clubs and performance venues. However, most musical activity in the capital tends not to be associated with the Arab tradition, as in Aleppo. Many of the concerts and recitals are of European music, for example the annual concerts of the Syrian National Symphony and the numerous recitals at foreign cultural centers, which draw large audiences. Much of the music produced, performed, and recorded in Damascus follows the modern pop styles. One is far more likely to hear a concert in Damascus by the pop icon George Wasoof than by the “traditional” *mutrib* Sabah Fakhri.¹⁴

However, Aleppo hosts far more concerts and recitals of the “classical” repertoire. The city has its fair share of night clubs, the “cabarets” of old that were once respectable performance venues but have now declined into less desirable places, if not down right seedy; they tend to feature renditions of contemporary pop songs and favorite songs from the 1950s though 1970s. Many musicians who used to earn a good living performing in these cabarets attribute their decline to the influx of wealthy “Arab” tourists (that is, Arabs from the Arabian Gulf whom Syrians often associate with having a penchant for whiskey and women). With rising conservatism in the 1970s and 1980s, many of Aleppo’s mercantile and religious elite shied away from the once famous cabarets and

¹⁴ Wasoof makes claims to the Arab tradition by naming himself “The Sultan of *Tarab*” (*sultān al-tarab*) and even uses a well-known *qānūn* player in his orchestra. The *qānūn* is so closely associated with the “authentic” music that its placement in Wasoof’s otherwise modern group adds a dimension of authenticity, even though the instrument cannot always be heard over the sounds of the violins, synthesizers and drums. Wasoof had a “run in” with the Sultan of ‘Oman, who refused to let the former perform there unless he changed his title to “King” of *tarab* since there can only one “Sultan” in the Sultanate! Wasoof did not change his name on the posters for the concert and hence did not perform.

many musicians gave up performing in them. Now considered off-limits for “respectable” people – mostly meaning the middle classes and elite but also the pious in general – these establishments tend to attract denizens from the lower classes, migrant workers, and foreigners, though higher class cabarets in Damascus are patronized by the wealthy.

Local musicians such as Muhammad Qadri Dalal, the *ūd* player, give seasonal performances of “classical” music at some of Aleppo’s ancient caravansaries and heritage buildings such as *Khān shūnah*, *al-Matbakh al-‘ajamī*, and the Citadel, all of which date from between the 13th and 16th Centuries. The annual Syrian Song Festival (*Mihrajān al-ughniyya al-sūriyya*), although held in a dreary sports arena during the period of my research, is now held in the Citadel. In addition to the Citadel, Aleppo’s numerous private clubs (*nawādi*, sing. *nādī*) host summer evening concerts for such local and regional artists. Concerts of European music are also held from time to time in Aleppo, though less frequently than in Damascus, and they garner only modest audiences. Occasionally foreign cultural centers will sponsor jazz festivals or concerts of European and “World” music (non-European and non-Arab, in this context). More common are concerts of contemporary Arab pop music at Aleppo’s clubs featuring pan-Arab superstars like George Wasoof, Diana Haddad, and ‘Amru Diab.

Despite the importance of Aleppo in modern (that is, twentieth-century) Arab music, almost no research has been done on the contributions of Syrian artists to Arab music (cf. Belleface 1992; Saadé 1993). In contrast, studies abound of Arab music in Egypt (e.g., Danielson 1997; S. Marcus 1989; Nieuwkerk 1995; Racy 1981; Reynolds 1995; Frishkopf 1999), and to a lesser extent Iraq, Yemen, Tunisia, Morocco, and the

countries of the Arabian Gulf (Touma 1996; Lambert 1997). The focus on Arab music in Egypt reflects both the common sentiment that Egypt is the cultural leader of the Arab world¹⁵ and the relatively greater openness of Egypt to foreign researchers. In terms of Egypt's role, many Arabs and non-Arabs make the implicit identification of "Egyptian" music with "Arab" music. The Egyptian styles flood the contemporary markets and the past masters of Egypt have gained significant audiences outside of Egypt through the influence of the Egyptian mass media (cf. Armbrust 1996; Danielson 1997; Racy 1977).

Syria, whose media and broadcast centers opened later than Egypt's and remained on a smaller scale, did not have the pan-regional effect that Egypt enjoyed. Non-Arabs as well as Arabs resident outside of the Arab lands have perpetuated the identification of "Egyptian" with "Arab" music through concerts featuring Egyptian tunes and through their memories that draw on a time when Egyptian artists were ascendant.¹⁶ Texts that treat "Arab music" as a whole often specialize in one region with only brief information about musical practices in others; this is the case, for example, with Touma's *The Music of the Arabs* (1996), which has rich information about music in Iraq, Morocco, and the Arabian Gulf (where the author had done research) but little information on music in Egypt and the Levant. Therefore this work aims to fill part of a large gap in our knowledge of the diverse Arab musical traditions as well as to establish an ethnographic framework for understanding them in the context of Aleppo.

¹⁵ Egyptians are well aware of this perception, as trumpeted in the brochures for the Cairo Conference on Arab Music in 1996, which featured numerous articles celebrating UNESCO's selection of Cairo as the Arab World's cultural capital for that year. As of 2000, Damascus and Aleppo had yet to be selected.

¹⁶ Syrians do so with respect to other media as well, for example through the identification of Egypt film as "Arabic film" (*film 'arabi*).

Music and Musicians in Syria

For music lovers, it may come as a surprise that in early-modern Syria musicians were grouped with thieves, dove trainers, and people who eat on the streets as those whose testimony was not permissible in court (Qassab Hassan 1988: 85, *passim*).¹⁷ Yet, music and song have always occupied an ambiguous status in Islamic cultures, as in many other cultures. Musicians occupy a low position on the status hierarchy in many Arab lands (cf. Van Nieuwkerk 1995). Therefore the choice to be a musician or even to learn music is often a difficult one for Arabs, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. For example, my main teacher, Muhammad Qadri Dalal, comes from a religious family in Aleppo, his father having served as the sheikh of a prominent mosque and his wife's father having been the *mufti* of Aleppo.¹⁸ His desire to study music was met with resistance from his father, who only allowed him to study once he had demonstrated his serious intent in school and passed his preliminary exams (the *broveh*, like our ninth grade). Once he passed these exams, his father hired Bakri al-Kurdi, the famous singer and shaykh, to tutor him in music and song. Dalal later went on to earn a degree in Arabic Literature from Egypt's al-Azhar University, a prominent religious institution, and taught Arabic literature and language in Syrian schools for many years before devoting himself full-time to music performance and research. Music alone would not have been an appropriate career.

Many older musicians, especially those from more prominent families, claimed

¹⁷ Dove trainers were suspect because they loiter on rooftops to train their birds, where they also have a view into the private domains of homes and thus are scandal-prone. People who eat in the streets were suspect because no one with a solid family and home would have to eat meals on the streets in the first place.

¹⁸ The *mufti* is the leading sheikh or religious authority in the city.

that they had to practice music in secret for fear of their parents' wrath. One man, an employee at the Syrian Ministry of Pious Endowments (*wizârat al-awqâf*¹⁹), hid an 'ûd in his closet and would only play when no one else was at home. He reminisced with me about the old days when he could *yidandan* ("to hum or sing lightly," "to croon") with his 'ûd. Even respected and established musicians from an earlier generation are said to have had others carry their instruments for them in the streets to avoid public censure. To be seen on the streets with an 'ûd was considered shameful ('ayb), and this is still the case to some extent today. I was once accosted by a gentleman for carrying my 'ûd with me on the street. He argued that music was forbidden (*harâm*) and that no respectable person should perform it.

At the same time, music has gained some prestige as a diversionary hobby and as a finishing element of polite education among the elite. One way of avoiding the public censure of music making in recent years has been for families to allow their children to study European music and instruments, such as the Western style violin, cello, flute, clarinet, and piano. Many elite families and those struggling to join their ranks associate European classical music with modernity, progress, and civilization, and consider Arab music to be backward. A Moscow-trained violinist and instructor at the High Institute for Music in Damascus, the son of a well-known Syrian family of musicians that includes prominent performers of Arab music, claimed that Arab music is irrational, leads to irrational behavior, and in general is a *bahdaleh* ("a joke"). At the time of my research, the Arab Music Institute in Aleppo had long waiting lists of students wanting to study piano and violin, yet only five students were studying the 'ûd and six the *qânûn* – two

¹⁹ This ministry administers *waqf* lands (pl. *awqâf*), i.e., lands and properties whose usufruct rights have been granted to religious authorities for the promotion of good deeds.

quintessentially Arabic instruments. One day, during a conversation with the Institute's director, a woman came in to register her young son at the Institute. When the director asked if the boy would like to study the *'ūd*, the woman proudly (and loudly) declaimed: "Oh No! My son would never play *that* kind of music. In fact he only listens to Beethoven and Mozart!" The director glanced over at me with a look in his eyes that said, "Not another one of those!"

Other families encourage the study of the "classical" repertoire as part of a heritage-based program of self-enrichment and study not dissimilar to classical notions of *adab*, polite education, which recommend study of the musical arts (Bonebakker 1988). One prominent Aleppine family includes members who, though all accomplished in music and the arts, earn their livings through more "respected" professions, such as medicine and engineering; for any one of them to become a professional musician would be unthinkable. I was often suspect because of my association with musicians and their domains, such as the Artists Syndicate, which conjures ignoble connotations of dancers and night clubs in the minds of elites ignorant of the Syndicate's important role in Syrian arts. My position as a foreign researcher earning a doctorate, though anomalous because of the subject matter, allowed me to retain some status in the eyes of suspicious elites; my focus on the "classical" repertoire and not the contemporary pop song assuaged their concerns. Paradoxically, the great Arab musicians and especially singers are praised and enjoyed on a daily basis, but nevertheless the upper classes do not consider music to be a noble profession. Acting and, to some extent, painting are also frowned upon. This is especially the case for women artists, whose activities are suspect in the eyes of conservative members of society, elites and others.

With respect to religious views on music, during my field research I encountered individuals who either hinted to me that Islam prohibits music and that I might be better off leaving it alone or rather forthrightly told me that music is *harâm* (forbidden) and that not only was I wasting my time studying it, I was endangering my soul in doing so. I recall attending a *mawlid* (a religious celebration, lit. “birthday”) held for a young man who had successfully passed Syria’s rigorous baccalaureate examination, a prerequisite for admission to a university. A group of three *munshidûn* were invited to recite the Qur’an and present some religious *muwashshahât*. Afterwards I spoke with the main *munshid*, who had a strong voice, about his training and experience in religious song. He proudly stated that his golden voice was a gift of *rabb al-‘âlamîn* (God, “lord of the worlds”) so that he could better proclaim His praises. In fact, he claimed, while in London studying dentistry, many “*kâfirîn*” (“unbelievers”) converted upon hearing his voice. He then took me aside and said, with some concern, that once I completed my study of music I should devote my life to something more “serious” (*jâddî*) and not let this interest lead me away from *al-sirât al-mustaqîm* (“the straight path”). When I offered that many devout Muslims also have an interest in music and some in fact are performers, he stated that then they are headed for Hell because, according to Islam, only the human voice (*sawt*) and the *daff*, a simple frame drum, are allowable, and he cited a *hadîth* (Prophetic saying) to support this claim. Musical instruments of all other varieties, he stated, are *harâm* and should be broken.

A young hotel worker also claimed that I was endangering my soul by studying music and learning to play the ‘*ūd*. When I asked him about the fate of great Arab musicians such as Umm Kulthum and Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab, both of whom had

strong religious training, he shook his head and said that they will pay a price for their music, that is, on Judgment Day (*yaum al-âkhira*). But many devout people, I offered, consider Umm Kulthum to be a *munshida* (female religious singer) because of her religious training in *tajwîd* (Qur'ânic recitation) and *inshâd*. “The female voice is an imperfection (*al-sawt al-unthawî a 'war*),” he stated in a mechanical drone, as if reciting from memory, “and Umm Kulthum will suffer long for her singing and recitation of the Qur'an” (*sawfa tata 'adhdhab ta 'dhiban tawîlan*; lit. “she will be tortured a long torture”).²⁰

However, other Aleppine artists who consider themselves devout Muslims argue that the above views are excessive (*ziyâda*) and that those who hold them are rigid extremists (*mutazammitîn*). For my teachers, all of whom were raised in religious families and served at different times in their lives as *mu 'adhdhinîn* (muezzins, those who give the Muslim call to prayer) and *munshidîn*, it is more the context of musical performance and less the music per se that determines its permissibility, though the type of music performed is also an important factor. If performed in a “respectable” venue (*makân muhtaram*) – one defined tautologously as a place where “respectable” people (*nâs muhtaramîn*) would go – then music is something allowable (*masmûh*) in Islam. That is, it must be performed in a place where no alcohol is served, dancing is limited or non-existent, and where men and women do not mix in a socially unacceptable fashion. Examples of appropriate “respectable” venues include the Citadel’s amphitheater, Aleppo’s few public theaters and concert halls, the ancient caravansaries that are being renovated as performance spaces, and the private homes of *nâs muhtaramîn*.

²⁰ These and similar remarks may indicate affiliation with or sympathy with ideologies of Islamic puritanism (*salafîyya*) associated with Syria’s Muslim Brotherhood since the 1970s (‘Abd-Allah 1983).

With few exceptions, those musicians and “respectable people” who denounce “vulgar” music decry Aleppo’s “cabarets” (night clubs) as disreputable venues because they serve alcohol and cater to listeners’ carnal rather than spiritual interests. One leader of a heritage-style ensemble, when I praised the voice of a promising young singer, told me that he would like to have that singer join his ensemble but since the young man performs in a cabaret he cannot allow him to join his group. Performing in the cabarets is definitely *harâm* from this musician’s standpoint. Of course, from the perspective of the young singer and others who make a living performing in the cabarets, such work is permissible because it allows them to survive and provide for their families, especially in the absence of alternative “respectable” venues. One friend who performs in a cabaret claimed to earn the equivalent of approximately 800 dollars a month performing six nights a week in a cabaret. By comparison a university professor might earn 150 - 200 dollars per month. Though they recognize that the atmosphere of the cabarets is usually not conducive to proper Islamic behavior nor very healthful, many of these performers claim to be at least as devout as those who spurn the cabarets.

However, repertoire is also an important factor in determining the permissibility of music. Allowable music usually means the “classical” repertoire, often including what some term folkloric or popular (*sha’bî*) songs. The important criterion is whether the music feeds listeners’ spiritual needs or rather leads to irreligious thoughts and motivations. Most contemporary pop songs are thought to fall in the latter category and are therefore decried by more conservative listeners as immoral, debased, and inappropriate. Yet, many contemporary listeners also take issue with certain songs performed within the context of the “classical” repertoire, such as songs that are overtly

amorous (*ghazalī*). For example, some consider the song “*min khamrat al-hubb*” (From the wine of love), composed and performed by Sabah Fakhri, inappropriate because it suggests the drinking of wine and irresponsibility, as in the verse *in kâna lî dhanb, hât al-sharh wa imlîlî* (“if I were at fault [lit. if I had an offense or sin] hand me the goblet and fill it!”). While some listeners argue that such songs refer metaphorically to spiritual love or have deeper, Sufi meanings and should therefore be permissible, others argue that the style of the performance makes the difference in deciding whether or not a song is appropriate. For example, an amateur musician found Sabah Fakhri’s rendition of the above *mawwâl* vulgar, *shâri’î*, (lit. “from the streets”) or *sûqî* (lit. “from the market”), because he felt that he emphasized the profane and not the spiritual aspects of the words.

Aside from ambiguous Qur’anic verses and various examples from the *hadîth* literature concerning music, many of my teachers and friends cited the twelfth-century Muslim jurist al-Ghazzali’s statements on song and dance in his *Ihyâ’ ‘ulûm al-dîn* (The revival of the religious sciences; cf. al-Ghazzali 1901-1902, 1991) to support their advocacy of a “Golden Mean” or Middle Way between prohibition and unequivocal acceptance of music in Islam. al-Ghazzali evaluates the evidence for a prohibition of song and dance and argues, in essence, that so long as song and dance lead the participant to serve Allah, then they are permitted; song and dance that excite only the carnal desires are clearly forbidden. al-Ghazzali refers to song and dance with the term *al-samâ’*, which literally means “listening” or “audition” and associated kinesthetic practices, and which in Sufi literature refers to a spiritual audition of sacred truths and not merely listening to music. According to al-Ghazzali and other Sufi thinkers, *al-samâ’* leads one to Allah if done properly; otherwise it is dangerous and can excite desires and lead to sin. Other

pronouncements on *al-sama* ' from the Sufi perspective include the great third/ninth century Sufi Dhû al-Nûn, who writes: "*al-samâ* ' is a divine influence that moves the heart to see Allah, and those who listen with their souls (*bi-arwâhihim*) pray to Allah, whereas those who listen with their senses and desires (*bi-hawâsihim wa shahawâtihim*) fall into sin (*yasquûna illâ al-ma'siya*)" (cited in al-'Aqîlî 1979: 259).

III) Learning Music in Syria

A prerequisite of my engaging in "serious" debates in the field was learning the critical language used by Syrian intellectuals to discuss aesthetic issues. Regarding music, this required that I acquire numerous tapes for different artists, learn to follow the melodies and modulations, appreciate vocal qualities, and differentiate between strong and weak performances. Achieving this aesthetic awareness required intensive study and listening, often carried out in cassette shops over glasses of tea or small cups of coffee. It also meant taking music lessons and learning an instrument. Prior to my arrival in Syria I had studied the *'ûd* for several months in Cairo with a private teacher.²¹ This came about almost as an accident. While studying Arabic in Cairo I had hoped to get acquainted with more Egyptians in order to learn the local dialect better. I was also pursuing a preliminary investigation into Islamic discourses in non-traditional domains and had decided that musicians might be an interesting group in which to study contemporary forms of Islamic practice and discourse, precisely because of music's ambiguous status in Islam.

²¹ I have a strong background in music and have performed the saxophone on a semi-professional level for many years. A rudimentary knowledge of guitar playing assisted my acquisition of a decidedly rudimentary facility on the *'ûd*.

In Egypt I learned many of the basic modes and several popular Egyptian songs. I began to appreciate what numerous musicians told me are the three most important elements of a good song: the melody (*lahn*), the lyrics (*kalimât*), and the performer's voice (*sawt*). For a song to be good – and also “authentic” – it had to have a strong combination of all of these elements; lacking one of them is enough to make the song or the artists weak, if not “inauthentic.” Despite my studies in Egypt, my understanding of the modes and technical skill on the *'ūd* remained limited, due in part to the complexity of the task, my own limitations, and my instructor's limitations as well.

Arriving in Syria in the late Fall of 1996, I sought a new *'ūd* teacher and found both a teacher, master, and friend in the Aleppine virtuoso Muhammad Qadri Dalal. Through our intensive sessions on the *maqâmât*, the major genres and history of Arab music, and *'ūd* technique – over an hour a day almost every day for several months – I came to appreciate better the subtleties of the music and to become familiar with the terminology and critical discourse of music in contemporary Syria. Nonetheless, much of my fieldwork time in fact was spent convincing Syrians that I, as a foreigner, could actually understand their music and appreciate it. Many Syrian musicians and others expressed the common and not entirely unfounded belief that Arab music is too complex for Westerners and non-Arabs in general to understand; in fact many Arabs do not understand it. Oftentimes I was told that a period of a year or two or three is insufficient for a non-Arab to understand the music and write anything intelligent about it. Quite accurately one scholar suggested that I would probably be suspicious of him if he went to America and proposed to write a study of American Jazz after only a year or so of study. One would need ten years in order to understand the music and its intricacies, not to

mention the language, he suggested.

My position as a foreign music researcher meant that I was expected naturally to be ignorant of the music though praised for attempting to learn it. Yet, it also meant that I had to prove myself constantly before the suspicions of those who thought Arab music to be ineffable for non-Arabs. Whenever an *'ūd* was available I was generally asked to play for people in order to demonstrate what I could do, and especially as a test for any manifestations of *rūh sharqīyā*, “oriental spirit” – that key yet elusive element of Arab musical aesthetics. Sometimes I was asked to sing songs, quizzed on specific *maqāmāt*, or enjoined to explain what I had “discovered” in their music. Only after sixteen months of fieldwork was I able to convince people that I had at least a modicum of “oriental spirit,” despite whatever technical mastery I might evince through my performances on the *'ūd*. My public lectures, in Arabic, on musical topics and performances on the *'ūd* in public contexts convinced some of the doubters that I had, if only in a rudimentary way, entered the heart (*qalb*) of their music and understood some of its secrets (*asrār*). In this fashion, my own performances as well as the recordings and performances of Syrian musicians became an integral part of my search for the keys to authenticity in Syrian music and culture.

Bi-Tisma' Mîn? Listening, Aesthetics, and Forming a Tape Collection

As much as knowledge of the genres and styles and skill on an instrument, it is to whom you listen that is an essential component in announcing one's musical cultivation and taste. I was constantly asked the question, *bi-tisma' mîn?* (To whom do you listen?). and given suggestions for tapes, specific recordings and concerts. The question of

listening and what recordings are in one's collection are absolutely critical in marking and defending claims to authenticity. Among non-specialists, a claim to listen to Umm Kulthum, 'Abd al-Halim Hafiz, and Muhammad 'Abd al-Wahhab is one common way of making a claim to being a cultured person and respecting cultural authenticity (especially to the foreign music researcher). Among the discriminating, however, to answer "Umm Kulthum" is not sufficient. At a listening session organized by a dramatist friend at the home of a well-known woman music teacher, my discrimination as a listener was early put to the test. *Min bi-thibb tisma* ' (? ("To whom do you enjoy listening?"), asked the teacher. I replied, "Umm Kulthum," and, with a look of resignation that suggested to me, "Is that all there is?," she asked, *min ayy fatra*? ("From which era?"). I had just listened to a harangue by a local cassette vendor about how beautiful and pure the early Umm Kulthum was in comparison to her later, more mainstream work, so I replied, "Her early work, before she became well-known." This elicited a nod of approval and the remark, "Her best recordings are from the period of about 1928-1930. Afterwards she became too repetitive and emotionally less sincere (*mufta'ila*)," she remarked.²²

Forming a collection of cassette tapes (and, recently, compact disks) is another component of determining and even performing one's musical taste as a symbol of wider "culture" (*thaqāfa*).²³ When I began my 'ūd lessons, my teacher instructed me that the first thing I must do aside from obtaining a decent 'ūd and practicing four hours every day was to begin collecting good tapes and listen to them regularly. Listening is

²² The question of emotional sincerity, usually linked strongly to the persona of Umm Kulthum, is a theme I take up in chapter six.

²³ Like the English word "culture" *thaqāfa* implies cultivation in the educative and agricultural senses. In Syria *thaqāfa* tends to refer to educational cultivation and sophistication and less often to either the arts (*funūn*) or what we would call "popular culture," *'adāt wa taqālid* (lit. "customs and habits"). Syrians use the word *hadāra* (lit. "civilization") to refer to high culture. Cf. Armbrust (1996).

considered a creative act among Syrians, and one's collection of recordings (whether reel-to-reel, cassette, or CD) announces one's level of discrimination and culture. My teacher, for example, argued that he listens to *kull shî*, everything, and indeed he had cassettes from numerous diverse musical cultures to prove it. Another musician friend went to great lengths to show me his "jazz" tapes that for him symbolized his cosmopolitanism.²⁴

Most Syrians listen to music on cassettes, which form the backbone of a thriving "cassette culture" (cf. Manuel 1993). Although first-run cassettes are available in the market (the so-called "original" recordings or *aslîyât*), most cassettes are bootlegged copies from "original" tapes, reels, and CDs, or copies of other copies. The quality of tapes hence varies tremendously, though a number of specialty stores have arisen that deal in high-quality "digital" tapes (i.e., recorded from CDs on premium tape), usually costing two or three times what a standard tape might cost (for example, 100-150 LS versus 50 LS).²⁵ It is not uncommon to see audience members with rudimentary tape recorders at concerts, and not long after the concert bootleg versions of these tapes will appear in the market. Yet, "bootleg" is hardly the appropriate term. "Copyright" is not a word found in the colloquial dictionary and Syrian artists rarely if ever receive any remuneration from the sale of recordings. As one musician and studio owner put it: "We have no rights in the market." In a way, the circulation of cassette tapes has democratized the music market in Syria.²⁶

²⁴ "Jazz" assumes a somewhat wider range of styles and genres in Syria than in the US, and often includes blues, rhythm and blues, and some pop in addition to what we might normally consider jazz (itself a flexible and ambiguous label even in the US).

²⁵ At the time of my research (1996-1998), US\$1 was equivalent to approximately 50 LS on the black market. The official exchange rate was about 44LS to the dollar.

²⁶ cf. Keil 1994: 227-31, who argues against copyright laws, the commodification of music, and restrictions on the free exchange of music.

The majority of cassette shops in Damascus and Aleppo carry the average run-of-the-mill cassettes of the most recent pop stars as well as a handful of tapes of older masters. However, there are a few stores that specialize in the “classical” repertoire and the great Arab artists of the twentieth century. I got most of my collection from these “classical” shops. I would also exchange tapes with my musician friends, with whom I would compare collections and ask advice about certain artists and recordings. Trading tapes became an important context for learning about musical aesthetics. Why was one performance of a given artist preferred over another? In which genres did a certain artist excel and, the converse, in which was he less skilled? What makes for a good voice, a good melody, etc.? Through engagement with local cassette cultures I was able to acquire certain habits of listening that allowed me to learn much about the music that I could not have learned from lessons alone. As one musician told me, “You have to learn how to listen before you can learn how to play the music.”

Old and New

In the exchange of tapes and in the cassette culture in general, discourses of the old (*al-qadīm*) and the new (*al-jadīd*) are very important. I found that there is widespread agreement that earlier material by older artists is better than their recent material. For example, the owner of one cassette shop, a young man of perhaps 22, argued that the older George Wasoof is better than the new George Wasoof, whereas ‘Abd al-Halim Hafiz is better than the Wasoof of any era. In discourses of authenticity, the old is almost always better than the new, which marks decay (*inhitât*). Indeed, the newer songs are almost universally blamed for lowering musical taste in Syria. Even cassette vendors,

whose livelihood depends on the sale of the “cheap” songs, argued that they prefer the older, “classical” material. But closer examination of this discourse of debasement and the threat of the contemporary songs to the existence of the older ones reveals a somewhat different picture. First of all, not all is lost with respect to the “classical” songs and their conventions. Umm Kulthum remains the single most popular artist not only on the airwaves but at cassette stands around Damascus and Aleppo. The owner of a stand in central Damascus that sells a variety of modern and “classical” songs, folk music, and even Western pop music claims that on any given day he sells about 25 Umm Kulthum cassettes, whereas he might sell that amount of a contemporary singer only in the first few days after the cassette is released to the market. By comparison, he might sell five to ten George Wasoof tapes or a handful of ‘Amru Diab tapes – both very popular Arab artists who have large audiences in Syria. But the Egyptian diva still reigns as queen of the market with an average of 25 tapes a day, every day, for the several years this man has been selling them. Other vendors claimed similar sales proportions: the new singers might sell a lot when their tapes first hit the market, but Umm Kulthum. ‘Abd al-Halim Hafiz, and Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab – the venerated Big Three – remain the top sellers. Syrian stars such as Sabah Fakhri also do well, especially in specialty shops that do not offer the “cheap” music. In such shops in Damascus and Aleppo one finds aficionados, young and old, of older styles and artists such as Asmahan, Layla Murad, Nur al-Huda, Bakri al-Kurdi, and Zuhayr Minini.

The Stratigraphy of Musical Authenticity

The valuation of the old is also expressed visually in a sort of stratigraphy of

musical authenticity. In surveys of dozens of cassette shops in Damascus and Aleppo, and especially those in which cassettes were displayed in vertical cases rather than in storage boxes or drawers, I detected an interesting pattern among the cassettes. In almost all of these shops, Umm Kulthum occupied the top row in the display cases. Only when the shop or stall also sold recordings of the Qur'ân was she displaced from the top rung, and in some instances she shared this honor with recordings of the Holy text.²⁷ Even in those stalls in which tapes were arranged horizontally, Umm Kulthum occupied the first row at what would be the top were the case to be righted vertically. In Aleppo, where the religious factor is higher to some extent due to the plethora of *munshidûn* there, Umm Kulthum often shared the high spot with other *munshidûn*.

The association between Umm Kulthum, musical authenticity, and her occupation of the highest strata in Syrian cassette shops was demonstrated graphically one afternoon at a small cassette shop near the Victoria Bridge and Hijaz railway Station area of Central Damascus. This particular stand consisted of a vertical display case standing upon a table that held another horizontal case as well as a large cassette player. Running the shop was a young man from Hassaka, a town in the Kurdish region of Northeastern Syria, and he was accompanied on this particular day by two young men, one from Hama in Central Syria and the other from the Hawran region in the South. I approached the stand and asked them if they had any tapes of Khadr Yâ's, a well-known Iraqi singer who was scheduled to give a performance in Syria that month. The young man produced three tapes and placed one in the cassette player for me to listen to it. After a few minutes and the perfunctory questions (You speak Arabic!? Where are you from? Why did you learn

²⁷ It is common practice in Islamic societies to give the Qur'ân pride of place in a home or shop, usually by displaying it on the highest shelf in a room.

Arabic? What are you doing here? etc.), I spoke with them about their musical preferences and asked what they thought was the best music. I had been following up on Iraqi singers after discovering that many rural residents and the denizens of the microbus stations frequently listen to them. After debating the qualities of various Iraqi singers such as Khadr Ya's, 'Ali al-'Aissawi, and Kazem al-Sahir (the popular artist), the young man asked me if I wanted to hear something really good and authentic (*shî hîlû wi 'asîl*). When I said yes, he stood for a moment thinking, then grabbed a chair, stood on it rather precariously, and reached up to the top shelf of the display case to bring down a tape of Umm Kulthum's *Amal hayâtî* (Hope of my life). "This is the real thing," he seemed to be saying as he placed it in the cassette player; to me, his putting in the tape spoke better than any words to his understanding of authenticity. We stood there, the three of us, listening to the great voice, which for these young men, like so many others, was the voice of tradition, perhaps even of the Arab nation (cf. Danielson 1997).

After Umm Kulthum I was surprised to find 'Abd al-Halim Hafiz occupying the second tier in the stratigraphy of musical authenticity in Syrian cassette shops. This Egyptian crooner, popular among youth and especially women but often considered a symbol of vulgarity by the cultural elite during his lifetime, has been resurrected as an icon second only to Umm Kulthum (and the Qur'ân), at least in popular cultural displays. In almost all instances when Umm Kulthum occupied the top rung, 'Abd al-Halim Hafiz would occupy the second. Only rarely was he displaced by others, and then usually by Muhammad 'Abd al-Wahhab or religious singers.

To my initial surprise, however, 'Abd al-Wahhab did not always occupy the third place of pride in Syrian cassette shop stratigraphy though he is almost always mentioned

among the “Big Three.” In fact, he was often exiled to a side display case or mixed indiscriminately with other artists having some relation to him or to musical heritage: Safwan Bahlawan (a Syrian artist who studied with ‘Abd al-Wahhab and adopted his style of singing), Sabah Fakhri, and so on. Often ‘Abd al-Wahhab occupied his own corner. Instead, after ‘Abd al-Halim, a variety of contemporary popular singers jockey for third place: ‘Amru Diab, George Wasoof, Diana Haddad, Nawal al-Zughbi, and other Egyptian, Lebanese, and Syrian singers. In fact the majority of the shops and stalls feature a revolving collection of recent pop hits as well as the numerous “variety” collections (*munawwa’ât*) and theme tapes, such as “‘*Atâbâ* 1998,” “The Most Beautiful *Dabkât* of 1997,” “Best Songs of 1997,” and “Love Songs 1997,” produced by the shop owners themselves or, less often, by local studios. All of them, of course, are “bootleg” copies.

This stratigraphy suggests that the older artists and hence older aesthetic values are not on the verge of extinction, as critics of the contemporary pop song claim. Yet, there is a strong sense among musicians and intellectuals that the older generations represent a “Golden Age” that will never be repeated. This is why the modern pop songs are considered to be such a threat; there appears to be no alternative. Unlike the West, where contemporary genres and styles have displaced but not entirely replaced the older, there is a fear in Syria that once the present “cultivated listeners” (*sammî’a*) pass on, there will not be a generation capable of appreciating the older music and of promoting its aesthetic standards. This is confirmed in the music conservatories, where students are shunning the study of the Arab instruments (‘*ud*, *qanun*, *nay*, etc.), instead flocking to the piano, violin, clarinet, guitar, and other “Western” instruments.

IV) *al-Qafla*

This chapter has explored why Aleppo has come to occupy such an important position in Arab music as well as in discourses of authenticity in contemporary Syria. Its traditional commercial and political importance led to its growth as a regional center for Levantine culture, including a rich musical repertoire comprising a variety of genres and styles. In modern Aleppo, musicians and music lovers cultivate habits of listening through engagement in a local cassette culture: listening to, discussing, and trading recordings of favorite artists. Examination of the cassette culture reveals the positive evaluation of older artists and even the earlier material of more recent performers, a phenomenon reflected to some degree in the layering of musical authenticity in local cassette shops. But this stratigraphy and statements about authenticity should not lead us to believe that there is consensus about authentic culture in contemporary Aleppo. Indeed, modern and modernizing Syria is rife with contradictions that can be heard in music: contradictions between advocates of modernism and defenders of tradition, between those who decry the contemporary pop song and those who adopt a more flexible position and listen to a variety of styles and genres. The next chapter explores the rise of the question of modernity and the concern with authenticity in Syria and sets the stage for further analysis of some of the contradictions of modernity in contemporary Aleppine music in the following chapters.

Chapter Three: The Question of Modernity and Authenticity in Modern Syria

I) *al-Matla'*: Adorno at the Tourist Café

I set out by bus one winter morning for Aleppo from the new terminal on the outskirts of Damascus – the old one in the city center having recently been closed after a terrorist bomb planted by Israeli agents had ripped through a bus on New Year's Day, 1997, killing or wounding over 50 passengers. The bus ride was not too long – only about five hours – but it seemed longer due to the cacophony of pop songs and the shouts and screams of the on-board movie blaring from the overhead speakers. The new inter-city buses are a far cry from the colorful and venerable “Hob Hob” buses bouncing along with chickens on their tops, as depicted in so many tour guides; they are, in fact, far more comfortable than any American buses I've ridden. But there is the noise factor – the radio and television are almost always on, sometimes simultaneously, and usually at full volume. This trip was to be my initiation into life on buses, what I later would call “My Life with ‘Adel Imam,” the famous Egyptian actor, since his movies are standard fare on the Damascus-Aleppo line. By the end of my fieldwork I must have seen over a dozen of his movies

I arrived in Aleppo on a cold and wet evening. Not knowing where I was I got off at the first stop in the city – far, it turned out, from the city center – but I was able to hail a taxi and get a lift to Martyr's Square (*sâhat al-shuhadâ'*) in the newer part of the city. Despite the large Martyr's Monument dominating the northern end of the square, locals refer to this area as “al-Siyahi,” after the nearby Tourist Hotel (*al-junduq al-siyâhî*). The hotel's café was to be the scene of many an afternoon's discussion for me and my

Aleppine friends and in many ways was my virtual office in Aleppo. Not long after settling into Aleppo, where residential phone service was at the time still a luxury, I began to receive phone calls in the café, a privilege afforded by the head waiter, Abu ‘Ali, only to “regulars.” But on this first night I did not know what to expect, although I had made arrangements to meet a friend there who would put me up while I searched for an apartment.

By coincidence a group of philosophy professors from Damascus University were seated in the café. They had come to Aleppo to give lectures at the university and were awaiting a midnight bus ride back to the capital. I settled in next to them and after customary introductions they asked about my research. One of the philosophers, a mostly blind specialist in medieval Arab thought named Dr. Yussef, immediately asked me, “What is your theoretical framework?” I was taken aback. Not only had no one in Syria or Egypt before then asked me about theory, I had actually forgotten my theoretical framework, it had been so long since I had thought or talked about it. I muttered a few words about aesthetics, anthropology, about being eclectic, and so on, when my inquisitor – as I began to see him – stated, “Well, of course you must be using Adorno!” Adorno? I had rejected Adorno some years ago for his statements on jazz (that it is not creative and promotes regressive listening, for example) and had only a passing knowledge of his aesthetic theory. I again muttered something about needing to look again at Adorno but also relying on Arab sources, when Dr. Yussef exclaimed, “Adorno was a maestro! You must use him if you want to understand our music.”

Most Syrians had pointed me toward the works of such thinkers as al-Kindî, al-Fârâbî, Ibn Sînâ, Sâfî al-Dîn al-Urmawî, and other great Muslim philosophers and

musical theorists. In my mind these were the paragons of “authenticity” and I spent many hours in vain trying to acquire copies of their texts or poring over them in libraries searching for clues to the “genuine” Arab tradition. Ironically, it seemed to me, many also referred me to the British Orientalist and musicologist Henry George Farmer’s history of Arab music (1929), now a standard reference for Arabs since its translation into Arabic, but I ignored it, preferring to read the “original” texts.

Within my first few minutes of arriving in Aleppo, I was confronting an unexpected challenge, and the message was clear: if I wanted to research and write something other than merely a documentary, self-celebratory study of Arab music in Syria I would need to rise above my preconceived notions of “authenticity” and reach out, if not to Adorno then to some critical stance from which to understand the music I had come to research. I had at once to be within the tradition, absorbing – osmosis-like – the sounds and spirit of the music and culture, and without it, finding my edge, my critical stance. This is one of the many paradoxes of fieldwork and this philosopher was among the first to introduce me to it. Much of the rest of my time in Aleppo and subsequent writing was to be a tacking between these poles, a quest for what musicians said was the “heart” (*qalb*) of the music and a search for a critical perspective from which to understand it.

The suggestion that I look to Adorno for critical tools also indicated the international, trans-local nature of discourses on culture and authenticity in Syria. Most of the artists, intellectuals, and musicians with whom I studied and interacted had a far more sophisticated understanding of what it meant to be authentically “Syrian” and or “Arab” in the late twentieth century. For them, it was not a contradiction to read T. S.

Eliot along side Adonis – rather it was part of their experience of modernity in Syria; one young writer even asserted that because *The Waste Land* evoked for him visions of the Arab World, Eliot was an “Arab” poet. I would at a minimum need to rethink many of my preconceptions, not the least being what I thought about “authenticity” and “Arab music.”

This chapter explores the conceptual terrain in which contemporary Syrian intellectuals and artists articulate notions of authenticity and cultural identity. To answer why it is that certain Syrian intellectuals and artists seem concerned – at times extravagantly so – with their authenticity requires an investigation into the historical conditions that have allowed the question of authenticity to be posed in the first place. The question of authenticity arose in the context of the question of modernity in Syria and around the Arab world, beginning in the late eighteenth century with the onset of European colonization of the region and continuing through the current struggles of Arab nations such as Syria to adapt to rapidly changing global political and economic conditions. Therefore, authenticity cannot be understood apart from its relationship to conceptions of modernity. In its turn, the experience of modernity in Syria cannot be understood independently of the experience of modernity elsewhere, especially in Europe. Despite familiar tropes of civilizational clash and the differences between the Occident and the Orient with respect to cultural modernity and social modernization, in many ways modernity has been mutually constituted in the “West” and the “East,”

primarily through the mechanism of colonialism but also through post- and neo-colonial political, economic, and intellectual relationships.

In Syria, the experience of the French Mandate and the changing relationship of Syria to an evolving Euro-American dominated global economy after World War Two has meant that Syria shares numerous discourses of cultural modernity and social modernization with the “West” in its many guises. Today, nevertheless, Syrian intellectuals, like many of their counterparts around the Arab World, are increasingly striving to envision an “alternative modernity” (cf. Gaonkar 1999) at once Syrian, Arab, and modern.¹ A critical term in contemporary Syrian discourses of modernity and cultural authenticity has been that of heritage (*turâth*). In its myriad manifestations, heritage has come to embody numerous discourses of self and society in contemporary Syria. In many regards a discourse of the privileged classes, heritage is also a privileged discourse, lying at the intersection of aesthetic practices and state ideologies of culture and the arts in Syria. Especially in the context of what Syria’s cultural and political elite deem to be “inauthentic” and “vulgar” aspects of contemporary culture (usually what critics in the West refer to as mass or popular culture²), heritage plays a central role in what I am calling the “aesthetics of authenticity” in contemporary Syrian arts.

¹ By this formulation I do not wish to imply that “Syrian,” “Arab,” and “modern” are either mutually exclusive or well-defined essences. See below for a discussion of the concept of “alternative modernity” and my use of it in the context of this work.

² See Armbrust (1996) for a discussion of these terms in the context of criticism in and of the contemporary Arab World.

II) Concepts and Debates: Keywords in The Aesthetics of Authenticity

What allows certain Syrian intellectuals and artists to question how they can be modern citizens of the world and at the same time retain a sense of cultural authenticity? To answer this question requires an examination of the historical constitution of some of the keywords in contemporary aesthetic discourse, primarily modernity, authenticity, and heritage. In what follows I examine these terms as they emerged in four major periods in modern Syrian history: the late Ottoman Period, from the middle of the eighteenth century to the end of World War One; the period of France's occupation of Syria (1920-1946); the post-Independence period up to the June 1967 war with Israel; and finally the period from the defeat of 1967 until the present.³ In each of these periods the concepts of modernity, authenticity, heritage, and cultural identity – always closely linked – assumed distinct forms and articulated with intellectual, political and economic currents in the Arab lands and around the world.

Modernity (Hadâtha)

In contemporary Syria, conceptions of authenticity arise in the context of debates over modernity. Indeed, in most textual discussions of the condition of modernity in Syria, the two terms form a binary pair; seldom is authenticity discussed in the absence of a discussion of modernity, and vice versa (Adonis 1974; Tarabishî 1991; al-Azmeh 1993; Jâbrî 1995). The Arabic term most commonly used to refer to modernity in these debates

³ Hourani (1983) classifies the "Liberal Age" of Arabic thought as extending from 1798-1939, approximately the first two periods of my classification. Barakat (1993: 242) divides modern Arab history and thought into three periods, roughly the same as my classification but combining the post-Independence and post-1967 eras. As will become clear below, a division between pre- and post-1967 Syrian thought is highly relevant for the purposes of this discussion.

is *hadâtha*. Literally meaning newness, novelty, or youthfulness, *hadâtha* derives from the triliteral root *h-d-th*, which also generates such words as *hadîth*, new, modern, but also speech, narrative, and Prophetic tradition; *hâdith*, an occurrence, event, happening, or mishap; *ihdâth*, production, creation, causation; and *tahdîth*, modernization, renewal.⁴ The principle connotations of *hadâtha* are thus newness, occurrence, and speech.

A sense of newness can also be expressed by the word *jadîd*, though it is not generally used in Syria to connote modernity. Rather, *jadîd* is generally used in contradistinction to *qadîm*, meaning old. In some instances, *hadâtha* describes the transformation from *qadîm* to *jadîd* (Barqâwî 1999: 50). In Egypt, as el-Shawan Castelo-Branco has demonstrated (1980, n.d.), *qadîm* and *jadîd* are used to refer to distinct types of musical heritage: *qadîm* refers to pre-WWI musical heritage, whereas *jadîd* refers to post-WWI styles, what in Syria are generally referred to as *hadîth* (cf. al-Sharîf 1991). When the connotation is newness, either term suffices. When the connotation is social or cultural modernity, usually the terms *hadâtha* and *hadîth* are used. The eventfulness and the sense of occurrence implied by *hadâtha* suggest some of the social and cultural implications of modernity that *jadîd* or the nominative *jidda* (newness) do not.

Finally, another word that arises in the context of discourses of modernity is *mu'âsira* (contemporaneity). The connotations of *hadâtha* and *mu'âsira* are not identical; something can be contemporary without necessarily being modern or modernist. Yet, Syrian intellectuals tend to use them in very similar ways – that is, as a counterpoint to the concept of authenticity (*asâla*), which by default cannot be modern. Intellectual discourse on Syrian society almost exclusively uses *hadâtha* to discuss social

⁴ Translations for standard Arabic terms are adapted from *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, ed. J. M. Cowan, 4th ed., 1994.

and cultural modernity, and hence I will use this term to refer to modernity with the understanding that Syrians sometimes use *mu'āsira* to convey some of the same meanings.

It is important when considering the history of these terms and their relationship to discourses of art and aesthetics to distinguish between *hadâtha* as cultural and intellectual modernity, and *hadâtha* as social modernization (what is often referred to as *tahdith*). While modernity and modernization overlap to a certain extent, as in nineteenth-century calls for the reform and modernization of Arab society and culture, the latter term assumed greater importance in the post-Independence period as Syria embarked on an aggressive program of social modernization in order to create “modern Syria” (*sûriyya al-haditha*).⁵ As scholars have shown for other areas of the world undergoing rapid social change in the period of decolonization (e.g. Escobar 1995), Western modernization theories of the 1950s were advocated by both international agencies and modernizing elites as models for rational development and social modernization in the developing world. In many instances these models replaced earlier models of cultural modernity or even modernism to the extent that for the generation coming of age in this period, the two terms were inseparable. This was the case in Syria.

Napoleon's Invasion, The Nahda, and the “Shock” of Modernity

Historians of the Middle East commonly date the advent of modernity in the Arab World to Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 (Hourani 1983 [1962]; Yapp 1987). When Napoleon's forces arrived, they not only brought with them superior arms and

⁵ The discourse of modernizing Syria assumes a central place in the ideology of the late Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad as “The Builder of Modern Syria” (*bānī sūriyya al-haditha*).

military training but also ideas of political, economic and cultural organization, as well as scientific and cultural missions to advance these ideas. Faced with the superiority of European civilization and a pervasive sense of the decline of Arabic culture under Ottoman rule, Arabs were provoked by the encounter into reexamining their own culture and society, according to these histories. Indeed, the Syrian-born poet and critic Adonis asserts that the encounter with modern European military and scientific technology produced what he terms the “shock of modernity” (*sadmat al-hadâtha*) (Adonis 1974). The Arabic word *sadma* means not only a shock but a jolt, collision, or blow; it may also imply a psychic or psychological shock as well. According to this view, the “shock of modernity” moved many Arab intellectual and political leaders to attempt to reform Arab society and culture in a number of domains, including, of course, the military, but also politics, economics, education, language, literature, religion, gender relations, and the arts (cf. Hourani 1983; Mitchell 1991 [1988]; Barakat 1993). This was the beginning of what Albert Hourani (1983) termed the “Liberal Age” of Arabic thought, one characterized by curiosity about the West, great openness to new ideas, and simultaneously an increased interest in the past and in cultural authenticity, thought to reside in the past.

Authenticity (Asâla)

In contemporary Syrian discourse, the word *asâla* has come to mean the converse of *hadâtha*. In the context of the dialectic of modernity and tradition, *asâla* signifies genuineness and is therefore commonly translated as “authenticity.”⁶ However, the use of *asâla* to mean “authenticity” reflects a decidedly modern sensibility. Examination of

⁶Cf. Badawî (1986 [1978]) and *The Oxford English-Arabic Dictionary of Current Usage* (1978 [1972]) s.v. “authenticity.”

