

# The Third Place: In the Shadows of Anxiety and Recovery • The Derivative • المشتق

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In the Shadows of Anxiety and Recovery •  
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Souhaib Ayoub, Untitled, watercolor. 2019

A few years ago, I was approached to compose music for a film. It was a film written in Arabic; the plot was set in an Arabic-speaking country, centered around a local, historical anecdote, and all of the actors' dialogue was also in Arabic. The rough cut included selections of temporary musical segments that were in the idiom of Western Art Music, most of which mediated the anxiety, tension and worryment which the characters, dramatic structure and cinematography embodied. When I presented some demos that included abstract oud and electronics motifs, the response that I received surprised me: "no oud, please, and no quarter tone."

By using the colloquial “quarter tone”, the reference was clearly to the infamous *segāh*, the archetypal note/interval used in Arabic *maqāmāt* like *Rāst*, *Bayāt* and its namesake, *Segāh*<sup>[1]</sup>.

Taking its name from the Persian linguistic portmanteau of *seh*, meaning three or third, and *gāh*, meaning position, location or place, the *segāh* is the quintessential interval of music from across North Africa, the Middle East and some of Central Asia. In nuanced variations, it defines the musical identity of the vast geography, both regionally and locally, sometimes even the individual touch of the musician.

Although delineated by Dutch orientalist J. P. N. Land as a “neutral”, as opposed to a major or minor interval<sup>[2]</sup>, the *segāh* is far from it. In fact, its shape-shifting character has been the bane of music scholars since the days of al-Farabi in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. It is an interval deeply entwined with the concept of *tarab* due to its profound relationship to the *maqāmāt* and its musical potency. Often it is also a benchmark against which the composer, singer or musician’s mastery of the complex *maqām* system can be judged.

Somehow the sound of the oud, and specifically the *segāh*, prompted anxiety, tension and worry, but not the kind that was desired for the scenes. The scenes and the musical placeholders they were using clearly exemplified the same emotional registers, albeit through a different musical vernacular.

I was fascinated that an artistic choice which felt so sensical and organic to me, in relation to the content of the film, would provoke such a response. Firstly, because the oud is one of the quintessential instruments in the region, used for centuries for theorizing and composing. In that sense, it serves exactly the same role as the piano in Western Art, Pop, Jazz music etc. . . . Secondly, the *maqāmāt* are fundamental to the majority of musical systems from Arabic-speaking regions spanning North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia. In that sense, they provide exactly the same framework as twelve-tone equal temperament and major and minor scales used in “Western” music.

Clearly both the instrumentation and the fundamental melodic intervals—regardless of their abstract, as opposed to traditional, usage—triggered something negative. I went back to square one and tried to find a different musical path that could satisfy both my and the director’s artistic desires. Contrary to popular misconception, of the nine principle *maqām* families, only four contain the *segāh*—*Rāst*, *Bayāt*, *Segāh* and *Şabā*. The other five—*‘Ajām*, *Nahāwand*, *Kurd*, *Ḥijāz* and *Nikrīz*—do not. Neither do the remaining, less widely used, *maqāmāt* *Şabā Zamzam*, *Chahargāh* and *Lāmī*.

The questions however remained... Why such an adverse reaction to a local and regional musical idiom? What did it trigger? What associations did it conjure?

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Throughout history, scientists have continuously tried to categorize the physiological and psychological characteristics and behaviors of humans. In parallel, philosophers and theorists have associated elements of musical cultures to similar categories of physiological and psychological tendencies, alongside the spiritual and the cosmological realms.

Humorism—and the four temperaments—are ancient ideas that perceive the human body as made up of four fluids: blood, yellow bile, black bile and phlegm. Each is associated with a personality trait: sanguine, choleric, melancholic and phlegmatic, the balance of these humors is deemed to affect health as well as personality traits and behavior.

Although the systematization of these concepts has been attributed to Greek medical theorists Alcmaeon (c. 540–500 BCE)—who was possibly a student of Pythagoras—and particularly Hippocrates (c. 460 – c. 370 BCE), Karl Sudhoff has suggested that this concept originated and was developed across Ancient Egypt, Babylon, China and India<sup>[3]</sup>. As with much of the knowledge credited to Ancient Greeks, this is not surprising<sup>[4]</sup>.

The ancient Indian system of Ayurveda, the oral tradition of which has been traced back to around 6000 BC and its written counterpart dating back to c. 500 CE, is based on similar but far more nuanced and complex concepts of the three *doshas*: *vāta* (wind), *pitta* (bile), *kapha* (phlegm), and the seven *dhātus*: *rasa* (nutrient fluid), *rakta* (blood), *māmsa* (flesh), *medas* (fat), *asthi* (bone), *majjā* (marrow), *śukra* (semen)<sup>[5]</sup>.

