PART I

Alternative Modernities

Norms and Innovations
CHAPTER ONE

Transforming Space
The Production of Contemporary Syrian Art Music

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In the summers Solhi [al-Wadi] used to return to Damascus and he soon mixed with the fledgling classical music enthusiasts and other members of a revolutionary movement with a love for the fine arts, people like Sadek Faroun and Rafah Qasawat. … Sadek and Rafah played the violin while Solhi played the viola and conducted. They persevered and eventually, with 3 instruments, played the Introduction to Boieldieu’s “Calif of Bagdad” and the 2nd movement of Schubert’s Unfinished Symphony at the Ommayad Hotel in front of an astonished public. In the late 1940s this quartet started the serious classical music movement in Syria.
—Samar al-Wadi (2009)

Decades after this vanguard performance of “serious” music in the “the oldest continually inhabited city in the world,” the risks taken in pursuit of a space for contemporary Syrian art music continue to push the boundaries of musical creativity and expressive culture in Damascus. In Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East, composers who are invested in experimental approaches to musical structures and processes develop their work in a musical culture that tends to besow aesthetic appeal and social prestige to modern Arab music or to classical, romantic, and early modern periods of European art music. Historically, the institutionalization of European art music in Syria has been attributed to Dr. Solhi al-Wadi, a visionary committed to the musical life of his nation. After graduating from the Royal Academy of Music in London in 1960, he returned to Damascus and established the inaugural children’s music school in 1962. From the late 1960s onward, he invited educators from the Soviet Union to Damascus for residencies in piano, strings, and music theory, and likewise sponsored study opportunities in Moscow for Syrian students. He established the Higher Institute for Music and Drama in 1990 to provide domestic opportunities for higher education in the performing arts and conducted the Syrian National Symphony Orchestra until his sudden collapse onstage and subsequent death in 2007. His legacy continues to be honored today through commemorative concerts, commissions, and the dedicated efforts of those who were guided by his stern yet profoundly personal approach to tutelage. 

The post–World War Two era in which Solhi al-Wadi came of age was a period when Syria strove to determine an autonomous sense of nationhood. Symbolic resources such as folk music and dance were harnessed by various factions that competed for sovereignty over the nascent state of Syria in alignment with political ideologies of Arabism, Islamism, secular liberalism, and socialism (Wieland 2006). As suggested by al-Wadi’s efforts, collaborations with institutions in Western Europe and the Soviet Union shaped the establishment of musical programs and activities in Syria. The founding of a Syrian conservatory for *musiqa klasikiyya*, or classical music, was predicated on these interactions that more broadly indicate historically contingent patterns of mobility. As music students pursued opportunities for training abroad that perpetuated aesthetic models of European modernism or Soviet socialist realism, respectively, their choices were situated within larger discourses of social progress and cultural modernity that Edward Soja (1989) has termed “geographies of imperialism.”

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, a young generation of Syrian experimental composers has conceived a space for *musiqa mu’asira*, or contemporary art music. Informed by debates on critical aesthetics, modernity, and subjectivity in the Arab world and beyond, composers affiliated with *musiqa mu’asira* draw on particular compositional devices and techniques in ways that mediate global discourses of avant-gardism. In what follows, I will discuss how their work transforms aesthetic concepts of musical space and situate *musiqa mu’asira* in the context of contemporary Syria. In particular, this essay focuses on selected compositions by three composers—Zaid Jabri, Shafi Badreddin, and Hassan Taha—who collectively articulate the possibilities for transforming modern Arab music into a contemporary space for experimentation.³

This essay draws on a series of conversations, exchanges, and debates that I was privileged to join during a period of fieldwork in Damascus in 2007–2008. As an ethnographer of musical practices, I regularly visited the Higher Institute for Music to take private instrumental lessons, visit informally with students and faculty, and attend workshops, conferences, programs, and events that reflect the bustling pace of musical life in Damascus. In particular, the contributions of Jabri, Badreddin, and Taha stood out as emblems for a new generation of Syrian artists striving to suggest alternative creative visions of and for their society. In this essay, their embrace of cultural alternatives and experimentalism will be framed within the geographical contexts and institutional spaces in which they emerge. By situating this art world within the discursive and artistic practices by which composers, performers, and audiences become subjects of their own histories and experiences, I hope to demonstrate how expressive forms and musical performance are shaped by social spaces and spatialized practices. *Musiqa mu’asira* seeks to intervene with physical space in ways that articulate the very contemporaneity of music in Syria today. In other words, I will link the
particularities of contemporary Syrian art music to the historical conditions, social structures, and discursive spaces from which it arises and which it may yet transform.

Spatializing Music History: The Emergence of Musiqa Mu‘asira

Contemporary Syrian art music has emerged in the past decade amidst a significant growth in entrepreneurship and economic liberalization in the Bashar al-Assad era. Like his father, Hafez al-Assad, Bashar and First Lady Asma al-Assad institutionalized high and traditional arts as part of their economic reform policies. They expanded Syria’s capacity to participate in global networks of cultural production by investing in arts training, infrastructure, and international collaborations. At the time of this writing in summer 2011, the arts and culture sector is divided, like many Syrians, between support for and opposition to Bashar al-Assad’s regime. Some arts leaders perceive antiregime Islamist factions as a potential threat to the musical arts and voice support for a secular state under Assad, whereas others condemn the regime for its violation of human dignity. Like most sectors of the Syrian economy, cultural production has declined during the conflict and, consequently, many artists have left the country. Though art music is no longer centered in Damascus, it is nonetheless sustained by Syrian composers and performers who continue their work abroad.

The main artery for music education and performance in Damascus is the Higher Institute for Music and Drama (hereafter referred to as the Higher Institute). The Higher Institute is adjacent to the world-class opera house, Dar al-Assad for Culture and Arts, which has served as the primary incubator for artistic collaboration and international exchange in Syria since its inauguration in 2004. The arts complex skirts Al-Umawyeen Square, a heavily trafficked area in central Damascus near the embassies and consulates of the Abu Roumanneh neighborhood. The complex is encircled by educational and cultural institutions including al-Assad National Library and the Department for Radio and Television. This zone bustles with motor traffic, arts students, and state clerks by day and with arts audiences by night in ways that dynamically texture the spatial experience of urban modernity in Damascus.

The Higher Institute is the entry point for those who aspire to participate in serious musical life and pursue Western art music. The majority of formal student programs and activities focus on classical Western art music or modern Arab music, the latter made possible by the 2003 establishment of an orchestra devoted to classical and modern Arab music and the recent expansion of performance studies to include Arab instruments such as buzuziq, nay, ‘ud, and qanun. Following Solhi al-Wadi’s retirement from public life in 2002, a young and energetic artistic director, Missak Baghboudarian, was appointed to lead the Higher Institute and
the Syrian National Symphony Orchestra. Trained in Italy, Baghboudarian has facilitated numerous educational programs and artistic residencies that are supported by the state and by government-operated nongovernmental organizations (GONGOS) for the arts, such as the SADA (Echo) Musical Cultural Association and Rawafed, the cultural arm of the Syrian Trust for Development.6

Despite new levels of commitment to cultural expression and contemporary arts production spurred by economic reform, usually though not always through commissions administered by Syrian and European GONGOS,7 musiqa mu‘asira remains at the institutional periphery of art music practices in Syria.8 Opportunities linked to musiqa mu‘asira are furthermore dependent on transnational arts networks that are entangled with postcolonial geographies and histories. Not unlike other skilled workers situated at the periphery of globalized political economies, Syrian composers and musicians often undertake training abroad and return to Damascus with an expanded set of social and musical resources. The compelling effects of these histories, or what Henri Lefebvre terms “spatial actions” (1991, 222), can be traced according to the following profiles of three artists whose cosmopolitan visions have shaped the emergence of musiqa mu‘asira. These three narratives illustrate the ways in which the subjects’ pathways reveal or contradict certain logics in the geographies of spatial modernities—that is, the economic and political dependencies that contextualize the production of contemporary Syrian art music.

