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CARRYING MELODIES: MUSIC AS SURVIVAL IN PALESTINE
A Multidisciplinary Framework
for Understanding Palestinian Musical Practices

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*To Palestinian artists and musicians,
in Gaza and across the world
with the hope that their voice of beauty will be heard,
And to Baraa,
Who has lost her home several times
but never her love for life*

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INTRODUCTION

“We don’t carry weapons — we carry melodies”

– Ahmed Abu Amsha

A personal note — During the past three years, while I was pursuing my jazz vocal studies in Milan together with this master’s degree at the University of Pavia, I was tormented by several doubts about the meaning of what I was doing. The main reason was the feeling of fragmentation that came from living such a double – and honestly quite hectic – life, exploring two worlds that initially seemed to me to have nothing in common except the fact that I happened to study both of them (which was already something, but it took quite a while for me to acknowledge it). I couldn’t see how practicing scales and joining jam sessions could have anything to do with the history of the Middle East or my Political Anthropology classes, or how my knowledge of Arabic language and interest in Arab music – which I had begun practicing in an Arab-Italian choir – could be somehow applied to a completely different genre such as Jazz. At the same time, October 7th happened and all the following atrocities, throwing my “will to meaning” – as Frankl would put it – into an even deeper crisis. While my beloved Lebanon – together with Gaza and, later, Iran – was being bombed and chaos was spreading through the whole region, like many others I relied on social media as a window onto events, trying to remain close to what was happening despite the distance. My daily Instagram feed was filled with images of destruction, lists of children killed in Gaza and unthinkable injustices perpetrated by Israel against the increasingly dehumanized Palestinian population, the same acts that led an increasing number of scholars, legal experts and demonstrators around the world to describing them as genocide. At first, I began as well to share information and engaging in online activism, but I gradually felt detached and desensitized to the displacement of violence and to endless lists of numbers that I could scroll past between memes and cat videos. Eventually, I decided to delete it and look for other ways of informing myself, constantly wondering what I could actually do for this situation and what meaning

there was in my being here, studying on books and playing the piano while thousands of families were being displaced or wiped out.

The first was the rather unusual request of an old choir conductor from my music school, who asked me to transliterate and translate from Arabic the lyrics of a song, *Sheel Sheel*, which he wanted his children's choir to perform. Since I was no longer on social media, I had no idea what the song was. Watching the now-viral video for the first time was an extraordinarily moving experience: I immediately felt the enormous symbolic power of such a simple gesture as harmonizing over a "drone" – something that, for me, was an almost everyday musical practice. Secondly, during the last summer's Nuoro Jazz Seminar, our voice teachers – the wonderful singers Francesca Corrias and Alessandra Soro – proposed us to sing a Palestinian melody at the final concert, whose lyrics they had partly translated in Sardinian. That melody was *Yamma Mwel el Hawa*, which Francesca had discovered through Nai Barghouti, an artist she deeply admired and encouraged me to listen to. During the final concert, held in the beautiful amphitheatre of a small Sardinian village, Francesca guided us through a choral improvisation on the song, coloured by her simple yet jazz-inflected chords, as a tribute to the Palestinian people and folk heritage. These moments, together with my later discover of Nai's music, who indeed brings together Arab musical tradition and jazz, inspired the subject of this thesis, which gradually became a journey through all these questions.

The main one from which all the others depart is: what does music do to people? Why does it move us to tears or incite us to war, and how? Why people in the most extreme situations turn to music and art? Does music actually help them survive? If so, in what sense? I later discovered that ethnomusicology and music therapy engage with many of these same problems, which became the starting point for my own research questions: how does music function as a practice of survival in contexts of existential and identitarian threat? Does music have any intrinsic qualities that enables it to engage with survival? Which are its main functions in this process – both individual and collective – for communities in the Arab East,

particularly the Palestinian one (characterized by a whole history of occupation, dispossession and exile)? How has music operated throughout this history, up to the present day? In particular, what is the role of Palestinian folk music in this process? What follows is therefore not an attempt to answer these questions definitively, but rather to explore them through the encounter between ethnomusicology, music theory and analysis, and the lived histories of Palestinian musical practices.

This thesis proposes a framework through which musical practices may be examined while addressing these questions, from a multidisciplinary perspective, with a particular focus on the musical and historical space of the Arab East. In musical terms, particular attention will be given to the relationship between emotional content and modal theory provided by the *maqam* system. The dissertation is divided into four chapters. The final chapter presents the principal case study, focusing on the folk tune *Yamma Mwel el Hawa* as an application of the proposed framework within the contemporary Palestinian mainstream music scene, which I argue is currently experiencing another “folk revival”, closely intertwined with the present political and humanitarian situation.

The first chapter addresses initially the two poles of my research question: music and survival. First, it attempts to define both concepts, mostly drawing on ethnomusicological literature and, in the case of survival, also on trauma studies, music therapy and sociology. Survival is understood on three interconnected levels: biological, psychological and symbolic at the individual level, and finally collective, based on the assumption that cultural survival constitutes an essential dimension of collective survival itself. Secondly, the chapter examines the intersection between the two concepts, following the same movement from the individual to the collective that structures the dissertation as a whole and constitutes the core of its analytical framework. Here, I explore some social and ethnomusicological functions of music, ranging from psychophysical regulation, meaning-making and emotional arousal, to their possible opposite of disruption

and violence. The individual dimension then gives way to the collective one, where musical and cultural practices are examined within socio-political contexts. Building once again on ethnomusicological literature, I discuss the multiple functions of music in contexts of conflict and mass violence, while also distinguishing different levels of threat to collective survival, from war to ethnic cleansing and genocide, drawing on examples from the Armenian case, which I had the opportunity to study during my undergraduate years. Moving from songs of struggle to resistance music, I observe how music may be a part of what Adamian calls a community's "battle of existence": an antidote to silence, a strategic tool (as in coded music) and vehicle of political resistance and identity formation. About to the latter, I finally turn to the role of music in diasporic communities, engaging with diaspora studies and with the fundamental notion of cultural survival, understood as an ongoing performative process.

The second chapter focuses on the musical legacy of the Arab East and provides the technical and aesthetic foundations of what is commonly referred to as "Arab music". After a brief discussion of the meaning and limitations of this expression, the chapter examines the common musical features identified by Arab theorists and ethnomusicologists. Particular attention is devoted to the historical development and rather fluid boundaries of the various musical genres, especially urban Arab music and the styles that emerged primarily in Egypt between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This period also witnessed the written codification of the *maqām* system and the rhythmic cycles (*īqā'āt*), which are presented and contextualized within the non-tempered system of Arab music. The chapter then turns to the emotional and ecstatic dimensions of this music. First, and most importantly, I examine the *ethos* traditionally associated with the *maqāmāt*, whereby specific modes have historically been linked to particular emotional – and, in earlier times, even therapeutic – effects. I subsequently discuss the concept of *ṭarab* as both an individual and collective ecstatic and emotional experience,

before examining the urban musical tradition associated with it and its transformations in contemporary media environments.

Having established the theoretical framework, the dissertation then moves to the Palestinian case. The third chapter provides the historical context for the emergence and transformation of musical practices in historical Palestine, beginning with the *Nahḍa* and the early modern period before tracing the major political stages of Palestinian history under successive colonial regimes. From the British Mandate to the creation of the State of Israel and the catastrophe of the Nakba, I reconstruct the history of the conflict through a musical lens, relating it to the framework of survival earlier developed, particularly regarding diaspora and resistance music. Throughout the chapter, the relationship between music, collective identity, and national narratives serves as its guiding thread. Alongside brief musical observations, I introduce some of the songs and artists that became emblematic of different historical moments within this lens. From Pan-Arab nationalism through the peace process and the two Intifadas, Palestinian music witnessed the emergence and re-emergence of rural and folkloric genres alongside styles shaped by other musical traditions, including Western popular music and hip hop.

The fourth and final chapter opens with a brief methodological introduction before presenting the case study of *Yamma Mwel el Hawa*, applying the theoretical and analytical framework developed throughout the dissertation. It first contextualizes contemporary Palestinian musical practice and argues that it is currently undergoing another folk revival, closely connected to the ongoing political and humanitarian situation. Then, the chapter reconstructs the history of the song, from its origins before the British Mandate to its contemporary transformations, discussing its various textual and musical versions and providing a transcription and musical analysis of its melody. Finally, the chapter reaches the core of the dissertation: an analysis of selected performances by the Palestinian singer and composer Nai Barghouti, whose artistic practice combines deep training in both

the *tarab* and jazz traditions. After a brief introduction to Barghouti and to her relationship with the song, I examine four performances, from 2010 to 2025, paying particular attention to the 2019 live trio version and to the collaborative 2025 recording produced for Together for Palestine. A comparative musical and performance analysis then leads to the conclusions of the dissertation.

This thesis adopts a deliberately hybrid and multidisciplinary methodology, consistent with the theoretical framework it proposes. Musical practices are examined simultaneously as musical structures, performative events, textual productions, and mediated audiovisual artefacts. The analysis combines musical transcription and close listening with ethnomusicological, historical and anthropological literature, drawing on both secondary sources and primary materials such as music videos, live performances and recordings.

With this dissertation, I also hope to contribute, however modestly, to a broader appreciation of the richness and beauty of Palestinian and Arab musical cultures, whose complexity and artistic value remain too often overlooked in European academic, musical and public discourse. In light of recent events, I believe they deserve our attention more than ever.

CHAPTER 1

Music and Survival in the Middle East and diasporas

Art is part of survival; art is part of the human spirit, an unquenchable expression of who we are. Art is one of the ways in which we say, "I am alive, and my life has meaning."

(Karl Paulnack)

1.1 Defining the concepts of music and survival

Before examining the intricate relationship between music and survival, it seems essential to clarify how the two concepts are understood within the framework of this study, given the breadth of their usage across different disciplines.

1.1.1 What is music?

Attempts to define music as both a concept and a practice date back to ancient Greece, when even Aristotle had some trouble trying to “determine the nature of music or why anyone should have a knowledge of it”¹. So, other than the problem of its nature and meaning, the great philosopher – as many others – raised the question of its aim and the sense of studying it, as the function of music for both individuals and the society appeared to him as tangible, yet difficult to define². Anyway, it was clear that music produced pleasure and enjoyment, defined by him as intergenerational and “natural”³. Discussing music and its educational role, Aristotele touched on two other essential aspects that would be later investigated by many intellectuals, philosophers and, most recently, ethnomusicologists: (1) the emotions that music ‘resembles’ and (2) the social activity that music produces⁴.

¹ Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, Book VIII, Part V, available at: [link](#)

² The philosopher put music as the third customary branch of education, together with reading and writing, gymnastics and drawing. Its purpose was mainly intellectual leisure, as he put leisure as first principle of all action. *Ibid.*

³ “For the pleasure given by music is natural and therefore adapted to all ages and characters.” *Ibid.*

⁴ “...with good reason it is introduced into social gatherings and entertainments, because it makes the hearts of men glad.” *Ibid.*

In the Aristotelian concept of art as ‘*mimesis*’⁵, the imitation of feelings channelled by music could generate what ancient Greeks – and modern psychologists – called ‘*catharsis*’⁶: the purification or purgation of the emotions⁷. The underlying idea was that the more authentic the depiction or reproduction of a particular emotion was by a certain art form – music in this case – the more the listener would be able to identify with the music and the emotion itself, reliving it from the outside. In this way, after living this often strong experience, they would feel liberated from that emotional weight and even draw some conclusion or more rational message from it.⁸ In this context, emotions were conveyed in music primarily through melodic structures, especially by the skilful use of the modes⁹, and by rhythm as well, as Aristotle describes:

“Some of them make men sad and grave, like the so-called Mixolydian, others enfeeble the mind, like the relaxed modes, another, again, produces a moderate and settled temper, which appears to be the peculiar effect of the Dorian; the Phrygian inspires enthusiasm. The whole subject has been well treated by philosophical writers on this branch of education, and they confirm their arguments by facts. The same principles apply to rhythms;

⁵ From ancient Greek the term *mimesis* – later translated *imitation* in Latin – was born related to music and dance rituals in Dionysian cults, but since V century it became connected with the nature of art as imitation of reality. The term has been interpreted differently by various philosophers; for Aristotle, the concept’s meaning was ‘doing like nature does’. He thought of imitation, and therefore art, as something extremely natural that could convey a possible truth, by rendering it in an ‘intensified’ form. Cfr. R. Diodato, E. De Caro, G. Boffi, *Percorsi di estetica: Arte, Bellezza e Immaginazione*, Morcelliana, Milano, 2009, 15-17.

⁶ The Greek term *catharsis* refers to the purification or purgation of the emotions (especially pity and fear) primarily through art. In criticism, catharsis is a metaphor used by Aristotle in the *Poetics* to describe the effects of true tragedy on the spectator. Cf. *Catharsis*, in Britannica [link](#), (accessed 5 March 2026). The use is derived from the medical term *katharsis* (‘purification/purgation’), as Aristotle said: “when such people feel penetrated by the accents that give the soul ecstasy, they are then brought back to calm, so that catharsis works in them like a medical cure” (*Poetics*, Book VII).

⁷ “When men hear imitations, even apart from the rhythms and tunes themselves, their feelings move in sympathy.” Aristotle, *Politics*, Book VIII

⁸ In modern psychology, catharsis is referred to as “a powerful release that can be a tool for processing your emotions and alleviating psychological distress”, that is caused by unrelieved unconscious conflict. It can happen in a variety of ways both in therapy and everyday life, especially through the engagement with and practice of artistic activities, or specific practices such as modern psychodrama. Cf. Kendra Cherry, *Catharsis in Psychology: Why an emotional release can be good for you*, Verywell Mind, January 13, 2026 – available at: [link](#)

⁹ Musical modes are organized pitch systems characterized by specific intervallic structures and emotional qualities; in ancient Greece, they were believed to produce different ethical and emotional effects on the listener. For further detail, see chapter 2.

some have a character of rest, others of motion, and of these latter again, some have a more vulgar, others a nobler movement”.¹⁰

The correlation between modes and emotions has a lot of cross-cultural and historical correspondences and has been recently studied for music therapy purposes as well.¹¹ This relationship will be central to the musical analyses developed in this thesis, particularly in relation to Arab music, where modal systems are closely associated with emotional expression through concepts such as *ṭarab* and *salṭana*, which will be examined in greater detail in the following sections¹².

For what concerns the social activity produced by music, the question of the nature and definition of music firstly must be raised again. The present research will adopt the definitions and perspectives of ethnomusicology¹³, given the interdisciplinary nature of the field and its understanding of music as a social practice and human behaviour that is produced and agreed on within a specific society.¹⁴ As the “study of music in culture”¹⁵, this field merges anthropological and musicological methodologies, with its scholars highly considering the social agreement that comes with the music and accepting the impossibility of a universal definition, while looking for and recognizing some common patterns in their cross-cultural research. To shift the focus of musicological research and analysis away from Western art music alone, John Blacking, one of the most prominent ethnomusicologists of the last century, states that “musicology is really an ethnic

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Politics*, Book VII

¹¹ On this topic, see: Yihe Jiang, Maoping Zheng, *The inductive effect of musical mode types on emotions and physiological responses: Chinese pentatonic scales versus Western major/minor modes* [link](#); Strachley, I. C., & Loebach, *The influence of mode and musical experience on the attribution of emotions to melodic sequences*. *Psychomusicology: Music, Mind, and Brain*, 24 (2014), 21–34. [link](#)

¹² See Chapter 2 for further discussion.

¹³ Ethnomusicology was born from late 19th century studies of “comparative musicology” and became an academic field in 1950. It merges methods of both musicology and anthropology, looking at music not only as an acoustic aesthetic object but as a fundamental complex of human behaviour, ideas, and social activities. Cfr. *Ethnomusicology*, in Britannica [link](#) (accessed on 5 March 2026).

¹⁴ Ethnomusicology aims to “science about music”, merging the social-sciences approach with a humanistic object such as music, with the purpose of integrating in the objective musicological analysis – merely focused on the qualities of the sound – the context in which such sound is produced and perceived. Cfr. Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music*, Northwestern University Press, Illinois (1964), 6-7, 25.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6

musicology”¹⁶ and that “all music is folk music”¹⁷, stressing the idea that music would not have meaning without the social interaction and human association component. He ultimately defines music as “humanly organized sound”,¹⁸ balancing the musicological emphasis on sound organization with the behavioural perspective characteristic of anthropology and other social sciences. As his colleague Alan Merriam argued in his seminal work, “the sounds of music are shaped by the culture of which they are a part”¹⁹; consequently, Eurocentric conceptions of music as a universal aesthetic object give way to a more culturally grounded and relativistic perspective. In this framework, music emerges as a patterned human behaviour around which a community aggregates – to produce it and enjoy it – and agrees on its “musicality or non-musicality”²⁰. Going further in this direction, the famous musician and philosopher Theodor Adorno established a parallel between musical production and social aggregation, conceiving music as a sort of force that “builds social consciousness” and functions as an active ingredient of social formation²¹. Sociologist Tia DeNora develops this argument through practical examples, illustrating how certain musical genres become linked to specific social contexts that music itself helps individuals to interpret and recognise²². She explores music as a dynamic element that operates in everyday life as a resource for constructing social contexts, organizing routines, and shaping the assumptions and interactions that constitute social life. Another influential

¹⁶ John Blacking, *How Musical is Man?*, University of Washington Press, Seattle (1973), 3

¹⁷ “The Venda taught me that music can never be a thing in itself, and that all music is folk music, in the sense that music cannot be transmitted or have meaning without associations between people”. *Ibid*, preface xi.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10

¹⁹ “What is of particular importance to the social scientist, is that the sounds of music are shaped by the culture of which they are a part (...). Each culture decides what it will and will not call music”. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music*, 27.

²⁰ Blacking illustrates this point with an example from his fieldwork among the Venda, a rural South African community where he lived for two years. He observed that they do not consider artificially produced sounds - such as those generated by an oscillator - to be music, since no direct human action is involved in their creation; this aspect is central to the Venda’s distinction between music and non-music. Cfr. J. Blacking, *How Musical is Man?*, 6-8.

²¹ Cfr. Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, cit. in Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, Cambridge University Press, 2000

²² DeNora suggests that music helps people make sense of particular social situations and can also guide their actions—for instance, waltzes or dance music encouraging dancing, or soothing music facilitating relaxation during pre-flight preparations. *Ibid.*, 12-13.

scholar, ethnomusicologist Martin Stokes, further develops this line of argument by affirming that music does not simply “reflect” a social space, but actively contributes to its transformation, reimagining and redefinition. By doing so, he argues, music becomes a key medium through which social groups construct boundaries and negotiate a sense of “place”²³ and ethnic identity, not only through processes of exclusion, but also through shared perception of intimacy, connections and collective emotional expression.²⁴ Taken together, these perspectives highlight how music operates as a socially embedded practice – rather than merely as an aesthetic and expressive form – that can shape both individual and collective experiences. This capacity of music to structure meaning, emotions and social relations becomes particularly relevant in contexts where the very conditions of existence are at stake.

1.1.2 Defining survival

The concept of survival in this thesis requires further clarification, as it will be approached not merely as biological endurance, but as a multidimensional process encompassing psychological, social and symbolic dimensions.

The term “survival” is usually defined as the state or fact of continuing to live despite difficult or extreme conditions, whether natural or manmade.²⁵ When it comes to the biological world, it is often associated with individuals’ interactions with hostile environments, through processes such as adaptation²⁶ or natural selection, described by the well-known expression “survival of the fittest” coined by Herbert Spencer in his attempt to extend Darwinian evolutionary theories to social and economic domains²⁷. The etymology of the term itself further reflects

²³ Martin Stokes, *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place*, Berg Series, 1994.

²⁴ Stokes critically reviewed his own previous work *Ethnicity, Identity and Music* 20 years later, shifting to a ‘post structuralist’ terminology that overcomes the previous rigid barriers of his language and introduces elements of affection and material perception of voice. Cf. Stokes, *Musical Ethnicity: Affective, Material and Vocal Turns*, *The World of Music*, 6, 2 (2017).

²⁵ Cf. *Survival*, in Britannica [link](#), (accessed 30 March 2026); *Sopravvivere*, in Treccani [link](#), (accessed 30 March 2026).

²⁶ Cf. Claude A. Piantadosi, *The Biology Of Human Survival: Life And Death In Extreme Environments*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2003; National Geographic, *Adaptation*, available at [link](#).

²⁷ The expression is present in Spencer’s book *Principles of Biology* (1864) to describe Darwin’s idea of natural selection, a part of his theory of evolution where he explains the continued existence of forms of a

this tension: derived from the Latin *super-vivere* – literally “to live beyond” or “to outlive” – the concept implies an often conflictual, or rather competitive, engagement with external conditions, whether environmental or social. While the term initially retained this transitive sense of outliving something or someone, its intransitive use, denoting the mere continuation of existence, became widespread only from the late fifteenth century onwards²⁸. In contemporary usage, however, the notion of survival extends well beyond its biological origins and is employed across a range of disciplines.

In psychological and trauma studies – an interdisciplinary field concerned with the impact, representation and processing of traumatic experiences – survival is understood not merely as physical endurance, but as a complex process involving coping strategies in response to extreme experiences. In fact, as highlighted by Judith Herman, exposure to overwhelming events may eventually lead to a disruption of the self-defence system, a complex and integrated set of reactions to danger that involves both the body and the mind; after a traumatic event, its components tend to “persist in an altered state long after the actual danger is over”²⁹. In other words, while the body activates a survival response to danger, the impossibility of effective action in the context of an overwhelming event may cause a persistent activation of this response, which progressively becomes detached from its original source. Consequently, mechanisms that are originally functional for survival – such as activation of the flight-fight response or dissociation – may evolve and stabilize into enduring defensive patterns, producing cognitive and emotional transformations.³⁰ In this context, cultural practices may play a significant role in regulating or containing such states; among them, music is particularly relevant since it operates directly on bodily, cognitive

living best fitted to their conditions, and the disappearance of others. Cf. *Survival*, in Etymonline, [link](#) (accessed 30 March 2026).

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, New York, Basic Books, 1992, 25-26.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 26-28.

and emotional levels, offering a means through which individuals may restore a sense of coherence in their internal experience. This function has been widely explored in music therapy and related fields that have highlighted the role of music in emotional regulation and trauma processing.³¹

Beyond these bodily survival responses, individuals may also engage with more symbolic and existential dimensions of survival, more related to inner life, imagination and meaning. As noted by psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, the experience of extreme suffering – in some cases – may paradoxically intensify inner life, enabling individuals to engage more deeply with beauty and imagination. As a Holocaust survivor, in his work where he reflects on his experience in a Nazi concentration camp, Frankl described how some prisoners could find moments of transcendence and true wonder in apparently minimal phenomena, such as a sunset or a branch of a tree³². Central to his thought is the concept of the “will-to-meaning”³³, the fundamental human drive to find purpose in one’s existence, as a crucial factor of survival under extreme threat, as he saw for himself in the camps. In this context, art and music may function as a medium through which “turn sorrow into meaning”³⁴, creating the conditions for forms of survival that are not only physical but also emotional, symbolic and cultural.

While these processes – related to body and inner life – can be observed at the level of individual experience, they also can operate at a broader collective level, especially in contexts of large-scale violence and human-made atrocities. In such cases, entire communities may face threats not only to their physical existence or

³¹ For further discussion, cf. Strachley, I. C., & Loebach, J. L. (2014). *The influence of mode and musical experience on the attribution of emotions to melodic sequences*. *Psychomusicology: Music, Mind, and Brain*, 24, 21–34; Fancourt D., Finn S., *What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review*, WHO Regional Office for Europe, Copenhagen, 2019 (Health Evidence Network synthesis report 67)

³² Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Boston, Beacon Press, 2006, 58-59.

³³ Frankl defines this personal concept as “the striving to find a concrete meaning in personal existence” and argues it to be the main motor in human action. This concept is at the core of his psychotherapeutic doctrine called *logotherapy*, developed after his experience in the camps. *Ibid*, 121-123.

³⁴ “Certain kinds of trauma visited on peoples are so deep, so stupefyingly cruel, that (...) art alone can translate such trauma and turn sorrow into meaning”. Toni Morrison, 2005, as cited in: David Corbet, *Trauma, Art and Memory in the Postcolony: Turning Sorrow into Meaning*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2024

belongings, but also to their cultural continuity, through practices of erasure or appropriation of memory, identity and traditions. This has occurred repeatedly throughout history – especially in contexts of colonial occupation and dispossession of lands, but not exclusively, as shown by the paradigmatic case of the Holocaust – and continues to occur today. It can be observed, for example, in the recent war and ethnic cleansing of the Armenian Republic of Artsakh/Nagorno Karabakh in 2020³⁵, and the ongoing war, ethnic cleansing and massacre of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip by Israel.³⁶ In all these cases, a large amount of survival strategies and tools have been mobilized by affected individuals and communities; among them, as this thesis will explore, cultural practices like music are widely spread not only as forms of psychological and identitarian support, but also as means through which social cohesion, collective endurance and memory are maintained and negotiated under conditions of threat.³⁷ In this last broader social and political dimension, survival will be approached as a collective process in which cultural practices such as music may function as tools of meaning-making, resilience, resistance and cultural endurance over time and space.

Overall, in line with the argumentative approach of this first paragraph, the present work approaches its key concepts – music and survival – across two main

³⁵ The region of Nagorno-Karabakh has been disputed for more than a century; historically, three quarters of its inhabitants were Armenian, even though it got included in the territory of Azerbaijan by Soviet authorities during the early 20s. After a first war in 1991 and 30 following years of ‘frozen conflict’, Azerbaijan attacked the region in 2023 and occupied it in less than 24 hours, forcing more than 120.000 Armenians to exile. For further details, see: Tilman, Aleksej, *Breve storia del Nagorno-Karabakh*, «Il Mulino», 28/09/2023 at [link](#).

³⁶ On the 7th of October 2023, the Islamist armed group Hamas and other Palestinian armed factions managed to break out of Gaza’s separation barrier and attacked Israeli military and civil targets, causing approximately 1195 victims, including 815 civilians and taking nearly 250 hostages. The Israeli government responded with a large-scale military operation, involving carpet bombings across all Gaza strip, a total siege and aid blockade and several ground invasions, also opening a front on South Lebanon. The effects of such operation have been devastating for Gaza, in terms of infrastructural damage (entire cities completely levelled), internal displacement and civil victims: according to the Ministry of Health of Gaza, 73,054 Palestinians were killed in the Gaza Strip between October 2023 and June 2026, as notified by latest UNRWA report, but the numbers are still growing. Israeli government is now facing several legal accusations for alleged war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide before international institutions, as well as the International Criminal Court arrest warrants against Prime Minister Netanyahu and former Defence minister Yoav Gallant. For more, cf. Arturo Marzano, *Storia di Gaza* (History of Gaza), il Mulino, Bologna 2025; UNRWA, *Situation Report #228 on the Humanitarian Crisis in the Gaza Strip and the Occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem*, July 1st 2026, at: [UNRWA report](#)

³⁷ See 1.2.2 for further discussion.

interconnected levels: an individual dimension, encompassing biological, psychological and emotional processes, and a collective one, involving social, political and symbolic forms of existential and cultural continuity.

As John Blacking states, “music is essential for the very survival of man’s humanity”³⁸ – a key proposition that I am interested in exploring in my research.

1.2 Music and survival: linking the two concepts

As mentioned above, music is a complex matter when it comes to its effects on human life, ranging from basic bodily functions to more complex psychological processes, from emotional and spiritual connections to social and cultural identities, political claims or propaganda. If considered – as in the perspectives outlined in precedence – as a social practice, the function of music may change significantly depending on many factors: the culture that produces it, the actors involved and the contexts of both its production and circulation, that are not always the same, especially in the contemporary digital era after the development of recording and distribution technologies. If its effects must be approached as neutral – as required in a scientific approach – its social functions must certainly not, since, like any form of power, they depend on whose hands it is in. In fact, as Timothy Rice points out, “the possibility that music can be associated with the worst aspects of human existence is neither attractive nor intuitive.”³⁹ However, since the aim here is to connect music to the concept of survival, with a focus on contexts of conflict, mass violence and threat to minorities, it becomes necessary to engage also with these less intuitive and more uncomfortable dimensions. This section therefore aims to link the two concepts and investigate their possible intersections in existing literature, with a focus on ethnomusicological research but without excluding insights from other disciplines such as psychological and trauma studies, sociological and socio-political analysis.

³⁸ J. Blacking, *How Musical is Man?*, 54.

³⁹ Timothy Rice, *Ethnomusicology in times of trouble*, Yearbook for Traditional Music, Vol. 46, 2014, 192.

1.2.1 Music and survival at individual level

1.2.1.1 Music as regulation

Existing research on this topic suggested that, among the several impacts of musical listening and practice on the human body and brain, a main function is that of regulation. On a primary level, music interacts deeply with our body, or, more precisely, it is our body that first interacts with the environment, whether hostile or safe. And music can be a part of this environment. The immediate connection between body and music is rhythm: not only because our own life depends on the regular beating in our chest, but also because the first sound we encounter in life is the maternal heartbeat, in the womb. Research in neonatal care literature shows that one of the main stressful changes for a neonate is the sudden absence of the regular intrauterine rhythm, replaced by the chaotic sounds of a hospital, particularly in intensive care units. That is why the practice of diffusing soft vocal sounds and intrauterine-like sound in the babies' incubators gives tangible results in modulating their state from unstable to more stable, helping to regulate physiological symptoms such as heart rate, breathing, blood pressure or stress-related movements.⁴⁰ In this context, rhythm and music are used to create a predictable environment and mask more stressful noises. A similar process can be also observed in surgery and medical care, in what Leslie Bunt reports as “music in therapy”⁴¹, where music becomes an additional tool to help patients undergoing certain treatments to relieve pain and stress⁴². Interestingly, it seems that the most significant effects of music listening in such environments (labour, surgical and dental care settings) are on respiratory rate and, as mentioned above, neonatal

⁴⁰ Case adapted from De Nora, *Music in Everyday Life*, 77-82; for further insight, cfr. Standley J., *Efficacy of music therapy for premature infants in the neonatal intensive care unit: a meta-analysis*. *Arch Dis Child Fetal*. 96, 6 (2011), pp. 400-405.; Standley J., *Music therapy research in the NICU: an updated meta-analysis*. *Neonatal Network*, 31, 5 (2012), pp. 311-316

⁴¹ Leslie Bunt, *Clinical and therapeutic uses of music*, 256, in David J. Hargreaves, Adrian C. North, *The Social Psychology of Music*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1997.