Arabic and Arabic-English dictionaries and lexicons from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reveals that *asâla* did not refer to “authenticity” in the modern sense of the word. For example, in the late eighteenth-century Arabic dictionary *Tâj al-‘arûs* (Murtadâ al-Zabîdî 1966) and in Edward Lane’s *Arabic-English Lexicon* (1978 [1863]), *asâla* does not carry the connotation of “authenticity” but rather refers to notions of rootedness, fixedness, permanence, and lineage.⁷ The verb *asula-ya ‘sulu* means “to be firmly rooted and established” or “to be of noble descent,” whereas the nominative *asl* (pl. *usûl*) refers to a root, a tree trunk, an origin point or foundation, a cause, a principle or fundamental, as well as noble descent and lineage. The adjectival forms *asîl* (“having a root or foundation”) and *aslî* (“underived,” “original”) are often used interchangeably to signify cultural practices and objects that are considered to be deeply rooted and therefore genuine (Lane 1978 [1863]: 64-66).⁸

In contemporary Syria, *asâla* and *asl* retain the connotations of rootedness and pure descent. One commonly asks where a person is from *aslan*, that is, “originally,” referring to a particular geographical location and, implicitly, a specific genealogy. Those Syrians considered to be genuinely “Arab” tend to be those with an *asl* from the Arabian Peninsula. For example, a wealthy Aleppine merchant, when I asked him about his family’s roots, brought out his family tree and graphically illustrated for me the ways in which the different meanings of *asl* as “tree trunk” and “genuine and authentic descent” may correspond. Held safely under lock and key in a special cabinet, the

⁷ The English word “authentic” derives from the Greek *authentikós*, meaning “original,” “primary,” and “at first hand.”

⁸ In chapter four I explore how Syrians may locate “genuine” or “spurious” culture, to borrow Sapir’s terms, in both rural “folk” practices and in urban-based civilization (*hadâra*), depending on their particular interests, background, and understandings of history and the past.

document – a parchment scroll measuring about six feet in length and a foot in width – depicts his ancestry (*nasab*) literally as a family tree (*shajarat al-â'ila*) with a central trunk rising along the many pages of the scroll and numerous branches (*furû'*) stretching off to the sides. The names of individual male members of his patrilineage are inscribed in leaves (*awrâq*) sprouting from each branch, arranged according to relationship to the founding line or “trunk” of the family tree. Newer pieces of parchment attached at the end of the scroll include the names of this man and his six sons. The oldest pieces of the scroll are very old and faded and therefore hard to read. Yet one can discern the roots (*usûl*) of the family tree planted firmly in the Hijâz, the region of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina in the Arabian Peninsula. According to the merchant, the scroll indicates that his ancestors first branched out of the Hijâz and migrated to Aleppo some 500 years ago, thereby establishing himself as a member of one of the oldest “Arab” families in Aleppo.⁹ As further evidence of his authentic Aleppine roots, he showed me pictures of his family’s expansive fifteenth-century home in the Old City; although the house remains in their possession to this day, they now choose to live in a modern quarter of the city.

The modern usage of *asâla* to refer to authenticity thus reflects an important shift in the meaning of the term that must be understood in the context of the dialectic of modernity and tradition characteristic of Arab thought since the *nahda*. Indeed, according to the Syrian historian Aziz al-Azmeh (1992: 13-14), “modernity is the root of authenticity” (*al-hadâtha asl al-asâla*). Like Orientalism, modern discourses of authenticity – whether with regard to Islam, literature, or the nation – essentialize Arab

⁹ For a recent study of notable families and kinship in Aleppo, see Meriwether (1999).

culture and society as self-sufficient (*mutakâfi*) and unchanging (al-Azmeh 1993: 42; 1992: 31-33). In this manner, *asâla*, like identity (*huwīyya*) and selfhood (*dhātīyya*), articulates implicit notions of political and cultural unity (al-Azmeh 1992: 27). Thus, “history” is understood as consisting of the alternation of stages of internal purity and corruption by external agents, of ascendant authenticity (*asâla*) and vulgar decline (*inhitât*) (al-Azmeh 1993: 42; 1992: 17).

The Nahda and the Shock of Modernity

In the context of conceptions of history and change that presuppose an essential self, it comes as little surprise, notes al-Azmeh (1993: 42), that the response to the engagement with (or “shock” of) European modernity is termed the *nahda*, or revival. Derived from the root *n-h-d*, *nahda* literally means a rising up, a standing up, or a reawakening and carries further connotations of revival, even renaissance. According to the prevailing historiography of this period, contact (or impact) with Europe inspired Arabs to reform their culture and society, to “retrieve an essence that the vicissitudes of time and the designs of enemies, rather than change of any intrinsic nature, had caused to atrophy” (al-Azmeh 1993: 42). The “nahdawist” visions of modernity were nevertheless plural and often incommensurate (Barakat 1993: 239-265; Laroui 1976). Some secular reformers advocated a strict departure from the past and an acceptance and, sometimes, zealous embracing of European culture and civilization (*hadâra*), while others advocated a more skeptical stance toward European society and culture. Religious reformers were also diverse; some advocated a return to the envisioned purity of the earliest Muslim community (the so-called *salafīyya* movements), while others, usually termed by Western

commentators as “liberal” or “progressive,” advanced less radical visions (cf. Hourani 1983: 67-160; Barakat 1993: 242-243). Finally, a variety of compromising trends emerged that advocated some eclectic mixture of borrowing from Europe what seemed most valuable while retaining certain practices from the repertoire of Arab customs and habits (Barakat 1993: 239-251).

For example, in the arts this period witnessed a renewed interest in classical poetry – the *dīwān al-‘arab* or registry of Arab achievements and touchstone of Arab identity. Yet, with the revival of classical poetry came the rise of the novel as a genre of Arabic literature and a prodigious movement to translate works of European culture into Arabic. With respect to music, historians write of a musical *nahda* and the revival of classical “Arab” genres¹⁰ by such noted nineteenth- and early twentieth-century artists as Muhammad ‘Uthmān, ‘Abdu al-Hāmūlī, and Salāma Hijāzī (Lagrange 1996: 69-108). This same period also saw the rise of new genres such as the *ughniya* and *taqūqa*, light colloquial songs associated with the musical theater that developed in Cairo in the late nineteenth century and had roots in European and Arab-Ottoman theatrical and musical practices (Danielson 1997; al-Sharīf 1991; Lagrange 1996: 109-111).¹¹

Indeed, in the period of the *nahda* we witness the rise of a modern conception of art (*fann*) as a mode of cultural expression independent of craft. Prior to the modern period, *fann* referred to techniques and technical abilities associated with crafts (*mīhan*, sing. *mihna*). As mentioned above, *usūl al-fann* referred to such “arts” as chemistry and

¹⁰ The concept of an independent Arab musical tradition did not arise until the 1930s, especially after the first Congress on Arab Music held in Cairo in 1932. Operationally the distinctions between “Ottoman,” “Persian,” and “Arab” musical traditions were fluent prior to the modern period, and to a large extent they remain so today. Referring to the music as “Arab” reflected more nationalist than purely musical concerns (cf. Danielson 1997: 77).

¹¹ However, as mentioned in chapter two, the Syrian artists Ahmad Abū Khalīl al-Qabbānī and Kamīl Shambīr were instrumental in the development of the musical theater in Egypt.

navigation in the technical sense, and not to painting and music per se, the latter of which was classified in classical texts as a branch of science and philosophy (Shiloah 1995: 45-47). Even today, remnants of the earlier association of *fann* with the technical professions remain in Syria. The “art” objects of glass blowing, wood-working, and weaving are sold in the *sûq al-mihan al-yadawiyya* or “Handicrafts Market” in Damascus. Of course, gathering these diverse practices under one roof and calling them “handicrafts” reflects more the Syrian Ministry of Tourism’s classification than an indigenous one, but it serves as a reminder merely that the term art, as in pre-modern Europe, referred primarily to crafts and techniques not associated with what we today consider to be a medium of personal expression. Therefore, when Arab intellectuals of the *nahda* and today express a desire to revive or preserve older “artistic” traditions, they may be imposing a decidedly modern conception of what art entails on an earlier association of art with craft and craft production.

Despite the diversity of intellectual and artistic trends in this period, a common assumption is that the *nahda* came as a response to a European impetus that indeed was felt by Arabs as a “shock.” The idea that modernity “shocked” Arab society and culture suggests that the Arabic culture was somehow dormant and needed to be rejuvenated by the light of European modernity, understood in this view as an agent of change. Indeed, other terms used to describe this situation include *istifâqa*, *sahwah*, and *yaqz*, each of which means an awakening (Tarabîshî 1991: 18). These terms imply that the Arabs were asleep in what Rashid al-Ghannushi terms “the sleep of decay” (*nawmat al-inhitât*; cited in Tarabîshî 1991: 17). As the Syrian-born critic George Tarabishi notes, “shock” (*sadma*) has come to play a critical role in contemporary Arab discourse about the

relationship of the Arabs with Europe and constitutes one of the central concepts with which Arab intellectuals understand themselves (*wa 'i al-wa 'i al- 'arabî li-dhâtihi*, “the self-awareness of the Arab consciousness”; Tarabîshî 1991: 17). The state of shock, argues Tarabîshî, refers to the “shocked object” (*al-maf'ûl al-iyqâzî al-tanbihi*, “the awakened and stimulated object”), which passively reacts to the “shocking entity,” which is Europe in its various roles as invader, colonizer, protector, and modernizer (Tarabîshî 1991: 18).

The metaphor of “the shock of modernity” suggests a physical and mechanical understanding of the relationship between Europe and the Arab World. The idea of a “shock” rests on a metaphor of a collision of one body in motion with another that is more or less stationary. this latter condition, according to the shock model, describing Arab society and culture in the late eighteenth century with the arrival of Napoleon’s forces on the shores of Alexandria. Under the impact of the body in motion (the “West”), the motionless or inert body (the “East”) was propelled into motion with a direction and velocity proportional to the energy and direction of impact. The resulting motion of the impacted body differs according to the ideology of the critic: forward along the linear track of modernity for optimistic secular modernists and their Western commentators, or, on the contrary, backwards toward the past in a search for authentic roots, or some variety of these two motions – the “eclectic” responses that Laroui outlines (Laroui 1976: cf. Barakat 1993: 240). But in almost all cases, there was motion, and it describes the dominant European meta-history of modernity as linear progress.

Deconstructing the Term "Shock"

However, few critics question the metaphor of the "shock of modernity" itself. Tarabishi, although he acknowledges the physical metaphor of the term *sadma*, argues merely that the Arab response to its collision with Western civilization was not so much a "shock," which implies a certain amount of resilience on the part of the struck body, but a trauma or "bruise" (*radda*), by which the inert body is permanently damaged and incapable of proper forward motion. Adopting a psychoanalytic framework for the study of group behavior, Tarabishi (1991) argues that the Arabs were traumatized by this encounter psychologically as well as physically, socially, politically, and culturally. Especially after the losses of 1948 and 1967, the formerly shocked entity has become, according to Tarabishi, a "traumatized entity" (*maf'ûl tanwîmî takhdîrî*, "an anaesthetized and narcotized object": Tarabîshî 1991: 18).¹²

Adonis, Tarabishi, and others subscribe to the notion that Napoleon's invasion represented a form of civilizational collision and that the Arabs were the inert body – subject to shock, from one perspective, or bruising, from the other (cf. Barakat 1993: 239-242). Yet, can this picture be maintained? Pursuing the collision metaphor raises questions regarding the disproportional motion of the two bodies, their relationship to other bodies, in motion or inert, and the consequences of the impact for all parties. To what extent was the interaction of Europe and the Arab lands in the eighteenth century a "collision" or "clash" when, for example, French were already residing in Alexandria

¹² I cannot find reference to the use of the term *sadma* or shock prior to 1967 and hence this model may reflect a reconstruction of the nature of the earlier (eighteenth- and nineteenth-century) engagement with Europe by Arab intellectuals coming to term with their society and culture in the aftermath of the defeat of 1967 – intellectuals for whom, as I argue below, conceptions of authenticity and modernity would have been different from their nahdawist counterparts. Indeed, available early texts that describe the interaction of Europeans and Arabs suggest less a state of shock than of fascination and curiosity mixed with abhorrence and disgust (e.g. al-Jabarti 1993).

when Napoleon arrived (Jabartî 1993: 20), and, more significantly, when economic and cultural networks had linked the peoples of the Mediterranean basin for centuries by the time of Napoleon's adventures in the East (cf. J. Abu-Lughod 1989)? While acknowledging the military and technological superiority of the French and Europe in general at the time, can we consider the Arabs to have been asleep and their encounter with Europe and European modernity to have been a collision (however shocking or traumatic it may have been)? Was the *nahda* merely a response to Europe, an attempt to return and revive a former state of purity?¹³

Moreover, while the notion of shock implies an effect solely on the body being impacted, the above-mentioned studies do not pause to reflect on the possible influences on Europe of the "collision" with the Arab World. Following Said (1978, 1994) and other critics of colonial and postcolonial European and Arab relations (Mitchell 1991; Barakat 1993), the encounter of "West" and "East" should be seen as having reciprocal if uneven consequences, among which was the mutual constitution or construction of modernity itself. First, the "shock" of modernity was felt in both "bodies" and was in a sense a product of the interaction of "East" and "West" and not merely an agent of the collision itself. That is, rather than being the outcome of a collision of the "East" with a modern "West," modernity was co-produced in the "West" and "East" as a result of their interaction. For example, Mitchell (1991) analyzes the role of colonialism not only in shaping European perceptions of colonial Egypt but of "enframing" European self-perceptions. Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) discuss not

¹³ We might compare the concept of the *nahda* to that of the pre-Islamic *jāhiliyya* or Era of Ignorance in that both are ideological constructions of history and forms of self-constitution.

only how Orientalist thought participated in colonial regimes of knowledge and power but also how Europe's experience with the Orient shaped the development of modern European art and letters. The "orient" and the "oriental" served as a mirror in which Europeans created their own self images (cf. Kuper 1982; Stocking 1987), to the extent that what we label "modern European culture" was a product of the interaction – and less so the collision – of Europe with its colonies.

Second, Arab discourses in the "Liberal Age" were not merely derivative of European enlightenment ideals, as the collision and shock metaphor would suggest. Rather, Arab intellectuals, while at times borrowing from European ideas of civilization and modernity,¹⁴ at the same time proposed novel ideals and drew on an extensive Arab intellectual and political heritage in the quest to articulate their own visions of modernity: the diverse visions of such reformers as Muhammad 'Abdu, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Rifa'at al-Tahtawi, 'Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi, Qassim Amin, and Shibli Shumayyil, just to name a few, can hardly be thought of as merely derivative of European discourses (Barakat 1993: 242-251). While the dynamics and consequences of this interaction were not identical for Arabs and Europeans and imbalances in power and influence often increased under colonial rule, yet neither were the relationships so one-sided as the "shock of modernity" metaphor and its associated discourses of cultural purity and authenticity imply.

Colonialism, Westernization, and Modernity: The French Mandate over Syria

The mutual construction of modernity in the Arab World and Europe produced

¹⁴ Mitchell (1991: 122-23) indicates that the writings of Gustave Le Bon on comparative civilization, education, and crowd psychology were popular in early modern Egypt, as were the ideas of Durkheim.

not a unified vision of modernity in both regions but rather different and historically constituted and dynamic visions of “alternative modernities” (Gaonkar 1999; Taylor 1999: 162). What is meant by “alternative” modernities? The term “alternative,” as used by Gaonkar and Taylor, implies that there is a “standard” or normative experience of modernity, which in their arguments is “Western modernity” in its many guises. Both authors argue for a “cultural” theory of modernity that privileges the contributions of “local culture” to the eventual form that modernity assumes in different cultures, as opposed to “acultural” or universalizing theories and models that stipulate a universal paradigm of the gradual banishment of “tradition” with the rise of techno-rational secular society. Yet, at the same time they seem to accept the commonly held notion that modernity began in Europe and spread to other lands as a result of European colonialism: their “alternative” modernities are gauged in comparison to an implied “normative” modernity, European modernization.

Although in this work I adopt a “cultural” model of modernity and argue for the existence of particular varieties of Syrian “alternative” modernities, I would suggest that it is misleading to privilege European modernities as prior to non-European modernities and in that sense normative, even if aspects of social modernization began in Europe sooner than in the colonies. The narrative chronology of colonialism (dates of arrival and conquest, of specific reforms, etc.) draws attention away from the long-standing interactions of European and non-European peoples over several centuries and the mutual production of concepts and practices that we commonly associate with modernity – ideas about the individual and society, military and economic reorganization, pedagogical reforms, science education, the rise of mass media, the arts, and literature, for example

(cf. Mitchell 1991, Viswanathan 1989). We therefore need to strive to understand “modernity” as a condition co-produced by Europe and its colonies, before they were even colonies, enacted through specific policies and practices, and differentially experienced in different cultures and eras. Moreover, we must not assume that “Syria,” “Arab,” and “modernity” (let alone “music”) refer to fixed entities and essences. As Talal Asad notes (1993: 16), narrative accounts of modernity within modern nation-states tend to assume the teleological development of fixed entities, even when they are not “making their own histories” but rather evolving or changing in response to outside agents (as in the “shock” metaphor). By advancing an analysis of possible alternative modernities in Syrian music I do not wish to advance a notion of “Syria” as a fixed unity that developed an alternative “modernity” but rather as a rhetorical figure constructed in the context of competing visions of modernity in a particular time and place.

Thus, modernity in Syria – and by “in” I refer to this rhetorical time-space in which transnational processes of social modernization and cultural modernity are understood as developing in “alternative” forms – evolved in relation to French and other visions of modernity in the diverse “West,” including those of the United States in the era immediately following Independence (1946) and, later, Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union from the 1960s until the late 1980s. The evolution of these different visions of modernity – if not different modernities – can be traced in the arts and music, which not only expressed or reflected these visions but played an active role in constructing them, especially through the contested notion of cultural authenticity, which came to assume greater prominence in discourses of modernity after the 1967 War with Israel. Authenticity moreover came to be defined dialectically with respect to variously

imagined “authentic” elements of Arab culture and “inauthentic” elements derived from the West. The dynamic of this dialectic produces what I term “the aesthetics of authenticity” in contemporary Syrian art worlds (what in Arabic might be termed *jamâliyyât al-‘asâla*, though I rarely heard it formulated thus). I explore this aesthetic sensibility in the following chapters through analysis of Arab music in Aleppo.

Following World War I and after some maneuvering among the European powers, France was granted a “Mandate” over “Syria,” which at the time included what is now Lebanon and parts of Turkey and Iraq. The French Mandate over Syria lasted from 1922 to 1944 and saw in addition to the fixing of national boundaries of Syria – with the creation of an independent state of Lebanon, the granting of the Hatay Province to Turkey, and the ceding of the region of Mosul to Iraq, for example – the fixing of a national spirit in Syria, indeed the notion of a distinct historical-geographical entity called “Syria.” Nationalism in Syria has taken many forms since the days of the Mandate, from the “Greater Syria” ideologies of the 1930s to the pan-Arab sentiments of the Arab Socialist Ba’th (or Awakening) Party of the late 1940s and since (Khoury 1987; Hourani 1983; Hinnebusch 1991: 30-33). These ideologies articulated conceptions of modernity, both cultural and social, as well as distinct if implicit conceptions of Syrian culture and cultural authenticity.

These conceptions and ideologies arose in the context of French power and hegemony in Syria, and therefore it is important to understand how French and Syrian conceptions of culture and modernity interacted. Recent studies have shown how the colonial situation in Morocco and other French territories influenced conceptions of French modernity (Rabinow 1989), but few have investigated the reciprocal influences of

French and Syrian conceptions of modernity during the Mandate (cf. Khoury 1987; Burke 1973; Thompspon 2000).

A focus on debates surrounding the modernization of Arab music can help shed some light both on the interaction of European and Arab conceptualizations of modernity and culture and how this interaction produced distinct visions of cultural and social modernity in Syria in the 1930s and 1940s. I focus my remarks on the first Congress on Arab Music, held in Cairo in 1932, which had as one of its aims the scientific study of Arab music and its modernization, and on Syrian reactions to the Congress and its proposals, which indicate a somewhat different understanding both of the music and of modernity. These sources reveal some of the contradictions of ideas of the modern and the relationship between social and cultural modernization, modernity, and Westernization. Also, they show that the question of what is “authentic Syrian Arabic culture” in this period is different from that in subsequent periods, but in a sense formative of it.

The Modern Period: The 1932 Cairo Congress and the Question of Theory

A turning point in twentieth century Arab music was the first Congress on Arab Music (*mu'tamar al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya*), held in Cairo in 1932. Convened under the patronage of the Egyptian King Fu'ād I, it brought together leading scholars and musicians from around the world to discuss and debate the principles of Arab music. An interesting issue is Fu'ād's decision to hold a conference on “Arab” music, since prior to this time the more common expression was “Oriental music” (*al-mūsīqā al-sharqiyya*). However, Fu'ād wanted to establish the ground rules for an Arab music in the Arab

lands; in many ways this conference was an expression of Arab nationalist sentiment of the period (cf. Hourani 1983; Danielson 1991: 24-27, 1997: 77). Referring to the melodic and rhythmic practices of the Arabs as “music” (*mūsîqâ*) is not unproblematic because prior to the modern period the term referred to theories of music and not to an autonomous realm of instrumental practices; Arabs tended to call their melodic and rhythmic practices *ghinâ'* (song) or *inshâd* (chant), revealing the privilege of the voice in Arab “musical” aesthetics. Only in the modern period, and as a consequence of the Cairo Congress and the influence of European scholars, has *mūsîqâ* come to refer to instrumental music as well as theories about it (Lambert 1997: 26).

Following from the implied focus on “music” (and not song or voice), the participants at the Cairo Congress focused primarily on the precise definition of the Arabic scale, the definition and categorization of the melodic modes (*maqâmât*), studies on genres and rhythms, the problem of notation, and numerous other technical matters related to the music (S. Marcus 1989; *Kitâb al-mu'tamar* 1933). Leading Arab musicians such as Syria's 'Alî al-Darwîsh and Egypt's Kâmil al-Khulâ'i. Orientalist scholars such as Henry George Farmer and Rudophe D'Érlanger, and such famous European scholar-composers as Bela Bartok and Paul Hindemith attended the conference and gave recommendations for the modernization of “Arab music.” Today many scholars and defenders of modernization celebrate the Cairo Congress as a landmark attempt to modernize the Arab musical tradition; numerous conferences have been held and publications issued on the context, recommendations, and overall importance of this event (e.g., Hassan and Vigreux, eds. 1992). However, few contemporary commentators point out that the Cairo Congress and its recommendations were not uniformly

considered successful when proposed and remain contested today. Indeed, many of the Syrian participants at the Congress and later scholars considered it to be limited, if not a failure altogether (Allah Wirdî 1948; Bin Dhurayl 1989: 35, 54). Why was the Cairo Congress, so celebrated today, considered a failure in its own time?

One reason was the proposed adoption of an equal-tempered 24-note Arabic scale analogous to the equal-tempered scale used in European (tonal) music since Bach. Proponents of the equal-tempered Arabic scale, including the conference organizers and their Orientalist supporters, argued that it would help “rationalize” Arab music and allow for the use of functional harmony in composition, something seen as lacking in “traditional” Arab music, which is largely monophonic (that is, comprising a single melodic line, though polyphony is common in ensemble situations). The adoption of an equal-tempered scale composed of 24 quarter-tones was proposed by the Congress organizers, and the equal-tempered scale has been taught as the “standard” scale in many Egyptian conservatories ever since (Bin Dhurayl 1989: 34).

Yet a number of musicians and commentators at the Cairo Congress opposed the adoption of the equal-temperament, arguing that it does not capture the nuances of Arab music, which for them does not have uniform pitch intervals (S. Marcus 1989: 178-188). Equal-temperament does not accord with earlier theories of the Arabic scale, such as those of al-Kindî, al-Fârâbî, and al-Urmawî, nor the system of *asâbi* (fingers) and *majâri* (courses) outlined in the ninth century by Ishaq al-Mawsili, for which scale intervals are not uniform (al-‘Aqîlî 1979, Vol. 4: 104-164; Bin Dhurayl 1989: 44-53; Shiloah 1995: 110-116; cf. Allah Wirdî 1948). According to a number of contemporary Aleppine artists, imposing an equal-tempered scale on Arab music leads to the loss of its “spirit”

(*rîh*), which is one of the defining terms of the aesthetics of authenticity, as will become clear throughout the dissertation.

Another proposal of the Cairo Congress that aimed to rationalize Arab music was the adoption of a tetrachord model of the “Arab” modes (*maqâmât*). This model proposes that each *maqâm* can be understood as consisting of two tetrachords (*ajnâs*, sing. *jins*, from the Greek *génos*), or fixed sequences of four pitches that when combined form a *maqâm* or scale (S. Marcus 1989: 271-322).¹⁵ In this view, the *maqâmât* can be categorized based on their constituent primary and secondary tetrachords into families (*fasâ’il*, sing. *fasîla*) of primary and branch *maqâmât*.¹⁶

While some Syrian musicians have adopted this categorical scheme, especially those who have either studied in Cairo or who teach at the national institutes in Syria, many practicing musicians reject this model as too simplistic. At the time of the Cairo Congress it was also debated (cf. Allah Wîrdî 1948). My Aleppine teachers insisted that although the tetrachord model might be useful in clarifying the relationships between the *maqâmât* and in understanding some principles of modulation and composition, in practice the treatment of each *maqâm* is special and may have little to do with its constituent “tetrachords” (or other subdivisions).¹⁷ A *maqâm* is generally more extensive than the scale that represents its constituent pitches since any given *maqâm* can support

¹⁵ For example, the *maqâm al-râst* consists, in the tetrachord or “*ajnâs*” theory, of two *ajnâs*: *jins râst* on C (C D E $\flat$ F) and *jins râst* on G (G A B $\flat$ C). The symbol $\flat$ refers to a neutral interval or “half flat.”

¹⁶ The *fasîla* of *râst*, for example, would include all the *maqâmât* that share the primary interval or tetrachord of *râst*: *râst*, *râst kabîr*, *sûznâk*, *mâhûr*, etc.

¹⁷ For example, the modes *mâhûr* and *râst* share the same tetrachords but their treatment in performance is markedly different: performance of *mâhûr* generally descends from the higher (secondary) tetrachord (*jins râst* on the note *nawâ*, G) to the lower (*râst* on C), whereas performance of *râst* always begins from the lower tetrachord (*râst* on C) and notes below this (*râst* on G, for example). Some modes having identical tetrachords transposed to different tonic notes may have very different treatments in performance, such as the modes *hijâz* on D and *hijâz kâr* on C.

modulations to a number of related *maqâmât* whose pitches and intervals are considered extensions of the original *maqâm*. In addition, the *maqâmât* are flexible in performance and may extend to include tetrachords not found in the typical *maqâm* scale representations. Some *maqâmât* may encompass two or more octaves of the same scale, and others combine different scales according to whether the melody is ascending or descending the scale degrees. According to my Aleppine teachers, reducing the *maqâm* as a musical phenomenon to a scale (or a written representation of a scale) ignores important aspects of the dynamism of the *maqâm* as a performance principle.

The equal-tempered Arabic scale, the tetrachord model, and other proposed alterations to Arab music practice fall sort of capturing those aspects of Arab music that many Syrian artists find essential to their tradition. In many ways this is a problem inherent to music theory in general, which constitutes a meta-discourse on music; that is, it represents an attempt to contain and describe in referential terms what are pragmatic and dynamic processes of employing and interpreting various musical rules and guidelines. Even the most creative musical gesture is guided by rules (what Kant (1952 [1790]) referred to as “enabling conditions”), yet theory can at best approximate these dynamic aesthetic choices; at worst it can lead to performances that are technically correct but aesthetically lacking.

Indeed, many of the Syrian musicians with whom I studied argued against the notion that there is a set theory of Arab music while being at the same time quite aware of the numerous attempts to create an Arab music theory since the time of the Cairo Congress. For these artists, the importance of local tradition and inherited rules of composition and performance, especially vocal, override any attempt to impose

systematicity on the performance tradition. While there are certain rules for music (what some termed *qawa'id mûsiqiyyâ*) – a “grammar” for music akin to the grammar of the Arabic language (also a construction) – no music “theory” (*nazariyya*) per se yet exists for Arab music, according to my teachers. There are systematic rules and agreed upon principles, yet they are flexible, locally variable, and cannot constitute a theory in the sense of Western music theory.¹⁸

In practice, musicians utilize a number of different variations of the “Arabic scale” and there remains a lot of active debate regarding this issue. Musicians may cite different authorities on the idea of an Arabic scale or on the *maqâmât*. There is even great disagreement among musicians on the number of *maqâmât* and on their character. Some claim that there are only a few basic *maqâmât*, echoing the simplified *maqâm* schedules proposed by in 1932 and followed today by many “theorists” (e.g. al-Hilû 1961; Gholmieh and Karbâj 1996). Others, usually older and more respected musicians, argue that there are a multitude of *maqâmât* numbering in the hundreds. One musician claimed to know and use 540 *maqâmât*. A “basic” set of about 90 or 100 are often proposed as more essential than others. But the idea that there are primary and secondary *maqâmât* – the *fasîla* model – is, like the theory of tetrachords, rejected by many practicing musicians as too simplistic, not in accordance with older treatises, and deaf to the finer nuances of style and spirit that are so important in Arab music.

Moreover, some musicians consider theory – at least as applied to Arab music – to be “foreign,” the result of Europeans and their followers who cannot appreciate the richness of monophonic oriental music and want to add harmony and other elements of

¹⁸ I do not wish by this to imply that “we” have “theory” while “they” have only “rules.” Clearly, European music “theory” is also a cultural construction.

Western tonality to modernize the music. For these artists, the “authentic tradition” has been inherited over the centuries as a part of the Arab heritage and hence no single theory can encompass it. Moreover, the rejection by Syrian and other Arab artists of the equal-tempered scale, the theory of the tetrachords, and other recommendations of the Cairo Congress indicates the extent to which issues of nuance and spirit, however defined, are important in Arab musical aesthetics, a point I take up in chapter six on emotions and the performance of the *wasla* in Aleppo. Many Egyptian artists also reject the equal-tempered scale and the theory of the *ajnáṣ* (S. Marcus 1989: 184-187). More important in this context than publications on music are the comments of living musicians and listeners who would critique the performances of others (including my own) for imprecision in the treatment of the *maqamât*, among other qualities.

Westernization and the Problem of False Parrots

The debates over the Cairo Congress were in many regards debates over the extent and desirability of modernization and Westernization. A common Syrian reaction to the Congress was that the formalization of the music – the attempt to establish a unified scale and system-classification of the *maqâmât*, among other practices – led to its Westernization (sometimes called *tafarnuj*, from *franjî* = Frankish, foreign, an appellation dating from the Crusader period). Critics of over-Westernization abound in contemporary Syria, but the debate in music goes back at least to the time of the Cairo Congress. For example, Tawfiq al-Sabbagh, the Aleppine composer and self-styled “King of the Violin” (*Malik al-kamân*¹⁹) participated in the Cairo Congress and, like

¹⁹ Sabbagh adopted this title in competition with another prominent Aleppine violinist, Sami al-Shawwa, who claimed the title Prince of the Violin (*Amîr al-kamân*).

many Syrian musicians and scholars, was critical of the results (Allah Wîrdî 1948; Sabbâgh 1950). In a chapter of his comprehensive *al-Dalîl al-mûsîqî al-‘amm* [*The general musical guide*] (1950) entitled “The Music of the East and the West and Which of the Two is Best,” Sabbagh decries the excessive “Westernization” (*tafarnuj*) rampant in the modern Arab world. Like many modernists of the age, he argues that while there is much to learn from the West, Arabs should adopt that which is beneficial from European culture and leave that which is not aside. Unfortunately, according to Sabbagh, Arabs of his day were guilty not only of imitating the West, but of adopting that which was worst (*al-‘awâ'id*, lit. “the ugliest”) and ignoring what might be beneficial. The result, he feared, would be total assimilation and loss of a distinct Arab identity. “But I say to them,” he writes, pointing to those who would imitate the West, “that the nation that does not preserve its inherited customs that are tied to its life-style will not hesitate to assimilate and dissolve in other nations to become just a trace to the eye” (1950: 13).

To illustrate the dangers of *tafarnuj*, Sabbagh relates the following anecdote about the bird seller and the false parrot:

I have not seen an example of these Westernized imitators who are not like the bird seller who sells parrots, [and] who one day decided to cheat his customers and took a raven and painted it like a parrot. His imitation was successful and he decided to profit from his efforts, so he displayed the painted bird for sale to his friends, claiming that it was a parrot that he had just bought. However, no sooner had he shown the cage to his friends then the bird flapped its wings, turned over the water dish that was put in the cage for him to drink from, and spilled the water

on itself, mixing the colors. His friends practically fell on their backs in their laughter because the raven had become so funny looking....

That is to say, the result of the influence of Western music on Arab music has been an odd mixture of styles and genres that struck Sabbagh in 1950 and a great many critics since his time as grotesque. Adding a patina of Western melodies, the colors of Western instruments, or imposing Western conceptions of music theory, for example, creates an artificial hybrid music that may at first glance appear to be beautiful but at heart is based on a disingenuous and inappropriate admixture of diverse elements.

This anecdote reveals some of the points of resistance that modernist discourses met in Syria. Yet Sabbagh and others who were critical of blind imitation of the West were not reactionaries or closed-minded; indeed, he had studied with European teachers, was well-versed in European music theory, and saw himself not only as a preserver but as an innovator as well, especially in the realm of composition (Mahannâ 1998: 151-54). During the period of the Mandate when French ideas of modernity were in circulation and resistance to the occupation flared into rebellion on a number of occasions (Khoury 1987), the quest for modernity was more nuanced than simply accepting French and European conceptions of modern culture and discarding the Arabic tradition, or the reverse. Magazines and newspapers from the early stages of the Mandate record an avid interest in both the Arabic heritage and European discoveries in science and education. For Syria's intellectual elite, there was no harm in learning what was useful from Europe

but this did not at the time mean rejecting the Arab cultural heritage.²⁰ Yet, the dangers of over-Westernization were acknowledged by a number of cultural leaders and constituted a theme that assumed different values in later decades, especially after Independence.

III) Independence and Assertive Modernity: From the Risks of *Tafarnuj* to *Kull Shi Faranjī Baranjī*

European visions of modernity began to assume greater importance in Syrian culture and society as a newly independent Syrian government struggled to create a nation from the aftermath of colonialism (Seale 1986). Despite the *nakba* or “catastrophe” of the Arab loss of Palestine in 1948 and continuing political instabilities in Syria, the post-Independence era was one of greater optimism about modernity and the possibilities for creating a dynamic and modern nation. With Independence came greater involvement in world political affairs, including Cold War relations and engagement in the growing global cultural and political economy dominated by the former colonizing nations. This period witnessed the rise of strongly modernist trends in Syrian culture and a generation of intellectuals came on the scene who had little interest in the Arabic heritage, much less in preserving it. Rather, they advocated the modernization of their society and culture, which for many was tantamount to its Westernization even if this came at the expense of “tradition.” In the arts, European, and specifically Western European, models of culture were held to be cultural standards and young Syrians

²⁰ For example, articles published in the mid-1930s in the Syrian magazine *al-Thaqāfa* [Culture], edited by the leading intellectuals Khalil Mardam Bāk, Jamīl Salībā, Kāzim al-Dāghastānī, and Kāmīl ‘Ayyād, dealt with such topics as French thought and literature, feminism, the merits of free verse versus classical prosody in Arabic literature, and reviews of scientific discoveries along side articles about Islamic thought and Arabic culture.

increasingly flocked to European academies and universities to study, later bringing home their newly-acquired ideologies of art and culture.

With respect to music, the post-Independence generation of intellectuals often saw Arab music as backward in comparison to European classical music, which was held by them to be the standard of civilizational development. A number of prominent Arab artists at the time argued that Arab music represented a primitive stage in a universal progression of musical development, of which European classical music represented the greatest achievement (Berque 1974: 208). Not only did these intellectuals think that Arab music was “primitive,” some questioned whether it was even music at all. The Egyptian writer Tawfiq al-Hakim disparaged Arab music with remarks that it is not really even music but only “party music, born of social gatherings, drinking bouts, and night-time revels, while Western music is born in a more serious, tragic setting” (cited in Berque 1974: 208-209). In this period of high modernist sensibility, Arab music and the Arabic cultural heritage represented a weight on advancement and modernization.

During an informal gathering in Damascus in 1997, these sorts of comments were aired by a group of Syrian musicians who claimed that when they were growing up in the 1950s they were taught by their parents and teachers to disdain and even to hate the Arab heritage as backward, as a heritage of weakness. These musicians, all accomplished performers of Western classical music and in some cases the children of prominent musicians of the Arab tradition, admitted to having little knowledge of Arab music. When I asked one of them, a cellist in the orchestra of a prominent Arab vocalist, about the *maqām* of a certain song his group performs, he stated that he just plays along with the song and does not even know which *maqām* it is in; in fact, he claimed not to know

much about any of the *maqâmât*. Such indifference would be inconceivable to any of my teachers in Aleppo.

Modernity and “Double Dependency”

The contradictions of a modernizing Syria caught between advocates of heritage and partisans of Westernization resulted in intellectuals becoming caught in what Adonis terms a “double dependency” – dependency on the Arab past as compensation for a lack of creative activity in the present, and dependency on European-American intellectual trends and technology as compensation for the Arab failure to invent and innovate on their own part (Adonis 1992: 80).²¹ How successfully to engage European culture while preserving a link to the Arab past characterizes the dilemma of Syrian artists and intellectuals: how to go forward with “modernity” while looking backward to “the past.” One contemporary Syrian film critic aptly summarized this dilemma as follows: “In the 50s we used to say *‘kull shi jārānji barānji’* (“Everything from the West is Best”), but now things are different. There’s a lot more interest in heritage and old things.”

Heritage and Old Things: Discourses of Authenticity and Modernity in Post-1967 Syria

By “now” this intellectual was referring primarily to the period after the 1967 War with Israel, which represented a humiliating defeat, on the one hand, and an impetus to change and reform, on the other. In many ways the June War of 1967 dispelled the

²¹ Ironically, Adonis himself illustrates this “double-dependency” in his own life and work. He himself is deeply versed in the classical Arabic literary heritage and often alludes to this heritage in his poetry, and yet his work is decidedly modern in rejecting the traditional forms and genres in pursuit of a version of free verse based on modern European poetics; indeed Adonis once wrote that it was through reading Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Rimbaud that he discovered the importance of Arabic poetry. To what extent is double-dependency a feature of modernity in all postcolonial societies?

optimism about modernization that characterized the early post-Independence era. The defeat of the Arab armies by what they considered to be a weaker foe led to a wave of critiques not only of Arab leadership but of Arab culture and society, if not the Arab “mind” itself (al-‘Azm 1968, 1969; al-Jâbrî 1984, 1986). Like the so-called “shock of modernity,” the “shock” of defeat in 1967 encouraged calls for a renewal of Arab culture from the “slumbering” and decadence into which it had fallen – this time because of an over-reliance on Western conceptions of culture and society and not necessarily because of the “backwardness” of the past; indeed, some critics attributed the Arab losses to the neglect of their rich past and heritage. As in the *nahda*, these more recent calls for reform assumed a number of different forms: Marxist-Revolutionary, Islamic Reformist, and more moderate calls for a rejuvenation of Arabic culture and society through a return to the cultural roots of Arab society and preservation of its heritage. In the aftermath of 1967, heritage came to play a central ideological position in contemporary Syrian society, for intellectuals of diverse stripes, for politicians, and for individual artists struggling to come to terms with life in the modern age.

“Heritage and old things” evokes images of the collections of costumes, folk crafts, and customs and traditions (‘*âdât wa taqâlid*) that are found in the many heritage and folklore museums throughout the Arab world. Yet, heritage does not consist simply in a catalogue of obsolete and dead cultural traits and artifacts.²² Not everyone even agrees on what counts as “heritage,” for conceptions of heritage are fluid, labile, and

²² Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1995) suggests that heritage entails the valuation of “the obsolete, the mistaken, the outmoded, and dead, and the defunct” (169), claiming moreover that heritage “adds value to existing assets that have either ceased to be viable ... or that were never very economically productive because the area is too hot, too cold, too wet, or too remote” (370). My research has shown that in Syria, “heritage” is at once more vital and more complex and contested than Kirshenblatt-Gimblett allows for.

frequently contested. Such factors as social class, religious and educational background, place of residence, ethnicity, and gender play important roles in determining what any particular individual considers to be “heritage” and its relationship to “authentic” culture.²³ Self-styled defenders of “tradition,” for example, tend to emphasize the Islamic elements of heritage, while modernizers, on the contrary, often see these same elements as sources of backwardness and instead emphasize its intellectual and artistic dimensions. Some reject heritage altogether as an impediment to modernity.

Derived from the root *w-r-th*, *turâth* denotes patrimony, the inherited customs and traditions of the forefathers (and *turâth* is almost entirely a masculine and patriarchal discourse). *Turâth* in Syria commonly refers to three basic categories of cultural practices:

- The classical heritage (*al-turâth al-klâsiki*): from 750-1250 CE, that is, the cultural production of the Arabs from the Umayyad through the ‘Abbasid eras, what is often considered a Golden Age of Arabic culture, including music.²⁴
- The popular arts (*al-funûn al-sha‘biyya*): urban and rural practices of the non-elite classes. This might include handicrafts, costumes, storytelling, certain dances and songs, games, and so forth.
- folklore (*al-fûlklûr*): this term, borrowed from the European word, overlaps with “the popular arts” and connotes primarily rural but also urban practices such as storytelling, dance, and costume.

For example, in Damascus the “traditional” costumes of the urban dwellers on display

²³ For a discussion of the relationship between gender, nationalism, and modernity in colonial Syria and Lebanon, see Thompson (2000).

²⁴ This is Muhammad Arkoun’s definition of *turâth*, cited in Abu Rabi’ (1996: 21).

at the 'Azm Palace museum are considered "Syrian urban folklore," as are some of the more "traditional" crafts and locales, such as the markets, the *hammâm*-s (public bath houses) and the people who work and frequent these places (also the subject of display at the 'Azm Palace). In other cities there are similar displays. In terms of music, the *qudiûd* (light songs) might be considered to be a variety of urban folk music arising from the cultural heritage of cities such as Aleppo that were major commercial cross-roads. Rural songs associated with peasants, such as the *dal'aunâ*, are also classified as "folklore" and "popular art." The distinctions are fluid.

Often *turâth* is specifically associated with things scientific, literary, or religious: medicine is *turâth* whereas reading coffee cups is folklore; (classical) poetry is *turâth* whereas *zajal* (colloquial poetry) is folklore or popular art; *al-fîqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) is *turâth* whereas supplications at tombs is folklore. In general terms, aspects of the Islamic high culture are valued and hence designated as *turâth*, whereas what we would term popular or mass culture is not. Music generally fits in any of these categories according to the genre and the locale in which it is or was "traditionally" performed. The urban art tradition is *turâth* whereas folk songs, especially those that are danced to, are folklore or popular arts. With dance, too, the categories are blurred. The *dabka* or circle-dance is often a "popular art" – collective, rural, non-elite. Yet, many dance troupes that perform rural dances such as the *dabka* are labeled as "folkloric" troupes, while others that perform dances more commonly performed in urban environments, such as the *raqs al-samâh* or *al-raqs al-'arabi* (as performed in Aleppo), are "popular arts" ensembles. There does not seem to be a clear set of criteria for one or the other; they appear to be interchangeable terms.

Given these contradictions, heritage might best be understood as what Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) terms a “tradition,” that is, a process of cultural selection and memory that implies modes of reasoning about the past, conceptions of selfhood and social identity, and attitudes toward the future. Understood as a “tradition,” heritage operates in two ways: as the substantive media through which notions of “authentic culture” are contested and transmitted across the generations (e.g., genres of music, forms of architecture, styles of painting, modes of narrative, conceptions of honor, gender relations, etc.), and as a process of framing and authorizing interpretations of the self, community, and nation. In this dual sense “heritage” has come to figure prominently in attempts by Syrian artists and intellectuals to make sense of their culture and society, find or impose order on their experiences, and construct narratives of “the past,” often by rounding off the rougher edges of what is commonly understood as “history.”

In many regards heritage constitutes a discourse of privilege, especially in the context of what Syria’s cultural and political elite deem to be “inauthentic” and “vulgar” aspects of contemporary culture, what critics in the West usually refer to as mass or popular culture.²⁵ Rarely are such “low-brow” elements of “traditional” Arab culture as story-telling, ecstatic religious practices, popular medicine, and “traditional” dance and song, for instance, granted the hallowed status of “heritage;” they tend to be relegated to the categories of “folklore” or “customs and habits.” Heritage is the preserve of Arab high culture, “the best that is thought and known,” in the Arnoldian sense, and hence also constitutes a privileged discourse in that it lies at the intersection of aesthetic practices and state ideologies of culture and the nation in Syria. Through state patronage of

²⁵ For a discussion of these terms in the context of criticism in and of the contemporary Arab world, see Armbrust (1996).

heritage arts (in festivals and national heritage orchestras sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, for instance), and through less auspicious means of cultural fashioning such as censorship and official cultural review boards, diverse cultural practices are projected as valued aspects of Syrian national culture that need to be preserved and defended, while others are prevented from thriving in the restricted public sphere. Many of the artists I study attempt to negotiate the boundaries between these two arenas of struggle, between the “imagined community” (Anderson 1991) promoted by the state, and the everyday practices of artistic creation and reception that are often at odds with such imaginings.

The context and content of a piece of art might be related to heritage in myriad and flexible ways, and there seems to be little consensus on what exactly constitutes heritage. Yet, a perceived association with heritage can be profitable for many reasons: local elites have developed a taste for *turāth*, as in depictions of the Old City and related lifestyles, and hence may patronize certain artists, while political patronage of selected artists associated in some way with heritage can translate into significant financial remuneration. A musician performing the *turāth* repertoire might be invited, for instance, to perform for local and international dignitaries and officials. Remuneration might be in the form of permits to travel or access to phone lines, in lieu of or in addition to any actual monetary payment. The key currency here is *wāsta* – connections and influence, in a way not atypical of patron-client relations elsewhere in the Mediterranean (Peristiany 1966).²⁶ In other words, heritage “pays.”

For their part, politicians utilize the discourses of heritage and authenticity to promote their claims to authority and legitimacy. This often occurs through specific

²⁶ Of course, patronage by the cultural elite often goes hand in hand with patronage by the political establishment.

channels of patronage such as sponsoring musical and other cultural events that are staged as revivals of heritage. Heritage, in these contexts, is presented as a guarantor of national autonomy and strength. For example, the words of Syrian President Hâfiz al-Asad that introduce the brochure for the 4th Annual Syrian Song Festival, held in Aleppo in December of 1996, claim that interest in what is “good and valuable” in the Arab heritage and its active promotion and revival (*ihyâ’*) are among the nation’s best defenses against outside threats. Of course, what is “good and valuable” in this context is that of which authorities approve; politics contributes to the selection of that which is “heritage” and that which gets left in the dustbin of history. Especially in the light of the “happenings” of the 1980s with the armed struggles between the regime and Muslim radicals in many Syrian cities, promotion of a conception of heritage that flavors the secular and socialist ideologies of the ruling Ba’th Party with a dash of moderate Islamic sentiment might be a way of co-opting criticism from more conservative religious circles.