Within all of these ancient systems, music in general, and pitch classes/strings/modes in particular, were often associated with cosmology, and the study of body and behavior. In Middle Eastern culture, a correspondence between the humors and the strings of the oud was suggested by Al-Kindi (c. 801–873 CE) and further developed by the Ikhwān Aṣ-Ṣafā' (10<sup>th</sup> century CE). This mystical group from Baṣra, Iraq, believed that the instrument's number of strings was not "arbitrary, but as resulting from a deliberate decision on the part of the inventor sages to make them match other phenomena grouped in fours". They also laid out "the negative as well as the positive associations and effects, the notes of each string being regarded as capable of strengthening one humour and weakening another"<sup>[6]</sup>:

<i>zīr</i> (highest string)	+ yellow bile	– phlegm
<i>mathnā</i> (second)	+ blood	– black bile
<i>mathlath</i> (third)	+ phlegm	– yellow bile
<i>bamm</i> (lowest)	+ black bile	– blood

Al-Farabi (c. 872–c. 951 CE) also discussed the effects of the *maqāmāt* in his *Kitāb al-Mūsiqā al-Kabīr* (The Great Book on Music), in which he not only treated their emotional characteristics but also:

*explored the effects of the Adhan and “prescribed” the following maqāms after five daily prayers because of their impact on human emotions: Reḥāwī and Huseynī after the morning prayer; Rāst after the sun rise, Zengūle in the middle of the afternoon, Nevā after the evening prayer, Buzurg after the late night prayer, and Zirefkand before going to bed.*<sup>[7]</sup>

This resembles the older and more systematized practice of North Indian Hindustani musical culture in which *rāgas* each have their own *rāsa* (flavor/mood) and are associated with, and expected to be explicitly performed at, specific times of the day. This, in turn, aligns with the Ayurvedic principles of associating times of the day with each *dosha*, and the *rāga*’s ability to help balance the physiology—and therefore the mood—of the listener<sup>[8]</sup>.

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I wondered if the reaction to the *segāh* might have been connected to the general trend in current music from the Arabic-speaking regions to steer clear of the *maqāmāt*, or at the very least the infamous *segāh*. I had noticed that films from the region also seemed to follow the same trend, often choosing Arabic songs sung by female voices that present a balanced blend of local and non-local sonic aesthetics—though always avoiding the *segāh*. *Tango al-Amal* (The Tango of Hope) by Nour el Houda and *Ana Ba’sha’ el-Bahr* (I Love the Sea) by Najat al-Saghira are obvious examples.

The pervasive influence of so-called Western musical aesthetics<sup>[9]</sup>—and Western music theory—on the musical sensibility of the Arabic-speaking region since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century is widely notable. From a social and historical perspective, the uptake has been superficially attributed to a desire for modernization, considered an outcome of decades of colonial domination and

the ingestion of Anglo-European ideologies and logics into the social, political and cultural bloodstream. What these readings often miss are the nationalist movements of the 20th century, which in themselves tried to impose new, albeit contrived, identities often either embracing or distancing themselves from geographic neighbors. These readings also fail to shine the light on the considerable movements of cultural resistance, such as the music of the Nahdha period for instance, or the documented tensions between Arab and European scholars at the Arabic Music Congress in Cairo 1932. Where then, is this distance coming from?

Just as the varying vocabularies and dialects of the Arabic language are intertwined with geographical identity, so too are the musical intervals, *maqāmāt*, melodies, musical gestures, rhythms, and instruments. Is something as abstract as a melodic interval or the sonic texture of an instrument potent enough to represent both local and regional identity? And if that were the case, why has that association become refuted by so many creatives? If the *segāh* is able to trigger such a reaction, might it therefore be a subconscious expression of the rejection of identity? What is uniquely provocative in the *segāh* and not in the myriad cultural identifiers that are consistently used and reused across the arts such as language, dialect, landscape, stories, symbols, cuisine, etc...? Is there a continuum upon which such identifiers can be placed according to the potency and resulting acceptability of their cultural representation?

Not Representative	Acceptably Representative	Too Representative
Potency = 0		Potency = 100

If it isn't about identity, then what is it about? Politics? Religion? Technology? A toxic mix of all of it isn't about identity, then what is it about? Politics? Religion? Technology? A toxic mix of all of the above? The complexity could lie in the remnants of curious historical cases revolving around the construction and assertion of national identities, whilst also adopting European legacies. A clear linguistic example can be seen in the Atatürk's Turkish language reform project in the 1930s, established to replace words of Arabic and Persian origin with new Turkish constructions, but also to replace the use of Arabic script with the Latin alphabet.

