

A Brief History of Tarab Music

By

Wael Kakish

Traditional Arabic music is mainly characterized by encompassing multiple instrumental and vocal genres; it is highly distinguished for what is called the “*Tarab*” (Rapture) among other widely used terms, such as “*Saltanab*” (Ecstasy) or “*Nashwa*” (Trance). These descriptive names are usually used to express the indefinable physical and spiritual state of utter and complete harmony upon listening to certain musical genres, such as the “*Mawwal*” (vocal improvisation, whether or not accompanied by music), or “*Taqasim*” (instrumental improvisation), or a song. The enchanted audience interact by cheering expressions that reflect the utmost admiration and appreciation, such as “*Allab*” or “*Ya Salam*” or “*Ya Ain*”, which we most often hear when listening to a skillful singer who can convey his/her innermost humanitarian sentiments and share them with the audience.

“*Tarab*” constitutes an integral part of the Arabic music but, unfortunately, we haven’t inherited from the glorious Arab Andalusian civilization, which is still considered as the pride of the Arabs during the Andalucian (Arab-Spain) period, except a small part of the enormous musical legacy that proceeded this era. It all started in the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties, with all the interchange with the music culture of other nations, such as the Persians, Egyptians, North Africans, Europeans, etc. and reached its peak with the musical creations in Andalucía. At that time, *Art Music* continues to profuse productions of the leading musical masters at the time, playing a verity of musical instruments, composing sophisticated and advanced forms of vocal and instrumental forms such as the “*Muwashshahat*” (a form of strophic sung poetry in the tradition of Arab-Spain). The music ensembles comprised of a large number of musicians, singers, and dancers performing continuously for many hours, captivating the audience and leading them into a state of an intense ecstasy. Regretfully, however, only a small part of that musical heritage managed to survive, as most of it disappeared after the collapse of the Andalucian dynasty and the ensuing wars that led to the retraction of this great civilization, and the loss of nearly most of the precious arts of that era, most notably of which the musical notations.

After the exodus from the Andalusia, many musicians who preserved this musical heritage settled in North Africa, such as Morocco, Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria, in an endeavor of passing that heritage orally. Others saved few musical notations, which later, were analyzed and re-written and arranged by specialists in the hopes of preserving them at music libraries, educational and cultural centers. Different genres were collected and later named after the place where they settled and performed, such as the “*Nuba*” or *al Tarab al-Ghernati*” in Algeria, “*Andalusian Tarab*” in Morocco, “*Maaluf*” in Libya and Tunisia as well as what is called “*Andalusian Muwashshahat*” in Egypt and the Middle East. In North Africa, for example, the Andalusian *Tarab* musical repertoire is considered among the highest inherited musical arts performed for dedicated audience, and occasionally attracts music researchers and connoisseurs.

The modern musical renaissance started towards the end of the Ottoman mandate over the Middle East which was followed by the early contact with Europe in mid-19th century. The musical movements were revived in Egypt and the Levant, and many coffee houses and theatres were flourishing, encouraged by some high dignitaries and important people in the government who used to reward the masterful musicians. The increasing interest in *Tarab* music widened to include different forms and genres, such as the “*Dawr*” in Egypt, which played a great role in the introduction and performance of poetry in colloquial Arabic. Numerous artists excelled in performing this type of *Tarab* singing, especially those with strong and melodious voices who enjoyed a wide vocal range, adorned by delicate melodic features, manifested in the performing and depicting of the “*Maqam*” (mode) that flows in harmony with the lyrics or poems sung to a set rhythm. The “*Takhl*”, a small musical ensemble (*Qanun*, *Oud*, violin, *Nay* and *Riqq* instruments), which accompanied these singers, lead by the main singer, accompanied by the chorus, enchanting the audience by performing different types of the traditional musical tunes, such as the “*Dawalib*”, “*Basharef*”, “*Samaiyat*”, “*Dawr*” and “*Muwashshahat*”. *Tarab* moments begin when “*Layali* and *Manawal*” (vocal improvisations) start the “*Wasla*” (medley), and then by the improvised dialogues, either among the different instrument, or between the instruments and the singer, in such a charming and captivating way.