Heritage pays as well in terms of the great foreign interest in heritage music, festivals, and local “folklore” that provides Syrian musicians and other artists with supplementary income (in some cases primary income) and rare opportunities to travel out of Syria. Foreign remuneration for performances forms a significant informal economy or parallel economy to that of the regular economy – i.e., the artists’ day jobs, if they have any. To give an example, the director of a music institute might earn a maximum of 14.000 LS per month, or \$280, a cap set on civil service salaries in Syria. from what informants told me.²⁷ A university professor might earn half this amount.

²⁷ I have no independent verification of the figures, but they are less important than the idea that salaries are very low. Currency figures for the Syrian pound or *lira* (LS) are translated into US dollars according to the black market rate of approximately 50 LS/dollar in 1996-2000.

Yet, an instrumentalist might earn anywhere from \$200 - \$500 or more for a single performance abroad. Well-known artists command at least \$1000 a performance, while Arab super-stars such as Sabah Fakhri and others can earn in the tens of thousands of dollars per show. A tour in several European nations might include ten or more concerts and thus several thousand dollars for each performer – far in excess of what they might earn in a year of performances at home.

Against *Turâth*?

In post-1967 Syria, not everyone is so sanguine about the revival of heritage and its role in saving the Arabs from their cultural and social (not to mention political and military) crises. Adonis (1992) and other critics suggest that Arab fascination with “the past” has resulted not in its valorization so much as its debasement and reification as “heritage.” One Aleppine poet, in response to my joke that Syrians stand on their *turâth* as if it were a terrace (*tarâs*),²³ laughed and remarked, “We walk on our *turâth* as if it were *turâb* (soil): here there is little respect for the past and even less understanding of it.” According to many artists and intellectuals, the overriding interest in the Arab past and the numerous discourses of authenticity and heritage that accompany it has not led to the sought-for “reawakening” – instead, it has merely produced another form of cultural slumbering (cf. Mbembe 1992).

Some contemporary artists remain unconvinced that heritage is an important avenue for reconstituting Arabic culture. For example, one concert violinist, a member of an elite family and host of a weekly intellectual salon, argued that *turâth* is merely an

²³ Playing on the similarity between the colloquial pronunciation of *turâth* as *tarâs* and the word “terrace.”

“empty discourse” (*khiṭāb fādī*). From his perspective, people use the term a lot but without any specific meaning. “I might say I am interested in *turāth*,” he said, “but what does this mean? What do people mean when they talk about *turāth*? What does it mean to preserve it? Why should we preserve it, and whose *turāth* should we preserve?” He indicated that the word has come to cover so wide a range of possible connotations and practices that it no longer carries any meaning: it is thus an “empty discourse.”

Similarly, a young Aleppine painter of large abstract canvases argued that people talk a lot about *turāth* but they do not understand it. During a conversation at his studio-home in Aleppo he criticized a contemporary Aleppine musician who claimed in a television interview to respect *turāth* but because it is too vast, an “ocean” (*bahr*), he has to take some little part of it and work on that. His songs, which are modernized versions of folk melodies, are heavily influenced by European pop music (I call him the Lionel Richie of Syria). To my artist friend, the problem is that this musician and so many artists and intellectuals like him identify *turāth* as something tangible, like objects in a museum that you might touch or melodies that can be arranged in different ways. Citing al-Jābrī (1991), he argued that *turāth* is an attitude, a set of ideas and ways of thinking and sets of relationships with other ideas, and not so much the tangible products of these ideas and relationships.

Sâdiq Jalâl al-‘Azm (2000) has gone so far as to argue that the focus of Arabs on their once glorious past and heritage has prevented them from establishing themselves more strongly in the present and preparing for the future. In other words, an exaggerated interest in heritage and a clinging to old or traditional ways of life and thinking has held Arabs back from advancing into the ranks of the modern and secular nations of the world;

more strongly in the present and preparing for the future. In other words, an exaggerated interest in heritage and a clinging to old or traditional ways of life and thinking has held Arabs back from advancing into the ranks of the modern and secular nations of the world; they are the Hamlets of the twentieth century, laying responsibility for their ills at the feet of their dead fore-fathers and traitorous interlopers. For al-ʿAzm and others, Arab fascination with reviving and preserving heritage is just another form of escapism.

IV) *al-Qafla*: Modernity and the Aesthetics of Authenticity

In this chapter I have outlined some of the keywords that are important in the study of the aesthetics of authenticity in contemporary Syria: modernity (*hadātha*), authenticity (*asāla*), and heritage (*turāth*). Modernity in Syria must be understood in the historical context of the co-production and co-experience of modernity in Europe and the Arab lands, which began with Napoleon's invasion in 1798 and continues today in Syria's scramble to find a place in the emerging Euro-American dominated global cultural and political economy. Concern with heritage in its many guises can be seen as one component of the search by Syrian intellectuals for a formula for an "alternative modernity" (though I use the concept advisedly) in which the benefits of modernity and modernization do not mean the disappearance of tradition. In fact, we must understand the concern with heritage and tradition as an integral aspect of the modern condition in Syria.

Chapter Four: Constructions of Musical Authenticity in Contemporary Aleppo

al-Matla': The Time and Place of Authenticity

With my research proposal in one hand and *'ūd* in the other, I felt that I was prepared for fieldwork in Syria. What I was not prepared for was a common response to my stated research interests in Arab music: Is there even such a thing as “Arab” music? Many Syrians expressed surprise at my choice of Syria as a research site – American researchers are few and far between there – but some also expressed doubts about my intentions to study “Arab music,” questioning if there even is such a thing. Is the music Arab, or is it Turkish, Persian, or Byzantine, or is it a mixture of all of these? What is “Arab” about Arab music? Because many of the genres commonly performed in the “classical” repertoire have their roots in pan-Ottoman and Persian musical practices, calling them “Arab” is problematic, and many of my interlocutors, musicians and otherwise, pointed this out to me.

Moreover, some Aleppines (mostly non-musicians) asked me what I even meant by “music.” Putting emphasis on the latter term, they often asked me if there is such a thing as Arab “music” – that is, music as distinct from song. As mentioned in the previous chapter, referring to the melodic and rhythmic practices of the Arabs as “music” (*mūsīqā*) is not unproblematic because prior to the modern period *mūsīqā* referred to theories of music and not to an autonomous realm of instrumental practices. Because of the privilege of the voice in Arab aesthetics, Arabs have tended to refer to their melodic and rhythmic practices as *ghinā'* (song) or *inshād* (chant) (Lambert 1997: 26; Shiloah 1995: 59).

What many Syrians considered to be “Arab music,” “Syrian music,” and even

“music” itself depended a lot on their educational, religious, and artistic backgrounds. Some intellectuals argued that Arab music is the inheritor of the music of the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia and the Fertile Crescent, and therefore “authentic.” Others argued that it is essentially Turkish music, and therefore “inauthentic.” Still others claimed different roots, different histories. Aside from causing a certain amount of epistemological self-doubt, these sorts of dialogues opened windows onto discourses about identity that found expression in discussions of music and musical origins. For my Syrian informants, the “Arabness” of their music had as much if not more to do with conceptions of cultural authenticity, origins, and identity than with more “objective” musical factors such as tonality, genre, and style.

Chapter three explored some of the meanings of the concepts of modernity, authenticity, and heritage, and argued that authenticity is a constructed and contested domain of fluid subjectivities for different groups within Syria. This chapter examines further the construction of concepts of musical authenticity through an analysis of the spatial and temporal dimensions of discourses on “authentic Arab music.” I explore a set of important spatial and temporal complexes that serve as orientational centers in contemporary discourses about musical and artistic authenticity in contemporary Syria. I then turn to four discourses on the origins of “Arab music” that reveal not only different visions of authenticity but also different understandings of culture, self, and society.

I) Temporal and Spatial Orientations of Authenticity in Contemporary Syrian Art

Many Aleppine artists and intellectuals support their claims to cultural authenticity by appealing to particular constructions of the origins of the music. Indeed,

some make the linguistic link between origin (*asl*) and authenticity (*asâla*), for the words derive from the same roots; for them, claiming an *asl* is tantamount to asserting their *asâla*. Authenticity itself implies a fixed origin in time and space. In their various discourses about art and authenticity, Syrian artists and intellectuals articulate concepts of origin or *asl* with respect to two orientational centers, one temporal and the other spatial. With respect to temporality, those having an interest in promoting their visions of authentic culture tend to locate authenticity temporally in “the past” (*al-mâdî*), or, to be more accurate, in constructions of different pasts – for example, the pre-Islamic era, the early Islamic era, the Ottoman Period, and the early modern period. In general, as Sylvia Naef notes in her study of modernity in Arab fine arts (1996), Arab intellectuals and artists have tended to locate authenticity in the pre-colonial past. But in a country like Syria that has been colonized and re-colonized literally for millennia, the “pre-colonial” past might mean the time prior to the French Mandate (1922-1944), the Ottoman Period (1516-1918), and even, for some Christians, prior to the Muslim “occupation” of Syria (beginning in 636).¹ Identifying the pre-colonial with the pre-modern does not suffice, since, as seen in chapter three, conceptions of modernity and even the precise dating of the advent of the modern period in the Arab world are debatable. The “authentic past” is hence a shifting and sliding frame that depends as much on the artist’s or critic’s personal interests as on any specific “objective” historical periodization. Therefore, diverse eras have come to represent authenticity in Syria.

In addition to the association of authenticity with the past and certain sentiments and emotions related to the past (however this past is conceived), Syrian artists tend to identify authentic culture with specific locales and geographical places. For some, the

¹ Muslims refer to this as the “opening” (*fath*) of Syria.

ultimate site of authenticity is the Old City, as in the old neighborhoods of Damascus and Aleppo, whereas for others it is the countryside or the desert. More often Syrian artists associate authentic culture with a combination of specific places and the people inhabiting those spaces in specific times. The temporal, spatial, and social-cultural nexus that defines authenticity constitutes an important dimension of the aesthetics of authenticity in late twentieth-century Syrian art worlds.

Conceptions of The Past: *Hanîn*

In contemporary discourse, the modern period is not normally associated with authenticity; indeed, modernity has come to stand for *inauthenticity* in many discourses of the authentic. As noted earlier, Syrian authors tend to contrast authenticity (*asâla*) with contemporaneity (*mu'âsira*) and modernity (*hadâtha*). However, recent Syrian television dramas that depicted modern historical events and nationalist sentiments were praised by many Syrian viewers as evoking an “authentic” Arab spirit.² What seemed to be important to viewers was the association of particular constructions of the past with particular sentiments. A general association of the old (*al-qadîm*) and the past (*al-mâdî*) with authenticity conveyed in these contexts a more basic association of authenticity with particular sentiments such as nationalist commitment, in the example of the television serials, and emotional honesty, in the songs of Umm Kulthum, for example. Therefore, what makes Arab culture authentic is often the association of particular emotional states with particular times and places and their evocation in the arts.³

² Examples include the 1997-98 serials “*Khân al-harîr*” (*The silk market*), which dealt with aspects of the *wahda* of Union with Egypt, and “*Ayâm al-ghadab*” (*The days of anger*), which dealt with rural resistance to the French Mandate.

³ I explore the link between emotional honesty (*sidq*) and authenticity in Arabic song in chapters six and seven.

Syrian artists and intellectuals relate to the past in diverse ways – some positively evaluate the past as a storehouse of tradition, while others negatively view the past as a realm of backwardness. A number of Syrian artworks in diverse media exhibit a romantic if not nostalgic vision of the past. For example, recent memoirs celebrate and memorialize life in the Old City of Damascus, a site *par excellence* of authentic culture for many Syrians (Qassâb Hassan 1988; Turjumân 1998 [1990]). A high percentage of commercial artwork represents street scenes from the Old Cities of Damascus and Aleppo, and Syrians and not just tourists purchase these works to hang on the walls of their homes. Works by more “serious” artists also depict such scenes, though often in a more nuanced and aesthetically interesting fashion (for example, the works of the Damascene artist Nasir Shoura from the 1940s and 1950s, and many of Fateh Moudarres’ canvases that treat themes from Syrian folklore and mythology).

In general, it seems that Syrian intellectuals and artists consider cultural practices, events, and personalities that they understand to be *in time* (that is, temporalized as “history”) to be *less* authentic than events that they understand to be *out of time* (that is, detemporalized as “myth,” “legend,” and “the past”). One reason for the primacy granted to detemporalized or mythologized aesthetic experience (“the past”) might relate to the commonly expressed sentiment in Syria that “history” is written by those who are currently in power, whereas myth and legend, being products of the popular imagination, are therefore more honest (*asdaq*), even if not “real.” The gap between “reality” and “truth,” at least in the minds of some artists, is an artifact of power. While some intellectuals and artists recognize this and attempt to accentuate the differences between “reality” and “truth” in their works – for example by self-consciously using symbols and

scenes from Syrian or Mesopotamian mythology – the state and its apparatuses of truth-production likewise attempt to close the gap by insisting on the truthfulness of “reality” and the reality of “truth.” The cult of former President Hafiz al-Asad illustrates well how the Syrian state has attempted to impose a patina of truthfulness on the mythologies associated with the “eternal leader.” Artists also play with this tension, for example by using simulacra of ancient symbols and alphabetical characters and not “real” symbols and characters in their works.

Artists concerned with authenticity as a personal or artistic vision generally demonstrate a positive relationship to the past and often use the term *hanîn* to describe their feelings regarding past locales and times. *Hanîn* means a type of longing or yearning, and relates linguistically to *hanân* (affection, love, and tenderness) and *hanûn* (affectionate, tenderhearted, touching); the sound of the *nâṣ* is often called *hanûn*, for example. *Hanîn* is often translated as “nostalgia,” and indeed in some cases artists and intellectuals express a relation to past times and places in ways that we might describe as nostalgic. For example, one writer expressed a longing for his childhood home in the Old City of Aleppo – the particular smells, sights, and sounds of his former home and neighborhood – while enjoying the comforts of his modern home in a newer quarter; he was certainly expressing a form of nostalgia when he said he felt *hanîn* for his family’s former domicile.

Yet, it is important to contextualize and clarify the meaning of *hanîn* since nostalgia may not be the best way to describe it. Indeed, nostalgia is often not an appropriate translation of *hanîn*. In many instances, what Arabs express as a longing (*hanîn*) for the past is in fact a gloss of what for them are highly evaluated emotional

states and sentiments associated with particular times, locales, social relations, and cultural practices. In English, “nostalgia” may evoke a negative sense of romantic or even naïve attachment to the past, whereas in Arabic *hanîn* and other terms such as *ghurba* (homesickness) carry more positive connotations. Therefore, I use “nostalgia” advisedly to mean a romanticized reminiscence of a past lifestyle or place and time, such as reminiscences of a childhood home. In other circumstances *hanîn* evokes highly positive sentiments about the self and society grounded in particular conceptions of time and space.

Spatial and Temporal Metaphors of Authenticity in Syrian Art Worlds

In Syrian art worlds, a number of distinct spatial and temporal metaphors structure discourses about authentic and inauthentic culture; indeed, in many ways debates about authenticity can be seen as debates over different metaphorical understandings of culture, time, and space. As a result of these debates, certain conjunctions of time and space come to represent authenticity, while others become badges of inauthenticity.⁴ In contemporary Syrian culture and art, three important and powerful metaphors of authenticity are the pre-modern (“Old”) city, the countryside, and the desert, with their associated life ways. The metaphor of the Old City (*madīna qadīma*) locates authenticity in the streets and buildings of the pre-modern Old Cities, especially Aleppo and Damascus, and in the lifestyles of the inhabitants of these urban

⁴ Clifford (1988: 236-237) suggests the utility of Bakhtin’s notion of the “chronotope” (1981) for analyzing the spatial-temporal dimensions of culture. While Bakhtin’s study focuses on literary chronotopes, it is clear that non-literary forms of discourse and narrative are also structured by specific chronotopes or chronotopic representations of time-space. In this work I treat the more concrete condensations of chronotopic understandings of cultural authenticity in contemporary Syria and not the more abstract notions of space and time that structure them.

space-times. In the contemporary Syrian literary, cinematic, and popular imagination, authenticity is symbolized first and foremost by the “Arab home” (*bayt ‘arabī*), consisting of an arrangement of rooms surrounding a courtyard full of citrus trees, a well, and gardens of fragrant plants; indeed, it is the courtyard and the citrus and jasmine trees that grow in it that most prominently excite memories of the older homes. For others, the mosques, public baths, coffee shops, stone walls, and cobblestone streets of the Old City also symbolize authenticity.

Aside from these physical locations, the metaphor of the Old City encompasses the lifestyle of the pre-modern urban elite – the merchants and their culture, including the *saharāt* or evening soirées held in expansive Arab homes, as well as the religious scholars (*ulamā’*) and *shaykh-s* performing their duties in the numerous and ancient mosques and *madrasa-s* (Islamic schools). Figures from more mundane walks of life are also important indices of authenticity in the Old City metaphor: fruit vendors hawking their produce in the streets, coffee shop denizens smoking *nargila-s* (water pipes), veiled women with their children, old men on donkeys, and so forth. These scenes of authentic culture and life are readily found in all the major media of Syrian art: painting, literature, television and cinema, and music in its association with the space and time of authentic culture (for example, an evening gathering in an old Arab home). In a way these locales and characters are thought of as “survivals” of pre-modern lifestyles in Syria, especially by members of the urban elite who reside elsewhere and who look upon them with a mixture of nostalgia, *hanīn*, and occasionally loathing.

Indeed, only a generation ago (pre-1967) the *bayt ‘arabi* symbolized backwardness for those elites who left the Old City for the relative comforts of the newer

quarters in the first half of the twentieth century, leaving the older neighborhoods for the urban poor and poor migrants from rural areas (Zenlund 1991). In fact, the flight of the urban upper classes and the expansion of the newer quarters gave the older neighborhoods their designation as the “Old City.”⁵ Only in recent years have the Old Cities of Damascus and Aleppo gained status as sites of authenticity now that they no longer serve as important residential neighborhoods for the Syrian merchant classes and elites. As a result, some elites are now returning to the Old City, not so much to reside there as to convert older buildings into commercial ventures such as restaurants, bars, and hotels. For some the identification of the Old City with authentic Syrian culture is a form of nostalgia – especially for the older merchants who, like my writer friend, reminisce about their former homes in the Old City from the comfortable confines of their modern homes – whereas for others it is part of a mission to preserve the Arab cultural and social heritage. The decay of the older neighborhoods and attempts by certain developers to demolish neighborhoods in Damascus and Aleppo and build modern buildings in their place, in conjunction with haphazard attempts to renovate or modernize certain older homes, have led to the establishment of committees for historic preservation with the authority to regulate renovations and new building in these neighborhoods. The positive evaluation of the Old City moreover has arisen in the context of the work of international organizations such as UNESCO to label these cities as World Heritage Sites, restricting building and development within them in order to guarantee their “preservation.” No

⁵ Few Damascenes or Aleppines refer to the modern quarters of their cities as constituting the “new city,” and unlike many North African cities, there is no Syrian concept of *la ville nouvelle*. The newer quarters are simply referred to by their names: e.g. *Shahbā’*, *Jamiliyya* (in Aleppo), and *Mezza*, *Mazra’*, *Abu Rumaneh*, and *Barzeh* (in Damascus). In Aleppo “new” (*jadid*) is used to differentiate the “old” Syriac quarter from the “new,” though the “old” is no more than about 125 years old, is not located within the walls of the “Old City,” and hence is not generally associated with authenticity in Aleppine discourse.

doubt, tourism and the prospect of luring foreigners in search of their own visions (fantasies?) of authenticity has contributed to the commodification of the Old Cities and the conversion of homes and schools into restaurants, coffee shops, and hotels. Yet the number of local and visiting Arabs and foreign tourists frequenting these establishments suggests that the identification of the pre-modern Old City with authentic Arab culture is widespread.

Another metaphorical time-space of authenticity is the pre-modern (if not pre-historical) countryside, primarily the land and its people, the peasants (*fallāhīn*), who more than anyone are associated with “folklore” and “authentic” culture. For some modernists, such as the late artist Fateh Moudarres, the rural village constitutes the very location of authentic culture; in his view, one expressed by others as well, Syria’s peasants are the inheritors of ancient Levantine and Mesopotamian culture and are therefore the most “authentic” Syrians (indeed, for some, the most authentic humans). The countryside is the source of many of the popular arts (*ḥimn sha’biyya*) and the cultural practices that give rise to such practices as the *dabka* or circle dance, songs about harvests, love and marriages, and so forth. These practices are thought to be timeless and eternal – in a sense without origin, dating back to pre-history. A number of contemporary Syrian fine artists capture many of these figures of authenticity in their works. Important symbols of rural authenticity in recent canvases and sculptures include sun-drenched landscapes, scraggly old olive trees, fields of wheat, peasants bent over in agricultural work, and especially peasant women wearing their colorful “folk” costumes and carrying jugs of water on their heads or ample hips. In these depictions (caricatures, almost), rural life is highly abstracted in terms of temporality, with peasants living in a

sort of eternal past, and in terms of space, with “the land” (*al-ard*) coming to represent the nation and Syrian people as a whole, even when it is a highly specific local scene that is depicted, say, in a painting or in a narrative.

A third metaphorical time-space of authenticity is the desert, which plays an important role in defining “Arabness” and hence “authenticity” in contemporary Syrian culture. The desert as a physical space evokes a sense of timelessness, the nomadism of the bedouin and their camels marching along the dunes suggesting eternal cycles. The haunting sound of the *nāy* is frequently used in such (again caricature-like) depictions of the desert in television and cinematic productions to evoke a sense of timelessness and vastness. Yet, the desert as a physical space is less important than its association with the inhabitants of this space, the bedouin and their particular culture. Bedouin culture conventionally represents “Arabness” (indeed, bedouin are often referred to as “Arabs.” *‘arâb/‘urbân*) through the association of bedouin and Arabs with eloquence, freedom, masculinity, honor, and fierce justice; indeed there are similarities between urban Syrian and European Orientalist conceptions of the bedouin. Other important components of this metaphorical time-space are the bedouin love for horses and customs of hospitality, drinking coffee, reciting poetry, nomadism, raiding, and so forth. These images are prominent in contemporary “bedouin” television serials as well as Syrian art and literature, where they help to define the cultural space in which questions of authenticity are posed and answered, in which they make any sense at all. The bedouin, through their association with “Arabness,” the vastness of the Syrian desert, and the pre-modern subsistence strategies that they are depicted as utilizing, thus come to represent another important realm of “authentic” culture.

Metaphors of Inauthenticity

Since authentic culture is often defined in contrast to what some may consider inauthentic, we would expect to find certain metaphorical expressions of *inauthenticity*. Indeed, such metaphors exist and sometimes focus on the same geographic places but at different times or with different people. In the Old Cities, the urban poor who moved there after the flight of two generations of middle and upper class Syrians following Independence are associated in the minds of these elites with inauthentic culture: poorly decorated homes, crowded and dirty streets, noise, and so forth. Elite Syrians consider the culture of the urban poor in any neighborhood, old or new, to be inauthentic. They also consider the *nouveaux riches* to be inauthentic because their wealth, as some *anciens riches* like to point out, comes not from family fortunes and land but from business dealings and especially corruption through association with the military and political elite. In this equation the urban Sunni merchants are authentic, while the newly urbanized Alawites are inauthentic because, while “essentially” rural poor, they have acquired positions by virtue of having political connections.⁶ Even their religion is suspect in the eyes of the Sunni majority.

As Raymond Williams notes for England (1973), the “country” may assume numerous valences – as the site of authentic rural culture and the simple, honest people who work the land, or as a source of backwardness and “rural idiocy.” These contradictory evaluations find expression in contemporary Syria as well, where

⁶ The Alawite (*‘alawī*) sect is an offshoot of Shi‘a Islam whose members are found primarily in the coastal and mountain regions of Northwestern Syria and in Turkey. The late Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad was an Alawite, and he promoted the rise of many Alawites to positions of authority in the Syrian military and government.

condescending portrayals of modern peasants interact with more “pastoral” visions (to borrow Williams’ term) of idealized rural life.⁷ While some of my Damascene friends claimed that all Syrian families have rural origins, when I mentioned this “fact” to other Damascenes, they reacted with repugnance; for contemporary families to have demonstrable rural roots would disqualify them from being authentic (*asīl*), which for the elite means 100% urban or even Ottoman roots. Interestingly, Arabness is not necessarily a criterion of authenticity for these elites; it is relationship to centers of power, Ottoman included (but not usually Alawite), that counts. Regarding the bedouin, the old (idealized) bedouin are authentic whereas modern bedouin running around in pick-up trucks and living off the cities, are not. All of these judgments are, of course, laden with class distinctions and reflect the privilege of those who can afford to worry about authenticity in the first place.

II) The Time and Space of Musical Authenticity: Four Meditations on the Origins of Arab Music

These three primary metaphorical understandings of authenticity structure to a large extent both the production of “authentic” culture and narratives about cultural authenticity in the contemporary Syrian art world and heritage politics that I am analyzing in this work. Turning to music raises the question of how Syrian intellectuals and artists understand “Arab music” and argue for its authenticity. The question of the authenticity of Arab music often revolves around questions of its origins. Indeed, many of my interlocutors made the connection between origin (*asl*) and authenticity (*asāla*),

⁷ For example, the Aleppine author Nihad Sirees’s *al-Kūmīdiyya al-fallāhiyya* (*The peasant comedy*) (1996) depicts the simplicity of the peasants and their corruption when they come in contact with modern urban life.

for, as mentioned, the words derive from the same linguistic roots. In this fashion, claiming an *asl* is tantamount to asserting one's *asâla*. Yet there is little consensus about which *asl*, and therefore whose *asâla*, is most "authentic" with respect to "Arab music." For some, the music has clear Arab roots and is hence authentically "Arab" music. For others, the music has diverse, non-Arab roots, which they emphasize to support their claims for other authenticities.

In what follows, I explore four different narratives of the origins of "Arab" music, each of which relies on different (and implicit) understandings and representations of the origins of the music in order to assert claims to a more "authentic" culture than the others. A university professor, a journalist, a bookseller, and a dramatist make claims to authenticity through their diverse understandings of and discourses on the origins of "Arab music." They employ a variety of rhetorical strategies in their appeals to authority – historical, mythological, and pragmatic, among others – to center a sense of musical identity and personhood with respect to music. Analysis of their claims moreover reveals the implicit understandings and metaphors that structure their narratives and through which they construct and evaluate notions of origin and authenticity. Each draws from different if overlapping narratives of authentic origins that imply particular understandings of the time and space from which the "true" music originated and developed. Whether the music is Arab, Turkish, Kurdish, Christian, or Muslim in origin (or of some other origin) depends in these narratives on particular understandings of the temporality and space of origin. In this manner, the concept of an origin becomes an important – if not *the* important – index of the authenticity of Arab music, however it is conceived (and each has distinct views of what if anything is "Arab" about it). Join me

as I return to these discussions

* * *

The Return of al-Isfahani

After some weeks in Aleppo, I head back to Damascus and pay a visit to Dr. Saad Allah Agha al-Qal'ah, Professor of Engineering at the University of Damascus, producer of programs on music and computers for Syrian television, and sometime performer of the *qanûn* from a notable Aleppine family. I want to talk to al-Qal'ah about his recent television program *Nahj al-aghâni* (*The course of songs*, 1997b), an encyclopedic work that aims to document, analyze, and evaluate the one-hundred most important Arab songs since the beginning of the twentieth century. For his program al-Qal'ah has created a multimedia database of song texts, audiovisual samples, commentaries from published sources, and over 1600 keywords that enable him to search for any lyric, artist, genre, *maqâm*, etc. al-Qal'ah self-consciously models his program on al-Isfahani's great opus, the tenth-century *Kitâb al-aghâni* (*The book of songs*), part of which, as so many Aleppines reminded me, was composed in Aleppo. According to al-Qal'ah, the *Kitâb al-aghâni* documented the one-hundred most important Arab songs up to the tenth-century. al-Qal'ah in some sense sees himself as a modern-day al-Isfahani and his program (an ongoing project with a projected three series) as a modern, multimedia update of the medieval text. Prior to *Nahj al-aghâni*, al-Qal'ah produced programs on Muhammad 'Abd al-Wahhab (1994) and the Syrian-born vocalist Asmahan (1996), and in 1998 he was preparing a program on Asmahan's brother, the famed 'ud player, composer, and

singer Farid al-Atrash. *Nahj al-aghâni* has been controversial both because of its content (al-Qal'ah's choice of songs and analysis of them) and because of his heavy reliance on the computer in documenting, analyzing, and presenting his research.

We discuss his programs and his own extensive musical background and career. Then I ask him about Arab music and how "Arab" it might actually be. I state that there seem to be a large number of foreign names used in Arab music – for some of the *maqâmât*, some of the genres and instruments, and some of its great composers – and many people tell me that this proves that is really no such thing as Arab music. What is "Arab" about the music, or is it merely a congeries of other musical traditions adopted by the Arabs as they moved from the desert and villages to their urban centers in the early Islamic period?

According to al-Qal'ah, evidence of a "pure" Arab tradition can be found in the classical treatises of al-Kindi, al-Urmawi, and others; we must not be misled by the names. Although many of the *maqâmât* have Persian and Turkish names, this does not mean that they are Persian and Turkish. For example, many of the *maqâm* names are merely ordinal numerals, such as the Persian numerals *yekâh*, *dûkâh*, *sîkâh*, and *jahârkûh*, which mean "first," "second," "third," and "fourth," respectively. The Arabs once referred to these same modes as *al-awwal* ("the first") *al-thâni* ("the second") and *al-thâlith* ("the third"), and so forth, according to al-Qal'ah. This is clear in the works of al-Kindi, who wrote in the ninth-century, well before there was even a Turkish culture to speak of, let alone Turkish *maqâmât* to borrow.⁸ Moreover, many of the *maqâmât* have

⁸ However, medieval Arab theorists did not refer to the modes as *maqâmât* but rather used diverse terms, among them the system of *asâbi'* (fingers) and *majâri* (courses) said to have been developed by Ishaq al-Mawsili (Sawa 1989: 73; Shiloah 1995: 14), the *dawâ'ir* (sing. *dâ'ira*, circle) outlined by the thirteenth-century writer Safi al-Din al-Urmawi, and *turuq* (ways, paths) mentioned in, among other sources, al-Ghazzali (1901-02).

authentic (*aslī*) Arabic names. For example, *râst*, *bayyâtî*, *hijâz*, *kurd*, *nawâ*, *sabâ*, and *'ajam* are all Arabic names of important and frequently used *maqâmât*. Similarly, in North Africa *taba'* and not *maqâm* is used to refer to the various modes, which have different names from those used in the Levant. Confusion arises from the fact that the classical theorists used different words from the modern names to identify the same modes; during the Ottoman Period, Arabs adopted the terminology of Ottoman music, applying these new names to the “original” “Arab” modes.

“What about the Persians?” I ask. al-Qal'ah replies that Persian civilization is ancient and no doubt there was a lot of sharing amongst Arab and Persian cultures, especially after the rise of Islam. But there developed a strong and independent Arab tradition and there is ample evidence that the modal system – in his ears at least – is “Arab” (*'arabī*) in origin, not Persian. Many of the instruments commonly used in Arab and Turkish music, such as the *'ūd* (short necked fretless lute), are of “Arabic” origin. For example, according to al-Qal'ah, despite the common claim that the *'ūd* has its origins in ancient Egypt or Persia archaeologists have unearthed evidence of early *'ūd*-like instruments dating back several thousand years in the ruins of the ancient Mesopotamian city of Ur. Therefore, there is a strong local (for him, “Arab”) tradition that dates back over many centuries, if not millennia.

La Yujid Shay' Safi: Nothing is Pure

Not long after visiting Dr. al-Qal'ah I make my way to an upscale café in central Damascus, the self-styled meeting place of Damascene intellectuals, where a friend introduces me to “George,” a young Christian journalist and writer who is seated at a

neighboring table. George folds up his newspaper and joins me at my table. We exchange greetings and when our mutual friend mentions my work on Syrian music he tells me that he has a deep interest in Arab music, or to be more precise, in what he considers to be “authentic oriental music” (*al-mūsīqā al-sharqiyya al-asila*). George asks me what I am doing, to whom I listen, and what I have “discovered” so far. I proudly name a number of well-known Egyptian and Syrian musicians, having recently acquired some good tapes: Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab, Umm Kulthum, Sabah Fakhri, and Asmahan. George shakes his head and says, “That’s not authentic Oriental music!” “But if these prominent Arab stars do not perform ‘authentic oriental music,’ who does?” I ask. George sighs and, as if preparing for a lecture, draws out a pen and paper, clears a space on our table and proceeds to set things straight.

What we know today as “Arab” music had its roots in the early civilizations of Sumer, Babel, and ‘Ashura (the Assyrians). Since these civilizations had no musical notation, their music was passed on orally over the generations, *abbān ‘an jadd* (from father to son). The early Christian Church played a major role in the writing down (*al-tadwīn*) of this ancient music. To make this clear he grabs his pen and writes: *bābil*, *‘ashūrā*, and *sūmar*, then underneath them draws a line and writes the word *mūsīqā* (music). He then writes *al-kanīsa* (the Church) and under it another line, *jamadat-ha* (lit. froze it, crystallized it, meaning preserved it, recorded it). Therefore, what we know as “Arab music” has two major branches that diverged from the early Church: Byzantine and Syriac. Each of these branches influenced later developments of “Arab” music, including Islamic liturgical melodies, especially in Syria and Iraq, the contemporary inheritors of the ancient civilizations. He writes *bīzāntī* (Byzantine) and *sūriyānī*

(Syriac). Under Byzantine George writes *shâmî* (Syrian) and *tartîl al-qur'ân* (Qur'anic recitation); under Syriac he writes *'irâqî* and *tartîl al-qur'ân*. *Halab* (Aleppo) he locates between these two, since Aleppo historically was an important cross-roads between Byzantium and Mesopotamia.

According to George, what most people know as “Arab music” – including the artists I earlier mentioned – is essentially “Turkish” art music that developed in the Ottoman courts and in the homes of the Turkish feudal overlords, the infamous “Pashas.” As for Egypt, he claims that it has lost touch with its *turâth* and “folklore”⁹ and through the hegemony of its mass media tools has spread its “Turkish” cultural legacy over the Arab world at large. “Everyone thinks it is ‘Arab,’ but it is really ‘Turkish,’” he says. He then writes *'Abd al-Wahhâb* and *Umm Kulthûm* and next to their names, *turkî* (Turkish). The Egyptian composer Sayyid Darwish is for him the only example of a *turâth*-inspired Egyptian composer; but, claims George, “he got most of his information from Aleppo,” where he studied “a number of times.” He writes *Sayyid Darwish* and next to it “*Halab*” (Aleppo).

“True” *sharqî* music, according to George, is to be found in the villages, a common sentiment linking the rural areas with authenticity, and especially in the traces of ancient, pre-Islamic musical-vocal practices found in some varieties of contemporary folk and religious song. Everything from the melody of the Islamic call to prayer (*adhân*) to the origins of the music of ‘Abbasid Baghdad – the so-called “Golden Age” of Arabic Culture in the third/ninth century – are, according to George, to be found in the musical theories and practices of the ancient civilizations. The Church, as he has repeated

⁹ Note his distinction between *turâth* and folklore.

claimed, is responsible for passing them on to us. As an example, George asserts that he has heard Christian funerary rituals in certain Syrian villages whose melodies are identical to the *adhân* and, *ipso facto*, must be its origin. Bilal, the first *muezzin* in Islam, was, after all, originally an Abyssinian Christian, so it comes as no surprise to him that there is evidence of such “borrowing.” Iraqi versions of Qur’anic recitation and present-day Syriac liturgical melodies are very similar if not identical; George suggests that I could verify this by comparing Iraqi Qur’anic recitation, the music of the Shi’ite rituals of ‘Ashura¹⁰ from Karbalâ’ (in Iraq), and Syriac music.

There is, then, no such thing as “Arab music;” rather, there is “oriental music.” *al-mûsiqâ al-sharqiyya*, the music of the ancient civilizations preserved and transmitted by Christian Arabs. I should not confuse modern “Turkish” (turkified) music with “true” Arab music, that is, “oriental music.” I suggest that Persian music also played a major role in the development of Arab music, not just Byzantine music. George grabs his pen and writes at the top of the page. *lâ yujid shay’ sâfi* (nothing is pure). “Does this mean that Persian music is just some sort of impurity?” I ask. “No,” says George. “just that it is less important than the other influences.” In the end George concludes by writing that *al-mûsiqâ al-sharqiyya* can be divided into two periods: pre- and post-Church music. The Church played an important role in preserving the music of the ancient civilizations in this varied land from over four-thousand years ago, a rich heritage that remained oral until the early Church documented it. If I want to get to the heart (*qalb*) of “Arab” music, I should study the music of the Church. George then writes for me a long list of people I should consult in this regard, including the Syriac patriarch in Damascus and church

¹⁰ Ashura is a Shiite festival commemorating the martyrdom of the Imam Husayn, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, who was murdered in the city of Karbalâ’ in 680 CE.

leaders in Aleppo and Lebanon.

It is all Kurdish Music

From the standpoint of a Christian intellectual, the roots of Arab music are ancient and not to be confused with modern accretions from Turkey. The Church played a central role in documenting and preserving this rich musical heritage and remains an important vestige of an ancient but living tradition. From the standpoint of another intellectual from a different background the story is somewhat changed.

Now we are in Aleppo, looking for books in the National Library. It is a few weeks after my discussion with George, and I am heading to the National Library in Aleppo in order to look up some musical references. Friends at the Siyahi Cafe tell me that the Library has everything, including al-Isfahani's the *Kitâb al-aghâni*. The National Library, situated at Bab al-Faraj near the Old City, is a prime example of colonial Mandate architecture with its red and black striped stones (the *ablaq* style – actually more a Damascene than Aleppine architectural style) and oriental arches. Today the building is in a state of disrepair, the entrance used as a ticket booth for local comedy shows. Above the stairs sits a bust of Abû al-'Alâ al-Ma'ârî, the famous eighth-century poet and grammarian, who in his present perch seems to turn his nose in disgust from the smell of urine wafting from the public lavatories. I ascend the stairs to the catalog room and to my dismay find the library closed for the day. It must be another national holiday. Sure enough there is the index of the *Kitâb al-aghâni* dominating the wall over the old-fashioned card-catalog. I leaf through some of the cards and scrutinize the large index to see how it might relate to the cards under my fingertips. Getting nowhere I notice that

there is a small book fair in the main reading room so I decide to stay and browse awhile. There are only a handful of browsers today and probably because I am the only foreigner in the room, and just as likely out of a mixture of boredom and curiosity, the director, "Ahmed," comes over and strikes up a conversation with me: "Can I be of any service?" Ahmed, who has earned a doctorate in Oriental Philosophy from the University of Damascus, works for a publishing house and runs book fairs at the libraries in Syria. In his suit jacket and striped shirt he looks important if a little uncomfortable in today's heat. "Please take a look around," he suggests. "then join me for tea!" I take a turn around the room and, finding nothing on music, return to his table and he offers me a small glass of sweet tea.

We settle into conversation. I tell him of my research and that I had wanted to read some books on Aleppine music: "Would you happen to have any interesting books on music at the fair?" I ask. "Not today," he says, "but I can get some for you." We exchange views on Arab music and culture. Ahmed's friend "Lu'ay," who studied English Literature at Aleppo University and can recite Shakespeare by heart, joins us for a glass of tea, pondering aloud "whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune...." I am half tempted to finish the line but wonder about its possible implications here.¹¹

When no one else is in the room Ahmed leans close and whispers, "we are both Kurdish." One cannot advertise that identity too loudly here, they suggest. They ask me who I know in Aleppo among the musicians and how far I have come in my research:

¹¹ For the skeptical, let me add that a young hotel attendant in Aleppo could recite Hart Crane's ode to the Brooklyn Bridge and was familiar with William Carlos Williams; a fruit seller in southern Morocco recited Hamlet's famous soliloquy to me while he placed some oranges in a bag, and so on. How many Americans could recite any of these, let alone famous *Arabic* poems?

what have I “discovered” about the music? When I mention that I have an interest in Syriac music (after my conversations with George) and had just seen a prominent Syriac composer and musician in Aleppo, Ahmed straightens up and with a concerned look argues, “This musician, like most Syrians, is *muta’assib* (zealous) with respect to Syriac music.” The “truth,” for Ahmed, is that much of what is claimed to be Syriac culture is originally Kurdish; the Syrians “stole” Kurdish culture then recorded it in their churches (as in notating Kurdish music) so that today everyone thinks that it is theirs. “Do you listen to Kurdish music?” he asks, and when I reply that I do not he suggests that I should. Kurdish culture, because it is traditionally oral (*shafahī*), was not written down until the Syrians came along and by documenting Kurdish culture claimed it as their own. Both Ahmed and Lu’ay assert (not without justification) that today Kurdish culture is ignored, even threatened by the politics of arabization (*ta’rib*) in Syria.

Then “Firās,” a writer and owner of a publishing house, stops in and we discuss the musics of the world.¹² Ahmed, Lu’ay, and Firas all agree that music is a “universal language” (*lughā ‘ālamīyya*) and hence can be understood by anyone no matter where – “all music speaks to you.” There are two aspects, says Ahmed: *idrāk* (realization), which is mental, and *‘awātif* (emotions) or *rūh* (spirit), which is emotional. “One might not understand the Persian or Hindi languages yet *yantarib* (experience *tarab*) from the music,” says Firas, that is, enjoy its emotional aspect. There is a clear preference and valuation among Aleppines of the emotional over what many described as the “merely rational” aspects of culture that we in the West are thought to value more. However, familiar local music, according to Ahmed, might not cause *tarab*. For example, Ahmed

¹² He is the publisher I cite in chapter one who referred to the modern Arab pop song as *qātīla*. “killer.”

gets bored with Sabah Fakhri after about ten minutes – it is enough for him. As some say, *mizmâr al-hayy lâ yutrab*, the neighborhood pipe does not please (cause *tarab*); familiarity breeds contempt.

Firas poses the question, “Is there in fact such a thing as ‘Arab music’ or ‘Japanese Music’ or ‘American Music,’ or is there just ‘Music,’ a universal language?” He proceeds to answer it in the affirmative: music is a universal language. As evidence he claims that he listens a lot to “World Music” (*al-mûsîqâ al-‘âlamîyya*)¹³ and enjoys it, can understand its language. Firas mentions Liszt, Mozart, and other European composers as among his favorite “world composers” in addition to some local artists: I wonder where else one might hear Mozart and ‘Umar al-Batsh mentioned in the same breath. Since he can enjoy both types of music, they must have some commonalities. “Perhaps there’s a shared *rûh mûsiqîyya*” (musical spirit), he suggests. Ahmed then argues that “the Turks claim that Greek music is Turkish, and the Greeks claim that Turkish music is Greek; Each thinks that the other’s culture is really theirs! Thus it goes with neighbors!” “Like the Syriac-Kurdish debate we just rehearsed,” I think to myself. Yet it is the shared *rûh* between the neighbors, says Ahmed, that makes their music similar. Still, if I want to hear real authentic music, I must go to ‘Afrin, a Kurdish village about twenty kilometers to the West of Aleppo. There I would hear the *real* music

The Arab Tradition: Ancient Roots, Assimilation, and Modern Vitality

Against these and other claims for the “real” roots of Arab music, some of my interlocutors argued that the Arab tradition is not only ancient and vibrant, it is also

¹³ Interestingly, in Syria the Arabic term for “world music” refers to European classical music and not what we in the West (that is, music production companies) term “World Music” or “World Beat.”

“Arab.” Not long into my stay in Aleppo I had the good fortune of meeting “Samîr,” a locally respected writer and authority on Arab and Aleppine folklore and folk life. I met Samir at his regular hours (his *dawwâm*, like academic office hours) at the *Maw'id* (Rendez-vous) café. The *Maw'id* – recently redecorated and renamed *al-Fânûs* (The lamp), but everyone still calls it the *Maw'id* – is known as an intellectuals’ café and despite its noisy location at a major intersection in downtown Aleppo it usually hosts a number of lively discussions throughout the day and well into the evening. At this table a group argues over the fate of Arabic literature, while over in the corner another debates politics in the global economy. Solitary figures sit at their upper level tables, hunched over sheaves of loose paper, their cigarettes poised precariously in their fingers while they scratch out drafts of their latest poem-story-play-review. Friends passing by wave through the large glass windows on their way to other appointments; some stop in for a chat, which develops into an argument and eventually calls for more coffee. *Yâ Mâjid....*

On this sunny afternoon I find Samir sitting alone at “his” table upstairs working on a draft of his latest play, his 30th publication. His small glass of coffee sits unsipped to one side of his notebook and a cigarette burns to ashes in his left hand. I introduce myself and he smiles and pulls over a chair from a neighboring table. Samir, about 55, has a calm and friendly demeanor, his eyes full of patience and understanding, and he appears genuinely interested to meet me; none of the usual boisterous *ahlan wa sahlan-s* that I have now come to associate with a degree of false welcome. “Will you join me for a coffee?” he asks.

I sit and he orders me a coffee and I begin to tell him of my previous work in Egypt and my interest in Aleppine music and folklore, and musical aesthetics. I mention

a special interest in the development of the Aleppine *wasla* (vocal and instrumental suite) and its social and cultural importance in Syria from 1946 through the 1960s. 1946 marked Syria's independence from France, and the first Syrian radio and broadcasting stations were opened in Damascus and Aleppo in 1947 and 1949, respectively. The period from approximately 1946 to 1970 is considered a high point in Syrian radio and music, a time when many now famous recordings were made in the radio station's studios by its own orchestras and choirs, which no longer exist. "Well," says Samir, "that is an interesting, important, and complex topic – in fact, I am working on a similar project for Aleppo Radio (*Idhâ'at halab*)," where he works in the mornings putting together various documentary programs for local and national television. "Tell me," he continues, "what have you 'discovered' so far?"

I tell Samir that I am still in the beginnings of my work but that I have taken on a new interest in Syriac and Kurdish music since they seem to be related to the "authentic" Arab traditions. Samir chuckles. "You must have been speaking with so-and-so," he adds, referring to a prominent Syriac composer and musician with whom he has recently done an interview. This composer claims that the roots of the *muwashshahât* and *qudûd* and other genres of Arab music are Syriac, but Samir does not agree with him. First of all, in his view Syriac culture is "limited" (*mahdûda*). Despite their efforts to revive Syriac language and culture, the Syriacs do not number more than about half a million so there is "little chance" (*mâ fî amal*) that they will achieve the cultural revival they hope for. Second, there's too much evidence from medieval Arab writers that the *muwashshah* (of which the *qudûd* are considered by many to be lighter versions) is a "local" genre, meaning "Arab-Islamic" and Levantine, if not Aleppine, but certainly not Syriac.