Shafi Badreddin, based in Luxembourg at the time of this writing, has pursued pathways in Francophone spheres of contemporary art music. After receiving a bachelor’s degree in electrical engineering from Damascus University, he graduated in ‘ud performance from the Higher Institute (Badreddin, pers. correspondence). Prior to his relocation in early 2011, he taught music theory, orchestration, composition, and chamber music at the Higher Institute. His numerous compositions and arrangements are frequently presented by the Syrian National Symphony Orchestra and chamber ensembles, including the Damascus Festival Chamber Players. Badreddin has received several distinguished prizes for solo ‘ud performance, including at a 2001 international competition affiliated with the Arab League of Nations, and has appeared as a solo ‘ud player and composer at the Autumn Festival in Paris. In 2005, Badreddin received a diploma in composition from the National Conservatoire in Lyon, France, where he studied spectral music with Christophe Maudot, Serge Borel, and Delphine Gaude.9 Badreddin also frequently works in Italy, where he has served as a member of the jury for the Valentino Bucci International Composers Competition held in Rome and received a special juror’s mention at the 2 Agosto International Composing Competition in Italy in 2010. Badreddin’s opportunities in Western Europe may be partially indebted to Syria’s strong and enduring trade relations with France, Germany, and Italy. The last has served as Syria’s foremost trading partner in
Europe since the late 1990s and sustains these alliances through opportunities for economic growth and renewed commitments to tourism and cultural diplomacy. In contradistinction to these journeys across Western Europe and the United States, Zaid Jabri is currently completing his doctorate in composition under the supervision of Krzysztof Penderecki at the Krakow Academy of Music. Jabri’s introduction to Lutosławski’s *Cello Concerto* (1970) during early studies in music theory with Solhi al-Wadi is what inspired him to pursue composition studies in Poland. His first composition, *Two Songs for Soprano and String Orchestra*, won first prize at the 1997 Adam Didur Composers Competition in Sanok, Poland, after which he began studying with Zbigniew Bujarski at the Krakow Academy of Music. Jabri’s choice to pursue studies in Poland may echo the pathways of earlier generations of Syrian music students who received training courtesy of scholarships available through the Warsaw Pact accords. Syria, which is a former non-Soviet Warsaw Pact country, displays aesthetic forms of socialist realism in ways that bear further consideration for a better understanding of twentieth-century intellectual histories in the Arab world.

Yet Jabri’s long-term residency in Krakow does not circumscribe his work as a nostalgic retention of a shared socialist heritage that links Syria with Poland. Rather, his work is commissioned and promoted as a signifier of musical modernism by which Syrian cultural production circulates through contemporary arts institutions across Western and Eastern Europe, as well as Cairo, Dubai, and Damascus. The inclusion of his work in these networks extends the visibility of contemporary Syrian art music to venues that include the Warsaw Autumn Festival, “The Days of Polish Music” at Istanbul Bilgi University, the International Musikwerkstatt Buckow and Morgenland Festival Osnabrück in Germany, and an ongoing roster of commissions from Dar al-Assad in Damascus.

Hassan Taha has taken a strikingly different approach to music education that is perhaps more typical of Syrian musical life than those of his colleagues in *musiqa mu‘asira*. Raised in the central Syrian region of Homs, Taha began playing ‘ud and composing at an early age as a result of the influence of his uncle, the distinguished ‘ud player Samih Taha (Taha, pers. correspondence). He pursued performance studies on French horn at the Higher Institute and upon graduation secured a position with the Syrian National Symphony Orchestra. Due to the absence of a formal program in composition at the Higher Institute, he taught himself methods of orchestration based on works couriered from Europe by colleagues. While his resourceful strategies helped him informally circumvent political and economic barriers to the flow of goods, they also indicate Taha’s relative lack of access to educational resources in comparison to his various colleagues. Nonetheless, he composes actively for chamber ensemble, symphony orchestra, and theater, and his work received national recognition at a February 2008 gala concert at Dar al-Assad that was dedicated solely to his oeuvre.
Taha has also played a critical role in launching collaborations with European cultural foundations and figures, one of which resulted in *Cadmus and Europe: East and West*, an instrumental suite commissioned by the European Commission and the Syrian Renaissance Association and premiered at Dar al-Assad in late 2009. Other recent works include an adaptation of Henrik Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People* (2008), commissioned by the Damascus Capital of Arab Culture Festival, and two musical theater works premiered in Germany, *The Bathroom* (2011) and *The Speech* (2011). Influenced by experimentalist composers such as Boulez, Xenakis, Ligeti, Penderecki, and Lutosławski, Taha recently completed artist residencies at the Maastricht Conservatory in the Netherlands and the Bern University of the Arts (BUA) in Switzerland. In the fall of 2010, Taha began pursuing a master’s degree in music composition and theater at BUA to develop his longtime interest in musical theater.

These artists began their musical careers at the Higher Institute during the 1990s and pursued instrumental performance in Western art music under the supervision of Solhi al-Wadi. Generally, though not always, they left Syria to pursue opportunities for professional growth in Europe and North America and returned to Damascus to integrate their studies of Western art music with musical life in Syria. Part of what distinguishes their artistic pursuits from those of their peers at the Higher Institute is the geopolitical and cultural spaces that are conjoined through their work. It is precisely because of how these musical histories are imbricated in the material and discursive space of the Higher Institute that these projects may be coalesced into a sense of Syrianness; that is, this art world has become representative of the contemporaneity of Syrian life.

**Representations and Transformations of Modal Space**

Spatial relations in music have arguably indexed the very modernity of Arab identity since the category of *musīqa ʿarabiyya*, or Arab music, was formulated during an historical encounter between reformers, musicians, and scholars from Europe and the Middle East in 1932.\(^{13}\) As suggested in the introduction to this volume, the conference in Cairo wrestled with ways to place Arab music on a “path towards progress” using “modern” and “scientific” methods and musical techniques from Europe (Racy 1991, 75). Participants tried to codify the relative tuning of the Arab musical system into a “master scale consisting of 24 equally-tempered quarter-tones. ... Reformers were attempting to formulate a universal model to be re-universalized in practice” (Thomas 2007, 5). While these reform efforts arguably failed in their attempt to systematize Arab music, I would suggest that they point to the significance of pitch relations and the role of musical space in negotiating processes of modernization.

Composers working today are heirs to these discourses that set an “aesthetics of
authenticity” (Shannon 2006) in relation to concepts of heritage (turath) and modernity (hadatha). For musicians in Syria, a sense of authenticity (asala) is expressed through the traditions of musiqa sharqiyya, or Oriental music, which refers to a genre of art music typified by improvised instrumental and vocal performances and a classicized body of repertoire from before the modern era. Vital to these creative practices is the production of what musicians and audiences term “Oriental spirit” (ruh sharqiyya). This affective quality emerges from how a musician articulates a sensitivity to the performance principles and musical grammar (qawa'id musiqiyya) of Oriental music through the local dynamics of improvised performance.

Musiqa mu'asira is articulated through compositional strategies that interrogate the formation of aesthetic media and potentially transform the localization of musical meaning. In framings similar to those that inform the global configuration of avant-gardism elsewhere, composers associated with musiqa mu'asira challenge these discursive relations by drawing on maqamat, or modal structures, as the main set of organizing principles that produce musical meaning in the performance of musiqa sharqiyya. In this performance genre, musical space is organized as modal units. Pathways emerge through the perceived distance between relative pitches that constitute a tetrachord (jins, pl. ajnas), the primary organizational unit of Arab maqamat. The transformation of modal space depends on how a performer negotiates pathways between tetrachords. Referred to as sayr, these pathways typically emerge through embellishments, timbral effects, and other stylistic techniques that are embedded in performance practices of solo instrumental improvisations (taqsim, pl. taqasim).

In the following sections, I will provide formal analyses of recent works by Jabri, Badreddin, and Taha in order to establish a conceptual framework for musiqa mu'asira. I draw extensively on interviews with the composers, in which they explain each work in terms of analytic methods, musical materials, and compositional processes. In particular, these analyses focus on how these three composers transform concepts of musical space by deconstructing sayr, exploring jins, and resignifying musical embellishments through experimental techniques. These interpretive analyses suggest that the aesthetic qualities of musiqa mu'asira emerge from the intertextual relations between discourses of European experimentalism and musiqa sharqiyya.

Zaid Jabri: Modal Representations

Zaid Jabri experiments with musical space through the mediation and representation of tonal, atonal, and modal structures. According to Jabri, Glyptos (2005), a commission by the Warsaw Autumn Festival written for flutist Mario Caroli and the Krakow Percussion Group, is one of the first compositions in which
he departs from Romantic-era conventions and experiments with classical form, orchestration, and tonality. Rather than subscribe to hierarchical figure-ground relations between soloist and ensemble in concertino form, Jabri facilitates harmonic interaction between percussion ensemble and solo flute. In the opening of Glyptos, Jabri presents a rapid succession of polyrhythmic, pitched flourishes in the tubular bells and tom-toms with a sustained flute drone in the background. These opening gestures establish rhythmic subdivisions of triplets, quintuplets, and septuplets that he recalls in the second section with a metric imprecision that allows the rhythm, as Jabri depicts, “to swim in a relaxed 6/8 dance meter.” In this piece, Jabri shifts the role of percussion away from traditional accompaniment by experimenting with parameters of duration, intensity, pitch class, and timbre.