⁴² These interventions include, among others, passive listening of recorded music, combining music with other forms of stimulation or using it as a tool of ‘biofeedback’. There is a large body of evidence showing positive effects of such practices. Cfr. Bunt, *Clinical and therapeutic uses of music*, 259-262; Fancourt D, Finn S., *What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being?* WHO Regional Office for Europe, Copenhagen, 2019, 35-36.

movements.⁴³ As for “music as therapy” – or music therapy as officially called – there is now a large body of studies documenting its positive effects, although it remains difficult to separate physiological responses from emotional and contextual factors. The main difference from the previous uses is in the structured application of music and sound within the therapeutic relationship between patient and therapist, where music works as a central tool to promote and support the patient’s well-being. It is therefore important to avoid over-romanticizing its role: music therapy rarely constitutes a primary treatment, but rather an adjunctive practice that supports, rather than determines, processes of physical survival and healing. Music therapy was traditionally used – as noted by Bunt in 1995 – with children with learning difficulties and adults with psychiatric conditions, neurological problems or various physical disabilities, mostly in hospital settings⁴⁴, but the branch is progressively expanding into a wider range of applications, being also employed nowadays in settings such as refugee camps and asylum centres. In these contexts, it has been proved that art and music therapy can be effective not only to reduce physical symptoms of distress, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in individuals, but also to support a sense of personal and collective identity, as noted in WHO report:

“Multicultural arts can support the preservation of personal identity, heritage and experience, which are all important factors within well-being (...); in refugee camps, the arts can support the preservation of religious identity through the celebration of festivals and events, help to alleviate psychosocial distress and trauma, and reduce stigmatization.”⁴⁵

At an individual level, DeNora argues that music can function as a “technology of the self”, that is, that “music comes to be implicated in the construction of the self

⁴³ Bunt describes 6 different techniques of intervention, among which passive listening is just one. *Ibid*, 260.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 251.

⁴⁵ Fancourt, Finn, *What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being?*, WHO Regional Office for Europe, 33.

as an aesthetic agent.”⁴⁶ In her ethnographic research, by interviewing a sample of 52 British and American women of different ages, she investigates how they use music through their daily routines and which functions and meanings they assign to it in their private lives. What emerges is evidence supporting her argument that music is a tool for the “reflexive project of the self”, that operates both as a self-regulation device, particularly in mood management, and as a space to nurture and preserve identity and memory, allowing individuals to relive past emotions and events, and to perceive reflections of their own characters and experiences in what she describes as an “aesthetic registration of self”⁴⁷. This dimension is also evident in the use of music therapy with patients affected by self-disrupting mental conditions such as schizophrenia or dementia⁴⁸, where music can be a tool of communication with the therapist, mirroring the patient’s idea of self and help reconstruct or stabilize identity, as well as to manage affective states that are often difficult to articulate.⁴⁹

1.2.1.2 Music as tool of destruction

Unfortunately, it is important to highlight that this capacity of music to act upon emotion and identity-building, makes it a potentially powerful tool in practices that go on the opposite direction, the one of manipulation, coercion and self-disruption, especially when observed in contexts of conflict and violence. As Timothy Rice notes, music in crisis cannot be reduced to a purely expressive or cohesive force, but may instead work as a form of “cultural action” that is deeply embedded in power relations and social control.⁵⁰ In contexts of war and conflict, music can be employed by different actors to escalate tensions and reinforce social divisions in

⁴⁶ De Nora, *Music in Everyday life*, 46.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, Chapter 3, 46-74.

⁴⁸ Neurologist O. Sacks describes how music incredibly can become a crucial tool for patients with dementia to remain connected world, providing them a momentary sense of self and presence, as it seems to be one of the few ways through which they can recall pieces of their past and experience enjoyment and connection in the present. Cf. Oliver Sacks, *Musicophilia: racconti sulla musica e sul cervello*, trad. Isabella Blum, Adelphi Edizioni, Milano, 2008.

⁴⁹ For further discussion, cf. *Ibid*, 422-437; Bunt, *Clinical and therapeutic uses of music*, ‘the iso principle’, 254; Donald E. Michel, Joseph Pinson, *Music Therapy in Principle and Practice*, 2nd Edition, Charles C. Thomas, 2012, 28-29; De Nora, op. cit. 14-15.

⁵⁰ Timothy Rice, *Ethnomusicology in times of trouble*, Yearbook for Traditional Music, Vol. 46, 2014.

several ways, from censorship and nationalistic propaganda to the incitement of soldiers, up to its use even as a weapon or an instrument of torture. In the contemporary digital era, similar dynamics can be observed in the some governments' media behaviours, for example the recent posts from the official White House accounts where some viral funny musical or visual elements were juxtaposed with videos of military operations and bombardments in Iran, producing a strong aesthetic dissonance that suggests mockery and trivialization, other than normalization, of violence.⁵¹ As musicologist Suzanne Cusick describes, sound can be highly debilitating if used as a weapon against hostile crowds – for example through near-lethal infrasound weapons or Long-Range Acoustic Devices (LRAD)⁵², used to distract or spatially disorient the enemy, – since intense bursts of acoustic energy can generate a strong impact to human perception and coordination, described as “being hit by a wall of air that is painful on the ears, sometimes causing nosebleeds and leaving you shaking inside”⁵³. These techniques were used in the Iraq war of 2003 by US army, that also “bombarded” a city with some Metallica’s songs, to confuse and provoke the enemy and gain tactical advantage. Without going too far in time, the Israeli army still uses similar tactics in the ongoing war, both in Lebanon and Palestine, with the aim of terrorizing civilians and soldiers. Firstly, through the practice of “breaking the sound barrier” with military jets⁵⁴ – already noted by Cusick as being used during the first Gulf War⁵⁵ – typically as a form of intimidation, territorial marking, or as a signal preceding bombardments. Secondly, some human rights

⁵¹ Emerald Maxwell, *White House releases video montages gamifying Iran war on social media*, France 24, 07 March 2026, at [link](#).

⁵² Long Range Acoustic Devices (LRAD) are non-lethal weapons developed by the American Technology Corporation after 2000, capable of projecting a ‘strip of sound’ at an average of 120 dB, intelligible for 500 to 1000 meters and designed to hail ships, issue battlefield or direct an “attention-getting and highly irritating” deterrent tone to confuse and disperse the enemy. Cfr. Suzanne G. Cusick, “*Music as Torture / Music as Weapon*”, *Transcultural Music Review*, n.10, December 2006, 3-4.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵⁴ This is part of an Israeli strategy defined as ‘sound terror’, particularly applied in Lebanon, where sonic booms in the skies of Beirut may trigger in the population traumatic events of the 2006 war and the port explosion in August 2020. Cf. Mat Nashed, *Sonic booms – the psychological warfare Israel uses to sow fear in Lebanon*, Al Jazeera, 10 Aug 2024 at [link](#); Chris McGreal, *Palestinians hit by sonic boom air raids*, The Guardian, 3 Nov 2005, at [link](#).

⁵⁵ Cusick, “*Music as Torture / Music as Weapon*”, 3.

organisations' investigations show that in the ongoing war and massacre in Gaza, some Israeli drones are being used to circulate at night over neighbourhoods while broadcasting recordings of war sounds, horror effects and music, desperate cries for help, sometimes even songs in Arabic or Hebrew, with the aim of psychologically intimidate civilians or, in some worst cases, lure them out of their homes and then target them directly⁵⁶. Here music becomes a tool of pure violence, as it is in the case of the so called “no-touch-torture”⁵⁷, a modern system of coercion developed and tested by CIA agencies on prisoners in the Vietnam War, where loud music and sound are used – alongside other systems such as stress positions, isolation and forced self-inflicted pain – to induce “sensory disorientation” and ultimately the “disintegration” of the prisoner’s identity. This may lead to forms of psychological regression or severe breakdown – what Cusick describes as “induced schizophrenia” – within a matter of days or few weeks, and have been considered more “effective” than more traditional methods.

This is possible because music and sound appear to have the capacity not only to sustain and build subjectivity, but also to disrupt it, suggesting that its power lies at the intersection between body and mind, reaching deeply embedded cognitive and perceptual mechanisms, as observed by Oliver Sacks in his work on neurological patients.⁵⁸ As demonstrated by the extensive work of J.M. O’Connell and S. El-Shawan Castelo-Branco, “music occupies a paradoxical position”⁵⁹ in contexts of conflicts, or, in O’Connell’s words, it functions a “double edged sword”⁶⁰ able to support individual and collective identities – even fostering

⁵⁶ Reliefweb, *Israeli army broadcasts intimidating sounds to lure, kill, and forcibly displace civilians in the Nuseirat camp*, News and Press Release, from Euro-Med Monitor, 17 Apr 2024 [link](#).

⁵⁷ Cusick, op. cit., 6-7.

⁵⁸ Oliver Sacks was a neurologist and writer who dedicated his books to his discoveries and experiences with people affected by neurologic disturbs. One of these investigates the relation between music and the brain. Cf. Oliver Sacks, *Musicofilia: racconti sulla musica e sul cervello*, trad. Isabella Blum, Adelphi Edizioni, Milano, 2008.

⁵⁹ O’Connell John Morgan, Salwa El-Shawan Castelo-Branco, *Music and Conflict*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana (2010), 13.

⁶⁰ Cf. Rice, *Ethnomusicology in times of trouble*, 195.

reconciliation – but also to incite violence and to contribute to their psychological and social disintegration.

1.2.1.3 Music as meaning and memory

If, as discussed earlier, music can influence bodily regulation or even contribute to processes of destabilization and control, its role becomes even more complex when considered in relation to existential survival. Such survival, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, concerns an existential dimension that transcends mere need for physical sustenance and relates instead to the potential loss of meaning in life itself, a loss that can affect anyone, but becomes particularly acute in extreme and dehumanizing contexts. However, as previously mentioned, Frankl argues that it is precisely in such conditions that the urge of meaning becomes more evident. Drawing from an existentialist premise, according to which life is mainly seen as suffering and surviving is about finding meaning in such pain, Frankl proposes the concept of the “will to meaning”, understood as the primary motivational force in human beings, which is unique and different for everyone⁶¹. The psychiatrist suggests that individuals are fundamentally oriented toward this search of meaning, and that in situations of extreme threat, this search, however difficult, becomes decisive factor between life or death. In the camps, finding meaning often meant having a goal or task to pursue, usually beyond that reality, that kept alive their hope, and often, in some cases, themselves. It could have been a small or bigger task, such as completing an important scientific work, or a loved one to live for, like a child waiting at home, that allowed prisoners to imagine an end to that “provisional existence”⁶² and orient their choices and behaviours to that imagined ending of sufferance. Those who were unable to find it, or whose hope had been destroyed by circumstances, often succumbed psychologically to the point of letting themselves die or even committing suicide. In this panorama, art, as both practice and fruition, could seem “somewhat grotesque”, but Frankl identifies it –

⁶¹Cf. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 11-12, 121-122.

⁶²*Ibid*, 91.

together with humour – as one of the “soul's weapons in the fight for self-preservation”⁶³: these tools don't eliminate the harshness of reality, but allow prisoners to reframe it, sustaining a fragile yet crucial sense of “spiritual freedom”,⁶⁴ a limited but meaningful possibility of agency in a condition of total powerlessness. Frankl reports some cases and personal experiences in the camp in which the aesthetic experience became a source of inner support to hope or meaning; a particular one was a dying woman who claimed to be grateful for her suffering, because she found not only consolation to her loneliness, but even a form of inner peace, in the sight of a tree branch with two blossoms visible from her window. Firstly, then, beauty could function as a form of companionship and consolation from existential abandonment or even produce moments of joy in the misery, what Frankl called “negative happiness”.

The musicologist Guido Fackler, in his work on music in concentration camps, stated that:

“Music served as a cultural survival technique and as a means of psychological resistance: it helped overcome the life-threatening situation at the camp and assisted in alleviating the terror. Simple humming or whistling could combat fear and loneliness in solitary confinement”.⁶⁵

Frankl also recalls a moment, during his first days in the camp, when he heard a melancholic yet simple violin melody, that unexpectedly evoked the memory of his wife's birthday – from whom he had recently been separated – producing in him an intense emotional response: “A violin sang a desperately sad tango, an unusual tune not spoiled by frequent playing. The violin wept and a part of me wept with it (...)”⁶⁶.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 63.

⁶⁴ “It is this spiritual freedom - which cannot be taken away - that makes life meaningful and purposeful”, *Ibid*, 87.

⁶⁵ Guido Fackler, *Music in Concentration Camps 1933–1945*, Témoin. Entre histoire et mémoire, 124, 2017, 60-83, at [link](#)

⁶⁶ V.E. Frankl, op. cit., 62-63.

In this case, the musical material itself becomes the trigger for an immediate emotional and mnemonic response, that allows both memory and affect to emerge spontaneously through a sound with certain qualities. This “cathartic” effect of music, combined with its ability to evoke memories, can be observed in different contexts, not necessarily extreme ones, but also in more common situations where sound and musical material reactivate emotions or past experiences, including traumatic ones. An example of this is recalled by pianist Karl Paulnack, in a speech addressed to freshmen at the Boston Conservatory; he remembered that during a concert he performed in a nursing home, an old war veteran was moved to tears by the music, to the point of leaving the room. He later explained that a particular piece – the *Piano Sonata* by Aaron Copland, dedicated to a pilot killed in World War II, the same war in which he himself had served as a pilot – evoked in him the memory of a fellow pilot and friend he had lost in battle:

“I have not thought about this for many years, but during that first piece of music you played, this memory returned to me so vividly that it was as though I was reliving it. (...) How does the music do that? How did it find those feelings and those memories in me?”⁶⁷

Here we can already glimpse one of the aspects that will be discussed in the following chapters: that among the elements through which music conveys meaning and affects emotions, memory and both personal and collective narratives, the musical elements themselves – such as melodic movements, timbre, or rhythm – and the context they’re forged in and experienced, may have a particular relevance, especially in contexts of existential instability and trauma, where this function of music could become significant towards a multiple forms of survival.

This emotional and mnemonic dimension becomes even more relevant when shifted to a collective perspective, where cultural and aesthetic practices may

⁶⁷ Karl Paulnack, *Music: A Basic Need for Human Survival*, at [link](#) (last access 13/05/2026)

themselves operate as archives of minority groups' traditions and memories of oppression, but also spaces where to shape new cultural and political narratives and identities, in contexts where both existential and cultural survival are under threat.

1.2.2 Music and survival at a collective level

As previously discussed, most ethnomusicologists agree on the understanding of music as a social practice whose analysis and interpretation cannot be separated from its cultural context and history. Since it is a practice that has characterized every society since early human history, music's social uses and functions are extremely various and numerous, but also difficult to assess universally⁶⁸. However, cross-culturally, some forms and practices of music appear more frequently across a wider range of societies, particularly those related to the cycle of life: lullabies and children's songs, music for healing processes, work songs, and religious or ceremonial music associated with social events such as funerals, weddings, initiation rituals. Most of the latter are accompanied by dance, which in many societies constitutes a fundamental element of the music practice itself, as in the case of the Venda: their national dance *tshikona* is considered with such importance that, as Blacking reports, they say it "makes sick people feel better, and old men throw away their sticks and dance"⁶⁹. Blacking further claims that this dance "expresses the value of the largest social group to which a Venda can really feel he belongs", ⁷⁰ highlighting some of the primary social functions of music relevant to this work: facilitating social cohesion and creating shared experiences that contribute to a sense of community and belonging. As Alan Merriam states, drawing on Radcliffe Brown's description of the Andamanese dance:

⁶⁸ For further insight about the categories of "use" and "function" in ethnomusicology as cultural universals, cf. Alan Merriam, op. cit., chapter 11 (XI)

⁶⁹ John Blacking, op. cit, 51.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 50

“Music provides a rallying point around which the members of society gather to engage in activities which require the cooperation and coordination of the group”⁷¹.

Indeed, in many so-called “nonliterate” societies, music can be such an important centre of communal life, that – for example, in the case of the Basongye of Congo – a village without musicians would be simply “inconceivable”, since funerals could not take place without the presence of at least one professional musician and his music⁷². Moreover, many communal events marked by music in these societies often happen in a participatory way that blurs the distinction between what Western societies tend to separate as “artist” and “audience”, since musical practices, dances and rituals involve the active cooperation of most members of the community.⁷³ These practices, other than structuring communal everyday life, may also contribute to the creation of a sense of responsibility and belonging within the group, inevitably carrying an identitarian dimension that goes beyond simple cooperation – which, nevertheless, is also listed among survival strategies by psychologist Paul Valent.⁷⁴ Scientific studies, in fact, have also demonstrated the effects of collective musical activities on social bonding. As reported by the WHO, experimental research on group singing and musical participation has shown effects “on self-perceptions of social bonding, social behaviours and oxytocin levels, demonstrating faster social bonding through music than with other social activities”.⁷⁵

This identitarian dimension is further developed by Martin Stokes, who discusses not only the “sense of place” and locational identity fostered by music, but also its role as a marker of symbolic boundaries both within a group and in relation to

⁷¹ Radcliffe Brown, the main developer of structural functionalism in social anthropology, individuates the Andamanese dance’s main function as the maintenance of a feeling of unity, harmony and cooperation among the members of the community. Cf Merriam, op. cit., 226.

⁷² *Ibid*, 215.

⁷³ Cf. *Ibid*, 211-212.

⁷⁴ Paul Valent, *Survival Strategies In Trauma (Trauma survival strategies)*, Encyclopedia of Trauma Ed Charles Figley, Sage, 1998.

⁷⁵ Fancourt, Finn, op. cit., (WHO), 9.

others⁷⁶. This aspect may acquire relevance in contexts where collective identity or group survival are threatened.

1.2.2.1 Music in conflict and mass violence

In his research on the relationship between music and the so-called “ethnic identity”, Martin Stokes builds a theoretical model centred on the question of how societies use music to “erect boundaries, to maintain distinctions between us and them”⁷⁷. Some years later, in another paper, he specifies that such ethnic identity is “as much about connection and contiguity as it is about difference and boundaries.”⁷⁸ This dual dimension – as previously cited – is confirmed by other ethnomusicologists, such as Timothy Rice and John O’Connell, both of whom encourage scholars to investigate the role of music in contexts of conflict and instability, where such ambivalent functions may be particularly visible, in the past as well as in the contemporary world. In fact, in these contexts, music may simultaneously reinforce group solidarity but also exacerbate division, preserving identities while also contributing to the separation of groups. As O’Connell and El-Shawan Castelo-Branco demonstrate, music may help to support reconciliation but also, more frequently, become part of systems of domination and violence or, in a more subtle yet effective way, of ideology and political propaganda.

Rice, O’Connell and Stokes, for example, all discuss the case of Northern Ireland, where Protestant Unionists fife-and-drums bands during national parades are used and perceived as a form of “acoustic attack” to Catholic republican neighbourhoods; at the same time, even the category of traditional “Irish music” itself became entangled with religious, ethnic and political belonging, often being instrumentalized by one group or the other.⁷⁹ As previously noted, music can undoubtedly function as a tool of violence and coercion; especially within colonial

⁷⁶ Martin Stokes, *Ethnicity, Identity and Music*, 1-3.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷⁸ Martin Stokes, *Musical Ethnicity: Affective, Material and Vocal Turns*, 23- 24.

⁷⁹ Cf. Rice, *Ethnomusicology in times of trouble*, 195; Stokes, *Ethnicity, Identity and Music*, 8-10; O’Connell, El-Shawan Castelo-Branco, *Music and Conflict*, chapter 5.

or oppressive dynamics, it may become, as Stokes writes, “one of the less innocent ways in which dominant categories are enforced and resisted”⁸⁰. In a context of conflict or dominance assertion, these processes may occur through different practices, such as censorship, symbolic humiliation and the appropriation or folklorization of minority cultures. As in some examples reported by Stokes, this could happen in a physical and symbolic way using musical instruments that are considered markers of a group’s identity, by desecrating them publicly, banning their usage, or even appropriating their use to the dominant national canon.⁸¹ Going further, Fackler describes testimonies of Nazi camp prisoners who were forced to sing while marching to work, publicly humiliate fellow prisoners through degrading songs, or perform music to drown out the sounds of executions, or sometimes even to accompany prisoners on their way the gas chambers.⁸²

Yet, paradoxically, music could also become a form of survival in the camp. Indeed, Fackler, as previously seen, also tells us about the music initiated by the prisoners, defining it a form of “cultural survival”. It provided not only consolation and entertainment to the prisoners, but also helped them articulate their feelings, relive their memories and confront existential threat in a more “holistic” way.

Some music was even composed in the camps⁸³, and transcribed secretly in notebooks; there were camp hymns, Jewish religious songs, famous melodies with new texts written, related to the conditions in the camp. These musical materials became a fundamental historical source for documenting the horrors of the Holocaust and understanding the reality of the camps. This suggests that music and cultural practices could function as ways through which a population, its memory

⁸⁰ Stokes, *Ethnicity, Identity and Music*, 8.

⁸¹ For further detail see: Stokes, *Musical Ethnicity: Affective, Material and Vocal Turns*, 26.

⁸² Cf. Guido Fackler, *Music on Command in Music in Concentration Camps 1933–1945*, at [link](#).

⁸³ One famous example is *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* (Quartet for the End of Time), a deep composition written by French composer Olivier Messiaen while imprisoned in a German prisoner-of-war camp and first performed there in 1941. Today it is a masterwork in the contemporary repertoire. Cf. Karl Paulnack, *Music: A Basic Need for Human Survival*, at [link](#); for further details: Rebecca Rischin, *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet*, Cornell University Press, 2003.

and its truth survive in history, implying that cultural survival itself constitutes an essential part of a group's survival.

This is not a new concept if we consider, for example, the history of the term *genocide*, coined by the Polish lawyer and refugee Raphael Lemkin in 1944. He identified in the experience of persecution of the Armenian population in 1915 some of the primary elements that he later used to name and conceptualize the atrocities of the Nazi's extermination plan against European Jews⁸⁴. Importantly, Lemkin also deeply connected physical and existential destruction with cultural destruction, using the terms “cultural genocide” or “culturicide” to describe the systematic eradication of a group's culture by a dominant group or a state. However, the term was ultimately excluded from the final draft of the 1948 Genocide Convention, and to this day scholars continue to disagree on whether cultural destruction alone constitutes genocide in a legal sense. What seems clearer is that it facilitates, reinforces and very frequently accompanies genocidal violence and broader processes of domination, colonization and erasure.

It is important to point out that, in this thesis, the terms *genocide*,⁸⁵ *ethnic cleansing*⁸⁶ and *mass violence*⁸⁷ are employed not as interchangeable categories, but as partially overlapping phenomena referring to different forms and scales of organized violence against groups and communities. In recent times, the debate

⁸⁴ Cf. Hamit Bozarslan, Vincent Duclert, Raymond Kévorkian, *Comprendre le génocide des Arméniens – De 1915 à nos jours*, Tallandier, Paris 2016, 34-37.

⁸⁵ Lemkin defined genocide as a “coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups” with the goal of annihilating the groups themselves. He then put a particular emphasis on culture – drawing such category from anthropologists Frazer and Malinowski – stating that “If the culture of a group is violently undermined, the group itself disintegrates”. Cfr. Donald Bloxham, A. Dick Moses, *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, 22-25.

⁸⁶ Ethnic cleansing is defined by Benjamin Lieberman as a purposeful policy intended to render a specific geographic area “ethnically homogenous” by using force or intimidation to remove persons belonging to certain groups from that area. While it shares the goal of “purity” with genocide, its primary objective is forced removal from a geographical space rather than the group's physical destruction. He argues that the two categories merge when the means of removal are intended as a strategy to result in the group's destruction, citing the Armenian as a case of example. *Ibid*, 42-45.

⁸⁷ Mass violence is a broad analytical category used to describe the intentional use of force, physical, structural, or systemic, against large groups or communities, in a spectrum that includes some theoretical subtypes such as structural, systemic and slow violence. For further details, cf. *Ibid*; Jonathan P.J. Stock, *Violence, Music and Arts in Action*, Volume 6, 2, 2018, pp. 91–104. [link](#).

and uncertainty around these terms – particularly in a legal sense, since, for example, an internationally recognized legal framework regarding ethnic cleansing still doesn't formally exist – re-emerged strongly, in the mainstream media and public opinion as well as in academic contexts, following the mass violence, destruction, displacement, war crimes and crimes against humanity witnessed in Gaza and, with different yet worrying intensity, in the West Bank and South Lebanon. Such events have generated an intense debate within genocide studies and international law, with scholars, legal experts and States still divided over the applicability of the legal category of genocide to the Palestinian case, since it appears to be a “seeming impossibility of reaching consensus around the basic unit of analysis that is the term genocide”.⁸⁸

Beyond legal classifications, a growing body of research has already documented numerous attacks carried out by Israeli forces not only against civilians and urban infrastructures, but also against Palestinian cultural and material heritage, archives, universities, artistic production and collective memory, with a recent dramatic intensification of such process in Gaza. Scholars and international reports by institutions like UNESCO⁸⁹ or the Institute for Palestine Studies are documenting the destruction and damage to cultural institutions, such as the Edward Said National Conservatory of Gaza⁹⁰, and material heritage, including archaeological sites, historical and religious buildings like the church of St. Porphyrius, heavily bombarded in October 2023 while being used as a shelter by some families⁹¹. These practices are not new in Israeli political and occupying strategies: for example, musicologist David McDonald reports in his ethnography that already during the Israeli Operation Defensive Shield in 2002, Israeli forces “systematically destroyed the institutional vestiges of Palestinian identity”,

⁸⁸ Moses, A. D. (2026). *Introduction: Gaza and the Problems of Genocide Studies*. *Journal of Genocide Research*, 28 (3), 515–528

⁸⁹ Cf. UNESCO, *Impact on cultural heritage*, UNESCO's action in the Gaza Strip/Palestine, at [link](#)

⁹⁰ Cf. Institute for Palestine Studies, *Documenting the destruction of the Cultural Sector in the Gaza Strip, Cultural and Art Institutions*, at [link](#)

⁹¹ Cf. Hamdan Taha, *Destruction of cultural heritage in Gaza*, Institute for Palestine Studies – published by Jerusalem Quarterly, 30/01/2024.

including archival recordings, books, historical documents and administrative records⁹².

As Lemkin already suggested, taking inspiration from the Armenians' persecution by the Ottomans, it seems that the annihilation of a group has very much to do with its cultural destruction. Armen Adamian asserts, in his research about Armenian folklore in the aftermath of 1915 genocide, that it was as much biological as cultural. He indeed refers to the well-known forced assimilation, linguistic 'Turkification' and systematic destruction of Armenian material heritage that was perpetrated by Ottoman authorities during the attempt of 'purifying' Turkey by forcibly deporting ethnic and religious minorities, firstly the Armenians, but also Greek, Assyrian and Yazidi. Such well-planned attempt resulted in nearly one million deaths and in the dispersion of the Armenian diaspora across different parts of the world (mostly Middle East, Russia and United States), that today is estimated around 6 million people, while Armenia's inhabitants are approximately 3 million. To this day, Turkey and other countries, as well as some scholars, still deny the genocidal intentions behind such events, refusing this term and prolonging the debate⁹³. Material and cultural destruction, as previously mentioned, was a part of the Ottoman strategy, that included forced Islamization, adoption of Armenian children by Turkish Muslim families, the banning of Armenian language and the occupation of Armenian lands and houses, together with the destruction of monuments and historical patrimonies.⁹⁴ Consequently, also musical heritage was damaged, as reported by Armen Ardaman's research⁹⁵ and Sylvia Alajaji's ethnography,⁹⁶ that both bring as an example the life of

⁹² McDonald, David A., *My voice is my weapon: music, nationalism, and the poetics of Palestinian resistance*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2013, 2-3.

⁹³ For more about this topic, see Marcello Flores, *Il genocidio degli Armeni*, il Mulino, Bologna 2017.

⁹⁴ This strategy was enacted also in the recent Second Karabakh War. For insights, visit: Maghakyan, S., & Maranci, C. (2024, February 7). Azerbaijan's attacks on Armenian heritage aim to erase an entire culture. *The Conversation*, [link](#)

⁹⁵ Armen Adamian, *The Armenian Azgagrakan Movement: An Ethnographic History of Music Revival in the Aftermath of Genocide and Sovietization*, UCLA, 2025

⁹⁶ Sylvia A. Alajaji, *Music and the Armenian Diaspora – Searching for home in Exile*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2015

composer and musicologist Komitas Vardapet. Considered as a symbol of Armenian music itself and being the first one to collect a repertoire of Armenian folk songs, Komitas experienced the trauma of deportation and genocide, which lead him to suspend his musical activity and to the loss of a big portion of his work. Fortunately, the parts that survived “became relics of Armenian culture and history salvaged from the permanent losses associated with Genocide” and were remembered and “canonized among Armenians as expressions of post-genocide musical memory, identity and survival.”⁹⁷

1.2.2.2 Resistance and music of struggle

Furthermore, Adamian also asserts in his introduction that:

“During and after mass violence and dispersion, Armenians utilized music and dance as mechanisms of social-cultural recovery and resistance: to circulate counter memories, rebuild community and establish a sense of normalcy, as well as a commitment to sustaining ancestral traditions and pursuing social justice.”⁹⁸

This suggests that music and cultural production may themselves become strategic sites of political struggle, collective memory, and symbolic survival, both within and beyond the conflict itself. Cultural practices thus become a way to respond and deal with the cultural destruction itself, which, as seen before, appears to be deeply intertwined with physical and existential threat against minorities and communities.

An ethnomusicological approach can help us examine these phenomena, since it understands music as a social practice embedded in power relations, whose dynamics are often more complex and multilayered than the simplified – and often romanticized – binaries of oppression and empowerment⁹⁹. Coherently with this perspective, my research won’t engage primarily with the explicit ideological

⁹⁷ Adamian, *The Armenian Azgagrakan Movement*, 139-140.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 16.

⁹⁹ McDonald, *My voice is my weapon*, 25-28.

content of musical practices and products, but more on how these practices participate aesthetically and socially in the construction of collective narratives of survival and identity. The focus will therefore be on how musical forms contribute to specific socio-political functions within the contexts examined, recognizing, as McDonal puts it, “the utility of music performance in resolving central questions of individual subjectivity, agency, and collective identity formation.”¹⁰⁰ Some of these functions, discussed in the literature on music and conflict, will provide the basis for my analysis.

One important premise is that the same songs can acquire different functions depending on their use and the contexts in which they are performed. A genocide-themed revolutionary song, for example, that was originally written to celebrate an old victory against an oppressor, can become a way to cheer up and support the morale of soldiers during a desperate time of loss in war. This dynamic is discussed by Adamian through the circulation of the Armenian genocide-themed song “*Gini Lits*” during the Second Karabakh War in 2020, through a viral video of a soldier singing it for his fellows while guiding them toward a safe zone.¹⁰¹ Interviewed by the author, the soldier – a musician and singer who volunteered in the war – narrated how his spontaneous singing led his previously discouraged and hopeless companions to smile and quietly sing with him, “changing their sorrows”. He later recorded and posted the video “as a testament of their existence and struggle”¹⁰², in case he did not survive the war. The immediate and rapid circulation across Armenian communities worldwide showed how a simple musical performance of an old revolutionary song transformed the function of the song: first into a form of morale-building and intra-group support among soldiers, and later into a broader symbol of resistance against “the Turk oppressor” for the whole Armenian world. Such an event contributed to the emergence of the so-called *goyamart*, – literally

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 23.