“But some say,” I interject, “that the Church played an important role in documenting the music.” I have George’s remarks in mind. “Certainly,” says Samir, “the Syriac church played an important role in documenting the ancient civilizations, and like the Byzantines developed a system of *maqâmât* in their religious song (*inshâd*) that parallels in many respects the Arab, Turkish, and Persian *maqâmât*.” But this is not the whole story, according to Samir. He adds, “With all due respect to the Kurds, they have never enjoyed civilization (*hadâra*).” The Kurds, in his view, have always been a mountain people and do not even have an alphabet of their own, let alone a strong musical tradition that could have been the root of Arab music. A well developed musical tradition is the result of civilization, of *hadâra*, he asserts. Civilization is the most important factor in creating a strong musical tradition.

“Let me tell you a story” (*bahkilak 'issa*), he continues.

There are some old tablets from the ancient [Euphrates] civilization of Mari, located on the Euphrates near the present day border with Iraq, that date back over 4,000 years. One is a letter from a local ruler to the King of Mari asking him to oversee the musical education of his three daughters. “Take my daughters. O King, and teach them the art of music in your schools,” says the letter. This suggests that there were schools for music at this time. Over 4,000 years ago and they had schools for music! Because it was a true civilization, there was a strong musical tradition. Kurdish music, however, is folkloric and *sha'bi* (popular), not “authentic” music, which comes from the urban civilizational centers such as Aleppo and Damascus.

For Samir as for others, the authentic musical traditions are primarily urban and not rural.

as others sometimes claimed; “civilization” (*hadâra*) is the key ingredient that makes music authentic, in this view.

“True,” says Samir, “with the exception of Saba (as in “The Queen of Sheba”), the Arabs likewise did not traditionally enjoy *hadâra*.” Only after the rise of Islam and through contact with others, especially the Persians, were the Arabs able to create a cosmopolitan Arab-Islamic civilization, he says. Yet, even though this was a civilization built upon the borrowed traditions of others, including the Byzantine and Syriac, “all civilizations are this way” (echoing George’s *lâ yūjid shay sâfi* remark, i.e., authenticity does not necessarily imply purity of origins). The Arab-Islamic civilization moreover assumed a local characteristic wherever it existed: in Baghdad, in Damascus, in Aleppo, in al-Andalus (medieval Muslim Spain), and elsewhere. Pointing out the “foreign” roots of a civilization does not deny its local authenticity.

For example, Samir says that in Aleppo one can hear a number of different varieties or “colors” (*alwân*) of music. Within the city proper (*al-madīna*) you have the *muwashshahât*, some of which are Andalusian and some of which are Aleppine.¹⁴ One also hears the *qudūd halabīyya* in their different forms,¹⁵ many of which are sung in various dialects according to their origin: Aleppine, Damascene, Egyptian, Iraqi, and Turkish. One also hears the *qasida* (classical ode), the *mawwāl* (colloquial lament), and various genres of popular song (*aghânī sha‘biyya*). These, along with the instrumental pieces that introduce the different genres and the Egyptian *dawr*, constitute the Aleppine

¹⁴ The Aleppine *muwashshah* differs from the Andalusian in that it is sung by a soloist with choral accompaniment, whereas the Andalusian *muwashshah* is for a chorus of singers.

¹⁵ For example, the popular *qadd* (*al-qadd al-haiabī al-sha‘bī*), the *muwashshah qadd* (*al-qadd al-muwashshah*), and the *muwashshah qadd* that uses the melody of a popular song (*al-qadd al-muwashshah ‘alā al-ughniya al-sha‘biyya*).

wasla. Even the Egyptian *dawr* has taken on an Aleppine character (*tâbi* ') and scent (*nakha*) appropriate to Aleppine aesthetics (*jamâliyyât*). Even genres which have their origins in the countryside (*al-rîf*) and desert regions (*al-bâdiya*) near Aleppo and may be of Kurdish, Iraqi, or even Turkish origin, have been assimilated into the Aleppine musical culture and are hence "Aleppine" genres.¹⁶

"Are Umm Kulthum, Muhammad 'Abd al-Wahhab, and others like them essentially Turkish singers," I ask? Samir looks surprised at my question. "It is true," he says, "that the Ottoman court style of singing prevailed in Cairo and elsewhere in the Ottoman lands in the end of the last century, but the style of Umm Kulthum and others has a noticeable *Aleppine* influence. At any rate they are Arab artists singing in Arabic, so the music is Arab." He did not elaborate on the Aleppine style of Umm Kulthum and 'Abd al-Wahhab other than to reiterate an oft-heard statement that Egyptian singers from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century adopted the Aleppine style of singing, which was less nasal than the then prevailing Ottoman-Turkish style (Bin Dhurayl 1989: 27-28). Yet, nasality or *ghunna* was one of the admired characteristics of Umm Kulthum's voice well into the twentieth century (Danielson 1997: 148).

* * *

III) Discussion

The primary metaphorical understandings of authenticity and origin implicit in these dialogues and others like them are the medieval Arab world (such as tenth-century

¹⁶ These rural genres include the many varieties of the *mawwâl* such as *al-'atâbâ*, *al-nâyil*, *al-sawâhili*, and *al-sharqâwi*.

al-Andalus or twelfth-century Aleppo) and the ancient Near East. Both time-spaces support claims to musical authenticity in the present, as if there were an uncontested link between these two pasts and locales and present-day Aleppo. Indeed, the two metaphors combine to form a sort of spatial and temporal genealogy of musical authenticity and, in other discourses, genealogies of religious and other varieties of cultural authenticity as well. Whereas al-Qal'ah and Samir trace what is largely a Muslim genealogy that focuses on such Muslim luminaries as al-Kindi and al-Farabi as well as the role of Muslim artists in modern Aleppine "civilization" as inheritors of the medieval and ancient civilizations, George and Ahmad trace different genealogies that emphasize different temporalities, spaces, and peoples.

al-Qal'ah's main rhetorical strategy is to cite medieval texts to authorize his position on the "Arabness" of Arab music. For example, he cites al-Kindi to support his argument that the tonal system of Near Eastern music is of Arab as opposed to Turkish or Persian origin (while recognizing the influence of the latter cultures on Arab music). His television program borrows explicitly from al-Isfahani; al-Qal'ah envisions himself as producing what is in a sense a second *Kitâb al-aghânî*. He uses the borrowed authority of the medieval authors and texts to support his evaluations of the "best" Arab songs of the twentieth century. Contradictions or contradictory opinions, though explicitly solicited in the television program, play a minor role in his presentation and evaluation of songs. Despite the scientific rhetoric of al-Qal'ah's approach to the music – his heavy reliance on computers in his television program and his "objective" comparisons – in the end it is his "ear" that is the deciding factor: he hears (feels) that the modal system is "Arab" and not Turkish or Persian.

The other primary authorizing source in al-Qal'ah's and Samir's dialogues is ancient Mesopotamia. al-Qal'ah claims the earliest example of the 'ud has been found there (and others in Syrian also made this claim though I have not seen the published data on these "finds"). Samir recites the story of the King of Mari and the musical education of his daughters to support his notion of urban civilization (*hadāra*). In both accounts, temporal and spatial jumps are made from the medieval authorities to the present, and from ancient Mesopotamia to contemporary Aleppo. The result is that physical/geographical Syria is seen as the inheritor of the culture of the ancient Mesopotamian (and Levantine) civilizations, and modern Arab musicians as the inheritors of the theoretical and practical efforts of medieval Arab theorists (one should perhaps write "Arab" theorists since the idea of Arabness in the tenth century was different from contemporary meanings). Especially for Samir, contemporary Aleppo sits at the end of a complex process of civilizational development based on the assimilation of and borrowing from previous civilizations. Authenticity lies in that quality of civilization (*hadāra*) that transcends the culture of the villages – in urbanism and cultural complexity.

For George and Ahmad, the genealogy has different roots. For George, the genealogy of authenticity is punctuated by the early Eastern Church's role in codifying the ancient heritage and propagating it generation after generation until today. In this genealogy Aleppo serves as a meeting point of two early Church-based heritages, Byzantine and Syriac. Yet, authenticity, he suggests, can be found in Christian villages, not the city, which in his view is "Turkish" or turkified. George's remark that he has heard melodies in Christian villages that are similar to the Muslim call to prayer suggests to him that the Christian melody is the root and basis of the Muslim one; he assumes that

a) since Christianity came before Islam, the Christian melody must be older, and b) rural life does not change, so cultural practices from Byzantine and Syriac culture that found their ways to the villages would remain essentially unchanged over many centuries. He does not entertain the idea that the Muslim call to prayer may have influenced the Christian funerary rite.¹⁷ Yet George is not a purist; he acknowledges that there have been many “outside” factors and influences in the rise of “oriental music” – after all, *lû yîjid shay sâfî* – but these are seen in a sense as “outside” if not “impurities.” less important than the roots. Again, roots and origins are important in supporting a claim to authenticity; origins thereby serve an authorizing and authenticating discourse.

Ahmad’s version of the history is similar to George’s but with a change in the originating culture: Kurdish and not Christian. For Ahmad, the genealogy of authenticity is interrupted by the early Church’s “stealing” of Kurdish culture. The “true” heritage lives on in present-day Kurdish villages, seemingly untouched by urban-based civilization in the ensuing centuries. In other words, if one were to look behind George’s claims and dig a little deeper one would find that the origin and root of what the early Church codified was in fact Kurdish culture. Ahmad and his friends posit a timeless Kurdish past, a source that was mined and codified and in their view “stolen” by the early Christians but nonetheless propagated and continued in autonomous Kurdish villages up to the present day. The time frame assumes an eternity that is punctuated by the historical act of codification (“stealing”) of the Kurdish heritage by the Syriac Church. The spatial aspect is the same: the villages of Mesopotamia are the sources of authentic culture. However, their construction of an originary and authentic Kurdish culture is

¹⁷ I am not advancing this claim but merely pointing out assumptions. It may very well be that the Christian melody “came first” and is in that sense “more authentic.”

compromised by their discourse on music as a universal language. If music is in fact a universal language, would not its universality contradict claims to a specific origin or authenticity? If it is universal, can we even speak of Kurdish or Syriac or Arab or Persian music? These genealogies of musical authenticity were reiterated at a conference on Arab music sponsored by the International Council on Traditional Music and held in Aleppo in the Spring of 2000. A number of the Syrian participants argued for similar histories of Arab music to support implicit claims for Syria (if not Aleppo per se) as the inheritor of an authentic, ancient, and now Arab tradition – “Arab” in the sense that the Arabs have inherited it and made it their own, as in Samir’s remarks.

IV) *al-Qafla*

From this more general discussion of temporal and spatial dimensions of authenticity and the common metaphors and genealogies that structure discourse about music and cultural authenticity in contemporary Aleppo, I turn to a specific cultural space that assumes significance as an originary space for Aleppo’s musical heritage: the Sufi *dhikr*. Many of my musician friends in Aleppo told me that if I wanted to understand their music properly I needed to attend the Sufi *dhikr*, which, for them, represented the origin of contemporary musical practices. If the roots of the *wasla* were to be found in the *dhikr*, as some claimed, then I needed to learn more about this special performance realm in Aleppo. Chapter five explores the Sufi *dhikr* both as a site for religious ritual observance and as a site for musical performance intimately related to the performance of music in other domains of life in contemporary Aleppo.

Chapter Five: Memory, Temporality, and Transformation in the Sufi Dhikr

I) *al-Matla'*: A Journey Toward Remembering and Forgetting

Knowledge of self is the key to knowledge of God, according to the saying: “He who knows himself knows God,” and, as it is written in the Qur’ân, “We will show them Our signs in the world and in themselves, that the truth may be manifest to them” (XLI: 53).

– al-Ghazzâlî. *The Alchemy of Happiness*.

Many of my friends and teachers told me that if I wanted to understand the roots of “authentic” Arab music then I should listen to and study the music and song of the Sufi *dhikr*, the ritual invocation and remembrance of God. They claimed a close relationship between the secular repertoire of Arab music and the songs and rhythms of the *dhikr* and the melodious style of Qur’ânic recitation known as *tajwîd*. In addition, Aleppo’s numerous *zawâya* (sing. *zâwiya*, lit. “corner”) or “Sufi lodges” have played an important role in preserving “traditional” Arab music, especially in times of change when traditions have been cast off in favor of the new. Even at the end of the twentieth century, argue many Aleppans, the *zawâya* continue to preserve the traditional song forms and spiritual life of the city.

Sufism (*tasawwuf*) expresses the “mystical dimensions of Islam” (Schimmel 1975), which is to say it focuses on the esoteric meanings of sacred texts and spiritual

practices in addition to their exoteric or literal meanings. Muslim mystics or Sufis – the word is generally thought to derive from the wool garments early mendicants wore, *siṭf* meaning wool¹ – can be found in both the Sunni and Shiite traditions of Islam. Despite important Shiite groups in Syria, it is the Sunni branch of Islam that constitutes the majority of Syria's Muslim population. Not all of these branches have Sufi or mystical leanings and therefore do not attend *dhikr*, but at the same time many of those who do attend *dhikr* do not consider themselves especially mystical either. Rather they participate in *dhikr* as a form of spiritual practice inherent to the *sunna* or orthodox obligations of Islam.

Syria has been home to numerous famous Muslim mystics, from the Great Master Muhyi al-Din Ibn al-ʿArabi, Shams al-Din al-Tabrizi, and Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi in Damascus, to al-Farabi,² Suhrawardi (al-Maqtul), and others in Aleppo. Aleppo is considered to be the second city after the Turkish city of Konya for the *Mawlawī* or “whirling dervishes” sect of Sufism founded by Rumi in the thirteenth century. Today, Aleppo is home to numerous *zawāyā*³ of different orders (*turuq*, sing. *ṭarīqa*), such as the Qādiriyya, the Rifāʿiyya, the Badawīyya, the Mawlawiyya, and others. Popular worship of Sufi “saints” (*awliyāʾ*, sing. *walī*, lit. “friend”) or mystical leaders is common as well. One man, a local heritage buff, claimed that in Aleppo one can find the tombs (*maqāmāt*,

¹ However, alternative explanations, while usually dismissed out of hand by Western commentators, are equally suggestive of the possible derivation of the term *al-tassawuf*. One informant in Aleppo, a local Sufi scholar, argued that the term derives from *al-safā*, meaning “the stone” and referring to the sacred black stone in the Kaʿaba shrine in Mecca, the center of worship for Muslims. Hence, for this man, Sufism derives from the practices of those drawn to Mecca as a spiritual center and not from the wool garments they may have worn.

² Some traditions state that al-Farabi, though associated with rational philosophy, was a mystic and would wear the tattered garments of a Sufi mendicant (Netton 1992: 4).

³ Some Aleppans use the word *takiya* (pl. *takāyā*, from the Turkish *tekke*) or, rarely, *khānah* (pl. *khānāt*; cf. Persian *khānah* and Turkish *hane*, “house”) to refer to the same place.

sing. *maqâm*) of over 150 *awliyâ'*, each specialized in providing certain services to devotees, including healing and curing disease, granting success, and even one – he claimed sardonically – thought to have the power of warding off the American army. *Dhikr* is held almost daily in Aleppo at the different *zawâyâ*, though usually only once a week at each, as well as in private homes and at the tombs of certain *awliyâ'*. The *adhkâr* (pl. of *dhikr*) I attended were primarily held on Friday, the Muslim Sabbath, although I also attended *dhikr* on certain holidays and feast days.

I had attended some of the more public *adhkâr* held near the Mosque of Hussein in Cairo but found them to be noisy affairs.⁴ I was assured by friends that the *adhkâr* in Aleppo, unlike those in Cairo, were austere, serious, and yet energetic. However, they told me that the *dhikr* is a relatively closed world; it would be best for me to find a local participant to accompany me to the *zawâya* rather than to go alone. Requests to friends and teachers were met with warm encouragement but not fixed appointments: *bukra, in shâ' allah*, "Tomorrow, God willing," was the usual response, meaning, "some day ... maybe." Indeed, the *dhikr* remains a closed world to many locals because of their distance from this dimension of Islamic spirituality.

While I was asking around about the *dhikr* in Aleppo, I became somewhat fixated on the so-called "Most Beautiful Names of God," the *asmâ' allah al-husnâ* (and what we prosaically translate as "The Ninety-nine Names of God").⁵ Earlier in my wanderings I had seen numerous little booklets on the Names scattered among the sidewalk book stores

⁴ These occasions are more properly termed *hadra* (pl. *hadarât*), of which the *dhikr* is only one element (Frishkopf 1999).

⁵ Islamic tradition states that God has at least 99 Names that refer to His Divine Attributes, though some refer to a secret 100th Name or even to higher numbers of Names. See Schimmel (1975, 1994) and Chittick (1989, 1998).

in Damascus and Aleppo, as well as in the small book shops of the *Sûq al-Misk*, located near the Umayyad Mosque at the farther end of the *Sûq al-Hamidiyya* in Damascus. Perhaps conversations with a Sufi friend in Damascus about Ibn al-‘Arabî and his interpretation of the Names led me to wonder what they were and to try to learn and memorize them. It would also help my Arabic, I thought, trying to find some justification for my arcane interest – arcane because few Syrians I know can recite all the Names. But now that I wanted to learn them I couldn’t find any of the booklets, and when I asked around for them I was told that there were none, or that I should come back later. Where did they all go?

Stymied in my attempt to procure a book (my favorite *modus operandi*), I tried to remember the few Names that I had heard before as well as imagine what might be probable Names. I already knew a few: *al-rahmân* (“The Merciful”), *al-rahîm* (“The Compassionate”), *al-‘azîm* (“The Great”), *al-‘azîz* (“The Beloved”), *al-‘alîm* (“The Omniscient”). I soon realized that a number of famous Arab musicians had names that revealed some of the Names of God. Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhâb, for example, pointed me toward *al-wahhâb* (“The Endower”); ‘Abd al-Halim Hâfiz suggested *al-halîm* (“The Gentle”) and *al-hâfîz* (“The Guardian”); Muhammad ‘Abd al-Muttalib, *al-muttalib* (“The Beseached”); ‘Abd al-Fattâh Sukkar, *al-fattâh* (“The Opener”), and so on. After a while I ran out of *mutribûn* and began searching street signs and trying to recollect the names of characters in novels that began with ‘*abd* (“servant of”), which would be followed by one of the Names of God: ‘Abd al-Mun‘îm, *al-mun‘im* (“The Benefactor”); ‘Abd al-Razzâq, *al-razzâq*, (“The Provider”); ‘Abd al-Samad, *al-samad* (“The Everlasting”). This got me

to about 33 Names. Ninety-nine seemed a lot.

I soon found myself on yet another bus ride from Damascus to Aleppo, this time accompanied for the fifth time by Ahmad Zaki playing Jamâl ‘Abd al-Nâsir in the movie *Nâsir* ‘56. Trying to ignore the film, though it gave me another Name (*al-nâsir*, “The Victorious”), I pulled out the *misbaha* or rosary that a friend had given me and began counting off the Names I knew on its 99 beads. By the time I reached Aleppo almost five hours later I had come up with only 61 Names. Where on earth were those little books when I needed them? Disappointed, I headed over to the Siyahi Caf   to say hello to whoever might be there. To my surprise I ran into my main music teacher, who normally sat at another nearby caf  . He invited me for coffee and we fell into talking about what I had been doing in Damascus, what was new in Aleppo, news of mutual friends, and the like. I reminded him of his promise to take me to see the *dhikr* and he suggested that we go to one the following morning. His father had been an important *shaykh* and my teacher, though he seldom attends the *dhikr* today, remains a well-known figure in Aleppo’s religious communities and would therefore be an appropriate guide.

We met the next morning at the caf   and headed off to the Old City in his car. We parked near one of Aleppo’s ancient gates then made our way into the old stone neighborhoods on foot. Winding our way through the myriad alleyways and thoroughfares of the Old City, which were mostly silent that Friday morning, we talked about music, about the importance of the *dhikr* as an institution that helps preserve the old ways: “As long as there are children attending the *dhikr*,” he suggested, “no one need worry about the future of Arab music.” After about twenty minutes and once I was totally

lost in the veritable labyrinth of lanes, we ducked into a narrow opening in a plain stone wall and found ourselves in the small courtyard of the *zâwiya*.⁶ A group of men young and old mingled amongst a number of old tombstones in the courtyard, their white *jalabiyya-s*⁷ suggesting purity and simplicity. My teacher introduced me to some of the men, and I asked about the tombs. I was told that they were the tombs of the founder of the *zâwiya* and his successors, the earliest dating back over 500 years. The current *shaykh al-zâwiya* is a direct descendant of the founding *shaykh*, near whose tomb we were standing. Sayings from the Qur'ân and Prophetic traditions (*hadith*) as well as poems were inscribed on the tombs in the simple *naskhi* script. I was told that, following the principles of Islamic numerology (*hisâb al-hurûf*), which assigns numerical values to each of the 28 letters of the Arabic alphabet, the last letter of each verse would add up to the year in which the deceased person had passed away.⁸ For those who know how to read them these sayings are signs of divine will and further proof of the sacred character of the Arabic language.

In the background we could hear the slow chanting of *sûrat al-kahf* ("The Cave") from the Qur'ân. In many ways the *zâwiya* seemed like a cave to me, its dark interior

⁶ In this description I have consolidated the features of two different *zawâyâ* and their *adhkâr* in order to protect the anonymity of the participants and especially the *shaykhs* who so generously allowed me to attend and, in one instance, to record the *dhikr*. Audio and visual recording of the *dhikr* is generally prohibited even to Syrians who regularly attend *dhikr*. Though there are differences in the structure and repertory of the *adhkâr* of the different *turuq* in Aleppo, the two *zawâyâ* on which I base my discussion belong to the Qâdiriyya Order and share a similar structure, physical features, and even participants. In addition to my own fieldwork in Aleppo and Damascus, discussions with *dhikr* participants and *munshidûn*, my analysis of the structure and dynamic of the *dhikr* is based as well on an unpublished manuscript on religious song in Aleppo presented by Muhammad Qadri Dalâl at the 3rd Annual Festival of Arab Music held in Cairo, 1993 (Dalâl n.d.). Mr. Dalâl's support and guidance were essential for my understanding of the Aleppan *dhikr* and Arab music in general.

⁷ Simple robes, usually white, that are popular throughout the region.

⁸ The writing of chronograms for pious scholars consisting of Qur'ânic verses whose numerical equivalents express the date of death is a common practice in the Islamic world (Schimmel 1994: 152).

contrasting with the brightness of the sun-drenched courtyard. Men and boys drifted in and out of the main room, while others prostrated in prayer in the smaller adjoining rooms. A group of doves circled above the high wall, swooping over the housetops of the Old City in their seemingly never-ending journey. After a short while we removed our shoes and walked in.

* * *

The *zāwiya* measures about 30 feet square with a high, domed ceiling. Dark wooden bookcases filled with old manuscripts and copies of the Qur'ān line the walls. rich carpets cover the floors, and a number of ceiling fans circulate the air on this hot day. A group of older men file in and stand along the back wall; these are descendants of the founding *shaykh* and each wears a beige turban, as does the *shaykh al-zāwiya*, who sits on the floor just in front of the back wall, which contains the *mihrāb* or prayer-niche. Others line the side walls, and the rest of us sit on the floor facing the *shaykh al-zāwiya*. As people enter they approach the *shaykh*, kiss his right hand and then press their foreheads to his hand, repeating this two or three times in a rapid motion. Others, usually older men, attempt to do the same but the *shaykh* quickly removes his hand before it can be kissed, refusing this sign of deference, and instead kisses his own hand and then places it on his own forehead. While my teacher goes to kiss the *shaykh*'s hand I take a seat, uncertain whether it would be appropriate for me to do so as well.

Once seated I am taken aback to find the *asmâ' allah al-husnâ'* written along the

side and back walls in beautiful, large *thuluth* script,⁹ the elegant black lettering standing out against the light marble in which they are engraved. What I have been trying to recollect and memorize for the past week is now written in front of my very eyes. Is this some kind of sign? The Qur'ân says: {*sanarihim ayâtanâ fî 'l-afâqi wa fî 'anfusihi* *hattâ yatabayyana lahum 'annahu 'l-haqqu*}, “And we shall show them Our signs in the horizons and in themselves, that the Truth may be manifest to them ” (XLI: 53). Looking above me I find *lâ ilâha illâ 'llah* (There is No God but Allah) written high across the back wall in green neon letters. Below it small white bulbs announce *Allah* and *Muhammad*. The four corners are graced by plaques bearing the names of the Rightly Guided Caliphs: *Abû Bakr*, *'Umar*, *'Uthmân*, *'Ali*. The writing reminds me of Michael Gilsenan’s discussion of the green neon writing he found in an Egyptian mosque, and “Gilsenan (1982)” comes to mind, which annoys me. When I should be focusing on the words and sounds and like those around me trying to open my heart to the spirit of the *dhikr*, Anthropology comes crashing in to break the spell and distract me

The recitation of the Qur'ân concludes and the ensemble begins chanting the Names, slowly and in a low voice: *yâ rahmân! yâ rahîm! yâ 'alîm! yâ 'azîm!* The hair on my arms stands on end and a shiver runs over my shoulders and up the back of my neck. How strange a sound – how otherworldly it seems! I try to follow along by reading the Names on the wall. A child at my right, perhaps ten years old, chants in a loud treble voice: *yâ hayy! yâ qayyûm!* Eyeing me suspiciously as I sit transfixed and mute, he leans over and offers me a small booklet that contains the prayers and the Most Beautiful Names, like the one for which I had been searching. He tries to give a copy to my

⁹ *Thuluth* is a decorative calligraphic style commonly used to write Qur'ânic verses.

teacher, apparently not knowing him, but is brushed off with a reproachful glance and that ubiquitous Syrian hand gesture that means something like “Hold your horses!” I take a copy and soon find myself chanting along with them, mechanically fingering the beads of my *misbaha*: *yâ wâhid! yâ wâjid!*

The Names having been recited, the *dhâkirûn* – those performing *dhikr* – begin chanting the first part of the *shahâda*, or proclamation of faith: *lâ ilâha illâ 'llâh, lâ ilâha illâ 'llâh, There is No Deity but God*. The chanting follows a syncopated rhythm, the “*ha*” of “*ilâha*” aspirated to provide a rhythmic stress, *ha!* Over this chanting the *munshidûn* begin to sing a *muwashshah*, “*kullamâ rumtu irtishâfan*” (*Whenever I desire a sip*).¹⁰ and the rhythmic chanting of the *shahâda* provides a background tempo for the singing. Finishing this *muwashshah*, the *munshidûn* begin another one, then another, the pitch subtly rising, gradually, stepwise. The *rayyis* or lead *munshid* stands before the *shaykh al-zâwiya* and slaps out the tempo with his right hand on the back of his left until it turns red; I imagine it must get sore from all the vigorous slapping. As the pitch rises the tempo accelerates and the chanting gets louder. The men along the walls, now numbering over 70, begin to sway their upper bodies in coordination with the tempo, first to the right, then to the left, to the right, to the left, right left, right left. The effect is astounding: a circle of motion and sound swirling around a stationary center from which rise the voices of the young *munshidûn*. They finish singing and the entire ensemble chants the *shahâda* – shouts it! – proclaiming the Unity of God. I look over to the back wall and find that one older man’s eyes have turned up into his head, his body moves

¹⁰ This *muwashshah*, in the *maqâm râst*, was reputedly composed by the fifteenth-century Turko-Persian composer ‘Abd al-Qâdir al-Marâghî and refers to the divine love. For text and notation, see Rajâ’î and al-Darwish (1956: 49).

spasmodically – right ... left, right; left – and his mouth dangles open in a sort of grin.

Another repeatedly knocks his head against the wall, seemingly oblivious to the tempo of the chanting. The *shaykh al-zâwiya*, earlier composed, now rocks back and forth on the carpet and shouts out *allah! aywâ! allah! aywâ!* (Allah! Yes!). The tempo increases to a frenetic pace, the volume increases to a veritable roar, and the men are nearly screaming: *lâ ilâha! illâ 'llah! lâ ilâha! illâ 'llah!*. The center begins to sway and I find myself moving along with my companions on the carpet, right, left, right, left, *lâ ilâha! illa 'llâh! lâ ilâha! illa 'llâh!*

Suddenly the *shaykh al-zâwiya* shouts *allaaah!* and everything stops. The group falls silent and still. Only the sound of the ceiling fans can be heard swishing the hot air around. The *shaykh* then proclaims: *saltâ 'alâ 'n-nabî!* (Pray to the Prophet!) All relax and murmur the standard prayer: *sallâ 'alâ sayyidinâ muhammad wa 'alâ 'âlihi wa sahibihi wa sallam* (Pray to the Prophet Muhammad and to his Family and Companions, and Grant Him Peace!) After a momentary pause, the *rayyis* takes up another *muwashshah*, slapping out the slow, heavy rhythm on his bare hands. The *dhâkirûn* begin to chant *allah hu! allah hu!* (Allah He!) and the men along the walls slowly begin to move again, first to one side, then to the other, one side, then the other....

* * *

And so began an Aleppine *dhikr*, a series of invocations, prayers, songs, and movements that reached several climaxes within the space of almost four hours. I left in

a strange state, a mixture of awe, confusion, joy, and exhaustion from sitting and chanting in a hot, sweaty room with 200 others. Afterwards, as we headed back to the café, my teacher and I discussed the *dhikr*, not so much as a religious ritual but as an artistic work (*'amal fannî*). We compared notes on the different *muwashshahât* that were sung, the modes and meters used, the elevation of the pitches and acceleration of the tempos, the dance steps, and other aspects of the *dhikr*, and agreed to attend *dhikr* at other *zawâyâ* in the coming weeks. The experience of having thought about the Names of God for a week and then finding them inscribed and invoked before me (within me?) in the *dhikr* left me questioning: was this somehow meaningful or merely a coincidence? A meaningful coincidence? I shyly asked my teacher and he replied that it must have been “just a correspondence of ideas” (*mujarrad takhâtub al-afkâr*). I’m still not sure what that means.

II) The Structure and Performance of the *Dhikr*

As this evocation suggests, the Aleppine *dhikr* follows a set structure.¹¹ *Dhikr* always begins with recitation of passages from the Qur’ân, often an entire *sûra*, in the melodious *tajwîd* style. This style closely follows many of the modal principles of Arab music, though devout Muslims deny that the Qur’ân is chanted, sung, or musical at all (Nelson 1976). Recitation of the Qur’ân itself is generally preceded by the recitation of a

¹¹ I make no claims that this structure is fixed, perdurable, or comparable to *dhikr* elsewhere in Aleppo, Syria, or the Islamic world generally. Indeed, descriptions of *hadra* and *dhikr* in Egypt and Morocco point to important differences (Lane 1973 [1836]; Gilsenan 1973; Waugh 1986; Frishkopf 1999; Crapanzano 1973; Eickelman 1976).

prayer to ward off Satan,¹² and then the *fātiha*, the first and shortest chapter of the Qur'an, which "opens" the recitation.¹³ Indeed, recitation of prayers and the Qur'an also opens the sanctified space of the *dhikr*, purifying the *zāwiya* and the hearts of the *dhākirūn*. The writing on the walls – the Most Beautiful Names and the names of the Prophet and Rightly Guided Caliphs – delimits this space as sacred, forming a scripted enclosure for the oral and kinesthetic acts of recitation and remembrance that constitute *dhikr*.¹⁴

Prayers of supplication (*ibtihālāt*) or forgiveness (*istighfār*) follow recitation of the Qur'an, then the *dhākirūn* invoke the Most Beautiful Names, chanting them in sequence to a simple melody. Once these preparatory prayers and invocations are completed, the *dhākirūn* enter the main sequences of the *dhikr* and embark on their spiritual (and musical-kinesthetic) journey.

The *shaykh al-zāwiya* leads the *dhikr*, receiving participants as they arrive, seating the prominent members near his side, and initiating the opening and closing of the *dhikr*. As a direct descendent of the founding *shaykh*, he along with the other descendants form the spiritual core of the *zāwiya*. His distinction is marked by his position in the center of the *zāwiya* – either seated on a rug or standing just before the back wall – as well as by his wearing of the special beige turban. The other living descendants of the founding *shaykh* stand along the back wall behind the main *shaykh* and wear similar turbans; the other participants, if they wear any head covering, place simple white scarves over their

¹² The prayer, called *isti'wāz*, is: *'a'ūdhu bi-llāhi mina 'sh-shaytāni 'l-rajīm* ("I seek refuge from the wicked Satan"). This prayer is often used outside formal religious contexts to express surprise, shock, or indignation.

¹³ Muslims recite the *fātiha*, which means "The Opener," to commence and conclude a variety of formal religious affairs: sermons, lessons, engagements and marriage contracts, funerals, etc.

¹⁴ Eliade (1959), Turner (1975), and Smith (1982) have all written on the processes whereby ritual creates and delimits sacred or ritual spaces. Cf. Bell (1992: 99).

heads.

The *munshidûn* gather in a circle around the *shaykh al-zâwiya* with the *rayyis* or lead *munshid* at the center, usually standing in order to lead the *dhâkirûn* in the chanting and singing. The other *munshidûn* are known as the *ajniha* (sing. *jînâh*) or “wings” and alternately lead the singing or serve as a chorus for another *munshid*. The *ajniha* are chosen from among the participants for their strong voices, and older, established *munshidûn* may join as members of the *ajniha*. Many of Syria’s prominent singers began as members of *ajniha* in Aleppo’s *adhkâr*.

The remaining participants stand along the walls or sit in a roughly semi-circular pattern on the floor in front of the *munshidûn* and *shaykh al-zâwiya*. Because I was allowed to tape one session, I was seated to the left and center of the *shaykh al-zâwiya*, one row behind the *munshidûn*. One *munshid*, seeing me assemble my recorder, moved the microphone into position just in front of the *shaykh al-zâwiya*, who acknowledged me with a brief nod. Behind me and to my sides sat a mixture of men and boys, most wearing white or blue *jalabiyya*-s, only a few being in street clothes. Toward the back sat a man with his young daughter of perhaps six years standing by his side, her head covered in a light scarf. She was the only female in the *zâwiya* that day; women may participate but must do so in a separate room on the other side of the courtyard.

The *dhikr* consists of a number of sections or movements known as *fusûl* (sing. *fasl*). Each *fasl* consists of specific sequences of prayers and songs accompanied by particular movements of the body. There are six primary *fusûl* in the Aleppine *dhikr*. The first, *jalâla* (“majesty”), comprises the rhythmic and repetitive invocation of the first

segment of the *shahâda*: *lâ ilâha illâ 'llâh* (There is no God but Allah). These words are chanted in 8/4 tempo to a particular rhythm.¹⁵ Melodically, the syllables of the *shahâda* are chanted to three pitches that correspond roughly to the first (tonic), sixth (superdominant), and seventh (subtonic) tones of a major scale, beginning with the first, descending to the sixth, then ascending through the seventh back to the first.¹⁶

Jalâla is moreover accompanied by particular body movements, beginning with a bend to the right on the first two beats followed by a return to center on the third and fourth beats, then a bend to the left on beats five and six and a return to center on the seventh and eighth beats. The overall motion appears as a swinging from right to left, right to left. Like so many ritual motions in Islam, the motion of the *dhikr* begins to the right side, associated in Islamic tradition with goodness and purity, whereas the left side has connotations of evil and pollution. In a similar fashion, one enters a home or crosses a threshold with the right foot, eats and writes with the right hand, and circumambulates the Ka'aba (*tawwâf*) during the *hajj* or pilgrimage to Mecca by proceeding counterclockwise, that is, to the right.¹⁷ The chanting, regulated by the *rayyis*, provides the tempo for these movements, and as the chanting picks up tempo, the *dhâkirîn* move more quickly.

The *munshidûn* sing *waslât* or suites of religious *muwashshahât*¹⁸ while the *dhâkirîn* recite *Jalâla*: a suite may consist of a single *muwashshah* or several

¹⁵ In 8/4 time, having eight notes of quarter-note duration per measure, the rhythm is:  Initial tempo is approximately 100 bpm. Final tempo may exceed 240 bpm.

¹⁶ i.e., I = beats 1-4 ("lâ ilâhâ"); VI = beat 5 ("il"); VII = beat 6 ("la"); I = beats 7 and 8 ("lah").

¹⁷ Left-handedness is suspicious in Islam and hence left-handed children are often forced to switch to using their right hands (cf. Schimmel 1994: 61-62).

¹⁸ Some *muwashshahât*, such as *kullama rumtu irtishâfan*, are sung in both "sacred" and "profane" contexts.

muwashshahât sung sequentially without pause. At the end of each suite, the *rayyis* elevates the pitch of the chanting in a process known as *tarqiyya* (elevation).¹⁹ *Tarqiyya* proceeds according to three fixed patterns of tonic progressions based on the initial tonic pitch and *maqâm* chosen by the *rayyis*.²⁰ Along with raising the tonic pitch, the *rayyis* also accelerates the tempo, a process known as *kartah* (acceleration), usually by proclaiming *mawlâya*.²¹ ("my master") and slapping the back of his hand with increased vigor. The *dhâkirûn* continue to chant *jalâla* on the new *maqâm* and faster tempo, although with slightly altered rhythms and accentuations.²²

The twin processes of *tarqiyya* and *kartah* continue until the *dhâkirûn* reach the highest tonic pitch of the *maqâm* series and a very quick tempo. At this point the participants are practically shouting, the high pitch and quick tempo of the chanting blending their voices into a single Voice, beyond pitch and rhythm. Those standing along the walls swing right and left, while those seated on the floor sway back and forth, creating swirling and contrasting currents of motion. Sound and motion intensify until there is but noise and a blurring, the climax of the *fasl* having been reached. Then the *shaykh al-zâwiya* pronounces *Allah!* (lengthening the "ah") to close the *fasl*.

Like *jalâla*, the other principle *fusûl* begin either with a *muwashshah* or with

¹⁹ *Tarqiyya* refers to both the elevation of musical pitch and a metaphorical spiritual elevation and refinement. The cognate *râqî* means refined, civilized. Sometimes only one *muwashshah* is sung on a given *maqâm* before moving to a new *maqâm*.

²⁰ If the *rayyis* opens in *maqâm al-râst* C, the *tarqiyya* will be to *maqâm al-bayyâtî* D, then *maqâm al-jahârkâh* F or *maqâm al-râst* F, then *maqâm al-bayyâtî* G, and finally *maqâm al-huzâm* B♭. If he opens in *maqâm al-bayyâtî* D, it will be to *maqâm al-jahârkâh* F or *maqâm al-huzâm* F ♯ then *maqâm al-bayyâtî* A, *maqâm al-'ajam* C, and finally *maqâm al-muhayyir* d. If he opens with *maqâm al-huzâm* E♭, it will be to *maqâm al-bayyâtî* G or *maqâm al-'ajam* G, then *maqâm al-'awj 'irâq* B♭, *maqâm al-muhayyir* D, and finally *maqâm al-'ajam* F (Dalâl nd: 8-10). The equivalent descending patterns are found in some secondary *fusûl* of the *dhikr*; this process is then known as *takhfid* (lowering) (Dalâl nd: 8).

²¹ Probably in reference to "maulâna" (our master) Jalâl al-Dîn Rûmî, founder of the *mawlawiyya* rite.

²² These rhythms are:  and then 

prayers followed by a *muwashshah* or sung poem (*qasida*).²³ Prayers and songs are accompanied by different chants and proceed through the stages of *tarqiyya* and *kartah* until the *shaykh* calls “Allah” and the *fasl* ends with a closure (*qafla*). Secondary *fusûl*, as many as twenty, can be interspersed between the second and third principle *fusûl*, thereby granting the *dhikr* a flexible, open-ended structure.²⁴ Each secondary *fasl* follows a similar structure to the other *fusûl* and includes suites of songs, prayers, and invocations.²⁵ Toward the end of the *dhikr*, someone may perform the *mawlawiyya* dance, donning a black robe and twirling in front of the *shaykh al-zâwiya* until the *fasl* closes.²⁶

Finally, each *fasl* ends with a closing sequence or *qafla* (lit. “lock”) at which point the *dhâkirîn* rest before opening the next *fasl* or concluding the *dhikr*. However, closure in the *dhikr* is never final. The *qafla*, like the musical *qafla* in the *taqsim*,²⁷ marks a temporary pause before the opening of another *fasl* or of another *dhikr*, if it is the *qafla* of the last *fasl*. The end of the *dhikr* itself is not marked with any sort of finality. When the last *fasl* concludes, the *dhâkirîn* recite the *fâtîha*, which in this case “closes” the *dhikr* (whereas it opens and closes other Islamic rituals) then arise and exit the *zâwiya*. Some linger in the courtyard and chat before the next call to prayer brings them back inside for prayer – the *dhikr* usually being held between the noon prayer, *salât al-zuhr*, and the

²³ The other principle *fusûl* are *musaddir* (“introducer”), *musaddir maqsum* (“divided introducer”), *sâwî* (“witherer”), *khamâri* (“intoxicator”), and *damdama* or *dandana* (“droning” or “humming”).

²⁴ The *dhikr* I taped consists of the six primary *fusûl*: *jalâla*, *musaddir*, *musaddir maqsum*, *khamara*, and *damdama*.

²⁵ Some secondary *fusûl* may include *takhfid*, the sequential lowering of tonic pitches, in addition to *tarqiyya*.

²⁶ This occurred in two different performances of *dhikr* I attended, one in Aleppo, where an individual performed the dance, and one in Damascus, where a team of eight dancers performed it. For a brief description of the Turkish *mevlevi* dance, see Stokes (1992: 217-220).

²⁷ See chapter seven on the role of the *qafla* in instrumental improvisation.

afternoon prayer, *salât al-'asr*, though some *zawâyâ* hold their *adhkâr* between *salât al-'asr* and *salât al-maghrib*, the sunset prayer. Others remain and perform supererogatory prayers (*nawâfil*, sing. *nâfila*), while still others head off home or to tend to affairs. Far from being an isolated ritual event, a given *halqa* or round of *dhikr* constitutes one moment in a general process of *dhikr* that recurs week after week, indeed day after day in Aleppo and throughout the Islamic world.

III) The Meanings and Symbols of the *Dhikr*

Having described the *dhikr* or any other “ritual,” there is the tendency to proceed to analyze it with respect to its meaning, symbols, and functions. The Aleppine *dhikr* certainly presents a rich domain for such analysis, with its intricate musical, kinesthetic, and “ritually charged” atmosphere. However, studies of Islamic rituals such as the *dhikr* have tended to reduce its dynamic to such functions as the mystification of power relations or their legitimation (e.g., Gilsenan 1971, 1982). Others have tended to reproduce Sufi ideologies, in particular those that claim that the aim and function of *dhikr* is to achieve union (*tawhid*) with God (e.g., Nasr 1972). Moreover, until recently, analyses of ritual behavior have tended to assume a strict division between ritual thought, on the one hand, and ritual action on the other. As Catherine Bell (1992, 1997) and Talal Asad (1993) have convincingly shown, most anthropological analyses of ritual have granted primacy to ritual *thought* and considered ritual action to be a peculiarly *thoughtless* variety of action. Witness, for example, the long tradition of studying myths as “charters” for ritual, blueprints for and of action, to borrow Geertz’s metaphor for the

function of religious symbolism (1966).

Following Asad (1993), Bell (1992, 1997), Mauss (1950), and others, I want to argue that the *dhikr* should be understood as a form of “embodied practice” and not as a form of action distinct from ideas about it. The meanings and connotations of the *dhikr* arise in its enactment and through the performance of its various sequences. The *dhikr* does not merely reflect the context in which it is enacted, it simultaneously creates and transforms this context so that meaning – if we can even speak properly of *the* meaning of such a rich and complex domain of spiritual practice – is continually suggested and deferred, in the Derridian sense (Derrida 1978). The multiple significations of the *dhikr* arise in their practice and are lent semantic continuity by the texts, authorities, and traditions of Sufism and the particular Sufi order (in this case, the Qadiriyya) that structure and legitimate the context in which participants undergo ritual embodiment and transformations. Yet, the *dhikr* does not so much reflect these relationships and contexts of power and authority (let alone mystify them) but participates in their construction (cf. Bell 1997: 82). The process of deferred signification is not open-ended: “tradition” defines (or attempts to define) the boundaries of practice and interpretation, but the complex and changing world in which the *dhikr* takes place raises the possibility for numerous novel interpretations and meanings to arise in the course of the performance of the *dhikr* and other spiritual and cultural practices.

With these considerations in mind, what are some of the possible aims and meanings that are enacted and embodied in the course of a performance of the *dhikr*? Of course, the primary motivation for performing the *dhikr* is the Qur’ānic injunction:

{*adhkurû allâha dhikran kathîran*}, “Be ever mindful of God” (XXXIII: 41). Indeed, participants at this particular *zâwiya* and others like it with whom I spoke claimed that for them the function and meaning of the *dhikr* is the fulfillment of their religious obligation to “be ever mindful of God” and the Prophets. Yet, being mindful of God is not limited to performing the *dhikr* in the *zâwiya*. In theory, one should invoke God when undertaking any important action: preparing to eat a meal, setting forth on a journey, entering someone’s home, sealing a business contract, and so on. One’s actions in the world should themselves be a form of *dhikr*. What, then, are some of the specific aims and meanings of the *dhikr* as performed in the Qadiriyya *zawâyâ* of Aleppo?

Sufi Perspectives on the Dhikr

According to Sufi theology, the *dhikr* is one component of the Sufi *tariqa* or “path”²⁸ that cleanses the “soul” and prepares the believer for an encounter with divine truth (*al-Haqq*). As a ritual process, the *dhikr* mirrors the Sufi vision of the progress of the human soul in its struggle toward the divine, what Schimmel (1975: 98) considers to be a Muslim version of the Christian *Via Purgativa*. Participants begin their journey through ritual ablutions, cleansing their bodies and souls of the pollution of the profane world (*dunyâ*). They gather and listen to the recitation of the Qur’ân and invoke God, which “comforts the heart” (XIII: 28). Prayers of supplication and forgiveness followed by invocation of the Most Beautiful Names opens the heart to *al-haqq*. The melodic and rhythmic progression of *tarqiyya* and *kartah* mirrors the adept’s spiritual elevation toward

²⁸ A Sufi *tariqa* is often called a “brotherhood,” after the French translation, “confrérie.”

the final stages before the encounter with *al-haqq* (if not actual unity) and completion of the journey. Just as the chanting and singing rise gradually from one *maqâm* to another, spiritual elevation (*tarqiyya ruhâniyya*) proceeds along what Sufis term the *maqâmât* or stations of the soul's journey toward the divine.

