

An Introduction to the Takht Ensemble in the Arabic World of Music

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In the late 19th to the early 20th century, the *takht* ensemble became the basis of Arabic art music. Much like the chamber music ensemble or the classical Western quartet, the *takht* is the fundamental ensemble for traditional Arabic music and has been embraced and widely accepted in countries such as Egypt and Greater Syria. It is typically associated with a specific number and type of instruments and a traditional musical repertoire.

The word *takht* is originally derived from Persian and means a throne or high-centered area, similar to a *majles*. The word *takht* in Arabic has a slightly different meaning where it is associated with a sleeping place, a bed, or a sofa. In Egypt, the word *al-dekkah*, a high raised floor or bench located in the center-end of a room, was used for the same setting as the *takht*. Whether we use the term *takht*, *majles*, or *al-dekkah*, the musicians are essentially placed in a high-centered area where they can be seen and heard by the audience.

Takht ensembles perform at a variety of venues and on different occasions, private and public, ranging from *afarah* (weddings) to a musical *hafla* (celebration). Their repertoires encompass a wide range of different genres of classical and folk music, and employ a diverse combination of instruments and vocal compositions. For weddings and other festive occasions, a *takht* ensemble can be accompanied by a dancer or several dancers. On these occasions, tunes such as a *tahmila* or *taqtuqa*, are lighter and more upbeat, or compositions made specifically for dancing are more likely to be performed. The repertoire changes depending on the type of performance and the audience; for example, a performance taking place in a coffee shop would be different than one performed on a stage or during a musical or a play; The instruments and musicians would still be the same, but the repertoire would be entirely different.

Since the turn of the 20th century, the word *takht* has become associated with an ensemble using traditional instruments and playing *tarab* repertoire. With *tarab* music, the audience is in a high state of enchantment and admiration becoming a part of the harmony of the music. Most compositions played by the *takht* are well ornamented and based on a dueling dialogue between the instrument(s) on one side and the accompanied singer on the other. Although well orchestrated, *takht* compositions could include improvisations which showcased the skill and proficiency of the musicians. Classical compositions such as a *dawr*, *muwashshah* or a *qasida* might not be performed at a wedding but at formal performances in the homes of elite and high-class society, just as a chamber ensembles played at select Western homes.

The *takht* ensemble actually took the same role as chamber music did in Western society. They started at the *saraya* (palaces) and homes of the rich and elite playing for a variety of reasons, at personal gatherings or for a national celebration. Many famous singers and musicians got their start playing at these *sarayas*, including Munira al-Mahdiyyeh, Mohammad Abdel Wahab and Abdel Hayy Hilmi. They performed in these palaces and were highly paid by the *pasha*, or the party host, and sometimes received extra pay or gifts from the guests or *sammi'ah*. Most major

singers and professional *takhts* started this way before they started performing publicly. Some *takhts* became so well known they were hired to accompany famous singers such as Umm Kalthum, Shaykh al-Safati, Saleh Abdel Hayy and many others.

Three types of *takhts* were present in the period of late 19th and early 20th centuries, the most popular type was made of all male musicians accompanied by a female dancer. The others included an all-female *takht* called *al-'awalim* and finally a mixed members of male and female.

Before the term *takht* or *Firqat al-Takht* was used, a group consisting of four musicians was called *al-ruba'i al-sharqi* (Eastern quartet). A famous example was the group 'Ruba'ie al Shawwa', a *takht* of four musicians from Aleppo led by Antoin al Shawwa, which moved and resides in Cairo in the late 19th century. Names for *takhts* were historically tied to the number of their musicians. The word *thulathy* was used to name a three-piece band; and *khumasi* was used for a five-piece band. Since the turn of the 20th century, however, the word *takht* simply meant a medium-sized ensemble using traditional instruments and playing a *tarab* repertoire. While a *takht* was typically comprised of four to five musicians, a medium-sized ensemble (eight or more) or an even larger ensemble was called a *firqah*. These expansions to the *firqah* started taking place in the mid 1960s and reached a size similar to the one we see in a Western orchestra. One of the more famous was led by Abdel Halim Nuwairah, who used *takht* repertoire and kept the *takht* as the core of the orchestra. Sadly for the traditionalists, the late 1960s and early 1970s saw an invasion of Western electronic instruments infiltrate the *firqah*. The electric guitar, electronic organ and the accordion all took a major role in shaping the new *firqah*, which a few years earlier, was based on simple traditional instruments.

A melody performed by a *takht* may be played heterophonically (simultaneous variation of a single melodic line) or solo as a *taqasim* (instrumental improvisation). Turkish-influenced compositions have been performed in this form, such as *bashraf*, *sama'i*, *tahmilah*, and *dulab*. The ensemble may be joined by a male or female vocalist called *mutrib* or *mutribah*, in addition to a chorus called *radideh* or *mazhabgiyeh* who sang the refrain sections. Vocal genres performed by *takht* include: *dawr*, *muwashshah*, *qasidah*, *layali*, and *mawwal*.