¹⁰¹ Adamian, op. cit., 313-318. Video available at [link](#).

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 316.

“battle for existence”¹⁰³ – a term used by Armenians since the second Karabakh war to indicate practices and expressions of wartime survival, which the author framed as “shared culture of post-genocide resistance rooted in a common history of ethnic, religious persecution wielded by Ottoman-Turkish regimes.” This culture of *goyamart* was performed and evoked in various activities, among which musical practices occupied a central role. A further example of the latter is the use of musical practices in genocidal contexts as a literal “antidote to silence”, as conceptualized by Thomas Turino and reported by Adamian¹⁰⁴; this silence does not refer only to grief for the death and loss, but also the structural violence of state, international and political denial, which he considers an integral part of the genocidal intent. He then states:

“Consequently, Armenians have turned to voiced practices – such as survivor testimonies and surviving musical tradition – as exercises of agentive power that commemorate and contest these violent legacies of silence.”¹⁰⁵

The concept of *goyamart*, as well as the antidote to silence, may also be easily applied to other contexts and functions of music such as resistance music for the Palestinian case. McDonald provides a useful framework to trace a path into the building of collective identity through music in conflict and dispossession, also critically redefining some terms, such as the idea of resistance music, drawing on Lila Abu Lughoud’s critique to the often-romanticizing narratives of resistance¹⁰⁶. Indeed, he argues that any musical style or product could virtually become “resistance music”, from folk songs to hip hop to art music, if we look at the political and relational context and the purposes of its production:

¹⁰³ Author’s definition of the term: “compound word conjoining *goy*–to exist, and *mart*–to fight, used as a discourse of survival in dier contexts of political upheaval and war”. *Ibid*, xi.

¹⁰⁴ See Turino, Thomas. 1993. *Moving Away from Silence: Music of the Peruvian Altiplano and the Experience of Urban Migration*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, quoted in *Ibid*, 23.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 24.

¹⁰⁶ For Lila Abu Lughoud, resistance is a “diagnostic of power”, that guides us to understand the complexity of the power relations and changes in a context. Cfr. McDonald, op.cit., 26.

“It is essential to understand each performative act, each song, poem, dance, gesture, as a tool for understanding the dynamics of power from which it arose”.¹⁰⁷

Consequently, if the broad social and political function of the musical practice fits in a picture of anti-colonial struggle, national belonging and self-determination, one can argue that it's resistance music, but as he often precises, there are “myriad understandings” of what is resistance among Palestinians. What seems certain is that musical practices and, more generally, performative spaces played an important role in constructing subversive narratives against state violence, contributing to Palestinian collective and national identity formation; they may therefore be a useful lens through which investigate “what it means to be a Palestinian”¹⁰⁸.

This understanding of identity draws from the ethnomusicological and anthropological assumption that identity is enacted and negotiated through social and aesthetic performance. McDonald draws from Butler's performativity theory¹⁰⁹, at which core he places the human “drive to belong”, suggesting that:

“... popular culture (specifically musical texts, sounds, images, and practices) is in fact a constitutive modality of collective identity formation within which broader social forces emerge.”¹¹⁰

This suggests that musical practices may become moments in which individuals and communities actively “perform themselves into existence”, making music an active participant in the construction and enactment of Palestinian national belonging and identity. A striking example is the conversation reported by McDonald during an interview to Abu Hani, a scholar and folklorist in the West

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 26.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 33.

¹⁰⁹ Judith Butler is one of the main scholars that worked on gender theory, in which she developed performativity theory in important works such as *Bodies that Matter*. Cf. *Ibid*, 24-26.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 31.

Bank village of Al-Bireh, in which he reflects on what dancing *dabke*¹¹¹ means to him and to all Palestinians:

“We stomp our feet in the dabke to show the world that this is our Land, that people and villages can be killed and erased, but our heritage is something that they can’t reach because it is here [motioning to his heart]. They have stolen our land, forced us out of our homes, but our culture is something they cannot steal.”¹¹²

1.2.2.3 Coded music

Once again, cultural practices confirm their ties with communal survival and their function of responding to menace of erasure to a minority. Furthermore, in such contexts of threat and freedom limitations, songs and musical pieces may become also adaptive strategies to evade censorship, forms of control and oppression. This has historically occurred in many different contexts and musical traditions worldwide, among which African American spirituals may be mentioned. It is believed among many scholars that, during the second half of the 19th century, some of these songs were used as coded messages to guide escaped slaves toward the Northern states or Canada through the clandestine network of routes and safe houses organized by abolitionists known as the Underground Railroad. The lyrics of songs that are now famous within the repertoire, such as *Go Down Moses* or *Wade in the Water*, combined biblical references with mentions of natural places and symbolic elements that progressively acquired the function of indications within a sort of hidden “map”, guiding fugitives without being detected by slave owners.¹¹³

Indeed, the song form itself appears particularly suited to becoming a vehicle for coded communication, coordination messages or disguised forms of protest and

¹¹¹ *Dabke* is a traditional Palestinian and Levantine line dance, for more details cf. par 1.3.

¹¹² McDonald, op. cit., 20.

¹¹³ Cf. Beth McDonald, *Will the Circle Be Unbroken?: The Sacred Music of the African American Diaspora*, California State University Dominguez Hills, website at [link](#); Luigi Onori, Riccardo Brazzale, Maurizio Franco in “*La Storia del Jazz*” (History of Jazz), Hoepli, Milano 2020

revolt, using symbolic textual elements or even deliberate transformations of words and pronunciation, as McDonald notes in his preface:

“Palestinian poets, singers, and musicians are notorious for manipulating the pronunciation of their texts to fit syllabic patterns and rhyme schemes, to shield meaning from censors and the secret police, and to play with words and their relations.”¹¹⁴

A meaningful example of this is the *tarāwīd* (sing. *tarwīdah*), a style of songs belonging to Palestinian oral folkloric tradition and are usually sung by women in different contexts such as weddings, funerals or political gatherings. It’s part of what is known as ‘coded singing’, a practice believed to have spread since the 1920s, especially during the Great Palestinian Revolt of 1936 under the British Mandate, when women reportedly reversed phrases or modified phonetically some words of the songs to communicate in disguise with revolutionaries and imprisoned detainees. Today, this genre has regained visibility within Palestinian resistance and even mainstream music, both as a way of honouring Palestinian oral history and cultural traditions and as a symbol of resistance against Israeli occupation and military violence.¹¹⁵

1.2.2.4 Music in diaspora and exile

The importance of oral culture therefore becomes even more evident if we broaden the context to that of diasporas¹¹⁶, particularly those generated by traumatic events such as genocides, ethnic cleansing and colonial occupation, like the Armenian and

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, note on transliterations.

¹¹⁵ Sharqawi, Y. *Palestinian tarweeda: a disappearing art*, Fanack, 25 January 2023, at [link](#) ; Marei Yara, *Reviving Palestinian tarweede in modern music*, Arab America, 19 June 2024, [link](#).

¹¹⁶ The term ‘Diaspora’ is of Greek origin, from the verb ‘*sperio*’ (dispersion) with the preposition ‘*dia*’ (through). During the 20th century, traditional diasporas (such as the Jews and the Armenians) were defined as communities forcibly exiled because of a particular traumatic event, named ‘the formative event’ by theorist Lipset, meaning the two genocides of example. However, from the 90s, the definition of the term grew and enlarged its meaning, as reported by the Society for Ethnomusicology: “Now diaspora commonly refers to the dispersion/displacement experiences of many different peoples—forced or voluntary, multiple- or single-generational, permanent or temporary—with a perceived homeland.” This definition encompasses broader migration processes related to globalization and former colonized countries. Cf. Boudjikianian, Aïda, *Armenians of Lebanon: From Past Princesses and Refugees to Present-Day Community*, Armenian National Archive, Beirut, 2009, 411; The Society for Ethnomusicology, ‘Music and Diaspora’, at [link](#)

Palestinian diasporas. Obviously, the literature on the relationship between music and diaspora is extremely vast, but here the focus will be placed specifically on the idea of cultural and symbolic survival that diaspora may carry and perform through the musical practices of a given community, often transmitted orally or clandestinely, as previously discussed.

Rolf Lidskog, in his review of the field, precises that diasporas have some distinctive features among other global communities, namely the collective memory of and the connection with “something seen as a homeland culture”¹¹⁷. This emerges clearly, for example, in discourses surrounding the motherland among Lebanese Armenians, who even use two different terms to distinguish between the territorial reality of the Republic of Armenia and the more symbolic and idealized notion of the “motherland”, which often remains partially detached from the concrete reality of contemporary Armenia¹¹⁸. Lidskog further argues that:

“The content of this homeland culture and the border between it and other contexts and cultures are not given, however, but are constantly negotiated and renegotiated”¹¹⁹

This idea of renegotiation and multidimensional identity is now widespread within postcolonial literature and diaspora studies, and has some of its roots in the thought of authors such as Edward Said, whose work frequently revolves around exile and diasporic existence:

“Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives

¹¹⁷ Lidskog, Rolf, *The role of music in ethnic identity formation in diaspora: a research review*. International Social Science Journal, 66 (2016), pp. 219-220, 23-35.

¹¹⁸ This discrepancy lies both in the foundational and nationalist myths that often characterize diasporic narratives surrounding the homeland, and in the sense of alienation felt by many diasporic Armenians toward the Republic of Armenia, which presents significant cultural and historical differences from their own communities. For more insight, cf. Boudjikianian *Armenians of Lebanon*, 416-420.

¹¹⁹ Lidskog, op. cit., 26.

rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that – to borrow a phrase from music – is *contrapuntal*. ”¹²⁰

Said’s experience as both a musician and an exile led him to propose a form of “contrapuntal reading” of the historical and sociological processes, beginning with imperialism, that forced individuals and communities into the complex condition of exile from their homeland. According to Said, such individuals develop an awareness of simultaneous dimensions coexisting within their identities, which consequently become active spaces of reconstruction and renegotiation through different practices, including cultural ones. At the same time, however, he also recognizes the suffering and precariousness associated with exile:

“...just beyond the frontier between ‘us’ and the ‘outsiders’ is the perilous territory of not-belonging: (...) where in the modern era immense aggregates of humanity loiter as refugees and displaced persons.”

As McDonald claims at the beginning of his ethnography, the human striving for belonging characterizes the musical performances he witnesses among Palestinian communities both in the West Bank and, especially, within the Jordanian diaspora. Thus, the displaced person may move from a condition of non-belonging, or ‘unhomely’ in Homi Bhabha’s words, toward a reconstructed sense of community through musical performance. This discourse necessarily intersects with nationalism in diaspora, an association Said himself considers essential, since nationalism represents “an assertion of belonging in and to a place, a people, a heritage” creating a “community of language, culture and customs”¹²¹ – a community understood by scholars as “imagined” – and which, moreover, frequently emerges from a prior condition of estrangement.

¹²⁰ Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and other Essays*, 2000, at [link](#); Cf. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, Vintage Books Edition, New York, 1994.

¹²¹ *Ibidem*.

In relation to national belonging, music may therefore be an especially powerful tool, if we considered what Stokes says about its ability to create a “sense of place” and symbolic boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’, precisely what exile seems to lack of in Said’s account. Alajaji confirms this idea by arguing that “identity in music becomes a matter of boundaries”; however, she also adds that it is equally important to observe the moments where such established boundaries are crossed, generating more flexible positions between Self and Other, and contributing to “new understandings of the collective”¹²².

The author then proceeds to describe the discrepancy that she herself observed between private musical practices and listening habits on the one hand, and the public narrative circulating within diasporic communities on the other; the latter was often shaped by nationalist and essentialist understandings of music, of which the figure of Komitas became a symbolic embodiment. Music may therefore also become a cultural signifier that follows dynamics of essentialism and mythical descent characteristic of nationalism, especially when such nationalism emerges from traumatic experiences such as genocide or colonial occupation. Ultimately then, music – thanks to its “flexibilities, its negotiable and permeable boundaries” – remains capable of traversing different narrative layers concerning identity and collective meaning, both reinforcing them and reconfiguring them into more open and hybrid perspectives.¹²³

This idea brings us back to the theory of performativity and to the idea of “performing the nation” described by some of the Palestinian artists discussed by McDonald:

“For them Palestine exists, comes to exist, and continues to exist as performative: a reiterative citation of power that produces the very phenomena it is intended to regulate”¹²⁴

¹²² Ajlaji, *Music and the Armenian Diaspora*, 41.

¹²³ *Ibidem*. In the subsequent chapters, we will analyse how these directions are reflected through the musical forms and contents examined.

¹²⁴ McDonald, *op. cit.*, 24.

One of the cases described by the author, for example, the musical ensemble *Baladna* founded by musician Kamal Khalil,¹²⁵ represents a form of “resistance in exile”: their musical activities allowed displaced Palestinians in Jordan to feel temporarily “at home”, giving them a space through which to raise their voices and “reach the whole nation” through music. Through songs and performance, they were able to communicate experiences of violence and sociocultural trauma within a context of exilic nationalism, which may itself be interpreted as a form of national survival performed through cultural practice.

In conclusion, music in diaspora may acquire many different functions that are coherent with the understanding of survival outlined in this thesis. Musical practices and performances, thanks to their flexible nature and deep embeddedness in human experience, may become active spaces where communities enact different forms of survival: physical and pragmatical ones, as in the case of coded songs, but mostly identitarian and symbolical. Musical heritage, oral transmission and collective participation allow displaced communities to preserve memories and maintain ties with their threatened or inaccessible homeland, whether imagined or not, while also helping them sustain a national – or rather transnational – sense of belonging. This may occur through the reinforcement of essentialist nationalist narratives and oppositional boundaries, but also by shaping new and hybrid understandings of identity, in a space that Bhabha refers to as “Third Space”, a sort of “home far from home” that transcends rigid binary divisions and boundaries¹²⁶. Cultural survival, therefore, appears not simply as the preservation of static traditions, but as an ongoing performative process through which communities continuously recreate themselves in response to displacement, violence and historical rupture.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 165-167.

¹²⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, *The World and the Home*, Duke University Press, 1992.

CHAPTER 2

Musical culture of the Arab East – Theory, Traditions and Contexts

A maqam is more of a schema than simply a scale. It is a process of melodic movement, and an operational protocol of improvisation according to the models and forms of melodic and rhythmic organization. (...) It is a recalling of a cultural identity, a modal system, and a form of improvisation.

(Stephen McAdams and Mohamed Ayari)

Before moving into the case analyses, it is necessary to narrow our geographic focus to the Arab Levant and to provide some musical and historical context of the area within my analyses will be situated. This section intends to outline the main theoretical elements and defining concepts that characterize what is broadly referred to as “Arab Music”, tracing the historical processes that shaped its formation and transformation from the late 19th century to the present. It then examines the modal system of the *maqāmāt* and their rhythmic counterpart, the *īqā‘āt*, as the primary analytical frameworks applied in the case studies, before turning to the *tarab* aesthetic and its emotional and social dimensions. Particular attention is given to the permeable boundaries between musical genres and traditions, and to the ways in which the *maqam* system works as a shared emotional grammar across genres and contexts of Arab music, including contemporary Palestinian practices, as examined in the next chapter.

2.1 “Arab music”: some coordinates

Defining or even attempting to delimit the term “Arab music” means navigating a particularly complex territory. This expression may in fact encompass such a conspicuous variety of genres, practices, theoretical concepts and geographical areas, that identifying common features across them is both analytically difficult and, some would probably argue, of doubtful utility. Nevertheless, the aim here is to trace some orienting coordinates within this multifaceted, continuously evolving

and unique musical landscape, keeping the focus on the areas and the elements that are more directly relevant to this research.

In the following pages, the adjective “Arab” as applied to music will be used in its more general usage: a broad designation that covers the Arabic-speaking communities of the Middle East and North Africa, from Morocco to the Gulf states, including what is commonly referred to as “the Levant” or *Bilād al-Shām* – Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and Jordan – as well as *al-Mashriq*, which usually extends to Egypt too. Most importantly, the term carries primarily a linguistic rather than an ethnic or territorial meaning: it encompasses Arabic-speaking communities both within these regions and across the global diaspora. “Arab Music”, then, today refers to a wide variety of musical genres and styles produced by communities that surely share a linguistic and cultural legacy, but which are highly different in their local traditions, dialects, soundscapes and socio-political histories.

2.1.1. Defining traits of Arab music

What unifies them, at least analytically, is a set of shared structural and aesthetic principles that scholars have tried to identify across the tradition. The most systematic attempt is the one offered by Habib Hassan Touma in his foundational treatise *The Music of the Arabs*¹, where he individuates five main constitutive elements that characterize of what he calls “Arabian music”². The first, and fundamental, is a specific tone system characterized by distinctive interval structures that theoretically subdivide the octave into 24 main steps, which combined generate a large set of modal scales and tetrachords known as the *maqam* system. Together with a set of cyclic rhythmic structures, called *īqā‘āt*, they form the backbone of the main vocal and instrumental genres of this music. As third

¹ Habib Hassan Touma, *The Music of the Arabs*, Amadeus Press, Portland – Cambridge, 1996

² The term “Arabian” in such context is fallen out of use in current English, so there’s probably a problem of translation from the original German version. The correct usage would be “Arab” as previously seen. Cf. Turath.org, *Music of the Arabs by Habib Hassan Touma, book review by Sami Asmar*, at: <https://www.turath.org/Articles/BookRev.htm>; Paul Brians, *Common errors in English usage and more*, WSU, at: <https://brians.wsu.edu/2016/05/17/arab-arabic-arabian/>.

component, Touma identifies some main musical instruments as the traditional vehicles of this system – among them, the lute (‘ūd), the reed flute (nāy), the Arab zither (qānūn) and various percussion instruments such as *riqq*, whose physical construction and tuning systems are essential to perform the expressive possibilities of this tradition. All these elements are part of what Touma calls “a musical mentality” oriented around a fixed “tonal-spatial component” – that is the modal structure – combined with a “rhythmic-temporal component” which is, by contrast, “essentially free” and far less rigid than its Western counterparts. Other elements of such musical mentality, in Touma’s discourse, include the predominance of vocal music among the genres, the predilection for small ensembles (like the *takht*), specific “mosaic-like” song structures, and a prevalence of monophony and repetition in musical arrangements.³

To these first essential features of Arab music, it seems necessary and worth adding the prominence of improvisation as a practice and a genre, both instrumental (*taqsīm*) and vocal (*layālī* and *mawwāl*). This practice provides the main foundation of the aesthetic principle of *tarab*, a multidimensional concept most commonly used to indicate the ecstatic experience or “enchantment” generated by the music performance in both the audience and the performers.⁴ Lebanese-American composer and ethnomusicologist Ali Jihad Racy, one of the most influential scholars on the subject, identifies further “elements of unity” of Arab music, with the premise that they may not be universally applicable. First, coherently with understanding of the term “Arab” adopted here, he highlights what he calls an “intimate connection” between Arab music and the Arabic language itself, proved by the emphasis upon the vocal idiom and instrument, the centrality of the “poet-singer” and the widespread practice of putting into music some literary forms⁵, such as the *qaṣīda* or the *muwashshaḥ*⁶. He also underlines the centrality

³ Cf. Touma, *The Music of the Arabs*, Preface xix - xx.

⁴ See the following section for further discussion and sources.

⁵ A.J. Racy, *Arab Music*, Arab American Almanac 4th ed., at: <https://www.turath.org/ProfilesMenu.htm>

⁶ The *qaṣīda* is a long poem written in standard Arabic with a precise metric scheme, that was translated in a musical form characterized by musical complexity and a solo vocalist accompanied by a *takht* ensemble;

of the melody, which occupies the foreground of this musical tradition, being refined and complex thanks to ornaments and nuances allowed by the tone system in use, in the near absence of polyphony or harmonic texture, typically Western. Regarding musical forms, Racy notes that compound forms prevail in the Near Eastern repertoire, such as suites combining instrumental and vocal pieces sharing a common *maqām*, which are typically identified by their generic name and the name of the *maqām*, or occasionally the composer's name.⁷

Ultimately, Racy draws attention to the fundamental role of music in Arab social and religious life, where Qur'anic recitation represents one of the most important forms of religious expression. Even though it is commonly regarded as a practice distinct from music – in fact, for example, no Muslim person would ever describe an *adhān* as a song – some musical elements are present in Islamic recitation, including the use of specific *maqāmāt*.⁸ Despite the ongoing debate within Islam about the permissibility of music, the broader Arab world has historically contained a rich plurality of musical practices tied to religious life: from the music and dance of certain Sufi congregations⁹, to the liturgical hymns of Eastern Christian communities, whose rich choral and melodic traditions reflect the diverse musical influences that have crossed the Arab world throughout history.¹⁰

2.1.2. Urban music through history

If these are the main ingredients that characterize the sound and musical practices of much of the repertoire we refer to as Arab music, their usage, function, and form

the *muwashshah* is a strophic, secular song genre that originated in Muslim Spain (Al-Andalus) between the 9th and 12th centuries, often performed by a choir singing in unison and structured in strophic texts with a refrain. Cf. *Ibidem*; Marcus, *Music in Egypt*, 110-112.

⁷ Especially pieces from the *tarab* repertoire. An example showed by S. Marcus is “*Sama’i Rast*”. Cf. Marcus, *Music in Egypt*, 28; About abstraction in *tarab* music, cf. A.J. Racy, *Making Music in the Arab World: The Culture and Artistry of Tarab*, Cambridge University Press, New York – Cambridge, 2003, 76.

⁸ Marcus explains that in the case of the call to prayer (*adhān*) usually performed by the *muezzin* in the minaret, there are more simple versions with only one note (*azan shar’i*), and more melodically advanced ways of performing it. Cf. Marcus, *Music in Egypt*, 13-15.

⁹ Marcus discusses the example of the *madh*, a Sufi religious musical poetry widely performed across Egypt. Other examples may be the Gnawa music from Morocco, or, even more broadly, the famous dance and trance music of the Turkish Mevlevi congregation. Cf. *Ibid*, chap. 3; A.J. Racy, *Arab Music*, at [link](#).

¹⁰ Cf. Touma, *The Music of the Arabs*, Preface; A.J. Racy, *Arab Music*, at [link](#).

vary considerably across both geographic and social contexts. Touma identifies an initial macro-categorization into three principal genres, grounded in a geographic and social distinction. Indeed, his fourth constitutive element of “the music of the Arabs” is a classification into:

“Specific social contexts for the making of music (...) classified as urban (music of the city inhabitants), rural (music of the country inhabitants), or Bedouin (music of the desert inhabitants)”.¹¹

This distinction, – which would be taken up, utilized, and also criticized for its excessive simplicity by later scholars – identifies urban music with what has variously been called “art music” or *al-mūsīqā al-sharqiyya*: a tradition that developed primarily in the major urban centres of Cairo, Beirut, Damascus, and Aleppo from the late nineteenth century onwards¹². After a long period of relative stagnation under the Mamluks and early Ottoman dynasties, Arab urban music underwent a process of profound transformation driven by European colonial influence and internal Westernization projects, such as that pursued by the Egyptian Khedivate, which led to initiatives including the opening of the Cairo Opera House in 1869 and the institutionalization of European music theory in nascent state conservatories. Scott Marcus describes how the social position of music changed dramatically during what he calls “the modern period”¹³: what had long been regarded as a marginal or “frivolous” activity started to gain more appreciation and involvement, being reframed by the contact with European artistic and intellectual models. The encounter with Western musical tradition and theory reflected one of the two dominant reactions to such contact in Arab societies of the time: a widespread perception of Western music as more “advanced” and “scientifically organized,” and a consequent pressure either to

¹¹ *Ibid*, Preface, xix.

¹² Cf. Scott L. Marcus, *Arab music theory in the modern period*, University of California, Los Angeles, 1989, 29; Ali Jihad Racy, *Music in Contemporary Cairo: A Comparative Overview*, Asian Music, 1981, Vol. 13, No. 1 (1981), pp. 4-26, University of Texas Press, 12.

¹³ Marcus, *Arab music theory in the modern period*, 14-17.

emulate its models or to systematize and legitimize Arab music on comparable theoretical grounds. This latter impulse led to an “intellectual revival” where Arab musicians and theorists such as Shihāb al-Dīn or Mikhā’īl Mashaqa rediscovered medieval Arabic theoretical treatises and begin codifying a tradition that had until then been transmitted almost entirely orally, using Western notation as a practical tool.¹⁴

These developments introduced what would become a persistent structural tension in Arab musical culture: the negotiation between indigenous modal and improvisatory traditions on one hand, and Western harmonic, orchestral, and institutional models on the other. Many Arab intellectuals, from early 20th century until now, disregarded the social and musical transformations occurring in those years, describing them as a profound crisis¹⁵ or, in Touma’s words, an “alienation from the authentic musical language”¹⁶. For them, it was the tradition embodied and performed by the *takht* ensemble – a small chamber group comprising the four principal melodic instruments (‘ūd, qānūn, nāy, and violin) with the *riqq* tambourine as the sole percussion, sometimes accompanying a solo vocalist – to better express Arab cultural identity and musical legacy. The *qadīm* repertoire and style performed by *takht* groups, in fact, came to represent what these intellectuals nostalgically recalled as the lost *turāth* (heritage):¹⁷ the purest musical expression of “Arabitude”¹⁸, valued precisely because its fully modal content was felt to generate the most authentic experience of *tarab* ecstasy. These ensembles, that performed traditional genres such as the *muwashshahāt* (the old Andalusian song form) and the *dawr* (a long Egyptian vocal genre), often performed in a suite form

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ A. J. Racy quotes the famous Egyptian writer Najib Mahfouz, who expresses his sensation of distress towards the recent changes occurring in Arab music in the modern period, Cf. Racy, *Music in Contemporary Cairo*, 11.

¹⁶ Touma, *The Music of the Arabs*, 16.

¹⁷ Both terms, *Qadim* (lit. ancient, old) and *turath* (lit. heritage) refer in this context to the repertoire and style performed mostly by *takht* ensembles in the late 19th century and first years of the 20th. Cf. Ali Jihad Racy, *Making Music in the Arab World*, introduction.

¹⁸ Professor Racy quotes this term from William Kay Archer, who links it to musical influence (*ta’thir*). *Ibid*, 13.

called *wasla*, gradually became the symbolic reference point of this *turāth* imaginary, against which subsequent musical transformations were compared.¹⁹ However, many other critics and musicians, the majority as Racy claims, indeed were recognizing and favouring the ‘present-oriented’ nature of Near Eastern music, with Cairo as main theatre of change and cultural contamination.

It is mainly from this culturally and politically active city that some of the biggest musical innovations and figures began to emerge, in parallel with the political ones, from the 1920s onwards. In this period, small *takht* ensembles gradually started to incorporate Western instruments – string sections, accordion, piano, and wind instruments – giving rise to larger orchestras (*firaq*) and new compositional approaches. The new music was written rather than improvised, favouring a unified melodic line that could be performed in unison by an increasingly large string section, at the expense of the heterophony that had characterized *takht* performances. Western influence was equally visible in the training of the new generation of professional musicians, many of whom were graduates of governmental music institutes where European theory and notation were either central or integrated into the curriculum.²⁰

This musical transformation unfolded in parallel with the emergence of the first mass media and a commercial recording industry²¹. Egypt’s national radio service opened in 1934, Palestine’s in 1936, and both fundamentally transformed the conditions of musical consumption and production across the Levant, bringing to prominence the first pan-Arab musical stars in the following decades. Chief among them was the Egyptian singer Umm Kulthūm, who – like many of her contemporaries – had begun her musical career in religious chanting before becoming “the voice of Egypt”:²² a figure of extraordinary reach across the Arab

¹⁹ Cf. Marcus, *Music in Egypt*, 100-102.

²⁰ Cf. Scott L. Marcus, *Music in Egypt*, 160-162.

²¹ Media and music industry are considered the most recent factor of unity in Arab Music according to professor Racy. Cf. A.J. Racy, *Arab Music*, at [link](#); about how radio and media influenced Arab music, cf. Michael Frishkopf, *Music and Media in the Arab World*, American University in Cairo Press, 2010.

²² Quoted from Virginia Danielson’s monography title: V. Danielson, *"The Voice of Egypt": Umm Kulthum, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the 20th Century*, University of Chicago Press, 1997

world and a popular image of Nasserist pan Arabism. She and the famous composer Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhāb – alongside their Lebanese counterparts, the Rahbani Brothers and Fairuz – came to personify Egyptian nationalism and pan-Arab unity, by developing and best incarnating what Racy calls the “central domain” of *al-mūsīqā al-sharqiyya*: a vast, predominantly Cairo-based musical field centred on a new extended song form (*ughniyya*), which retained elements of the *tarab* aesthetic while drawing simultaneously on the *maqām* tradition and on conspicuous borrowing from Western musical idioms²³.

2.1.3 Distinguishing between genres: a challenge

Within Racy’s model, in a scheme drawn by himself ²⁴, this central domain is surrounded by a series of peripheral but intersecting fields: Western art and popular music, religious genres such as Sufi music, the pre-World War I heritage (*turāth*), and folk music in its various forms, all of which interact with the centre rather than existing in sealed separation from it. Each one of these genres was marked by Cairo’s public with a “colour” (*lawn*)²⁵ that defined the musical and ethnical quality or style of music; it was far from being a rigid categorisation, since single performances could contain different colors and more established performers were often skilful in more than one style. For example, what he calls folk music or “folklore” comprehended different kinds of performances, that could be described as having *lawn baladī* (native) – with elements from Egyptian rural and wedding music – or *sha‘bī* (popular), a more western-influenced urban genre performed in Egyptian dialectal Arabic. This section probably included Tuma’s more rigid category of rural and Bedouin music.

Racy ultimately asserts that for the audiences of his time “the highest premium is generally placed upon songs which combine the acknowledged elements of *tarab*

²³ Actually, the relationship between Umm Kulthum and pan-Arabism seems to be more complex than Abd el-Wahhab’s: it’s true that he wrote songs for her, but usually she did not sing openly patriotic songs, partly out of a sort of respect for her status (in addition to the fact that she was from an older generation).

²⁴ Cf. Racy, *Music in Contemporary Cairo*, 16.

²⁵ For more about *lawn* distinction, cf. Racy, *Music in Contemporary Cairo*, 14-20.

with modernity and innovation”, highlighting again the interconnected and unbounded nature of Near Eastern musical culture of the past and, as this thesis argues, also in contemporary times. Such nature was shaped by the many influences, socio-political and musical, that passed through the region, particularly in major urban settings like Cairo, and the “present-oriented” attitude of Arab musical practitioners. Scott Marcus argues that virtually all Arab musical practice – including its most westernized popular forms – retains some relationship to the modal structures of the *maqam* system and to *tarab* aesthetic, that both function as a shared musical grammar cutting across genre distinctions. In a personal interview with Marcus, ‘90s Egyptian pop-star Hakim, – one of the first Arab performers to achieve international recognition through television and a deliberately commercial artistic vision, as well as the pioneer of a genre he called “modern *sha ‘bī*” – stated that all of his songs were set within *maqāmāt* and that he conceived of no music outside the *maqam* system²⁶, even while his ensemble included instruments such as the electric keyboard or the trumpet, which are physically incapable of producing microtones. Whether or not such statements may be a strategic claim that reconciles “Arab authenticity” with international commercial appeal, they align with Racy’s comprehensive description of Cairo’s musical life in the last century and with his picture of an open musical culture that absorbs external influences without abandoning its foundations.

