'Ūd Taqsīm as a Model of Pre-Composition

Rohana, N.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this research project I analyze and reflect on *taqsīm* recordings by two leading figures of *ʻūd* playing who were pillars of modern Arabic music, namely the Egyptians Muḥammad al-Qaṣabjī (1898-1964) and Riyāḍ al-Sunbāṭī (1906-1981). I decode and underline their most significant traits in order to:

1) enrich and develop my melodic-rhythmic vocabulary;
2) deepen my understanding of the structural, melodic and rhythmic processes underlying the genre;
3) design a structural framework or a model for pre-composing *taqsīm*-like pieces of music.

To put it another way, the dissertation discusses the creation of pre-composed *taqāsīm*. The pieces follow a specific model of pre-composition that was designed while taking al-Qaṣabjī and al-Sunbāṭī's *taqsīm* practice as a reference and a source of inspiration. The artistic outcome of this project includes five new works for solo *ʻūd*.

1.1 **A brief historical account**

1.1.1 The *taqsīm* genre

Taqsīm (*taksim* in Turkish) is a major form in Arabic (and Turkish) music,[5] and some even consider it as the nucleus of instrumental Arabic music.[6] In the 19th and 20th centuries, the *taqsīm* has been commonly practiced in countries 'incorporated within the Ottoman Empire, especially Turkey, Syria/Palestine and Egypt.'[7] In other Arab countries such as Iraq the genre became prominent only after World War II.[8]

The *taqsīm* is mostly classified into two types. The main type which is the subject of this research project, is often defined as non-metric improvisation; it is frequently called *taqāsīm ḥurra* (lit. free). Nidaa Abou Mrad, a Lebanese musician and musicologist, on the other hand, defines the *taqsīm* as improvisation that includes multiple consecutive metric units.[9]

[5] Netll, Bruno, and Roland Riddle. "Taqsim Nahawand Revisited: The Musicianship of Jihad Racy." *In the Course of Performance: Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation*, edited by Bruno Nettle and Melinda Russell. Chicago University Press, 1998, p. 370.
[6] Abou Mrad, Nidaa. "Madkhal ilá Taḥlīl al-Irtijāl al-'Azfī fī al-Taqlīd al-Mūsīqī al-'Ālim al-Mashriqī al-'Arabī" [A Prelude to Analysing Instrumental Improvisation in The Oriental Arabic Tradition]. *Al-Baḥth al-Mūsīqī* [Music Research], vol. 4, no. 1, Autumn-Winter 2005, p. 112.
[7] Feldman, Walter. "Ottoman Sources on the Development of the Taksîm." *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, vol. 25, 1993, p. 1. JSTOR, doi:10.2307/768680. Accessed 02 February 2014.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Abou Mrad, "Madkhal ilá Taḥlīl al-Irtijāl al-'Azfī," p. 106.

A second and less prominent type of *taqsīm* is performed with a fixed rhythmic cycle played by another instrument (often a percussion instrument). This type is often called *taqāsīm muqayyadah* (lit. restricted) or *taqāsīm muwaqqa'ah* (lit. measured). This type is not addressed in this research project.

Today there are three main classifications of *taqāsīm* according to their function:

1) a *taqsīm* that is performed as an interlude before a song or a pre-composed instrumental piece;
2) a *taqsīm* that is performed as an interlude within a song (mostly a vocal improvisation) or an instrumental piece;
3) a *taqsīm* that is performed as an independent piece; it is often referred to as *taqsīm mursal* (lit. recitative); this research project focuses on the latter type.

The term *taqsīm* is from the Arabic (and Ottoman) root Q.S.M. which literary means 'to divide'.[10] There are several ideas about the meaning of the terminology. According to the researcher of Ottoman and Turkish music Walter Feldman, the 'division' most likely refers to the separation and recombination of different modal entities in the *maqām* system or in the individual *maqām*.[11] Abou Mrad quoting Jean During, a researcher of Persian and Sufi music, ascribes the division to the different rhythmic-melodic units that are improvised in accordance with the rules of *maqām*.[12] Lois al-Faruqi, an expert on Islamic art and music, claims that the term refers to a multi-layered and repeated division within the performance of *taqsīm*. This includes the division of phrases and periods by pauses, the division of *maqām* into its successive tetrachords, and the division 'of the tonal and durational fields.'[13]

When discussing the history and origins of the genre in the Ottoman period, Feldman claims that 'the taksim probably emerged during the second half of the sixteenth century, as a vocal genre,'[14] and developed into the genre that was known in Turkey already in the 18th century.[15] However, in Cairo and Syria it is not clear when the *taqsīm* has developed.[16] The earliest Arabic source mentioning the term *taqsīm* is a book by the Egyptian musician Kāmil al-Khula'ī[17] (1880-1938) dating from 1904,[18] a work that is based on the music practice of the late 19th century.

[10] Feldman, "Ottoman Sources on the Development of the Taksîm," p. 2.
[11] Ibid, pp. 2-3.
[12] Abou Mrad, "Madkhal ilá Taḥlīl al-Irtijāl al-'Azfī," p. 102.
[13] Al-Faruqi, Lois Ibsen. *The Nature of Musical Art of Islamic Culture: A Theoretical and Empirical Study of Arabian Music*. PhD dissertation, Syracuse University, 1974, p. 197.
[14] Feldman, "Ottoman Sources on the Development of Taksim," p. 8.
[15] Ibid, p. 21.
[16] Ibid, p. 4.
[17] Al-Khula'ī, Kāmil. *Kitāb Al-Mūsīqa Al-Sharqī* [The Book of Oriental Music]. Mu'assasat Hindāwī lil-Ta'l īm wal-Thaqāfah, 2011.
[18] Feldman, "Ottoman Sources on the Development of Taksim," p. 8.

Similar to Feldman, the musicological literature dealing with the Arabic *taqsīm* suggests that the genre has its roots in improvised vocal music, and has a strong affinity with the Qur'anic recitation (*tajwīd*).[19] Abou Mrad, for instance, defines the genre as an intoned recitation of an implicit text;[20] he indicates the role of the instrumental accompaniment in a vocal improvisation known as *tarjamah* (lit. translation).[21] This role or technique is best described by the Lebanese-American musician and musicologist Ali Jihad Racy:

> In vocal improvisation, a *tarjamah* (literarily, translation), namely an improvised instrumental interlude that largely emulates a preceding vocal phrase, grants the leading vocalist suitable moments of repose between the improvised vocal phrases.[22]

In the late 19th and early 20th-century Egyptian music practice, the *taqsīm* was typically performed within the *waṣlah*, 'a suite-like sequence of vocal and instrumental numbers all in the same maqam […], incorporating both improvisatory and precomposed genres.'[23] It mainly functioned as a prelude and interlude in the *waṣlah's* improvised vocal genres and between its pre-composed vocal and instrumental pieces. The *taqsīm* became an independent genre and was recorded separately throughout the phonograph era.[24] By the end of this era, 'taqāsīm were envisaged merely as "instrumental solos"'.[25] A recorded *taqsīm* is mostly named after its *maqām*; for example, *taqsīm* in *maqām nahāwand* or simply *taqsīm nahāwand*.

1.1.2 The *taqsīm* genre and solo *'ūd* performance

Solo instrumental performance in Arabic music gradually gained popularity since the phonograph era, and in the second half of the 20th century the western concept of an instrumental recital, or a performance that highlights a single instrument, became common. *'Ūd* players were leading figures in this development, and *taqsīm* or improvisation always formed an axis of the soloists' repertoire.