Jabri experiments with tonal conventions of tempered pitch space in several ways. He scores acoustic variables local to the timpani and subjects these to continuous retuning in concert performance. Atonal figures in the flute part are transformed through serial techniques of repetition, transposition, and retrograde. Melodic motion favors descent by semitones with frequent registral shifts and leaps by a seventh or ninth; this activity inverts constrained intervallic space, such as a minor second, in ways that generate tension and relaxation. Semitonal pitch relations are also destabilized by microtonalities in the flute (E half-flat and B half-flat in measures 24 and 27). Glissando techniques are frequently used not only as embellishments but also as a means to equivocate the alignment of pitch space in diatonicism. Finally, Jabri employs extended instrumental techniques in all parts, most remarkably in an exchange between crotales and flute in the closing section. The crotales part moves dynamically through pitch space by means of arco technique—here by drawing a string bow along the brass surface. This produces a continuous series of sustained pitches that ascend stepwise by semi- and whole-tone intervals (G–C₃) and exchange registers with the flute part, which mimics percussive attacks by means of sixteenth-note slaps and descends by semitones (B–B flat–A) in the final phrase of the work.

The techniques employed in Glyptos signify less the production of sonic difference itself, such as arco techniques or microtonalities, and more the transformation of meaning in the process of composing polysemic figures. One way in which Jabri integrates discrete events into a narrative structure is through his concept of “modulation.” In a 2010 interview, Jabri clarified that the concept of modulation refers not only to musiqa sharqiyya but also to diatonic shifts in Western harmonic progression, rhythmic and metric shifts in temporal processes, and sonorous shifts in timbre, texture, and registral space. Jabri reflexively connects aesthetics and cultural representation of maqamat through his explanation of modulation. He distinguishes between traditional and contemporary music as distinct modes of cultural expression. Jabri shared that he
“forbids” himself from attempting to render improvisational performance practices into composition. Improvisation, for Jabri, is a traditional practice that cannot be rendered by compositional texts into an authorial discourse of the composer. Moreover, he insists that improvisation is an art form that produces authentic values of cultural heritage which must be preserved through performance rather than through alteration by composition.

With regard to *Glyptos*, modulations gradually occur in the contrapuntal expansion from a fifth (A-E) to an octave (G-G\(^1\)) and through semitones in the timpani line in measures 43–65. This spatial expansion is complemented by a gradual intensification from fortepiano to fortissimo and a deceptive cadence in measure 65 that transitions into a dancelike section. Modulation may also occur through serial transformation of distinct figures, such as the inversion of a minor second into a leap by a seventh or retrograde Bach technique. Modulation, in *Glyptos* and more generally across Jabri’s oeuvre, depends on multiple voices interacting with one another in ways that I suggest are heteroglossic, or capable of referring to several orders of representation within the same authorial voice. Heteroglossia, according to Bakhtin (1991), is constituted of dialogic interaction between voices in ways that open up the possibilities for multiple and subjective interpretations as potential meanings reinforce, overlap, and at times contradict one another. In this context, modulation may arguably be framed as a technique used by Jabri to either intimate or defamiliarize sonic events based on specific sets of relations constructed within the compositional narrative of his works.

This framework offers a conceptual apparatus for *Song without Words III* (2009), a work commissioned for the first Musahat Sharqiyya (Oriental Landscapes) Festival held at Dar al-Assad in Damascus. The third of a series under the same title, the premiere featured Kinan Abo Afash, a cellist who performs with classical, jazz, fusion, and world music projects in Syria and the United States. *Song without Words III* (solo cello, strings, and percussion) explores harmonics, perception, and resonating bodies and is inspired by the frequencies produced by moving a sound source, namely a metallic bowl, within greater or lesser proximity to the listening body. These sonorities are reimagined by Jabri in relation to *maqam bayati* as a creative response to the stipulation by festival curators that the commission be “inspired by *maqam*” (Jabri 2010, 49). This curatorial stipulation can be interpreted as an insistence that figures of *maqam* articulate links to classical Syrian musical heritage, that is, between tradition and modernity. Composers may negotiate this overdetermined and paradoxical operation by refuting it, as will be discussed with regard to Hassan Taha’s work, or, as demonstrated here by Jabri, by participating in these operational practices of representation.

In *Song without Words III*, Jabri approaches *maqam* as a fixed set of intervals that constitute a compositional topic rather than a mutable set of tetrachords that emerge during a *taqsim* by modulation through other tetrachords. In other words,
he represents *maqam* as a scalar figure rather than as a dynamic field organized by 

modes (Marcus 2002). *Song without Words III* thus explores the tetrachords 

associated with *bayati* as idiomatic spaces that can be modified by atonalist 

approaches to timbre, pitch design, and textural micropolyphonies. For example, 

Jabri extracts the lower tetrachord of *bayati* and performs a retrograde 

transformation in the first violin part. Figure 1.1a presents the lower and upper 

tetrachords of *bayati* according to standard *maqam* conventions, and Figure 1.1b 

represents the aleatoric transformation. By altering the lower tetrachord of *bayati*, 

Jabri maintains his aesthetic distinctions between, on the one hand, traditional 

musical practices of improvisation through *maqamat* and, on the other, 

contemporary compositional practices that decontextualize tetrachords and modes 

as fixed stylistic figures.

![Fig. 1.1a. Lower and upper tetrachords in *maqam bayati*.](image)

*Song without Words III* opens with an acoustic simulation of the resonances 

produced by striking a metallic bowl. These atmospheric conditions are mimicked 

by artificial harmonics and glissandi in the upper strings, which produce a 

background effect. The stillness of the sustained harmonics suggests a drone, as 

conventionally occurs at the beginning of a solo *taqsim* in *bayati*, and establishes 

the modal center (D). Though nonmetered, the opening is temporally 

differentiated by staggered entrances and heavy accents in the strings, which are 

individuated in the musical score by stand. This increases the textural depth of the
work in ways that broadly suggest heterophonic qualities of modern Arab orchestration. The primary modal space of the work, the lower tetrachord of bayati (D–E half-flat–F–G), is introduced not by stepwise motion as would occur in a taqsim but rather as a vertically stacked sound cluster enmeshed among the sliding and partitioned string parts (Fig. 1.2).

In the opening measures, the second violins iterate a motif that is similar to the Doppler effect by alternations between minor third and semitonal intervals, as depicted in Figure 1.3 (Jabri 2010, 49). This figure emerges in different voices and constructs a narrative through its transformation in the work. Jabri transforms musical material by means of aleatoric and serial techniques including Bach fugal sequences, inversion, repetition, retrograde, as well as registral shifts and transposition by a quarter tone in the solo cello part. Accents and bowing techniques in the strings also transform this motif by dynamic shifts in timbre and intensity. The concomitant effect of these motivic transformations is to oscillate between tension and resolution, anticipation and peak, proximity and distance. In addition, the compositional design of harmonic effects structures the work as an oscillation between sheer and lush timbres. Sonorities are produced in the strings through a variety of techniques that include artificial harmonics, glissandi, double stops, pizzicato, tremolo, sul tasto, and molto lento vibrato. The intermittent use of bells intones other sonorities. By means of harmonic effects and explorations in sound, the overall structure is a dynamic alternation that swells and recedes between sections of heightened intensity and dampened stillness.
Fig. 1.2. Jabri, *Song without Words III*, vertically stacked realization of lower tetrachord in *maqam bayati*, mm. 15–29.

Figure 1.3. Zaid Jabri, *Song without Words III*, “Doppler effect” motif in second violin, mm. 10–13
In addition, aesthetic qualities emerge through Jabri’s assimilation of stylistic ornamentation associated with *musiqa sharqiyya*. In *Song without Words III*, embellishments are not ancillary to the main melodic line but are constituent of that line itself in ways that resemble *musiqa sharqiyya*. Referred to as *zakhrafa* (plural: *zakhrafat*), embellishments generally consist of trills, tremolos, glissandi, grace notes, and the repetition of idiomatic figures. *Zakhrafat* are represented as compositional topoi through phrase structures that are incongruent with their stylistic referents. Jabri’s modernist appropriation of formal stylistic devices creates an aesthetic effect that can be likened to, but does not directly mimic, conventional idioms of *musiqa sharqiyya*. For example, the background drone of artificial harmonics is produced in the strings by sustained whole notes that repeatedly ascend by semitone through lower neighbor figures (F♯–G, G♯–A). The background texture is punctuated by staggered entrances. In the foreground, the solo cello generates a sense of anticipation by gradual melodic ascension composed of octave leaps, sixteenth notes, and glissandi that shift registers by tenths (E–G♯) or octaves. This ascension peaks in measures 79–80 by means of a suspension that gives way to descending *sospiro* figures staggered in the strings. The lamentative character of this section is glossed by a reiteration of the Doppler effect motif in the solo cello as a retrograde set in the lower tetrachord of *bayati*, dampened by artificial harmonics.