These permeable boundaries between genres are continuously being crossed also in contemporary musical practice across the Levant. The most recent experiments in this direction are gaining significant international attention through the amplifying tools of social media and online streaming platforms, which have become, particularly in the context of the recent events in Palestine and Lebanon, as important to news distribution and international solidarity as they are to the

²⁶ It is worth noting that Hakim's statement should be understood within its context: as Marcus observes, while Hakim stresses the *maqam* content of his work in continuity with a narrative that wants to connect modern musical practices to “the old tradition” of Arab music, some of his songs are in fact built entirely on Western scales and harmonic structures. This suggests that such claims are as much ideological as they’re purely descriptive. Cf. Marcus, *Music in Egypt*, 172.

music industry itself.²⁷ The aforementioned “present-oriented” attitude of Arab musical culture finds a particularly vivid expression in this moment: urban, rural, and Bedouin traditions are being woven together by contemporary Palestinian popular artists who recuperate melodic and lyrical material from pre-Mandate and Mandate-era archives and reframe it within entirely new musical and social contexts. Far from being mere aesthetic nostalgia, this practice constitutes an active cultural and political gesture: the construction and reassertion of an indigenous Palestinian musical narrative against the backdrop of colonial occupation and the ongoing threat of cultural erasure. This phenomenon of folkloric revival fits within the survival framework outlined in precedence, particularly in relation to the construction of identity and the cultural continuity of threatened populations and will form a central thread in the following case analysis.

2.2 The *maqam* system

Before proceeding to the analysis, an effort to understand and outline what *maqām* means and how the maqam system works is necessary and central to the musical readings developed in the subsequent sections.

The word *maqām* literally translates to “place” or “position”, and its usage in a musical context dates to the early modern period of Arab music theory²⁸, when scholars first began systematically codifying the Arab musical system²⁹, after a long period of oral transmission. Some theorists of this period, such as Mīkhā’il Mashaqa, identified seven fundamental notes, already considered the most important tonal reference points in pre-modern practice, to which they assigned Persian names composed of a number and the word *kāh*, meaning precisely

²⁷ See Chapter 4 for further discussion.

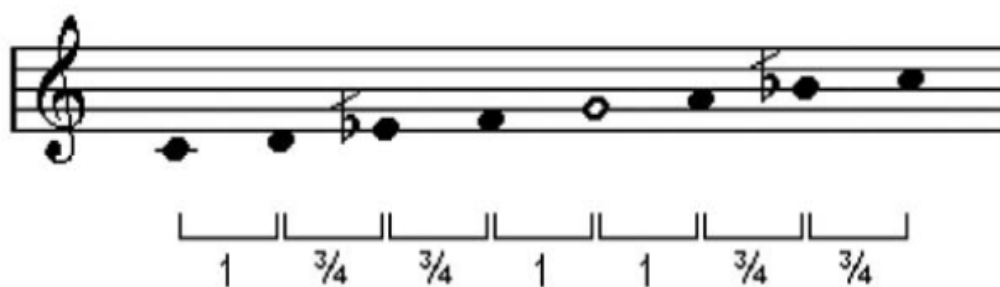
²⁸ Scott Marcus notes that the ‘modern period’ is not a monolithic entity: its starting point varies depending on which aspect of music theory is considered and the geographical area in question. However, it is conventionally made to coincide with the historical “Modern era”, that begins with Napoleon’s arrival in Egypt in 1798. Cf. Marcus, *Arab music theory in the modern period*, 14-15.

²⁹ This is not the first attempt of music theory systematization: these scholars based their research and intervals calculation on medieval treatises, especially on the works of al-Fārābī and al-Urmawī Cf. Touma, *The Music of the Arabs*, 17-18.

“position³⁰”. Some of these names have survived to the present day, while others evolved over time – *rāst*, for instance, retaining its Persian form – and others were translated into Arabic, as in the case of *‘irāqī*. It was within this framework that the term *maqām* first came to designate specific notes as “positions” within the intervallic series: to speak of *maqām rāst* was to refer to the first note of this series of seven fundamental positions, whose centrality to the system was reaffirmed as late as the 1932 Cairo Congress of Arab Music³¹.

It was only in the twentieth century that the terminology of “scales” – *sullam* in Arabic – and “modes” entered common use, and that these seven foundational notes came to be associated with the mode *rāst*, whose point of departure corresponds to the note C in Western notation. Even though *rāst* starts on C and is made of seven main grades just like the Western major scale, there’s a substantial difference in the intervallic series, since the third and seventh grades of *rāst* are both “half-flat”, creating intervals of “medium seconds” and “three quartertones”, as explained below.

Each mode subsequently took its name from the scale degree that typically served as its point of departure, replacing the earlier system of ordinal Persian numerals.



An example of maqām rāst in the length of an octave with its intervals, in western notation. Source: Sami Abu Shumays, Maqām analysis: A Primer.

³⁰ For example: *yakāh* (“first position”) corresponding to G, or *dūkāh* as D. Cf. Marcus, *Music in Egypt*, 19-20.

³¹ The 1932 Cairo Congress of Arab Music was an international conference convened under the invitation of King Fu’ād I of Egypt, bringing together Arab and European musicologists to discuss the systematization of Arab music theory, including the division of the octave and the codification of the *maqām* system. Cf. Racy, *Making Music in the Arab World*, Introduction, 3-4.

2.2.1 Melodic paths: *maqām families, ajnās and sayr*

Today, the total number of recognized *maqāmāt* varies depending on the theoretical source and regional tradition,³² but historically many attempts of classification were made, generally subdividing the modes in “families” (*faṣīla*) based on their proximity with a main modal sequence. Touma, for example, drawing from medieval treatises, individuates eight main genres distinguished by their cadential sequence of descending intervals, as well as by their initial and final notes; each genre may contain an approximate number of individual scales from six to twenty.³³ With the reintroduction of the concept of tetrachords (*ajnās*, sing. *jins*)³⁴ in the late 1930s from medieval Greek and Arab treatises, contemporary theorists shifted towards a classification based on the first *jins* that builds the *maqām* row.³⁵

A *jins* consists of a four-note scalar segment whose outer notes are separated by a perfect fourth³⁶, such as the interval from C to F; the different sequences of internal intervals determine the quality and name of each *jins*, which, just like a *maqām*, takes its name from its root note. A full octave scale, then, is built by juxtaposing two tetrachords, sometimes with a whole tone in between: *maqām rāst*, for example, is built from a *jins rāst* spanning C to F, a whole tone from F to G, and a second *jins rāst* from G to c³⁷.

³² At the Cairo Congress, 52 *maqāmāt* were documented in use in 1932, while today contemporary theorists like Sami Abu Shumays defend the idea that the number of existing *maqāmāt* is potentially infinite, given that the system functions like a “discrete combinatorial” structure, such as language, where the number of potential combinations of elements exceeds any fixed catalogue and varies not only across regions but also across individual practitioners. Cf. Sami Abu Shumays, *Maqām Analysis: A Primer*, Music Theory Spectrum, Vol. 35, Issue 2, pp. 235–255, 254.

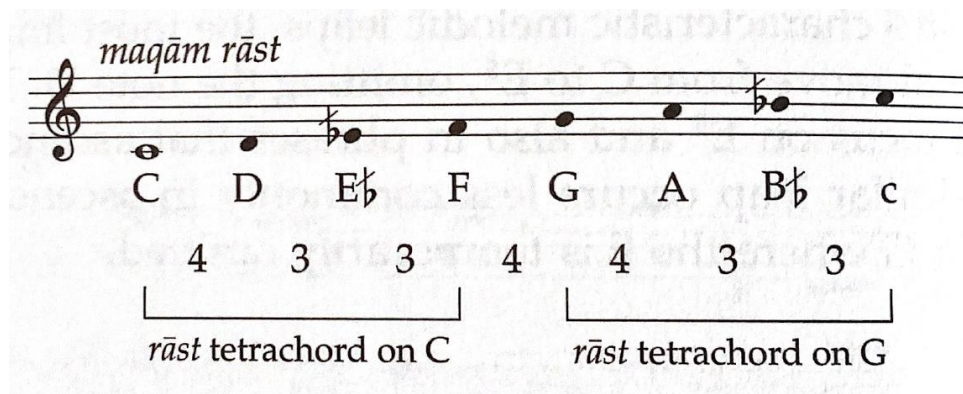
³³ The eight genres are *rast*, *bayati*, *sikah*, *nahawand*, *hijaz*, *nakriz*, *‘ajam*, *kurd*. For full notation, cf. Touma, *Music of the Arabs*, 29–37.

³⁴ The word *jins* in Arabic means “kind,” “type,” or “gender,” and it is derived from the Greek word *genus*, with an analogue meaning. Cf. Sami Abu Shumays, *Maqām Analysis: A Primer*, 235.

³⁵ Cf. Mondher Ayari, Stephen McAdams, *Aural Analysis of Arabic Improvised Instrumental Music (Taqsīm)*, University of California Press, 2003, 21 (2), pp. 159–216, 164.

³⁶ Cf. Marcus, *Music in Egypt*, 24.

³⁷ Both Marcus and Abu Shumays point out that this is only one version of *rāst*, mostly used in ascendent patterns. The upper *jins*, in fact, is interchangeable with at least one other *jins* in use in the repertoire, in this case *nahawand*; Abu Shumays claims that there are at least three options of upper *jins* for each *maqām*. Cf. *Ibid*, 29–31; Sami Abu Shumays, *Maqām Analysis*, 235–239.



Maqam rāst with its tetrachordal analysis within an octave. Source: Marcus, Music in Egypt.

The concept of tetrachords allows considerably more flexibility both in maqam classification and musical analysis, since many scales share the same first *jins* and differ only in the second one, sometimes even within the same song or piece. In the attempt of distinguishing maqam families, then, the first *jins* of each row became the primary criteria of classification, since it shares its name with the root note of the whole maqam itself.³⁸

The melodic unfolding of a maqam is called *sayr* – meaning “path” or “movement” – and encompasses a kind of traditional protocol that musicians follow in “presenting” the mode during a *taqsīm*, with specific tones being emphasized or foregrounded at particular moments, according to both common practice in the traditional repertoire and the choice of the *maqam* in question. Certain *maqāmāt* typically begin on a precise note or tonal area – whether the tonic or a median register – and each possesses its own characteristic melodic leaps, accidentals, and ornamental gestures that define its expressive quality.³⁹ Touma describes “central tones” forming the “nucleus of the *maqam*” which anchors a series of melodic “phases” – passages gravitating around a particular tone or tonal area – that succeed one another in a gradual melodic climax, usually moving from lower to higher registers.

³⁸ For an example of such classification, see *Ibid*, chap. 2, 23-25.

³⁹ Shumays explains that in performance, some *maqamat* have a fixed *sayr* to follow, while others have more options (like *rast*). Cf. Sami Abu Shumays, *Maqam Analysis: A Primer*, 235; for more detailed description of *sayr* and melodic movements, see Marcus’ analysis in: Marcus, *Music in Egypt*, 25-42.

More recent theorists, including Scott Marcus and Sami Abu Shumays, propose a broader understanding of Arab modal structure, conceiving *maqāmāt* not merely as fixed scales, but as networks of melodic pathways built from *ajnās* combinations. While Marcus acknowledges the frequent variations, modulations between *maqāmāt*, and the interchangeability of *ajnās* within a single mode, his framework remains fundamentally oriented around the *maqām* as an octave scale. It is Abu Shumays who most systematically addresses the complexity that this model leaves unresolved. Through an extensive catalogue of *ajnās* combinations⁴⁰ drawn directly from performance practice and the traditional repertoire, he argues that the two-tetrachord partition within a single octave is a framework too rigid to account what musicians and singers actually do while performing. In the practice, he observes, the constraint of one octave is frequently exceeded, and virtually every *maqām* may be presented with at least three *ajnās* rather than two. Such a conceptualization of modal areas as composed of a greater number of melodic fragments and embellishments would also resolve the difficulty in distinguishing the modulations between different *maqāmāt*, which in a model like Marcus's occur too frequently in Abu Shumays' opinion.

The existing gap between Arab musical theory and practice points also towards a broader characteristic of the *maqām* concept itself: it emerges across the literature as something considerably more complex than a simple set of heptatonic modal scales. This is already implicit in Tuma's own framing, which consistently refers to *maqām* not as a scale or mode but as a "phenomenon", a term that signals how the word may designate not only a tonal framework, but also a general musical style, an improvisational technique, and a performance grammar that musicians

⁴⁰ Abu Shumays's catalogue and theoretical framework are contained in an interactive online resource in which each *maqām* is explored as a complex network of *ajnās* and their possible combinations, through which the musician moves in unfolding the *sayr* of a given mode. Basically, he collects all the melodic conventions and possibilities for musicians to develop a theme or improvisation on a specific *maqām*, also arguing that it is fundamental for the musician to learn and internalize them for each *maqām*, practising them directly rather than seeking theoretical shortcuts. Resource available at: Sami Abu Shumays, *Maqām Lessons*, <https://maqamlessons.com/playground/index.html>, from *Maqām Analysis: A Primer*, 235. He also provides free video-lessons on each *maqām* using his method, at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xN7E1pc8Y2Y&list=PLcfDkfaWrWRRcgUawWPz4bdL0Co17rphx>

must internalize in order to fully command the repertoire.⁴¹ This style, in fact, despite the notable improvisational component and considerable expressive freedom that allows, operates according to its own set of implicit rules and conventions related to melodic movement and formal articulation. Going further, ultimately, for contemporary author and musician Abu Shumays, the most productive way to understand *maqāmāt* is not as fixed scales but as collections of melodic gestures available to the musician. It consists in a repertoire of small melodic units between which the performer moves, according to conventions codified through practice and oral transmission rather than explicit rules. Each of these melodic units carries recognizable characteristics that give a *maqam* its particular colour and emotional quality, making it immediately identifiable to the trained ear of a *sammī* – the attentive, knowledgeable listener whose presence is essential to the social dynamic of Arab musical performance⁴². Among these recognizable traits, for example, is the *qaflah*, a cadential closing gesture that concludes a phrase, a section or an entire performance and functions as a sort of signature of the *maqam*’s identity through melodic resolution. It is precisely this journey – the *sayr* unfolding through its *ajnās* and resolving in the *qaflah* – that, when performed according to tradition and received by an attuned audience, is understood to produce the *maqam* “reigning” over the performance⁴³.

2.2.2. The tone system: quartertones and tonal fluctuations

During the early modern period, theorists also attempted to define fixed parameters for calculating scalar intervals. Scholars such as Mishāqah and Shihāb al-Dīn

⁴¹ Here, the term phenomenon suggests the double use of the word *maqam* in the literature: as a modal scale on one hand, or as a broader musical genre that usually corresponds to “*tarab* music”, meaning the art music tradition developed from the end of 19th century throughout the first decades of the 20s, where *maqamat* were re-discovered, systematized in theory and used as a foundation for new compositional works and practices. Cf. *Ibid*, preface; Racy, *Making music in the arab world*, Introduction.

⁴²The term *sammī* (pl. *sammī’ah*) refers specifically to the cultivated listener who possesses the musical knowledge and emotional sensitivity required to fully appreciate and respond to a *tarab* performance, to whose success he’s essential, according to Racy. These small groups of listeners possess the musical knowledge and a listening “gift” that allows them to respond emotionally to the music, often through specific gestures or expressions, and to properly interact with the performance. Cf. Racy, *Making music in the arab world*, 40-42.

⁴³ Cf. Marcus, *Music in Egypt*, 115; Racy, *Making music in the arab world*, 100-101.

began to analyse the distances between the degrees of the fundamental scale, which were initially classified as large or small on the basis of the quartertone (*rub* ‘pl. *arbā*’) as the fundamental unit of measurement⁴⁴: the large interval, corresponding to a whole tone, comprised four quartertones, while the small comprised three. This smaller interval is today referred to as the medium or neutral second, and over time the system was expanded to incorporate interval categories derived from Western theory, including minor, major, and augmented seconds. Touma argues that it is precisely this interval, the medium second, that has functioned as the defining marker of Arab music since at least the tenth century, and not the quartertone as generally claimed. Indeed, in his historical reconstruction of the codification of the Arab tone system, moving from the medieval works of al-Fārābī and al-Urmawī – both of whom tried to calculate precise mathematical ratios to measure the intervals of Arab music⁴⁵ – he ultimately concludes that:

“...the three-quartertone does not have a fixed size that holds for all maqam rows. In fact, the breadth of deviation of this musical step is a crucial ingredient in the peculiar flavour of Arabian music. To temper the scale by dividing the octave into 24 quartertones of equal size would be to surrender one of the most characteristic elements of this musical culture”.

Here, Touma identifies a tension that runs through the entire literature on Arab music and that any musician approaching this tradition must face: the gap between

⁴⁴ Marcus refers to the quartertone as the simple equal partition of the octave in 24 sections, based on the subdivision of the semitone in a half. However in musical practice, as seen later, the intervals do not conform to such equal partition, making the quartertone more of a theoretical and notational convenience. Cf. *Ibid*, 236-237; Marcus, *Music in Egypt*, 19-22.

⁴⁵ Both medieval authors individuated seven main tones within different octave partitions (for example into 25 or 53 steps), drawing on Pythagorean tuning systems. Such calculations originated the micro-interval known as the *comma*, a small unit corresponding approximately to 1/9 of a whole tone. This system is based on the modern logarithmic unit of the *cent*, which divides the semitone into 100 equal parts - making a quartertone equivalent to 50 cents - and allows comparisons across different tuning systems. Today, cents are the most widely used unit of interval measurement in music theory and acoustics. In practice, commas occasionally appear in Arab music notation as small “+” or “-” symbols indicating slight upward or downward adjustments of intonation on specific notes, in order to fill the gap existing between theoretical measurements and real practice. Cf. Touma, *The Music of the Arabs*, 17-24; Ayari, McAdams, *Aural Analysis of Taqsim*, 163-165.

theory and practice. As both Touma and Marcus explain, music theory existed as a philosophical and mathematical domain from the medieval period onwards and was systematically revisited from the end of 19th century through all the 20th, shaped also by the influence of Western models and the establishment of formal musical institutions across the Arab world. Performance practice, by contrast, works according to its own logic, rooted in a tradition of oral transmission in which many principles are applied fluidly and differently depending on many factors, both musical and social. Violinist and music educator Sami Abu Shumays captures with clarity this discrepancy, stating that:

“The intonation of the so-called “quartertones” differs from scale to scale, being higher in some scales than in others, (...) so that the musical reality is one of many gradations of pitch, each of which is learned precisely by ear by practitioners of the tradition. By my count I have (...) around 12 different distinct notes between my lowest E-flat and my highest E-natural”.⁴⁶

This observation confirms that the mathematical equal partition of the octave in 24 quartertones is mainly a theoretical convention, and a somewhat misleading one, also because in actual practice only a select number of these notes appear regularly in the repertoire, while the majority remain an abstract subdivision. Intonation in Arab music then, is considerably more flexible than in the Western equal tempered system, which leads to the further conclusion that written notation can only ever approximate the sounds actually produced in a musical practice.

2.3 Rhythmic-temporal dimension: the *īqā'āt*

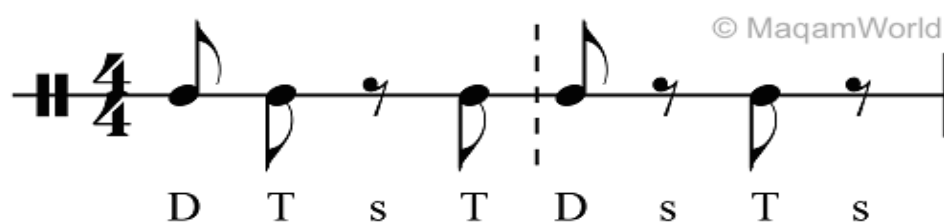
Alongside the melodic modal system, Arab music is structured by a set of cyclic rhythmic modes called *īqā'āt* (sing. *īqā'*) or *awzan* (sing. *wazn*)⁴⁷, that may be considered as the parallel rhythmic counterpart of the *maqāmāt*, governing

⁴⁶ Sami Abu Shumays, *Maqam Analysis: A Primer*, 236.

⁴⁷ Touma refers to *īqā'* with the synonym *wazn* (literally meaning “measure”), while also citing other synonyms like *uṣūl*, *mīzān*, or *ḍarb*. Touma, *Music of the Arabs*, 48

accentuation patterns in the melodic material. Their usage is documented across the whole Arab world, some of them occurring across different genres or musical and social contexts, while others are found only in specific regional folk traditions or certain urban genres. They're also present in more contemporary popular genres, usually in less complex forms and with borrowed patterns from other global musical traditions.

An *īqāʿ* consists in a rhythmic cycle of a fixed number of beats, each one characterized by specific patterns built of two fundamental sounds produced on all percussion instruments: *dumm*, a deep, resonant stroke at the centre of the drumskin, and *takk*, a sharp, high-pitched stroke at the rim of the drum. Using these two words, it is possible to “speak” the various cycles, which are built out of the alternation between them and rests (*iss*), in fact they were studied through oral repetition and memorization, each one carrying its name and characteristic tempo. However, in the 20th century, the *īqāʿ āt* began to be written and taught in written Western notation and associated with time signatures: for example, the most widely used pattern, an eight-beat cycle named *maqsum*, was presented in a 4/4 time signature with each beat as an eighth note:⁴⁸



Iqa' maqsum notated, *dumm* indicated as “D”, *takk* as “T” and rest as “s”. Source:

<https://www.maqamworld.com/>

Touma notes that more than a hundred of rhythm cycles exist in the tradition⁴⁹: some of them are extraordinarily complex and extending over long beat sequences, corresponding to odd meters like 10/8 or up until 32/4, mostly used in the old

⁴⁸ The image and notation of *īqāʿ maqsūm* is taken from Maqam World, an online educational resource on Arab music theory: <https://www.maqamworld.com/>, accessed: 24/06/2026.

⁴⁹ Touma, *Music of the Arabs*, 48. Marcus instead speaks about “dozens of different *īqāʿ āt*”, cf. S. Marcus, *Music in Egypt*, 60.

muwashshah genre, while simple meters like 4/4 or 2/4 are more commonly found in folk or popular music. Each *wazn* carries its own aesthetic character and social functions related to the musical genre: certain rhythms are more suited to moments of dance, others to processional or ceremonial contexts, others to the more introspective listening context of the *tarab* performance. The interaction between the modal framework of the *maqām* and the rhythmic cycle of the *īqāʿ* generates the structural and affective foundation of most Arab musical genres, from classical suite to contemporary popular song. It is nonetheless worth noting that not all Arab music has a fixed rhythmic-temporal organization. In fact, as discussed in the following section, some improvisational genres of *tarab* music – performed without ostinatos or drones on the background – have no fixed rhythmic pulse, leaving even more freedom to the musicians and percussionists in building their musical dialogue. This temporal freedom⁵⁰ may create ideal condition for *tarab* ecstasy, and the listener may experience, in Touma’s words, the “maqam phenomenon in its purest form”⁵¹.

2.4 “Music is feeling”⁵²: *Tarab* and the role of emotions in Arab music

Many scholars, as well as music performers and listeners, would agree on the primary role of emotional content in Arab music, especially for what concerns the repertoire commonly referred to as *tarab* music⁵³. As in the case of the word *maqam*, the term *tarab* encompasses several dimensions and meaning, ranging from an emotional state to metonymically indicating a musical style or genre within a precise historical period and context.

The word was variously defined in historical dictionaries as joy or excitement but also, paradoxically, as sadness; the two apparently opposite emotions are

⁵⁰ About “detemporalization”, see footnote 54.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

⁵² “*Al-fann ihsās*”, literally “art is feeling”, is a common phrase heard after musical performances. Cf. Racy, *Making music in the Arab World*, 4.

⁵³ Such term mainly refers to the urban art music developed from late 19th onwards, related to takht ensemble and the relevance of the singing voice, with Umm Kulthum as main representative of the genre. *Ibid.*

understood as intensified and blended together in the related concept of *shajan*, a combination of the two, often translated as “enchanting melancholy.”⁵⁴ The intensity of such emotion provoked by music was frequently accompanied by physiological behaviours and changes in the audience; more commonly, a sensation of kinesthetic lightness called *khiffah*, often connected to involuntary physical movements and a modified state of consciousness in which time seems to come to a standstill, creating a sense of “detemporalization”⁵⁵, especially during improvised sections of the music. Moreover, early definitions of *tarab* placed considerable emphasis upon the power of the singing voice: the second verbal form *tarraba* – and its related noun *taṭrīb* – means to produce *tarab* by singing with ornaments and stretches in melody and lyrics, in a way that generates this unique ecstatic feeling⁵⁶.

The most extensive scholarly work on the concept is offered by ethnomusicologist Ali Jihad Racy, whose research on the subject benefits from his dual perspective as both a scholar and a practicing Near Eastern Arab musician.⁵⁷ Racy is the first to articulate the broad multidimensionality of *tarab*, which he understands as encompassing an intimate and largely ineffable inner experience felt by the listener, an active and performed relationship between listener and performer, and an entire *tarab* culture. Such culture is made of a set of practices tied to the performance setting and to the essential relationship between audience and musicians, alongside a historical and ideological connection to a particular idea of tradition, of an “Oriental spirit” and cultural authenticity (*ṣidq*), further elaborated by anthropologist Jonathan Shannon.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Cf. Racy, *Making music in the Arab World*, 205.

⁵⁵ For more discussion cf. Jonathan H. Shannon, *Emotion, Performance, and Temporality in Arab Music: Reflections on Tarab*, American Anthropological Association, Cultural Anthropology, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Feb. 2003), pp. 72-98, 87.

⁵⁶ Cf. Racy, *Making music in the Arab World*, 203-205.

⁵⁷ The monography in question is the already cited: A.J. Racy, *Making music in the Arab World: The Culture and Artistry of Tarab*, Cambridge University Press, New York – Cambridge, 2003

⁵⁸ Cf. Shannon, *Emotion, Performance, and Temporality in Arab Music: Reflections on Tarab*, 79-81.

2.4.1 *Ethos and emotional content of the maqāmāt*

Historically and cross-culturally, as Racy explains, music was widely associated with extraordinary powers, often within a spiritual or religious context, where the idea of the ecstatic feeling (*wajd*) prevailed, but also in terms of healing powers and its connections with emotional and characterological aspects of human experience. In medieval times emerged the Greek concept of *ethos* often translated in Arabic as *aṭar* or *ta'īr*, meaning a “reactive aesthetical and emotional content”⁵⁹ attributed to specific musical parameters, particularly the melodic modes. This content could be understood as “ethical and educational” – as in Aristotle’s account discussed in the opening chapter –, but also as producing healing and therapeutic effect on listeners and, in medical cases, even patients⁶⁰.

Medieval Arab authors such as al-Kindī and al-Urmawī developed a categorization of the musical *ethos* within Arab musical world, drawing on Greek Pythagorean treatises of the fourth and third century BC that identified three main qualifications describing the “expansive and contractive” movement of musical rhythm. The first one, named *baṣṭī* – or from the Greek, diastolic – was characterized as “dilated”, joyful, and capable of inspiring laughter, strength and courage, often associated with active and “masculine” traits. Musically, it corresponded to the so-called “diatonic genre”, comprising *maqāmāt* with a prevalence of major seconds, like ‘*Ushshāq* and *Būsalīk*. Its parallel opposite was the systolic or *qabḍī*, associated with a more “chromatic” genre – with scales containing more minor and medium seconds like *ṣabā* and *ḥijāz* – perceived as “contracted”, closed and sad, related to lamentation and more passive qualities. Between the two stood *aṭar mu’tadil*, or hesychastic: a more balanced and calm state, related to modes considered peaceful

⁵⁹ Musicologist Abou Mrad defines the concept of *ethos* as an “aesthetic perception of phenomena, alongside the ethical influence exerted by these phenomena on the psyche and the human body”. Cf. Nidaa Abou Mrad, *Un précis médiéval arabe de musicothérapie modale*, Revue des Traditions Musicales, Vol.17 No.1, pp 13-37, 14.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

and suitable for religious devotion such as *iṣfahān* or *rāst*, the latter often regarded as the “king of modes”⁶¹.

From this broad categorization, theorists built more precise correlations not only between individual modes and specific emotions, but also between modes and moments of the day, feminine or masculine qualities, elemental qualities and even therapeutic properties on certain pathologies. Lebanese violinist and musicologist Nidaa Abou Mrad, through his work of translation of an anonym medieval treatise, has documented how such modal theory was combined in medieval times with Hippocratic humoral medicine⁶², generating a proper “modal music therapy”, reportedly employed in practice inside Abbasid hospitals (*bīmāristānāt*).⁶³ The foundation of this idea – music acting on and potentially rebalancing internal states – lays, in Abou Mrad’s opinion, in the musical grammar of the modes themselves: their intervallic structure and the melodic procedure of the mode generates cycles of tension and release, of diastole and systole. Such movements are capable of activating certain neurophysiological responses like dopamine or endorphin release, sedative or stimulant effects.⁶⁴

When medieval treatises were revisited in the early modern period, the question of modal theory reemerged in authors such as Tuma, who addressed it in evident continuity with the earlier tradition while offering his own reinterpretation, identifying more precise emotions associate with each *maqam*: he associates *rāst* with clarity, strength, and masculinity; *ṣabā* with profound sadness; *bayātī* with

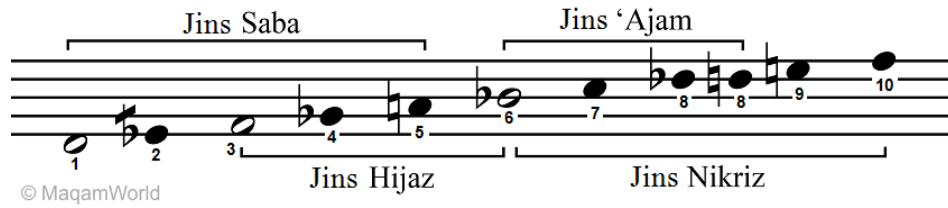
⁶¹ Meaning the one with the best aural qualities and that originates the other modes. *Ibidem*.

⁶² Abou Mrad has translated and commented an anonyme Arab treatise of music therapy, that connected modal theory to the “quaternary humoral theory” of Hippocrates: this was used to describe the quaternary composition of the matter of the universe, associating the group of the four elements (air, water, earth, fire) to the four humors that compose the human body (blood, yellow bile, black bile and phlegm) and on which balance depend human health. Following a logic called “antipathetic”, the author of this treatise associated each mode with qualities opposed to a specific medical pathology, to balance the “percentage” of humors in the body. For example, he used *maqam ‘iraq*, considered ‘cold and sad’, to cure more “warm” pathologies like meningitis. Cf. Abu Mrad, *Un précis médiéval arabe de musicothérapie modale*, 21-25.