In Egypt, 'taqāsīm recordings were fairly popular throughout the entire Phonograph Era, especially during the 1920s' according to Racy.[26] The 1920s are also considered the golden age of *'ūd taqsīm* recordings, and al-Qaṣabjī was its leading and most productive performer.[27]

---

[19] For example, see al-Khūlī, Samḥa. "Al-Irtijāl wa Taqālīduh Fī al-Mūsiqā al-'Arabiyyah" [The Tradition of Improvisation in Arab Music]. *'Ālam al-Fikr*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1975, pp. 18-19.
[20] Abou Mrad, "Madkhal ilá Taḥlīl al-Irtijāl al-'Azfī," p. 109.
[21] Ibid., p. 102.
[22] Racy, Jihad Ali. *Making Music in the Arab World: The culture and artistry of Ṭarab*. Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 82.
[23] Racy, *Musical Change and Commercial Recordings in Egypt*, p. 55.
[24] Ibid., p. 195.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Abdallah, Tarek. "Muḥammad al-Qaṣabjī Mujaddid Fann al-'ūd wa Ustādh al-Asātidha" [Muḥammad al-Qaṣabjī the Reviver of the Art of the 'ūd and the Master of the Masters]. *AMAR Foundation*, 7 September

After the introduction of the radio in the mid 1930s, instrumental music and solo performances were notable through its live broadcast.[28]

A leading figure in solo *ʻūd* performance in both Turkish and Arab music was the renown Ottoman-Turkish *ʻūd* player Şerif Muhiddin Targan (1892-1967), known in the Arab world as Sharīf Muḥyīddīn Ḥaydar. Targan, who was also trained in western music and the cello, adopted the western concept of the virtuoso into *ʻūd* performance.[29] Targan introduced new compositions using new or untypical hand positions and fingering; the composition titles were often named after western music virtuosic genres such as caprice and etude.[30]

In 1936, Targan began teaching at the newly established Baghdad conservatory, and eventually laid the foundation of the Baghdad school of *ʻūd* playing. Among the most notable of Targan's disciples were the brothers Jamīl Bashīr (1925-1977) and Munīr Bashīr (1930-1997), who were the most influential performers of the Baghdad school, and became notable figures in *ʻūd* playing in the Arab world and worldwide in the second half of the 20th century.

Jamīl Bashīr established the style of the Baghdad school which later became popular in the Arab world. Inspired by his teacher's legacy, in 1961, Jamīl published an *ʻūd* method[31] which became one of the most popular methods of *ʻūd* teaching in the Arab world.

The popularity of the *ʻūd* recital was finally established with the succesful career of Munīr Bashīr, who, starting from 1971, performed solo concerts in Europe and worldwide; he eventually became 'the most admired Arab artist in the Occident.'[32] Bashīr's career is considerd a milestone in the development of the instrumental solo recital, and also enhanced the popularity of the genre in the Arab world. Throughout Munīr Bashīr's career, *taqāsīm* or improvisations occupied the most significant part of the performance repertiore.

Another notable figure in *ʻūd* performance in the second half of the 20th century was the singer, composer, *ʻūd* player, and movie star Farīd al-Aṭrash. In his live performances, al-Aṭrash performed *taqāsīm* as part of the instrumental introductions to his songs. 'This format proved

2016, amar-foundation.org/qasabgi-article/?lang=ar. Accessed 15 March 2020.

[28] Ibid.
[29] Işktaş, Bilen. "Şerif Muhiddin Taragan: As the Actor and Indicator of Modern Compounds." *Musicult 15, May 2015*, Istanbul Technical University, edited by Karahasanoğlu, Dakam Publishing. Lecture. Research Gate, researchgate.net/publication/313967439_SERIF_MUHIDDIN_TARGAN_AS_THE_ACTOR_AND_INDICATOR_OF_MODERN_COMPOUNDS. Accessed 17 June 2019, p. 40.

[30] Ibid., p. 44.
[31] Bashīr, Jamīl. *Al-ʻŪd wa-Ṭarīqat Tadrīsahu* [The *ʻŪd* and the Way to Teach it]. Wazarat al-Thaqāfah wal-Iʻlām, 1961.
[32] Charbier, Jean-Claude. 'New Developments in Arabian Instrumental Music.' *The World of Music*, vol. 20, no.1, 1978, p. 102. JSTOR, jstor.org/stable/43562543. Accessed 23 May 2016.

so successful that Farīd al-Aṭrash soon came to be the single-most famous ‘ūd player in the Arab world, and more specifically, the most famous performer of ‘ūd taqāsīm.’[33]

The emergence of *taqsīm* as an independent genre, the development of the solo instrumental recital, and the contribution of al-Qaṣabjī and al-Sunbāṭī to Egyptian and Arabic music should be viewed in the broader context of processes of change in Egyptian and Arabic music since the second half of the 19th centruy. The following subchapters describe the music practice in Egypt before World War I and present the most significant developments in Egyptian and Arabic music as a result of westernization.

1.1.3 Music practice in Egypt before World War I

In late 19th and early 20th-century Egypt, music performances centered around the *waṣlah*. The *waṣlah* was performed by a lead singer, accompanied by a small chorus, and a small ensemble (*takht*) mostly composed of instruments such as the *‘ūd*, *qanūn*, *nāy*, violin and *riqq*.[34] It was typically performed in private and at festive occasions.[35]

The vocal repertiore of the *waṣlah* consisted of metric and non-metric forms. Among the metric vocal forms of the *waṣlah* were the *muwashshaḥ*, a pre-composed song with classical Arabic lyrics, and the *dawr*, an elaborate metric song with colloquial text characterised by an improvised middle section. The *dawr* ‘was probably the most prevalent and highly regarded Egyptian genre during the late nineteenth century and before World War I.’[36]

Non-metric vocal forms of the *waṣlah* were *layālī* and *mawwāl*, two improvised songs with colloquial text performed successively. Another prominent fully improvised vocal genre performed occasionally in the *waṣlah* was the *qaṣīdah* (plural *qṣā’id*). It is an improvisation set to a classicl Arabic poem, and it either follows a musical metre or is free of metre.

While prominent vocal genres such as the *dawr* were mostly considered as typical Egyptian, the instrumental metric repertoire of the *waṣlah* such as the *samā‘ī* and *bashraf* had an Ottoman origin.[37] Other instrumental forms were the short metric prelude, the *dūlāb*, and the instrumental improvisation, the *taqsīm*.

When describing a typical pattern of the *waṣlah*, Racy notes:

---

[33] Marcus, Scott Lloyd. “Solo Improvisation (Taqāsīm) in Arabic Music.” *Review of Middle East Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1, 1993, p. 110. Cambridge University Press, doi:10.1017/S0026318400027127. Accessed 11 September 2021.
[34] Racy, *Musical Change and Commercial Recordings in Egypt*, p. 52.
[35] Ibid., p. 49.
[36] Racy, Jihad Ali. “Music in Nineteenth-Century Egypt: An Historical Sketch.” *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology*, vol. 4, 1983, p. 168.
[37] The *samā‘ī* and *bashraf* (*saz semai* and *peşrev* in Turkish) are rondo-like forms which mostly included four sections and each section is followed by a refrain.

> First, there was a short *taqsim*, a solo improvisation on the ‘ud, followed by a precomposed metric instrumental introduction, usually a *dulab* or the much longer *sama‘i* played by the entire *takht*. This introduction was followed by *taqsim* on other instruments, specifically the violin and the nay. After these instrumental solos came the *muwashshah*, a precomposed metric genre sung by the entire chorus and accompanied by the entire *takht*. Then came a short *taqsim* transition on the qanun, followed immediately by *layali* and *mawwal*, two improvisatory nonmetric genres accompanied by the qanun and sung by the *mutrib*. Finally there was the longest and most indispensable genre of the *waṣlah*, namely the *dawr*.[38]

As the quote implies, in pre-World War I music practice, the instrumental repertoire was closely connected with the vocal repertoire, and the lead singer (*muṭrib*) was ‘the central element of the ensemble.’[39] This was particulalrly manifested in the centrality of the *dawr* which formed the peak of the *waṣlah*.

1.1.4 Westernization in Egyptian and Arabic music in the 20th century

Gradual processes of change characterized by westernization were witnessed in the Arab region since the early 19th century and continued into the 20th century.[40] Westernization manifested itself in the different layers of Arab society, including the cultural-musical sphere.