Jabri eschews adherence to any given system of composition or stylistic period in favor of self-informed historical critique. As he himself explains, he draws upon stylistic devices, atonal techniques, and experimental approaches and refers to historical periods of Western art music, such as serialism, or to specific composers, such as Ravel and Ligeti. In ways perhaps comparable to his advisor Penderecki, he also distances his aesthetic framework from that of European avant-gardism, which he regards as an overtly formalistic approach. Jabri espouses a musical sense of cosmopolitanism that is expressed through his capacity to naturalize a broad range of effects, from single pitch-classes and clusters to heterogeneous sound shapes and canonic writing. In self-reflection, he recognizes a proclivity for particular features, such as a “relatively narrow” ambitus of a fifth, but suggests that while this “is probably due to my heritage ... it is not something that I try to stick with” (Jabri, pers. correspondence). This statement registers a sense of cultural intimacy to structures of Arab music in ways that arguably Orientalize his subjectivity; however, Jabri disavows such intimacy by claiming to transcend the signifying capacity of music. Moreover, he internalizes processes of representation andprojects subjectivity in ways that are embedded within the subjective conditions of autonomous art music. For Jabri, the musical meaning of his work arguably emerges from a social space that privileges European cultural imaginaries and projects Romantic conceptions of organicism and universalism that have been historically situated by scholars who seek to provincialize
European art music.

Hassan Taha: Distending Modal Space

The German literary critic Peter Bürger situates the Western avant-garde within the historical development of institutions in capitalist society (1984). From this perspective, Hassan Taha’s work serves as an apparatus for the social critique of mass culture and consumption practices in modern Syrian society. Taha is dedicated to developing new possibilities for contemporary music in Syria as a response to what he views as the degradation of modern Arab music by those who produce taqlid (lit: imitation), or the appropriation of musical conventions and folkloric idioms that are overtly “sweet and pleasing to the ear.” For example, he criticizes the burgeoning popularity of Oriental improvisation among fusion groups that assimilate the practice of maqamat and threaten to banalize it through their copycat efforts. Addressing this anxiety, Taha preserves an authenticity of modern Arab music by inscribing the structural dynamics of improvisation within his compositions. Taha also frames his projects as a means for social reform that will cultivate new audiences for contemporary music. In a televised interview with Sharq wa Gharb (“East and West” 2009), a talk show aired by the state-sponsored satellite television channel, he laments the decline of serious listening practices among contemporary audiences. Rather than providing music that stimulates bourgeois desire for modern Arab music, he argues that audience development is key to the modernization of society and seeks to promote new ways of listening through the production of critical aestheticism in contemporary Syrian music. He suggests that audiences should expand their capacity to appreciate and distinguish among contemporary art music, Oriental music, Arab music, and folkloric forms, among other categories of taste.

One way in which Taha integrates critical aestheticism into his composition projects is his critique of linearity in Arab music. Taha claims that linearity imposes constraints on musical texture through certain forms and structures (Taha, pers. correspondence). For instance, linearity might emerge melodically from an ambitus of a fifth, structurally by modal expansion through stepwise motion (as compared to vertical harmonic progression in Western tonal music), and orchestrally by homophonic relations among multiple parts that either double the melodic phrase or embellish the principal line through idiomatic fills, or lazim. To transform the linearity of Arab music, Taha proposes the concept of tajsim, or embodiment. A spatial metaphor, the concept of tajsim shapes volume and depth into a three-dimensional sound texture by experimentation with harmonic effects, pitch space, polyrhythms, metric dissonance, and orchestration.

In Sama'i Chromatic (2006), written for clarinet, lute, cello, piano, and horn, Taha engages with maqamat as a discursive structure that he “destroys” through
encounter with dodecaphonic and other experimental techniques (Taha, pers. correspondence). This approach constructs an antinarrative to the organizing principles that structure modal progression in *maqamat* as well as to parameters of rhythm, meter, and form. While Taha employs dodecaphonicism to expand the boundaries of form, he does not sustain a systematic treatment of aleatoric techniques such as repetition, retrograde, inversion, and retrograde-inversion transformations of pitch class series. Rather, he intermittently uses these techniques as expedients that reconfigure tropes of *maqamat* practice and potentialize “a new language” for Arab music. This approach offers an alternative to creative projects and prevents *maqamat* from “becoming frozen in a tourist museum” (ibid.). Taha celebrates aesthetic critique as a social intervention that preserves *maqamat* through the dynamics of performance and approaches cultural memory work as a creative and adaptive process.

According to conventions of modern Arab music, particularly those of the *muwashshah* genre associated with Aleppo, *sama‘i* compositions are canonized as expositions in a given *maqam* that articulate and extend the aesthetic possibilities of that *maqam*. *Sama‘i* is typically performed at a moderate tempo in a metric cycle known as *sama‘i thaqil*. Subdivided into clusters of $3 + 2 + 2 + 3$, *sama‘i* rhythms are typically performed by *riqq*, or tambourine, in a conventionalized pattern of higher and lower percussive attacks and rests (Fig. 1.4a). In *Sama‘i Chromatic*, Taha adapts these rhythmic figures to the cello part and displaces the third beat of the metrical pattern with a rhythmic accent rather than an *iss*, or rest (Fig. 1.4b). He also chromatically expands the pitch series from a diminished fifth (G-C#) to a full fifth (G-D) in measure 11 in ways that may be associated with his concept of *tajsim*. Further experimentation occurs in the clarinet by means of a repeated anacrusis that anticipates rhythmic subdivisions by an eighth note and by the production of minor-second intervals that are not local to the host *maqam* of the composition, *hijaz*. This activity constitutes compositional interventions of conventional *sama‘i* form by means of displaced figures, aleatoric techniques, and nonconventional orchestration. The instrumentation itself materializes new possibilities in timbral aesthetics insofar as *sama‘i* is typically performed by a *takht*, or a chamber ensemble comprising *nay*, ‘*ud*, *qanun*, *kiman* (violin), and *riqq*.

![Fig. 1.4a. Sama‘i Thaqil, standard rhythmic pattern.](image)
In *musiqa sharqiyya*, sama‘i compositions traditionally develop through four sections, or *khana*: the first *khana* introduces the primary *maqam* of the composition; the second *khana* establishes this *maqam* through a compositional statement that serves as a reprise between each section as a reprise between every section; the third *khana* destabilizes modal relations by modulating to a related *maqam*; and the fourth *khana* typically switches to a dancelike ternary meter in the primary *maqam* before a recapitulation to the melodic line of the second *khana*. In contrast to this traditional alternating sequence, Taha evokes sonata form in his narrative development of *hijaz* as the main topos of *Sama‘i Chromatic*. In the first section, Taja aestheticizes the modal space of *hijaz* through dodecaphonic techniques, the second section emerges through a distinct clarinet melody in a light duple meter, and the final recapitulation refers back to the initial chromatic development of *hijaz*.

*Sama‘i Chromatic* generates the modal space of *hijaz* in ways that both depend on and equivocate the principles of modulation in *musiqa sharqiyya*. To illustrate his approach to modulation in the context of another *maqam*, Taha elaborates on the conventional pathways, or *sayr*, of *maqam rast*: “You have to pass through the intervals of *maqam rast* in order to make *rast* clear. Then you modulate, such as moving from G for *maqam hijaz*, or scale degree 3 to make [*maqam*] *sigah*, or 5 to make *bayati* [sic] from sol. You may use scale degree 3 or 7 to bridge between *maqam* [sic]. You finish the cycle by returning to *rast*—what ‘Abd al-Wahhab called a ‘happy finish’—as the center or the primary pitch” (Taha, personal correspondence). In *Sama‘i Chromatic*, however, pitch material neither “passes through” the intervals of *hijaz* nor modulates to related *maqamat*. The work opens with a drone on the French horn, accompanied by the cello and piano, that establishes G as the modal center of *hijaz*. Yet in the first section, Taha equivocates the pathways by which audiences typically anticipate and recognize the host *maqam* of *hijaz*.

The introduction critiques *maqam* practice in two additional ways. A traditional improvisation of *hijaz* on G introduces the *maqam* on a starting pitch (*mabda*) of C, explores the upper tetrachord (C–D–E flat–F–G), descends by stepwise motion and repeating motivic patterns to the *qarar* (tonic) of G, and after a medial pause (*markaz*), states the primary melodic material in the lower tetrachord of *hijaz* (G–A flat–B–C). By contrast, in *Sama‘i Chromatic* Taha outlines the lower tetrachord of *hijaz* through stepwise ascension in the lute part, which is then doubled by the clarinet line in the repetition of the statement. The scalar ascension through the

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Fig. 1.4b. Hassan Taha, *Sama‘i Chromatic*, cello, mm. 5–6.
lower tetrachord, rather than descending-ascending movement through both lower and upper tetrachords, departs from conventional pathways of *hijaz* (Fig. 1.5).