At the beginning of the 20th century, this type of *Tarab* performance was on the decline and became limited to few creative artists. Luckily enough, however, a remarkable number of those recordings were done and preserved by few international and local record labels, including the works of some best and most famous artists at

the time, like “*Abdo Al Hamouli*”, “*Sayed Darwish*”, “*Abul Hay Hilmi*”, “*Salih Abdul Hay*”, “*Sheikh Sayed Al Safti*”, “*Yousef Al Manilawi*”, “*Muneerah Al Mahdiyab*”, “*Abul Ola Mohammed*”, “*Mohammed Al Ashiq*”, *Abul Lateef Al Bunni*” among others.

Another *Tarab* genre was emerging in Egypt and Syria was the light song called “*Taqtouqa*”, which captured the Eastern spirit through its simple and merry melodies, along with its artistic profound and humanitarian, intellectual and social themes, presented in a sheer *Tarab* style. The *Tarab* song was later branched to few types or sections; some were intended for light entertainment, while others were purposeful and professional. The light entertaining ones were mostly performed at coffee shops, or at celebrations and festive gatherings and weddings, while the others performed in big theaters and at the homes of the *Pashas* and dignitaries. The musical form remained intact, since the small orchestra (*Takht*) was essential at both types of *Tarab* music, the Popular and the Classical.

Great artists and singers were influenced by this era such as *Mohammed Abul Wahhab* and *Umm Kulthum* who studied the *Inshaad* (religious chants) and practiced to recite it at young age, and this was, perhaps, the secret behind their virtuoso performance and clear articulation, which stem from the roots and the art of *Inshaad*. Nevertheless, after their resounding success, and with the advent of the cinema, radio, and recordings, they became more interested in the professional and dedicated art of singing, strictly away from the popular areas, bars, coffee shops, small theaters, etc. and they appeared at more prestigious places till the end of the reign of the last Turkish ruler, King Farouq.

At the early 1970s, the art of singing has transformed from the *Tarab*, which used to rely on singing classical or colloquial poetry, whether it be “*Dawr*”, “*Muashab*”, or “*Taqtouqa*”, to a new phase, namely the romantic song, as the influence of the European romantic or classic music played a crucial role in the development of this genre. The presence of the *Takht* was gradually fading away and being replaced by the grand, multi-instrument orchestras, called “*Firqa*” (big band), which adopted new instruments, not known before in the small ensembles, such as the “double bass”, “banjo”, “cello”, “congas” etc.. Thereafter, by the late 1960s and early 1970s, electrical instruments were introduced, such as the “guitar”, “keyboard”, “electric bass”, and before that the “accordion” and then the “piano” and then gradually in the 1980s the “saxophone”, “clarinet”, and other wind and percussion instruments, such as the drum-set, were also introduced. The increasing focus was on the technique, audio

arrangements, colors, and customs, rather than performance of *Tarab*. It lost most of its connection with the customary deep-rooted artistic principles of the true classical art music, the rich lyrics, ancient poetry, and the classical *Tarab* melodies.

Great efforts were exerted by many musicians and groups interested in preserving the musical heritage to safeguard the Eastern style and performance and the traditional musical instruments, but it had become almost impossible by the end of the 1980s.

Some of today's singers are still trying to maintain such special style of *Tarab* performance, like our special guest for tonight's performance, "Wael Jassar", who dedicated himself to the classical Arabic performance, in an accomplished and masterful fashion. Since his tender age, Wael Jassar used to perform the songs of the legendary Arab singers, such as Umm Kulthum, Mohammed Abdul Wahhab and Abdul Haleem Hafez. Later on, his ambitions led him to stardom, when he became well known for his fabulous renditions of the great names of the golden era of Arabic music in three highly acclaimed albums titled "*Tarab Evening*". After trying to create his own new *Tarab* style, Wael Jassar released his first album "*Mashi*" which was met with great success.

We hope tonight's performance will be an enchanting and memorable evening and a window to bring back to us all, the love and appreciation of this wonderful dying art form, the *Tarab* Music!