The most significant symbol of westernization in the Egyptian and Middle Eastern music scene in the 19th century was the opening of the Cairo Opera House by Khedive Ismā‘īl in 1869. The Opera House hosted numerous western music performances such as Italian operas, classical ballets and symphonic music.[41] Perhaps the most distinguished among these performances were two operas by Verdi: Rigoletto which was performed on the opening event, and Aida which was premiered at the Opera House in 1871.[42]

One of the significant developments was the emergence of the music theatre. In its earlier stages, the theatre introduced original musical plays or Egyptian ‘operette’ which incorperated traditional music genres such as the *qaṣīdah* and *muwashshaḥ*.[43] The theatre, which ‘was both a cause for and an effect of westernization,’[44] reached its peak after World War I. As Racy puts

---

[38] Racy, Jihad Ali. “The Waslah: A Compound-Form Principle in Egyptian Music." *Arab Studies Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 4, 1983, p. 398. JSTOR, jstor.org/stable/41857697. Accessed 11 September 2021.
[39] Racy, Jihad Ali. “Sound and Society: The Takht Music of Early-Twentieth Century Cairo.” *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology*, vol. 7, 1988, p. 145.
[40] Marcus, Scott Lloyd. *Arab Music Theory in the Modern Period*. PhD dissertation, University of California, 1989, pp. 17-18.
[41] El-Shawan, Salwa. “Western Music and Practitioners in Egypt (ca.1825-1985): The Integration of a New Musical Tradition in a Changing Environment.” *Asian Music*, vol. 17, no. 1, Autumn-Winter 1985, p. 144. JSTOR, doi:10.2307/833746. Accessed 12 September 2017.
[42] Racy, “Music in Nineteenth-Century Egypt’: An Historical Sketch,” p. 164.
[43] Racy, *Musical Change and Commercial Recordings in Egypt*, pp 69-70.
[44] Ibid., p. 71.

it, 'the new medium inspired the rise of new genres, musical techniques and aesthetic criteria.'[45] The most prominent genre to emerge from the theatre was the *mūnūlūj* (monologue). This new genre which developed into the musical theatre, 'was conceived as a lengthy, solo expression of the thoughts and emotions of a single character, somewhat like the aria in European opera to which Egyptians occasionally compared it.'[46] Composer and singer Sayyid Darwīsh (1892-1923), who was the leading figure of the Egyptian musical theatre at its peak, is widely considered today as the father of modern Egyptian and Arabic music, and his work is regarded by many as the turning point from the late 19th-century music practice to the modern music practice of the 20th century.

With the turn of the century, the introduction of the phonograph changed music dramatically. 'Commercial recording in Egypt between 1904 and 1932 created a new musical era, and paved the way for other no less influential mass media – radio, film, and television.'[47] By the late 1920s and early 1930s, most of Cairo's well-known performers and composers where directly involved with the record industry.

The most evident symbol of westernisation in Arabic music was the Arab Music Congress held in Cairo in 1932. The congress which invited well-known European music scholars such as Bela Bartók (1881-1945), Paul Hindemith (1895-1963) and Curt Sachs (1881-1959), aimed at 'reviving and systematizing Arab music so it will rise upon an artistic foundation, as did Western music earlier.'[48]

Eventually, westenization manifested itself in all aspects of Arabic music including music theory, education, performance, forms, genres, and instruments. Here are the most siginifcant developments as a result of westenization in the first half of the 20th century:

1) Adoption of western melodic elements and instruments

Western instruments became known in Egypt due to their demand at the Opera House and the Military Chapel. At the beginning of the 20th century, the violin was already considered an integral part of the *takht*.[49] After World War I, the *takht* was gradually transformed into *firqah*, a larger ensemble based on the western concept of orchestra. Besides the traditional instruments of the *takht*, the *firqah* included a string section which had a number of violins, a cello and a double bass.[50] Experimentation with, and the adoption of other western musical instruments continued into the 20th century. For instance, in the 1960s, instruments such as piano and guitar

[45] Racy, "Music in Nineteenth-Century Egypt," p. 164.
[46] Danielson, Virginia. *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthum, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century*. Chicago & London, The University of Chicago Press, 1997, p. 71.
[47] Racy, *Musical Change and Commercial Recordings in Egypt*, p. 177.
[48] Racy, Jihad Ali. "Historical Worldviews of Early Ethnomusicologists: An East West Encounter in Cairo, 1932." *Ethnomusicology and Modern Music History*, edited by Stephen Blum, Philip Bohlman and Daniel Neuman, 1991, p. 70.
[49] The violin was already classified as part of the *takht* in the *Book of Oriental Music* by al-Khula'ī dating from 1904 (1904, p. 91).
[50] Racy, *Musical Change and Commercial Recordings in Egypt*, p. 194.

were featured in the song repertiore of Umm Kulthūm (1904-1975), the most celebrated singer in the 20th-century Arab world.

Western influence became significantly evident in the melodic character of Egyptian music after World War I, largely due to the influence of the musical theatre, which 'aquainted the theatrical composer and the public with the European approach to dramatic expressiveness.'[51] Sayyid Darwīsh, who was a pioneering figure in this development, introduced to the public a number of light operas (operettas) which displayed highly westernized melodies. He also borrowed western motives from the vocal genres of the pre-World War I practice, most notably the *dawr*. Darwīsh's work paved the way for a new musical era charachterised by westernization and innovation, which was lead by al-Qaṣabjī and Muḥammad 'Abd al-Wahhāb (1901-1991). For example, when he describes the recorded repertoire of the *qaṣīdah* in the 1920s, Racy notes:

> Westernization was illustrated by assimilation of musical techniques such as duple and triple meters, text-painting, wide intervallic leaps, melodic sequences, and specific European melodic motives.[52]

2) Changes in performance medium and musical forms, and emphasis on pre-composition

With the introduction of the phonograph, the *waṣlah* was slowly 'broken down by the recording medium into detached vocal and instrumental components,'[53] and after World War I, the western concept of a public concert became popular.[54]

The post World War I era in Egypt witnessed a gradual process of change in musical genres, especially in vocal music, a process which continued even after World War II. Generally speaking, there was a shift from elaborate forms highly dependent on improvisation into shorter pre-composed forms which suited the dimensions of the 78rpm records. In addition, during the phonograph era, there was a sharp demarcation between the 'role of the composer, the text-writer, and the performer.'[55]

A distinct example of the emphasis on pre-composition was the transformation in genres such as the *mawwāl* and the *qaṣīdah*. While being fully improvised in the *waṣlah*, the *mawwāl* and the *qaṣīdah* were transformed into pre-composed genres, and fitted the avarage length of songs in the phonograph era (around 3-6 minutes).

By the end of this era, genres strongly associated with the *waṣlah*, especially the *dawr* and the *muwashshaḥ* fell out of use. The monologue became one of the prominent genres in the post war era.

---

[51] Ibid., p. 69.
[52] Ibid., p. 329.
[53] Ibid., p. 192.
[54] Ibid., p. 50.
[55] Ibid., p. 176.

In the 1940s the increasing popularity of the radio medium led to the development of long songs which fitted the live broadcasts. Long songs were confined to two main types, the *ughniyah* (lit. song) and the *qaṣīdah* (lit. poem), which absorbed characteristics from previous genres. The *ughniyah* was set to a colloquial text, and consisted of a flexible form based on a refrain combining metric and non-metric parts. The *qaṣīdah* was set to classical poetry with a through-composed form combining metric and non-metric parts. From the 1940s onwards these two genres occupied a big portion of the repertoire of singers such as Umm Kulthūm.

3) Rise in the position of instrumental music and the development of elaborate instrumental forms

In 20th-century Egyptian music there was a considerable rise in the position and popularity of instrumental music and instrumentalists. In the first three decades of the century, this development was evident in the popularity of recorded instrumental repertoire, and the involvement of ensembles in a variety of activities other than accompanying singers, such as playing in theatres, night clubs and recording studios.[56]

New instrumental genres detached from Ottoman genres gradually developed after World War I. Starting from the late 1920s, composers such as al-Qaṣabjī and ʻAbd al-Wahhāb replaced the simple introduction, the *dūlab*, with elaborate instrumenmtal preludes and interludes which fitted thematically with songs such as the monologues. These instrumental segments mostly displayed a westernized melodic character which suited the nature of the expanded orchestras. Preludes and interludes within songs became gradually more elaborate, and by the mid 20th century, especially with the development of the long song, the *ughniyah*, instrumental segments occupied a large portion in vocal performances, and became an important tool of musical development.