Second, Taha introduces chromatic intervals and pitches that are foreign to the modal space of *hijaz* in *musiqa sharqiyya*. The significance of chromaticism in *Sama’i Chromatic* is not that accidentals occur beyond the modal horizon of *hijaz* but rather that these pitches do not construct a narrative that is consensually agreed upon within the norms and expectations of general audiences of modern Arab music. Chromatic figures are typically a stylistic technique that anticipates modulations into related *maqamat*; these modulations develop a specific narrative curve through shifts between different tonal spaces. The individual events by which composers and performers aestheticize this narrative curve are recognized by connoisseurs in ways that display specific dispositions of taste. In measure 10 of *Sama’i Chromatic*, the clarinet, lute, and piano begin to exchange a sixteenth-note melodic figure based on a diminished fifth that segues into the second section of the sonata form. Deconstruction of the narrative discourse of *musiqa sharqiyya* by means of encounters with dodecaphonicism and aleatoric techniques offers new pathways through modal space. For Taha, these creative interventions express his concept of *tajsim* by expanding beyond the linear relations of musical space that he associates with *musiqa sharqiyya*.³⁰

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Fig. 1.5. Hassan Taha, *Sama’i Chromatic*, mm. 1–2.
For *String Quartet* (2008), Taha establishes serialism, form, and modal space as distinct compositional devices that he sets in dialogical relation to one another. The first movement is a ternary sonata form that begins with a serial pitch class set in the first violin (C sharp–G–F sharp–C-natural). Serialism is disrupted by repetition as well as the omission and inclusion of pitches outside the established set. The first section segues into the next by means of serial and aleatoric techniques. These consist of metric dissonance and a canon in descending motion in the viola and cello parts in measures 12–15. The conventional *sama‘i* form is adapted by setting the rhythm in the cello part and by increasing the density of pitch in ways that evoke percussive embellishments characteristic to *sama‘i thaqil* in measures 25–29. A recapitulation of the original melody in measure 30 resolves the ternary form and segues into a dance section. This section is characterized by metric dissonance and polyrhythms in the viola and cello parts in measures 48–65 that adapt rhythmic patterns associated with the *tabl* drum of Syrian wedding dance music.

![Musical notation]

Fig. 1.6. Hassan Taha, *String Quartet No. 1*, melodic figure in *saba* with dissonant cluster in upper strings, mm. 67–69.

This section also features a lively melody set in the modal space of *saba*, which Taha employs to signify the *muzaj* (atmosphere) of somberness typically associated with this *maqam*. As with modes used in his other compositions, *saba* is not used conventionally. Rather, Taha subjects the *maqam* to aleatoric techniques including a dissonant cluster (C-D-F) in the upper strings that marks arrival to this modal space. *Saba* is sustained by the repetition of a melodic figure in the lower tetrachord of *saba* (D–E half-flat–F–G flat) in the cello (*Fig. 1.6*) and by repeating triplet figures in measures 74–81. Yet the sobriety of the atmosphere is juxtaposed with a lively dance meter that alternates between 5/8 and 7/8 and sustains its...
brilliance through the final measures of the movement.

The second movement of *String Quartet* playfully juxtaposes text-based practices. Taha ciphers signature motifs through sequences that depict his and his wife’s given name, Najat, in historical reference to musical cryptograms such as Schoenberg’s *Suite for Piano* and Berg’s *Lyric Suite*. For instance, a pizzicato indicates the closed consonant of his name, Hassan, as would be transcribed into Arabic text by a diacritical *sukun* over the letter *nun*. Live performances of this movement use large-screen projectors to render these texts as *khattat*, calligraphy associated with the decorative arts and cultural heritage of Ottoman-era urban Damascus.

Taha positions his work in relation to a critical discourse that assesses cultural innovation as either *taqlid* (imitation of form) or *tajdid* (creative adaptation). This discourse can be traced to debates on social progress and reform associated with the Arab cultural renaissance, or *nahda*, that took inspiration from European forms and systems and catalyzed a search for cultural alternatives. Intellectuals favored works that offered new aesthetic constructs through processes of interpretation and adaptation and thereby articulated a modern Arab identity. Postcolonial critiques of expressive culture subsequently revisited the relation between a source and its interpretation and asked whether political and cultural dependencies are produced in the act of interpretation itself. For instance, Syrian literary critic George Tarabishi argues that conditions of modern Arab subjectivity are constituted by the initial “collision” in 1798 between Europe and the Arab world, with Napoleon’s arrival in Egypt (1991). This encounter precipitated a shock (*sadma*) that conditions the ways in which a “shocked object” (the Arab world) reacts passively to the “shocking entity” (Europe). Adapting this metaphor of collision and shock to *Sama‘i Chromatic* and *String Quartet* raises the question of whether an aesthetic critique of modern Arab music depends on the European intervention of aleatoric technique and dodecaphonism. Does this ultimately reproduce dependency on European cultural forms and substantiate claims for European hegemony in contemporary art music?³¹

In the process of composing an alternative approach to modal space and the linearity of Arab music, Taha may be critiqued for a dependence on European forms of cultural modernity that not only imitates these forms but also reifies *maqamat* practices. I suggest, however, that Taha’s work is not an effect of structural Orientalism. Rather than approaching experimentalism as a hegemonic force that collides with and expands a static field of modern Arab music, Taha engages with each field through “dynamic aesthetic choices” (Shannon 2006, 73). His strategic representation of these aesthetic fields establishes a contiguous and mutually constitutive relationship between techniques and subverts subscription to any exclusive compositional system.
Planes of Modality

Composed by Shafi Badreddin and commissioned by Kinan Azmeh’s Damascus Festival Chamber Players and the Syrian Trust for Development, *Quintete* (2008) is a chamber piece written for clarinet, violin, viola, cello and piano. In *Quintete*, Badreddin sets spectralism, *musiqa sharqiyya*, and popular folk music in dialogic relation with each other. He explores sonorities through the harmonic effects of microtonalities and micropolyphonies at the same time that he develops a musical narrative through conventional pathways of *maqamat* and the adaptation of musical idioms from Syrian folk music.  

To explain his compositional strategies, Badreddin evokes the metaphor of a “mosaic” in which diverse parts are assembled into a collective whole (Badreddin, pers. correspondence). The symbol of a mosaic is often deployed in state discourses on cultural heritage and the arts to represent the nation’s cultural and ethnic diversity.  

In drawing an analogy between a cultural mosaic and his composition, Badreddin proposes that new forms of cultural meaning are generated when disparate elements are set in relation to each other. His work is, on the one hand, a musical narrative that emerges through the intertextual relations of *maqamat*, serialism, spectralism, and folk music. On the other hand, he conceptualizes sound within compositional parameters of timbre, intensity, duration, and density, in order to experiment with narrative form through the conceptual approach of spectral music.

The formal apparatus of the work suggests how Badreddin manipulates narrative conventions. The first movement, “*Istihlal*” (lit: introduction), is in sonata form and weaves between spectralism and *musiqa sharqiyya*. The modal space of *bayati* (D–E half-flat–F-G and G–A–B flat–C–D) is explored as pitch spectra through microtonalities, textural development, extended instrumental techniques, and aleatoric gestures. Badreddin conceptualizes the first movement as a metaphoric leading tone, or *zahir*, to the second movement, which is named “Dokah” (also the Arabic term for scale degree 2). Accordingly, the first movement recapitulates with a tonic of C that itself anticipates the modal center of *bayati* on D, which, in turn, is developed in the second movement. In the finale, Badreddin adapts folk music idioms from wedding dance music, usually played in *maqam bayati* or *sigah*, and concludes with ecstatic cadential flourishes that echo a Syrian wedding.

The following details the dialogic relations between these musical systems—spectral music, *musiqa sharqiyya*, and popular folk music—in order to better understand these distinct yet interrelated aesthetic spaces as representative of specific cultural contexts. According to Badreddin, pitch spectra are circumscribed within closed tonal systems. He gradually establishes a twelve-tone series through the introduction of pitches in the opening measures of “*Istihlal*,” in which a tritone chord unfolds as an arpeggiated, contrapuntal figure in the piano (Fig. 1.7). As a
constrained and spatially dense set of microtonalities, the tritone quivers with a tension that is maximized by tessitura of the string trio and the B flat clarinet. Dissonance among semitones evokes the paradigmatic relations of partial overtone series explored in spectral analysis. The dissonance emerges from a chromatic sequence (E flat, A, A half-flat, C, and D), arpeggiated in contrary motion by the piano hands.

Badreddin positions the intervals of the tritone as the set of pitch relations by which all consequent pitches are spatially related, whether by proximity, distance, or in absentia. Movement occurs by degrees of proximity or distance to the tritone in ways that are developed by the discursive interplay of spectralism and the structuring principles of maqamat. For example, a brief stasis in measure 6 emerges from the absence of dynamic movement among tritone intervals. When these intervals are subsequently recalled as descending flourishes in the piano in measure 7, their quick successive repetition increases instrumental texture. Hierarchical relations of tritone intervals to other pitch spectra are thus reinforced by reiteration.