Yet, to understand more completely the aims and meanings of the *dhikr* requires a more precise explication of the meanings of the Arabic terms that are translated as "self," "soul," and "spirit." Western-language translations of Islamic texts and commentaries on them often use the terms "self," "soul," and sometimes "spirit" interchangeably. Indeed, even in Arabic texts the terms are often used interchangeably or indiscriminately (Smith and Haddad 1981: 18). The primary difficulty in rendering these terms resides in translating precisely the Arabic words *nafs* and *rûh*. In effect Arabic uses two words to describe three words in English. On the one hand, *nafs* refers to the "spirit," "soul," or "self," and sometimes, depending on the context, to "desire" or "person" (*Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam* 1995: 433-436; cf. Pandolfo 1997). Etymologically, *nafs* (pl. *anfus*) derives from the root *n-f-s*, having such cognates as *nafasa*, to breathe, and *al-nafas*, the breath. For example, the Qur'ân speaks of the *nafas al-rahmân*, the Breath of the Merciful, by which God infused the life-force into Adam (XXXII: 9) and Maryam when she conceived Jesus (XXI: 91) (Schimmel 1975: 268). On the other hand, *rûh* (pl. *arwâh*)²⁹ is usually translated as "spirit" or "soul," so there is potential confusion when referring to the soul since both *nafs* and *rûh* can mean "soul." The word *rûh* derives from the root *r-w-h*, from which is derived *rîh*, "wind." As numerous scholars have pointed

²⁹ The plural *arwâh* is never used in the Qur'ân. However, *arwâh* is used in popular parlance to refer to spirits, for example the spirits of the departed.

out, the notion of the breath, breathing, and wind are tied in many cultural traditions to concepts of the soul or spirit (Evans-Pritchard 1965: 22; Schimmel 1994: 184). *Rûh* and derived terms refer to life-sustaining forces, vital energies of the body, and hence “spirit” is perhaps the most appropriate translation. For this reason, Schimmel (1975, 1994), Chittick (1989, 1998), and other scholars translate *rûh* as “spirit.”

I have chosen to follow Schimmel and Chittick and use “self” to refer to the *nafs* when it refers to the conscious and intentional ego, and “soul” to refer to the *nafs* when it implies a more theological sense; “spirit” refers to *rûh*. The complexity of the linguistic and conceptual matrix in which notions of the soul, spirit, and self are found in Islam precludes any simple resolution of this matter. Indeed, some commentators, such as Nasr, refer to a “higher self” as if it were the soul, and a “lower self” as the intentional ego. Moreover, using derivations based on classical philology and theology is not necessarily appropriate for commenting on contemporary spiritual practices; rather, such derivations are meant in this context to suggest some of the possible spiritual and linguistic valences of contemporary spiritual exercises such as the *dhikr*. Such terms as self, soul, and spirit should be read with caution – even under what Derrida (1988) refers to as *erasure* – for any translation is in essence a palimpsest, a montage of inscriptions, hesitations, erasures, and bold interpretive sallies. In the end, the Qur’anic words ring true: {*wa yas ‘alûnaka ‘an ‘ir-rûhi qull ar-rûhu min ‘amri rabbî wa mâ ‘ûtîtum mina ‘l-‘ilmi ‘illâ qalîlan ...*} (And they ask thee concerning the spirit. Say: The spirit cometh by command of my Lord. Little indeed is the knowledge vouchsafed to you) (XVII: 85).

Returning to the aims and possible meanings of *dhikr*, Sufi manuals and

commentaries commonly argue that the aim of the *dhikr* is to bring adepts closer to God, with the ultimate goal of oblivion (*fanâ*) of the individual “self” (*nafs*) and its union (*ittihâd*) with the divine reality (*al-haqq*) (Nasr 1972; Schimmel 1975). Paradoxically, some texts refer to this final state as the simultaneous remainder (*baqâ*) of the “higher self” and the oblivion or obliteration of the “lower self,” both, presumably, called *nafs* (Baldick 1989: 3; Schimmel 1975: 178; *SEI* 1995: 189). Most orthodox Muslims would reject the claim that the human soul can literally unite with the divine essence because that would imply *shirk*, a sharing of the divine essence, which is incompatible with the doctrine of *tawhîd*, the Unity of God.³⁰ Metaphorically, however, *ittihâd* refers to states of proximity to the Divine, or even to a form of mystical knowledge or gnosis (*ma'rifa*, *mushâhada*)³¹ of the divine reality gained as a result of the spiritual practices and devotions of the Sufi path.

One component of this path, the *dhikr* brings the believer to a realization of divine truths such as the unity of God (*tawhîd*) and the unity of existence (*wahdat al-wujûd*). Since these truths are eternal and unchanging, the participants in the *dhikr* must have paradoxically “forgotten” what they must accept as articles of faith. Practicing the *dhikr* reminds them (the verb *dhakara* means to remind) so they will not “forget” again these

³⁰ It is important not to confuse the central Islamic tenet of *al-tawhîd*, the Unity of God (as opposed to plurality), with the Sufi doctrine of *al-ittihâd*, which refers to unity with the Divine Presence. The doctrine of *al-ittihâd* is most closely associated with the works of al-Fârâbî and the Ikhwân al-Safâ. Other Sufi schools of thought refer to this state as *ishrâq* (e.g. Suhrawardi) and *wusûl* (e.g. Ibn Sînâ). For more information on these different conceptions, see the entry “Tasawwuf” in the *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam* (*SEI*) 1995: 581.

³¹ Schimmel (1975; 1994) and other commentators make clear the distinction in Islam between human rational knowledge (*ilm*) and divine knowledge (*ma'rifa*). Practices such as the *dhikr* allow humans to witness the domain of *ma'rifa*, hence the term *mushâhada*, “witnessing,” “viewing,” or “seeing.”

truths about themselves and about reality.³² The *dhikr* in effect accomplishes this by bringing the faithful from a state of ignorance (*jahl*) to a state of knowing (*ma'rifa*), just as the advent of Islam brought the faithful from the *jahiliyya* of the pre-Islamic “Days of Ignorance” to the knowledge of divine will. The *Qur'ân*, also known as *al-dhikr al-hakîm*, “The Wise Remembrance,” serves as a reminder to the children of Abraham of their earlier covenant, and as a warning to humanity to follow the Straight Path.

Therefore we can understand the *dhikr* as a form of ritual remembrance, indeed an unveiling (*kashf*³³), of eternal truths that remain buried within us but which are revealed and re-membered through the embodied practices of the *dhikr*. The Sufi path, the practice of *dhikr*, the acts of invocation, effects this transformation from ignorance/forgetting to knowledge/remembrance. As Nasr writes (1972: 17), Sufi practices allow one “to become aware of what one has already been from eternity (*azal*) without one’s having realized it until the necessary transformation has come about.”

While prayer and constant meditation on the Names of God may lead to a state (*hâl*) of annihilation and perseverance, it is the particular musical and kinesthetic elements of the *dhikr* – the practice of *samâ'* (audition) – that Sufi texts most often cite as having the power to effect this transformation (al-Ghazzali 1901; Schimmel 1975: 168-76). *Samâ'* is thought capable of triggering an ecstatic state known as *wajd*, literally “finding.”³⁴ That is, Sufis “find” (*wajada*) God and attain a state of peacefulness

³² Remembering one’s true, higher self-soul implies a transcendence of a fundamental forgetting or, to borrow from Lacan, the subject’s “*méconnaissance*” of his own reality (Lacan 1991a: 167).

³³ Cf. Schimmel’s discussion of the tenth-century Iranian Sufi Nîfârî’s reference to *hijâb al-ma'rifa*, the veil of gnosis (Schimmel 1975: 46, 80-81, 192-93).

³⁴ Some musicians indicated that in non-sacred musical realms this state is referred to as *tarab*. Whether *wajd* and *tarab* “actually” refer to the same or similar states in these diverse contexts cannot be assumed or determined through analysis. See chapter seven for a discussion of *tarab*.

(*itmi'nân*) – a state reflected in the stillness of the *qaf̣la*, which comes after the expense of considerable energy in the performance of the *dhikr*. This peaceful state can instill such a sense of happiness that adepts fall into ecstasy; hence the paradox of an ecstatic peacefulness.³⁵ Behavior associated with this state varies from quiet, still and trance-like paralysis to violent spasmodic movements of the limbs, shouting, and occasionally such extreme acts as slashing the head, chewing glass, and inserting swords or skewers in various parts of the body (*darb al-shish*) (Crapanzano 1973; Gilsenan 1982). In Aleppine *adhkâr* I seldom noted more than a few rolled eyes and spasmodic movements, with an occasional knocking of a head against a wall. More extreme acts such as *darb al-shish* and chewing glass have been forbidden, so I was told, by authorities in Syria, although these practices can still be found amongst more “popular” (*shu'bi*) populations.³⁶

Study of the musical and kinesthetic elements of the *dhikr* reveals that the spiritual truths of Islam and the moral values to which they give rise cannot be understood as concepts abstracted from the actual lived experience of Muslims. Rather, Islamic spiritual practices and values are mutually constituted through the specific acts we call “rituals,” of which the practice of *dhikr* is only one. The *dhikr* participates in a wider field of spiritual practices – prayer, recitation, fasting, study, almsgiving – that engender in participants specific Islamic virtues. In this regard, what we might treat as a question of belief (and especially as inner belief as opposed to outer behavior) is less relevant than the question of participation. Participation in the *dhikr* and other “rituals” inculcates or

³⁵ Paul Nwiya argues that this state be called “instasy” rather than ecstasy because the adept is brought into the depths of his Self rather than outside of himself (Nwiya 1972: 276; cited in Schimmel 1975: 178).

³⁶ In Aleppo I saw an exhibition of photographs taken in a *zâwiya* in a Syrian city that still practiced *darb al-shish*.

engenders those states of spiritual experience that we might translate as faith, (*'aqīda*,³⁷ *īmān*) but which are not merely inner beliefs understood as separate from external actions and prior to them in the hierarchy of religious obligations (see Asad 1993; Bell 1992, 1997). Faith and ritual action are mutually constituted in the *dhikr* through its specific structure and through the various techniques that provide its dynamic, among them song and dance (*samā'*).

Indeed, the chanting and ritualized body movements constitute a form of ritual discipline, “techniques of the body” through which adepts simultaneously embody and express a relationship to the divine (cf. Mauss 1979). By the conclusion of the *dhikr* participants have been spiritually cleansed and disciplined, according to the Sufi view, and thereby are prepared for their return to profane life (*hayāt duniyā*); performance of the *dhikr* disciplines a moral self. Repetition of the *dhikr* every week, if not every day, further inscribes these practices into the adept’s spiritual and physical memory – re-members spiritual truths – and aids the progression of the soul to its final stage of “serenity.” The language of higher truth and transcendence evoked in the *dhikr* expresses not only participants’ relationship to the divine, but to themselves as well. Therefore, we should understand the *dhikr* as intimately related to the complex processes of self formation, via moral discipline, and also self characterization and presentation since, as Crapanzano (1992) and others have shown, conceptions of the self and personhood arise in the dialogical engagement of self and other which has an important presentational

³⁷ *'Aqīda* does not appear in the Qur’ān with this meaning. The word derives from the root ‘-q-d, implying a binding together, a tying or linking, not dissimilar to the Latin *religare*, to tie back, to rebind, to yoke, from which “religion” derives.

element.³⁸

Artistic, Dramatic, and Social Aspects of the Dhikr

It is important to note that the *dhikr* does not necessarily have mystical or even spiritual meaning for all participants. Few participants of the *adhkâr* I attended described its meaning for them in Sufi terminology, though some did argue that the *dhikr* brings them to a state of spiritual elevation, *sumû rūhânî*. They described this state as a sort of floating or hovering (*tahlîq*) in elevated airs (*ajwâ'*). Interestingly, as I examine in chapter seven, many musicians use the same terms to describe the process and experience of improvisation. Yet, none of the participants with whom I spoke suggested that unity with God was the true goal of the *dhikr*. Some suggested that nearness (*taqarrub*) to God was possible but that union with the divine was not (perhaps in line with Sunni teachings that deny the possibility of unity with God). In fact, many did not claim to have a particularly strong identification with Sufism at all. For them performing *dhikr* is a Sunni obligation, part of what they consider to be a normative and not particularly mystical variety of Islamic worship. Just as Crapanzano (1973) found that the dramatic rituals of the Hamadsha Sufi lodges in Morocco had more to do with notions of spirit possession and exorcism than with Divine union, in Aleppo the *dhikr* has a practical and non-mystical meaning or effect for many of its participants. Labeling the *dhikr* a "Sufi ritual" in some ways obscures for us its potential meanings.

For example, some Aleppans attend the *dhikr* more for its artistic than for its spiritual content. This includes Muslims and some non-Muslims interested in the musical

³⁸ Crapanzano (1992) advances a triadic conception of self characterization, which I explore in chapter seven. cf. Goffman (1959).

or performance aspects of the *dhikr*. The director of the Arab Music Institute in Aleppo, a Syriac Christian, claimed to have attended *adhkâr* for many years as part of his field research on Oriental (*sharqî*) melodies and rhythms. Contemporary musicians study the genres and melodic and rhythmic processes of the *dhikr* as a basis for their compositions and performances. Some musicians suggested that the step-wise melodic progression of *tarqîyya* might provide the basis for novel modulations in Arab music composition and improvisation, which seldom follow step-wise progressions (S. Marcus 1992).³⁹ For devout and non-devout participants, attending the *dhikr* provides a solid training ground for acquiring a strong voice and learning the *maqâmât*. As previously mentioned, most of the prominent Aleppine vocalists and musicians of the past century received their primary musical training in the *zâwiya*. The younger generation continues this tradition.

Aside from its artistic aspects, an important function of the *dhikr* for some participants is what is known as *fishsh al-qalb*,⁴⁰ the cathartic release of tension from the heart (*qalb*) “like air from a balloon,” as one friend put it – *fishsh* being the sound of air escaping from a balloon.⁴¹ Another explained that performing the *dhikr* releases emotional tension and energy that might otherwise be released in violent ways; evoking Aristotle’s discussion of catharsis in the *Poetics*, he argued that the *dhikr* is a form of

³⁹ See the discussion of Muḥamad Qadri Dalal’s experiments in “non-modal” improvisations in chapter seven.

⁴⁰ In colloquial Syrian Arabic: *fishsh al-‘alb*. In urban varieties of Syrian colloquial Arabic, the letter *qāf* (q) is usually pronounced as the letter *hamza* (‘).

⁴¹ This phrase is also used in aesthetic discourse to refer to the absence of qualities in an artistic work that might “*fishsh al-‘alb*.” When asked about a concert or exhibition, one might respond, *mā fī shī bi-fishsh al-‘alb* (lit. “there’s nothing that releases the heart’s tension”), in other words, “it was not very good.”

drama.⁴² The progression from slower to faster tempos and from lower to higher pitches in conjunction with repeated bodily movements has the effect of generating and releasing psychic and physical tension, according to many participants. Some further argued that *dhikr* is a good form of exercise, beneficial practically as well as spiritually.⁴³ These evaluations make sense given the high energy of the *dhikr* and the fact that it can be demanding physically, let alone spiritually. Chanting and moving for three or more hours with 200 others in often intense heat can be exhausting, to say the least.

Occasionally participants attend the *dhikr* to seek the cure of a physical or spiritual ailment. In some *zawāyā* in Aleppo, the *shaykh al-zāwiya* is thought to be able to cure illness because of his unique endowment of *baraka*, a special spiritual power and presence.⁴⁴ Before the first *fusl* commences and while the Qur'ān is being recited, people afflicted with back aches, paralysis of limbs, spirit possession, or other (usually somaticized) illnesses, gather round the *shaykh*. The afflicted sits before the *shaykh* and either he or a caretaker whispers the particular ailment in the *shaykh*'s ear. The *shaykh* then lays his hands upon the afflicted part of the body and recites certain prayers or puffs a breath of air into the face of the afflicted person. It is believed that the *shaykh*'s touch, prayers, and even his breath – energized by his *baraka* – will thereby effect a cure. The link between the *shaykh*'s breath, his *baraka*, and his power to cure suggests the previously described correlation in Arabic between the words for soul (*nafs*, *ruh*), on the

⁴² What some participants identified as the dramatic structure and function of the *dhikr* recalls Victor Turner's (1968, 1974) discussion of the cathartic effect of ritual as "social drama" and Jane Harrison's (1912) examination of catharsis in the ancient Greek *dithyrambic* rites (yet, see Bell 1992, 1997 among others for critiques of these models).

⁴³ cf. Hugh of St. Victor's view that the Christian sacraments were instituted "on account of humiliation, on account instruction, and on account of exercise" (cited in Asad 1993: 78).

⁴⁴ For some definitions of *baraka*, see Geertz (1968), Crapanzano (1973), Eickelman (1976), Schimmel (1994), among others.

one hand, and breath and wind (*nafas, rîh*), on the other.

For many participants, the *dhikr* is an important social ritual that brings people together to share in a sense of community. In recent times, when having a strong Islamic identity has been officially suspect, the *zâwiya* has served as an important domain for collective forms of worship. This is especially the case after what are referred to simply as the “happenings” (*al-ahdâth*) of Aleppo in 1982, when the city was blockaded by the Syrian army for a month and large sections of traditionally Islamic neighborhoods were razed, including the neighborhood near one of the *zawâiyâ* at which I attended the *dhikr*. The government hoped thereby to prevent a feared uprising by the Muslim Brotherhood against the regime, as happened elsewhere in Syria, most notably in the city of Hama. In the context of these events, the *dhikr* brings people together for prayer and invocation, for song, for psychic and physical release, and to strengthen their commitment to Islam and to one another, and to help raise a new generation in the spiritual (and, as my teacher remarked, musical) traditions of the city.

Performing the *dhikr* brings participants together but it also effects certain transformations in the social order as well. Within the *dhikr* social hierarchies are ritually erased as rich and poor, who outside the *dhikr* might not have any social contact, sit side by side on the carpets invoking the names of God. At the same time, spiritual hierarchies are raised within the boundaries of the *zâwiya*, and the materially poor may occupy a higher spiritual status than the materially wealthy. This is especially true for descendants of the founding *shaykh*, who stand in the privileged position along the back wall of the *zâwiya* during the *dhikr* and who, along with *shaykh al-zâwiya*, wear a uniquely colored

turban. Even the wealthiest of the local merchants, such as the merchant in chapter three who showed me his 500 year-old genealogical scroll, pay ritual deference to the poorest of these descendants, the so-called *darâwîsh*, which in the local dialect means at once “spiritual mendicants” and “impoverished people.” In this way the *dhikr* bends and often breaks the normal rules of social intercourse, emphasizing brotherhood through piety, community through adherence to a common tradition, but also a spiritual hierarchy in which descent (*nasab*) plays a role alongside piety (*taqwa*) in determining one’s rank (*hasab*).

Certainly the above remarks pertain to those believers who attend the *dhikr* for spiritual reasons as well as out of any interest in its artistic aspects. We should not, however, romanticize the sense of community that the *dhikr* might create despite whatever states of *communitas* the participants in the *dhikr* might achieve or evoke. Individuals attend the *dhikr* for numerous reasons not all of them mutually compatible, and it would be naïve to suggest that a weekly ritual could eliminate the potentiality for discord and difference within any community of believers. Social tensions are not necessarily ameliorated in the *dhikr* and may even be exacerbated. For instance, the formation of spiritual hierarchies that grant descendants of the founding *shaykh* higher status within the *zâwiya* than they might enjoy outside of it might cause tension. Differences often arise within the *dhikr* amongst the *munshidûn*. A now famous dispute arose some years ago between two well-known *munshidûn* in Aleppo, leading to tensions within the various *zawâyâ* when either one attended the *dhikr*. Attempts to reconcile the two have failed. The *zâwiya* therefore can be the domain of discord as well of communal

feeling.

Moreover, many Sunni Muslims avoid the *zawāyā* and denounce the *dhikr* as being outside the normative tradition, though they accept the Qur'ānic command to perform *dhikr* and interpret it to mean the quiet *dhikr* of the heart (*dhikr al-qalb*) – as opposed to the louder *dhikr* of the tongue (*dhikr al-lisān*) associated with *fishsh al-qalb*. Secularists, for their part, often ridicule those who attend the *dhikr* as backwards, overly emotional, and – ironically, given their professed *lack* of faith – unorthodox. Many contemporary Syrians are content to watch *mawlawiyya* dancers twirl in a restaurant to the sounds of the *'ūd*, *qānūn*, and *nāy*, instruments never found in Syrian *zawāyā*, but very few would attend the *dhikr* themselves or even encourage their children or siblings to do so, or even to learn one of these instruments. The above remarks are meant to suggest some of the possible social transformations that may occur in the Aleppine *dhikr* both as a religious ritual and as a musical event.

In addition to the social transformations that are enacted in the *zāwiya*, time itself is transformed and altered. While the structure and dynamic of the *dhikr* might on first view suggest a temporal linearity from opening (*fātiha*) to closing (*qafla*), in fact a plurality of temporalities converge. The *dhikr* occurs within a finite, delimited span of time, usually the few hours between the noon and afternoon prayers, though some rounds of *dhikr* take place at other times of the day. Moreover, an individual round of *dhikr* can be compartmentalized into its various *fusūl*, each *fasl* further divided into prayers and suites of *muwashshahāt*, these in turn divided into sections or movements, constituent tempos, and so on. These divisions create a sense of finiteness, or order, and of linear

momentum.

However, at the same time the *dhikr* evokes numerous non-finite and non-linear temporalities within this delimited time frame. First and foremost, the *dhikr* evokes the eternal time of creation (*khalq*) and the eternity of the Qur'ân, considered timeless, uncreated.⁴⁵ Among the Most Beautiful Names invoked are *al-dahr*, "Eternity," and *al-dâ'im*, "The Everlasting," "The Eternal" (cf. Berque 1993). As adepts approach the *barzakh* or limit⁴⁶ between human intelligence (*'aql*) and the Divine knowledge (*ma'rifa*), between the finite (*nihâ 'î*, *mahdûd*) and the infinite (*lâ nihâ 'î*), they move from linear, measurable time toward the eternal, toward eternity (*azal*, *'abad*), timeless, outside of time. Similarly, the gradual increase in the tempo of invocation and *inshâd* during the process of *kartah* contributes to a sense of having overcome finite, measurable time as the chanting melts into one extended invocation: God, eternal, timeless. The different tempos of each *fasl* evoke different perceptions of temporality: the slow, majestic time of eternal motion in the slower portions, the compressed time of the soul's frenetic ascent to the *barzakh* of the divine in the faster portions, the eternity of judgment with the stillness of the *qafla*. Yet, the sequential, linear progression from *fâtiha* to final *qafla* is interrupted by intermediate *qaflât*, secondary *fusûl*, and even (in some secondary *fusûl*) the process of *takhfîd*, a slowing down. One *fasl* leads to another, as one *dhikr* leads to the next, suggesting the cyclical nature of creation, the progression of the days, weeks, months, and seasons.

⁴⁵ This is not the place to examine the debates between the Mu'tazilite and Ash'arite schools of Islamic theology (*kalâm*) regarding the nature of the Qur'ân, the former arguing for a created Qur'ân, the latter for an eternal, uncreated Qur'ân. See Rahman (1979: 85-99).

⁴⁶ The concept of the *barzakh* plays an important role in the Sufism of Ibn al-'Arabi as the interstitial, liminal realm between human and spiritual life forms (see Chittick 1989, 1998; Corbin 1997 [1969]).

Finally, the finite *dhikr* evokes the eternal *Dhikr*, a continual process of invocation and remembrance, just as the single call to prayer (*adhân*) echoes not only across the rooftops of the City of Aleppo but across all the lands of Islam – the entire globe – forming a continuous chain of calls to prayer, a virtual wave of spiritual sound encircling the Earth as the prayer times in adjacent cities and lands follow one upon the other in a perpetual, eternal sequence. From the perspective of eternal time, the combined calls to prayer constitute a single, eternal Call, itself a reminder, and a warning.

IV) *al-Qafla*

This chapter departs from most discussions of the *dhikr* in Islamic society by exploring the *dhikr* in Aleppo as a religious, musical, artistic, and cultural phenomenon intimately related to processes of self-formation and transformations in the experience of temporality. I have striven to take the Sufi perspective seriously, examining how specific musical and kinesthetic processes structure the *dhikr* in Aleppo and construct an experiential world in which Islamic values are evoked, performed, and inscribed in the bodies and memories of participants. As a variety of spiritual practice, the *dhikr* allows participants to transcend their mundane existence and approach a realization of their “Self-ness” and – to borrow a phrase from al-Ghazzâlî – acknowledge the signs of truth in the world and in themselves and thereby reenact and memorialize themselves through experiences framed as fundamentally spiritual. I argue that this is a form of ritual memory making and re-membling resulting in the disciplining of a locally specific understanding of moral selfhood. It also represents of type of forgetting; indeed, a

dialectic of memory and forgetting, existence and oblivion, can be traced in the *dhikr*.

The problem of ascertaining the meaning of the *dhikr* is far more complex than an initial reading of Sufi commentaries might portray. Indeed, the very idea of a stable meaning of the *dhikr* needs to be handled with caution. Any attempt to ascertain the meanings of the *dhikr* as if it were a text to be read and interpreted implies a distinction between belief and behavior, and thought and action, that ignores the more pragmatic and performative elements of the *dhikr*. The multiple meanings of the *dhikr* in Aleppo emerge in its enactment, not in readings of interpretations and commentaries on the *dhikr* and other Islamic spiritual practices. The *dhikr* is thus a performative practice, at once expressing the social and material context in which it occurs and creating new contexts. Fundamental texts remain as anchors to these emergent meanings but they do not determine them.

I have modulated, to borrow a musical metaphor, to the topic of the *dhikr* in order to suggest the centrality of the *idea* of the *dhikr* as a source of authenticity in Aleppo's musical culture. As I indicated above, many Aleppine musicians consider the *dhikr* to be an origin of their "secular" musical practices and a veritable "conservatory" – both in the sense of a music institute and as a domain of preservation – for learning the particular musical arts that comprise the "sacred" and "secular" repertoires (keeping in mind the slipperiness of this distinction). Moreover, Sufism in general serves as a strong metaphor of authenticity for a number of contemporary Syrian artists and intellectuals for whom spiritual practices such as the *dhikr* refer to a broader realm of experience that believers, musicians, and promoters of heritage cultural politics alike consider uniquely authentic.

The temporal transformations that occur in the course of the *dhikr*, the simultaneous evocation of finite and infinite temporalities, and the transformative power of the *barzakh* between the physical and the spiritual domains engage in the broader discourses of authenticity in which detemporalized experience (“myth,” “the past”) is thought of as more authentic than temporalized experience (“history”), as discussed in the previous chapter. The *dhikr* evokes these same correspondences between suspended or transformed temporal orientations and authenticity in a space uniquely spiritual, thereby providing yet another metaphorical time-space of authentic culture: the *zāwiya* as a locus of the authentic and, as in my teacher’s remarks, a defense against the inauthentic and a preserver of authenticity for future generations. Finally, the *dhikr* also becomes a site of authenticity through its association with the spirit (*rūh*) and the extensive domain of emotional life that many Syrians value. The following chapters on the performance of the secular repertoire and the concept of *tarab* explore how conceptions of the emotions and the discourse of emotionality and transcendence conveyed in such domains as the *zāwiya* and the *sahra* metaphorize intricate processes of social interaction and self-presentation that contribute to Aleppine understandings of musical and social authenticity.

Chapter Six: Authentic Performances and the Performance of Authenticity

1) *al-Matla'*: The Master in Concert

Its another hot July day, and as I zip along the streets of Aleppo in a packed minibus I notice a colorful sign draped across the light posts at an intersection. Usually these signs announce upcoming concerts by local singers, generally those who sing in the modern pop style: "*An Evening with the Mutriba Nawal al-Zughby, with a Luxurious Meal, at the Miami Club!*" is just one example. Such placards are common in Damascus and Aleppo, especially at major intersections and plazas. One older musician expressed his dismay that today singers are presented as "just another dish" in the evening's offerings. For this reason I am a little surprised to find that the proffered artist is none other than "*The Great Arab Mutrib Sabah Fakhri, for One Show Only at The Freedom Club, 31 July 1997.*" No mention was made of food....

The next day I make my way to the Freedom Club (*nādi al-huriyya*), which, along with The Resort (*al-muntadah*), Miami, and The Spring (*al-rabi'*), is one of Aleppo's premier clubs (*nawādi*). The *nawādi* are combination social and health clubs, often featuring large swimming pools, gymnasiums, meeting halls, lounges, and often fancy restaurants. Usually only members can use the facilities during the day, but clubs often open their restaurants to the public in the evenings. However, the expense of dining there means that only certain classes ever go. Another common function of the Aleppine clubs is to host evening concerts or *saharāt*. In many ways this distinguishes Aleppo from Damascus, where most shows are held in hotel night clubs and certain cabarets in the

foothills surrounding the Rabwa Valley on the city's Western outskirts and along the highway to the airport to the Southeast.

Arriving at the front entrance I find a small number of people gathered about who like me have come for tickets. When my turn comes I am presented with the option of sitting in the *shabâb* (youth) or '*â'ilât* (families) section. Since I am there alone, I decide to sit with the *shabâb*; had my wife come we would have had to sit in the '*â'ilât* section since women, married or otherwise, cannot sit with the *shabâb* – what would people say? Plus, at 500 lira (approximately \$10), sitting with the *shabâb* is a little cheaper than the 750 lira "family" seats.

The ticket says that the show begins at 9:00 p.m. Although I have become accustomed to Aleppine conceptions of time (most appointments are afforded at least a half-hour leeway), I show up at 8:30 in order to make sure to get a good seat. Not only am I early and the first person in line, they haven't even begun to set up for the show. I stand at the gate for about half an hour before a few others begin to trickle over, including a young singer I frequently run into at other concerts. He sometimes sings in Sabah Fakhri's chorus and studies *muwashshahât* with him in his monthly workshops in Aleppo. He doesn't have a ticket and hopes that "Ustâz Sabâh" will let him in for free, but the master has yet to show up and the young guy is stuck standing at the gate with the rest of us; he would later get in. About 9:30 they finally open the gates and a number of us wander in.

The club consists of a large outdoor swimming pool enclosed on four sides by low buildings, a cafeteria, and a gym. At one end of the pool is the stage, and before it and to either side of the pool are set a number of tables with white table cloths – the "family"

section. At the opposite end of the pool are about 100 plastic chairs arranged in neat rows – the “youth” section. It’s a good 40 meters from the first row of the “youth” section to the stage, but it affords a nice view of the performers and the audience. I grab a seat right on the edge of the pool, but later I will regret my decision when evening finally falls and cool winds begin to blow across the waters and chill me to the bone. But for now I am quite pleased with my location, get my notebook and camera ready, and take in the scene.

Not long after I sit down a group of *shabâb* file in next to me. Each has brought along the hose pipe and mouthpiece for a *nargîla* (water pipe) and are anxious to get one of the club staff to bring a lighted *nargîla* over to pool-side so they can begin their evening’s entertainment in earnest. Once they are settled in and happily puffing away – their pipes making that familiar gurgling sound – one of them, a young man of about 30 years dressed smartly but casually (and warmly – evidently an experienced concert-goer), notices my note pad and camera and asks me what I am up to. I describe my research on Syrian music, and he begins a long tale of how he is obsessed with the music. He is the closest I have met in Syria to what might be called a Sabah Fakhri “groupie,” for he claims to attend over 30 of his shows a year and has traveled as far as Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt to hear him sing. I ask him why he goes to so many concerts, and he replies, “I am a true *sammi’a*” (cultivated listener); I cannot live without it.”

At around 9:15 a group of musicians comes onto the stage and begins to get set up. The audience applauds weakly, while a couple of *shabâb* get up and begin a mock dance even though there is as yet no music, earning jeers and laughter from their compatriots, then sitting back in their plastic chairs. The *qânûn*-player, whom I had

befriended at his cassette shop a few weeks earlier, takes a seat center stage. To his right sit five violinists, and to his left two cellists, an *'ūd*-player, and two percussionists, who set a variety of drums before them, including the *riqq*, *tabla*, and *daff*. Five vocalists appear behind microphones stage-right while the instrumentalists tune their instruments. One of the vocalists begins to sing a *layâlî*, "O night! O eye!," while the *qânûn*, *'ūd*, and violin play a drone note and improvise behind him. No sooner has he started then he stops, and the orchestra begins playing a well-known *samâ'î*. It is just a sound-check, and soon the musicians leave the stage. I try to occupy myself by drawing a map of the club and the locations of the performers on stage, but my *nargila*-smoking neighbor, looking at my obscure drawing, shakes his head and laughs lightly, as if to say, "What on earth are you doing? Have some fun!" and offers me a drag on the *nargila*.

By 10:30 the wind has begun to pick up and I am getting rather cold. A few drags on the *nargila* help a bit, but I am wondering when the show will really start. The club is now full: families sit at their tables waiting patiently or engaged in discussions, while the *shabâb* sit nervously chatting, getting up to get colas or *kabâb* and *shawârmâ* sandwiches from the cafeteria, ordering more *nargilas*.

The show finally begins at 11:20 when a man – apparently the emcee – comes on stage and, after welcoming everyone to the club (*ahlan wa sahlân fikum bi-nâdî al-huriyya!*), recites a poem on Aleppo. I can't understand what he is saying, and neither can my neighbor – when I ask him what the poem is, he says, "some old *qasîda* on Aleppo." Nearly every public event I have attended in Aleppo has begun with the recitation of a poem about the city, usually a classical *qasîda* by such poets as al-Mutanabbi and Abu Firâs al-Hamdânî, and sometimes poems by contemporary poets.

The emcee then speaks about the Andalusian *muwashshahât* and the role of Aleppo as a preserver – *the* preserver – of the great Arab-Andalusian musical-poetic tradition. Some of the *shabâb* shout *yâ ‘aynî* (“O my eye”), *yâ rîhî* (“O my soul”)¹ in what seems to me to be a satire of the traditional responses to vocalists and musicians when they perform well and cause *tarab*. The man then introduces Sabah Fakhri as *ibn halab al-bârr*, the “Righteous Son of Aleppo” (echoing the slogan on Fakhri’s campaign posters when he ran – unsuccessfully – for a seat in the Syrian parliament a few years ago) and the audience, *shabâb* and *‘â’ilât* alike – break into spirited applause.

Yâsîn al-‘Âshiq, a composer and Sabah Fakhri’s lead violinist, comes on stage and stands before a microphone in front of the orchestra. With a wave of his bow, the orchestra begins to play his composition “*Ahlâm al-shabâb*” (The dreams of youth), an instrumental piece that traditionally opens Sabah Fakhri’s concerts. It features changes in mode, meter, and has several sections of improvisation by the various instrumentalists, including the percussionists; in fact, it is the measures of percussion “breaks” that really get the *shabâb* off their feet, clapping and dancing, establishing a mirthful atmosphere while the aging al-‘Âshiq leads the orchestra with his affable stage presence and sardonic humor on the violin.

As “*Ahlâm al-shabâb*” comes to a close, the family section suddenly bursts into applause and cheers: Sabah Fakhri has appeared in the wings. A group of white doves are released and flutter about confusedly for a moment before scattering to the tops of the club buildings. The great artist acknowledges the applause, raising his arms over his head in the fashion of a political leader and bowing, then mounts the stage as the music

¹ These are both terms of endearment, equivalent to the English phrase “apple of my eye” or “my love.”

ends, turning his back to face the musicians. Seeing him on stage, the *shabâb* yell and scream too.

The orchestra begins to play a *dûlâb* or short introductory piece in the *maqâm hijâz kâr* and Fakhri cocks his head to one side as if listening intently. He pays special attention to the percussionists, standing before them and having them adjust the volume of their playing. He then walks over and listens to the violins, says a word or two, and several of them retune their instruments. The *qânûnjî* embellishes a descending phrase of the *dûlâb* with quick finger work, and Fakhri nods to him in appreciation. As I begin to scribble some notes on my notepad, my neighbor leans over and, smiling, says, “*maqâm hijâz kâr!*” then leans back in his chair and puffs on the *nargîla*. Its gurgling makes for an interesting counterpart to the orchestra.

Once the *dûlâb* ends, Fakhri – Ustaz Sabah – begins to sing the first *muwashshah* of the evening: “*Murru ‘l-tajanni*” (Bitter is the accusation). The first line states, “*murru ‘l-tajanni badi’ al-muḥayyâ hilû ‘l-tathanni ‘adr li al-humayyâ*” (Bitter is the accusation, wonderful is the countenance. Sweet the swaying, the passion overflows me). It is a song of passion and love – a typical theme for the *muwashshahât* – and sung in the higher dialect of Arabic. I ask my neighbor what the song is, and he replies, “*murr al-tajanni, hijâz kâr!*” I then ask what the words means, and he replies, *wallâhi* (By God!) I don’t understand all the words, because they’re difficult. But it’s about love. We often don’t understand these old songs but we like to listen to them [anyway].” I ask why, and he says, “They’re ‘sweet’ (*hilwa*),” using that all-purpose aesthetic term to describe the music. We return to listening.

Aside from a few *shabâb* who are settling in their seats with sandwiches or soft drinks, the audience is quiet and somewhat subdued, sitting and listening to the great master vocalist and the smooth sounds of the orchestra. This *muwashshah*, while not among the slower in the Aleppine repertoire, has a stately meter (approx. 70 bpm). The *maqâm* – *hijâz kâr* – hovers in the upper register before finishing in the lower, suggesting a reflective mood, complaint, the bitterness of the accusation resolving in a flood of passion as the orchestra descends to the lower register. As is common in *muwashshahât*, the poetic and musical meters do not precisely coincide, so “filler” words such as *amân* (“peace”) and *yâ layl* are added either at the end or between hemistiches of the poetry. These afford the *mutrib* the opportunity to display his skill and vocal range. The first lines of “*Murru 'l-tajannî*” end in *amân*, and when Ustaz Sabah finishes them with a melismatic flourish the audience shouts its approval. A couple of men in the family section jump out of their seats and raise their arms, then sit back down with sheepish grins on their faces. It is only midnight, still early in the evening.

The *wasla* proceeds through two more *muwashshahât* in the same *maqâm*: *hijâz kâr*. In fact, the entire *wasla* remains in the same *maqâm* with the exception of modulations to related *maqâmât* during instrumental improvisations (*taqâsîm*), for example, or solo singing. The latter *muwashshahât* are much faster, and the audience claps along. Some of the *shabâb* arise and dance, and another group shouts out a traditional wedding chant as an expression of joy and not a little bravado. A couple of men in the family section sing along with the *mutrib*, and another plays “air *tabla*,” mimicking the rhythm of the percussionists with his hands. Ustaz Sabah waves his arms as he sings, and people shout “*aywâ!*” (“Yes!”) and “*yâ 'aynî!*” in encouragement. A

young man to one side of the pool gets up and begins what I have come to term the “semaphore dance,” waving paper tissues with his hands up and down, side to side, as if directing some wayward airplane to a crash landing in the pool with vague and confusing signs. He seems a little odd since no one else around him is dancing, though others look on smiling and he clearly is having a good time.

At the conclusion of the last *muwashshah* the orchestra pauses and the audience bursts into applause. Ustaz Sabah bows and raises his arms, then turns to the orchestra, has the cellists retune, and says a few words to the *qânûn* and *‘ûd* players. Then the orchestra begins the next section of the *wasla*, consisting of the *ughniya* (song) “*Yâ nâs anâ mutt fî hubbi*” (O people, I have died in my love) by the Egyptian composer Sayyid Darwish (1892-1923); the folksy Egyptian song “*Yâ mariyâ*” (O Maria); and the formidable *dawr* (multi-part song) “*Yâ mâ inta wâhishni*” (O you whom I miss) by the nineteenth-century Egyptian composer Muhammad ‘Uthmân. These songs are composed in the Egyptian style and sung in the Egyptian colloquial dialect. Musically this means a sense of lightness and modernity as opposed to the heaviness and antiquity of the *muwashshah* genre. The meters of these songs tend to be simpler and the melodies lighter if still complex, especially the multi-part *dawr*, which also includes extended vocal improvisations and exchanges between the *mutrib* and the chorus. Especially in the “*ahât*” section of the *dawr*, when the *mutrib* and chorus sing operatic “Ahs” throughout the range of the *maqâm*, the audience responds energetically – singing along, clapping, dancing, shouting encouragement, and so on. The mood is much more enlivened, though still somewhat restrained; everyone is having a good time but I have a feeling that we still have not reached the heart of the matter.

After the conclusion of the *dawr*, the orchestra takes a five minute break. It is nearly 1:00 am and now that I am not writing in my notepad I realize how cold it is; I curse myself for not having the foresight to bring at least a sweater. My neighbors get up to stretch their legs, we exchange a few words about the *dawr* and how great Ustaz Sabah sings it – “Better even than the Egyptians,” says the groupie, with obvious pride. “No one sings it like him. except maybe the late (*marhûm*) Muhammad Khairi,” another well-liked Aleppine singer and contemporary of Fakhri’s who died in 1981.

While Ustaz Sabah is still off stage, the orchestra returns and commences the second *wasla* with a *dûlâb* in the *maqâm râst*. The mood is immediately lively and the instrumentalists perform with gusto, adding numerous embellishments. Ustaz Sabah returns to great applause and launches into the *muwashshah* “*Ahinnu shawqan*” (I Long with Yearning). It is a slow number (60 bpm) and the audience seems a bit distracted: conversations ensue, *nargilas* are refilled, we are settling in for the rest of the evening. This is the only *muwashshah* of this *wasla* since at its close the ‘ûd player begins a *taqsîm* or solo improvisation. Beginning low in the register of the *maqâm* he strums out a long drone on the tonic note (middle C). He then proceeds slowly to explore the lower range of the *maqâm*, then its mid range, modulating briefly to a related mode before closing back on the tonic. He then progresses back up the *maqâm* until he is in the upper range, now employing a great deal of *rishsh* or fast trilling with the plectrum (*rîsha*) as he modulates through a number of *maqâmât*. Unlike many players, he does not make dramatic pauses between sections but plays right on, buzzing like a bee with all the *rishsh* and showing his fancy technique by playing in the highest register at the inner positions near the body of the instrument. The audience comes alive to his technical fireworks and

shouts encouragement, “*aywâ!*” “*yâ rūhî!*” Finally he makes a dramatic ending by coursing through some difficult arpeggios all the while maintaining a constant bass drone and lightening-fast *rishsh*, then closes with a *qafla* on the tonic. The audience erupts into wild applause and he settles into a quiet droning, and the *qânûn* joins in.

Ustaz Sabah then begins to sing the *qasîda* “*Salû fu ‘âdî*” (Ask my heart), a lover’s complaint. In the *qasîda*, the *mutrib* sings a classical poem to a melody that he improvises, usually accompanied by an instrumentalist with whom he engages in a sort of improvisational dialogue. The *qasîda* is often interspersed with or at times introduced by a *layâli*, the singing of the words *yâ layl* and *yâ ‘ayn* in an ad lib fashion meant to display the *mutrib*’s range and skill at modulation (*taswîr*). Tonight Ustaz Sabah goes straight into the *qasîda*. He seems entranced by the mood as he stands almost frozen on the stage listening to the ‘*ūd* player as he states simple phrases in the *maqâm*. Musicians refer to this state as *saltana*, when the mood of the *maqâm* “dominates” (from the verb *saltana*, to rule) the *mutrib*’s emotions. Especially when there is good rapport between the *mutrib* and the audience, in particular the skilled listeners known as *sammî’a*, the *mutrib* can enter the state of *saltana* and evoke a corresponding state of *tarab* or musical rapture in listeners.

As he sings the verses of the poem, the master evinces great emotion in his visage and through the movement of his arms and hands. The audience seems enthralled: all eyes are on him. At one point Ustaz Sabah sings one phrase with considerable feeling and a man from the family section jumps out of his seat with a shout of “*allâh!*”, hops up on the stage and hugs the great vocalist, then returns to his seat. The audience applauds in appreciation, some of the *shabâb* shout *yâ ‘aynî!*, while a couple of others laugh.

Ustaz Sabah proceeds into a *layâli* and the 'ûd player follows with choice phrases in response to the great singer's improvisations. When they reach a particularly high pitch, well above the range of most singers, the audience is transformed into a cacophony of "allâh!," "yâ salâm!," and "aywa!"

Ustaz Sabah then closes with a flourish and descent from the high to the low register of the *maqâm*, the audience roars, and the orchestra immediately begins playing the *dawr* "*Asl al-gharâm nazra*" (The root of passion is a glance). No sooner does he start than people hop up and start dancing. Up near the stage a handful of men dance together, while over on the side, that same younger man does the "semaphore dance" again; several of the *shabâb* rise and clap, some dance. At one point Ustaz Sabah sings a phrase with a noticeable cry (*bukâ'*) in his voice, and the *shabâb* near me cry out, "yâ habîbî!" (O my beloved!) This goes on for almost ten full minutes – Ustaz Sabah singing the same line and the audience reacting with various cries and shouts.

Then it happens: Ustaz Sabah begins his trademark *saltana* dance, turning his back to the audience, making a few quick steps with arms spread wide, spinning around, first in one direction, then the other, and then more quick steps. It is far from elegant but the audience roars with approval: the great singer is *mitsultan*, under the influence of the mood and atmosphere of the evening. This reflects well on the audience, for they have contributed to the atmosphere with their shouts and cries. A number of listeners sit and rock their heads back and forth to the meter of the stately *dawr*; many gyrate and wave their arms around; semaphore signals are sent; *tarab* is in the air. There is a definite groove in the air and I find myself getting into it.

A few minutes later they are performing the *taqtûqa* (light song) “*Ib ‘atli jawwâb*” (Send Me a Response) by the late Aleppine composer Bakrî al-Kurdî. It is easily among the most popular songs in Aleppo: light, energetic, and in the modern Egyptian style that was popular among Aleppine composers in the 1950s and 1960s. While the orchestra establishes the mood, Ustaz Sabah comes out of his *saltana* and adjusts one of the speakers that seems somehow off. One man dancing near the stage offers him a rosary (*misbaha*), which he politely refuses by placing his hand over his heart and bowing his head. Things begin to heat up again as the audience sings along with the *mutrib*. Now almost everyone is dancing. In the family section, a few women dance with their daughters, husbands, and other family members. Two young men on the opposite side of the pool from the semaphore dancer get up and dance in a style reminiscent of women’s dance (what we inappropriately term “belly dancing”); in a parody of feminine grace and motion they gyrate their hips, shake their flat chests, and move their hands and wrists in quick circles. This sort of burlesque (if that is an appropriate term for it) inevitably occurs at public concerts, especially during the lighter portions of a *wasla*. The *shabâb* laugh at them while their neighbors look on with mirthful grins on their faces. The dancers are apparently enjoying themselves immensely and this goes on for several minutes. It is now about 2:00 am!

Ustaz Sabah then launches into a *mawwâl*, a colloquial poem sung, like the *qasida*, to an improvised melody with the accompaniment of an instrumentalist and modulation into a *layâli*. The audience stops dancing but their engagement with the vocalist is still high, for many attempt to sing along with him, sighing “*ah!*” and “*allâh!*” after each phrase. Some in the front wave their arms in a peculiar manner, as if unfolding

reams of cloth or drawing out something from their chest, each hand alternating with the other in an outward flowing circle. I noticed this as well in Cairo and it seems to be a trademark motion of the *sammî'a*. Finishing his *mawwâl*, Ustaz Sabah seamlessly leads the orchestra into a *wasla* of the light Aleppine tunes known as the *qudûd halabiyya*. Beginning in the *maqâm râst*, he sings some of the most popular songs in Aleppo: “*Yâ tîra tîrî*” (O bird, fly) and “*Yâ mâl al-shâm*” (O wealth of Damascus!), both by the famous Damascene composer Abu Khalîl al-Qabbânî. These light and fast tunes get everyone up out of their chairs. I have forgotten the evening’s chill and am standing pool side clapping and watching the semaphore dancer. Ustaz Sabah takes another turn at dancing, people shout, and the atmosphere is mirthful and carefree. At last, after modulating through a number of folkloric songs in the *maqâm bayyâtî*, Ustaz Sabah brings the concert to a close with an impressive ascent to the note D two octaves above middle C (*jawwâb al-muhayyir*, in Arab musical parlance) – well above the range of singers half his age. It is now 4:00 am and he has been singing almost non-stop for over five hours. Fans are quick to point out that this is not unusual for Fakhri; in fact, many claimed that he holds the Guinness World Record for endurance singing, seventeen hours non-stop at a concert in Venezuela in the 1980s. Putting away his *nargîla*, my neighbor exclaims “It’s still early!” (*lissa bakîr!*) and slaps me on the back as he makes his way toward the exit.