Eventually, experimenting with instrumental preludes and interludes in vocal genres yielded an independent instrumental genre, the *maʾzūfah* (lit. instrumental piece). The *maʾzūfah*, which is perhaps the most significant instrumental genre in 20th-century Arabic music, has a flexible form often based on a refrain using a number of rhythms and alternating between metric and non-metric parts. The majority of the leading composers of the first half of the 20th century experimented with this genre to some extent. The genre's most promenint composer was ʻAbd al-Wahhāb, composing a total of 53 instrumental pieces during his musical career.[57]

4) Adoption of western notation and the westernization of music theory

Arab musicians and theorists gradually adopted the western notation and solfège systems since the late 19th century. According to Scott Marcus, a specialist on Arabic music theory and *maqām*, this development 'was in keeping with the commonly held perception that western

[56] Ibid., p. 193.
[57] Saḥāb, Victor. *Al-Sabʾa Al-Kibār Fi Al-Musiqa Al-ʻArabeyya* [The Seven Giants in Arabic Music]. Dār al-ʻIlm lel-Malāyīn, 1987, p. 197.

music was a more highly evolved music tradition than Arabic music, and that Arab music needed to embrace the scientific foundations which helped Western music achieve its advanced state.'[58]

As a result of the borrowing of western ideas, Arabic *maqām* theory was subject to constant change. While prominent theoretical sources of the 19th century mainly included descriptions of the melodic movement of the various *maqāmāt* (known as *sayr* in Arabic or *seyir* in Turkish), prominent sources of the first half of the 20th century introduced the western concept of scale in addition to the concept of tetrachord. Presentation of the various *maqāmāt* in these sources mostly included two scales 'accompanied by detailed description of melodic movement in terms of tetrachords.'[59] Late theoretical sources of the 20th century, on the other hand, are characterized by simplification; they present the various *maqāmāt* using 'single-octave scales devoid of any mention of melodic characteristics.'[60]

5) Institutionalization of Arabic music

Among the main developments in the 20th century was the institutionalization of Arabic music, and subsequently, the gradual rise of conservatory training.

The first official institute to offer conservatory-like music teaching of Arabic music in Cairo, the Oriental Music Institute (later named the Royal Arabic Music Institute), was already established in 1929.[61] Formal training at the institute, which included the teaching of western music since its beginnings, gradually became indispensable for becoming a professional musicians in the Cairo music scene.[62] Western music and western notation became a basic component of Arabic music training. Today, conservatory training is the most prominent way of learning music in the Arab world and it 'requires the acquisition of knowledge and skills in western music notation, theory, history, and performance.'[63]

1.2 **Pre-composed *taqsīm* in the *'ūd* recording repertoire**

Farīd al-Aṭrash's *taqāsīm* in *maqām ḥijāzkār kurd*, *taqāsīm* which he performed in public performances as part of a prelude to the song *Awil Hamsah* (probably in the 1960s and early 1970s), exemplify the roots of the practice of pre-composed *taqsīm*. These improvisations are

[58] Marcus, *Arab Music Theory*, p. 124.
[59] Ibid., p. 706.
[60] Ibid.
[61] El-Shawan, Salwa. "The Socio-Political Context of al-Mūsīqa al-'arabiyyah in Cairo, Egypt: Policies, Patronage, Institutions, and Musical Change (1927-77)." *Asian Music*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1979, p. 95. JSTOR, doi:10.2307/833799. Accessed 11 September 2021.
[62] Ibid., p. 96.
[63] El-Shawan, Salwa. "Institutionalization of Learning in Egypt." *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music: The Middle East*, edited by Bruno Nettl, Virginia Danielson, Ruth Stone, and James Porter, Timothy Rice, Garland Publishing, 1998, p. 321.

perhaps the most popular *taqāsīm* in the Arab world, and they are strongly identified with al-Aṭrash's *'ūd* playing style.

Many public performances of *Awil Hamsah* are widely available on commercial recordings and on the Web. We find several recordings on YouTube, such as a recording from a live performance in Kuwait,[64] and a recording from a live performance in Syria.[65] Despite clear differences, we notice many common melodic segments in the different recordings. Several of these phrases are repeated with high accuracy. But above all, what is clearly common in all recordings is a gradual build up towards a climactic melodic segment that is the highlight of this piece (and which is recognized by the audience as such, by reacting with significant cheering and clapping). At the beginning of this climactic melodic segment, al-Aṭrash copies or imitates the famous opening melody of the piece Asturias by Isaac Albéniz (1860-1909), and continues with a descending sequence in the highest pitches of the *maqām*, which he repeats several times.

A distinctive example of a pre-composed improvisation where the reproduction of the melodic material is highly accurate, is a *taqsīm* in *maqām nahāwand* by Jamīl Bashīr. We find two almost identical versions of the same piece of music; the first version was probably released on a commercial recording[66] (most probably by the company Duniaphon); and the second version was probably recorded in a private studio.[67] In the commercially recorded version, the *taqsīm* is connected to or followed by a metric improvisation accompanied by percussion instruments. In the privately recorded version on the other hand the *taqsīm* is prolonged by a modulation to a different mode.

A similar example is also found in Munīr Bashīr's repertoire. The track entitled *Taqsīm en Maqām Kurdī* is featured on his album *Irak: L'Art du 'Ūd*.[68] The same piece of music is featured on the album *Luth Solo "Oud" Récital a Genève*,[69] a live concert which was released on few commercial recordings. On this track, the piece is given a slightly different name: Maqam Kourdi. Compared to traditional practice, this *taqsīm* has an atypical element: a repeated melodic segment, or a refrain, that reoccurs at the end of every part which gives the piece a definite structure or form.

[64] USFahad. "Farīd al-Aṭrash - *Awil Hamsah + al-Taqāsīm*, Ḥafl al-Kuwait." *YouTube*, 8 May 20 2017, youtube.com/watch?v=4d27SYiikOY&t=214s
[65] Farīd, Hanī, "*Awil Hamsah* - Farīd al-Aṭrash, Ḥafl Sūriyā." *YouTube*, 24 December 2014, youtube.com/watch?v=x0rbhMaTnic&t=36.
[66] Ismail 293, Ahmed. "Jamīl Bashīr… *Musīqa Nahāwand*." *SoundCloud*, 2015, soundcloud.com/ahmed-ismail-308/kgxttfsqiluh
[67] Koft, Al. "*Taksim Nehawand*." *YouTube*, 21 August 2017, youtube.com/watch?v=FHb8kT20lJ0.
[68] Bashir, Munir. *Irak: L'Art du 'Ūd*. Ocora, 2001, CD (no. C 583068)
[69] Bashir, Munir. *Luth Solo "Oud" Récital À Genève.* Club du Disque Arabe, n. d, Vinyl (no. 72505-CDA).

1.3 **Motivation**

1.3.1 On the problems of studying and researching *taqsīm*

Despite *taqsīm*'s prominence in Arabic music and its importance for instrumentalists, no methods of teaching this genre have been developed to suit the modern conservatory training. In addition, careful and accurate attempts to deal with this subject analytically are scarce, and until today, the field of *taqsīm* remains largely untheorized. Musicians and students seeking knowledge of *taqsīm* often have to rely on their own personal efforts and private research.

The rhythmical and temporal aspect of *taqsīm* is often the most challenging element facing both the researcher and the student. Written sources dealing with musical analysis of *taqsīm*[70] often lack an in-depth discussion on the genre's temporal aspect. On the other hand, most of the literature – be it ethnomusicological or otherwise – chooses to focus on the *taqsīm*'s modal aspect. This approach is best demonstrated by the description of the *taqsīm* genre by Habib Touma – a pioneering musicologist in the field of Arabic music – as 'an instrumental realization of the modal framework of the maqam.'[71] As the Turkish music scholar Yoram Arnon puts it, 'the abstract, flexible and undefined nature of the rhythm of taksim is probably why most literature on the taksim seems to put more emphasis on its melodic, rather than its rhythmic characteristic.'[72]

According to Martin Clayton, an expert on rhythm in Indian music, the 'neglect' of the rhythmical aspect is a common phenomenon in musicological and ethnomusicological literature dealing with free rhythm musical forms, and the few sources that adhere to this aspect, fail to discuss it in depth.[73] Clayton adds that one of the major reasons for this neglect lies in the western staff notation system – the main system used for music analysis in musicology and ethnomusicology – which 'implies the existence of pulse in music, and in most western usage, of metre.'[74] Consequently, both disciplines are lacking concepts and methods to deal with free rhythm musical forms.[75] Clayton also notes that the lack of free rhythm theories in non-western cultures contributes to this neglect.[76]

Another challenge facing the Arab music student today is finding his way in *maqām* practice. *Maqām* practice has been subject to an ongoing process of change since the 19th century. In

[70] For example, Nettl and Riddle, "Taqsim Nahawand Revisited."
[71] Touma, Habib Hassan. 'The Maqam Phenomenon: An Improvisation Technique in the Music of the Middle East.' *Ethnomusicology*, vol. 15, no. 1, January 1971, p 43. JSTOR, doi:10.2307/850386. Accessed 11 September 2021.
[72] Arnon, Yoram, "Improvisation as Verbalization: The Use, Function, and Meaning of Pauses in the Turkish Taksim." *Dutch Journal for Music Theory*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2008, p. 36.
[73] Clayton, Martin. "Free Rhythm: Ethnomusicology and the Study of music Without Metre." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. 59, no. 2, 1996, p. 325. JSTOR, jstor.org/stable/619715. Accessed 11 February 2014.
[74] Ibid, pp. 325-326
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid, p. 326

parallel, there has been a tendency towards simplification of *maqām* theory over time. When describing the gap between music theory and practice, musician and independent scholar Sami Abu Shumays claims that the tendency to describe *maqāmāt* as mere scales in recent theoretical sources is problematic or insufficient since Arabic music tends to violate the constraints of octave-based scales.[77] On the challenges facing the students of Arabic music, Marcus adds:

> Students are not explicitly taught about non-tempered tunings, accidentals, or specific paths for the melodic unfolding of each *maqām*. The most talented students will come to learn these aspects of the traditional *maqām* system over time (by prolonged and intimate contact with respected repertoire through transcriptions, recordings, and live performances). Other students, however, seem to accept contemporary theory as if it were comprehensive.[78]

Finally, to exemplify several of the difficulties facing the student seeking knowledge of *taqsīm*, I quote another paragraph from Marcus, which describes his experience of learning *taqsīm* with George Michel (1915-1998), one of Cairo's most respected *ʿūd* players in the second half of the 20th century:

> For my part, I spent many lessons with George trying to learn the art of *taqāsīm* improvisation on the *ʿūd*, an art of which he was an acknowledged master. This was a somewhat frustrating endeavor for George, since he did not feel that this art could be taught. "Play from your heart," he would instruct me. He decided that I should, as first step, imitate one of his improvisations, which he proceeded to record for me. After many weeks, when he finally decided that I could reproduce his *taqāsīm* to his satisfaction, he declared that I must now come up with my own creation. When I played a phrase that he considered to be from his *taqāsīm*, he stopped me, stating in a loud, forceful voice, "No, that's mine! Play something of your own. Your own creation!" But he was not able to teach how to build individual phrases or how to structure a given *taqāsīm*. My attempts to receive instruction in the improvisatory exploration of individual modes were meeting with little success. Finally, I suggested that we turn our attention to the modulations that occur in *taqāsīm*. "Ah," George exclaimed, "now this I can help you with. Yes, this is my business." In subsequent lessons, with him and others, I learned that musicians of Cairo conceptualize with great specificity about modulations among *maqāmāt* 'modes', though much less so about movement within a single *maqām*.[79]

---

[77] Abu Shumays, Sami. "Maqam Analysis: A Premier." *Music Theory Spectrum*, vol. 35, no. 2, Autumn 2013, pp. 235- 236. JSTOR, doi:10.1525/mts.2013.35.2.235. Accessed 07 January 2018.

[78] Marcus, Scott. "The Eastern Arab System of Melodic Modes in Theory and Practice: A Case Study of Maqām Bayyātī." *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music: The Middle East*, edited by Virginia Danielson, Scott Marcus and Dwight Reynolds, vol. 6, 2001, p. 43.

[79] Marcus, Scott Lloyd. "Music in Performance: 'Ūd Lessons with George Michel." *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*. Edited by Virginia Danielson, Scott Marcus and Dwight Reynolds, vol. 6, 2002, pp. 75.

1.3.2 My previous experience with *taqsīm* and motivation to conduct this research project

I started my musical training at the age of ten. My first instruments were the keyboards and piano on which I played Arabic and western music repertoires ranging from Arabic folk songs to Minuets by J.S. Bach. My fascination with and practice of *taqsīm* began when I started playing the *ʿūd* around the age of twelve.

For my professional music training, I studied at the Rubin Academy for Music and Dance, a school for music and the performing arts in Jerusalem with a worldwide reputation, which offered a four-year course in Arabic music performance. Though *taqsīm* was always part of the curriculum and each student had to perform an improvisation in every recital at the end of each year, it was rare to encounter *taqsīm*-related practical learning experiences and *taqsīm* occupied a very small part of the curriculum.

Though my instrument mentors were experienced improvisers, their classes mainly focused on pre-composed (metric) instrumental repertoire, more specifically on the performance-related interpretational and technical sides of the pieces. Moreover, *ʿūd* performance classes where relatively short (a class of one hour every week) which did not leave much room for discussing or practicing *taqsīm*. During the four years of training, the curriculum offered only one class on the topic of improvisation, a class which lasted only one year. This class was a mixture of listening to different *taqsīm* recordings and theoretical discussions focusing on *maqām* and modulations.

Like many Arabic musicians, I developed my *taqsīm* practice having to rely on personal effort. This involved intensive listening, memorizing or copying records, and experimenting with the genre. However, my learning process was always unstructured. Moving on to my professional career, *taqsīm* felt (and it still does) like an ongoing process of learning. One of the most challenging aspects of developing my *taqsīm* practice, was to 'sound original' and avoid clichéd phrases; and one of the most challenging experiences during my professional career was to record *taqasīm* in a studio setting.

In 2008, I released my first album titled *Sard*[80] (lit. narration). It included two pre-composed *taqasīm*: the pieces *Ajam* and *Ḥijaz*. These pieces were basically improvisations that went through a long and unstructured process of pre-composition until they became finished works. After many challenging experiences with improvising live in the studio during my professional career, my initial intention with creating these pieces was 'to be ready', and leave as less as possible 'to the spur of the moment'. In addition, I felt that in this way, I could give more emphasis to 'my own voice' within the genre.

My motivation to conduct this research project comes above all from a personal artistic need. Between the release of *Sard* (in 2008) and the start of this research project (2013), creating pre-composed *taqāsīm* was a difficult task: I did not manage to compose a single piece in this style.

[80] Rohana, Nizar. *Sard*. 2008, CD.

I was lacking ideas and felt uninspired. In particular, it was challenging to create pieces that are different in their character compared to the pieces that I have already composed. This research project is a response to the urgent need of a focused and a systematic effort, the need for a basic theoretical framework, or a model that allows me more productivity in creating such type of pieces. I also felt that in order to create my own model, I needed to solidify my own improvisations by deepening my understanding of the *taqsīm* genre's different components on the macro and micro levels, and by having a source of inspiration for enriching my melodic-rhythmic repertoire and vocabulary.

Pre-composed *taqāsīm* is a topic that has not been investigated thoroughly. Therefore I believe that this type of research will contribute to the knowledge often sought by students and *taqsīm* practitioners, knowledge that is first and foremost a practical one.

1.4 **Research questions and methodological approach**

This research project was guided by the following intertwined questions:

1) how does a *taqsīm* become a pre-composition?

2) what techniques within the art of composition can be used to create *taqsīm*-like pieces? Or what model of composition can we use to create composed *taqāsīm*?

3) how can variety be achieved from piece to piece in such a style of composition?

In my attempt to answer these questions, I have followed a multifaceted methodological approach. Throughout this long and constantly challenging research project, I have engaged with diverse theoretical and practical activities including intensive listening to recordings, music transcribing, music analysis, bibliographical research and literature reading, copying or memorizing recordings, improvising, and composing.

All these methodological activities were eventually translated into a number of phases that shaped this research project. The phases evolved in parallel; they were well-connected and there was a continual 'exchange' between them. The phases include:

1) choosing the main artists and determining the repertoire for music analysis;
2) transcribing and analyzing the chosen repertoire;
3) choosing a terminology that will guide the writing of the dissertation;
4) enriching my melodic-rhythmic vocabulary through experimenting with the chosen musicians' main stylistic features;
5) creating five pieces in the style of *taqsīm*.

My preliminary research incorporated various leading *ʻūd* players and a much larger scope of repertoire than the recordings discussed in this dissertation. In the end, I settled on al-Qaṣabjī and al-Sunbāṭī for a number of reasons. Perhaps the most important reason was that these musicians were among the most important composers of vocal music in the 20th century. They contributed immensely to modern Egyptian and Arabic music, and their musical-historical significance makes them among the most prominent authorities in areas such as *maqām*. In addition, since my project also deals with composition, al-Qaṣabjī and al-Sunbāṭī captured my interest for their immense knowledge and experience in the 'craft' of composition as it is evident by the large repertoire of songs they composed during their musical careers.

Al-Qaṣabjī and al-Sunbāṭī's *taqāsīm* recordings span different stages of their musical careers and were performed in varied contexts. These include commercial recordings, live radio broadcast, and recordings from private gatherings. After familiarizing myself with most of this repertoire, I chose to focus on the commercial recordings, or in other words: *taqāsīm* that were made in a studio context. The main reasons behind this choice were: firstly the context seemed very similar or the closest to my own production methods within this project (CD releases or YouTube videos). And secondly, in the case of each musician, the commercial recordings reflected a tangible and a coherent structural approach within *taqsīm*.