This series is abruptly interrupted in the bass register of the piano by a sound cluster in measure 9 that signifies departure from the tritone through an unanticipated chromatic (F sharp). Similarly, Badreddin articulates both chromatic dissonance and timbral contrasts between instruments by means of the transfer of a raised fourth (G–C sharp) between the viola and piano parts in measure 10 (Fig. 1.8). The shock of chromatic dissonance is somewhat displaced by glissandi in the string trio, which lower and raise tritone pitches by a semitone, and by the clarinet, which vibrates altissimo on D.

The incorporation of glissandi in the strings evokes the embellishing gestures commonly performed in solo improvisational taqasim on ‘ud and violin. In the practice of musiqa sharqiyya, a performer will typically establish the qarar (modal center), then gradually modulate away from the center by means of embellishments, stepwise motion, and sequential motivic patterns. Badreddin uses glissandi to establish and develop micropolyphonies, texture, and timbre.
through both spectralism and *musiqa sharqiyya*. In *Quintete*, glissandi are embellishing figures that anticipate but do not resolve expectations for the dynamic expansion of modal space. The dialogic relations between glissandi and tritonal space arguably destabilize the second section of this movement by manipulating stylistic conventions associated with these musical systems. *Quintete* opens with glissandi in the strings that build texture rather than develop the lower tetrachord of *maqam bayati*. Texture is intensified by staggered entrances between string parts and by double-voicing in the clarinet line. This orchestration also foregrounds the piano and establishes a hierarchy among instrumental parts. Finally, glissandi explore tritonal space within close, yet imprecise, proximity to the pitches and help to sustain the tritone by repeating the tritone pitches.

Badreddin equivocates pitch structures of *bayati* in this composition through dialogic encounters between *musiqa sharqiyya*, spectralism, and atonalism. Whereas the overall development of the work is generally in accordance with the codified *sayr* of *bayati*, Badreddin defies conventional treatment of *bayati* by introducing pitch spectra that lie beyond the set pitches of the *maqam*. For instance, in the second section of this movement, he introduces *hijaz* into the modal horizon through an accidental enharmonic (A flat/G sharp) in the piano. Rather than develop *hijaz* conventionally, Badreddin displaces pitch relations

![Fig. 1.8. Shafi Badreddin, *Quintete*, transfer of raised fourth between viola and piano, mm. 9–10.](image)
chromatically to suspend development of the *maqam*. For example, he raises the pitch class of the *qarar* (G) by a semitone (G sharp). Rather than directly outline the modal spaces of *hijaz*, he alludes to this *maqam* by means of a disjunctive melodic line and chromatic dissonance in the piano and clarinet (Fig. 1.9).

Spectral and aleatoric techniques shape the ambivalent pathways of this section. After a sense of resolution arrives in measure 20, microrhythmic activity and extended instrumental techniques increase density and texture. Techniques include col legno and saltando in the strings, the use of half an embouchure and altissimo in the clarinet, and an open pedal tone in the piano. Melodic lines in all parts explore the descending-ascending direction characteristic of *hijaz* yet in an interrupted and nonlinear pathway. Oscillation (G-C) in the strings suggests both spectral effects and the anticipation of a secondary *qarar* (C) by way of a *ghammaz*, or dominant (G). 36 A staccato sound cluster in the piano followed by a caesura brings a sense of closure to this section.

![Fig. 1.9. Shafi Badreddin, *Quintete*, ambiguation of modal center of *maqam hijaz* between G and G# in piano, mm. 24–26.](http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/northwestern/detail.action?docID=1466220)

In the final four bars of the movement, Badreddin provides a formal reprise of the opening material. Piano arpeggiation resolves from the tritone to a C major chord and segue, by means of recall, into the second movement of *Quintete*. This transition is part of a larger modal progression in which C functions as a leading tone to the modal center of *bayati* in D. To summarize this movement, the narrative development begins with a tritone that expands into a twelve-tone system. The modal space of *hijaz* on G sharp emerges only to be interrupted by a reprise of the tritone, which resolves into C major. The noncadential resolution on C acts as a pivot point for the introduction of *bayati* in the second movement. In conclusion, the resolution of the tritone chord to C major, by means of the relative dominant of G indirectly suggested by *hijaz*, establishes *bayati* on D. “Istihlal” anticipates *bayati* as the main modal space of the composition.

In the second movement, “Dokah,” the first ten measures anticipate and suspend arrival to the modal center of D (in *bayati*), evoking expressive elements of *musiqa*
Bayati develops by means of a voice exchange between cello and clarinet (C sharp) and by a pitch that, when slightly lowered, becomes local to the *maqam* (E half-flat). Other compositional devices include a vertical stack of the upper and lower tetrachords of *bayati* in the cello and clarinet lines as well as artificial harmonics, pedal tones, metric dissonance, chromaticism, and atonalism. As the last section of this movement accelerates by means of frantic *pont métallique* in the strings, the clarinet figures prominently in a high register with a melodic line that descends through the lower tetrachord of *saba* (G-flat-F–E half-flat–D). Badreddin reduces musical space by shifting into *maqam saba*, whose modal space in the lower tetrachord is smaller than *bayati* by a semitone. He thus articulates creative constraints of *musiqa sharqiyya* while positioning these in relation to the avant-gardist discourse of extended instrumental techniques.

Much of the second movement is characterized by the representation of a third aesthetic space, *musiqa sha’biyya* (folk music). Melodic fragments are situated as cultural indices that refer to the diversity of ethnic and religious identities in Syria. For example, Badreddin adapts a melodic phrase from traditional Suriani melodies and orchestrates it for all parts in unison. This adaptation could be interpreted as an embrace of the cultural heritage of Syriac Christian traditions in ways that affirm a public space for religious minorities. Badreddin also draws on a sonic emblem that represents his Druze heritage. Melodic contours in the clarinet part imitate the lower pedal tones of the *mijwiz*, a reed instrument played at Druze weddings in the southern province of Suweida. Badreddin cautioned me in an interview that his work is metonymic of Suriani and Druze identities and not wholly representative of these religious-minority communities.

The final movement, “Khetam-Kar,” reimagines melodies and rhythms associated with *dabka* and *choubi*, genres of wedding dance music that are widely practiced throughout Syria and Iraq, respectively. Badreddin simulates the polyrhythms of *dabka* and *choubi* through metric dissonance, prepared strings in the piano, and col legno in the strings. The work ends with two musical events that adapt sonic tropes of a Syrian wedding: metric dissonance captures polyrhythms of the *tabl* drum in *dabka* dance music, and *zagharit*, or high-pitched vocal ululations typically performed by women to honor bridal households, are evoked by the cadential flourish.

In what ways does the convergence of disparate musical worlds in this work assert a broader claim on the power of musical representation? Badreddin suggests that “music does not take on political content but exists for music’s sake” (2011). I would counter this perspective by suggesting that the integrity of a musical work may mask the uneven and contradictory social relations that shape and are shaped by creative processes. For instance, is musical difference marked as popular music by the adaptation of folk music from minority communities, as avant-garde through the use of extended instrumental techniques and tritones, or...
as *musiqa sharqiyya* by the narrative progression between compositional sections? As these instances show, the production of difference through cultural representation reinforces binary oppositions between, respectively, high and low or East and West, that construct a fetishized space of Otherness. Badreddin’s work arguably produces an Arab subjectivity that is destabilized by internal Others and external intervention in ways that both literally and figuratively problematize the work of representation.

Further questions of interpretation may be gathered from these analyses of the creative works that constitute *musiqa mu‘asira*. What meanings are attributed to compositional devices in these musical works? What are the cumulative effects of these discourses, and for whom do they acquire meaning? This soundworld of *musiqa mu‘asira* is contingent on the “aesthetics of authenticity” (Shannon 2006) that govern how music connoisseurs experience feelings of ecstasy and enchantment in the performance of *musiqa sharqiyya*. Jabri, Taha, and Badreddin destabilize these expressive effects by constructing an uneasy relationship among *maqam* pathways, folk music idioms, spectral microtonalities, and aleatoric techniques. However, the extent to which these soundworlds signify meaning for individual listeners depends on particular distinctions of taste. An ethnography of reception would help situate these distinctions in relation to the relative accessibility of social and cultural resources. Although this line of inquiry is beyond the scope of this essay, the interpretive variability of meaning in *musiqa mu‘asira* will be further discussed through the broader theoretical approaches presented in the next section.