Friends and families pile into cars and taxis, parents hold sleepy children in their arms, some head off to the mosque to pray the dawn prayer (*salât al-fîjr*). Yet there is an air of expectation for the next *wasla*; indeed the term *wasla*, which means a connection, a tie, implies a continuity between the past performances and those yet to come. This is an

important aspect of the *tarab*-culture: ever evolving contexts for experiencing the joy of great music that comes “from the heart” (*jāyya min al-’alb*), and is authentic (*asīla*) and honest (*sādiqa*).

* * *

This chapter discusses how Aleppines evaluate what makes a good song “good,” and what makes it “authentic.” Basing my remarks on attendance at numerous concerts such as the above described evening with Sabah Fakhri, I examine the musical and performative dimensions of the *wasla* as the epitome of musical authenticity in contemporary Aleppo. Although Aleppines utilize a specific musical terminology when discussing songs, what makes a song both “good” and “authentic” depends on the context of its performance as much as on its specific musical properties, though these also serve an important function as what Kant (1952 [1790]) termed “conditioning concepts” that frame aesthetic discourse. More specifically, despite the well-established tradition of aesthetic discourse on the modes, rhythms, and performance practices in Arab music (Sawa 1981, 1989; Shiloah 1995), for contemporary Aleppine musicians and listeners the most important factor in determining the aesthetic value of a song is the actualization of culturally valued emotional states in performers and listeners. This constitutes an important dimension of the “*tarab* culture” of the Arab East (Racy 1998; Danielson 1997), referring to special intersubjective musical-cultural practices and values through which performers and listeners engage in a dialogue of the emotions and the self. Through music, performers enact and present culturally specific cues that are understood

by listeners as evidence of internal emotional states, especially *rûh sharqiyya* (“oriental spirit”) and *saltana*. For their part, listeners present certain culturally understood cues of internal emotional states, in particular that of *tarab*, which participants, artists and audiences alike, read as the prime index of a successful – and authentic – performance.

II) The *Sahra* and the *Hafla*: Genres, Venues, and Patronage

Fakhri’s concert exemplifies the predominant genre of musical performance in contemporary Aleppo, the *sahra* (pl. *saharât*). Literally meaning an evening gathering or soirée, *sahra* refers colloquially to a gathering of friends and family for a mirthful event such as a birthday, engagement, wedding, or graduation. As a social institution in contemporary Aleppo, as elsewhere in Syria, the *sahra* is governed by elaborate rules and etiquette, as the anthropologist soon discovers when he transgresses most of them at first: particular dress codes, forms of conversation, culinary and other gustatory practices, and a distinct temporality. A *sahra* is a semi-formal, semi-public affair usually held in someone’s home whose key ingredient, if anything, is the concept of closeness or intimacy.² Not just simply a party, the *sahra* is an opportunity for members of a certain class – usually middle-class and elite men – to engage in forms of polite behavior that fall under the category of *adab* (Bonebakker 1988). Of course, the poor and working classes also hold *saharât*, but they tend to be less formalized. In addition to *saharât* held for special occasions, some Aleppines host varieties of weekly *saharât*. One type is the *sahra bishmariyya*, in which a group of friends take turns hosting a *sahra* every week in

² Cf. Eickelman’s (1976) discussion of the concept of *qarâba* or closeness in Morocco. I use the public-private distinction as a heuristic device while acknowledging its problems, especially with respect to the Arab world, for which we need to rethink our concepts of personal and non-personal spaces.

one of their homes, or, alternatively, one will bring food and everyone will split the cost. Another type is the *sahra sahaniyya*, for which everyone brings a dish (*sahn*) of food, like the American “pot luck” dinner. Both varieties feature food, conversation, and music.

In the “Golden Age” of Aleppine music³ – from approximately the middle of the nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth century – wealthy merchants entertained guests with fine food, conversation, and music. In this period the *sahra* was a domain reserved almost entirely for the men of Aleppo’s commercial and religious families. Women hosted analogous women-only *saharât*, such as the *subhiyyât nisâ’* (morning women’s gatherings), the *talbisa* (the adornment of the bride on her wedding night), the *istiqbâl* (women’s reception), and others.⁴ The musicians would generally not be paid for their services though they would be provided food. Many were not professional in the sense of deriving their primary income from performing but were rather what we call “amateurs” who had other jobs. For example, many vocalists have served as imams or muezzins at local mosques, and many were also merchants or tradesmen. The famous composer and singer ‘Umar al-Batsh was a stone engraver who later earned a modest income from training students in the art of singing and the composition of *muwashshahât*. Artists and patrons thereby participated in a system of reciprocity, however unbalanced, which was the context for the production of what some Aleppines consider to be the most beautiful music and song.

³ This is my term for a period which many Aleppines refer to as the most productive era of composition and performance of their music, and in a sense the period to which the term “*klasikî*” refers.

⁴ These women’s *saharât* are still held today, although I had no access to them during my research. For a brief description of some women’s only gatherings where singing is performed, see Mahanna (1998: 257-258).

As a context for the performance of the *wasla*, the public or commercial *sahra* has come to all but replace *saharât* held in private homes. Today *saharât* tend to be held not in private homes but in public or commercial venues at which admission fees are usually charged. Both men and women attend these medium- to large-scale events (though women are usually found only in the “family” sections). *Saharât* are less frequently held in private homes today than in the period of Aleppo’s “Golden Age.” As mentioned in chapter three, many musicians and music lovers in Aleppo attribute the decline of the *sahra* as a context for music-making to Aleppo’s commercial-economic and cultural decline, beginning with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and continuing today as political and economic power has been consolidated in Damascus. To get a clearer idea of role of the *sahra* in contemporary Aleppo, I asked my teacher Muhammad Qadri Dalâl about the reasons for the decline of the musical *sahra* in contemporary Aleppo. He replied:

There are a lot of reasons, such as that many of the people that used to have good relations together have gotten busy with work, left, traveled, and the world is no longer the way it was (*al-dunyâ mâ ‘âdit mital ‘awwal*)... There is also a big economic depression (*rukûd iqtisâdî*) overall. People are busy thinking about how to make a living (*wahid bâluh masghûl*). The other problem is that in the beginning the food could be anything. Today, no – other things have to be present. For example, we used to eat *mujaddara* [a simple dish of lentils and cracked wheat], whereas today *mujaddara* is not enough; there has to be salad and other things [meat *kabâbs* are common fare]. We used to eat falafel, but now it’s

become a sandwich, and so on. So even with respect to the food it has become different.

Today, as Aleppo struggles to revive its economic position, mostly through developing agriculture, construction, and tourism, the remaining merchant and commercial classes either do not have the time or money to host regular *saharât* or no longer reside in the old Arab homes in which they were traditionally hosted, according to numerous informants. Economic decline and the social changes of the last century have meant that fewer Aleppines are capable of hosting *saharât*. Moreover, Dalal implied that those who can are no longer satisfied with the simpler pleasures of the old days; he was not alone in indicating that today well-off Aleppines, the ones most likely to host *saharât*, like to show off their wealth and are becoming not a little *mfazlukîn* – conceited or showy.

As a result, musical performance has shifted almost entirely from the private home to the stage, with recitals and concerts (often called *saharât* as well) now held in performance halls or public venues, not private homes. This marks a radical change in the context for music making. Public venues for the performance of music did not exist in Aleppo or in Syria as a whole until the after the first third of the twentieth century and the establishment of cafes and theaters in the major cities; before then most music was performed in the context of private homes or in the confines of the *zawāyā*. Even today there are relatively few concert or recital halls in Syria devoted exclusively to the performance of music or related arts. For example, Damascus boasts a recital hall in the Asad National Library, the auditorium of the High Institute for Music, and a newly

completed opera house, in addition to multi-purpose halls and conference rooms at hotels and cultural centers. Aleppo, for its part, has no single performance space devoted exclusively to music. Performances are held in a variety of multi-purpose venues, including the dilapidated auditorium of the National Library, the aging Mu'awiya Hall, and also the amphitheater and reception hall of the Citadel and various "heritage" buildings that are currently being renovated to serve as performance spaces. The numerous *nawâdi*, hotel lounges, night-clubs, and cabarets provide another set of venues, though they can hardly be considered designed especially for the performance of music (as my description will have implied).

Nonetheless, concerts held at hotel lounges, night-clubs, and cabarets are also called *saharât*, or *saharât ghinâ 'iyya* (evenings of song) in order to suggest the more intimate setting of a private *sahra*. In fact, restaurants that feature music often present it as a *sahra* as well. A large concert is generally called a *hafla* (pl. *haflât*, literally "parties") since the degree of intimacy implied by a *sahra* is not expected at a *hafla*, nor are there as many social rules as in a *sahra*. Women may attend these events freely, though often they do so in the accompaniment of male relatives. In the end, the difference between a *sahra* and a *hafla* may only be a matter of scale. If the musical setting is intimate or if intimacy is an important aspect of the performance atmosphere, then it is likely to be labeled a *sahra* and occur in a place where you can easily see and possibly interact personally with the singer. If the concert is held in a large venue such as a sports arena in which the singer is separated from the audience by a great distance with little or no probability of interaction, it will be called a *hafla*. For example, a multi-*mutrib* show at the *Fayhâ'* sports arena in Damascus was billed as a *hafla*, while the

previously described Sabah Fakhri concert, at which there was continuous interaction between *mutrib* and audience, was a *sahra*. The difference between the two genres may also be a matter of repertoire and orchestra; the *wasla* tends to be performed primarily at *saharât*, whereas modern songs and larger orchestras appear in *haflât*.

In contemporary Aleppo, *sahra* and *hafla* performances take place in the context of the ideologies, rhetoric, and practices of the Syrian state. These include active sponsorship of concerts, exhibitions, festivals, and literary publication through systems of official patronage under the auspices of the Ministries of Culture and Media, and exclusionary practices such as the numerous and inauspicious forms of censorship organized under the same authorities. Through these and other practices the state attempts to control the allowable or imaginable discourse in the public realm in order to frame people's views of social life and establish guidelines for compliance with official views, or resistance to them (Wedeen 1999: 45). Even when we acknowledge the ambiguity – indeed, the absurdity – of many of these practices and discourses, nevertheless the cultural arena is, to use Wedeen's apt phrase (1999: 33), "cluttered" with official rhetoric, making efforts to navigate the contemporary Syrian cultural scene somewhat clumsy. Hence the move of the context for music making from the home to the stage, from "private" domains to cluttered "public" domains, has had important political implications for musical aesthetics.

The political implications of these changing contexts become readily apparent when we consider the nature of patronage and the social relations of the performers and audiences in these different performance domains. On the one hand, as indicated above, intimate *saharât* engage forms of reciprocity, as in the *bishmariyya* and *sahaniyya*

varieties of *sahra* in Aleppo. The important point is that in these contexts patronage is local and directly involved in relationships of reciprocity, usually revolving around food-for-music, music-for-food. On the other hand, many public *saharât* and almost all large-scale *haflât* are sponsored entirely by political figures such as the mayor or leader of the local branch of the Ba'th Party. As mentioned in chapter one, nearly all recitals and artistic exhibitions in Syria occur "under the patronage" (*taht al-ri'âya*) of the Minister of Culture, the local Ba'th Party leader (especially outside of Damascus), or the mayor. Often they celebrate national holidays. The above-mentioned multi-*mutrib* *hafla* at the *Fayhâ'* Center in Damascus celebrated the 50th Anniversary of the establishment of the Ba'th Party and included numerous encomiums to then President Hafîz al-Asad.

III) The *Wasla*: Aesthetics and the Performance of Authenticity

The *wasla* is the primary context for the performance of what Aleppines and many non-Aleppines consider to be the best and most authentic form of Arab music. Literally meaning a suite, the *wasla* (pl. *waslât*) comprises a number of *muwashshahât*, usually no more than four or five, as well as the *qasîda*, *mawwâl*, *dawr*, *taqsîm*, and light popular songs known collectively as the *qudûd halabîyya*.⁵ Usually the *muwashshahât* are preceded by the performance of an introductory instrumental genre such as the *samâ'î*, *bashraf*, or *dûlâb*. The *dûlâb* may also be used to introduce instrumental *taqâsim* (improvisations) or changes in *maqâm*. As Sabah Fakhri's concert indicates, a great amount of variety exists with respect to the order and number of each genre, though the overall structure remains one of a movement from heavy and slow meters and complex

⁵ For a review of the *muwashshah* and *qudûd* genres in Aleppo, see Shannon (n.d.).

melodies to light and fast meters and simpler melodies, as in the *dhikr*, with which it shares numerous structural features. The typical *wasla* involves an overall alternation of fixed and unfixed meters and forms; that is, pre-composed songs and vocal improvisations, pre-composed instrumental pieces and *taqâsim* (cf. Touma 1996: xx). A given *sahra* may comprise more than one *wasla*, and there are some twenty-two different *waslât* known in Aleppo – one each for 22 different *maqâmât* (Rajâ’î and Darwîsh 1956; Touma 1996: 84). Recall that Sabah Fakhri presented two (*hijâz kâr* and *râst*) in the course of five hours, each comprising songs selected from much larger repertoires in the same modes that are also called a *waslât*.

The *wasla* generally begins with an air of gravity and grandeur evoked by the slow, heavy rhythms of the instrumental preludes and the *muwashshahât*. These songs, which consist of poetry in classical Arabic set to music, tend to follow one of three set schemes.⁶ Of putative Andalusian origin, they are often referred to as *muwashshahât andalusiyya* (Andalusian *muwashshahât*). However, in Aleppo the *muwashshahât* have assumed a distinctive local style, what many Aleppines refer to as an Aleppine *nakha* or scent, especially in the hands of famous composers such as ‘Umar al-Batsh (1885-1950), who composed over a hundred. Since the lyrics of the *muwashshahât* allow for numerous interpretations, many of them are performed in both “sacred” and “secular” contexts in Aleppo; e.g., some are performed in both the *dhikr* and the *wasla*.⁷

⁶ The most common structures of the *muwashshahât* correspond loosely to the European sonata and ternary rondo forms, i.e., AABA and ABA (Apel (1944): 696, 451; al Faruqi (1975); Shannon (n.d.). Some *muwashshahât* were composed in colloquial Arabic, but the majority performed in Aleppo today are in the high variety of Arabic, *al-fushâ* (lit. the eloquent), which I gloss as “classical Arabic.”

⁷ The structural similarities between the *dhikr* and the *wasla* suggest that they share common roots. Indeed there is some evidence that the present *wasla* structure derives from earlier religious suites performed in Aleppine *zawâyâ*. One such suite is the *fasl* or *wasla* “*Isq al-‘itâsh*” (*Water the Thirsty*), which is a suite of unknown but probable Aleppine or Egyptian provenance that consists of prayers of forgiveness and supplication for rain in a time of drought (al-Aqîlî 1979; Mahannâ 1998).

Indeed, a firm distinction between “sacred” and “secular” is hard to maintain with respect to Aleppine music, both because of the interrelationships between spiritual and non-spiritual realms in Islamic culture and because most prominent Aleppine vocalists have come from strong religious backgrounds (see below). Despite the avowedly “secular” venues of *wasla* performances – concert halls, theaters, Aleppo’s famous clubs – the atmosphere in the beginning of the *wasla* is subdued if expectant, as in the *dhikr*. Audience members may still be arriving, the orchestra and *mutrib* still “warming up,” the special emotional state of *tarab* yet to be established. Therefore we need to treat the secular-sacred distinction, as the public-private, with caution; each pair of binaries expresses social and cultural potentialities that artists and audiences actualize in specific performance situations. For this reason one may find “whirling dervishes” on a concert stage and people performing adaptations of popular songs in the *zāwiya*.

As the *wasla* moves into its middle sections – the *qasida*, *ughniya*, and *dawr* – performers and members of the audience gradually become more energized and establish a mood, set a groove.⁸ This is not unlike the mood of the middle *fusūl* (sections) of the *dhikr* once the participants have “warmed up” with the chanting of *jalāla*. Indeed, some musicians refer to this early period as *taskhīn*, warming up, preparing for more energetic phases to follow. At this point some people begin to dance, spontaneously rising in their seats or dancing together in groups, while others shout encouragement, “*aywa!*” “*allāh!*” “*yā salām!*” – phrases also uttered in the *dhikr* to express delight, awe, and ecstatic rapture. The musicians, now loosened up, may fall into a groove and the *mutrib* may

⁸ Following Keil 1994a, 1994b and Feld 1994b, we need to examine more closely the processes through which performers and audiences in different cultures and musics interact with themselves and with their sonic, natural, and social environments to create a sense of groove or flow.

dance about on stage (as with Sabah Fakhri's trademark twirls) and talk with performers and audience members, the general atmosphere becoming highly charged, joyful, mirthful.

In the latter genres, especially the *qudūd* and *aghânî shâ'i'a* ("widespread songs"), the pitch may rise and new *maqâmât* used, as in *tarqiyya*; in the Sabah Fakhri concert, for example, the first *wasla* was in *hijâz kâr* and the second ended in *râst* and *bayyâtî*. In a process similar to *kartah*, the tempo of the latter segments of the *wasla* invariably increases, usually involving the use of quick and simple duple meters such as *baladî* and *wahda wa nusf* that are also used in popular music today (especially *baladî*, which has folkloric connotations). As in the *dhikr*, these lighter meters are accompanied by body motions and forms of dance; the faster tempos tend to bring large numbers of audience members to their feet. Moreover, because the lyrics of these songs are in colloquial Arabic, just about everyone understands them and many sing along; they are far more participatory than the heavy and archaic *muwashshahât* of the beginning of a *wasla*, the lyrics of which are sometimes incomprehensible to native speakers. Finally, the *wasla* concludes with a *qafla*, but as in the *dhikr*, it is a temporary *qafla* since each *wasla* performance connects with those that have come before and suggests those yet to come.

IV) Aesthetics and Authenticity in Arabic Song: The Three Keys to a Good Song

Why do so many Aleppines flock to *saharât* to hear the songs of the *wasla*? Why, especially, was the *shabâb* section full when so many critics have pronounced the death of traditional music and the dominance of the modern pop song in the hearts and

minds of Syria's youth? Why are these genres considered by many to be exemplars of musical authenticity and standards of musical taste?

Aleppine musicians and music lovers, like their counterparts in Cairo and elsewhere in the Arab world, evaluate music through the use of a specific aesthetic vocabulary or *qâmûs* (lit. "dictionary" or "lexicon"). In Aleppo, this aesthetic lexicon comprises a set of terms that I call the "Three Keys" to a good song: *lahn* (melody), *kalimât* (words or song lyrics), and *sawt* (voice).⁹ For many, these terms constitute the minimal requirements of a good song. However, this musical-critical lexicon articulates a more fundamental discourse on the emotions that determines the aesthetic value and authenticity of a given performance. The "Three Keys" act as a sort of meta-language that articulates in musical terms what are performative qualities of the musical engagement, especially emotional honesty (*sidq*), rapture (*tarab*), and what Syrians refer to as "oriental spirit" (*ruh sharqiyya*).¹⁰ Closer examination of critical discourse in the context of specific musical performances in Aleppo reveals that the musical elements of performance are often not the decisive factors in determining aesthetic judgments of a performance's value or authenticity. Rather, the evocation of emotional states in performers and listeners is more often a stronger factor in the Aleppine aesthetics of musical authenticity.

⁹ Danielson (1997) and Racy (1998) discuss similar critical terms in their research on Arab musical aesthetics and aesthetic discourse in Egypt and Lebanon.

¹⁰ That is, "*lahn*," "*kalimât*," and "*sawt*" are in fact meta-pragmatic glosses expressed in referential or semantic terms of emotional characteristics that emerge through specific performance practices. Cf. Silverstein (1976), Crapanzano (1992).

Lahn: Melody

The Arab tradition is rich with treatises that discuss the theoretical basis of the music, and especially the melodic and rhythmic modes that are the basis of the classical (*klâsîkî*) music (Abû al-Shâmât 1997; al-ʿAqîlî 1979; al-Himsî 1994; al-Sabbâgh 1950; Allah Wirdî 1948; Shiloah 1979, 1995; Sawa 1989; Touma 1996). Despite numerous efforts in the twentieth century to systematize and classify the modes and meters, especially after the landmark Cairo Congress of 1932, Aleppine musicians and music lovers still debate the precise number of modes and their interrelationships, as well as their postulated emotional connotations. The rhythmic modes engender less debate, and there are numerous treatises on them that specify both their arrangement of accents, duple and triple meter components, and occasionally their origin in certain natural phenomena and cultural practices, such as the rhythm of the camel's gait, the weaver's loom, or the rocking of a crib (al-Himsî 1994; Abû al-Shâmât 1997; al-ʿAqîlî 1979).¹¹

However, mode and rhythm alone do not a good *lahn* make. A good melody results from the ways these and other features are employed to express musical ideas. The art of composition (*talhîn*) requires mastery of the modes and rhythms, to be sure, but it also requires imagination (*khayâl*) and the ability to create (*khalq*) new musical ideas. When I questioned Aleppine and Damascene composers about the most important factors in composition and how they go about composing songs, many remarked that

¹¹ Oddly, the ethnomusicological literature on Arab music is relatively silent on the issue of meter and rhythm despite its importance to Arab musicians and critics. For example, Marcus' 800-page dissertation on modern Arab music theory does not devote even a single paragraph to the topic, and Shiloah and Touma present only brief sections on meter and rhythm. This might reflect what Chernoff (1979) and others e.g. Keil (1979) have identified as a bias in favor of melodic rather than rhythmic analysis in Western musicology, as well as the notion commonly expressed by Arab musicians that their melodic modes are more complex than the meters and hence more worthy of study. Arab authors may also be influenced by Western models of musical analysis and consider rhythm and meter to be less important than melody.

mastery of the technical language of the music is a first step, but that the art of composition depends more importantly on a strong sense of *rûh sharqiyya* (oriental spirit) and having a good ear (*idhn mûsiqiyya*), which develops only through intensive listening and as a result of God-given talent. This talent may be developed through study and formal lessons, and many contemporary composers have pursued lessons in music theory and composition in Syria, Egypt, and various European and American academies. It should be pointed out that this does not necessarily imply knowledge of musical notation and orchestration, as is the case in European “classical” music. In fact, many well-known twentieth-century Aleppine composers have had little or no training in music theory and notation. The oral transmission of melodies and their memorization by choruses and instrumentalists was the primary mode of composition and study and remains practiced today among older and even some younger singers and composers: in fact, some musicians expressed a distrust of notation, preferring what they perceived to be the “certainty” of learning via listening (*sama’*) and dictation (*talqîn*) from a master teacher. As mentioned in chapter two, the mosque and *zâwiya* have been important musical training grounds for generations of Aleppine vocalists and composers, a role only recently being assumed by formal schools of music in the major cities of Syria.

Kalimât: Lyrics

The most important function of the *lahn*, however, is to convey the meaning of the words or *kalimât* (sometimes *kalâm*). In fact, most people with whom I spoke argued that the words are the most important component of a good song. Without meaningful

words, even the best melody sung by the best vocalist will not be good. But what are meaningful words? How does a melody express their meaning?

The lyrics of the *wasla* repertoire often derive from classical poetry or contemporary poetry that follows the classical conventions of meter and rhyme. The link between the classical poetic tradition and such genres as the *muwashshah* and *qasida* grants these songs special authority as “authentic” and provides a model of authenticity for contemporary musicians and composers who aspire to emulate this standard. The esteem granted classical poetry and poets in Arabic culture helps us understand why the words to a song might be so important to these artists and listeners, for they relate to deeply-held notions of what it means to be an Arab – eloquence (*fasāha*), imagination (*khayāl*), and sincerity (*sidq*) being highly valued characteristics. However, other genres of the *wasla* are sung in colloquial Arabic, such as the different varieties of *mawwāl*, *ughniya*, *dawr*, and the *quḍūd* and other light songs that close the performance of the *wasla*. In these genres, authenticity lies not in the eloquence of the classical language but in the meaning and meaningful rendition of the colloquial words themselves. Indeed, as mentioned, many people claim that they cannot understand the words of the *muwashshah* and classical *qasida* because the language is too archaic for them.

One evening as I was taking a stroll down the main drag in the *Jamiliyya* neighborhood I heard someone shout out, “*yā ustaz*!” (“hey teacher” or “master” – a common honorific). I stopped and a young man came up to me and asked, “Excuse me, but aren’t you the one who appeared on TV a few days ago?” I had been interviewed on Syrian television that week and the show had aired the previous morning. All day long I had engaged in similar conversations with taxi drivers and newspaper vendors and was

feeling a little self-conscious; “Here we go again!” thought I. Soon there gathered about me a group of five earnest *shabâb*. We shook hands and they asked me about the TV program and my work in Aleppo. When I told them that I was interested in Aleppine song, one, wearing a t-shirt with the word “Jazz” written on it in big bold letters, claimed to love the older songs. I asked him if he also likes jazz, pointing to his t-shirt, but he replied with an emphatic “No!” Another replied, “You sang some old song on TV, right?” I said that I had *tried* to sing part of an old *muwashshah*, but that it is very difficult. Another told me that whenever he hears that song he just shakes his head, demonstrating for me by shaking his head violently from side to side as if confused. “It is just too heavy (*thaqîl*) for me,” he said. “I prefer the *qudûd* and popular songs (*aghânî sha’biyya*) because they are lighter (*akhafl*).” Even the Sabah Fakhri groupie at the concert did not understand all of the words of the *muwashshahât* and showed greater interest in the *qudûd*, for example by dancing and singing along with them. This is not uncommon since indeed the language is difficult.

Why, then, should the words be singled out as the most important factor in a good song if often they are incomprehensible to many native listeners? First, not all the words are so difficult that most native listeners cannot pick out certain phrases and verses that the *mutrib* repeats. Some are based on well-known poems that students may study in school and have memorized. Second, the cultural valuation of poetry in the classical language grants these songs the seal of authenticity as part of Arabic high culture. Despite (or because of) its high-brow implications, I found that this valuation is shared by members of different classes. College graduates, newspaper vendors, hotel workers, taxi drivers, and manual laborers all impressed me with their ability to speak the standard

variety of Arabic.¹² In Syria, unlike in Egypt, where literature and song in the Egyptian colloquial have played an important role in popular expressions of nationalism (Armbrust 1996), the ability to speak standard Arabic is an important component of Syrian national and pan-Arab sentiments. The Syrian government places heavy emphasis in the schools on learning standard Arabic. For example, a student must pass the Arabic portion of the end-of-year examinations to continue to the next grade while being required to pass only two of three subjects in other fields. On the notoriously difficult Syrian Baccalaureate exam, students must pass the Arabic portion in order to graduate.¹³

Nevertheless, I found that the colloquial genres remain the most popular.

Numerous Aleppines and other Syrians claimed that the lighter songs in the colloquial language express (*tu'abbir 'an*) the conditions of daily life more than the *muwashshahât* and are therefore more authentic for them. Hence the great popularity of the *qudûd halabîyya* among young and old listeners. Through their association with local and pan-regional urban "popular arts" (*funûn sha'biyya*), they are considered by many Aleppines to be more authentic and honest (*asdaq*) than the urban high culture genres because they are "closer to the people" (*aqrab lil-sha'b*).¹⁴

¹² As I have indicated in chapter two, some workers even impressed me with their knowledge of English poetry.

¹³ It is not uncommon for students to fail the Arabic examination because of its rigor and repeat grades or, more commonly, repeat the Baccalaureate exam, several times if necessary.

¹⁴ As mentioned in Chapter 3, the distinctions between urban and rural folk culture and between such terms as the popular arts (*al-funûn al-sha'biyya*), folklore (*al-fûlklûr*), and popular heritage (*al-turâth al-sha'bî*) are fluid. Often these terms are used interchangeably. Nonetheless, there are some clear distinctions between urban and rural folk culture, the former including such practices and locales as storytelling in coffee shops, the public bath houses, artisan culture, and other distinct practices related to particular neighborhoods, especially in the Old City; the latter refers predominantly to aspects of rural life such as the harvest and associated practices such as the *dabka* or circle dance.

Musical Expression (al-ta'bir al-mûsîqî)

Aleppine musicians and music lovers commonly stated that a *lahn* should express the meaning of the words it accompanies. Some critics have argued that Arab music, unlike European music, is not capable of expressing emotional states (cf. Shiloah 1994). Others have argued that, on the contrary, Arab music is highly expressive, employing numerous compositional techniques to suggest emotional states such as sadness and passion, natural conditions such as the wind and rain, and so forth.¹⁵ For my purposes it is less important what these techniques are than that musicians and listeners engage in discourse about musical expression and expect that there should be a relationship between a song's melody and its words. Classical treatises argued for a correspondence between the melodic modes and moods; today some artists assert that certain *maqâmât* are directly associated with the experience of specific moods. For example, I was told that the *maqâm sâba* evokes sadness, while *râst* instills bravery and courage. Touma (1995: 43-44) reports that Arab listeners conventionally associate *bayyâtî* with "vitality, joy, and femininity," while *sikâh* conjures "feelings of love" and *hijâz*, "the distant desert." While some contemporary Aleppine musicians argue that the medieval theories are valid and others that they are not much more than myths, cultural conventions do associate certain modes with certain moods, some of which may even be cross-culturally valid (Touma 1996: 44).¹⁶

¹⁵ This was an important theme of a number of episodes of al-Qal'ah's television program *Nahj al-aghani* (1997b).

¹⁶ They may even result, as Touma suggests (1996: 45), from fluctuations in specific intervals in the non-tempered Arabic scale, especially the variable "medium second" interval that characterizes a number of common tetrachords such as *sâba*, *bayyâtî*, *râst*, and *hijâz*.

However, in terms of musical expression and the association of *kalimât* and *lahn*, there is actually quite a degree of variation that suggests that the sorts of associations that Touma reports in his survey of Arab musicians may not always be practiced. For instance, I asked a well-known composer about the association of the *maqâmât* with certain moods and how this may influence his choice of *maqâm* when fitting music to words. He picked up an *‘ūd* and played a melody in the *maqâm zinkulâh* (sometimes called *zinjirân*), which has a resemblance to *hijâz* and *hijâz kâr* and thus, according to Touma’s survey, should conjure “the distant desert.” Indeed the melody sounded sad, mournful even. However, it turned out to be the melody of a song by the Egyptian composer Sayyid Darwish called “*Yâ halâwat al-dunyâ*” (O the Sweetness of the World) whose words are decidedly upbeat and cheerful. In this instance, barring the deliberate and ironic utilization of a “sad” mode to sing about the sweetness of life, there is no relationship between the mode and the mood of the lyrics. A good composer, according to this artist, can compose any type of song on any *maqâm*. The cosmological models, he suggested, are myths; there is no necessary relationship between modes and moods. Echoing a common modernist sensibility, he asserted that musical expression relies on the genius of the composer and the poet-lyricist, and then ultimately on the skill and sensitivity of the artist (*jānnân*) to convey it in performance.

Sawt: Voice

The interpretation of lyrics and the apt expression of their meaning in the *lahn* is the responsibility of the composer (*mulahhin*), but the meaning of the *kalimât* and the beauty of the *lahn* become apparent only through the voice of the *mutrib*. Hence, the

human voice and vocal qualities are important components of musical aesthetics in Aleppo. Not surprisingly, Aleppines have an extensive and precise vocabulary for describing the human voice. One text lists over thirty different vocal characteristics, both positive and negative (Abû al-Shâmât 1997: 221-222). These include:

- *shajî*: “the best of the voices and the sweetest, clearest, and most melodious of them.”
- *mukhalkhal*: “a high and sharp voice with strength and sweetness.”
- *ajashsh*: “a low voice with pleasing huskiness and grand melodiousness.”
- *karâwânî*: “that which resembles the voice of the plover bird (*karâwân*) in precision, clarity, and fluency.”
- *rath*: “that which is like freely flowing water, and sweet.”

Other, less desirable characteristics include:

- *musahrij*: “like a heavy scream without embellishment or melody.”
- *muqa'qa'*: “that which resembles the speech of bedouin, without any sweetness.”
- *sarsûrî*: “a fine, high-pitched, and ugly voice.” (from *sarsara*, to squeak, and *sarsûr*, cockroach).
- *murta'id*: “a voice as if the singer is chilled with a fever” (*maqrûr bi'l-hamâ*).
- *luqmî*: “a voice as if the singer has a bite of food (*luqma*) in his mouth.”
- *akhann*: “a voice as if the singer’s nose is clogged.”
- *muzlim*: “that in which there is no melody and which is barely audible.”

There are numerous popular terms for describing the voice as well, some that overlap with the above terms (such as *shajî*). Most common, however, are general terms that are applied to many different domains of cultural life, such as the ubiquitous *hili*

(sweet), which commonly describes anything considered good or beautiful: a voice, person, house, car, song, dog, painting, dress, food, the Moon, etc. Other terms are *da'îf* (weak), *nâ'im* (delicate, tender, or smooth), *hassâs* (sensitive), *rakhîm* (mellow, melodious), *sâfî* (clear), *qawî* (strong, loud), *'âlî* (high or loud), *hadd* (high and sharp), *ghalîz* (low, bass, or coarse), *nashâz* or *nâshîz* (discordant, out of tune), and others. The superlative *kitîr* is commonly used in colloquial evaluations, as in *hilû kitîr* (very sweet), *kitîr nâ'im* (very delicate), or *kitîr ghalîz*.¹⁷

Min al-Mashâyikh

As mentioned in chapter two, Aleppines consider the best singers to be those who have a strong religious background, especially those trained in Qur'anic recitation and Islamic spiritual song. As Danielson (1997: 21-27) has written regarding Egyptian beliefs that their best artists are "*min al-mashâyikh*" (from the *shaykhs*), for Aleppines the best vocalists are those who have had religious training in such Islamic aural practices as *dhikr*, *adhân* (call to prayer), *tajwîd* (Qur'anic recitation), and *inshâd* (religious song). Examples include the *mutrib* Sabri Moudallal, who is the main muezzin at the Great Mosque in Aleppo and a well-known *munshid*; Hassan al-Haffar, also a muezzin and *munshid* in Aleppo's Great Mosque; Adîb al-Dâyikh, who became famous for his pre-dawn supplications (known variously as *ibtihâlât*, *tadhkîr*, and *tasbîh*) and for his renditions of *qasâ'id*. Other great vocalists have also served at one point or another as muezzins, including Bakri al-Kurdi, Sabah Fakhri, Muhammad Khairi, and others. Many younger vocalists in Aleppo have also been or continue to serve as *munshidîn* or have

¹⁷ For a similar discussion of vocal characteristics in Egypt, see Danielson (1997: 92-94).

training in Islamic song. Some well-known vocalists actually made the *reverse* progression, becoming muezzins later in life when they could not find work as singers in clubs (cf. Mahanna 1998). This indicates the fluidity of the boundaries between sacred and spiritual domains in Aleppo, as well as the value placed on the human voice for rendering the word of God and in praising Him.

Reference to the religious background of a singer is exceedingly important in Aleppine discourses of musical authenticity. Often when a young singer begins to make a name for himself as an artist, his religious background will be cited as the decisive early conditioning factor. For example, in a biographical entry on the young singer Nihâd Najjâr (Mahannâ 1998: 294-95), the first few paragraphs are actually descriptions of the religious school he attended, which has produced numerous well-known singers in its time. Even though this singer does not now perform what Aleppines would identify as primarily spiritual genres of song (*inshâd*, *dhikr*), his roots in the religious school are emphasized as the most important factor in his success (and authenticity) as an artist.

This is the case for non-Muslim artists as well, who are plentiful in Aleppo with its numerous and venerable Christian communities. For example, Shâdî Jamil (né George Jubrân) is described in a musical biographical entry on him as having developed his “heavenly throat” (*hanjar ‘anân*) in the choir of the Orthodox Church in Aleppo (Mahannâ 1998: 290-92). Yet, the biography does not hesitate to state that Jamil, who like so many other young singers today performs in the style of Sabah Fakhri, studied the art of Qur’ânic recitation (*tajwîd*) and other genres of spiritual song in addition to the great Aleppine musical heritage at the hands of some of Aleppo’s great Muslim teachers.

By emphasizing his professed links to the Islamic tradition, the biographical entry grants him an added degree of authenticity.¹⁸

Religious training is thought to inculcate proper pronunciation (*lafz* or *ilqā'*), skill in the interpretation of the lyrics (*taswīr al-ma'anā*), and a proper moral stance (*khulq, ikhlaqiyya*) in order to interpret the words and convey their meaning sincerely to an audience. As for the latter quality, Nūr Mahannā's own biographical entry (Mahannā 1998: 296-98) clearly states that his father would allow him to pursue a career as a singer only if he abided by the strict moral standards to which a "great artist" (*fannān kabīr*) should adhere: honesty, dedication, and morally upright behavior. Regarding proper pronunciation, Danielson notes that Umm Kulthūm, who had a strong background in Islamic song, was known for the clarity of her pronunciation (1997: 96). Similarly, a musician friend with whom I attended a Nihad Najjar concert commented extensively on the young singer's proper and clear pronunciation. Other vocalists cannot pronounce them properly, he complained, though it is very important in his estimation to be able to do so. "The true artist" (*al-fannān al-haqīqī*), he said, "must be cultured (*muthaqqaf*) and know how to appreciate (*dhawq*, lit. taste) the meaning of the words and pronounce them properly." Along with so many other critics of the modern pop song, he argued that few contemporary pop stars are able to sing these kinds of songs properly; either they do not have the culture (*thaqāfa*) or the background that would prepare them for this, meaning a religious background. "'Amrū Diāb," he claimed, commenting on one of the biggest stars in the contemporary Arabic pop music scene, "doesn't have a good voice. It's weak and discordant (*nashāz*), but they are able to fix it (*yiẓabbitūh*) in the studio." Nor does

¹⁸ Some Christian musicians emphasize what they claim are the Byzantine Christian roots of the Arabic modal system and hence their affiliation with an "authentic" Aleppine heritage, as I indicate in chapter two.

Diâb have a recognized connection to *al-mashâyikh*. “Voice” (*sawt*), then, comes to represent a set of cultural and spiritual practices that condition a musical and moral-ethical state in the would-be artist; it is also a prime index of a performer’s authenticity (or, as in the case of Diâb, whose voice must be “fixed” in the studio, his *inauthenticity*). This becomes apparent not only through study of biography but in the act of performance as well.

V) Emotions and Music

There is one essential ingredient that “makes or breaks” the Arabic song, even if the above components are present: emotional honesty (*sidq*). The best of lyrics sung to complex and expressive melodies by a strong yet feeling-less and insincere vocalist will fail to inspire listeners. Time and again, when I asked people at concerts or music conferences what they found most appealing about a certain artist or song, they mentioned this quality of *sidq*. Sharing linguistic roots with the word *sadiq*, friend, and *sâdiq*, honest or sincere, *sidq* implies genuine feeling, a lack of artifice, and a surrender by the vocalist to the true meaning of the words of the song. *Sidq* implies that the artist understands the words and is able to express their meaning to listeners by translating them through his own feelings. To be authentic (*asîl*), a *mutrib* must be *sâdiq* or endowed with *sidq*. In fact, this is what some Aleppines argued distinguishes a mere singer-performer (*mughannî* or *mu'addî*) from a true *mutrib*, who can evoke *tarab*.¹⁹

In Aleppo, all the great vocalists, such as Sabah Fakhri, Muhammad Khairi, and Bakri al-Kurdi, are considered to have a high degree of *sidq*, whereas most contemporary

¹⁹ *Mutrib* means “one who causes *tarab*.”

singers are thought to lack this quality. This sentiment was echoed in discussions I had with critics and journalists at the Syrian Song Festival, held annually in Aleppo and which I attended in 1996 and 1997. One woman journalist despaired at the majority of the performers and their songs. “So many of them are *hakī fādī*” (“nonsense,” lit. “empty speech”), she said. “A lot even lip-synched on stage instead of performing live.” I agreed that the lip-synching was unfortunate but asked about those who did perform live. “Most of them aren’t sincere (*mā ‘indhum sidq*),” she claimed. “A *mutrib* should be *sādiq*.” Samīr, whom we met in chapter four, claimed that modern singers may sing of love, but “they don’t know real love.” In his estimation, these new singers are at best mimicking true love, and at worst fabricating the experience; there’s is false love. Others also indicated the insincerity of modern vocalists who sing of love but “are really only interested in sex.” Hence, the more these artists portray sexualized love in their songs, the less honest they are thought to be. “True” emotion would therefore seem to be another condition of authenticity.

One of the artistic directors of the Festival also mentioned the importance of *sidq* in our long conversations about music in Syria. According to him, what distinguishes the good from the bad in any art form, whether a composition, a poem, or a painting, is this quality of sincerity. Why aren’t a lot of the newer songs and singers sincere? “Before a singer can be sincere with the audience,” he argued, “he must be sincere with himself. These days it is getting harder for people to be honest with themselves, so how can they produce good art?”

A number of Aleppines cited Bakri al-Kurdi as the foremost example of a sincere *mutrib*. Known for having a weak and delicate voice, *Shaykh* Bakri, as he is called, could

produce *tarab* in listeners nonetheless because they felt that he was singing “from the heart” (*min al-qalb*). Some musicians criticized Sabah Fakhri as insincere, even vulgar (*shâri’î*, “street-like”), because in their view his voice is strong (*qawî*), but devoid of feeling. Others, as we have seen, react more positively to his singing, such as the man who jumped on stage to hug him after Fakhri sang a particularly moving phrase. Even Umm Kulthûm, despite being almost universally recognized as among the outstanding voices of the twentieth century, is sometimes described as “insincere” (*mufta’ala*, fabricated, artificial). One prominent artist claimed that he cannot listen to her for more than five minutes because she is overly emotional; her feelings are exaggerated. insincere, artificial. Interestingly, for the same reason he claimed that he cannot read Naguib Mahfouz for more than a few pages – the Egyptian novelist is just too maudlin for his tastes.

Sidq and Rûh Sharqiyya

According to numerous Aleppine musicians and music lovers, *sidq* is intimately related to a performer’s “oriental spirit” (*rûh sharqiyya*). Aleppines describe the person endowed with oriental spirit as emotional (*’âtîfî*) and sensitive (*hassâs*), someone who uses intuition (*hads*) and understands instinctively the nuances of the *maqâmât*. The Westerner, on the contrary, they describe as rational (*’aqlânî*), direct (*dughrî*), and logical (*mantiqî*), someone barely capable of understanding the Arabic *maqâmât*, if at all. If these descriptions strike the Western reader as auto-Orientalist characterizations, for many Aleppines and other Arab musicians I have known elsewhere they are matters of both fact and pride. Who *wouldn’t* want to be emotional, sensitive, and intuitive?

Although there are many Syrians who criticize this characterization, for many Aleppine musicians emotionality is as matter-of-fact as the richness and beauty of their music.

The longer I stayed in Syria and the more I studied the music, the more I was asked by friends and acquaintances to play something on the *'ūd* or sing in order for them to assess my knowledge and see to what extent I possessed any *rūh sharqiyya* (it initially seemed that one possesses this spirit rather than develops or acquires it). At best they would politely encourage me in my efforts; usually I failed the “test” and they would pronounce my lack of *rūh sharqiyya*. Saddened by this, I asked my teacher what it meant not to have this *rūh*. “If you’re playing and someone says to you, *‘mā fī rūh*’ (there isn’t any spirit),” he said, “this means that you still haven’t entered the music or represented it fully so that your personality and presence can come through in it (*yasirlak shakhsiyya wa hudūr min khilālha*).” Toward the end of my field research, one of my personal high points came when I was asked to play a *taqsim* after giving a public lecture in Damascus. After I played, a member of the audience, a respected Syrian dramatist, told me that if he had had his eyes closed while I played he would not have known that I wasn’t Syrian because I demonstrated *rūh sharqiyya*. So maybe it can be acquired after all At any rate, having *rūh sharqiyya* is tantamount to having *sidq* as a performer; the latter presumes the former. *Sidq* arises in performance and is measured by the *mutrib*’s ability to induce *tarab* in listeners; in fact, *tarab* is a sort of Aleppine “litmus test” of a vocalist’s sincerity, and hence of his oriental spirit and authenticity.

What, then, is this thing called *tarab*? That is the subject of the following chapter.

VI) *al-Qafla*: The Importance of Performance in Aesthetic Judgments of Authenticity

This chapter has outlined the “Three Keys” to a good Arabic song and shown how they are in effect a meta-language for discussing emotional conceptions of musical culture. The aesthetic lexicon of *lahn*, *kalimât*, and *sawt* attempts to account for what are fluid processes of musical creation and reception that emerge in specific performance situations. It is in performance that these aesthetic values are enacted and a song or performer becomes “good,” “authentic,” or otherwise. In fact, despite informants’ emphasis on the musical qualities of song, it is a song’s performative dimensions that actually determine its aesthetic merit. The three essential elements alone cannot ensure a good and authentic song; the added “special ingredients” are emotional sincerity (*sidq*) and the elusive “oriental spirit” (*ruh sharqiyya*), qualities that emerge in performance. Performance and the performance context are, in the end, what makes a good song “good” and an authentic song “authentic;” that is, meaningful, sensitive, and sincere performance determines a song’s aesthetic value and authenticity.

The physical place of performance also determines to a large degree the expectation of intimacy and emotional sincerity. In the transformation of the space of the *sahra* from the private home to the club or concert stage, many of the ingredients of intimacy are potentially lost: the eye-to-eye contact and direct personal interaction between artists and audience members, the overall atmosphere (*jaww*) of intimacy and closeness that characterize the private *sahra*. Nevertheless, audiences in Aleppo may still experience *tarab* in the context of these novel performance settings, suggesting that the physical space of performance may not be as critical in judgments of authenticity and

emotional sincerity as *expectations* of authenticity. The following chapter explores the performative qualities of authenticity and the link between emotion, especially the experience of *tarab*, and the context of performance to further question what it is that makes a given performance authentic.

Chapter Seven: Tarab and Authenticity

I) *al-Matla'*: Tarab and Samna

I am back in Damascus paying a visit to my friend 'Adil al-Zaki, owner of the Sham Dan cassette shop, to get some more cassettes of older songs. As mentioned in chapter one, Mr. Zaki's shop has *kull shi*, "everything," including nearly half a million recordings on a variety of formats, mostly cassettes, of older Arab music and music from around the world. In his 80s, Zaki is a jocular man, somewhat round of belly and quick of smile, and a great enthusiast of Arab music. Needless to say he has little regard for most contemporary artists.

When I visited his shop I would generally sit for a while as we listened to various artists – whomever he happened to be making a tape of at the time, or others according to his mood: Umm Kulthum and 'Abd al-Wahhab, of course, but also Indonesian Qur'an readers, Persian *'ud* players, all-women orchestras from Tunisia, and others both famous and obscure. We'd sip little glasses of coffee, sit back in our chairs, and enjoy the music. Return with me for a representative afternoon at his shop....