Al-Qaṣabjī and al-Sunbāṭī's commercial recordings were all subject to analysis at least through intensive listening and partial transcription. In the end, I carefully selected a number of recordings which in my opinion were representative of the musicians' most significant traits. The recordings were fully transcribed and analyzed. The analysis is detailed and I tried to understand the micro and macro structural units comprising a *taqsīm*. For each musician, I also tried to summarize the most significant features of his musical language. The transcriptions and analysis form a large part of this dissertation (chapters 3 and 4). In some respects, this phase was the main engine or driving force keeping the project in motion; it was the bridge between the different phases.

Choosing a terminology to guide the writing of this dissertation was one of the most difficult tasks and one of the last phases to be completed in this project. I have divided the terminology in chapter 2 into two parts. The first part is terminology associated with *maqām*. Here, I chose what in my view are the necessary concepts and definitions that provide the reader with a basic understanding of Arabic music theory. The second part of this chapter is terminology associated with *taqsīm*. This subchapter is a mixture of terminology from the literature on the genre, common terms among musicians, and a few original terms that I propose based on my thorough analysis. Compared to major works dealing with Arabic and Turkish improvisation

(for instance, the dissertations by Anne van Oostrum,[81] Frederic Stubs,[82] and Eric Ederer[83]), and more specifically literature incorporating *'ūd taqsīm* repertoire (for instance, the dissertations by Soufiane Feki[84] and Taysir Elias[85]), I think what is new or original about my analysis is a holistic approach which investigates structural, pitch (or *māqām*) and rhythmic processes at the same time.

On the practical side of this research project, a basic step towards exploring al-Qaṣabjī and al-Sunbāṭī's styles was to learn how to play, or to copy and memorize their music. In some cases, I learned or memorized the complete recording, while in others, I only memorized part of the recording. One of the main methods that I used was to experiment with my analytical findings through constant improvisation sessions. I did this with three aims: 1) to improvise in the style of al-Qaṣabjī and al-Sunbāṭī; 2) to alter and combine some of the musician's most significant traits in new ways and make them my own; and 3) to pre-compose *taqsīm*-like pieces of music.

Finally, during the first years of this research project, I took several sessions with Bishara Khell,[86] a leading composer in the Palestinian music scene. These sessions proved to be a fruitful experience and helped me develop many aspects of my research project, including the transcriptions, the terminology, and how to incorporate my analytical findings in my own practice. Above all, I pre-composed a number of *taqsīm*-like pieces under the supervision of Khell.

It is necessary to add something here about the duality of improvisation and composition, which has been prominently debated in western musicological literature. Despite being written in the 1970s, Nettl's article "Thoughts on Improvisation: A Comparative Approach"[87] remains among the most relevant studies when it comes to non-western, modal music. Nettl questions the adequacy of the concepts improvisation and composition in such cultures:

> Improvisation and composition are opposed concepts, we are told – the one spontaneous, the other calculated; the one primitive, the other sophisticated; the

[81] Van Oostrum, Anne Heleen. *The Art of Nāy Playing in Modern Egypt*. PhD dissertation, Leiden University, 2004.

[82] Stubbs, Frederic Winsor. *The Art and Science of Taksim: An Empirical Analysis of Traditional Improvisation from 20th Century Istanbul*. PhD dissertation, Wesleyan University, 1994.

[83] Ederer, Eric Bernard. *The Theory and Praxis of Makam in Classical Turkish Music 1910-2010*. PhD dissertation, University of California, 2011.

[84] Feki, Soufiane. *Musicologie, sémiologie ou ethnomusicologie. Quel cadre épistémologique, quelles méthodes pour l'analyse des musiques du* maqâm*? Eléments de réponse à travers l'analyse de quatre taqsîm.* PhD dissertation, Paris-Sorbonne University, 2006.

[85] Elias, Taysir. *Covert Legality in Instrumental Arabic Music (Taqsim) in Israel, Using Principles of Natural and Learned Schemas* (my own translation from Hebrew). PhD dissertation, The Hebrew University, 2007.

[86] Bishara Khell was one of the notable alumni of the composition department at the Rubin Academy for Music and Dance in Jerusalem where he specialized in western music composition. More information on Khell is available on his website: http://bishara.khell.com/official/

[87] Nettl, Bruno. "Thoughts on Improvisation: A Comparative Approach." The *Musical Quarterly,* vol. 60, no. 1, January 1974, pp. 1-19. JSTOR, jstor.org/stable/741663. Accessed 07 August 2021.

> one natural, the other artificial. But on the other hand, we are also given to believe that improvisation is a type of composition, the type that characterizes those cultures that have no notation, a type that releases the sudden impulse to music through the direct production of sound. We hear that improvisation ends where notation begins, yet at the same time we are told that certain non-Western cultures which do not use notation distinguish between the two processes, if not explicitly, then by the way they internally classify their musics. Thus, while we feel that we know intuitively what improvisation is, we find that there is confusion regarding its essence.[88]

In Arabic music, the term improvisation is often paralleled with the word *irtijāl*,[89] and the term composition could be paralleled with the word *ta'ālīf* . In the latter the melody is more or less fixed. However, it should be emphasized that an Arab musician always makes melodic and rhythmic variations, even when playing a more or less fixed or composed (or pre-composed) piece or melody; thus, unlike western classically trained performers, an Arab musician, be it an instrumentalist or a vocalist, is an improviser by definition.

To give one example, a prominent instrumental genre where the pieces have fixed melodies is the *samā'ī*. *Samā'ī* pieces are written in a specific rhythmic cycle based on ten beats (or mostly 10/8) and they follow a rondo form usually complying with ABCBDBEB. In the E part, there is a divergence from the ten-beat rhythmic cycle. These pieces are frequently transcribed and during conservatory training they are mostly learned or studied with the help of musical scores. However, in actual performance, the repeated part B (known as *taslīm*), is almost never played the same twice, while the melody is usually played with a great deal of variation. The Egyptian musicologist Samḥa al-Khūlī considers this practice as a complementary type of *irtijāl* or improvisation.[90]

The *taqsīm* is considered the most important and most refined type of *irtijāl* in Arabic music.[91] If we take Nettl's suggestion into consideration, to 'think of composition and improvisation as opposite ends of a continuum,'[92] the *taqsīm* genre will be situated somewhere in the middle. When an Arab musician improvises or plays a *taqsīm*, he always refers to pre-existing musical materials. The renowned musician Hariprasad Chaurasia argues that improvisation is a highly overrated idea in Indian music. According to the Dutch specialist of Hindustani music Wim van der Meer, 'much of a performace is done from memory; perhaps the main question is how deeply the music is buried in memory.'[93]

---

[88] Ibid., p. 5.
[89] Al-Khūlī, "Al-Irtijāl wa Taqālīduh Fī al-Mūsiqā al-'Arabiyyah," p. 16.
[90] Ibid., p. 20.
[91] Ibid., p. 21.
[92] Nettl, "Thoughts on Improvisation," p. 6.
[93] Meer, Wim van der. "Dilip Chandara Vedi's Conception of Composition." *Journal of the Indian Musicological Society,* vol. 39, 2008, p. 115.

According to Nettl, musicians in non-western modal music cultures improvise following a model which consists of points of reference or a collection of building blocks. In Arabic music, this model is the *maqām*, and the building blocks include aspects such as the tones of the specific *maqām*, common melodic progressions, common modulations, and melodic motifs.

To become good at performing and improvising a *taqsīm*, a musician develops his skills and works on mastering and refining his building blocks. This notion is best described by Derek Bailey, an English guitarist and a prominent figure in the free improvisation movement:

> An ability to improvise […] depends, firstly, on an understanding, developed from complete familiarity, of the musical context in which one improvises, or wishes to improvise. As this understanding develops so the ability to improvise can develop.[94]

I like to conclude here by saying that I prefer the term pre-composition to describe the *taqsīm*-like pieces that I have created in this project to emphasize that they are, in the words of Nettl, 'carefully thought out, perhaps even worked over with a conscious view to introducing innovation from piece to piece and even from phrase to phrase.'[95] Van der Meer also argues that 'the use of pre-composed music is of a great importance in Indian music, and that much of the learning process is related to it.'[96]

Though these pieces (like the pieces in the *samā'ī* genre) are more or less fixed, they can be played with a certain degree of variation.