In music across Egypt and the Levant, this included the decline in composition and performance of Ottoman instrumental music forms like the *samā'ī* (*semāi*) and the *bashraf* (*peşrev*) and the development of new forms such as the *dawr* (lit. cycle), *'ughniya* (lit. song) and the *qasīda*. Baghdad also saw the increased prominence of the Arabic *takht* ensemble in place of the traditional *chālghī*, and the decline of instruments like the *sanṭūr* in Iraq due to its seemingly overt Persian i.e. non-Arab, influence, and the removal of Persian words and

phrases from Iraqi Maqām performance. Curiously though, the Persian note names of the *maqām* system remained untouched.

In the same period this Arabization was accompanied by a major drive to include European or European-supported logics, such as Western music notation, European-style conservatoire education, and the 24-tone equal division of the octave tuning system. First proposed by Lebanese scholar Mikha'īl Mashshāqa in 1840, it was refuted by almost all those who participated in the 1932 Arabic Music Congress in Cairo. Somehow it was defiantly maintained in theory books, ultimately leading to its embedding in late 20<sup>th</sup> century music technology such as the *org sharqī* (oriental keyboard) and its propagation in the ears and consciousness of audiences across the region.

The complexity of these issues surrounding musical tradition, innovation and resistance is clear, though they remain insufficiently investigated, whether historically or in contemporary terms.

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I remember the period following the uprisings of 2011, when many of my friends on social media were consistently writing in Arabic, only to slowly switch back to English after 2016, once everyone realized real change was not coming.

I also remember a few years ago when Apple Inc. changed the default Arabic font on iOS to a typeface that was more cursive, fluid, and easier to read, subconsciously leading me to write more often in Arabic, until I noticed I was also receiving more messages from friends written in it. The typeface recently changed again and is sadly a far less encouraging experience.

Then there's the pure joy that blasts from Hakim's *Nār* when it blares through the dance clubs, a joy that comes not only from of its Egyptian sha'bī *maqsūm*-driven energy, but I would add specifically because of its *segāh*-fueled melodic phrases and modulations.

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In 2017, whilst recovering from serious burnout and all that ensues from being in that state, including anxiety, depression and a total sense of loss, I started working on fractured musical demos as a process of self-healing. Something about soft, dark synthesized sounds and abstract *maqām* phrases felt more soothing than the narrative-driven dryness of the oud, but

nothing felt right to me until I was able to craft the *segāh* from within them. That’s when things became meaningful, even spiritual.

Over the last years, I found myself returning to these demos often, listening to them for pleasure, and often failing to recreate them. Even though they are equally influenced by the *maqām* tradition and the musical technologies and compositional stylings of Europe and America, one thing is certain: without the *segāh*, they are nothing.

I would lean towards arguing that the potency of the *segāh*—of this one single evasive interval—is so deeply associated with the culture of the region that it is refuted precisely because of that. So excessively representative and symbolic, it has become capable of triggering a reaction subconsciously associated with the political realities that have left many of us heartbroken to say the least, and dead to say the worst.

I would also argue, however, that just as old associations were once made, so too can new ones. Sometimes it is just hard to know where to start.

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[1] Due to the use of the same names for both the *maqāmāt* and the individual notes in this musical system, names of the *maqāmāt* are capitalised i.e. *Segāh*, whilst names of individual notes are not i.e. *segāh*.

[2] Land, J. P. N. “Recherches sur l’histoire de la gamme arabe.” *Actes du sixième Congrès international des orientalistes, tenu en 1883 à Leide. Partie 2*. E. J. Brill, 1885, p. 61.

[3] Sudhoff, Karl. *Essays in the History of Medicine*. Medical Life Press, New York City, 1926, p. 87.

[4] For example, both Pythagoras’ Theorem ( $a^2+b^2=c^2$ ) and Pythagoras’ supposed “discovery” of the relationship between mathematics and music can be traced back to ancient cultures of Egypt and Mesopotamia where he studied. See Guthrie, K.S. (1988). *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library: an Anthology of Ancient Writings Which Relate to Pythagoras and Pythagorean Philosophy*. Grand Rapids: Phanes Press. pp. 20 and 61, Neugebauer, O. (1969). *The Exact Sciences in Antiquity*. Second ed. New York: Dover Publications Inc. pp. 36, and Kayser, H. (1970). *Akróasis The theory of world harmonics*. Boston: Plowshare Press pp. 46.

[5] Larson, G. J. (1987) ‘Āyurveda and the Hindu Philosophical Systems’, *Philosophy East and West*, 37(3), pp. 245–259.



[6] Wright, O. (2010) *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity: On Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press pp 15-16.

[7] Isgandarova, N. (2015) 'Music in Islamic Spiritual Care: A Review of Classical Sources', *Religious Studies and Theology*, 34(1), pp. 101–113.

[8] Kaufmann, W. (1965) 'Rasa, Rāga-Mālā and Performance Times in North Indian Rāgas Author', *Ethnomusicology*, 9(3), pp. 272–291.

[9] The influences of many Latin American genres such as the Tango and Rhumba due to the importation of 78 rpm and 45 rpm records from the 1920s were also prominent.