* * *

Today I have come to get some cassettes of songs by Aleppine composers recorded by the Aleppine radio station in the 1950s and 60s. When I ask him if he has

anything by Aleppine composers, he says, “‘*Ammû*, (uncle¹) I have *kull shî*! Whom are you looking for?” He then rattles off a long list of names and has his son bring down several boxes of tapes from the shelves, each precisely numbered, catalogued, and arranged according to the artist or genre.² Peering through the boxes, he selects some tapes for me and begins putting them in a tape player so we can listen to them. As Muhammad Khairi sings about lost love, Zaki exclaims, “What a voice!” and waves his arms around in that familiar *tarab* gesture. “*Hilû*,” (sweet³), I add. “Do you want to hear some real *tarab*?” he asks me. Of course I do, and he says, “Here’s an old-time (*qadîm*) singer from Homs, not well-known, but he could really sing!” and puts in a cassette. The tape is a recording from the 1950s of ‘Abd al-Wahid Shawish, a vocalist from the central Syrian city of Homs. He is singing a *qasida* and when he finishes each phrase the audience on the tape bursts into ahs, oohs, and shouts of encouragement – typical *tarab* responses. Zaki is all smiles as he leans back in his chair, his hands moving ever so slightly along with the singer – a shadow conductor of the emotions.

When the song is over, he turns to me and asks, “*shû? ma hilû?*.” (“Well? Isn’t it good?”) and I respond by shaking my head in amazement and saying “*hilû kitîr*” (very nice). I ask if there were others like him in Homs and elsewhere in the 1950s, aside from the big names from Aleppo and Damascus, and he says “*kân fî kitîr*, there were a lot, but

¹ His calling me ‘*ammû* (uncle) is one example of the Arab practice of referring to someone by the honorific that you would use in referring to him or her. For example, a father will call his young children, boys and girls, *bābā* (father), whereas a mother would refer to them as *māmā*; a grandfather would call his grandchildren *jiddū* (grandfather), and so on. Because I would refer to Mr. Zaki as ‘*ammû* (metaphorically any older man who would warrant the respect of an uncle), he referred to me as “uncle” too.

² On a visit to his shop in April 2000 I found Zaki and his son busy creating a CD-ROM archive of his collection and preparing for a web site – a far cry from the diverse notebooks in which he had scribbled information about each composer, singer, and song.

³ *Hilû* literally means “sweet,” but as I have indicated elsewhere, it is a general aesthetic term meaning “good” or “fine.” My translations of other colloquial phrases are loose and attempt to capture the spirit of the words.

now there aren't that many voices like that – that can cause *tarab*.” He adds, “there are only a handful today, nothing like the old days” (*mû mital ayyâm zamân*). “Why?” I ask. Leaning back in his chair and patting his pouch, he says, “The reason is that today no one eats enough fat.” I look surprised, so he continues.

Shuif, ammu (Look, uncie), in the old days we used to eat *samna baladi* (purified butter), but today everyone eats Mazola. It's just not the same! You need fat to have a good voice. God made the sheep so that for every fifteen kilos of meat you have five of fat. That's one third fat, 33 per cent. We need to eat fat! Today all these singers are skinny and their voices weak. So how can they evoke *tarab*?! They need to eat more *samna*!

He laughs with a sparkle in his eye that says he is only half joking. I collect my tapes and leave. Over the coming weeks I can't help noticing that many of the good artists, old and young, appear to be a little fat. Do they eat *samna*? Is this the secret to *tarab*?!

* * *

As shown in the previous chapters, Aleppines associate musical authenticity with their perceptions of the emotional sincerity of artists more than with specific musical features. *Sidq* and *ruh sharqiyya* constitute the two most important ingredients for a successful and hence “authentic” performer. But the test of the authenticity and quality of a performer is his or her ability to induce *tarab* in listeners – a test that arises in

performance. *Tarab*, then, is a key term in musical aesthetics in Syria – and especially in Aleppo, which locals refer to as “*umm al-tarab*” (“The mother of *tarab*”).

This chapter explores in detail the subject of *tarab*, that most “authentic” of emotions experienced by listeners of Arab music. I explore *tarab* in Aleppo and investigate some of the situations in which artists and audiences experience it. I argue that *tarab* can be understood as a process of social presentation in which valued emotional states are given linguistic, para-linguistic, and kinesthetic expression. Rhetorically, *tarab* confirms individual claims to authenticity and operates as a frame for the presentation of the self. Musical factors are not irrelevant, however, and I argue that in the context of performance, *tarab* may arise as a result of perceived transformations in the temporality of performance. I explore the relationship between the evocation of *tarab* and the experience of temporal transformations in the context of the genre of instrumental improvisation known as the *taqsim*. Finally, I examine some of the contradictions in modern understandings of *tarab* and outline efforts by contemporary Syrian artists to transcend *tarab* and musical emotionality in favor of more intellectual musical styles.

II) *Tarab* Defined

Tarab is an incorrigibly difficult term to translate for it connotes numerous concepts. *Tarab* refers to a state of heightened emotionality often translated as “rapture,” “ecstasy,” or “enchantment.” It describes as well a style of music and musical performance in which such emotional states are evoked and aroused. Finally *tarab* constitutes a more general term in Arab aesthetics that describes a culturally-induced and appreciated sense of aesthetic bliss or rapture with respect to an art object: one may

experience *tarab* when hearing a poem or even when regarding a painting as well as through listening to music, though usually *tarab* is restricted to the oral arts and acts of listening.⁴ Given these different connotations of the term, some scholars refer to a “*tarab* culture” of shared social, cultural and aesthetic practices and sentiments related to performing and listening to music (Danielson 1997: 19; Racy 1998: 97).

As one Aleppine vocalist put it, “*tarab* is the feeling you get when you listen to music, and it just makes you want to say Ah!” There is the sense that listeners cannot help themselves – they are moved to shout, to sigh, or to move their arms and bodies. Indeed, *tarab*-style musical performances are often accompanied by a running commentary of shouts, exclamations, sighs, and gestures; this was certainly the case in the Sabah Fakhri concert described in the previous chapter, and even with ‘Adil al-Zaki and others as they listen to recordings. Performers and audience members interact throughout performances, and these shouts, sighs, and gestures are thought to express emotional states aroused in listeners by the artist, who reads these expressions as encouragement to continue a masterful performance. Like so many other musical cultures in the world, jazz being another (Berliner 1994; Monson 1996), Arab music is a highly sociable form of music-making, and in fact audience participation is a key ingredient in the *tarab* culture.

Racy (1991, 1998), writing on the dynamics of the *tarab* culture, proposes an “ecstatic-feedback” model of *tarab* by which Arab music arouses *tarab* in listeners as a result of a dynamic interplay of such factors as the emotional and physical state of the

⁴ For interesting discussions of the inter-relatedness of different domains of aesthetic experience in Arabic culture, see al-Faruqi (1981) and Boullata (1990).

performer, the particular musical modes being used, and the ability and readiness of the listeners both emotionally and culturally to appreciate the music. In this model, the *mutrib* must be open to the influence of the particular *maqâm* until reaching a state of melodic flow or groove known as *saltana* and becoming *mitsaltan* – under the influence of the *maqâm*.⁵ Because it often arises in the performance of the *wasla*, *saltana* is described by musicians as coming to the *mutrib* after he has experienced and internalized the mode (and mood) of the *wasla*. Thus in theory a *mutrib* will need some time to warm up before getting into the appropriate mood or modal groove. For their part, listeners must be at once cultivated in the specific repertoire and emotionally responsive to the *mutrib*'s performance, as both Racy (1998: 101-103) and Danielson (1997: 10) note. The act of listening itself is a performative and creative act equally important to the construction of the musical experience as the performance of the musicians themselves. The so-called *sammi'a* or skilled and cultivated listeners play an important role in stimulating the *mutrib* to perform well; Sabah Fakhri claimed that he feels that these skilled listeners judge him as he sings (*bihâsibûnî*) (Racy 1998: 95). This is a key aspect of the *tarab* culture.

Certain other factors, such as the occasion for music-making, the time of day, and the vagaries of human social interaction, are also important in establishing an appropriate atmosphere or *jaww* for the achievement of *tarab*. In Racy's model (1991), these factors

⁵ *Mitsaltan* derives from *saltana*, what Racy (1998: 100) translates as "modal ecstasy" and which refers to a state of being under the influence of the overall mood of the music. A woman vocalist or *mutriba* (pl. *mutribât*) would be described as *mitsaltana*. I use the masculine forms in this chapter since most of my information comes from male informants talking about other male performers. As Danielson's important study (1997) of the life of Umm Kulthûm shows, the *tarab* culture and its attendant aesthetics are by no means restricted to male vocalists, and indeed numerous *mutribât* have been stars of local *tarab* cultures in Cairo, Alexandria, Damascus, Aleppo, and Beirut, among other Arab cities, and many earned regional and international fame, including Umm Kulthûm, Mary Jubrân, Asmahân, and Layla Murâd.

constitute a dynamic system of stimuli and responses in which no single factor is indispensable or extraneous. However, both Racy and Danielson (1997: 12), while acknowledging these other factors, argue that the vocalist plays the most important role in the evocation and experience of *tarab* in performance, primarily through mastery of musical repertoire and through achieving a state of *saltana*.

Because various musical and non-musical circumstances influence the experience of *tarab*, “*tarab* culture” should assume different characteristics in different locales; for example, the experience of *tarab* in Cairo or Beirut would be different from the experience of *tarab* in Aleppo, which in turn would be different from *tarab* in another place. Even within Aleppo, as we shall see, there are very different contexts for the experience of *tarab* and evaluation of musical authenticity. Rather than speak of a single *tarab* culture we must therefore attempt to understand diverse *tarab* cultures and how they may relate to elements of performance practice in Arab music in specific locales. Whereas Racy writes on the Arab East and Egypt, and Danielson on Egypt in the context of the songs of Umm Kulthûm, I below examine some of the elements of *tarab* culture in Aleppo and the factors that Aleppine artists indicate are the most important in the experience of *tarab* in their city. I turn to one particular artist whose reflections on his lengthy involvement in Aleppine musical culture both clarifies and extends certain arguments in both Racy’s and Danielson’s discussions of *tarab*.

An Aleppine Perspective on Tarab

During an early lesson, I asked Muhammad Qadri Dalal about *tarab*, what it is and how it comes about among musicians and singers in Aleppo. After all, if Aleppo is

indeed “*Umm al-Tarab*,” then *tarab* must occupy a special place in the city’s musical culture. According to Dalal, the first question we must ask when investigating *tarab* is, “Does a connection (*tawāsul*) exist between the artist and the audience?” All of the great artists he has known and listened to have had the ability to connect with their audiences and evoke *tarab*. Then, said Dalal, this leads to the question, “Is *tarab* to be found in the *tawāsul* between the *mutrib* and the audience (*jumhūr-sammī’a*), or is it a characteristic of the *mutrib* himself, the music, or what?”

Dalal gave me some examples of Aleppo’s *tarab* culture from his own experience as a performer with many of Aleppo’s great singers. Regarding the state of the performer, sometimes a *mutrib* may not be in touch (*mittasil*) with himself during a performance and *tarab* won’t arise. For example, Sabah Fakhri once complained during a concert that it wasn’t working out, meaning that something was wrong either with his voice, the orchestra, or the audience. There just wasn’t any *tarab*. However, the *mutrib* Muhammad Khairi would be *mitsaltan* whether his voice was on or off, whether the orchestra was in tune or not, and the audience would fall into *tarab*, shouting their Oohs and Ahhs almost regardless of the musical aspects of the performance. It didn’t matter what was happening: he could always produce *tarab*. In addition, the great composer and *mutrib* Bakri al-Kurdi, though his voice was delicate and weak (*nā’im wi da’if*), could get the audience to cry Ahh! with one sentence (*bi-jumla wāhida*). Hence, Dalal argued, it seems that the artist’s relationship with himself, his internal harmony (*insijām*), is what determines the ability to be creative (*yusdir al-ibdā’*, “produce innovation”). This reflects on the audience (*bi-yin’akas ‘alā al-jumhūr*) and they react to it (*bi-yinfa’ilū*) with *tarab*.

Dalal seemed to place great emphasis on the *mutrib*’s ability to cause *tarab* in

audiences. A *mutrib* must achieve a state of being *mittasil* (connected) or *munsajim* (in harmony) with himself in order to effect *tarab* in listeners. *Saltana* thus derives from an internal state of harmony that is then reflected onto the audience, who experience *tarab*. Interestingly, this is connected in Dalal's narrative with the ability to be creative, to "produce innovation." *Tarab*, a chief index of authenticity, relies in part on innovation on producing something new. While this might seem paradoxical, innovation and authenticity, as I explore below, are not mutually exclusive domains and there is a close connection between authenticity and the expectation of innovation and originality in Aleppo, as in Syrian arts more generally.

Emphasizing the processual nature of *tarab*, Dalal argued that a *mutrib* needs time to warm up before getting into a state of internal harmony and thus having the ability to effect *tarab* in others. For example, Bakri al-Kurdi would warm up in private *saharât* first by playing a *samâ'î* and then by improvising (*viqassim*) on the 'ūd. After the improvisation (*taqsim*) he would then play a few *muwashshahât*, and this would have the effect of making him *mitsaltan*; "the *maqâm* and *tarab* would dominate (*visaytar 'alâ*) the *sahra*," said Dalal. Then all it took was for al-Kurdi to sing *yâ laylî! yâ layl!* (O my night! O night!) ⁶ and the listeners would explode. Ahh! ⁷ "It's strange" (*'ajîb*), he claimed. "When a *mutrib* sings a beautiful sentence (*jumla hihwa*) or a line from a *qasîda*," he continued, "the audience doesn't just react with him (*yitjawwabû ma 'ûh*) – they are prepared to do anything (*ayya shî*) as a result of the *tarab*."

⁶ These words are sung to an improvised melody in the vocal genre known as *layâlî* (literally "nights.").

⁷ In a private recording of one such *sahra* held at the home of Mr. Zaki's father in 1965, al-Kurdi "warmed up" by performing a *taqsim* on the 'ūd, then a *samâ'î*, and then singing a *muwashshah*. A *qânûn taqsim* followed, and then al-Kurdi launched into his *tarab*-inducing *layâlî*. *Tarab* responses can be heard throughout the 'ūd and *qânûn* solos, but the audience really explodes in the *layâlî* section, as Dalal suggested in his remarks.

In this scenario, the *tarab* felt by the audience is a product of the internal state of the *mutrib*, itself a result of warming up to a modal groove, *saltana*; the *mutrib* – or rather his voice – is the medium for the expression of deeply moving emotional states.⁸ Nevertheless, it is a “strange” process, and even for this experienced artist *tarab* presents some mysteries. *Tarab* appears to have a magical power to move, such that audiences, when they feel it, are prepared to do “anything.” What extreme acts might be associated with *tarab* was never clarified to me, though stories circulate in Aleppo of people dying from being overpowered by strong emotions while listening to a song. As I have indicated it is not uncommon for people to shout, scream, cry, moan, dance, and otherwise exhibit behavior that we might define as “ecstatic.” There are also certain parallels between the conventional *tarab* responses and behavior in the *dhikr*, such as shouting *allāh* or making certain gestures.⁹ In Dalal’s account, a lot depends on the individual *mutrib* and his internal emotional-musical state. Certain artists feel *saltana* and cause *tarab* quickly and easily, while others do not. For example, Muhammad Khairi could get into it right away even if the conditions weren’t favorable, while Sabah Fakhri might not be able to because of some problem with himself, the orchestra, or the audience. The audience, at first playing a central role in determining the *tawāsul* between them and the *mutrib*, now seems to be a reactive, secondary agent in the *tarab* process.

Switching emphasis, I asked Dalal how he experiences *tarab* and *saltana* as a performer, and when and where he first experienced these feelings. He related to me the following story:

⁸ In effect that is what the word *mutrib* means, “one who causes *tarab*.”

⁹ One also detects a certain similarity between these models of *saltana* and *tarab* and Platonic and Neo-Platonic conceptions of the artist as a conduit of supernatural powers, as in Plato’s dialogue *Ion* (1983).

I remember when I was young, like ten, and there used to be *saharât* in our house and some of the big names would come – Bakri al-Kurdi, Muhammad Khairi, others – and, for example, they would do a *wasla* in [the *maqâm*] *bayyâtî*. *Maqâm al-bayyâtî* would ring in my mind (*fî zihnî*), in my head (*fî ra'sî*) for a week afterwards! A full week and my head would be full of *bayyâtî*! That's *saltana*!

Dalal described an experience familiar to anyone who has had a particular tune run in his or her mind for days on end. This is one aspect of *saltana* – the idea that the tune or melody or even mode will remain in one's head almost despite oneself. Because it would seem that one would need some familiarity with the *maqâmât* before being able to feel *mitsaltan* for a week by a single *maqâm*. I asked Dalal where he first learned the *maqâmât*. He said that he first learned the *maqâmât* in the *dhikr* as a child.

I would go to the *dhikr* with my father when I was five years old. The *zâwiya* would be packed, maybe 500 people, sometimes 600!, all participating in the *dhikr*. [There were always] good *munshidûn*. My father would recite a *qasida* – my father was a strong personality (*shakhsiyya qawwiyya*) and had a good, strong voice – and the *dhikr* would turn into a mass of emotion (*kutlat mashâ'ir*).

Something very strange! (*shî 'ajîb jiddan*). I would feel scared (*khawf*), and frightened (*ra'b*). The *shaykh al-zâwiya* would open up his wallet and give me a quarter *lira* (which seemed like a lot to me then) so that I would come back! I

would be really happy (*mabsût*) going with my father, like when I worked with Sabah Fakhri. I'd be happy when he sang [because of the feelings], not because of the money.¹⁰

As mentioned in chapter five, the *dhikr* has served as an important training ground for Aleppine musicians for many decades. In contemporary discourse, the *dhikr* often serves rhetorically as a site of musical and cultural authenticity; the claim to having learned the *maqâmât* and the Aleppine repertoire in the *zâwiya* testifies to one's *asâla* as a Aleppine and as an artist. Moreover, it is in the *zâwiya* where the intimate connection between strong (even fearful) emotions, the human voice, and the musical modes are first forged for many artists – a connection that extends outside the *zâwiya* to include *saharât* and other performance venues. The *sidq* experienced in the *zâwiya* (and, at least for the faithful, conditioned as a result of the moral discipline of the *dhikr*) is what allows the *mutrib* to evoke *tarab* on the stage. It is not the money, suggested Dalal, but the emotions that would make him *mabsût* or *matrûb* (under the influence of *tarab*) at a *dhikr*, *sahra* or *hafla*. These emotions arise from a combination of the specific musical modes being performed (such as *bayyâtî* in Dalal's remembrance) and the social environment of the *zâwiya*; *tarab* is hence a musical-social phenomenon.

What about the audience and its role in creating the appropriate atmosphere for *tarab*? To what extent do the audience and the physical location of the *sahra* affect the probability of attaining *saltana* and *tarab*? Dalal compared two different *saharât* at

¹⁰ The current *shaykh al-zâwiya* at the *dhikr* described in chapter five continues this tradition, dispensing 25 lira coins (approximately 50 cents) to the young boys at the *dhikr*.

which he participated to illustrate how the people and atmosphere can considerably influence the outcome of a *sahra*. Every Thursday evening for over fifteen years he and a group of friends have met for an evening of food, conversation, and, of course, song. “We sing the songs we like,” he said, “and everyone has a good time” (*kull wâhid bi-yinbasit*). “It’s something well-known about the Aleppans,” he continued. “We love *saharât haki* (conversation), food and *tarab*.” This same group once attended a *sahra* at the house of a foreign music lover and performer who was hosting a foreign diplomat from Damascus. Local television was even going to come and film some of it, so Dalal brought along the venerable *mutrib* Sabrî Moudallal and Moudallal’s prodigy, ‘Umar Sarmini, in addition to his ‘*ûd*. One would expect that with such talent the *sahra* would have been a great success. Dalal commented on the second *sahra*:

We had a good time, but it wasn’t the same [as the Thursday night *sahra*].

Everything was fine with respect to the form (*shakal*) and movement (*haraka*) of the *sahra*. People were happy (*kân fî bast*, lit. “there was happiness”), but there wasn’t anything inside us (*mâ kân fî shî jawâtnâ*), not the atmosphere (*jaww*) ... you know. The TV cameras were there filming and so on. It became artificial (*mufîa ‘ala*).

The *jaww* (atmosphere) of the first *sahra* was more conducive for *tarab* than that the second, even though pretty much the same individuals were present and some of Aleppo’s finer artists performed familiar and beloved songs. But because the *jaww* was artificial – with the television cameras and perhaps the presence of foreigners and a

foreign diplomat – the participants did not achieve the same state of *tarab* and *bast* that they normally experienced in their weekly *sahra*. In a similar vein, Racy remarks that Arab musicians commonly explain a lack of creativity in a given performance by the absence of *jaww*, often as a result of stifled or stilted interactions between the artists and the audience (1998: 102).

Is the secret of *tarab*, then, to be found in the relationship between the listeners and the *mutrib*, in the particular *jaww* of performance, and not in the music or *mutrib* alone? (I neglected to ask him about the possible influence of ingesting *samna*!). Dalal told me another story about how the relationship between artists and audience members and not the quality of the music determines whether or not participants will experience *tarab*.

Once Sabah Fakhri was invited to our house – and my father was a religious man, and my wife's father was the *mufti*¹¹ – and he came with his ensemble (*firqa*), maybe four people. Everyone present went crazy (*il-'ālam janmī*). It was really outstanding (*rā'i'a*). So once [years later] when I saw Sabah I asked him, “How was that *sahra* back in 1970, 1971?” He told me “It was bad” (*say'a*). I said, “That *sahra* in which we had such a good time?!” “Yes,” he said, “very bad” (*say'a jiddan*). I was surprised. We had such a great time, we were happy, we felt *tarab* (*sār tajallī, sār bast wa tarab*¹²). So I went and listened to a tape of the

¹¹ The *mufti* is the chief religious official in the city.

¹² *Tajallī*, from the verb *tajallā*, to become manifest, to be clear, come to light, literally means a revelation or manifestation. Musicians in the Arab East commonly use *tajallī* along with *bast*, *kayf*, and *saltana* to refer to an ecstatic state of happiness experienced when listening to the secular repertoire (Racy 1998: 100). It should be noted that similar terms are used in the context of *samā'* and *inshād* (“sacred” song forms) and we cannot discount the highly significant sacred connotations of *tajallī* as “revelation.”

sahra, and it turned out to be *say'a*!

Turning back to the cassette tape of the *sahra*, Dalal discovered that, from a strictly musical standpoint, Fakhri was correct: the *sahra* was *say'a* (perhaps even *say'a jiddan*). But he nevertheless remembered having had a great time and that other participants also experienced *tarab*. Hence a low level of artistry combined with a high level of intimacy and whatever else contributed to creating the right *jaww* led many of the participants (if not the *mutrib*) to experience *tarab*. A musically exemplary performance might not necessarily guarantee that participants will experience *tarab*. It is the *tawâsul*, the relationship between the artist and the listeners, that is important, more so even than the music itself, as Dalal suggested. “The cassette doesn’t record the presence (*hudûr*) of the people and their emotions, the atmosphere,” said Dalal. Muhammad Khairi and Bakri al-Kurdi could elicit *tarab* with ease because of their relationship with their audiences even when their performances were less than stellar. Aleppans remember them as great artists endowed with a high degree of *sîdîq*, and their performances as great, independent of evaluations of their precise musical qualities: indeed, both singers were thought to have weak voices (certainly weaker than Sabah Fakhri’s). The consummate master Sabah Fakhri, however, seems to place greater emphasis on the music itself and to have more discriminating standards – as well as a formidable memory if he could recall the particulars of a given *sahra* years afterwards! But regardless of the merits or lack thereof of a given performance, an audience may indeed experience *tarab*, as Dalal’s story illustrates, if the relationship between the vocalist and the audience is right. The internal state of the *mutrib* – his *insijâm* and *saltana* – now seem to be at least partly the result of

his relationship with his audience and not the cause of it. *Tawāsul*, then, at once reflects and produces the musical, social, and emotional states that allow the *mutrib* to experience the feelings that then enable him to produce *tarab* in others.

III) *Tarab*, Intersubjectivity, Sentiment, and the Presentation of Self

As Dalal's remarks make clear, *tarab* results from a complex interplay of factors, including the quality of the musicians, the voice and mood of the *mutrib*, the overall *jaww*, and, most importantly, the connection (*tawāsul*) between artists and audience members – themselves performers in the sense of contributing to the overall experience of the music. In Aleppo, whether or not listeners experience *tarab* – or *tajalli*, *bast*, and *kayf* – determines the extent to which they consider a given performance and, over time, performer to be authentic (*asil*). The *tawāsul* between the *mutrib* and the audience strongly depends on the audience's evaluation of his *sidq* or emotional sincerity; therefore the burden of proof, as it were, falls on the *mutrib* to display enough *sidq* so that the audience will interact well with him, he will become *mitsaltan*, and as a result they will experience *tarab*. In this fashion *tarab* responses are closely indexed to evaluations of *sidq*, which is itself a feature of the interaction of artists and audiences. Hence “*tarab*” in many ways serves as a gloss for the highly complex and intersubjective process and experience of music-making – of achieving what Alfred Schutz (1977 [1951]) called the “mutual tuning-in relationship,” the experiential “we” established in performance.

In the context of performance, the emotions that are presumed to be evoked and experienced (*tarab*, *saltana*, *tajalli*, *bast*, *kayf*, and so on) might better be understood as expressions in conventional language of the pragmatic elements of the musical

engagement. That is, these terms are abstractions not so much of internal emotional states (which we cannot verify anyway) but of the intersubjective processes of the “mutual tuning-in relationship” itself (cf. Crapanzano 1992; Silverstein 1976). The language, para-language, and gestures associated with *tarab* are in effect social-emotional metaphors of authentic musical performance; they gloss the complex and positively valued sentiments and the social and musical interactions that give rise to them in performance. For example, when listeners shout *allâh*, sigh, or make elaborate bodily gestures, they may be expressing to themselves and to those around them their emotional states, but in the overall context of performance these actions also serve as indexes of the *jaww* of the performance, the *tawâsul* between artists and listeners, and, implicitly, the participants’ and performance’s authenticity.¹³

I do not wish to deny that individuals who exhibit conventional *tarab* responses are “really” experiencing *tarab* or other emotions. Rather, my purpose here is to call attention to the rhetorical and presentational aspects of these responses. When listeners rhetorically evoke the concept of *tarab* in their discourse about Arab music or about a given musical performance, they are not only describing a given musical performance but also making claims to a wide range of metaphorical and metonymic associations between the music and emotional sincerity, cultural authenticity, and so forth. For example, Dalal’s narrative of his early musical-emotional experiences at the *dhikr* and his

¹³ In one sense *tarab* responses are metaphors that link the two domains of musical performance and emotional experience; one might describe them as “internal metaphors” that gloss the experiential states of individual listeners, those who present *tarab* responses. In another sense they can be thought of as marking a metonymic or part-whole relationship between the listeners and the overall performance context: the shouts, gestures, and so forth that occur within the context of a given performance may come to stand for the whole performance. In a similar manner a given performance may come to stand for an entire genre, indeed “heritage” and “authentic culture.”

acquaintance with great *tarab* artists established his claim to authenticity as a musician and as a true son of Aleppo in a city that celebrates its religious and musical heritage. Similarly, dismissal of the contemporary Arab pop song as inauthentic with respect to melody, lyrics, and voice is one way for individuals to promote their claims to authenticity. In the same manner, the young man who sat next to me at the Sabah Fakhri concert and claimed to attend over thirty shows a year was also rhetorically expressing valued conceptions of himself as a music lover and connoisseur.

By displaying *tarab* responses listeners demonstrate to others, and to themselves, that they are capable of being moved emotionally by music, which is a valued attribute of the self for many Aleppine artists and music lovers. These displays in the course of a performance are important presentational accompaniments to Aleppine rhetorics of the authentic self (cf. Battaglia 1995) that, as I have argued, often center on music. Emotionality, as in such qualities as emotional sincerity (*sidq*), is for many Aleppans an important if not defining component of their diverse self-conceptions. *Tarab* responses in a musical performance, and similar responses at poetry readings, the *dhikr*, and in the context of listening to recorded music, are in effect presentations of these deeply-valued self characterizations.¹⁴

Of course, self characterizations and their presentation and enactment in

¹⁴ As mentioned earlier, by adopting a broad conception of performance that includes a wide variety of events and situations, we can understand listening to cassette tapes and other forms of mediated music (CDs, videos, etc.) as performance. Moreover, many of the dynamics of the *tarab* culture in the context of live performance also hold true for listening to mediated music, especially when people listen to music in groups. The majority of *tarab* situations today are in fact mediated by cassettes and other media. Umm Kulthūm's legendary Thursday evening performances drew together millions of listeners from across the Arab world into a sort of virtual *tarab* culture (Danielson 1997). The absence of the live artist in these contexts confirms rather than denies the presentational aspects of the *tarab* culture, which, I argue, must be thought of as mediated by cultural conventions and expectations. The responses of Zaki and so many others to mediated music (especially cassettes) indicates the importance of this mode of creative listening.

performance are never as straight-forward or simple as the somewhat mechanical “ecstatic feedback” model might imply. Conceptions of the self are not so stable or fixed that they are immediately presentable and recognizable in performance situations. Rather, such conceptions are labile, situational, and multifaceted, and the presentation of “self” depends to a large extent on the precise performance situation – who is present, where the performance is held, the overall mood, and so on. Moreover, as Crapanzano suggests (1992), the presentation of self is also subject to plays of desire and power. For example, the expectation of experiencing *tarab* and the willingness and desire to display *tarab* responses are as important as the music and *jaww* of the performance in determining whether listeners or artists experience *tarab*. The different presentations of self are not straightforward representations or reflections of the internal emotional states of the participants, nor are they fixed; one may wear different hats, as it were, at different times, or even during the course of the same performance. Furthermore, we should understand the emotions that these responses are thought to index as presentations of conceptions of emotional states and not the emotional states themselves – “*tarab*,” not *tarab*, “*saltana*,” not *saltana*, “*kayf*,” and not *kayf*, and so on (cf. Langer 1960 [1942]).¹⁵ In this regard,

¹⁵ My analysis borrows some terminology from Suzanne Langer’s study of musical communication and symbolism, in particular her notion of “presentational” symbolism (Langer 1960 [1942]). For Langer, music symbolizes *concepts* of feelings rather than the feelings themselves; that is, a particular musical passage, in her view, would not so much evoke emotions in listeners as present iconic concepts of the emotions in musical form. Unlike Langer, I focus on the reactions of listeners to music and argue that such responses as *tarab* present conceptions of emotions, but that the music itself does not present them: in fact, the music may have little to do with the emotional states that audiences claim to experience when listening to it, as Dalal made clear with his aforementioned illustration with the “sad” melody of Sayyid Darwish’s up-beat and cheerful *Yā hilawāt al-dunyā*. Rather, I argue that music in the *tarab* culture arouses emotional states that listeners present aurally and visually as the conventional *tarab* responses. These conventional *tarab* responses can in a sense be thought of as iconic presentations of the emotions with which they are associated; the gesture or sigh or exclamation is identified as the emotion. Langer would reject such an “arousalist” theory that music expresses emotions by arousing emotions in listeners. Yet, my argument is that focusing on the music alone means missing a significant dimension of the processes by which artists and audiences experience and communicate *tarab* and other “emotions” in the course of a performance.

sincerity (*sidq*) must be understood as a presentational aspect of performance and not an essential attribute of a given performer; indeed, *sidq* is performative.

Although the overall atmosphere is perhaps the most important factor in determining the extent to which audience members will experience *tarab* – that is, present *tarab* responses – musical properties are not usually unimportant. The expectation and desire to experience *tarab*, the overall atmosphere, and the specific musical features of the performance provide the context in which artists and listeners may experience *tarab*. Performers, both artists and listeners, in fact make a number of important evaluative decisions during a performance. As Feld has argued (1994:85-89), performers make a series of “interpretive moves” or evaluations of certain qualities of the musical engagement by which they orient their experience of the music.¹⁶ In the *tarab* culture listeners make interpretive moves regarding the style of performance, the emotional sincerity of the *mutrib*, the authenticity of the musicians’ renditions and treatment of modes, the overall *jaww*, and other aesthetic conventions of Arab music and the *tarab* culture. Artists for their part make similar moves to assess the engagement of the audience, the quality of the music, the *jaww*, and so forth. These interpretive moves establish frames in which listeners and artists express and understand their experiences. With a shout, a sigh, or a movement of the arms, listeners create such frames and give symbolic expression to their having made certain interpretive moves regarding the performance’s quality. With a cry in the voice or a rapid trill of the plectrum on the *‘ūd*, a performer too may attempt to establish interpretive frames in performance.

¹⁶ According to Feld (1994: 86-87), these include locational, categorical, associational, reflective, and evaluative “moves.”

These frames – and there will always be multiple, overlapping frames in any given musical performance – are contexts for the presentation of the self, understood performatively (Goffman 1959; Crapanzano 1992). Both artists and listeners make strategic choices in performance that frame what I call the conventional “performance personae” of the *tarab* culture. For example, through the manipulation of conventional musical idioms or through body movement and gesture, a performer might pragmatically attempt to establish his or her “self” as a “master performer” (*‘ustâz*) or as a “romantic lover” (*‘âshiq*). Because cultivated listeners may expect to hear conventional phrases that are known to produce *tarab* responses, artists often use these phrases at certain times to generate these responses or to reestablish a connection with an audience gone astray. Dalal mentioned that when he feels that audience members are not following him or are somehow distant when he performs an instrumental improvisation (*taqsîm*) he will insert some conventional *tarab* phrases into his playing to get them excited. Doing so has the effect of re-centering the performance on the artist and the emotional relationship between him and the listener. By shouting, sighing, and gesturing, a listener might move to establish his or her “self” as a “skilled listener” (one of the *sammî‘a*) or as a “connoisseur” (*dhawwâq*), in this manner playing off the artist’s self presentation as a master performer. Hence the presentation of self – or the framing of conceptions of the self in performance – is a dialogical, intersubjective process in the *tarab* culture; the self is negotiated between the artist, the listener, and the culture’s aesthetic conventions.¹⁷

¹⁷ In Crapanzano’s terminology, the aesthetic conventions operate as a “Third” or “guarantor of meaning” in the triadic relationship of self, convention, and other (Crapanzano 1992: 72, 88-90).

IV) Innovation, Authenticity, and *Tarab*

According to Dalal's narrative of *tarab* in Aleppo, an artist's ability to "produce innovation" (*yusdir al-ibdā'*) – to be creative (or be understood as being creative) – is one condition for producing *tarab* in listeners, and therefore of being considered by them to be an authentic performer. It does not suffice for an artist merely to follow musical conventions; he must be *mubdi'*, creative. The *mubdi'* or creative artist is another familiar performance persona in the Aleppine *tarab* culture, and it is also a standard term of praise for exceptional artists in all media. To be labeled "the great creative artist" (*al-fannân al-mubdi' al-kabir*) is about the highest praise an artist can receive. Hence artists will strive to innovate or bring novelty to their works, and this is reinforced by art lovers who often express a desire to encounter something new – or their disdain when presented with the same old stuff. When I asked acquaintances what they thought of a certain performance, they often would reply critically, *mā fī shī jadīd*, literally, "there's nothing new." I heard the same pronouncements at fine arts exhibitions and poetry readings. These artists and intellectuals, many skilled in or knowledgeable about the classical musical repertoire or other heritage-related artistic styles, expressed a desire to engage with something new, with novelty in the context of tradition.

In the *tarab* culture, authenticity, then, is closely linked to creativity and innovation. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that in the context of the *tarab* culture – at least in Aleppo – tradition and innovation are not mutually exclusive but mutually implicated domains. In contemporary Syria the valuation of the old does not preclude innovation; in fact, there is often the expectation that a "genuine artist" (*fannân asîl*) will innovate within the parameters of "tradition." For example, Sabah Fakhri may sing

verses of well-known songs in his own manner, or improvise a *mawwâl* or *qasîda* in special and unexpected ways. The unexpected, if it falls within the realm of the possible and accepted, is valued and can elicit *tarab* responses. Something too far outside the realm of accepted practice (for example, an entirely unorthodox melodic modulation or change in tempo) would not produce *tarab* so much as ambivalence, possibly scorn. Artists therefore tread a fine line between innovation (*ibdâ'*) and excess, on the one hand, and between innovation and the mere following of tradition (*ittibâ'*), on the other.¹⁸

According to Dalal, innovation and creativity in music rely on two factors: the artist's internal harmony (*insijâm*), and his storehouse of memorized musical material. As discussed above, the *insijâm* of the artist is a product of the intersubjective "mutual tuning-in process" of music making. It also reflects the artist's desire to experience and evoke *tarab* in performance as well as his or her self-characterization as a master artist. However, as Dalal and others related to me, innovation must be based on a firm understanding of tradition. A "genuine artist" will have learned and committed to memory a large storehouse (*makhzûn*) of songs and styles upon which he or she can proceed to innovate and produce something new. Indeed, in the course of an improvisation Arab musicians, like jazz artists, often incorporate phrases from instrumental and vocal "standards." For many, mastery of the various instrumental and vocal pre-composed genres is a prerequisite for improvisation.

To help me understand the relationship between learning pre-composed pieces

¹⁸ In the context of Islamic jurisprudence, innovation or *bid'a* may be viewed as an acceptable novelty or as heretical, depending on the school of thought (*Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam* 1995: 62). Conservative theologians distinguish between *ittibâ'*, following – in other words, the *sunna* – and *ibtidâ'*, unlawful innovation. However, few Aleppan musicians made a connection between musical or artistic innovation (*ibdâ'*) and religious heresy (*bid'a*) although the words derive from the same linguistic roots.

and the ability to improvise, Dalal related to me the story of the youth who would be a poet. One day a young man went to the great poet Abû Nuwâs and asked, "What do I have to do to become a great poet like you?" Abû Nuwâs told him, "First you must memorize 10,000 lines of poetry." So the youth went off and spent several years roaming from town to town collecting and committing to memory as many poems as he could, until he had faithfully memorized some 10,000 lines. Returning to Abû Nuwâs the youth proudly declared, "I have memorized 10,000 lines. Am I now ready to become a poet?" "Now," said the great poet, "you must go and forget everything you memorized. Once you have forgotten them all, then you will be ready to write poetry!"

Like the would-be poet, the aspiring improviser, Dalal suggested, must first memorize hundreds of pre-composed pieces until they form a musical storehouse that can be accessed in performance.¹⁹ Memorizing the "classical" repertoire *'an zahr al-qalb*, "on the back of the heart," provides artists with the melodic tools from which to create their own melodies and "really" improvise, that is, create (*khalq*) and "produce innovation." Although no one suggested that I actually forget what I had learned, many argued that merely repeating what one has studied and memorized is not sufficient to be counted as a genuine artist. One must create novel forms from the storehouse of tradition. Hence development of the imagination (*khayyâl*) is a critical component of musical and other artistic education, and, as mentioned above, astute audiences will

¹⁹ Similarly, students of Persian music must master the *radif*, a body of compositional materials and a type of musical "canon" from which they draw in improvisation (Nettl 1992, 1998), and jazz musicians master a large repertoire of songs and song forms that they use in the course of improvisation (Berliner 1994; Monson 1996). However, as Nettl suggests (1998: 16), we need to beware of making inferences about the similarities between diverse musical cultures (Arab, Persian, Indian, European, etc.) based on the use of the same word, "improvisation," to describe what might in fact be very different processes of musical composition in performance (cf. Blum 1998).

expect a certain amount of imagination and novelty in performances. Ideally, *ittibâ'*, following, should lead to *ibdâ'*, innovation.

V) *Tarab* and Transformations in Time

One way an artist can “issue innovation” is to manipulate certain conventional musical phrases in the course of performance that have the effect of altering the listener’s experience of temporality. In the performance of an instrumental improvisation (*taqsîm*), for example, an artist can take the stock phrases of the *tarab* culture and combine them in novel ways, create unexpected modulations and rapid changes in tempo, or otherwise interrupt the expected flow of the music. Such alterations can trigger admiration and *tarab* responses from astute listeners, for whom such changes more than the artist’s technical prowess and fast finger work are indications of his or her ability, creativity, and – ultimately – authenticity. Vocalists can manipulate the expectations of the audience, delaying certain closing phrases, repeating others, and in other ways creating something new out of something old and well-known. The best artists do this consistently, “[enlisting] the flux of time as a force to serve [their] ends” (Zuckermandl 1956: 181).²⁰

It is instructive to analyze *tarab* in the context of instrumental improvisation, the *taqsîm* (pl. *taqâsîm*). In the performance of a song, the *mutrib* may trigger *tarab* responses due to his interpretation and expression of the different meanings of the lyrics (*taswîr al-ma'na*). In the absence of lyrics, extra-linguistic factors are responsible for these reactions. Instrumentalists strive to elicit *tarab* responses through a variety of

²⁰ While Zuckermandl writes that the music itself “enlists the flux of time” for its own ends, I focus on the various strategies of performers to alter the experience of time to suit *their* goals, often the arousal of *tarab*.

strategies, including the skillful use of melodic repetition (*tikrâr*), modulation (*intiqâl*), and closing phrases (*qaflât*). I would like to suggest that these strategies evoke in listeners the experience of being removed from and then reinserted into the normal flow of time. The experience of detemporalization and retemporalization, or of temporal transformation in general, may evoke the *tarab* response if the overall *jaww* is appropriate.

The *taqsîm*, derived from the verb *qassama-yuqassimu*, to divide, implies both a division between the different sections in the *wasla*, often marked by instrumental improvisations, and the divisions within the improvisation itself. The conventional *taqsîm* generally consists of an opening section (*matla'*) followed by a body (*jism*) consisting of a series of passing phrases (*muriûr*) and modulation to other modes, and a concluding section (*qafla*; pl. *qaflât*).²¹ Each section and certain phrases within them will conclude with a *qafla*. A *taqsîm* usually begins and ends in the same *maqâm*, though artists commonly explore a number of related *maqâmât* in the course of a performance via modulation. A *taqsîm* may be either metrical (following a fixed tempo) or non-metrical (temporally and rhythmically “free”²²), though the non-metrical variety is most common in Aleppo, as elsewhere in the Arab world today.

Repetition, Protension, Retension

²¹ These terms are not standard or universally utilized in Aleppo. I use them as convenient heuristic devices for the purpose of discussing the structure and process of instrumental improvisation. Vocal improvisations such as the *mawwâl*, *qasîda*, and *layâlî* follow similar patterns as the *taqsîm*, though no one in Aleppo refers to the vocal practices as forms of *taqsîm*, which is reserved for instrumental practice. Short solos on percussion instruments are common in contemporary practice, but I never heard anyone refer to them as *taqâsîm*.

²² Yet, even in a non-metrical *taqsîm* a performer will establish a variety of internal tempos and rhythms.

Listening to a traditional, non-metrical *taqsîm* brings listeners out of the normal flow of time into a state of detemporalization as the performer creates intricate webs of interlocking melodic phrases. Melodic repetition and fluency of movement create this sense of suspended time, one which some performers and listeners described as a “soaring in Sufi airs” (*al-tahliq fî ajwâ’ sufiyya*). Within this state of “soaring,” the repetition of a musical phrase or motif simultaneously recalls those phrases that came before and anticipates those to come, thereby establishing a melodic-rhythmic groove. In this manner the experience of the repetition of a musical phrase is never the same but rather cumulative and anticipatory (cf. Kierkegaard 1964 [1941]). This contributes to a sense of suspended temporality as listeners hover between the “retentions” of the previously heard material and the “protensions” of material yet to come. to borrow the terminology of Husserlian phenomenology (Husserl 1990; Ricouer 1984).

In the midst of this temporal suspension, skillful modulatory phrases and *qaflât* bring listeners back down from the rarefied heights of their auditory journey with the performer and effect a momentary retemporalization of their aesthetic experience. If executed with artistry, this retemporalization elicits the characteristic shouts, ahhs, and bodily movements of the *tarab* reaction. The *qafla* (literally meaning a lock or closure) is especially important in effecting this transformation; indeed, a skillful *qafla* can save an otherwise mediocre *taqsîm*, whereas a poor *qafla* can ruin a good one (S. Marcus 1993). In most *taqsîm* performances, *tarab* responses are strongest after the *qaflât*. During performance, listeners may react during the playing and not only after a *qafla*. Some may hum an accompanying tonic note, occasionally vocalized as “Allah,” which is a common response by the *sammî’a* – or, importantly, those who would like to be thought of as

skilled listeners (again, to emphasize the importance of self-characterization and presentation in *tarab*-responses). Indeed, that the strongest responses usually come after the *qaflât* suggests the close relationship between Arab musical and verbal art forms. Similar responses are heard during the recitation of the Qur'ân, for example, but also in poetry recitals, story-telling, and, of course, vocal improvisations (the *qasîda*, *mawwâl*, and *layâlî* genres). Arab music shares some aesthetic features with the visual arts, especially the arabesque, which I consider to be not merely an element of design but an aesthetic principle based on the processes of repetition and variation and the play between infinity and finitude, openness and closure, unity and diversity, circle and line (cf. Kühnel 1976 [1949]).

Studium and Punctum in the Experience of Tarab

Pursuing the arabesque metaphor, I would like to suggest that music, like the visual arts, demands at least two varieties of aesthetic attention: first, to the overall design or flow of musical phrases and rhythms (even in non-metrical pieces, which exhibit internal if unfixed tempos and rhythms), and second, to the particular components of a performance that may strike listeners as noteworthy. Following Barthes' examination of perception in the visual arts (1980), the first experience approximates what he terms the *studium* or contemplation of a work of art as a whole and the search for its meaning, while the latter corresponds roughly to what he terms the *punctum* of certain details forcing themselves upon beholders – “pricking them like arrows,” as Barthes puts it

(1980: 15) – and demanding an interpretation of the work’s meaning.²³ Repetition of melodic phrases and the overall flow (*sair*) of the performance establishes the space-time for the *studium* or contemplation of the performance as a whole. It is associated, I argue, with detemporalization, with a sort of suspension or removal from everyday temporalities. Modulatory phrases mark transitions and help to establish a change in the overall character of the performance, its overall temporal flow. Novel modulations in particular will act as a type of *punctum* for the listener, retemporalizing the experience of listening in a new temporality separate from if linked to the temporality of the passing phrases. The *qaflât* – both intermediary ones that follow certain passing phrases and those that come at the end of distinct sections of the performance, including its conclusion – further reorient the listener in time. These strategic detemporalizations and retemporalizations – changes in the experience of the flow of time – can be occasions for the evocation of *tarab*, assuming all other conditions are appropriate.

Detemporalization and the Arrière Pays of the Imagination

In other words, in a *taqsîm*, the experience of flow created in performance correlates with an experience of detemporalization, while the *qaflât* engender an experience of retemporalization, recentering. It is as if the skillful artist brings listeners on a journey to a different world where altered temporalities structure experiences and frame meanings. Indeed, a number of Aleppan artists referred to the process of music-making as a journey (*rihla*) or travelling (*safar*), often, as mentioned above, framed metaphorically as a

²³ Barthes also relates this to Lacan’s notion of the *tuché*, an experience that transcends the ordinary and links the individual with the self and with history (Lacan 1977: 53-66).