### Conclusion: The Predicament of Musiqa Mu‘asira

Critical approaches to the study of space as a practice, discourse, and cultural imaginary (Lefebvre 1991) have argued that representational spaces are “transformed through and on the basis of relations of power” (Rabinow 2003, 354). This claim raises the question of whether and how this art world is imbricated in larger spatial formations that are embedded in local, regional, national, and global relations of power. In what ways does the early twenty-first-century emergence of *musiqa mu‘asira* articulate transformations of power, and how can these shifts be grounded by broader historical understandings?

Shannon 2006, 73). This “double dependency” on European forms of knowledge—at once aesthetic, historical, and political—reproduces European cultural hegemony and positions Syrian music as a signifier of non-Western difference within the modern world.⁴⁰ Others question whether these cultural politics engender a crisis of representation, or “representational paralysis” (Deeb 2010), in which cultural production stagnates in the absence or suppression of creative expression.⁴¹

Rather than perpetuate the teleologies embedded in these critical discourses on cultural modernity, art historian Gao Minglu (2008) stresses the emergent quality of cultural production. He suggests that conditions of production are embedded in “a network of forever changing relations among human subjectivity, living space, and experience” (Minglu 2008, 137). Contemporaneity is therefore situated within the flow of everyday life as the “permanent” condition of modernity.⁴² This reformulation brings together “the jostling contingency of various cultural and social multiplicities, all thrown together in ways that embrace the contradictions and inequalities within and between the particularities of shifting lifeworlds” (Smith 2008, 8–9). Recapitulating to Syrian experiences of modernity, this perspective suggests that the social contradictions and historical contingencies of musiqa mu‘asira are what shape its various meanings in contemporary contexts.

The composers and works described in this essay are, in many ways, constrained by the predicament of Syrian modernity. They struggle to define visions of cultural modernity and build audiences who are open to these visions. This position has been exacerbated by Syria’s isolation from the global flow of ideas, resources, and populations ever since the Ba‘ath Party assumed power in 1963. Despite the Ba‘athist state’s claims toward social progress and economic development, it has willingly faltered in integrating these agendas into the global political and economic order. The authoritarian regime has legitimated this policy by invoking Third Worldist sentiments of anti-imperialism and anticolonialism that support central Ba‘athist tenets of Arab nationalism and socialism (Wieland 2006). Moreover, the state has actively suppressed alternative visions—political, cultural, or otherwise—through systems of coercion that perpetuate a culture of fear between and among citizens (Wedeen 1999, Cooke 2007).

*Musiqa mu‘asira* is therefore situated in complex economic and political conditions that beg the following questions: What makes this musical world contemporary? What historical processes have shaped the encounters and opportunities pursued by these composers? Does their creative work offer a new vision for cultural modernity in Syria today? Prior to the onset of social unrest in Syria in 2011 linked to the broader “Arab Spring,” it seemed possible to attribute the blossoming of musical culture, ideas, and creativity in the past decade to policies of economic liberalization and cultural development mandated by President Assad. As described earlier in this essay, patronage of the arts increased
through the building of new cultural centers and performance venues, state sponsorship of international contemporary arts festivals, allocation of resources to programs and events, and funds for individual artists. It is not insignificant that the musical works and professional livelihoods discussed here were made possible by state support for the arts.

It is problematic, however, to situate *musiqa mu'asira* as an outcome of economic development and social progress. The developmentalist logic of the Ba'athist state is perpetuated by the assumption that *musiqa mu'asira* marks an unprecedented flourishing of avant-gardism and postmodernism in the musical arts as well as the attribution of this development to economic liberalization in the last decade. These hegemonic forces conceal economic and social disparities that have increased due to flawed policies of industrialization and modernization since the 1970s. Whereas economic liberalization policies in the past decade assured citizens of increased access, benefits, and provisions, in reality, these have been distributed unevenly. Liberalization has failed to reduce unemployment, curtail rising costs of living, or stabilize domestic security (Abboud 2009). In short, a “social market economy” selectively infused by privatization measures has not reformed society but rather reproduced the systematic contradictions and social grievances that triggered the Syrian uprising in 2011.43

The predicament of *musiqa mu'asira* is that it is at once contingent on liberalization and yet marginalized by its engagement with global soundworlds. This field indicates the increased importation of conceptual and material resources; however, its emergence does not herald the diffusion of such cultural capital into the musical lives of many Syrians. Perhaps due to decades of relative isolation from the global order, connoisseurs reject efforts to engage with spectralism and atonalism and privilege *musiqa sharqiyya* as the most distinguished modern Arab musical expression. These aesthetic distinctions occur in the context of a Ba'athist regime that legitimizes its authoritarian power through anti-Western and anti-imperialist rhetoric, which, in turn, service its ideological commitment to pan-Arabism.

At the time of this writing in late summer 2011, contacts based in Damascus suggest that civil unrest and popular protests in Syria have not disrupted musical life at Dar al-Assad. Though some students are not able to travel to Damascus from other regions due to anxieties over violence, the arts complex has maintained its active calendar of programs and events, which are attended by full-capacity audiences. This situation is gradually shifting, however, as international economic sanctions make a negative impact on the arts. It is possible to conjecture that the arts are relatively immune because urban elite have been least affected by civil unrest, for reasons that may be historically traced to Hafez al-Assad’s economic policies of *infitah* (opening) in the 1980s that benefited urban mercantile elite (Perthes 1995). Each of the composers discussed in this essay has been based in
Europe since before the Arab Spring in order to pursue professional opportunities, and all plan to remain abroad for the foreseeable future. Like many Syrians residing abroad, they are uncertain about what paths their brethren will pursue and how this may affect the conditions in which they produce artistic work.

Rather than assume that experimental composition developed in teleological alignment with discourses of progress and modernity, this essay embeds *musiqa muʿasira* in the jostling conditions of history from which it emerged. The works discussed here represent the crossings, exchanges, and mediations that composers experienced as they traversed musical routes and encountered disparate narratives of the global avant-garde. Uneven, paradoxical, and textured by overlapping discourses of modernity, contemporary Syrian art music is itself an expression of the contemporaneity of musical worlds.

Notes

1. This slogan appears throughout tourism sectors to invoke Syria's role in the historical epochs of world civilization, from Mesopotamia to today.
2. Throughout my residency in Damascus during 2007–2008, I observed frequent articulations of nostalgia for Solhi al-Wadi through these and other mediums.
3. I began meeting with composers Hassan Taha and Shafi Badreddin in 2008 while conducting research in Damascus on traditional Syrian music and dance. Along with Zaid Jabri, these two composers have emerged as leaders in the field of art music through their commitment to creative activity, music education, and audience development. Other major figures working today include Nouri Iskandar (b. 1938), recognized for his adaptation of folklore into classical composition, as well as Kareem Rou stom and the late Dia Succari (1938–2010).
4. Scholarship on postsocialist transition and social market reform is just now emerging in the field of Syrian studies (Abboud 2009). Economic data can be found in the annual reports published by the Oxford Business Group, which also mentions the social value and material benefits associated with entrepreneurship and small to mid-sized businesses.
5. The built environment reflects relations of power embedded in the infrastructural resources of rehearsal and practice rooms, acoustic technology in recording studios, state-sponsored venues (Dar al-Assad, the Citadel), and independent performance spaces (Art House, Mustafa Ali Gallery, and Teatro). Intellectual, commercial, and political spheres shape a discursive space in satellite, radio, and print media that has expanded the field of arts marketing and management. For instance, the *Cultural Diary* was launched in 2004 as a monthly event listing and is distributed to an English- and Arabic-language readership. By and large, Arab audiences are targeted by talk shows on satellite television that feature live interviews with public figures. One of these, *Sharq wa Gharb*, is the primary outlet for composers and musicians to discuss their projects and debate issues such as music education and the role of the arts in Syrian society.
6. See the organizational website at [http://www.echo-sada.org](http://www.echo-sada.org) for more information.
8. While I have not been able to fully trace the emergence of the categorical label *musiqa muʿasira*, the term is consistently used in interviews and on printed materials in reference to the creative work discussed in detail in the second part of this essay.
9. Spectral music refers to the exploration of the properties of sound itself and issues of musical perception. It is commonly associated with late twentieth-century French composers, particularly Grisey and Murail.
10. The architect of social market reform in Syria, Deputy Prime Minister of Economic Affairs Abdullah al-Dardari, visited Italy in 2008 in a successful effort to actualize 150 new Italian-Syrian business opportunities. Italy also supports cross-sector training and development for Syrians (see Oxford Business Group 2007, n.d.).
11. See Antoun (1991) and Freedman (2010) for political histories of Syria’s alliances within the Warsaw Pact.
12. Biographical details and a full list of works can be found on Jabri’s website, zaidjabri.com. It is worth noting that Jabri and Azmeh possess web domains as part of musical professionalization of resource capital whereas Badreddin and Taha have not acquired domains to date. All composers mentioned here maintain sites on social networking platforms such as Myspace and Facebook.