Takht ensembles were often named after the leader or the main musician or singer in the group, such as *Takht Ibrahim Salwan* and *Takht Munira al-Mahdiye*. Some of the other notable *takht* ensembles of the time were: *takht Ibrahim Sahloun* (accompanied major singers at the turn of the 20th century such as Umm Kalthum), *takht al Aqqad al Kabir* (named after a famous *qanun* player Mohammad al Aqqad), *takht Mansi al-kabir*, *takht Mohammed al-Muqaddam*, *takht Mohammed al-Rashidi*, *takht Mansour 'Awad*, *takht Ibrahim al-'Aryan*, *takht 'Ali al-Rashidi* and many others.

The Instruments Used in a *Takht* Ensemble

The '*ud* or *oud* is a five double-stringed fretless lute; the *qanun* is a trapezoid zither with over 70 strings; the *nay* is a reed flute; and the *riqq* is a fish-skin tambourine. The original *takht* ensembles did not use a *kaman* (violin); but some of the older groups had a *rababah*, which is an old primitive spike fiddle with only two strings which had very limited range of notes. Eventually, the *rababah* was replaced by a *kaman*, also called a *kamanjah*.

A Brief Description of the Instruments Used in a *Takht* Ensemble

Oud

The ancestor of the European Lute; *Oud* literally means wood or a branch of wood. It is shaped like half a pear with a large resonating body attached to a short fretless neck. The *oud* has five courses of double strings. *Oud* players use *risha*, a kind of plectrum, which is often made from a trimmed eagle's feather or from sea turtle shell (or tortoise shell). Presently, plastic picks have become more commonly used.

Qanun

In Arabic, this name means 'principle' or 'law'. The *qanun* is a kind of plucked dulcimer and has a trapezoid shape. The flat wooden board has over 78 strings stretched in groups of three resting on top of a wooden bridge, which is placed at one end on an area of fish skin, and on movable metal frets or levers (called '*urab*') on the other. The instrument is placed flat on the knees of the player; and the strings are plucked with two plectrums attached to the forefinger of each hand.

Nay

The *nay* is a piece of a hollow reed with six finger holes on the top and one thumb hole on bottom. *Nays* are constructed in various keys. There are seven common ranges: the longest is the *rast nay* in C followed by the *dugah* in D, the *busalik* in E, the *jhargah* in F, the *nawa* in G, the *hussayni* in A, and the *ajam* in Bb. The most commonly used nays by advanced players are typically D, E and G.

Riqq

The *riqq* is also known as a *daff*, is made of a round wooden frame, covered on one side with fish skin. Pairs of metal discs are set into the frame to produce the jingle. The *riqq* is the major percussion instrument used in performances of classical pieces.

Darabukkah or Tabla

This is a vase-shaped hand drum percussion instrument. Its body is made of clay or ceramic and has a piece of goat or fish skin stretched over one side, normally the wider side. A musician places the drum under the left arm and strikes the drum with the right hand in the middle to get the strong beats, and along the edge for the sharp beats.

Takht Repertoire

This is a sample of the most common pieces played by a *takht*:

1. ***Wasla***: a suite or a medley of instrumental and vocal compositions in a selected *maqam* (mode). The *wasla* might start with a *sama'i* or a *dulab* followed by an instrumental improvisation called *taqsim*, a vocal improvisation called *layali* and *mawwal*, then a *dawr* or a *muwashshah* and sometimes ends with a *taqtuqa* or a light song. A *wasla* is

composed in a certain selected *maqam* or mode and takes its name after this *maqam*. A long *wasla*, which last sometimes to 20 minutes or longer, might modulate to other *maqamat* (plural of *maqam*) which are related or branch out of the main *maqam*. In tonight's *Bayati Wasla*, we will notice that *Bayati*, a *maqam* that starts from D and has an E half flat (as in *Siga*), is the dominating *maqam* and modulates to *Bayati Shuri* for example, *Saba* or *Hijaz*.

2. **Dulab**: a short instrumental introduction (prelude)
3. **Tahmilah** features the alternation between solo instruments and the full ensemble.
4. **Taqsim** (pl.: *Taqasim*): instrumental improvisation
5. **Mawwal** (pl. *Mawaweel*): vocal improvisation
6. **Layali**: a *mawwal* using the words: *Ya Layl* and *Ya 'Ain*
7. **Sama'i**: an instrumental composition based on a 10/8 beat rhythm called *Sama'i Thaqil* performed at the beginning of a *wasla* in Arabic music and at the end of a *fasil* (*wasla*) in Turkish music. It is sometimes performed as a separate piece. A *Sama'i* consists of four sections each is called *khana*. Each *khana* is followed by a *taslim* (refrain). The first three *khanas* and the *taslim* are set on a 10/8 beat rhythm (*Sama'i Thaqil*). The fourth *khana* is set on a 3/4 beat rhythm (*Sama'i Darij*). The first *khana* and *taslim* emphasize the main *maqam*; meanwhile the rest of the *khanat* (pl.) show some modulations to other related *maqamat*.
8. **Muwashshah**: sung Arabic poetry in the tradition of Arab Spain
9. **Taqtuqa**: a simple folk song, also called *Ehzuja*.
10. **Longa**: a fast dance piece based on a 2/4 rhythm with a recurring refrain. A famous *longa*, 'Longa Hijazkar' by Wanis Vartanian, will be performed tonight by our distinguished women ensemble from Syria. The *hijazkar maqam* is derived from *maqam hijaz*.

Conclusion

The *takht* was and still considered a major musical school, where artists learn the secrets of playing an instrument or singing; a school to enhance their skills, strengthen their voices and improve their techniques.