⁶³ Abu Mrad moves a step further by incorporating modern neurocognitive analyses to these therapeutic approaches and demonstrating that the ability of music – and modes in particular – to alter states of consciousness could help in the development of a functional form of music therapy based on the capacity of individual modes to regulate specific emotional states, thanks to their musical grammar. Cf. *Ibid*, 21-23.

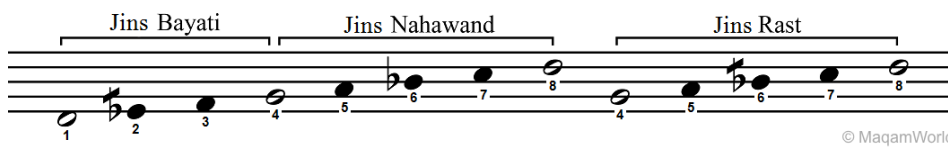
⁶⁴ These aspects recall the discussions of music's regulatory functions outlined in Chapter 1.

vitality and femininity; *sīkāh* with love and tenderness, and *hijāz* with a mystical desert melancholy.⁶⁵ Here is provided their notation and relative *ajnās*:

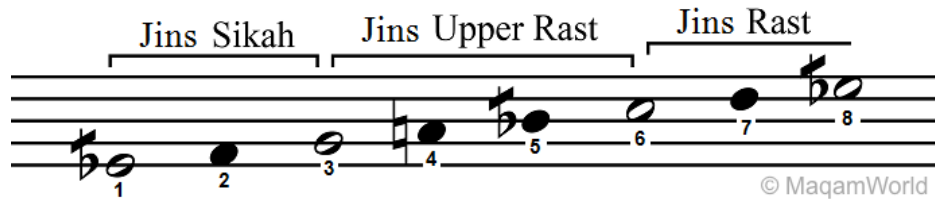


Maqam Saba.

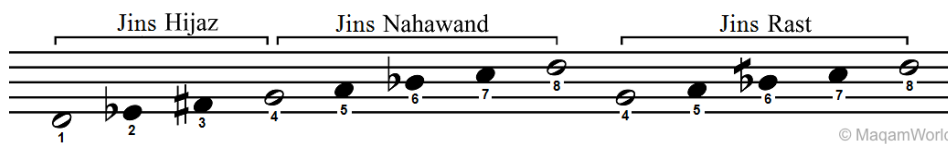
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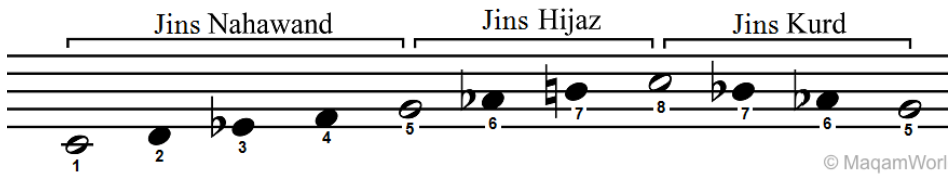
Maqam Bayati



Maqam Sīkāh



Maqam Hijāz



*Maqam Nahawand*⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Such associations vary considerably across authors, history and regional traditions, but Touma's account comprehends most recurrent correspondences across the literature. Cf. Touma, *The music of the Arabs*, 43-45.

⁶⁶ I have included *nahawand*, as it features very frequently in the repertoire and, in terms of its interval sequence, corresponds to the Western natural minor scale, known for its sad, melancholic colour.

Touma's approach presents an interesting parallelism with the theory of the "Energy of the modes" (*Énergie des modes*) formulated in Europe during the same Baroque period by Marc-Antoine Charpentier in his treatise *Règles de Composition* ("Rules of composition,") of 1692. Both systems revive the ancient concept of musical *ethos*, mapping specific musical structures directly to human psychology. While Touma assigns precise emotional, spiritual, and gendered traits to the *maqāmāt*, Charpentier codifies each Western major and minor key with similar affectations, such as describing C major as martial and C minor as dark and sad, while D minor was "serious and devout".⁶⁷ Both served as early modern guides for composers to systematically evoke targeted passions, though Charpentier relied on Western tonalities while Touma referred to Arab modal traditions⁶⁸.

He also reports the results of a listening experiment that introduces another relevant dimension: the distinctly "Arab" character of this emotional modality. In this experiment, two groups of Arab and non-Arab listeners were asked to describe their emotional responses to *maqām ṣabā*. The results showed that "only approximately half of the non-Arabs had the same perceptions as the Arabs", with Arab listeners providing considerably more nuanced descriptions of emotional states, while non-Arabs tended to use technical musical language or colour associations.⁶⁹ These results speak to what Racy calls "Arab-ness" and Shannon the "Oriental spirit", other than resonating with Touma's earlier observations on flexible intonation as a distinctly Arab musical character; all of these narratives converge in underlying how the emotional dimension of these modes is deeply

⁶⁷ Interestingly, in the Baroque time the Western system was not standardised yet into equal tempered but relied on "mean-tone temperaments" or "just intonation": in such systems, each key or tonality sounded differently from the other and intonation sometimes relied on personal taste. That's why Charpentier's theory is built on each key's two main modes transposed. Today, our ears perceive distinctly the difference between major and minor modes, but it is much more difficult to catch the differences between each different key's emotional content, even though they still have some unique distinctive qualities.

⁶⁸ Cf. Ruff, Lilian. "M.-A. Charpentier's 'Règles de composition'." *The Consort* 24 (1967): 233–70.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*. For more about comparative aural listening experiments, cf. Ayari, McAdams, *Aural Analysis of Arabic Improvised Instrumental Music (Taqsīm)*, University of California Press, 2003.

culturally situated, tied to a specific sonic and cultural space. The two elements then, – the musical and the identitarian – appear to be deeply intertwined in the maqam system, even if this connection is subject to many interpretations and frequently risks falling into essentializing or overly rigid narratives about tradition. What is certain is that the emotional dimension – particularly the experience of *tarab* – lies at the heart of Arabic musical poetics, and that such dimension is most powerfully activated by specific musical elements. Among these, above all is the flexibility of pitch and the characteristic intervallic sequences of each mode⁷⁰, whose relative “contraction” or “dilation” can evoke distinct emotional states in both performers and listeners, at times transporting them into a state of “altered conscience” or ecstatic feeling.

2.4.2 *Tarab and salṭana: ecstatic feelings and shared experiences*

In this regard, *tarab* as an ecstatic feeling is the most widely accepted understanding of the concept. In his book, Racy traces an historical path moving from the ancient connection between music and spiritual trance, through Qur’anic recitations and Sufi poetry and dance practices, noting how ecstatic feelings were often associated with altered consciousness, often mediated by other extramusical elements and understood as passively experienced by the listener. Racy himself, indeed, moves beyond this perspective, reframing the concept of *tarab* ecstasy as an active “borderline state of consciousness”⁷¹ that exceeds the simple physical and sensorial transformation, even though time perception in both listeners and musicians is altered⁷². In fact, unlike a deep trance, listeners – especially *sammī‘ah* – generally retain a modified awareness of their surroundings while experiencing *tarab*; they remain “musically absorbed” and analytical, in a dimension called *muhāsabah*⁷³ where they are fully cognizant of the musical stimulus, appreciating

⁷⁰ Also Touma reinforces such argument, pushing it into the idea that the changeable size of intervals in a single performance influences deeply the emotional content of a maqam, so any attempt of equalization would be a significant loss. Cf. Touma, *Music of the Arabs*, 45.

⁷¹ Racy, *Making music in the Arab World*, 199.

⁷² For more about time perception, cf. Shannon, *Emotion, Performance, and Temporality*, 87.

⁷³ Racy, *Making music in the Arab World*, 200.

technical nuances of the performance while being moved and emotionally transported by it.

This configures *tarab* not as a passive experience but an active social process: as Racy describes, it consists in a feedback loop between the performer or *mutrib* – literally “the one who enchants,” – and the *sammī‘ah*, whose cultivated listening allows them to appreciate both the strictly musical and more cerebral elements of the performance while responding to it emotionally and expressively. Such responses constitute what Racy describes as a veritable performative idiom: exclamations and physical expressions of amazement, exaltation or pain – a murmured or shouted “*Allāh*”, other metaphorical expression of appreciation, involuntary movements, facial expressions, tears, applauses – all of which follow some implicit criteria. For instance, the audience typically manifests feelings of *tarab* after a cadential sequence (*qafla*), or a well-known melodic phrase in a *taqsīm*. The audience is thus a vital and complementary element of the performance itself, as the famous Syrian rubsinger Sabah Fakhri states, in words reported by Shannon:

“(...) it is the audience that plays the most significant role in bringing the performance to a higher plateau of creativity (...). If they respond, I become inspired to give more. As such, we become reflections of one another”.⁷⁴

This image of mutual reflection of audience and performer as two mirrors facing each other, generating a constantly deeper dialogue, suggests that the *tarab* experience is fundamentally relational and communal. In fact, while the audience experiences *tarab* emotions and responds actively, the performer reaches a culminating ecstatic state called *salṭana*⁷⁵: an inspired and ecstatic condition of enhanced creativity particularly connected with the modal content of the music,

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁷⁵ Derived from the root *salṭa*, that means, “power”, the word refers to being in command of the maqam mode, by having the musical skills to make it “reign” (as seen before) over the performance and conduct its whole mood. *Ibidem*.

which is in turn reinforced by the feedback of the audience.⁷⁶ According to Racy, a musician or singer capable of experiencing *saḥnā* must possess certain preconditions: firstly, possessing what he calls an “Eastern soul” (*rūḥ sharqiyya*), a concept that draws from the previous idea of *ethos* with a strictly indigenous connotation. The performer, regardless of personal origin, must thus show a deeply internalized emotional sensitivity toward Arab music, culture and identity or, in his words, “Arab-ness”. He then adds that a performer must possess “genuine artistic skills”, and have the capacity to perform with *iḥsās*, feeling intensely their music and communicating such feeling outwards⁷⁷. Moving beyond this somewhat idealistic and musically centred model, Shannon further emphasizes the extramusical dimensions of these experiences, particularly their intersubjective and performative – that is, social and environmental – character, going so far as to describe *tarab* performances as sites of “presentation of self”⁷⁸, in which the borders between presentation of emotional states and those emotional states themselves may become blurred, thanks to the entire apparatus of cultural conventions that surrounds the *tarab* event. Drawing on the example of Aleppo, a city often referred to as the “mother of *tarab*”, Shannon shows how audience and performer influence each other on the presentational aspects of the performance: sometimes, by enacting socially codified behaviours in order to defend a claimed identity or role, like that of the *sammī*⁷⁹, or by showing pride in their *tarab* tradition as Syrians and Aleppines, recognizing themselves in the narrative of “pure *tarab*”

⁷⁶ The social and emotional audience-performers dynamics of *tarab* bear a notable resemblance to phenomena documented in jazz performance contexts (and found in personal experience as a jazz singer), where the interaction between an improvising musician and an attentive audience - particularly one composed of fellow musicians - can produce similar states of collective emotional immersion and analytical listening. The psychological concept of “flow” developed by Csikszentmihalyi and that of rhythmic and emotional “entrainment” between performers and listeners may be useful tools to analyse such states of heightened musical engagement. For further reading on the jazz as a collective performance, see Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz* (1994) and Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something* (1996).

⁷⁷ For the whole section cf. *Ibid.*, 126-127.

⁷⁸ Cf Shannon, *Emotion, Performance, and Temporality*, 79-84. This concept resonates with De Nora’s reflexions on identity and music, as seen in chapter 1.

and the idea of “local authentic tradition” felt to be progressively disappearing under the pressures of modernity.⁷⁹

2.4.3 “What happened to *tarab*?” New media and modernity

In this sense, the present-oriented attitude observed in Racy’s account of Cairo’s musical life seems to encounter some obstacles in the rapid technological transformations that have occurred since the end of last century. If, as Shannon claims, *tarab* is fundamentally a performative and communal process that unfolds during the moment of the live music, what space is left for it in a world of mediated music? From cassettes to recordings and music videos, technology transformed music’s fruition across the Arab world, beginning with national radio broadcastings from the late 1930s, which alternated live and recorded *tarab* performances with lighter genres, typically reserving the evening hours for *tarab*. With the birth of LP and cassettes, *tarab* music became widely distributed and mediatized already in 1950s, profoundly impacting songs’ length and musical structures, as well as the intimate space of *takht* performances, that gave way to larger orchestras and fixed arrangements, leaving less room for improvised sections and for the unpredictability of the live dynamic that inspires the performer-audience relationship. During the 1990s, with the emergence of music videoclips and the spread of satellite tv, Arab music shifted progressively from an auditory to a visual medium, increasingly centred on the singer’s image rather than on the musical and improvisatory qualities that had historically generated *tarab*. Frishkopf documents the widespread sense of loss this produced especially among adult Arab listeners:

“There are no great singers today,” or “what happened to *tarab*?” are commonly voiced complaints. Others appreciate the musical gifts of particular young Arab pop artists (...), while decrying a music industry that forces them to sing bland pop melodies and flaunt their visual appeal, underutilizing their musical talents and

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 88.

negating the faculty of imagination so critical to earlier romantic song”.⁸⁰

And yet *tarab* has not disappeared: it has migrated and changed form. Both Shannon and Racy remind us that *tarab* remains possible and alive⁸¹, as both a genre and an experience, even while acknowledging a decline on the number of live *tarab* performances and in the *tarab* culture in general. As they note, it persists with vitality in religious domains: Qur'anic recitation and Sufi *inshād dini* continue to cultivate the modal depth and performance intimacy that secular pop has largely abandoned, preserving the ecstatic dimension of *tarab* within a spiritual rather than an entertainment context. This progressively created a wider distinction between genres, as Frishkopf reports:

“While the boundary between “art” and “popular” music is not clearly defined in the Arab world, a sharper boundary between “popular” and “religious” gradually emerged.”⁸²

It survives as a nostalgic commodity on dedicated satellite channels broadcasting the recordings of the “golden age”, as well as on more “niche” and specialized musical environments, including among younger listeners and practitioners.⁸³ Moreover, the emblematic example of Umm Kulthoum’s famous Thursday evenings, when every Arab family turned their radio or tv on to listen her performances and still got moved intensely by it, enacts what Shannon describes as a form a “virtual *tarab* culture”⁸⁴, where the presentational elements of the live experience are reconfigured as more private, yet still felt and reacted to collectively. More recently, new music streaming platforms have further globalized *tarab* culture, allowing listeners worldwide to get in touch with Arab

⁸⁰ Frishkopf, *Music and Media in the Arab World*, 39.

⁸¹ Cf. *Ibidem*; Racy, *Making music in the Arab World*, 221-225;

⁸² *Ibid*, 10.

⁸³ Racy, *Making music in the Arab World*, 233-34.

⁸⁴ Shannon, *Emotion, Performance, and Temporality*, 82

heritage music – even if often through a pre-standardized and nostalgic lens that fixed a particular idea of *turath* as timeless, immutable and faceless.⁸⁵

In conclusion, *tarab* seems to be an experience that can survive whenever the emotional grammar of the *maqām* system remains operative – which, as the preceding sections have argued, is virtually everywhere in Arab musical practice, including its most contemporary forms – as well as whenever there's an emotional interaction between performers and audience, whether live or virtual. What *tarab* requires, then, is the emotional charge of the *maqam*: the codified relationship between modal aesthetic and affective response that Arab listeners carry with them across genres, contexts, and generations. This flexibility – some would argue too stretched – of *tarab* experience and of emotional content of Arab music, at both individual and collective levels, makes it then relevant for the analysis and interpretation of the contemporary Palestinian performances examined in the following chapter. It also represents a paradigmatic case of cultural survival, creating a bridge between musical aesthetic and cultural identity that appears particularly distinctive within the Arab world. These elements will be considered in the following analysis, while also considering the different social contexts, musical genres and contents and modes of mediation through which these performances circulate, treating them as mediated cultural objects, whose meaning is shaped also by the platforms and technologies through which they reach their audiences.

⁸⁵ Frishkopf noted that the growing compartmentalization of musical professions – the birth of figures like the producer, the composer and the arranger – due to the new dynamics of music industry left less space for old improvised live music, often leading streaming platforms to assign old recordings to a null composer, ironically called “*turath*.” Cf. Frishkopf, *Music and Media*, 5-6, 10.

CHAPTER 3

Palestinian musical culture: a journey through genres and history

“Resistance, through performance, begins to matter. It takes shape”

(David McDonald)

This chapter will first examine the main musical genres and traditions present in Palestine, tracing their historical development within the broader context of the dense Middle Eastern history from the XX century to the present day. Key historical moments and factors that have accompanied the major transformations in the region’s musical practices will be identified, with a focus on the oral genres of folk music, which are of particular significance in the history of this country and its people.

If the previous section focused primarily on the urban art music tradition that developed in Cairo and the broader Levant – given its relevance for Arab musical history – the point of interest here narrows to the Palestinian region, as both a geopolitical and cultural space, where historical events had a profound impact on local musical life and practices. Palestinian ethnomusicologist and musician Issa Boulos¹ has highlighted how daily life across the Palestinian region was steeped in music, from religious rites, weddings and social gatherings to more explicitly political contexts. He argues that Palestine occupies a singular position in the musical landscape of the Arab world, because, unlike other regional traditions, its musical culture has developed under conditions of continuous colonial rupture: the late Ottoman period, the British Mandate, the 1948 *Nakba* and the mass displacement of the Palestinian population, the subsequent Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, and the ongoing processes of dispossession and erasure. In his work Boulos traces a historical arc organized around two defining political

¹ Issa Boulos, *The Palestinian Music-Making Experience in the West Bank, 1920s to 1959: Nationalism, Colonialism, and Identity*, PhD diss., University of Leiden, 2020

watersheds of early Palestinian history: first, the British Mandate period, with its revolutionary movements and the establishment of broadcasting radio stations that would considerably shape musical culture and education in the region. Secondly the post-1948 era, when the *Nakba* brought the fragmentation and dispersal of the Palestinian people and their musical practices to neighbouring countries like Jordan or Lebanon, transforming those countries' musical landscape. In these contexts, especially in the refugee camps where hundreds of thousands were forced to relocate after the mass displacement of 1948, music became a practical tool for Palestinians to express and affirm their national and cultural identity, sustain each other in the struggle and preserve their traditions and cultural memory. This suggests that the political dimension of music in Palestine is a constitutive element of the tradition itself, embedded in its forms, its genres, its modes of transmission, and its social functions. David McDonald drives this argument even further, observing in his discussion about popular culture in Palestine that:

“Such expressive media should be seen as constitutive field where the political and ideational effects of the occupation are not only expressed but given materiality.”²

The political and identitarian aspects of Palestinian musical life did not prevent its landscape of genres and practices from growing considerable variety and complexity. Such diversity encompasses oral folk tradition rooted in rural and village life alongside urban art music, Bedouin sung poetry, religious music from both Muslim and Christian traditions, nationalist and patriotic songs, and more popular genres heavily shaped by Western industry and media. These traditions grew together and intertwined with one another, as well as with external socio-political and musical influences: those of the British colonizers, Jewish immigrants and Western musicians and intellectuals, whose musical system had a significant impact on the Near Eastern landscape, especially in the wake of the 1932 Cairo Congress of Arab Music. The result was a complex and contested space, that

² McDonald, *My Voice is My Weapon*, 31.

nonetheless sustained a remarkable variety of genres and practices, a partial selection of which will be outlined in the following section.

3.1 An overview of Palestinian musical genres

Returning to Touma's previously cited distinction between urban, rural, and Bedouin music, this section outlines the main musical practices and genres that have traversed Palestinian history, with an initial attention to the two historical moments identified by Boulos, which will serve as a point of departure for the transformations that followed. As previously stated, these broad genre categories are imperfect and overlapping and will be presented here as mere guidelines for orientation among the complexities of these phenomena, using the geospatial context as criteria of distinction.

The first category is the already discussed urban art music tradition or, as designated by the members of Cairo congress, *al-mūsīqā al-'arabiyya*. Palestinian urban musicians of the late Ottoman and Mandate periods participated fully in the regional musical scene centred on Cairo, Beirut, and Damascus, performing and composing in the established genres of the *wasla*, the *muwashshaḥ*, and above all the *qaṣīda*, alongside their Egyptian, Lebanese, and Syrian counterparts. As previously seen for the Egyptian case, urban music was subjected to many changes and pressures of modernization and Westernization, by colonial powers as well as Arab intellectuals somehow persuaded of Western music's superiority in terms of organization and complexity. This manifested in the Cairo congress' attempt to standardize Arab music's intonation into an equal tempered system of 24 exact same intervals parallel to the Western model, as well as in the push to adopt notation and integrate harmonic structures into compositions.³ This tendency was partially successful, also due to the activity of the two British-led broadcasting stations of PBS (Palestine Broadcasting Service) and the Near East Broadcasting Station Jerusalem (NEBS) in Jaffa, which both dedicated portions of their

³ Issa Boulos, *Modernity, Tradition, and Identity: The Transformation of Music-Making in Palestine, 1936 to 1948*, Jerusalem Quarterly 103, 68-69, in Institute for Palestine Studies at www.institute.org; 56-60.

programming to “educate and elevate” local population’s musical taste and culture, by promoting artists such as Salvador ‘Arnita or Yūsif al-Baṭrūnī, who engaged with Western instruments, harmonies, and compositional techniques. The latter was also an advocate for Western methods who trained traditional musicians at the PBS to read and transcribe music.⁴ Nevertheless, various Palestinian artists – those Boulos defines “realists” – were able to incorporate Western material into the rooted traditions of Levantine urban music, working within the *maqam* system and the melodic and intonational tendencies⁵ that characterized Palestinian style in its specificity relative to Egyptian or Lebanese schools.

The second broad category is the rich landscape of oral traditions, which constituted the musical life of most of the Palestinian population before 1948. It includes two broad and overlapping subcategories: Bedouin (*badawī*) and rural or peasant (*fallāḥī*) music. The two are distinct in instrumentation, dialect and social contexts, but they share common vehicles of transmission and are mostly understood as part of the *sha‘bī* (“populist”)⁶ musical world, a term that in Palestine refers to the sung poetry which characterizes both genres. Bedouin music is primarily associated with the *rabāba*, an ancient one-stringed bowed instrument used by poet-singers (*shā‘ir rabāba*) to accompany long narrative epic poems.⁷ These performances typically combine spoken narration with singing and are embedded in the social contexts of nomadic and tribal life: hospitality rituals, honour narratives, and communal gatherings. Rural or peasant music, on the other hand, is more closely associated with wind instruments such as the *shabbāba* (flute) and the *yarghūl* or *mijwiz* (double clarinets)⁸, and is organized around the rhythms of sedentary village life: weddings, engagements, harvests, and above all

⁴ Boulos, *The Palestinian Music-Making Experience*, 147-149; Boulos, *Modernity, Tradition, and Identity*, 75.

⁵ For example, Boulos notes that “in Palestine, the intonations of *maqam bayati*, *rast*, and *huzam*, among others, especially the E-half-flat, are slightly higher than those in Egypt”. Boulos, *Modernity, Tradition, and Identity*, 67.

⁶ Boulos, *The Palestinian Music-Making Experience*, xxii (Glossary)

⁷ About epic poems and *rababa*, cf. *Ibid*, 73-75.

⁸ They’re all wind instruments: a *shabbāba* consists of a hollow cylinder with six finger holes, while a *yarghūl* is a double-tubed reed woodwind, where one tube is longer than the other. *Ibid*, glossary; 64-66.

the communal line dance of the *dabke*, that has become one of the most recognizable symbols of Palestinian cultural identity, performed at social gatherings, celebrations, and increasingly at political events and diaspora occasions.⁹ Despite their differences – which are also dialectal – the two traditions overlap in some elements, primarily in the importance of shared vocal genres, such as the *‘ataba* and the *shurūqī*: forms of improvised oral poetry sung in call-and-response patterns that share formal structures and differ mainly in dialect and musical renditions. Another important song type was the previously cited *tarwīdah* (pl. *tarāwīd*), which belongs to the category that Boulos terms “short songs with a pulse”¹⁰: short melodies made of few notes and typically repetitive, set to fast or slow tempos and mostly related to rural settings. Their lyrics usually draw on colloquial poetry within specific rhythmic schemes, and are written in rural Palestinian dialect; their formal structure lends itself to phonetical modifications and melodic stretches, which could occur when performed in urban context but were most famously employed by women as a form of coded music to communicate with prisoners, as seen in the first chapter.¹¹ The *tarwīdah* has undergone a significant revival in recent years as both an act of cultural memory and a symbol of resistance, and will be encountered again in the following sections.

3.2 A historical arc through music in Palestine

As previously mentioned, the musical traditions outlined above were shaped at every stage by the political and social upheavals that have defined Palestinian history. This history of profound transformations and colonial oppression moved Palestinian communities from a centralized urban hub to a shattered diaspora across the region and the world, eventually dispersing cultural practices of resistance across broader regional and diasporic contexts. Throughout this largely

⁹ *Dabke* or *dabka* is a traditional line dance based on rhythmic foot stomping and heavy drumming, present in weddings and social gatherings across the whole Levant region; its genres comprise various musico-poetic genres and frames, originated from specific poems that became rhythmic and textual models, such as *‘alā dal ‘ūnā*, *yā ẓarīf al-tūl*, *al-jafrā*. Cf. *Ibid*, xix; McDonald, *My Voice is My Weapon*, 67.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 54-59.

¹¹ Cf. Chapter 1, par. 1.2.2.3

painful path, music has served as a vital tool for national survival and the construction – and performance – of identity, evolving alongside the political exigencies of the Palestinian struggle. The following pages trace an arc that encompasses the main historical phases of last century's Palestinian journey alongside the musical developments that accompanied them, within the broader context of the Levant region. Attention will be placed on artists, songs and performances that resonate with the survival framework outlined in the opening chapter, especially regarding the performance of self and collective identity in contexts of conflict, mass violence and displacement or diaspora, and the aforementioned notion of cultural survival.

3.2.1 The Nahḍa and the 1919 Revolution: Darwish's legacy

In the late 19th and early 20th century the Arab world went through a large cultural and intellectual revival known as the *Nahḍa* (“Renaissance”), a movement that emerged from the decay and collapse of the Ottoman system together with the encounter with European cultural institutions and currents. Intellectual elites from different Arab countries and religious background started to propose different ideas of nationalism: local, pan-Arab or with an Islamic imprint. Major cities like Cairo, Beirut, Aleppo and Damascus became cosmopolitan venues of cultural and musical ferment, as seen previously in relation to the emergence of art urban music across the centres of *al-Mashriq*. Egypt, the Arab country that had first experienced and institutionally integrated the encounter with European modernity – including its musical heritage –, exemplifies well the fractures that traversed the Arab world in those years: Westernizing tendencies sympathetic to Europe, especially among elites, stood in tension with more nationalist and anti-colonial currents – often connected to Islam but not exclusively – that looked for autonomy from foreign interference.

The latter grew increasingly strong with the British occupation of Egypt from 1882. After 20 years of imperial dependency and military rule under Cromer's government, Egyptian society began to organize politically for independence

through the *Wafd* party, led by Sa‘d Zaghlūl. After his forced exile, revolts spread across the whole country, culminating in the popular revolution of 1919, a mass uprising that mobilized Egyptians across class, religious, and regional lines in a collective demand for independence. This revolution represents one of the first examples from the past century in which music played a central role in the Arab struggle against occupation, to the point that scholar Amina El-Halawani stated that:

“Songs and artistic performances played a major role in the political sphere in 1919 – to the extent that there were two co-existing figures leading the revolution in different ways: politically, Saad Zaghloul Pasha was the leader of the nation, while artistically, Sayed Darwish was known as the artist of the people”.¹²

A composer and performer of humble origins from Alexandria, Sayed Darwish occupies a singular position in the history of Arab music, precisely because he refused the separation between artistic sophistication and popular accessibility. Today, he’s still celebrated in Egypt as a revolutionary symbol and the father of Egyptian and Arab music. Blending his knowledge of the *maqām* tradition with Western-style orchestrations, rhythms and harmony – and drawing freely on folk melodies and colloquial Egyptian dialect – he composed songs that were at once musically rich and innovative and immediately legible to audiences with no formal musical education. The cosmopolitan environment of Egyptian culture of the time was perfectly reflected by his songs and work, which incorporated diverse religious and musical traditions, within a modernized compositional approach; he wrote for the theatre and was influenced by Italian opera, being among the first Arab composers to work with written notation.¹³ At the same time, he participated

¹² Amina El-Halawani, *The Voice of the People: the Role of Kinship in the Songs of Sayed Darwish*, in G. Bauer, A. Heise-von der Lippe, N. Hirschfelder, K. Luther, *Kinship and Collective Action in Literature and Culture*, Narr Francke Attempto, Tübingen 2020

¹³ *Ibid.*, 112-114.

directly to the political turmoil of those years: performing at demonstrations and documenting musically the abuses of British military rule, he was able to build solidarity among ordinary people against the occupation. El-Halawani highlights that his lyrics and performances were aimed at “preaching kinship”¹⁴ among Egyptians regardless of social and class boundaries, creating a sense of unity and fraternity essential to face the colonial oppression.

With the example of the famous song *Oum ya Masri*¹⁵, El-Halawani argues that Darwish’s understanding of Egyptian identity was not defined by ethnic boundaries – as recalled in Stokes’ discourse about ethnic identity¹⁶ – but was instead performed and inscribed in a person’s willingness to act, to rise against the occupation, and to caring about the survival of “their neighbour”, regardless of religious distinction. This sense of solidarity emerges equally in other songs, like the famous *Aho dah elly Sar* (“This is what it has come to be”), composed during the 1919 Revolution and written in colloquial Egyptian dialect – an uncommon but deliberate political choice that placed the dignity of the ordinary person at the centre of the musical and national project:

بدال ما يشمت فينا حاسد إيدك فى إيدى وقوم نجاهد
وإحنا نبقى الكل واحد والأيدى تكون قوية
أهو ده اللي صار وأدى اللي كان
مالكش حق مالكش حق تلوم عليا
يا مصر يا أم العجائب شعبك أصيل والخصم عايب

Section of lyrics from *Aho dah elly Sar*, written by Muhamed Yunis al-Qadi. Source: *Musical Archive of the 1919 Egyptian Revolution*, 59.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 117.

¹⁵ Sayed Darwish wrote *Oum ya Masri* (Rise, Egyptian!) to mobilize people in occasion of 1919 Revolution, of which it became a national hymn or, as the source defines it, “the *Marseillaise* of Egyptian national movement. *Ibid*, 109.