13. The category of musiqa 'arabiyya emerged at the 1932 Cairo Congress on Arab music, which strove to distinguish Arab musical traditions from non-Arab practices, such as Turkish and Persian musics, and to develop scientific approaches through documentation, observation, and analysis. Prior to this conference, the label musiqa sharqiyya was in popular use and remains so today. See El-Shawan (1984) and Thomas (2007) for further discussion.

14. These debates can be traced to the late nineteenth-century intellectual renaissance in the Arab world known as al-nahda (lit: awakening), which is explicated at length in the introduction to this volume. The nahda flourished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries due to the circulation of print and sound media among the urban centers of Baghdad, Cairo, Damascus, and Jerusalem (see Sheehi 2004). Though under debate, the nahda is more or less indicative of developments in governance and technology as well as social cleavages that are linked to the rise of modernity, which has been dated to 1798 in the Arab world (see Gran 1998, Mitchell 1991, Abu Lughod 2005). For ways in which twentieth-century Arab cultural production is imbribated in these processes, see Armbrust (2000) and Shannon (2006), among others.

15. See the introduction to this volume for a full articulation of a “globally configured avant-garde” suggested by Kay Dickinson.

16. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to fully explain the complex pathways of maqamat practice, I will draw on specific examples in the course of interpretation and analysis. In the absence of a comprehensive English-language study of Arab maqamat, see the work of Scott Marcus (1993, 2002) for detailed discussions of particular maqam sets situated in Egyptian performance practice. For discussions of cultural meaning and modernity in a Syrian context, see Shannon (2006).

17. The work of music theorist Fred Lerdahl (2001) on space, pitch, and transformational theory suggests how spaces may signify polysemic relations between musical objects. He argues that the perceived distance between musical spaces, such as pitch class and region, shapes the pathways by which transformations become meaningful in particular contexts. For an extended discussion on pathways and pitch class, see Gollin (2000).

18. Under the supervision of Krzysztof Penderecki at the Krakow Academy of Music, Jabri is currently completing his doctorate in composition with a work that sets Aramaic text to cantata form. This project addresses the issue of whether music bears meaning through procedural systems or whether the multiplicity of compositional systems is itself a contradiction of systems theory. Jabri designs prescriptive rules to form valid musical sequences out of the total space of all possibilities and to postulate a system that expands the constraints of dodecaphonism. Based on proportions of quarter tones, musical space is distributed through twenty-four pitch classes, which are organized by ratio and transformed by sequence and series. The empiricism embedded in this formalistic approach is itself subject to critical inquiry by Jabri, who asks whether music may be expressive or representational of that which is beyond musical structures.

19. Jabri (2005). With regard to the acquisition of sources, all scores and sound recordings for the compositions discussed in this essay were received directly from the creator by means of electronic transfer or print reproduction. Due to the absence of intellectual property rights in Syria, none of this material is subject to copyright law. At the time of this writing, scores and sound recordings remain unpublished.

20. Jabri was inspired by Czech conductor Leos Svarovsky, who suggested in a workshop that rhythmic attack could be “calm, and even soft; one doesn’t have to beat percussion” (Jabri, pers. correspondence).

21. In Glyptos, microtones are not indexical of tonal relations in Arab maqamat; rather, Jabri employs them to explore the micropolyphonic effects of sound clusters in spectral worlds.

22. Jabri differentiates the concept of modulation from David Lewin’s transformational theory, which postulates a teleological operation rendered globally within a closed musical system. Here, modulation refers to contextual shifts among and between multiple systems, including but not limited to Western diatonicism, Arab maqamat, and rhythmic developments pace Lutoslawski’s Music Fenerbe (Jabri, pers. correspondence).

23. Musahat Sharqiyya was launched in 2009 by Rawafed, the cultural initiative of the Syria Trust for Development, as an annual symposium that brings together composers, musicians, and scholars from around the world to promote Oriental music. This festival, and the Jazz Lives in Syria Festival, is now managed by Hannibal Saad. For details, see www.jazzlivesinsyria.com.

24. Song without Words III was commissioned for solo cello by Dean Athil Hamdon of the Higher Institute; Song
without Words II premiered with Kinan Azmeh on solo clarinet; Song without Words I was written to “echo” an earlier work by Jabri, Two Songs (1999).

25. Conventional expositions in this maqam would be characterized by ascending-descending stepwise motion, exploration of bayati (lower) and nahawand (upper) tetrachords, with possible modulations to maqam ‘ajam on F and B flat (as scale degrees 2 and 7, respectively). The pitches referred to here are D, E half-flat, F, and G.

26. The performance practice of Oriental music in present-day Syria may be categorically differentiated from Arab music in terms of the relative orthodoxy of systematic approach by which the latter is discursively linked to ‘ilm al-musiqā, or the science of music that dates to the Abbasid era.

27. In a televised interview, Taha (2009) refers to a long-standing debate within the arts on taqīli’d and positions its value in relation to taqīdī—that is, on the efficacy of innovation (taqīdī) over adaptation and borrowing, even if from traditional customs (taqīli’d). This may also refer to nineteenth-century debates on liberal reform and religion in society with regard to modes of interpretation of religious doctrine.

28. Though we had met several times for informal interviews in Damascus in 2008, Taha first introduced the concept of tajsim to me during personal correspondence conducted by Skype in 2010. I am not aware of the extent to which he has written about this concept or discussed it in televised or other interviews.

29. Note that rast classification may indicate either the jins (tetrachord) or the larger maqam family, depending on context.

30. The role of accidentals in modal progressions is discussed in Marcus (1993).


32. The “mosaic” may be traced to Carleton Coon, Caravan: The Story of the Middle East (New York: Holt, 1958), as a schematic for social organization. In present-day Syria, it refers to a model of multiculturalism that supports diversity and dialogue between religious, sectarian, and national groups. It also bears associations of cosmopolitanism tied to the cultural heritage of the historical Silk Road, Phoenician, and Mesopotamian civilizations, among other historical claims. For critiques on the “mosaic” as a structural-functionalist approach to collective identity that maps social and political order onto discursive imaginaries, see Eickelman 1989.

33. Syria is ethnically and religiously diverse, with a Sunni Muslim majority of approximately 75 percent. Alawites and other Muslim sects account for 15 percent, and Christian communities total 10 percent. Ethnically, the country is 90 percent Arab and approximately 10 percent Kurdish and Armenian (CIA World Factbook).

34. For an extended discussion of the role of tonic (qarar) and dominant (ghammaz) within Aleppine maqam practice in historic relation to D’Erlanger’s treatises, see Iino (2009).

35. Hijaz is conventionally spelled (D–E flat–F sharp–G) (G–A–B flat–C–D), though these tetrachords vary in performance practice.

36. Though not equivalent to tonic-dominant relations in Western diatonicism, the ghammad, or dominant, is typically a fourth or fifth above the qarar and signals the climactic turning point of modal development, eventually leading back to resolution on the qarar. Badreddin emphasized that the dominant is reinforced (mithabat) through its doubled meaning. What occurs is “not itself the dominant but resembles the dominant (laisha al-dominant bas tshbah al-dominant)” (Badreddin, personal correspondence).

37. One could critique these as a rehearsal of Orientalism itself—that is, as a representation of Suriani melody, Bedouin rhythms, and feminine voice that reinforces these tropes of cultural identity in Syrian society in ways that further marginalize the lived experiences of those represented.

38. Please see Silverstein (2012) for recent work that discusses the effects of class, power, and cultural capital on the contemporary arts in a Syrian context. For a discussion of consumption practices in Old Damascus and the transformation of urban space, see Salamandra (2004).

39. Arjun Appadurai (2003) argues that these power formations are constructed in relation to each other as a claim for the segmentation of sovereignty from territory. The localization of spatialized experiences also serves as a critique of Edward W. Soja’s (1989) seminal work on the historicization of space in terms of geographies of imperialism.

40. The concept of double dependency is critiqued by Shannon for the ways in which it reinforces modernity as “a product of autochthonous European developments” (2006, 64). Rather than project forms of alternative modernity that perpetuate postcolonial relations of dependency, Shannon suggests that a search for cultural alternatives might instead lead to multiple visions of cultural modernities.

41. Miriam Cooke (2007) provides a compelling description of the stifling conditions in which artists and writers produced in “Dissident Syria” under President Hafez al-Assad’s regime.

42. Minglu responds to debates on social causality implicit in the concept
of modernity. Jameson (2002) distinguishes between aesthetic modernity and capitalist modes of late modernity by particularizing the Habermasian model (1987) to specific historical and political conditions. See also Smith et al. (2008) for an extended discussion of contemporaneity as a construct that disengages modernity from historicized modes of representation.

43. Since 2004, banking, insurance, and trade sectors have expanded significantly. Private regional banks opened in 2004, private insurance companies received permission to operate in 2005, and the Damascus Securities Exchange opened in March 2009 (Abboud 2009).

References


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