1.5 **The artists in this study**

Al-Qaṣabjī and al-Sunbāṭī were among the most renowned *ūd* players in the 20th century, and the best to master the art of *taqsīm*. However, most of their musical careers evolved around composing vocal music. In fact, al-Qaṣabjī and al-Sunbāṭī were two of the four leading composers of Egyptian vocal music after Darwīsh, and together with Zakariyā Aḥmad (1896-1961) and 'Abd al-Wahhāb, they led the development of Egyptian music from the 1920s into the second half of the 20th century.

Al-Qaṣabjī and al-Sunbāṭī's careers were strongly tied with Umm Kulthūm. They were Umm Kulthūm's main composers in different stages of her career, and profoundly participated in establishing her fame. Through Umm Kulthūm's voice and the voices of other singers al-Qaṣabjī and al-Sunbāṭī's music reached the ears of millions of Arabs, and many of their compositions are considered milestones in the modern history of Arabic music.

---

[94] Bailey, Derek. *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*. Da Capo Press, 1993, p. 7.
[95] Nettl, "Thoughts on Improvisation," p. 11.
[96] Meer, "Dilip Chandara Vedi's Conception of Composition," p. 116.

1.5.1 Muḥammad al-Qaṣabjī (1898-1966)[97]

Al-Qaṣabjī was born and raised in Cairo. His father ʻAlī Ibrāhīm al-Qaṣabjī (1854-1924) was a well-known reciter of the *qur'ān*, and a composer and an *'ūd* player who collaborated with leading singers of the late 19th century such as ʻAbduh al-Ḥāmūlī (1841-1901).

Influenced by his musical surrounding, al-Qaṣabjī began to sing and play *'ūd* at a relatively young age while being instructed by his father. He learned the repertoire of the 19th century and practiced reciting the *qur'ān* as part of his religious education at school. Al-Qaṣabjī was also exposed to the music theatre and became familiar with the work of its leading performers such as Salāmah Ḥijāzī (1852-1917).

In his adulthood, al-Qaṣabjī was very interested in western music. He regularly attended performances of various European orchestras performing in Cairo. He managed to learn solfège and the basic principles of orchestration, harmony and counterpoint through his meetings with European musicians who visited in Cairo. Along with western music, he was also interested in other musical traditions such as the Turkish, Indian, and Chinese traditions.

After graduating from school in 1911, al-Qaṣabjī pursued a career as an elementary school teacher. He graduated from the school of education in 1914 and worked as a teacher between 1915-1917. In 1917, al-Qaṣabjī retired from his teaching position and fully devoted himself to music.

Al-Qaṣabjī started his musical career as a singer while composing his own songs in traditional genres such as the *dawr* and *muwashshaḥ*. He slowly abandoned singing and focused on composing songs for other singers. By the mid 1920s, he abandoned the traditional forms in favor of upcoming genres (such as the monologue and *ṭaqṭūqah*) and quickly established himself as one of the leading composers in Cairo. By 1926, he composed songs for all the famous singers at that time.

Al-Qaṣabjī began collaborating with Umm Kulthūm at an early stage of her career, in 1924. He composed most of the songs she performed during the late 1920s and 1930s, significantly contributing to enhancing her fame and establishing her position as Cairo's leading singer. He remained one of Umm Kulthūm's main composers (along with Aḥmad and al-Sunbāṭī) until the late 1940s. However, al-Qaṣabjī's status and reputation as a composer drastically decreased when Umm Kulthūm stopped commissioning him to write songs for her around the year 1949.

Alongside his work with Umm Kulthūm, al-Qaṣabjī collaborated with other accomplished singers living in Egypt, especially female singers. Among them were Munīrah al-Mahdiyyah

[97] Al-Qaṣabjī's biography is based on two books: 1) Kāmil, Maḥmūd. *Mūhammad Al-Qaṣabjī, Ḥayātoh Wa A'māloh* [Muḥammad al-Qaṣabjī, His life and Work]. Al-Hay'ah al-Maṣriyyah al-'āmah lil-Kitāb, 1971; and 2) Al-Ḥifnī, Ratība. *Muḥammad al- Qaṣabjī: al-Musīqī al-'āshiq*. [Muḥammad al- Qaṣabjī: The Lover Musician]. Dār al-Shurūq, 2006.

(d. 1965), Fatḥiyyah Aḥmad (1898-1975) and Asmahān (1912-1944). Throughout his career, he composed around 380 songs.[98]

Being one of the most influential composers in the first half of the 20th century, he was 'regarded as the teacher of a generation of composers and musicians […]; many of al-Qaṣabjī's compositions have passed into the *turāth* or heritage of Arabic music.'[99] He is also considered the leading modernizer after Sayyed Darwīsh together with 'Abd al-Wahhāb. In short, he significantly contributed to the development of Egyptian music, most notably the development of the monologue genre. Utilizing Umm Kulthūm's voice, al-Qaṣabjī was the leading composer of this genre until it faded in the 1940s. The monologue *In Kunt Asāmiḥ*, which was recorded and released in 1928, was a landmark in al-Qaṣabjī and Umm Kulthūm's careers. This song, which sold unprecedented numbers of copies upon its release,[100] is considered a milestone in the history of Arabic music, according to Virginia Danielson, an American musicologist:

> It was virtuosic, dramatic, romantic, and innovative in genre and melodic line. […] The song aptly illustrates the creativity common in Umm Kulthūm's repertoire. Specific melodic gestures were borrowed from European music and from Arab genres such as the *dawr* which the monologue resembled in its virtuosity. The result was at once musically new and familiar.[101]

As an *'ūd* player, al-Qaṣabjī is considered by many as one of the greatest in the 20th century, known also for his high technical abilities.[102] Throughout his musical career, al-Qaṣabjī performed regularly as part of music ensembles. In 1919, he joined the *takht* ensemble led by the *qanūn* player Muḥammad al-'Aqqād (1851-1931), a well-known ensemble in Cairo which had accompanied the leading singers since the late 19th century. In 1928, al-Qaṣabjī joined Umm Kulthūm's ensemble and accompanied her in all her performances and recordings until his death in 1966.

Al-Qaṣabjī was an *'ūd* teacher for many famous musicians, most notably 'Abd al-Wahhāb. Al-Qaṣabjī also influenced other *'ūd* players such as al-Sunbāṭī who used to listen to his *taqsīm* recordings and imitate him.[103]

Al-Qaṣabjī was also the leading figure in further developing the Egyptian *'ūd* as an instrument after World War I.[104] He worked closely with famous luthiers of his time in an attempt to improve the sound and playability of the instrument. Perhaps the most notable among his adjustments was the shortening of the string length from 64 cm (the standard before World War

[98] This number is based on Kamil's listing of al-Qaṣabjī's works. See Kāmil, *Mūhammad Al-Qaṣabjī*,, pp. 147-165.
[99] Danielson, *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthum*, p. 78.
[100] Ibid., pp. 71-73.
[101] Ibid., p. 72.
[102] Abdallah, "Muḥammad al-Qaṣabjī Mujaddid Fann al-'ūd," amar-foundation.org/qasabgi-article/?lang=ar.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Ibid.

I) to 60 cm, which became a very common length until today. Al-Qaṣabjī also revived the seven-course *ʻūd* which was common in the early 19th century and experimented with the instrument's tuning. Several of these adjustments to the instrument's tuning became a standard until today.

1.5.2 Riyāḍ al-Sunbāṭī (1906-1981)[105]

Al-Sunbāṭī was born in Fārskūr and raised in al-Manṣūra, two cities in the Egyptian Delta. His father Muḥammad al-Sunbāṭī, was a professional singer, composer and an *ʻūd* player.

Since a very young age, al-Sunbāṭī fully devoted himself to music. He began singing with his father in weddings in the surroundings of the Egyptian Delta and in parallel, he began leaning *ʻūd* under the supervision of his father.

In 1928 al-Sunbāṭī moved to Cairo in an attempt to be part of Egypt's main music scene. In 1930 he began studying singing at the Institute for Arabic Music, and in the same year he was hired by Odeon Records, one of Cairo's leading recording companies back then, to compose songs for their singers they produced. He gradually focused on composition, which slowly became his main profession.

Al-Sunbāṭī started composing for Umm Kulthūm in the mid 1930s and he gradually became one of her principal composers along with al-Qaṣabjī and Aḥmad. His early compositions for Umm Kulthūm were highly influenced by his colleagues.