¹⁶ Cf. Chapter 1, par. 1.2.2.1

“Hands together; we heed the call/ all for one and one for all/ Hands together, we are strong/(...) Egypt, you Mother of Wonders/ great ancestry and flawed opponent/ look after your loved ones...”¹⁷

The imagery of the lyrics - hands joined together, Egypt as a mother protecting her loved ones, the shared predicament of a people united in struggle -, express clearly this sense of solidarity, lived in practice and performed collectively by people singing together along a melody in *maqam kurd* upon a fast but simple rhythmic cycle¹⁸. Here music appears not only as a means of political mobilization but also as a space for collective emotional processing. As El-Halawani concludes:

“Singing as a shared activity helps create a sense of oneness, where the many voices unite in harmony in song, creating (...) a form of kinship based on the active pursuit of their rights of citizenship”.¹⁹

Starting from the individual identity of each person, it appears that Darwish constructs through music and words the collective identity of the Egyptian people, from which - with the effective tool of music as catalyst - a proper kinship emerges, rooted in shared ancestry and in the solidarity that brings people together in action. In El-Halawani’s words, this “interplay of identity formation” can foster kinship in a cyclical process that may inspire collective action, which lies at the core of resistance and revolutionary movements. It is not by chance that one of his songs has been called “the *Marseillaise* of the Arab nationalist movement”, or that his music was sung and transmitted across the Arab world in revolt against colonial power.

¹⁷ Lyrics and translation by The American University in Cairo (AUC), *This is what it has come to be - The Musical Archive of the 1919 Egyptian Revolution*, 100 years ed.

¹⁸ The genre of this song was called a *taqtuqa*, a light vocal genre sung in colloquial Arabic that became widespread in the early 20th century, thanks also to Sayed Darwish who composed 132 of them. *Ibid*, 59.

¹⁹ Amina El-Halawani, *The Voice of the People*, 117.

3.2.2 *The British mandate in Palestine: radio stations and rural poets*

Great Britain established its Mandate on Palestine in 1922, after the deathful years of the First World War and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The Arab inhabitants of Palestine had to face the trauma of being occupied by yet another foreign power – after four centuries under Ottoman rule –, one that had in its agenda the incontestable support to the Zionist movement, after the famous Balfour Declaration of November 1917, then incorporated into the Mandate document itself.²⁰ Jewish immigration was largely favoured by the British authorities, and in little time the Jewish population grew from 6% of the total before the war to 18% by 1926, reaching more than 30% in 1939, year of the Great Revolt. Palestinian identity began to take shape in this context of threat and political weakness: with most of the Middle East under French or British colonial influence or occupation, and Palestinian elites unable to reach any agreement with either the British or the Zionist institutions - which had rapidly built a far stronger organizational infrastructure with British support - a locally rooted Palestinian nationalism gradually emerged and spread²¹. The continuous frustration generated by progressive foreign immigration, land expropriation and the failure of diplomatic efforts eventually erupted in the widespread revolt of 1936, which continued and escalated in violence until 1939, when it was suppressed with force by British military action.

Palestinian musical and cultural life continued to circulate among major urban centres throughout this period, even though documentation remains scarce; as Boulos notes, the lack of accessible sources, compounded by the destruction or inaccessibility of archives after 1948, has meant that the urban music scene of Mandate Palestine is only now beginning to be reconstructed through recently opened newspaper archives and broadcasting records. What these sources reveal

²⁰ Cf. Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917–2017*, London: One World Publications, 2020; Italian trans. *Palestina: cento anni di colonialismo, guerra e resistenza*, trans. Michele Zurlo (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2025), 42-43.

²¹ It is in this context that the terms “Palestinians” and “Palestine” started to spread, in local press and public discourse. Cf. Khalidi, *Palestina*, 34-36.

is a vibrant scene in the cities of Jerusalem and Jaffa – sites of the PBS and NEBS stations respectively²² – characterized by active musical venues, cafés, and performance spaces. Within the context of live and recorded broadcasting, multiple musical contacts gave rise to productions that were “hybridities”²³ between Western and Eastern traditions, as well as between art music and rural folk traditions, in continuity with the permeable boundaries between genres in the Near Eastern musical space previously discussed. This fluidity is further confirmed by Cohen and Katz’s work, which documented how the *maqam* system applies and runs through folk, urban, and popular genres alike in Palestine; they do in fact approach the study of Palestinian oral musical tradition as a proper “*maqam* tradition in practice”²⁴. At the same time, numerous ideological fragmentations fractured Palestinian society, challenging the interconnected and cosmopolitan nature of its musical culture. These divisions pitted the drive toward Westernization and modernization against the defence of oral tradition, and pan-Arab nationalism against locally rooted identities. Furthermore, musical production became a battleground for competing agendas, split between urban elites and peasants, fractured by sectarian divisions, and pulled in different directions by colonial, missionary, and nationalist institutions.²⁵

The radio stations reflected and strategically pushed these internal divisions, for example by dividing the programming long ethnic and sectarian lines and promoting Western musical models through educational initiatives led largely by Christian missionary institutions. The maintenance of a strictly apolitical broadcast

²² The musical life of the time was fostered and simultaneously controlled by these new broadcasting stations founded by the British: the PBS (Palestine Broadcasting Service) in 1936 and the Near East Broadcasting Station (NEBS) in 1941, which became central to musical production and dissemination in Palestine and surrounding regions, second only to the also British-led Radio Cairo in Egypt. Cf. Boulos, *The Palestinian Music-Making Experience*, 130-135.

²³ *Ibid*, 314.

²⁴ Cohen Dalia, Ruth Katz, *Palestinian Arab Music: A maqam tradition in practice*, University of Chicago Press, 2005

²⁵ Issa Boulos, *Modernity, Tradition, and Identity: The Transformation of Music-Making in Palestine, 1936 to 1948*, Jerusalem Quarterly 103, 68-69, in Institute for Palestine Studies at www.institute.org

environment was a main concern of British management, in fact resistance songs and explicitly nationalist content were systematically excluded from the airwaves.

Despite these constraints, certain figures managed to circumvent them. Among the most significant was Nūḥ Ibrāhīm, a poet-singer of the masses – particularly of the *fallāḥīn*, the rural illiterate population – whose work represents an early and powerful example of music as a tool of collective survival and anti-colonial resistance. Through simple poems sung in rural Palestinian dialect, often ironic in tone and designed for easy memorization, Ibrāhīm was able to mobilize rural communities against British imperialism and Zionist colonization at a moment when both were intensifying. He systematically drew from indigenous poetic and musical forms familiar to his audiences: above all the *murabbaʿ*, a responsorial rhyme scheme widely used by *zajjal* poets²⁶ at weddings and social gatherings, deeply embedded in the oral culture of the rural and village areas. His use of colloquial Palestinian Arabic “in a thick rural accent”, combined with his direct involvement in the anti-colonial resistance movement, made his songs both accessible and politically charged in ways that formal urban music could not achieve in that context. Like Darwish in Egypt – with whom he shares the choice of vernacular language and the commitment to popular audiences and resistance movements –, Ibrāhīm is today considered one of the primary figures to have shaped Palestinian resistance music, since the years of the Great Arab Revolt of 1936 - 1939. The fact that his melodies are still remembered and sung today speaks precisely to the survival capacity of orally transmitted music²⁷: unlike the institutional infrastructure of urban musical life, which the *Nakba* would largely destroy, the songs of Nūḥ Ibrāhīm survived in the memory of the people who had learned them by ear and carried them into displacement.

²⁶ *Zajal* is a generic term used to describe various forms of vernacular poetry that are either declaimed or sung during social and family celebrations, as well as in daily life, while a poet who recites or sings *zajal* is known as a *zajjāl* (pl: *zajjālīn*), also referred to as a poet-singer (*shaʿir al-murtajal*). *Ibid*, xxiii.

²⁷ About the tension between oral transmission and written notation in the Arab World, cf. Boulos, *Modernity, Tradition*, 51-53.

3.2.3 *The Nakba and the 1950s – Displacement and new nationalisms*

While in Egypt there was a prominence of the urban genre, in Palestine the oral traditions proved paradoxically to be more resilient to the disruptions of historical displacement than the more institutionally dependent urban scene, which lost its organizational infrastructure after the events of 1948²⁸. The *Nakba* left Palestinian people with few or no institutional actors – especially in major urban centres – capable of providing the infrastructure and resources necessary for professional musical production and performance. Instead, displaced communities carried their oral traditions with them into the West and East Bank and the broader diaspora: here, folkloric tradition established and were kept alive in refugee camps, where MacDonald reports that the role of the “poet-singer” (*sha’r al-murtajal*) became central to musical and communal life, since “their repertoires of sung poetry safeguarded village practices against erasure and maintained a vital performative link to the homeland”.

Diaspora in nearby countries was also a context where the overlap between rural and Bedouin music was further consolidated and, in some cases, deliberately engineered. In the mid-20th century, Jordan Radio – the successor to the PBS that had relocated from Ramallah to Amman following the 1950 annexation of the West Bank – commissioned musicians to blend peasant melodies with Bedouin Jordanian dialects. The goal was to construct a unified “national song” capable of appealing to both East and West Bank populations. Through this musical engineering, the Hashemite Kingdom sought to reshape the identities of displaced Palestinians into loyal subjects, positioning itself as a regional hegemon and a rival to Nasser’s pan-Arab leadership.

²⁸ The term *Nakba* (litt. catastrophe) refers to the mass displacement of approximately 720,000 Palestinians during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, the destruction of over 500 Palestinian villages and land expropriation, along with the establishment of the State of Israel on the majority of historic Palestine. It remains the defining trauma of Palestinian collective memory and the foundational event of the Palestinian refugee crisis that continues to the present day. Cf. Khalidi, *Palestina* 71.

A contrast with Egypt in this period emerges vividly. While Palestinian musical life was fragmenting across host neighbouring countries and being absorbed into their national projects, Cairo was experiencing the height of its pan-Arab musical influence under Nasser's revolutionary government²⁹. The Egyptian state invested heavily in music as a tool of political mobilization and ideological consolidation, broadcasting songs of Arab unity and anti-colonial solidarity across the entire Arab world through public radio and the newly introduced medium of state-owned television. Through state control on media and investments in recording production and distribution, Egypt affirmed itself as the main cultural and musical hub of the Middle East, with Cairo at its privileged centre and primary venue for the leading performers in the Arab world. This mediatic power was in fact essential to the rise of the first great musical stars of the Arab world, above all the singer Umm Kulthum – whose extraordinary fame was built primarily on the *tarab* repertoire previously discussed –, and the great composer Muḥammad 'Abd al-Wahhāb, who instead wrote several patriotic tunes for Nasser's Egypt, celebrating the Revolution, Egyptian socialism and the pan-Arab union. Voiced by various singers, including 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Ḥāfiẓ and Shādyā as well as himself, these patriotic songs were almost entirely built on Western musical elements: brass instruments, Western scales and harmonies, fanfare-like rhythm and melodies sung in unison highly resembling Western martial music.

Often televised and performed in military-like contexts, songs such as *Waṭanī Ḥabībī* and *Ṣawt al-Jamāhīr* praised Egypt and Arab identity. Strikingly, these tracks featured no Eastern instruments and very few traditional elements in their orchestration. This revealed a subtle contradiction between ideological content and

²⁹ Gamal Abdel-Nasir, or Nasser, (1918–1970) was the second President of Egypt, from 1954 until his death. A central figure of Arab nationalism and the Non-Aligned Movement, he guided the golpe of the Free Officers in 1952, making Egypt a Republic. He nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956 and promoted a vision of pan-Arab unity that made Egypt the political and cultural centre of the Arab world throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Cf. William L. Cleveland, Martin Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 6th ed., Westview Press, Boulder CO, 2016; Italian translation: *Storia del Medio Oriente Moderno*, Mondadori Università, Milano, 2023, 289-92.

musical form, a tension that nonetheless seemed of little concern to the Nasserist project. As Massad explains:

“Although Arab music in Egypt was Westernized (...) under pioneers like Sayyid Darwish and ‘Abd al-Wahhab, the Revolution, which coupled its anticolonialism with a commitment to a Western modernization project, did not object to the colonial pedigree of this music”.³⁰

‘Abd al-Wahhāb must therefore be counted among the modernizers and founding figures of Egyptian and Arab music more broadly, given the resonance his work achieved across the Arab world and continues to hold today. It was during these years that the Egyptian dialect spread not only as the vernacular of television but of popular music itself, with many non-Egyptian performers singing in Egyptian Arabic to reach broader audiences –, a dynamic that persists in modern Arab pop to the present day.³¹ This capacity for diffusion allowed the Egyptian repertoire to reach diverse corners of the Arab world, including refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Gaza.

During these years, Palestine became primarily a musical subject rather than a producer. Its tragedy was voiced chiefly by Egyptian and other Arab artists,³² while Palestinians themselves struggled to maintain an institutional basis for their own creative output.³³ In the meantime, in fact, the Palestinian cause and its diaspora

³⁰ Joseph Massad, *Liberating songs: Palestine put to Music*, Journal of Palestine Studies XXXII, no. 3 (Spring 2003), pp. 21–38; 23.

³¹ Scholar Nedjat-Haiem speaks about “Egyptocentrism” as an attitude of Nasserist period that still has an impact on musical perception and industrial dynamics of modern pop-genres in the arab world. Cf. Richard Nedjat-Haiem, “The Dubai Effect: From Egyptocentrism to Gulf-based Pan-Arabism in Arab Pop Songs”, *Arabian Humanities*, 18, 2023, at: <http://journals.openedition.org/arabianhumanities/11395>

³² For example, the song *Sawt el Jamahir* makes a clear reference to 1948 Nakba and calls for Palestinian resistance, in continuity with Nasserist discourses about Palestinian cause as being at core of the Panarab cause. Cf. Massad, *Liberating Songs*, 24.

³³ An interesting phenomenon to note is the professional diaspora among Palestinian musicians: because of the lack of local infrastructure, a few prominent Palestinian professional musicians (like Halim al-Rumi, Sabri al sharif or Riyad al-Bandak) moved to Beirut or Baghdad, where they helped shape those national music scenes rather than developing a centralized Palestinian one. Cf. Boulos, *The Palestinian Music-Making Experience*, 247.

had spread across the Arab world, and the pan-Arab nationalist ideals of Nasser consistently framed the liberation of Palestine as an integral part of the broader project of Arab unity. If those years were marked by a widespread sentiment of determination and political resurgence, reflected in the musical practices of the time, all of this would be shattered by the great disillusionment of 1967.

3.2.4 The “Naksa” of 1967: the Lebanese school and guerrilla songs

The tragic defeat of June 1967 – known in Arabic as the *Naksa* (setback)³⁴ – shattered the former pan-Arab widespread confidence. The loss of the remaining Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza, together with the Sinai and the Golan Heights, dealt a severe blow to Nasserist pan-Arabism and to the musical culture that had grown around it. Egypt’s near monopoly on Arab musical production declined measurably after its military defeat, and new centres of song production emerged across the Arab world. The post-1967 musical landscape reflected this shift in mood: where the songs of the Nasserist period had been triumphalist and forward-looking, the new wave mixed despair and mourning with a cautious hope in the emerging Palestinian guerrilla movement.³⁵

The most significant new centre of musical production in the Arab World was Beirut in Lebanon, where the singer Fairuz and the composers ‘Āṣī and Maṣṣūr Raḥbānī (known as the Raḥbani Brothers) had already established themselves as

³⁴ The Six-days War broke out after a long period of tension building in June 1967 and resulted in a devastating defeat for the Arab states: Israel destroyed the Arab air forces within hours of launching a surprise attack on 5 June, and within six days had occupied the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula, the Syrian Golan Heights, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip, bringing all of historic Palestine under Israeli military control. Approximately 400,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled from the newly occupied territories into Jordan. Israel immediately began establishing civilian settlements in the occupied territories and annexed East Jerusalem on 28 June 1967, in violation of international law. The defeat effectively discredited Nasserist pan-Arabism as a political project and forced a fundamental reorientation of Arab and Palestinian political strategy. Cf. Cleveland-Bunton, op.cit., 322-327; 342.

³⁵ Palestinian guerrilla groups known as *fiḍā'iyyūn* (litt. “those who sacrifice themselves”) emerged as the primary vehicle of Palestinian resistance after the Nakba. The largest and most influential was Fatah, led by Yasser Arafat, whose credible performance at the Battle of al-Karāma in March 1968 dramatically boosted its membership and prestige across the Arab world. Fatah subsequently took over the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1969, with Arafat elected as chair. They operated from Jordan until their expulsion following the Black September of 1970, after which PLO forces relocated to Lebanon, where they continued operations until the Israeli invasion of 1982. Cf. Cleveland-Bunton, op. cit., 341-43; McDonald, op. cit., 87.

major figures of the Arab musical world.³⁶ Their partnership, alongside the vision of Ṣabrī al-Sharīf (founder of the Lebanese Recording Company), gave life to a new musical school that broke away from Egyptian hegemony and the older *tarab* tradition. This new movement heavily incorporated the elements, instruments, and production techniques of Western popular music, while simultaneously drawing on local folk and rural dialects.³⁷

Fairuz, who began with Western vocal training before studying the classical Arab repertoire, developed a remarkable capacity to integrate diverse styles across her long career. Through songs of nostalgia and return like *Rāji 'ūn* and *Sanarji 'u Yawman*, tributes to cities like Jaffa, and theatrical works such as *Jibāl al-Ṣuwwān* – where she played a heroine named *Ghurbah* (“Exile”) in a mythologized Palestine – she became one of the primary voices of the Palestinian cause. Notably, unlike their Egyptian counterparts, the Rahbani Brothers and Fairuz managed to embody this popular sentiment outside of direct state commission or political pressure. Operating even within market logics, they achieved a quality of authenticity that resonated deeply with Palestinian audiences. The famous poet Mahmud Darwish captured this when he declared, on the occasion of ‘Āṣī al-Raḥbānī’s death in 1986, that their songs had become “the reference point for our hearts” and “the restored homeland” for Palestinians.³⁸

The song *Zahrāt al-Madā'in* (“The Flower of Cities”), composed by the Rahbani Brothers in response to the Israeli conquest of Jerusalem of 1967 and released in

³⁶ Interestingly, one of the first people to discover their talent was Palestinian musical director and program supervisor of NEBS Radio station Ṣabrī al-Sharīf, who moved the station firstly from Jaffa to Cyprus after 1948, and then to Beirut with the aim of working with the trio and merging Arab music tradition with various Western styles in new visionary ways. Cf. Boulos, *The Palestinian Music-Making Experience*, 192-200.

³⁷ The Rahbani Brothers and Fairuz experimented with various colloquial dialects of Arabic, creating songs with hybrid accents – even if most of Fairuz repertoire sounds Lebanese –, inserting vernacular elements in the lyrics and musical style while also keeping diverse sophisticated elements of classical Arab poetry and language. Cf. *Ibid.*, 206.

³⁸ Massad, op. cit., 27; this description resonates directly with the argument developed in Chapter 1 related to the role of musical practice in diaspora: a performative space through which a displaced community temporarily reconstitutes the sense of belonging that displacement has denied, a “homeland culture” (Lidskog), becoming a proper form of collective survival. Cf. Chapter 1, par. 1.2.2.4

1969, following the burning of al-Aqṣā Mosque by a Jewish extremist, was the most popular song at the time and became the most enduring musical symbol of Palestinian loss and the aspiration to return.³⁹ The song's musical hybridity makes it, in Massad's words, "quintessentially Rahbani"⁴⁰. It moves fluidly between martial passages – drawing on the Egyptian patriotic repertoire – and Byzantine Arab church hymns.⁴¹ This sonic blend reflects Lebanese and Palestinian multireligious nature, which is reinforced by the lyrics in standard Arabic that acknowledge Jerusalem's historical religious diversity, citing churches, synagogues and mosques alike. These elements captured the complex emotional register of the post-1967 Arab world, characterized by disillusionment combined with faith in collective resistance, generating an extraordinary and enduring reception across the Arab world.

Meanwhile, a distinctly Palestinian musical voice was beginning to emerge from within the resistance movement itself. Joseph Massad reports that *Al-Firqah al-Markaziyyah* (the Central Band), working for al-Fatah and established in 1969, produced dozens of revolutionary and propaganda songs that combined Palestinian folk tunes with martial rhythms, performed by anonymous choruses of male and female singers in Palestinian rural dialects. No particular musical attention to detail was paid in the composition and production of these songs, often performed by untrained musicians and members of the guerrilla movement itself, and musical quality was deliberately subordinated to political purpose. In McDonald's words, they functioned as proper "sonic political posters": their main intent was to elicit

³⁹ The legacy of this song reaches the present musical scene, explored in the next section. Even though it is not part of folkloric tradition, it became a national Palestinian anthem, and it is nowadays spreading across the media. Both Nai Barghouti and Ahmed Abu Amsa have this song in their published repertoire.

⁴⁰ Massad, *Liberating songs*, 25–26.

⁴¹ The song is organized in three distinct sections characterized by a different musical idiom, tonal area and textual register. The first, more intimate – or "*systolic*" – expresses grief for Jerusalem's loss, through a solo section by Fairuz, with a slow melody on *maqam nahawand* and some digression on *ajnas hijāz* and *kurd*. The second section shifts toward a more liturgical and solemn pace, with a choral Byzantine-like harmony that reflects the Cristian dimension of Jerusalem expressed in the lyrics. Finally, the third one marks the most dramatic shift, with a sudden faster march tempo and fanfare trumpets, echoing the sounds of war and resistance rising: with the choir shouting the word *ātīn* (آتِيْن, "it is coming"), the tone of the song turns from lamentation into incitement and revenge against the enemy.

public support and solidarity for the *fidā'iyyin*, whose figures soon became the embodiment of a new Palestinian identity, shaped by the armed struggle for liberation. This *musiqā al-thawrah* (music of the revolution) circulated through guerrilla radio transmitters and, from the mid-1970s, through cassette tapes that reached refugee camps across Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Gaza⁴², becoming so widely known that most people in the camps knew them by heart⁴³.

3.2.5 The 1980s and the first Intifāda: folk revival and new voices

The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the siege of Beirut, and the massacre of Sabra and Shatila marked the effective end of the PLO's Lebanese base – with Arafat's exile – forced yet another dispersal of Palestinian political and cultural institutions. After another defeat and the continuous weakness and inaction of other Arab governments, it became increasingly clear that Palestine would have to be liberated from within: indeed, the armed guerrilla model of the preceding decades was giving way to new forms of struggle, rooted in civil disobedience, solidarity and grassroots resistance. This political shift was accompanied by a corresponding cultural one: from the militarized aesthetics of the “outside” PLO and the *fidā'iyyin* to a new identity grounded “inside” the West Bank and Gaza, centred on the *sha'b* (the folk, the people) rather than the armed fighter.

The rising of the first *Intifāda* (1987–1993) crystallized this transformation. Prominent folklorists such as Nimr Sirḥān argued that it consisted fundamentally in a “cultural uprising,” in which the preservation and performance of folklore functioned as a defence against cultural erasure – which became of greater concern among middle-class Palestinians – and a tool for reconnecting with their pre-1948 roots.⁴⁴ Organizations such as *Jam'iyyat In'āsh al-Usra*⁴⁵ became institutional hubs for collecting and safeguarding songs, stories, and material heritage, while

⁴² McDonald adds that these productions were part of the “performative efforts on the grassroots conscription of youth in the refugee camps across Jordan and Lebanon” by the PLO guerrilla movement. Cf. McDonald, *My Voice is My Weapon*, 92.

⁴³ Massad, *Liberating songs*, 31

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ Cf. par 3.3 for further details.

the United National Leadership of the Uprising⁴⁶ promoted a strategic return to folk attributes, such as dresses, dialects and agricultural imagery, as markers of a unified national identity, mostly standardized, as McDonald points out: “This new *jil al-hijara* (generation of stones) was operationalized in popular folklore as a strategically imagined Palestinian identity, a construction”⁴⁷. Such strategy, however, was powerful in creating a sense of solidarity that crossed internal social boundaries, for example bringing middle-class urban Palestinians closer to rural communities through shared cultural practice in voluntary work initiatives. In this context, collective singing in street demonstrations became an act of civil disobedience after Israeli authorities banned public gatherings. As the ethnomusicologist observes, “merging their collective voices together in song, participants iconically resembled the political movement as a whole”⁴⁸, demonstrating again how music can function as a resource for group solidarity and communal integration.

Musically, this period was characterized by a “folk revival”, dominated by politicized *sha ‘bī* songs such as the *‘ataba* or various *dabke* genres, performed and revived by groups such as PLO-founded *Firqat Aghānī al-‘Āshiqīn*. Drawing directly on folk poetry from the 1936 Great Arab Revolt and modernizing these tunes with various musical expedients to make them catchier,⁴⁹ they achieved enormous success in refugee camps across the whole diaspora. Their function in relation to Palestinian musical expression and its ties with identitarian narratives will be further investigated in the following paragraph.

Against the dominant current of nationalist *sha ‘bī* music, the urban ensemble Sabreen represented a markedly different and minority voice. Working from within

⁴⁶ UNLU was an “underground grassroots consortium” formed by representatives of the four major political forces among Palestinians, with the aim of organizing and managing demonstrations, rallies and cultural initiatives during the Intifada. Cf. McDonald, *My Voice Is My Weapon*, 118-119.

⁴⁷ McDonald, *My Voice Is My Weapon*, 121.

⁴⁸ McDonald in Moslih Kanaaneh, Stig-Magnus Thorsén, Heather Bursheh, David A. McDonald, *Palestinian Music and Song: Expression and Resistance since 1900*, Indiana University Press, 2013; 60.

⁴⁹ McDonald cites some of these techniques, such as the standardization or change of more complex *maqamat* – usually the ones containing microtones – to more “western-friendly” ones, as well as simplifying odd meters into simple ones. *Ibidem*.

the occupied territories and in contact with Israeli and international musical markets, Sabreen blended *maqām*-based Arab music with jazz, blues, and reggae influences. He combined acoustic and electronic instruments in a sound that moved beyond what their guitarist described as “faceless revolutionary slogans” toward more individualized and psychologically complex forms of expression, nevertheless without excluding Palestinian sociopolitical reality from their work. With lyrics that revived poems of the time, by authors like Mahmud Darwish and Hussein Barghouti, their “new Palestinian sound” reflected the personal, bitter reality of life under occupation, finding their audience primarily among university students in urban centres rather than in the camps, as well as internationally.⁵⁰

3.2.6 Oslo’s “honeymoon”⁵¹ and the Second Intifada (1993-2005)

If music in conflict may fulfil the propagandistic function of inciting armed resistance as well as civil disobedience, as discussed in the first chapter and in the preceding section, it may also foster reconciliation, advocate “for peace” and, as seen throughout this research, actively contribute to identity formation, narration and performance. The post-Oslo period in Palestine exemplifies this latter dimension. After the Declaration of Principles of September 1993⁵² a sudden wave of optimism spread through the occupied territories and internationally: for the first time in decades, a non-violent reconciliation process seemed possible. Crowds filled the streets with celebratory music as the Israeli army withdrew from parts of the territories and Yasser Arafat prepared to return from exile and establish the Palestinian Authority in Gaza and the West Bank. Suddenly, Palestinian nationalist musicians found themselves without their primary job, as the main musical venues shifted back to weddings, celebrations and social gatherings. Many of them found

⁵⁰ McDonald, *My Voice Is My Weapon*, 142-143.

⁵¹ As cited in *Ibidem*.

⁵² The Declaration, or “Oslo I” (1993), signed between Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin after secret negotiations held in Norway, represented a historical turning point in Israeli Palestinian relations. It established for the first time a mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO and created the Palestinian Authority (PA) as an interim self-governing body. The agreement divided the West Bank into Areas A, B and C with different degrees of Palestinian autonomy, while leaving, however, central issues such as statehood, refugees and the status of Jerusalem unresolved, contributing to the later stagnation of the peace process. Cf. Cleveland-Bunton, *Storia del Medio Oriente Moderno*, 476 - 479.

employment under the Palestinian Authority, which needed to use “traditions and customs (*taqālīd wa ‘ādāt*) as a means to help ease the [PLO’s] transition from an ‘outside’ political formation in exile to an ‘inside’ national government.”⁵³

Music remained in the service of politics, but a more consistent wave of artistic production emerged that looked beyond political function toward the international musical panorama. Sabreen, whose work had been marginal during the first *Intifāda*, gained considerably more recognition in this period with the release of *Jay al-Ḥamām* (“Here come the Doves”) in 1994, an album that celebrated the new era of reconciliation (“Widen the roads, For the deer of love and peace. Widen the roads, The doves are coming”⁵⁴), while pursuing a “modern originality” that bridged Eastern and Western musical worlds and transcending traditional music relationships and genres in a new aesthetic of hybridity.

As political and aesthetic constraints from the previous periods lifted, the Palestinian musical scene started opening towards the globalized musical industry, as well as toward collaborations with Israeli and international actors. Among the most debated of these was the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra⁵⁵, co-founded by Daniel Barenboim and Edward Said, as well as the Arab-Jewish Youth Orchestra and the Voices of Peace Choir, described by Nili Belkind as: “publically funded projects that promote Arab-Jewish coexistence through the showcasing of musical diversity and collaborative work of the participants”⁵⁶.

It was also in this period the main Palestinian musical institutions for education were established: the Edward Said National Conservatory of Music (ESNCM), established in 1993, and Al-Kamandjātī, a Palestinian music association founded in France in 2002 which opened its first centre in Ramallah in 2004. The first one

⁵³ McDonald, *My Voice Is My Weapon*, 135

⁵⁴ Lyrics from the song *Jay al-Ḥamām*, as reported in: *Ibid*, 136.

⁵⁵ About controversies on the Orchestra as the “utopian republic” conceptualized by Said, cf. Rachel Beckles Willson, *Whose Utopia? Perspectives on the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra*, Music & Politics – Michigan Publishing, Volume III, Issue 2, Summer 2009, at: [link](#)

⁵⁶ Nili Belkind, *Music in Conflict: Palestine, Israel and the Politics of Aesthetic Production*, PhD Dissertation, Columbia University, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2014, 130.

is still the largest and most-enduring musical conservatory in Palestine, with centres across all the West Bank (Ramallah, East Jerusalem, Betlehem) and also Gaza city. It provides structured academic programs and exams to enter university level institutions, with ensemble groups and concerts organized in and outside the Palestinian space⁵⁷. Al-Kamandjātī, (The Violinist”) organization was founded by violinist Ramzi Aburedwan and inspired by his personal journey from a “potential *shahid*” in a refugee camp to an international musician; it focuses specifically on music education for children in refugee camps and peripheral villages, pursuing a non-violent cultural resistance through the democratization of musical access and the organization of concerts and initiatives involving both Palestinian and international artists.