“soaring in Sufi airs” (*al-tahlīq fī ajwā’ sufiyya*). We can think of these “Sufi airs” as constituting a rhetorical frame for interpreting musical experience as transcendent or rather as transcending, processual, “soaring.” The French poet and critic Yves Bonnefoy (1972) describes this other world in the context of the perception of visual art as the *arrière pays* or “beyond” that provides a referent for the construction and interpretation of aesthetic experience and meaning. In the performance of a *taqsīm*, artists bring listeners to a realm in which listeners experience time as having been suspended or transformed. They are brought to a temporal margin – a *barzakh*, to use the Sufi terminology²⁴ – between the temporalities of everyday life and those of transcendent experience, for example the eternal *Dahr* as evoked in the *dhikr* or the “ecstasy” articulated as *tarab*. “Soaring” at this marginal realm, the repetition and fluency experienced in performance, evokes this sense of transformation, if not transcendence. The closing phrases or *qaflāt* of a *taqsīm*, on the contrary, create the experience of being brought back from this beyond into the flow of everyday temporalities (which are themselves plural and conditioned by the context of performance). Like grammatical punctuation or the details in a work of visual art, the *qaflāt* frame the flow of time in the course of musical performance and delimit the listener’s sentential and sensual awareness of musical phrases. They create a disjuncture in the flow of performance, which itself marks a disjuncture from everyday time; thus we have the potential for a double-disjuncture in time, which, given the other contextual elements, may elicit *tarab*. In effect the *qafla* gives shape to a variety of “shapeless time,” to use Greenhouse’s term (1996: 86), frames the process and experience

²⁴ For more information on the concept of the *barzakh* in Sufi thought, see chapter five and the writings of Chittick (1989, 1998) Corbin (1997 [1969]) and Pandolfo (1997).

of music-making, and marks a temporary arresting of that process. As it closes it also opens a time-space for further elaborations, further extensions, further repetitions.²⁵

Thus, *tarab* may result both from the experience of being lifted from normal temporality, as when a performer executes especially fluent phrases, and from being brought back into it. Needless to say, unskillful performances or those that radically depart from the standard repertoire of performance practices cannot usually effect *tarab*, although certain individuals predisposed to experiencing *tarab* may do so even in poorly executed performances as a result of the social context and their personal motivations. In the end, a combination of musical, social, and personal factors interact in the experience of *tarab* and therefore in the construction of musical authenticity.

VI) Against *Tarab*: Music, Emotion, and Expression

Although *tarab* is an important component of conventional musical aesthetics in Aleppo and a central element in Aleppine rhetorics of musical and cultural authenticity, not all Aleppans or Syrians experience, enjoy, or even approve of *tarab* and the *tarab* culture. Just as some intellectuals and artists show little interest in heritage and authenticity – indeed, some consider them to be impediments to modernity in the Arab world – many also reject the *tarab* culture for similar reasons. In the 1950s and 1960s, the height of post-Independence hopes for cultural modernity and social modernization in the Arab world, a number of leading intellectuals, artists, and critics argued that classical Arab *tarab* music was only one stage (and a primitive one at that) on a universal musical

²⁵ Kierkegaard writes, “when reality and ideality touch one another, repetition occurs” (1964: 186). The *qafla* in this sense marks the conclusion of a “touching” of the ideality of the melodic potential of the *maqām* and the reality of its actualization in performance.

and civilizational progression of which European art music represented the greatest achievement (Berque 1974: 208). In Syria this period saw the establishment of a national symphony orchestra and institutes dedicated to the performance and teaching of European music. As a consequence, Arab, or “oriental music” as it is often called even today, has occupied a minor place in the curricula of Syrian music institutes. The director of the main conservatory in Damascus, a graduate of London’s Royal Academy (and who is also responsible for all other music institutes in Syria), is commonly said to have a low regard for Arab music.

Not only did this generation of intellectuals think that Arab music was “primitive,” some questioned whether it was even music at all. As mentioned in chapter three, the Egyptian writer Tawfiq al-Hakim disparaged traditional Arab music as mere “party music,” not as serious as European music. This is an apt expression of the aforementioned *kull shi faranji baranji* (everything from the West is best) mentality prevalent among Syrian intellectuals of that era. al-Hakim and others like him considered the emotionality of Arab music – at least as evidenced by *tarab* responses – to be a lower form of aesthetic pleasure than what they perceived to be the more intellectual joys to be gained from listening to European art music.

An important dimension of the critique of *tarab* culture is socio-political. Some intellectuals and artists, among them musicians, claim that *tarab* is a form of emotional escapism. For example, a leading Syrian artist, commenting on top Egyptian artists such as Umm Kulthûm, suggested that “Egyptian musicians are all ‘hash heads’ (*bi-hashshishû*). The music is a drug for them.” I also heard some critics claim that the Arabs lost the war with Israel in 1967 because everyone was “high” (*matrûb*) on music,

and that Israel took advantage of Arab emotionality by broadcasting Umm Kulthûm concerts at strategic times so that everyone would be listening to her when they attacked (it being a well known fact that huge numbers of Arab listeners would tune in to Umm Kulthum's concerts). When the Israelis attacked, there was no defense – everyone was *matrib* listening to Umm Kulthûm.

These critiques reveal some of the contradictions regarding the cultural valuation of emotionality in Arab culture. Although emotionality is often presented as a positive characteristic, especially in terms of strong family ties and basic humanity (which many Arabs claim is absent from more technologically oriented societies such as the United States), some despair about Arab emotionality, asserting that it is the cause of Arab “backwardness” (*takhalluf*). With respect to music, some Syrian musicians and music lovers have given up listening to and performing Arab music, turning instead to European art music. Many, of course, listen to a variety of music, Arab and European, but rhetorically the assertion that Arab music is somehow emotional and hence backwards is not uncommon today. For some contemporary Syrian intellectuals, *tarab* is no longer a positive aesthetic term; they prefer a more intellectual music that caters to the thinking listener and not the old-fashioned emotional *tarab* listener whose shouting and sighing seem to them “vulgar.”

Tarab vs. Ta'bîr

The disparagement of *tarab* and its implied emotionality by modernist critics relates to a wider and much older musical debate about the merits of emotionality versus musical expression in Arab music. In late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Cairo,

tarab-style music (sometime called *tatrīb*, “to cause *tarab*”) was not considered separate from voice. For example, in the songs of Salama Hijazi and ‘Abdu al-Hamuli the melodic line performed by instrumentalists tended closely to follow that of the vocalist. These older *tarab* songs were primarily about an idealized love expressed in classical Arabic, divorced from everyday reality. There was little relationship between song texts and the lived experience of the listeners. However, in the early twentieth century, at the same time that Arab and European musicians were debating the modernization of Arab music (such as the Cairo Congress of 1932) there arose new genres of light song such as the *ughniya*, *taqtūqa*, and other vocal genres associated with the musical theater and later the cinema. These genres were thematic, both in terms of the lyrics, which often dealt with contemporary social issues, and the music, which borrowed from European music the notion of expression (cf. Lagrange 1996: 103-107, 109-141; Danielson 1997: 70-78). Composers and artists such as Sayyid Darwish, Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab, and Muhammad al-Qasabji wrote songs that featured musical introductions (not a feature of the classical song), multiple melodic parts distinct from the vocal line, and as some experiments with harmony. For these artists, the music could stand alone as an expressive medium – expressing not the vocalist’s internal states, as in the past, so much as the composer’s intention and interpretation of the meaning of the lyrics.²⁶

Contemporary Syrian artists similarly seek to advance modernist visions of Arab music that transcend *tarab*, or at least conventional understandings of *tarab* and *tatrīb*. For example, Samih Shuqair, a young Ukrainian-trained composer of Druze descent

²⁶ al-Qala’a’s *Nahj al-aghānī* goes to some lengths to “prove” that Arab music is indeed expressive. His examples of musical *ta’bīr* come from the 1950s and 1960s, such as the songs of ‘Abd al-Halim Hafiz and Fairuz – precisely the period in which arguments against *tarab* were gaining popularity and well after expression became an important term of debate in musical circles.

known for his political songs, argued in an interview that he aims to transcend *tarab* in his music. I asked him if classical Arab music were not expressive (*ta 'biriyya*) by nature, and he replied that, no, it is mostly *tarab* music; in other words, *tarab* and *ta 'bîr* are mutually exclusive traits. When I asked if *tarab* itself is not a form of expression, he said:

No, *tarab* is a condition, one of repetition, like someone feeling [the beads of] a rosary: the same movements, over and over. [It is] a condition of forgetfulness, suspended time, whereas expression requires imagination (*khayyâl*) and *tarab* does not use imagination; indeed, *tarab* is *against* *khayyâl* [his emphasis].

Western music is more expressive because it relies on more than one voice [and] requires the use of the imagination (*khayyâl*). Each voice provides a color (*lawn*). If you have many voices, you have many different colors. Just as in a painting, the more colors you have the better it will be, whereas a painting of one color or line only is not good.

That is, classical, *tarab*-style music, being based on one voice, has only one color to “paint” with and is therefore limited in its ability to express ideas. His music uses more colors in order to express a wide range of ideas. He finds the *tarab* style to be limited and limiting; in fact, on a recent recording (Shuqair 1998), he parodies this style.

In another effort to transcend *tarab* in Arab music, the Aleppine composer Nouri Iskandar began experiments in the 1970s and 1980s in what he terms “breaking the *maqâm*” (*kasr al-maqâm*). Influenced by European atonal and twelve-tone music,

Iskandar aims to reduce the *maqâmât* into their constituent components (*ajnáṣ*) in order to compose music that transcends the modal context of classical Arab music, which relies on a single family of related *maqâmât*. His compositions recombine *ajnáṣ* into novel configurations (*tarkíbât*, sing. *tarkíb*) or utilize a single segment of a *maqâm* to express distinct musical ideas. In particular, his works, which include string trios and quartets as well as works for *ūd* and strings, aim to express the contradictions and violence of modern life through highly abstract and expressive uses of melodic segments, rapid changes in tempo, and dissonance.

Similarly, Muhammad Qadri Dalal, a colleague of Iskandar's, also experimented in the 1980s with what he calls non-modal improvisations (*taqâsim lû maqâmiyya*). Like Iskandar, Dalal takes the constituents of *maqâmât* and weaves them into improvisations that depart often radically from the conventional melodic structure of the *taqsim*. For example, in a non-modal improvisation Dalal will improvise on a single melodic segment and transpose it onto different tonic notes. He may also modulate to related tones and use variations of standard closing phrases as well. Yet his aim is not to produce *tarab* so much as to explore what he calls melodic ideas (*afkâr*, sing. *fikra*) that engage the listener's mind and not just his heart – it is an intellectual enterprise related more to meditation (*ta'ammul*) than *tarab* or *tatrīb*.

Musicians such as Dalal, Iskandar, and al-Qal'ah sometimes distinguish between *tarab* and *ta'ammul* styles of improvisation, on the one hand, and between “real” *tarab* and “false” *tarab*, on the other. These artists associate the latter, “false” *tarab* with the performance of mechanical, clichéd phrases to elicit the conventional (and hence clichéd) *tarab* responses. In their view, the former, “real” or “true” *tarab* is something more

“authentic” and sublime. Interestingly, they relate “true” *tarab* to Sufi notions of *ta’ammul* so that *tarab* and *ta’ammul*, instead of being opposed aesthetics, are synthesized at a higher level of understanding; “true” *tarab* and *ta’ammul* are, in the end (and for “true” artists), one and the same thing (al-Qal’ah 1997a). In their discourses, true *tarab* results when artists express their internal states and ideas through music. This requires a form of meditation and the creativity to formulate phrases capable of expressing internal states and ideas. Thus, *tarab* and *ta’bîr* become linked through the intermediate notion of *ta’ammul* as a medium for the expression of creative musical ideas; this, in the end, is the meaning of “true” *tarab*. For these musical modernizers conventional *tarab* is non-expressive, automatic, almost autonomic. “True” *tarab* is at once expressive and reflective; it expresses the artist’s ideas and reflects higher emotional truths through meditation. In a sense this understanding of “true” *tarab* as *ta’bîr* via the bridging discourse of *ta’ammul* combines mimetic and expressionist aesthetics (cf. Abrams 1953; Dickie 1997).

VII) *al-Qafla*

This chapter has investigated the cultural and musical phenomenon of *tarab*. I argue that *tarab* must be understood not only as a socially-constructed experience of musical rapture or ecstasy, as other models of Arab musical aesthetics have pointed out, but as a strategy for the presentation of conceptions of selfhood and the emotions that carry strong associations with constructions of authenticity in Aleppo.²⁷ While *sidq, rûh*

²⁷ In a similar manner Abu Lughod (1986) analyzes how oral poetry serves as a medium for the expression of sentiment among bedouin women in Egypt.

sharqiyya, and other emotional characteristics of the *mutrib* are important in the arousal of *tarab* and in evaluations of musical authenticity, it is the enactment of a strong relationship (*tawâsul*) between artists and performers that provides the central arena for the enactment and presentation of *tarab* in performance. Another key factor in the evaluation of musical authenticity is the expectation of innovation (*ibdâ'*) and not merely the following of tradition (*ittibâ'*) in performance. Artists tread a fine line between “tradition” and “innovation,” though I would argue that we need to understand innovation and musical “tradition” in Aleppo as mutually implicated and not exclusive domains.

Moreover, while the social context of performance is critical in both the experience of *tarab* and the construction of musical authenticity, certain musical properties may also be important in the Aleppine *tarab* culture. I suggest that the experience of transformations in the temporality of performance may elicit *tarab* responses when other factors of the musical engagement such as the overall atmosphere (*jaww*) and connection between artists and listeners (*tawâsul*) are appropriate. In this regard the experience of *tarab* and its association with authentic musical culture affirms the more general association charted in chapter four between authentic culture and detemporalized representations of historical experience.

Yet, examination of *tarab* in Aleppo reveals some of the important contradictions in contemporary Syrian musical aesthetics, especially regarding the role of emotions and emotionality in social and cultural life as well as music. While some artists argue for their construction of “true” *tarab*, others discount *tarab* altogether as an impediment to true musical (and social-cultural) modernity in Syria. Just as different listeners may not necessarily agree on the quality of a given musical performance – the self-styled *sammî'a*

often have very different evaluations from those of “lesser” listeners – there is no consensus on the direction of music and the parameters of the diverse “alternative modernities” that are promoted by different constituencies in contemporary Syria.

Chapter Eight: Afterward – Notes Toward Closure

I) *al-Matla'*: Listening with the Heart

It is my last week in Aleppo before heading back to Damascus and then New York, and I pay a final visit to the vocalist and *munshid* Sabri Moudallal. Moudallal, a spry octogenarian and one of the few surviving students of 'Umar a-Batsh, operates a small shop for household goods not far from his home in the Jalum neighborhood of the Old City of Aleppo. I visit him there in the morning as he is getting ready to go to the Great Umayyad Mosque and deliver the noon call to prayer. He invites me to join him and, setting his trademark red tarboush on his head and grasping my arm, we set off through the old cobble-stone streets. As we pass other shops people shout out *tufuddalû'* and *ahlayn Abu Ahmad!* – customary greetings of welcome in this city – and I feel proud to have the honor of walking with him, arm in arm, as I had done with Ustaz Fateh in Damascus on a number of occasions. For me this walk through the streets of the Old City with the venerable Hajj¹ at my side is the picture of authenticity, one soon to be complemented, I imagine, by the sound of his voice when he calls the faithful to prayer. As we pass through the streets we talk about sundry things: how when he traveled to Europe he found it strange that people on buses there are so absorbed in reading newspapers and books that no one talks to anyone else; how the great 'Umar al-Batsh used to charge his students half a *lira* for lessons but never charged *him* because he was his favorite; how he himself has composed over forty *muwashshahât*; and so on.

¹ The honorific *hâjj* (pl. *hujâj*, fem. *hâjja*) refers to a someone who has completed the pilgrimage or *hajj* to Mecca, which is one of the "pillars" of Islam.

As we near the mosque I ask about the *adhân* (call to prayer) and how he chooses which *maqâm* to present it in (like other forms of *inshâd* the *adhân* utilizes the Arabic modes). He says that it depends on his mood, what he feels like; he'll start in one and then modulate to others, and then finish on the original one. I was told by others that Moudallal excels in the *adhân* and that his rendition in the *maqâm nahâwand* is especially noteworthy, so I ask if he could present it in that mode for me to record. He says *tikram 'uyûnak* ("may your eyes be honored"). I had tried on other occasions to record him from outside the mosque, but my recorder had always failed me: usually the batteries were low or dead, or I had forgotten to bring a blank tape, or something had gone awry. However, today I am prepared, having that morning procured fresh batteries and a new cassette; I even tested them in the taxi on the way over to Moudallal's shop. This is, after all, my last chance to record him, and I don't want to blow it.

We remove our shoes and enter the great mosque. The faithful are beginning to stream in from the streets and head toward the main prayer room as the bright mid-morning sun glares from the marble floors of the courtyard. Some older men stoop before the central fountain to perform their ablutions, and children play hide and seek among the columns that form a portico around the courtyard. Hajj Sabri introduces me to the *shaykh* who coordinates the *adhân*, who warmly greets me and brings a chair for me to sit on. I get my recorder out and Moudallal, checking his watch and seeing that the time has come for him to begin, looks at me and asks, "Ready?" I nod and he walks into a small room off the main door of the mosque, opens a small metal cabinet on the wall that turns out to be the microphone for the mosque, unceremoniously flips a switch. Taking a deep breath, he begins. I press the record button on my recorder and hold out

the microphone.

Nothing happens. His voice begins to soar, *Allâhu akbar! Allâhu akbar!* (God is Most Great), but the recorder is lifeless, dead. How can this be?! Frantically I press buttons, shake the recorder, even smack it on the side in the way people superstitiously hit television sets and radios in the hope that it will fix them (even though it almost never does). I even take out the batteries to make sure that they are placed correctly, but to no avail: the recorder will not work. “Not again” I think, but Moudallal is in full force with the most beautiful *adhân* I have ever heard, so, resigned to the fact of yet another technological break down, I put the recorder down on the chair and stand and listen. *Ashhadu ann la ilâha ilâ allâh!* (I witness that there is no God but Allah) ... he is in *maqâm nahâwand*, but then modulates to *naw’athar*. *Hayya ‘alâ ‘l-salâh* (Come to prayer!), and then to *hijâz*, *Hayya ‘alâ al-falûh* (Come to salvation/safety), and so on through the course of the *adhân*. He prolongs each phrase, making dramatic melismatic runs up and down the *maqâm*, filling the words with passion, each phrase more beautiful than the one it follows. It is an incredible performance and I stand there as if spellbound.

Allâhu akbar! Allâhu akbar! Lâ ilâha illâ allâh!

Hajj Sabri finishes the *adhân*, flips off the switch, closes the metal cabinet, and looks over at me as if to say, “How was *that*?!” I say “*yâ salâm!*” (“O peace!”) – a common statement of wonder and approval – tell him it was fantastic (*râ’i’*), and ask which modes he used. He names about eight, then asks, seeing the recorder on the chair, “Didn’t you record it?” When I tell him that the tape recorder failed, he smiles and says, “*ma’lish, marra tâniya, in shâ’ allâh*” (Oh well, maybe another time, God willing). Glancing out the door at the people heading into the main prayer hall, he puts his arm on

my shoulder and says, “Time for prayer,” and slowly heads out the door and across the courtyard. I stand for a moment watching him, then go to the door, put on my shoes, and head out to the streets.

The sound of the *adhân* is still in my ears and I feel not a little *mitsaltan*; it really was beautiful. I think about the tape recorder and take it out to see what might be the matter. I press the record button and it jumps to life, whirring away as it records the street sounds outside the mosque. I am at a loss; five minutes earlier it was totally dead, but now it works fine! Why wouldn’t it ever work when I wanted it to? I think back to Hajj Sabri in the simple little room of the mosque, to the beauty of his voice, and sense that his rendition of the call to prayer has engraved itself on my heart in a way that my tape recorder could never have registered. Is this another sign, like finding the Most Beautiful Names of God inscribed in the *zâwiya*? The Qur’ân says: “We will show them our signs in the horizons and in themselves.” Not knowing what to think, I throw the tape recorder back into my bag, take one last look around, and head to the bus station.

* * *

In some ways my troubles with technology in the field – mute tape recorders, blind cameras, and amnesiac computers – led me time and again to conclude that the best way for me to understand the music and other aspects of the culture I was researching was direct experience and not that mediated through a recorder’s ears or a camera’s eyes, or even a notebook’s memory. It was as if these moment’s of failure were trying to teach me a lesson: to listen more carefully, to observe both more acutely and more

comprehensively, and above all to strive to remember *'an zahr al-qalb*, “on the back of the heart,” as so many Syrians put it, what I experienced and learned. Technology could at best assist me in this, but at worst it could distract me from what I was most intent on understanding: what my informants indicated was the heart (*qalb*) and spirit (*rûh*) of their music and culture.

My own fantasies about the heart of the music and culture notwithstanding, many of the Syrian artists and intellectuals with whom I associated place great emphasis on the quality of “spirit” in what they deem to be authentic cultural practices. As I explored in chapter six and elsewhere in this work, spirit (*rûh*), and especially “oriental spirit” (*rûh sharqiyya*), constitutes not only an important aesthetic term in the critical lexicon of contemporary Syrian art worlds and culture, but *the* defining characteristic of “authentic” culture. Regardless of the form of a given work of art (including, of course, musical performances), it is the amount of *rûh sharqiyya* that determines its authenticity (*asâla*) and aesthetic beauty (*jamâl*); indeed, it was the coincidence of evaluations of *asâla* and *jamâl* in Syrian aesthetic and critical discourse that led me to focus my research on what I call “the aesthetics of authenticity” (*jamâliyyât al-asâla*) in the first place. While not all art works that critics consider to be aesthetically pleasing (*jamîl*) are necessarily authentic (*asîl*), yet for the group of artists and intellectuals about whom I have been writing, evaluations of *asâla* and *jamâl* often coincide, and moreover, each evaluation in turn implies a certain degree of *rûh sharqiyya*, often regardless of form. Thus, a realist or expressionist painting rendered in a demonstrably European style might be considered “authentic” if viewers felt it to exhibit sufficient *rûh sharqiyya*; this is certainly the case in the works of the Aleppan artist Lu’ay Kayyâlî, for example, and in the works of Fateh

Moudarres.² Similarly, listeners might not consider a “traditional” song performed in a heartless and emotionless manner to be authentic or aesthetically pleasing; the form would be appropriate, but the rendition (*adâ*) would lack *sidq*, and *tarab* would likely not be experienced. Although the contemporary pop songs generally are not associated with authentic culture, and in fact are often the brunt of criticisms by those who would preserve their visions of authenticity by banning them from the airwaves,³ some of these songs that listeners felt conveyed a sense of “oriental spirit” might be classified as authentic. For example, to my initial surprise, Fateh Moudarres, normally indifferent or even hostile to contemporary music, praised a contemporary popular singer whom he felt performed with sufficient *rûh*. The late Aleppo musician and teacher Nadîm al-Darwîsh, son of the master ‘Ali al-Darwish, experimented in creating novel genres for Arab music that preserved what he felt was the spirit of the music but in a non-traditional even modern form (al-Darwish n.d.). Moreover, as mentioned in chapter seven, the Aleppo artists Muhammad Qadri Dalal and Nouri Iskandar both strive to create “authentic” musical forms that break from traditional generic constraints, even from the *maqâm* itself. Thus, authenticity would seem to be more a matter of spirit than of form.

Whence the spirit? Fateh Moudarres urged me to find the spirit “among the

² Lu’ay Kayyâlî was a contemporary of Moudarres, with whom he represented Syria at the 1962 Venice Biennale. Kayyali specialized in portraiture, especially of the women of Syria’s bourgeoisie. Although his canvases are influenced by styles of European portraiture, they capture sentiments which a number of viewers and collectors described to me as essentially Eastern or *sharqi*. Moudarres was strongly influenced by European modernism and his “expressionist” (*ta’birîyya*) and “abstract expressionist” (*tajridîyya-ta’birîyya*; the terms are used by Syrian critics) canvases are considered by critics to be authentically Syrian.

³ A leading vocalist suggested just this in a conference on “The Role of the Arab Arts in the Present Condition” (*dawr al-fann al-‘arabi hiyyâl al-wad’ al-râhin*), held in Damascus in June, 1997. Although no one seconded his recommendation, a large number of participants at the conference expressed their outrage at the contemporary popular song as if it alone were responsible for (and not only a product of) a perceived cultural decline across the Arab lands.

jasmine trees,” in the old cities of Aleppo and Damascus, in “traditional” locales; he suggested I investigate folk culture as well, which for him, like George in chapter four and many others, was a site of authenticity. Not any old city, not any countryside, but the imagined life ways of a pre-modern Syria, indeed a pre-“Syria” Syria, when the land was merely “*al-shâm*,” what we refer to as the Levant but literally referring to “the North,” that is, the northern regions of the Arab lands.⁴ The image of pre-modern *al-shâm* incorporates those cultural practices that contemporary Syrians might label as *turâth* (heritage) as well as those that arose in the modern era but which are understood by Syrians to represent social contexts having a connection with *turâth* and laden with *rûh sharqiyya*, as in the famed *saharât* of Aleppo in the 1950s and 1960s.

Indeed, as I endeavored to show in chapters five, six, and seven, *rûh sharqiyya* and related terms such as *sidq* and *tarab* are experienced in the *dhikr* and the *sahra* as a result not only of the musical and kinesthetic practices specific to these domains but as a result of the social relations that form the context of invocation and music-making as well. “Oriental spirit,” like other terms in the emotional-critical lexicon of Arab music, serves as a metaphor for the social relations and contexts for interaction in which these emotions are presented. A lack of spirit – or rather the rhetorical claim of such an absence in a given context – indicates an absence of or failing in the social relations of performance: television cameras at a *sahra*, for example, or a distant, unfamiliar audience or performer, often articulated as a lack of *jaww* or atmosphere. Again, the form is less important than the social relations that structure the given performance or aesthetic experience.

⁴ Cf. the phrase *shâman wa yamanan*, northward and southward, with Syria (*al-shâm*) at the northern and Yemen (*al-yaman*) at the southern extreme of the Arabian Peninsula.

Authenticity in Syrian music, painting, literature, and other domains of social and cultural life can be understood as a gloss of complex, situated practices that express and present (in Goffman's and Langer's different usages of the term) valued conceptions of selfhood and the emotions. Musicians and music lovers characterize and present their self-characterizations through terms such as *rûh sharqiyya*, *sidq*, the nuanced varieties of *kayf*, *bast*, and *tarab*, and critical terms such as *lahn*, *kalimât*, and *sawt* that are thought to be vehicles for the expression of these sentiments. These aesthetic terms are performative in the sense that they both arise in specific performance situations (a *sahra*, *hafla*, round of *dhikr*, conversation, gesture, and so on) and perform or give form to what are labile and shifting conceptualizations of the self and society. Thus, "authenticity" – and the aesthetics of authenticity through which conceptions of authenticity are brought into play in the arts – expresses metaphorically and metonymically (as a part-for-whole relation) a series of complex and at times contradictory characterizations of self, the emotions, and social relations. In music these conceptions find expression in evaluations of the authenticity of certain artists and songs, primarily through the use of a critical lexicon of terms that gloss intersubjective processes of self characterization, presentation, framing, interpretation, and – not to be forgotten – musical delectation (*tadhawwuq*, or "tasting"). *Tarab* comes to serve as the primary musical metaphor of *rûh sharqiyya*, and hence of authenticity.

Musical Authenticity and Affecting Presence

In a similar vein, the anthropologist of aesthetics Robert Plant Armstrong remarks that "the work of 'art' is a presence, and ... it abides in power" (Armstrong 1981: xi).

While Armstrong writes on the experience of “affecting presence” (1971) in African sculptures, I believe that if we extend the concept of the affecting presence to musical performance, we will discover that it is the social nexus of performance – the congeries of artists and listeners engaged in the mutual construction of musical experience – in which the “power” of the music abides. While a good, strong voice and compelling rhythm certainly contribute to the aesthetic experience of the music, it is the social context of the *sahra*, *hafla*, and *dhikr* that empower a given performance with its “power,” its authenticity. *Tarab* as an affecting presence results from the collective engagement of artists and audiences in the construction of musical experience. To use Kantian terminology, there is no “free beauty,” that is, no realm of autonomous aesthetic experience disengaged from the social and political context in which it is produced, indeed which produces it; as Becker and Danto note, it is the art world – the theories, histories, and institutions that are the context for aesthetic experience – that creates “art” (Becker 1982; Danto 1964; Marcus and Myers 1995: 28). In the art world of “classical” Arab music in Aleppo, the social contexts of performance form the most important institutional bases for musical aesthetic experience, more so than the music institutes and conservatories of today.

My failed recordings reminded me of the importance of the social context of music-making, the intricate processes of establishing the “mutual tuning-in relationship” and the emotional closeness that is the heart of such domains as the *sahra* and the *dhikr*. Even my few moments with Hajj Sabri in the small antechamber of the mosque were an occasion for such intersubjectivity; his call to prayer was as much addressed to me as to the faithful he was in fact calling to prayer, and my recorder was in a sense an intruder on

this intimacy.⁵ My attempt to document and record this performance, as so many others like it, betrayed the emotional immediacy of the experience. And so, the tape recorder's failure allowed an opportunity to "listen with my heart," as some Aleppans urged me to do, as well as a pretext to return in future times to reconstitute the social relations and networks that were the context for my activities in Aleppo, Damascus, and elsewhere. In fact, now several months removed from the proverbial field, I have merely to look upon a cassette tape or CD from those days and a flood of sounds and images returns to me – not merely the sounds, but, importantly, feelings of closeness and intimacy with the artists. As Dalal said, the tape recorder cannot register the presence (*hudūr*) of the performance. That is a matter for an entirely different sort of instrument.

As I write these lines I question to what extent my own desire for social intimacy and "authentic" social experience has colored my interpretation of discourses and aesthetics of authenticity in Syria. To some extent my life there was, as I noted earlier, richer than elsewhere, and as with many anthropologists my fieldwork experience was in many ways transformative. Life in America before and since has seemed to me "inauthentic;" that is, for me at least, American mass culture, including new internet cultures, and the hyper-driven forces of consumption and materialism have meant a severing of the social ties that I found so compelling in Syria. But am I imputing my own desires onto my interlocutors in the field? Many of them would share my criticisms of America and positive valuations of "Oriental" life, and like me their notions of authentic and inauthentic would be based as much on stereotypes as on personal experience.

⁵ In other contexts, it should be noted, my tape recorder played the role of mediator and was often addressed in the second person in interviews. People would ask it (rhetorically, of course), "Are you listening?" "Did you get that?" And, of course, such questions were also meta-commentaries on the process and context of my research addressed as much to me as to the recorder.

Moreover, social ties in Syria are not always as strong and harmonious as ideals of intimacy would imply. Whatever elective affinities there may have been between my desire and that of my Syrian acquaintances for “authentic” experience, the large number of publications and panel discussions devoted to discussions of authenticity, heritage, and modernity in Syria suggests that these remain important and debated topics.

II) The *Qafla* of the *Qafla*?

The *qafla* is the most important part of a *taqsîm*, and hence the most difficult. Time and again in my lessons, when I performed my own *taqâsim* Mr. Dalal would remark that while my melodic lines were acceptable (if uninspired), my *qaflât* were not. They had to say something about what I had just been playing, he told me, and give the listener the impression that I had not merely been playing up and down the notes of the *maqâm* but rather allowing my imagination (*khayyâl*) to work on some melodic ideas (*afkâr*). Merely to end a *taqsîm* was not the same thing as performing a *qafla*, he indicated; a *qafla* provides the finishing touch to a good improvisation. As mentioned in chapter seven, a poor *qafla* can ruin an otherwise acceptable *taqsîm*, whereas a beautiful one might save an otherwise uninspired performance.

Since in this work I have adopted the structure of the *taqsîm* as an implicit model for my writing – beginning each chapter with a *matla'* or opening evocation and ending each with a short *qafla* or closing statement – I am faced now with the task of creating an appropriate *qafla* to what I have written. This is made especially daunting by the nature of the work itself, which has explored a number of themes and issues related to the main problematic of authenticity and modernity in contemporary Syria. Through my

evocations I have striven to establish a sense of the time and place of my research and association with artists in Syria not only in the interests of advancing a variety of reflexive ethnography but in order to emphasize that the results I obtained – whatever “conclusions” I may have arrived at – are the product of my personal experience with the music and the people who perform and listen to it. Other scholars would necessarily have had different experiences and thus written different ethnographies. Moving beyond these evocations I have also striven to set forth the main issues as I encountered them in the field: authenticity and concern with heritage; the contradictions of a society in which the most popular cultural forms are the most vehemently vilified; how individuals make sense of a changing world through artistic and intellectual activities. I do not pretend that my statements speak for the larger group of artists, intellectuals, musicians, critics, and music lovers with whom I associated during the time of my field research and writing (1996-2000), and less so for “Syrian society and culture” in general. Nor do I hold that, even when my statements do accurately describe how some of my interlocutors felt some of the time, they necessarily represent perdurable sentiments and opinions. Rather, I claim only to have captured a moment in the debate over “alternative modernities” in Syria, a moment understood – heard and experienced – through my work with musicians and conversations with other interested parties, one that was articulated in relation to concepts of authenticity and heritage through music and other domains of culture.

Toward Closure

This work has aimed to provide a number of evocative scenarios, hints at contradictions, and tentative interpretations concerning discourses about authenticity in

Syrian music; yet, I defer the matter of closure, leaving it in a sense “open” for further resonances in the minds and ears of other scholars, performers, and listeners. No performance is ever self-sufficient or ever truly finished. As Feld suggests (1994: 89), every performance has a biography and a history, for listeners and performers bring to any given performance their accumulated experiences with past performances and attitudes toward artists, genres, styles, and venues. Moreover, no performance is ever truly concluded since, as the term *wasla* suggests, each closing implies future performances, further openings. A given performance stands as a link to those that have come before it and those yet to come. In the same way a *taqsim* is never finished, never truly concludes and achieves closure, but rather picks up in the next instance of performance – and in the memory of those who have experienced it when they recall a performance or listen to a recording of one.

So this work closes with an opening to yet further elaborations on the construction of authenticity in contemporary Syria in the hope that by pointing in suggestive directions I and others who share these interests might enact future “performances.” The above chapters articulate a certain vision – a highly personal and personalized one to be certain – of authentic musical culture in Aleppo, Syria, during the time of my research, and at the same time suggest further and future articulations and elaborations, further evocations and partial closures. Just as the range of a given *maqâm* can never be exhausted in a single performance, so the complexities and contradictions inherent in the aesthetics of authenticity in contemporary Syria cannot be exhausted in a single work. The construction of musical authenticity articulates, as I suggest, with constructions of authenticity in literature, fine arts, architecture, and the diverse practices of daily life, all

of which beg further exploration.

If there is to be a tentative closure to this work it is that “authenticity” is a domain of debate and contradiction for a number of Syrian artists and intellectuals, one that they cannot abandon because it is intimately related to a wider debate over modernity – what is to be gained from it, what might be lost. As I show in chapters one through four, these loosely affiliated practitioners and critics construct notions of modernity, authenticity, and selfhood in response to their diverse personal, social, and political motivations and interests. Authenticity, expressed through the language of sentiment (*tarab, sidq, rūh sharqiyya*), articulates a drive for an alternative to both the perceived techno-rationality of Euro-American culture and to previous generations’ attempts to assimilate or imitate a Western model of social modernization and cultural modernity, the *kull shi faranjī baranjī* (everything from the West is best) attitude. The rhetoric of the emotions, if not the “jargon” of authenticity, as Adorno termed it in a very different context (1973), is in many regards a response to the failure of *kull shi faranjī baranjī*, especially in the post-1967 era. In this regard the quest for authenticity articulates a search for a viable formula for the future course of Syrian culture and society. Making recourse to “the past” in its many and contested forms is not so much an atavistic looking backward or escape from the realities of the present, as one Syrian intellectual has recently claimed (al-‘Azm 2000), as it is an expression of a will to be modern, to address the present and prepare the road to the future.

In a similar vein Bakhtin writes on what he terms the “historical inversion” in ancient Greek literature (1981: 147), that “a thing that could and in fact must only be realized exclusively in the future is here portrayed as something out of the past, a thing

that is in no sense part of the past's reality, but a thing that is in its essence a purpose, an obligation" (147). That is, via a type of "mythological and artistic thinking [Greek novels locate] such categories as purpose, ideal, justice, perfection, the harmonious condition of man and society and the like in the *past*" (147). To what extent can we consider the concern of a set of Syrian artists and intellectuals with "the past," with heritage, tradition, and authenticity, to articulate a "purpose, an obligation" for their decadent present and uncertain future? Examining the discourses of authenticity has revealed that such characteristics as emotional sincerity, "oriental spirit," and direct experience are thought to emanate from the past, from tradition, from heritage; in discourses of authenticity the positive characteristics of Syrian society and culture are shifted to the past and located in particularly "authentic" sites, making these time-spaces seem more resonant and persuasive than present-day Syria, which is by extension a time-space of decline, lack, and inauthenticity.

al-'Azm (2000) claims that the Arabs are the Hamlets of the twentieth century, living in the (imagined) glory of their past and waiting to revenge themselves on those (i.e., Europe, the West) who have usurped what they think rightly belongs to them. In his critical view, the Arabs were dragged "kicking and screaming into modernity, on the one hand, and modernity was imposed on them by superior might, efficiency and performance, on the other." Making the claim that "Modern Europe got it all from us anyway," which al-'Azm rightly chastises, does little to advance the Arab cause in the present; indeed, in this view, the modern-day Arabs are putting their future at risk by adhering to such notions. Past-consciousness and concern with authenticity prevent them from taking the necessary steps toward responsibility for the present and future.

In other words, either we [and with this “we” al-‘Azm implicates himself in these debates] come to terms critically with this deep-seated, ritualized and stratified complex of highly emotional beliefs, valuations and images that in their turn give the sanction of sacredness, taboo and immutability to inherited illusions, archaic institutions, dysfunctional attitudes and arrangements, anachronistic but cherished modes of living, thinking and governing, or, again, the Fortinbrases of this world will win the day and have the final say (al-‘Azm 2000).

In my view, the concern with the past and the “complex of highly emotional beliefs, valuations and images” among the Syrian artists and intellectuals with whom I worked express not an abdication of responsibility for the present and future, as the above remarks suggest might be the case, but rather a more nuanced vision or rather set of visions for regaining a place in the present and future. These emotionally-inflected orientations, I have been arguing, constitute the inchoate outlines for an “alternative modernity” that finds expression in the various art worlds of contemporary Syria. Nor is this alternative modernity separate or derivative from European modernities, as I have endeavored to show; the Arabs and other colonial subjects were not “dragged, kicking and screaming” into modernity so much as they helped to shape it both through their involvement in a European dominated world economic system and through their influence on European political, social, moral and artistic development. Whether, in the end, the Fortinbrases of the world will “have the final say,” or whether the creative visions I have delineated in this work will contribute to a less troubled future, remains to

be seen. But I sense a degree of hope and not merely resignation or nostalgia in Ustaz Fateh's call to search for the spirit of the music, and possibly the germ of a new modern condition, among the jasmine trees.

Glossary of Selected Arabic Terms

adhân Muslim call to prayer

'*aqd*, '*iqd* (pl. '*uqûd*) three, four, or five note constituent unit of a *maqâm*

asâla authenticity, rootedness; purity of descent

asîl authentic, pure

asl (pl. *usûl*) origin, root; lineage

asmâ' allâh al-husnâ' the Most Beautiful Names of God (also called the Ninety-Nine Names of God)

baqâ' remainder (of the higher soul in Sufi exegesis of the *dhikr*)

bashraf (pl. *bashârif*) compositional form of Persian origin popular in Ottoman and Arab music but is seldom performed in contemporary Syria

bast enjoyment, amusement

daff, *duff* (*dufûf*) small frame drum played with the hands

dawr (pl. *adwâr*) complex, multi-part vocal form developed in Egypt in the nineteenth century and popular in Syria

dhâkir (pl. *dhâkirûn*) participant in the *dhikr*

dhâkira memory

dhikr (pl. *adhkâr*) ritual invocation and remembrance of God

dhikrâ remembrance, commemoration

dhawq taste, sensitivity, urbanity

dûlâb (pl. *dawâlîb*) short instrumental piece that introduces vocal pieces, *taqâsim*, and modulations to another *maqâm* in the performance of a *wasla*

fanâ' obliteration [of the lower soul in Sufi exegesis of the *dhikr*]

fann (pl. *funûn*) art

fannân artist

ghinā' song

hadātha modernity, newness

hadīth new; Prophetic tradition in Islam

hafla (pl. *haflât*) large concert (lit. "party.")

hâjj (pl. *hujjâj*) honorific title of one who has made the pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca

hakî speech

hakî fādî "empty speech," nonsense

hilû "sweet," aesthetically pleasing

inshâd varieties of religious song

intiqâl modulation from one *maqâm* to another.

îqâ'a (pl. *îqû'ât*) meter

irtijâl improvisation, although this term is not used in medieval Arabic texts; see *taqsim*

jamâl beauty

jamâliyyât aesthetics (also *'ilm al-jamâl*)

jinâh (pl. *ajniha*) "wing" or supporting *munshid* at a *dhikr*

jins (pl. *ajnâs*) constituent melodic unit of a *maqâm*, sometimes called a tetrachord

kalimât, kalâm lyrics

kartah gradual increase in the tempo of *inshâd* in the *dhikr*

kayf a state of pleasure, delight, and high-spirits

khalq creation

khayyâl imagination

kull shî faranjî baranjî "everything from the West is best." An expression of *tafarnuj*.

lahn melody

- layālī* solo singing of the words *yā laylī*, *yā 'aynī* (O my night, O my eye) to an improvised melody
- maqām* (pl. *maqāmāt*) musical mode based on a seven-note (heptatonic) scale; also, tomb of a Sufi “saint”
- matla'* (pl. *matāli'*) opening section of a *taqsim* or musical composition
- mawwāl* (pl. *mawāwīl*, *mawāliya*) solo singing of colloquial poetry to an improvised melody that usually follows the *layālī*
- mihna* (pl. *mihan*) craft
- muftī* leading Islamic authority in a city or country
- mulahhin* composer
- munshid* (pl. *munshidūn*, -*īn*; fem. *munshida*, pl. *munshidāt*) religious singer
- mūsīqā* “music,” (< Greek *mousiké*); refers in the modern period to instrumental music
- muthaqqaf* “cultured person,” intellectual
- mutrib* (*mutribūn*, -*īn*; fem. *mutriba*, pl. *mutribāt*) vocalist
- muwashshah* (pl. *muwashshahāt*) of putative Andalusian origin, the *muwashshah* consists of classical Arabic poetry set to music and forms the staple of the Aleppine *wasla*
- nafs* (pl. *anfus*) soul, self
- nāy* (pl. *nāyāt*) bamboo end-blown flute
- qafla* (pl. *qaflāt*) closing section or music phrase in instrumental and vocal improvisations and pre-composed genres
- qânûn* (pl. *qawânîn*) trapezoidal lap zither or psaltery
- qasīda* (pl. *qasā'id*) solo singing of classical Arabic poetry to an improvised melody
- qudūd halabiyya* (sing. *qadd halabī*) light songs in the Aleppine and other colloquial Arabic dialects that are performed at the conclusion of the *wasla*
- rayyīs* lead *munshid* at a *dhikr*
- riqq* (pl. *riqqāt*) tambourine

rûh (pl. *arwâh*) soul, spirit

rûh sharqīyya oriental spirit

sahra (pl. *saharât*) small, intimate evenings of music, conversation, and food

samâ' listening, audition; music and dance in Sufi exegesis

samâ'î (pl. *samâ'îyyât*) instrumental introduction to the *wasla*

samna (*samn*) clarified butter

sawt (pl. *aswât*) voice

shahâda Muslim proclamation of faith

al-shâm Syria, the Levant; Damascus

shaykh al-zâwiya leader of the *dhikr* and head of the *zâwiya*

sidq emotional sincerity, honesty, truthfulness

tabla (pl. *tablât*) goblet-shaped drum

tadhawwūq taste, appreciation, enjoyment

tafarnuj Westernization

tajallî manifestation, revelation, and a state of transcendence

taqsîm (pl. *taqâsîm*) instrumental improvisation

taqtûqa (pl. *taqâtîq*) variety of light song that arose in Egypt at the turn of the twentieth century and was also performed in Syria at this time

tarab a state of musical rapture or ecstasy

tarqīyya gradual rise in the tonic pitch of *inshâd* in the *dhikr*

taswîr al-ma'nâ "depiction of the meaning," a vocalist's skill in interpreting the meaning of song lyrics

tawhîd (*ittihâd*) unity, union (with God, in Sufi exegesis)

thaqâfa culture, learning

'ūd (a *'wād*, *aydân*) short-necked Arabian lute

ughniya (pl. *aghânî*) variety of light and popular song

wasla (pl. *waslât*) musical suite composed of an instrumental introduction followed by *muwashshahât*, *qasîda*, *taqâsim*, *layâlî*, *mawwâl*, *dawr*, and *qudûd halabîyya*

zâwiya (pl. *zawâyâ*) a small mosque or section of a mosque where *dhikr* is performed

For other musical terms, see the glossary in Touma (1996). For explanation of Islamic terms, see *The Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam* (1995).

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Autobiographical Statement

Jonathan Holt Shannon was born on 14 July 1966 in Detroit, Michigan. He attended Stanford University from 1984-1988, earning a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature in 1988 with departmental honors and distinction. His honors thesis was entitled, "Much More the Better for Being a Little Bad: The Character of Sir Gawain in the English Epic, 1250-1550." After graduation he worked as a musician in England and France then moved to New York City to pursue work as a research assistant in molecular virology at the Rockefeller University. Concurrently he began taking courses in anthropology at Hunter College of the City University of New York. Convinced that anthropology could engage his myriad personal interests, he left the Rockefeller University in 1991 and enrolled in the Ph.D. Program in Cultural Anthropology at the City University of New York Graduate Center. At CUNY he has studied under Professors Vincent Crapanzano, Jane Schneider, Talal Asad, Shirley Lindenbaum, and the late Eric Wolf and Delmos Jones. He has been the recipient of numerous grants and awards, among them: pre-dissertation and dissertation fellowships from the Social Science Research Council (1994, 1996); the Center for Arabic Study Abroad (CASA) fellowship in Cairo, Egypt (1994); a Fulbright-Hays Dissertation Research Grant for research in Syria (1996-1998); the CUNY Graduate Teaching Fellowship (1998-1999); and the CUNY Writing Fellowship (1999-2001). Between 1996 and 1998 he conducted field research in Syria on musical aesthetics and modernity, resulting in the writing of his doctoral dissertation, entitled "Among the Jasmine Trees: Music, Modernity, and the Aesthetics of Authenticity in Contemporary Syria," the first ethnographic study of musical aesthetics in Syria and one of few ethnographic studies of artists and musicians in the contemporary Arab world.