From the mid 1940s Umm Kulthūm focused her attention on singing classical poetry or *qaṣīdah*, and commissioned al-Sunbāṭī to compose a number of songs in this genre. Through these songs, al-Sunbāṭī developed his distinctive style and gained a higher status as a composer. As Danielson notes, 'the *qaṣā'id* established Riyāḍ al-Sunbāṭī as Umm Kulthūm's principal composer and as the most formidable master of the genre in the Arab world.'[106]

One of al-Sunbāṭī's master pieces in the *qaṣīdah* genre was the song *al-Aṭlāl* from 1967 which 'became a signature composition frequently excerpted to evoke the memory of Umm Kulthūm.'[107] Describing this song Danielson notes:

[105] Al-Sunbāṭī's biography is based on two books: 1) Kāmil, Maḥmūd. *Al-Tārīkh al-Fannī lil-Mūsīqār Riyāḍ al-Sunbāṭī 1906-1981* [The Artistic History of Riyāḍ al-Sunbāṭī 1906-1981]. 1993; and 2) al-Sharīf, Ṣamīm. *Al-Sunbāṭī wa Jīl al-ʻamāliqah* [Al-Sunbāṭī and the Age of the greatest]. Al-Hay'ah al-'āmah al-Sūriyyah lil Kitāb, 2010.

[106] Danielson, *The Voice of Egypt*, p. 122.
[107] Ibid., p. 178.

> Its success illustrated the vitality of a historically Arabic compositional model as well as flexibility of that model in accommodating the continuous absorption of new features. These, whether developed from closely or distantly related repertoires, did not seriously disturb the underlying character of the genre.[108]

From the late 1940s, al-Sunbāṭī became Umm Kulthūm's principal composer and wrote most of her repertoire for more than ten years. His career as a composer faded after her death in 1975. Alongside his work with Umm Kulthūm, Sunbāṭī collaborated with many of Egypt's most accomplished singers, such as Sāliḥ ʻAbd al-Ḥayy (1896-1962), Muḥammad ʻAbd al-Muṭṭalib (1910-1980), Asmahān, and several others. Throughout his career al-Sunbāṭī composed around 500 vocal works.[109]

Al-Sunbāṭī also gained a wide reputation as an *ʻūd* player. When he joined the Institute of Arab Music in 1930, he was immediately appointed as an *ʻūd* teacher thanks to his advanced technical skills. In the 1930s, he accompanied many singers in their recordings and their ensembles. The most notable among these was ʻAbd al-Wahhāb – the most famous male singer in Cairo back then, and a good *ʻūd* player himself – who in 1933 hired al-Sunbāṭī to play *ʻūd* in the recordings he made for his first film. Al-Sunbāṭī was awarded the UNESCO International Music Prize as a performer of the *ʻūd* in 1979.

1.6 **The repertoire chosen for music analysis**

The bulk of al-Qaṣabjī's commercial *taqāsīm* recordings were made at an early stage of his musical career, especially in the 1920s. Until recently these recordings were mostly found in privately owned collections. However, I was exposed to al-Qaṣabjī's recordings in the early 2000s. Back then I obtained a 'rare' cassette that included a large part of the recordings. With the growth of internet technology, al-Qaṣabjī's recordings gradually became accessible through internet forums specializing in Arabic music (such as the website *Zaman Al-Wasl*[110] and *Sama3y*[111]), and in recent years they became accessible on Web platforms such as YouTube and SoundCloud. In 2016, most of the recordings were digitized and published on two CD-ROMs (and a booklet) titled 'Muḥammad al-Qasabgi, The Sultan of Ud',[112] by the Arabic Music Archiving & Research Foundation (AMAR).

---

[108] Ibid., 181.

[109] These numbers are based on Kāmil's listing of al-Sunbāṭī's works. See Kāmil, *Al-Tārīkh al-Fannī lil-Mūsīqār Riyāḍ al-Sunbāṭī*, pp. 135-187.

[110] http://www.zamanalwasl.net

[111] http://www.sama3y.net

[112] Al-Qaṣabjīl-Muḥmmad. *Muḥmmad al-Qaṣabgī The Sultan of ʻŪd*, Arabic Music Archiving & Research Foundation, 2016, CD (no. P1131192). In this publication, AMAR uses a different system of Arabic Romanization, therefore, there are differences in the titles and names between this dissertation and the actual publication (for example, al-Qaṣabjī versus al-Qasabgi).

AMAR's first CD-ROM includes 16 *taqāsīm* that were recorded for commercial purposes between 1921 and 1937.[113] The vast majority of these recordings occupy one side of a 78rpm disk and last around three minutes. After intensive listening to the recordings, I focused on nine *taqāsīm* made between 1921 and 1928. Table 1 lists these recordings and indicates the name, the company, and the approximate year of each recording.[114] Excluding *ḥijāz*, there are two *taqāsīm* in each *maqām*. Therefore, for the sake of clarity, I will differentiate the recordings by also mentioning the name of their company; for instance, *taqsīm rāst* on Odeon.

Recording	Record company	Year
taqsīm rāst	Odeon	1921
taqsīm nahāwand	Odeon	1921
taqsīm bayātī	Odeon	1921
taqsīm ḥijāz	Odeon	1921
taqsīm nahāwand	Baidaphon	1923
taqsīm ḥijāzkār	Baidaphon	1923
taqsīm rāst	Colombia	1927
taqsīm ḥijāzkār	Colombia	1927
taqsīm bayātī	Gramophone	1928

Table 1: nine *taqsī*m recordings by al-Qaṣabjī made between 1921-1928

The bulk of al-Sunbāṭī's commercial *taqsīm* recordings was made at a later stage of his musical career: a group of six *taqāsīm* (Table 2) that was made for Cairo Radio in the 1970s. They were released on cassettes and CD-ROMs. A widely available CD-ROM was produced by the Saudi Arabian company SIDI.[115]

These *taqāsīm* are popular and much admired by musicians and the genre's practitioners. For instance, when describing these recordings, Racy notes:

> The late Riyāḍ al-Sunbāṭī of Egypt, considered one of the greatest composers of the Arab modal tradition, has recorded somewhat circumspect taqāsīm that flow along the organic structure of the mode but evoke intense ecstatic sensations. Particularly cherished by other musicians and musical aficionados, al-Sunbati's style is marked by precise intonation, careful pacing, distinct interest in resonance, careful utilization of pauses, economy and subtlety in the use of the plectrum, and

[113] The second CD on the other hand includes radio recordings, live performances, and private gatherings which were made between 1937 and 1966.
[114] These informations are found on AMAR's liner notes. See Al-Qaṣabjīl-Muḥmmad. Liner Notes. *Muḥmmad al-Qaṣabgī The Sultan of* '*Ūd*, Arabic Music Archiving & Research Foundation, 2016, CD (no. P1131192), pp. 6-7.
[115] Al-Sunbāṭī, Riyād. *Taqaseem Oud*. SIDI, 1995, CD (no. 95SDCD01B03). On this album, *taqāsīm ḥijāz* and *rāḥat al-arwāḥ* are mislabelled as *ḥijāzkār* and *sikā*.

full exploration of the primary mode before a modulation is introduced. His renditions achieve a unique balance between feeling and technical excellence.[116]

Recording	Track number on SIDI release
taqsīm nahāwand	01
taqsīm ḥijāz	02
taqsīm rāḥat al-arwāḥ	03
taqsīm kurd	04
taqsīm rāst	05
taqsīm bayātī	06

Table 2*:* six *taqsīm* recordings by al-Sunbāṭī's made in the 1970s

My investigation also includes another *taqsīm* in *maqām nahāwand*, which was recorded in the late 1960s as part of the song *Ashwāq*. This is a lengthy *taqsīm* lasting about ten minutes which forms an intermezzo between an orchestral interlude and the actual song (to differentiate this recording from others, I will refer to it as *taqsīm nahāwand*/*Ashwāq*). Finally, I also explored two recordings by al-Sunbāṭī made during the earlier phonograph era. These are *taqāsīm* in the *maqāmāt nahāwand* and *sikāh*, and they were released on one 78rpm disk around 1927 produced by Odeon company.*[117]*

[116] Racy, Jihad Ali. "The many faces of improvisation: The Arab Taqāsīm as a Musical Symbol." *Ethnomusicology*, vol. 44, no. 2, spring-summer 2000, p. 313. JSTOR, doi:10.2307/852534. Accessed 31 January 2014.

[117] Al-Sunbāṭī, Riyāḍ. *Taqāsīm nahāwand/sikāh*.' Odeon, ca. 1927, disk (no A244250).