The window of optimism closed abruptly with the outbreak of a new mass uprising in September 2000⁵⁸, triggered by Ariel Sharon’s provocative visit to the Temple Mount and the disproportionate Israeli military response to the following protests, which killed, among others, the twelve-year-old Mohammad al-Durra, who became the symbol of the second *Intifada* (2000-2005). The wave of protests generated a revival of the poetics of the first *Intifāda* and a resurgence of the motifs and symbols of resistance and martyr culture. Musically, however, the discourse of resistance shifted onto a different level: the international and mediatic one. In fact, unlike the participatory, grassroots nature of the First Intifada, the Second was experienced as a mediated spectacle: satellite channels like Al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya broadcast images of violence directly into Arab homes across the region,

⁵⁷ Belkind provides some examples, like the Palestine Youth Orchestra (PYO) and the Palestine National Orchestra, which both reunite talented young musicians from all Palestinian diaspora to participate to national and international events and competitions. Belkind claims that such initiatives have the function to “reterritorialize geographic and social fragmentation into a continuous Palestinian cultural space”, breaking the isolation of Palestinian diaspora. Cf. *Ibid*, 99-101.

⁵⁸ Frustration and internal tensions were already growing among Palestinians because of the perceived corruption and ineffectiveness of the PA, the failure of the Camp David negotiations, and the persistence of unequal power relations with Israel. Hamas, fundamentalist movement founded in 1987 and opposed to territorial compromise, gained increasing support after the Second Intifada as a more grassroots alternative to the PA, eventually winning the 2006 elections and contributing to the enduring political division between Hamas and Fatah, and later between Gaza and the West Bank. Cf. Cleveland-Bunton, *Storia del Medio Oriente Moderno*, 486-489.

creating a new pan-Arab solidarity based on shared visual trauma. This dynamic pushed various transnational Arab pop stars (such as Amr Diab, Kathim al-Safer or Zakra) to release high-profile solidarity productions like *Al-Ḥilm al-‘Arabī* (“The Arab Dream”) and *Al-Quds Hatarja ‘ Linā* (“Jerusalem will return to us”) denouncing the violence and advocating for peace and Arab unity. However, local Palestinians often critiqued these productions as “anesthetizing” and inauthentic, since those wealthy stars were not sharing the daily reality of occupation. McDonald reports how the Saudi-founded song *Al-Ḥilm al-‘Arabī*, with its simple pop rhythms and heavy bass, distances itself considerably from national Palestinian song; more importantly, it contains little to no reference to the Palestinian people, as well as doesn’t involve Palestinian artists, even if it shows filmed documentations of the violence in the music video⁵⁹. This genre of “pop intifadiana”⁶⁰ failed at capturing the reality of the Palestinian struggle, remaining more suited to a superficial globalized awareness than to the needs of those living under occupation.

By contrast, within the occupied territories a revival of first *Intifāda* musical practices and pre-*Nakba* folk materials intensified, reaffirming the link between national identity and cultural rootedness, where folk traditions had come to function as a cultural flag of Palestinian national identity, inseparable from the broader struggle for self-determination. Alongside this, a new generation of Palestinians who found folk revival somewhat clichéd turned to hip-hop as a vehicle for political expression. Groups like DAM, founded by Palestinian citizens of Israel, challenged the binary separation between Israeli and Palestinian identities by performing in both languages’ vernaculars, gaining significant international visibility and earning the disputed title of “soundtrack of Palestinian resistance”⁶¹. Such label exemplifies the tension that has traversed Palestinian

⁵⁹ Available at: <https://youtu.be/jt-ZsBgevk?si=Fv1XmCfOBvebQb1e>

⁶⁰ McDonald, *My Voice Is My Weapon*, 151; for more about DAM and hip-hop groups, cf. *Ibid*, chapter 9, 262.

⁶¹ McDonald, *My Voice Is My Weapon*, 281.

artistic production for decades, between political representation and the desire for individual artistic expression that goes beyond a rigid identitarian flag. Such tension has no easy resolution and is still present to this day, as discussed in the following sections. As Massad concludes his survey of songs about Palestine:

“Palestine and the Palestinians have obviously not been liberated by these songs. Nonetheless, the songs both express and register the changing dynamics of the Palestinian struggle, reflecting which segment of the Palestinian people is most salient at the moment and which form of struggle is imagined as most effective.”⁶²

The question of *fann al-multazim* (cause-committed art)⁶³, is thus here linked to how music is able to express and register the spirit of a people in a precise historical and social context. Taking this conclusion as a starting point, yet a few questions remain open: what happens in and out that act of registration? Is there more to it than the function of expressing the changing dynamics of the struggle? What kind of political achievement can this music obtain, other than the impossible one of liberation? Most importantly, apart from the political, what does this music do to those who sing it, hear it, or carry it across borders and generations? How can music make the difference when the very existence of a population is at stake?

⁶² Massad, *Liberating songs*, 37.

⁶³ The tension between *al-fann li-l-fann* (*al-fann ghayr multazim*) and *al-fann li-l-nas* (*al-fann al-multazim*) - roughly corresponding to “art for art’s sake” and “committed art” - strongly shaped the period and found advocates on both sides. Cf. Issa Boulos, *Negotiating the Elements: Palestinian freedom songs from 1967 to 1987* in Kanaaneh, Thorsén, Bursheh, McDonald, *Palestinian Music and Song*, 55.

CHAPTER 4

Contemporary folk revival: the case of *Yamma Mwel el Hawa*

“The seeds of a grain of wheat dying will fill the valley with grains”

(Mahmoud Darwish)

Having outlined the theoretical foundations and musicological elements relevant to the purpose of this thesis, as well as a historical contextualisation, this section will turn to the proposed case study and its analysis. The aim is to explore the intersection of musical and rhetorical-poetic elements in the composition of the selected piece, its social function and the media contexts through which it is presented to audiences, whilst always keeping the survival framework as a guiding thread across the levels previously outlined.

First, a brief methodological section will introduce the core area of my analysis, which is the contemporary folk revival currently engaging the Palestinian, Arab, and diasporic music, particularly after the events of 7 October 2023 and the ongoing Israeli military operations in Gaza and southern Lebanon, with their own tragic consequences already mentioned.

Having traced the contours of this musical context – in which media are central actors – the chapter proceeds to examine the paradigmatic case of a folk song, *Yamma Mwel el Hawa*, which has survived all the major historical phases of Palestine and the Israeli occupation and is today a prominent protagonist of this revival. After situating it historically and musically, several contemporary performances of the song – both live and recorded – featuring Palestinian singer Nai Barghouti will be analysed. By examining these performances musically and contextually, the chapter will attempt to locate them within the analytical framework proposed by this thesis and draw conclusions from them, without losing sight of their historical, musical, and political rootedness. Attention will also be given to connections with musical phenomena sharing analogous functions or

characteristics: the *Together for Palestine* concert, the work of female artists engaged with Palestinian folklore such as Rim Bannā, Sanā' Mūsā, and Zeyne, and more mediatic cases directly implicated in the conflict such as that of Ahmed Muin.

4.1 Reading music and survival: methodological lenses

The case studies examined in this section approach the selected piece considering all the analytical lenses outlined in the previous sections of this work: the theoretical background offered by ethnomusicological literature – the *maqam* theory and emotional dimension of Arab music, as well as its contacts with other musical traditions –, and the historic-political dimension related to identity, which is closely tied with musical performance in the Palestinian case, as outlined in the previous chapter.

The first lens is ethnomusicological, grounded in Alan Merriam's foundational premise that musical sound cannot be separated from the human behaviour and cultural context that produce it.¹ Consequently, the following analysis treats musical choices – such as modal or tonal frameworks, rhythmic structures, melodic lines, vocal styles, and instrumentation – not as purely aesthetic decisions, but as culturally meaningful acts whose emotional and social effects are rooted in shared conventions of performance. In the Arab musical tradition examined in Chapter 2, these conventions are particularly explicit within the *maqam* theory, which encodes a relationship between modal choices and emotional response that Arab listeners and practitioners carry across genres and contexts. The intent of the analysis is also to explore the relationship between musical and aesthetic choices and the poetic effects they seek to produce, as well as their broader symbolic and cultural meanings.

The second premise is textual and poetic: following McDonald's approach to Palestinian musical performance as a field in which political and cultural identities are expressed but also given materiality, the analyses focuses also on the linguistic

¹ Cf. Chapter 1, par.1.1.1

register, central imagery, and rhetorical strategies of each song's text, reading them in relation to the musical material. Essentially, it asks what the text does in relation to the music, and what both together do in relation to the situation that produced them.

As for the third lens, following Frishkopf's view of Arab music as deeply shaped by the platforms and technologies through which it circulates, each piece will be examined as a mediated cultural performance. Given that the selected works are contemporary practices, they are situated within a context of mediatization in which there is almost always a visual dimension to the performance, whether in the form of a music video or a live recording. The role of this dimension – and in particular the mode of dissemination through which each piece reaches its audience, most notably social media platforms – will be considered in relation to the identitarian narratives, political messages, and broader social impact it may generate or reinforce. Since this research does not rely on primary fieldwork, the media themselves constitute the primary “field” of observation: recordings, videos, and their contexts of online circulation are treated as the main sources for the analysis, alongside the secondary literature.

These three analytical dimensions are consistently read against the survival framework developed in Chapter 1, which identified two interconnected levels at which music may function as a tool of survival: the individual level, encompassing psychological, emotional, and self-identitarian processes, and the collective level, encompassing socio-political and symbolic functions of music in conflict or diaspora. Within each level, the analyses ask which specific survival functions may be activated by a given piece and, most importantly, how:² do the musical choices – most importantly related to modal theory but not exclusively – of the song have repercussions on audience's or artist's perception of self or collective identity? Are

² It's necessary to note that, due to lack of direct sources and fieldwork about the single artist's and audiences experience related to the music, the focus will be more on the aesthetical choices made – within a precise historical and social context - and their possible outcomes, then on actual experiences of the people involved.

the emotions depicted by the music reflected in a narrative of survival? Is the piece itself functioning as a mean of preserving or performing cultural survival and identity? In what ways and using what tools? These and other questions will guide us through the pieces, noting that part of the analytical work will be precisely to identify which dimensions of survival are most powerfully at stake in each case, and why the specific musical, textual, and mediatic choices made by each artist serve those dimensions rather than others.

4.2 The contemporary folk revival

As traced in the preceding historical arc, it has become apparent that the rural and Bedouin musical traditions – which will be referred to as ‘folk’, since rooted in the *sha‘b*, (people), not only withstood the numerous traumatic upheavals experienced by the Palestinians over the past century, but unfolded as a continuous thread running through them, reflecting the effects of such transformations on Palestinian society and, at times, actively carrying identitarian messages and practices in response to them. Folk musical culture traverses every page of Palestinian history, from the poet-singers of the pre-Nakba generation to the artists operating within the displacement of refugee camps. This heritage also spans the dispersal of *dabke* and *zajal* traditions across the diaspora host countries of Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon – a movement that, in turn, generated and shaped new musical practices, genres, and narratives. Resurfacing in virtually every era as a conscious attempt to maintain a connection with the past, this cultural legacy functioned as a vital tool to anchor and legitimize identities continuously threatened by outside forces, from the British colonial power to the Zionist movement.

The more conscious and institutionalized of these attempts followed a logic that scholars have called “strategic essentialism”³: certain actors – such as the PLO-founded musical groups of the 1970s and 1980s, as well as the United National

³ Concept quoted by McDonald and firstly developed by postcolonial author Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, it refers to a use of essentialism to affirm and consolidate the political identity of a minor group. McDonald, 118; Pallavi Singh, *Gayatri Spivak’s Strategic Essentialism: Meaning & Examples*, Literary Theory at: <https://www.literatureandcriticism.com/strategic-essentialism/>

Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU) during the first *Intifāda* – revived and reclaimed specific cultural symbols and practices from popular culture, tying them to Palestinian identity as markers of authenticity and national legitimation. Such symbols, taken from the rural past, built a poetic and visual aesthetics that included the *fidā'ī* uniform with the *kūfiyya* and the rifle – later supplanted by the image of children with slingshots – as well as folk musical chants, poems and dances. This strategy proved particularly effective during the first Intifada, when indeed actors like UNLU managed to shift from the usual “top-down approach” of political elites toward a “bottom-up” one, in which the masses (the *sha'b*) rose from oppression by reaffirming their “authentic past” and culture through a folk revival.⁴ If this institutionalized and politically charged folk revival was effective in creating solidarity and mobilizing masses, it also presented some risks. Above all, the risk was that of hardening into a stagnant stereotype that, paradoxically, would have reinforced the “primitive” narrative of the Zionist discourse, used to delegitimize Palestinian cultural complexity and value. This is also why certain artists, like Sabreen or DAM, consciously pushed against the dominant nationalist aesthetic, focusing instead on artistic value and authenticity beyond a national and essentialist discourse. While still embracing the complexities of political and social reality, their work insisted also on the beauty, enjoyment, and quality of Palestinian artistic expression as ends in themselves – or, I could argue, as an attempt of cultural and musical legitimation, on the largest scale possible – and not merely as vehicles for a strictly political message.

4.2.1 *The artistic scene nowadays*

The contemporary artistic scene encompasses all these tensions and expresses them in new ways. The aesthetics and symbols that emerged in past folk revivals are still present in today’s Palestinian identity narrative and discourse, as this analysis will explore, and are being activated with particular urgency since the happenings of 7 October 2023 and the subsequent Israeli military offensive in

⁴ McDonald, *My voice is my Weapon*, 118.

Gaza, which generated one of the largest-scale humanitarian crises of this century.⁵ What this section argues is that the months since October 2023 have generated a new wave of Palestinian folkloric revival, one that shares the political urgency of its predecessors, but operates in a radically different mediatic and worldwide environment. Social media and streaming platforms have given Palestinian artists direct access to global audiences without institutional mediation, so that folk melodies which once circulated in refugee camps and diaspora gatherings now reach millions of listeners worldwide within hours of being posted. In addition, Palestinian artists in the territory and outside are becoming increasingly interested and conscious about their cultural heritage that preceded 1948. In fact, some of them are engaging with local still-living practices, as well as with archives and preservation initiatives that began to be built during the Intifada period driven by what Nimr Sirḥān called “cultural anxieties”⁶. Anxieties that are now furtherly exacerbated by the ongoing threat of cultural and existential erasure.

This tendency was already visible in the 2010s with artists like the internationally renowned singer Rim Banna, who engaged with Palestinian folklore by rearranging traditional songs – such as *tarāwīd* – through Western styles and instrumentation. She also composed original melodies for seasonal poems, lullabies, and children’s songs. Deeply intertwined with her personal activism against the occupation, Banna's music transformed her into a global Palestinian icon, widely celebrated as “the voice of the cause.”⁷

A parallel figure is the singer-intellectual Sanā’ Mūsā, whose 2010 album *Ishrāq* (“Reminiscence”)⁸ gives voice to her personal research into folk vocal songs transmitted by Palestinian women in their daily life⁹, performed with a classical

⁵ Cf. Chapter 1.

⁶ Nimr Sirḥān, quoted in McDonald, *My Voice Is My Weapon*, 119.

⁷ Maher Charif, *Rim Banna*, Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question, at: <https://www.palquest.org/en/biography/40159/rim-banna>; Rim Banna’s official website at: https://web.archive.org/web/20100604232501/http://www.rimbanna.com/songs_e.htm

⁸ Full album with lyrics and captions by Sana’ available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s4-4gKXh7-c&list=PLQrXhdUxPKNWWd-edwcOkPHT0eUFtXhX7&index=3>

⁹ Women appear to have played a fundamental role in the transmission of Palestinian folk songs, both historically - through the daily chanting associated with life-cycle events and everyday moments - and in

vocal style and sophisticated acoustic instrumentation that blends Eastern sounds and Western jazzy colours. Both represent a mode of folk revival oriented toward artistic depth and personal research while keeping a strong but less rigid political message and identity.

4.3 The case: *Yamma Mwel el Hawa*

Along this journey of more than a century, certain songs and poems have had particular fortune, travelled all the way to the present: the song *Yamma Mwel el Hawa* emerges as one of the most telling examples: a pre-Nakba folk melody that has been recuperated and transformed across successive generations of Palestinian artists, accumulating layers of political and emotional meaning while retaining at its core – despite the numerous changes made to them – the melodic and textual substance that connects it to its folk origins.

McDonald recounts in his ethnography his first encounter with the song, while he was visiting the small village of Umm Qais:

“I noticed a small group of young girls sitting together on a blanket singing with an older relative, perhaps a great-aunt or grandmother. I lingered momentarily to better hear their song (...) The melody was incredibly beautiful and immediately caught my attention (...) it remained with me for several weeks”¹⁰.

This “elegantly slow-paced melody” – as McDonald describes it with considerable adequacy – proved to be immediately memorable and affecting. It is, I’d argue, precisely this quality of melodic simplicity and elegance that accounts in large part for the song’s extraordinary longevity and continued popularity.¹¹ He then asked ‘udist and composer Adnan Odeh, member of *the Firqat Aghānī al-‘Ashiqīn*, about

the contemporary artistic scene, where female artists constitute a significant presence. Cf. Shaimaa Abulebda, “Resistance and the Palestinian Folk Song,” *ArabLit*, 5 April 2024, at: <https://arablit.org/2024/04/05/resistance-and-the-palestinian-folk-song/>

¹⁰ McDonald, *My Voice Is My Weapon*, 36

¹¹ Interestingly, this melody produced an analogous effect on me, upon my first listening: I was struck, nearly moved to tears, by the beauty of the melody, and it remained in my mind long after that moment.

the song significance. Odeh explained to him that every Palestinian knows this folk song since childhood, and that whenever his ensemble performed in concerts across the Arab world, audiences stopped dancing and stood listening in silence, because “it had the most beautiful melody and powerful text...everyone knew the lyrics...Everyone knew it because everyone could identify with it”.¹² But why is that so?

4.3.1 Title and origins

Firstly, the title of the song resists unanimous translations, due to the ambiguity of some terms of local Palestinian dialects in use. While *Yamma* is a dialectal contracted form of “*yā umm*” (literally “Oh mother”), some scholars, like McDonald himself, read it as a common expression of emotional intensity – also widely used in colloquial local Arabic – rather than a direct address to the mother, translating the title as “Oh my song of longing”. However, today most artists – Nai Barghouti as well – prefer the more literal and affectionate rendering of “Mum, sing to the wind”. The element of singing persists across both readings, since *mwel* or *mawīl* shares its root with *mawwāl*,¹³ the vocal improvisation genre present in both *tarab* and folk traditions. The term *hawā* (هوى) instead oscillates between a meaning of tension, longing, desire and even love on one hand, and “wind” or “air” on the other, the latter more common in its homophonic form *hawā*’ (هواء). This ambiguity will persist in every version, as it coherently encapsulates the emotional register of the song itself, tied to the nostalgia and pain of exile and displacement.

The origins of *Yamma Mwel el Hawa* are difficult to trace with precision, since the oral transmission of most Palestinian melodies across generations and displacement contexts has made authorship and dating largely irrecoverable, as

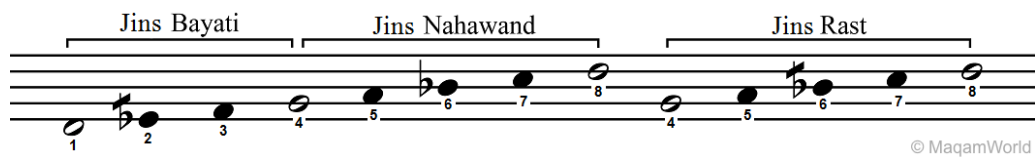
¹² *Ibid*, 37

¹³ The song’s title thus connects to the improvisatory vocal tradition of the *mawwāl* discussed in Chapter 2: a genre defined precisely by its capacity to carry emotional weight through melodic elaboration and ornament, suggesting that the song’s very name encodes the mode of expression through which its content is meant to be felt.

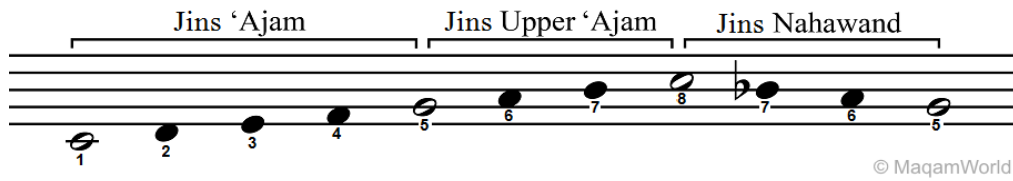
well as recorded material. As reported in an article of *Ma 'āzef*,¹⁴ the song seems to predate the British Mandate, and its original tone and meaning differed considerably from later versions. The earliest second two verses were: “*Ḍarb al-khanājir walā / ḡulm al-walaf liyyā*”, which translates to “Better the blows of daggers / than the injustice of the beloved”, suggesting a theme of love and emotion without any political content. This changed during the Great Arab Revolt of 1936, when the last verse was modified into “*ḡukm al-nadhāl fiyya*”, (“the rule of the vile over me”) transforming the song’s object of injustice, from an unfaithful lover to the oppressive British colonial power. A single word replacement converted a love song into an act of resistance, that would survive in successive generations, as the referent of “the vile” shifted from British colonizers to Israeli occupation, showing again the adaptive capacity of the oral folk tradition here discussed.

4.3.2 Musical elements

As McDonalds reports, by explanation of Odeh, the original folk version was set in *maqam bayātī* and was then changed into ‘*ajam* by his bandmate, the composer Hussein Nazak, who simultaneously simplified the song’s melody and meter to reach a wider audience. The modal shift is not a neutral decision: while *bayātī* contains quartertones and neutral intervals – on the second and sometimes on the sixth scale degree –, by contrast *maqam ‘ajam* approximates the Western major scale in its intervallic sequence:



¹⁴ Cf. Janā Ḥasan, “*Nadhr li-l-ḡurriyya - Yamma Mawīl al-Hawā bayna al-umm wa-l-ḡubb wa-l-muqāwama*,” (A Vow to Freedom - Yamma Mawil al-Hawa between Mother, Love and Resistance), *Ma 'āzef*, Qīṣaṣ al-aghānī, 25 September 2025, available at: <https://ma3azef.com/>; accessed: 1/07/2026. Non peer-reviewed: cited for contextual and historical detail.



Maqam Bayati and Ajam compared, with their respective ajnās. Source:
<https://www.maqamworld.com/en/index.php>

Unfortunately, no recordings or scores of the original *bayātī* version were found available, making a direct musical comparison impossible. The melodic choice of Nazak can nonetheless be interpreted, as both politically strategic and practically motivated. As discussed before, the practice of adapting Arab melodies to avoid quartertones became increasingly common over the last century, driven by the need to make music accessible to both Western ears and instrumentalists, most Western instruments being physically incapable of producing microtonal intervals. Other than that, in this specific case *Firqat Aghānī al-‘Āshiqīn* was primarily addressing Arab audiences, so the simplification served another purpose as well: to produce a melody sufficiently catchy, immediate, and emotionally moving, to mobilize mass audiences and, in Odeh’s words, get people “out of their seats and into the streets”.¹⁵

This is the melody as transcribed by McDonald himself:

¹⁵ McDonald, *My Voice Is My Weapon*, 106.



Melody of Yamma Mwel el-Hawa. Source: McDonald, My voice is my weapon, 37.

The refrain, built on the two verses examined above, opens on the tonic – in this case C, the preferred point of departure of *maqām 'ajam* – with three repetitions, before moving to the third scale degree for an equal number of repetitions, then descending back to C through a stepwise motion. This preference for conjunct movement over intervallic leaps is characteristic of both Arab improvisatory genres, like the *mawwāl*, as well as simpler vocal forms such, as nursery rhymes and lullabies, a quality that likely contributes to the song's immediate memorability and its suitability for performance by and for children. After the repetition of the first four verses – eight measures in total – many versions begin the second iteration on the fifth degree below the tonic, in this case G, which also functions as the *ghammaz*, the degree on which the melody most frequently rests throughout the piece aside from the tonic itself. The skeleton transcribed here does not venture beyond the sixth scale degree and presents no modulations or variations. It is a melodic scheme, a sort of *canovaccio* around which performers in the folk improvisatory tradition move freely, both melodically and rhythmically. Contemporary artist Nai Barghouti, herself also a jazz singer, has noted precisely this quality of the melody: its simplicity makes it remarkably flexible and optimal for improvisation and rearrangement, functioning equally well, in her own words,

as “very pure slow lullaby” or an upbeat track.¹⁶ In her performances, as in most contemporary renditions, the former option is preferred: today, the song is universally distinguished by its elegantly slow, contemplative pace, that captures its double emotional character: the calming and melancholic quality of a lullaby, together with a nostalgic yet collective displacement of loss. As McDonald notes:

“Families shared this song with their children while evoking collective memories and experiences of dispossession. As they overlooked the now-empty fields where their ancestral villages once stood, ‘*Yama Mawil al-Hawa*’ was sung to best communicate the feelings of the moment”.¹⁷

4.3.3 Significant versions of the song

The song as it is known today was established by *Firqat Aghānī al-‘Āshiqīn* in 1977, whose version – with lyrics rewritten by poet Aḥmad Daḥbūr – spread through Arab homes and refugee camps in the years preceding the first *Intifāda*, becoming one of the foundational pieces of Palestinian collective memory:¹⁸

Yamma mawīl al-hawā / yamma mawīliyyā
Ḍarb al-khanājir walā / ḥukm al-nadhal fiyyā
Wa mashītu taḥt al-shitā / wa-l-shitā rawwānī
Wa-l-ṣayf lammā atā / walla ‘a min nīrānī
*Bayḍall ‘umrī yunfadā / nadhr li-l-ḥurriyya*¹⁹

¹⁶ Cf. interview at: Tarwida Podcast, *The Sound of Palestine – Nai Barghouti*, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LqXvUOeE9zI>, min.36.00.

¹⁷ McDonald, *My voice is my weapon*, 35.

¹⁸ Maḥmud Darwish also incorporated the song's refrain into one of his own compositions, entitled *Mawwāl*, included in the collection *Ākhir al-Layl*. In the poem, which interweaves themes of love and shattered dreams, the two verses are repeated after each section as a refrain. For the full text, cf. <https://www.diwanalarab.com/article12747.html>

¹⁹ “Oh my song of longing /It is better to be killed by daggers than ruled by the unjust. / I walked under winter’s sky and it quenched my thirst / And summer became hotter from the fires which burn inside of me. / My life will continue through sacrifice for freedom”, translation by McDonald, *My voice is my weapon*, 36.

In Odeh's view, every Palestinian could identify with this song because it narrates a personal history of *Nakba* while simultaneously providing identitarian and national elements of a shared collective experience:

“...The winter's walk of 1948 the summer heat moving [from Palestine] to the [Jordanian or Syrian] desert, the loss of our land, the sacrifice of the martyrs, these were all things that Palestinians knew and experienced everywhere [*wayn makān*].”²⁰

These national elements – above all the poetics of sacrifice – were pure gold for the PLO propaganda between the 1970s and 1980s, and were perfectly embodied by al-‘Āshiqīn's performances, which successfully conjugated the two aesthetics, visual and musical, that were prevailing in the political discourse around Palestinian identity and resistance. In their most widely circulated performance video the ensemble plays the song²¹ preceded by a spoken introduction delivered in Modern Standard Arabic – a register choice reflecting political gravitas and authority – by the young lead singer in military uniform. He addresses the recent tragedies of the war in Lebanon and Arab resilience, ultimately connecting them to the celebrated verse about the injustice of the oppressor (*ḥukm al-nadhal*). The performance thus made the propaganda program visible: male performers appeared in military fatigues and *kūfiyyas*, embodying the *fidā'ī* archetype, while female dancers wore embroidered *thawbs*, evoking the rural *fallāḥīn*, a visual juxtaposition of the revolutionary “outside” and the indigenous “inside” that sought to project a unified Palestinian identity across the fractures of diaspora. This artificially “reconstructed homeland” gained enormous success, and from that moment on, countless renditions of the song have been made inside and outside Palestine²², particularly in contemporary times after the events of October 2023.

²⁰ *Ibidem*

²¹ The ensemble is composed by two percussionists, an ‘udist and a qanun player; they keep a simple texture to the arrangement and are later joined by female dancers and a mixed choir, all dressed traditionally. Version available at: <https://youtu.be/PTL1twYajy8?si=N8dFqQWa2oNQVFtX>

²² Among them, is worth noting a very different version sung and played in 1984 by old Sheikh Imam ‘Īsā, the blind Egyptian singer who composed numerous Arab political anthems, highly opposing Nasser's

Already in 2021, during the Sheikh Jarrah uprising and the so-called “Dignity Revolt,”²³ the song was performed by singer Zeyne²⁴ and her mother in a video that circulated widely across social media²⁵. A domestic, intergenerational rendition charged with immediate political urgency and dramatic quality, well rendered through modern piano accompaniment and two-voice harmonization, both distinctly Western-like musical choices that nonetheless served to universalize the song's emotional appeal for a global digital audience. In 2024, a year into the Israeli military offensive in Gaza, Julia Boutros released her own version:²⁶ the video opens with Julia seated alone, dressed in black, against a backdrop of footage of crying children and wounded families. The music is orchestral and restrained, building gradually in sync with her voice, in a register that is documentary rather than celebratory, bearing witness rather than inciting. Such tone recalls, though in a more sober key, the pan-Arab solidarity productions of the first *Intifāda* era, themselves now being partially revived in response to the current war.

Beyond these high-profile productions, *Yamma Mwel el Hawa* has generated a broad network of human connections through mediatic diffusion of countless

regime as well as colonial occupation. Among his songs, some pro-Palestinian anthems like the famous “*Ya Falastiniyya*” made him an icon of national resistance for the Palestine and whole Arab world. His rendition of the song is set at a faster tempo and in *maqam hijāz*, which gives the music a sadder and introspective nuance, exalted by the deep lyrics rewritten by the poet Aḥmad Fu’ād Najm. Structured in three main sections modulating into *nahawand* and *rast*, it is considerably more complex musically and emotionally, bearing the influence of Shaykh Imām's formation in Sufi music and *muwashshahāt* and sounding more deeply rooted in the Eastern political song tradition of the 1960s. Cf. McDonald, 81-85. Version available at: https://youtu.be/xUPUJ_eXEzg?si=oFp2_IWk7CrM5NIL

²³ Also known as the Unity Intifada, this wave of protests across Palestine and internationally – the media as well, with the hashtag #saveSheikhJarrah – rose after continuous evictions of Palestinian inhabitants of the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood in East Jerusalem. It culminated in military escalation in Gaza and the west bank between Israel and Hamas, lasting 11 days. Cf. Akram Salhab, Dahoud al-Ghoul, Jerusalem Youth at the Forefront of 2021's Unity Intifada, Middle East Research Project, November 10, 2021, at: <https://www.merip.org/2021/11/jerusalem-youth-at-the-forefront-of-2021s-unity-intifada/>

²⁴ The young Palestinian-Jordanian singer is a rising star in contemporary Arab musical scene, as well as internationally, especially after her debut 2022 album “*Awda*” (Return) and her song *Asli Ana*, “(My roots). Here she reimagines traditional *dabke* through a contemporary R&B production, to unapologetically reclaim Palestinian identity, also clearly depicted in the poignant lyrics and in the music video, that contains a lot of folklore key elements including a beautiful footage of a *dabke* dance in Betlehem. Available at: <https://youtu.be/xhH6CON3SD8?si=dcNjudTzW0OP0Iw4>

²⁵ Available at <https://youtu.be/3t6-aDrZGxs?si=BMHUC4YgqM2jh1E>

²⁶ Available at https://youtu.be/MNfWELiWi_U?si=uJ-qezbXGUww76UB

renditions: from the Soul Band, born in the heart of Gaza with limited resources, to Ḥamza Namira, Lina Salibi, and Nidā' Sharāra, to spontaneous videos on YouTube and TikTok, a global circulation that no institutional folk revival could have produced, and that speaks directly to the mediatic dimension of survival here examined. It is within this landscape that the Palestinian singer Nai Barghouti has produced what are, for the purposes of this analysis, the most significant contemporary renditions of the song.

4.3.4 *Nai Barghouti*

Nai Barghouti is a highly skilled and eclectic singer and flutist who fits in the contemporary generation of young Palestinian diaspora artists for whom musical expression functions as an essential bridge between cultural heritage and as a vehicle for political and humanitarian messaging. It should be noted that she occupies a distinctive niche within this panorama, which is largely dominated by Arab pop voices such as Elyanna or Zeyne, or hip-hop influenced artists such as Saint Levant: her formation is rooted in jazz and classical *tarab*, giving her work a depth and sophistication unusual in the mainstream scene. Born in Jerusalem (in 1996) and raised in Ramallah, she trained at the Edward Said National Conservatory of Music before pursuing international studies, first in the US and then establishing her career in Amsterdam, home to one of Europe's most prestigious jazz conservatories and scenes. As singer, instrumentalist and composer, she has pioneered a hyper-personalised musical and vocal technique, that she calls "NaiStrumentation". Such technique seamlessly blends the complex ornamentations typical of *tarab* traditional vocal genres (*layālī* and *mawwāl*) with the spontaneity and freedom of jazz improvisation, only possible with high skill and experience rooted in both musical traditions. Inspired by artists such as Fairuz, Umm Kulthum, and Ziad Rahbani, her work ranges from classical *tarab* repertoire performed with Arab and European orchestras to collaborations with artists as diverse as electronic producer Skrillex and jazz trumpeter Ibrahim Ma'luf.

Barghouti's relationship with *Yamma Mwel el Hawa* is deeply personal. In an interview on the podcast *Tarwīda*,²⁷ she recounts how the song was among the first folk melodies she learned as a child: one of those pieces, she explains, that Palestinians carry without remembering exactly when or how they first encountered it. For her, the lyrics function as what she calls “a much needed reminder” that Palestinians do not lose their defiance, dignity, and hope, no matter the hardship they're going through: a belief crystallized in the notable second verse (*Ḍarb al-khanājir walā / ḥukm al-nadhal fiyyā*), that she paraphrases as “I'd rather die in dignity than live a life enchained”, stating that it summarizes the core belief of Palestinian resistance in the present and, I'd argue, historically.

Speaking with the interviewer, herself also Palestinian, about the song's significance, the singer reflects on how it has been sung by their mothers and grandmothers before them, reminding the intergenerational character of the Palestinian struggle and the role that women have played as primary vehicles of oral transmission in Palestinian culture, as previously discussed. The conversation itself between two young Palestinian women in diaspora discussing a folk song they both learned in childhood precisely enacts – or as McDonald would say, actively performs – the cultural survival the song has made possible: a melody that has outlasted displacement, occupation, and the destruction of institutional infrastructure, carried forward in living memory from one generation to the next.

4.3.5 Nai Barghouti's selected performances

This personal connection to the song is reflected in the fact that Barghouti has released several versions of it over the whole course of her career, four of which are worth noting here, two of which will be examined in greater detail.

²⁷ Tarwida Podcast, *The Sound of Palestine – Nai Barghouti*, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LqXvUOeE9zI>

*A time to Cry, 2010*²⁸

The first version is a contribution to the 2010 collaborative album *A Time to Cry: A Lament over Jerusalem*, led by Rim Banna and featuring Barghouti – who was then only sixteen years old – alongside Palestinian singers Wissam Murad and Jawahir Shufaiī, and an American-Norwegian trio. The album was recorded in a Palestinian threatened home in Sheikh Jarrah – then at the centre of international attention due to attempted Israeli evictions of Palestinian families – and contains both traditional and original songs. As reported by a Norwegian music journal:

“The target audience for their songs is us in the West (...) We who for far too long have silently allowed the Israelis to break up the last bits of land that were once assigned to the Palestinians”²⁹.

This political orientation is reflected in the musical choices: this version of *Yamma Mwel el Hawa* is rendered with semi-acoustic guitar accompaniment in a folk-bluesy style, with a slow yet groovy half-time feel carried by double bass and drums, that resembles the slow-paced elegance already present in McDonald’s notes. The young Barghouti’s voice emerges light and restrained, already marked by brief vocal ornaments at the end of phrases and a short *mawwāl* over an ostinato guitar-flute groove, early evidence of her grounding in *maqām* and *tarab* vocabulary, even at sixteen years old.

*Live in March 2019*³⁰

Chronologically, another rendition by Barghouti was released on YouTube in 2019, in a live recording from March of that year during the finals of the Aga Khan Music Awards in Lisbon. Accompanied by musicians Khalil Khoury on *qanun* and Maen Ghoul on *darbouka*, this version is substantially different and analytically interesting for our purposes: indeed, the musical choices here draw from a different

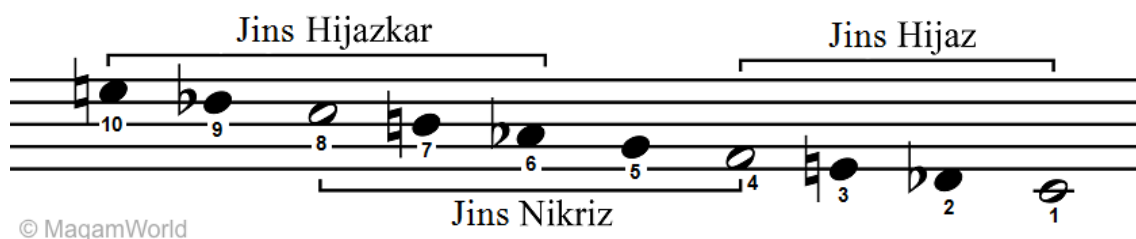
²⁸ Version available at:

²⁹ KKV Records, review of *A Time to Cry*, available at: <https://www.kkv.no/en/music/rim-banna-nai-barghouti-wissam-nurad-jawaher-shofani-2>

³⁰ Version available at: <https://youtu.be/3uHruAwqj50?si=mlZ9mMHt8ynh12Ce>

musical world than in the other versions she performed, namely the classical *tarab* heritage, from which several fundamental elements emerge.

The core melody does not differ significantly from McDonald's transcription in '*ajam* – except for the movement around the *ghammaz* mentioned earlier – but what makes the difference here are the instrumental arrangement and Nai's improvisations. The piece opens with an instrumental ostinato that adds, over the now recognizable slow-paced two-feel pattern, a short phrase moving from the tonic C to the flattened second degree D $\flat$, passing through the natural seventh B and resolving on the fifth degree G. Nai first joins this ostinato by repeating it and then develops it into a remarkable and complex *mawwal*, in which she demonstrates the uniqueness of her technique of "Naistrumentation". Using a mixture of quasi-scat phonemes and the typical phrase of Arabic vocal improvisation "*Ya layl*", she moves through the melody progressively increasing speed and complexity. She passes through a scalar succession centred around the area of C *hijazkar* (characterized by a minor second, major third and major seventh), mostly using conjunct motion from lower to higher registers, a feature typical of this improvisational style. However, she does so with a rhythmic awareness and flexibility – and expressive poignancy – clearly influenced by jazz language, particularly in the way notes are articulated distinctly and individually, whereas more traditional Arab vocal styles tend to privilege mostly legato phrasing, allowing notes to flow more seamlessly into one another. After a final virtuosic passage moving between the upper jins *nahawand* and *hijazkar*, with brief excursions into *rast*, she returns to the ostinato and the "*Ya layl*" phrase. To introduce the main melody, she emphasizes the final note of the phrase, the second degree, which shifts from flattened to natural: with this subtle yet sudden move – likely appreciated by trained ears – she leads the listener into the new major world of '*ajam* melody.



Maqam Hijazkar notation with its ajnās. Source: <https://www.maqamworld.com/en/index.php>

The piece then unfolds in a more regular manner, with the major melody mirrored by the *qanun* and accompanied by the usual short ornamental phrases at the end of each musical line, performed either by the instrument or the voice. Both receive another solo moment: this time, the vocal improvisation employs the song's lyrics rather than syllables, over a tonic pedal; this section is less rhythmically driven and closer to more conventionally "Eastern" melodic movements and phrasing.

Two main elements emerge from this performance that are particularly useful for our analysis. The first concerns the emotional content of the song, which, already in McDonald's observations, appears emotionally charged through the simplicity of its melody and the meaning of its lyrics, but here is further stretched and enriched through Nai's melodic choices. Beginning the piece in *hijazkar* – a mode belonging to the *hijaz* family, often associated with a sense of melancholy and longing³¹ – and then suddenly, but not abruptly, transporting the listener into the reassuring and assertive world of the major '*ajam* mode, seems very intentional. In fact, not only she demonstrates her rootedness in the *tarab* repertoire and a great knowledge of the *maqam* system, but also her expressive intention. Such intention, in my view, is highly representative of Nai's musical vision, especially of this song. While displaying the richness of Palestinian Arab artistic traditions, she confronts the listener with – if necessary, forcefully reminding them of – the suffering and struggle of the Palestinian people in exile, as herself explicitly states before performing the piece, dedicating it to refugees around the world. In contrast to, for example, Sheikh Imam's version, she decided not to alter the melody substantially

³¹ Cf. Chapter 2, par. 2.4.1 for further details.

but rather to add more personal elements around it: a choice that seems crucial in preserving the powerful symbolic content carried by the now almost inseparable union between these lyrics and this melody.

The second important element concerns the diasporic – or even exilic –, composite nature of Nai’s musical world. The combination of elements drawn from the *tarab* tradition – such as *mawwal*, melodic variations, the choice of instrumentation and a specific vocal technique – alongside a song from the Palestinian folk repertoire, already constitutes a “hybridity” internal to Arab musical culture itself. The addition of personal stylistic elements influenced by Western traditions, – most clearly jazz, by her improvisational language and the rhythmic accompaniment approach of the musicians – further expands such a hybrid nature. For example, the *qanun* player partially departs from his conventional homophonic function of simply doubling the melody and the usual ornamental *sayr*. Instead, he adopts a more rhythmically and melodically expansive role, characterized by leaps and variations that contribute to this hybrid aesthetic.

*Mum, sing to the wind – October 2023*³²

A third version, released on the October 29th, 2023 – just weeks after the Hamas attack and the beginning of the Israeli military offensive – seems to mark a significant shift in register. The music video accompanies Barghouti’s performance with footage of journalists reporting from Gaza and images of children, employing a visual language already seen: documentary-like, bearing witness, and relatively restrained in its aesthetic choices.

Musically, such heaviness and “harmless” attitude is much perceivable. The arrangement, mostly based on pedals by strings and synthesizers in a slow, quasi-ambient style, creates a broader melodic space. She fills it with ornamentations and vocal variations quite different from the other version: departing more from the melody – kept in *‘ajam* – she manages to make it sound way more heart-

³² Version available at: <https://youtu.be/U7PERhd6zEM?si=UEYGITdsd5tcyqMJ>

wrenching than its natural character³³ by indulging on thrills, glissandos and legatos between the notes, emphasizing non-tempered frequencies as *tarab* classical styles prefer.

The piece closes with a sample of *zagharīt* – the ululation traditionally associated in Arab cultures with both celebration and mourning – followed by the words “*we are not numbers*”. This creates a sudden and striking transition from musical elaboration to an explicit political statement, encapsulating the coexistence of aesthetic and political dimensions throughout the performance. The timing of the release also appears significant: the piece was published at a critical moment in which Palestinian lives and existence were once again under immediate threat and, as Barghouti herself stated, functioned as a “much needed reminder” addressed to an international audience.

It is also worth noticing the visual and musical similarity between Barghouti’s version and Boutros’ (which dates some months later). This convergence may suggest the existence of a shared aesthetic sensibility among Palestinian diaspora artists in responding to moments of crisis, but also a broader continuity with forms of humanitarian solidarity music that have characterized both Western popular music and also Arab musical production since the period of the first Intifada.

*Together for Palestine, Lullaby – December 2025*³⁴

The fourth and last version of Barghouti’s *Yamma Mwel el Hawa* is included in the *Together for Palestine* project, which originated from the concert held at the OVO Arena Wembley in London in 2025. Organized by a collective of artists and cultural figures including the famous British musician and producer Brian Eno,

³³ This detail reveals some interesting considerations on the modal *ethos* argument here researched: firstly, the emotional charge (in this case one may speak of *tarab*) of a melody or a performance cannot be restrained on the modal choices, but it surely results from a combination of factors, as Racy already noted in his work. Secondly, the equation modes-emotions developed by the theory are far more negotiable and personal, even musically malleable, than they pretend to be. Here, nonetheless, the pedals and the absence of modulations create a modal fixation, which is by contrast a fundamental condition for the emergence of *tarab* feeling. Cf. Chapter 2 for further insight.

³⁴ Version available at: <https://youtu.be/G957oaAZwhc?si=qZrqUHC4Xc7hyLvg>

actor Khalid ‘Abdallah and musical director Khaled Ziada, the event gathered thousands of people both physically and online, raising around £2 million for Palestinian-led humanitarian organizations supporting medical relief and aid initiatives³⁵.

Interestingly, the organizers explicitly framed the project not as a generic act of charity, but as a space centred on Palestinian voices, experiences and artistic agency³⁶. Palestinian artists, contributors and organizations occupied a central role throughout the event, and such intent actually resonated in audience and mediatic reception. As *The Guardian* commented, “as much of the evening plays through despairing testimony, tender performances and quiet introspection, it is the breadth and depth of Palestinian artistry on display that provides hope”³⁷. This marks a clear difference the previous examples of musical projects of solidarity among mainstream artists, both within the Arab world and outside, dismantling a trend that is now luckily changing. As Markaz Review puts it:

“This is no charity gala put on by white liberals for Palestinians – it is a mutual aid effort conducted with Palestinians. The organizations working in Gaza and benefitting from the funds are all Palestinian-led.”³⁸

Within this context, on 12 December 2025 the project released *Lullaby*, a charity single based on *Yamma Mwel el Hawa*, arranged by Nai Barghouti and Kieran Brunt, with English lyrics translated by famous British singer and composer Peter

³⁵ These organizations include Palestinian Children’s Relief Fund, Palestinian Medical Relief Society and charity Taawon. Cf. Together for Palestine, official website at <https://togetherforpalestine.org>; Kalia, Ammar, ‘If you don’t make a stand now, when would you?’: inside the Together for Palestine concert, *The Guardian*, 18 September 2025, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2025/sep/18/if-you-dont-make-a-stand-now-when-would-you-inside-the-together-for-palestine-concert>

³⁶ Some participants were jazz pianist Faraj Suleiman, rapper El-Far3i and Saint-Levant, DJ Sama Abdulhadi as well as visual artists like Malak Mattar.

³⁷ *Ibidem*

³⁸ Gabriel Polley, “Together for Palestine: Truly Historic,” *The Markaz Review*, 19 September 2025 available at: <https://themarkaz.org/together-for-palestine-truly-historic/>

Gabriel³⁹. The single brought together Palestinian and international artists⁴⁰ in a multilingual collaboration that relocated the song into a significantly different musical and symbolic register.

Compared to the previous versions discussed, the arrangement transforms the song through a broader and more cinematic soundscape, largely shaped by the presence of the London Community Gospel Choir, whose harmonies bring the piece into the territory of African American spiritual and gospel tradition. The song opens with a tonic pedal played by the orchestra while Barghouti sings the melody freely; the choir then joins smoothly in two-part harmony over the first two verses, which they subsequently repeat in Peter Gabriel's English translation ("Oh, sing for me, mama/Mama, sing to the wind"). Then, British soul-pop singer Celeste takes a solo over the pedal, improvising in her gospel-inflected style over the translated lyrics. She rests for a moment on the flatted seventh scale degree, giving the moment a distinctly bluesy, dramatic quality⁴¹. The intentional juxtaposition of the two vocal solos creates a strikingly beautiful contrast between the different vocal techniques and musical influences. The song then proceeds with an alternation of two-part harmonies, first sung by individual female singers then taken up by the full choir, which progressively adds voices and embellishments until erupting into a full choral burst of stacked triadic harmonies – the characteristic *gospel shout* – over which Barghouti re-enters with a *mawwāl*.⁴² The choir drops to a murmur beneath her, holding the melody while she improvises, drawing on lyrics – in modern *fushā* Arabic – from Mahmud Darwish's poem "*Insān*" (Human): "*Ḥubūb sunbula*

³⁹ The song was originally proposed to be performed on stage at the concert, by Brian Eno and Es Devlin, who then involved Nai Barghouti who was "integral to the whole process." After their performance being canceled during the concert, the group decided to record it in studio and release it as a charity single. Cf. Emily Stabell, *Together for Palestine's reimagining of a traditional lullaby aims for Christmas No. 1*, *Songline*, available at: [link lullaby for Christmas](#)

⁴⁰ The single features Palestinian artists including Lana Lubany, Amena Youssef, Sura Abdo and Yasmeen Ayyashi, alongside international performers such as Brian Eno, Celeste, Dan Smith (Bastille), Leigh-Anne Pinnoch, Nadine Shah and Neneh Cherry, with the London Community Gospel Choir providing the choral component. Full credits available at [togetherforpalestine.org](#).

⁴¹ Maqam '*ajam* has the natural seventh, like a major scale. The use of the 7th minor suggests an approach over the C minor pentatonic scale, from the African American musical area (blues, gospel and soul).

⁴² Her solo moves between *maqām 'ajam* and the upper *jins ḥijāz*; notably, she too rests on a minor seventh at a climax point, mirroring Celeste's earlier melodic choice in an echo likely deliberate.

tamūtu, satamla`u al-wādī sanābil”(The seeds of a grain of wheat dying will fill the valley with grains”)⁴³. The song closes with a repeated mono-note iteration of this phrase, all sustained over the opening pedal.

4.4 Some remarks

The collective and almost liturgical character of the choral writing gives the piece a strong communal dimension – partially recalling the devotional and mournful atmosphere noted earlier in *Zahrat al-Madā`in* –, but rooted in a completely different musical tradition, namely the Afro-American spiritual one. This choice does not seem accidental: besides addressing an international and English-speaking audience more familiar with this musical language, the two traditions – Palestinian folk music and Afro-American spiritual culture – also share, to some extent, comparable social functions of music in comparable historical contexts of dispossession and structural violence.⁴⁴ Within such contexts, music exceeded its merely aesthetic or political dimension and adopted other functions: supporting everyday life and articulating daily experiences of hardship and transform them into shared expression. Whether in the context of *work songs*, religious gatherings or collective musical practices, communities were brought together through singing as a way of processing pain and creating bonds and alternative communal spaces around it. In fact, in both traditions, the voice occupies a particularly central position, becoming a primary vehicle of emotional and social communication. Musically, this balance between collective participation and individual expression is expressed through vocal improvisation practices and *call and response*⁴⁵ structures, which are present in both musical languages: the first allows spaces of agency and personal articulation, while the second creates communal dialogue and mutual support.

⁴³ Translation from the official music video.

⁴⁴ Further comparative research may investigate such functions and cross-cultural parallels between Palestinian folklore’s origins and the birth of African American main genres (blues, spiritual, gospel). For more about the latter, cf. Luigi Onori, Riccardo Brazzale, Maurizio Franco in “*La Storia del Jazz*” (History of Jazz), Hoepli, Milano 2020, Chapter 1.

⁴⁵ Defined as an “afro-arab tradition” in *Ibid*, 33.

The fusion of the two genres within the context of this song as a humanitarian project seems then particularly effective and suggests an even broader understanding of collective survival conveyed by musical practices.

Ultimately, McDonald concluded that *Yamma Mwel el Hawa* “played an important role in narrating a collective national history and identity in exile”, and acknowledged that beyond narration, musical practices in the Palestinian context can actively perform such identity, rooting it to the past while enacting it in the present. Here, in this final stage of its trajectory, this orally transmitted song seems to bring its function even further: it no longer only narrates survival but materially contributes to it. While still drawing on the folklore aesthetics and symbols already present in past institutional folk revivals – evident also in the official music video⁴⁶ –, *Together for Palestine* relies on collaboration between Palestinian artists and international artists and on its media resonance primarily to raise funds for practical humanitarian aid in Gaza, which have reached approximately £2 million and continue to increase through song purchases and related initiatives.⁴⁷

The primary function here becomes material and humanitarian: rather than reproducing top-down forms of cultural solidarity, the project relies on collaborative networks between Palestinian actors and international supporters, while simultaneously using its visibility to bring Palestinian artistic production to wider audiences. A circular dynamic finally seems to emerge: cultural heritage survives through musical transmission; musical circulation generates visibility and solidarity; and such visibility can, in turn, contribute materially to sustaining the communities from which that heritage emerged. Rather than a purely a top-bottom

⁴⁶ Filmed between Gaza and Jerusalem, the official video visually reinforces the song's themes through a rich repertoire of Palestinian national and folkloric symbols. Elements of war and displacement are featured with oranges, the sea, churches and mosques, olive trees, the Palestinian flag, and the symbolic passing of a handful of soil from one person to another, evoking attachment to the homeland. It displays a multigenerational dimension of Palestinian struggle and tradition: children and elders under olive trees, young boys diving from a cliff, families and youth sitting or walking over shattered buildings in Gaza. The closing caption is inspired from Darwish's verses present in the song: “They tried to bury us. They didn't know we were seeds”, another striking affirmation of hope and resilience. Video available at: <https://youtu.be/G957oaAZwhc?si=qZrqUHC4Xc7hyLvg>

⁴⁷ Cf. official website: togetherforpalestine.org.

or bottom-up model, this process appears to operate in a hybrid indeed circular logic.⁴⁸ These dimensions are also reflected musically by the performance itself: internal and external musical “hybridities”, together with the interaction of diverse stylistic elements, contribute to emotional expressivity and color. The two vocal solos, for example, or the incorporation of the strong harmonic dimension of Gospel traditions alongside the melodic richness of Arab musical language, are able to generate individual affective responses that may ultimately contribute to collective action. All of this suggests a conscious attempt by the artists to mobilize this music simultaneously as memory, cultural expression and practical intervention.

⁴⁸ A comparable yet closer to a bottom-up dynamic may also be observed in recent digital contexts. During the war in Gaza, musician and musical educator Ahmed Muin Abu Amsha and his children choir Gaza Birds Singing gained widespread visibility through a video in which the sounds of Israeli drones were used as musical pedal for a vocal improvisation over a melody (*Sheel Sheel*). Initially moving from a spontaneous attempt of “cheering up the children” and cover the persistent horror of the drones’ sound, this performance later acquired a broader social impact through viral circulation and became a worldwide known phenomenon thanks to the powerful symbolism of such a simple gesture. Abu Amsha thus started an online musical project out of it, called “Songs from the Rubble”, and with it he’s raising international awareness, collecting humanitarian support, while also contributing to the preservation and reinterpretation of Palestinian musical culture through both original compositions and reworkings of folk repertoire. His trajectory illustrates once again how musical practices may move from individual experience toward collective forms of survival and solidarity. Official website with all performances available at: <https://songsfromtherubble.com/>; for more about the song and his project’s origins, see: Radio Quar, interview with Ahmed Muin Abu Amsha available at: https://soundcloud.com/radio_quar/interview-ahmed-muin-abu-amsha?utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has tried to explore the possible intersections between music and the concept of survival, starting from the simple yet broad question: what does music do to people? How does it participate in survival? The theoretical framework and the analyses presented throughout these chapters suggest that music seems capable of participating in survival through multiple, interconnected dimensions that only become visible when approached from a genuinely multidisciplinary perspective.

The first chapter proposed a definition of the two concepts of music and survival and a theoretical framework that draws on various disciplines, among which ethnomusicological literature had a primary role especially on the lens through which musical practices are observed, as inherently tied to human and social behaviour. Such framework, that understands survival not as a single phenomenon but as operating simultaneously at biological, psychological, symbolic and collective levels, has been later applied to the Palestinian case. Nevertheless, it may be potentially applied to other examples of communities facing conditions of conflict, massive displacement or existential threat as suggested with the case of the Armenians. What emerges from this chapter is a first understanding of communal survival as something actively performed through music, while music itself appears as a form of cultural survival that travels across history and collective trauma. This suggests a first cyclic movement that intersects the two concepts.

The second chapter briefly explored the musical world of the Arab Eastern region and its key elements: the *maqām* tradition, the *tarab* aesthetic and the shared emotional grammar that Arab listeners carry across genres and contexts. The most significant finding of this chapter is that the *ethos* theory of the *maqām* establishes culturally shared associations between musical structures and emotional experience, both culturally specific and experientially recognisable through personal listening and collective musical practice. Such aesthetic-emotional grammar encompassing individual and collective dimensions resonates with

Merriam's constructivist perspective on musicality as agreed within a community. The listening experiments reported by Ayari-McAdams and Touma provide a good empirical support to such perspective, showing how Arab listeners tend to associate closer emotional areas to specific sounds, as well as find them more aesthetically pleasing. *Tarab* itself emerges as a further instance of cultural survival: an ecstatic feeling connected to a practice that has outlasted the historical conditions that sustained it in its classical form, migrating across media and genres while preserving its emotional logic of deep communion between music and listener, performer and community.

In the third chapter, such principles are shown in practice throughout the historical journey of Palestinian musical culture. A first notable observation is the historical endurance of certain musical practices, mostly oral, as showed by how folk music maintained a symbolic continuity through the often-traumatic historical events experienced by Palestinian people. Daily musical practices and elements repeatedly became attached to political and identitarian narratives – through spontaneous or well-engineered processes –, suggesting that such functions may be drivers of cultural transmission and continuity. The diasporic condition of most Palestinian communities did not interrupt this process but often intensified it. The urge of continuous contact with the past and the constant renegotiation between Self and Other – explained by Alajaji, expert on the Armenian case, which features many similarities – makes music in diaspora a privileged medium of memory and belonging, sometimes providing a “restored homeland” as well as a space of resistance. Another notable finding is the tension between art committed to the cause and non-political art that characterizes certain phases of especially recent Palestinian musical history and remains a crucial question for Palestinian artists today.

The final chapter initially photographs the contemporary reality of Palestinian music making, with a focus on folk practices and the mediatic expansion happening in recent years. Drawing on past recuperations of folk traditions that

characterize many phases of Palestinian musical and political history, it argues that the same is happening in the contemporary scene, with a key role played by mediatic influence. The case, *Yamma Mwel el Hawa*, becomes emblematic of the historical trajectory of Palestinian people, a musical thread that has crossed more than a century of conflict, exile and displacement while continuously acquiring new symbolic meanings. The contemporary revival of the song reflects what I argue to be a broader revival of Palestinian folk music, which seems to have expanded into a globally recognised phenomenon, also fostered by social media. As mentioned at the beginning, social media may produce distance from violence and detach users from ground reality, but somehow also contain unprecedented possibilities for Palestinian artistic agency, in terms of both artistic recognition and solidarity message. This differs quite importantly from past trends in both Arab and international mainstream pop scene, where for example there was little or no Palestinian involvement in artistical solidarity projects. The examples of Together for Palestine and Ahmed Muin Abu Amscha represent a new collaborative model of “committed art” (*fann al-multazim*), a hybrid form of cultural survival that is neither institutional nor purely grassroots. The international window opened in one case by collaboration of international artists and institutions with Palestinian ones, and in the other case by social media, represents a possibility for a new hybrid and cyclic form of survival that encompasses all the dimensions present in our framework.

This circular dynamic represents perhaps the clearest outcome of the analytical framework proposed throughout this dissertation. The visibility generated by international and cross-cultural collaborations allows the aesthetic and rhetorical content of the music to spread and generate emotional engagement, which may, in turn, inspire collective action, as El-Halawani claimed. In both examples, such action generates humanitarian material support to the same communities whose culture generated that response. Crucially, this process appears not to be based on externally imposed or paternalistic forms of humanitarian representation. Rather,

Palestinian artistic agency becomes the starting point from which this cycle unfolds.

For example, Abu Amsha's project clearly illustrates how an individual act of musical creativity, born from the immediate need to comfort children under bombardment, can evolve into an international network of solidarity, cultural recognition and humanitarian support. His work, as well as Nai Barghouti's and all other contemporary artists here cited, function also as a testament against the dehumanization process enacted towards Palestinians as a whole. By placing music and culture at the centre of their public presence, these artists pursue a double objective: internally, they support their communities both materially and psychologically; externally, they invite wider recognition of Palestinian cultural and human value through music's shared emotional grammar. In doing so, these practices challenge the dehumanizing narratives produced by colonial power. At the same time, they offer an alternative to the hyper-ideologized and intransigent narratives of resistance that still dominate both Palestinian political discourse and external media representations. Abu Amsha's reply to both is disarmingly simple:

“I dream of sharing our music with the world and being a voice of beauty from Gaza – not a voice of war. We don't carry weapons – we carry melodies.”

Overall, if Massad shows that music documents Palestinian history, and McDonald that it actively performs Palestinian identity, the present dissertation ultimately suggests that such performance may itself become productive, generating material – even biological –, emotional and symbolical-cultural forms of individual and collective survival.

This thesis opens many other new questions that could merit ulterior research and interest. Given the multidisciplinary nature of the framework proposed, the interaction of music and survival may be looked in more depth through a specific discipline and then combined, as I'd suggest both research and humanitarian

groundwork to rely on the collaboration among disciplines to better understand and have an impact on these dynamics. Moreover, the tension between folk culture as living practice and folk culture as political symbol is indeed not resolved – it cannot be, because it is a tension internal to the tradition itself – but it is identified as one of the most productive analytical frames for understanding contemporary Palestinian musical production, and perhaps other communities’ as well. Indeed, it could be of interest to explore better Merriam’s proposition “all music is folk music”, to see if the functions of folk music for the Palestinian case are applicable to other musical genres and other communities or musical worlds.

This dissertation also presents several limitations here acknowledged. First, it relies almost entirely on secondary literature and audiovisual material, without ethnographic fieldwork or personal interviews with musicians and audiences. Second, the multidisciplinary nature of the framework inevitably requires engaging with fields that could each deserve much deeper treatment, from trauma studies to music psychology, anthropology and *maqam* theory. Finally, several of the contemporary musical phenomena discussed here remain ongoing and rapidly evolving, making any interpretation provisional.

Overall, there is no definite answer to the question of what music does to people. Yet if this dissertation has shown anything, it is that in contexts where human life itself is threatened, music does, at times, become one of the ways through which survival is imagined, enacted, performed, and made possible. Personally, I’d agree with John Blacking’s sentence at the end of Chapter 1: music is essential to human survival, and I’d add that art is always “for the people” (*fann li-l-nas*).

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