Modern Algorithmic Aesthetics and Mathematical Harmony Throughout History

Nessreen Y. Ibrahim

Helwan University, Cairo, Egypt, nessreen_ibrahim@a-arts.helwan.edu.eg

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Identifying and Transcribing Meter and Rhythmic Elaboration of the Percussion in Some of Egyptian Zar Songs

Nahla Mattar

Theory and Composition Department, Faculty of Music Education, Helwan University, Cairo, Egypt

Abstract

More functional music transcription is needed for the folkloric Egyptian ritual zar. This study attempts to unlock some of the complex rhythmic elaboration the zar, especially bi-meter and fluid embellishment of the percussive ink line in each instrument.

Although the folkloric nature of zar music, but unlike the usual simple temporal structure of such music, it is very complex. In transcribing such oral musical tradition, one is always faced with difficulty regarding announce music flow nature of folkloric music flow and writing it within the tradition of notation developed mainly to function for western classical music. The sample consists of four songs: Ricosha, Ywra Ya Amar, Mamma and Hakim Basha. We will discuss some of the challenges related to elaborative rhythmic and meter notation. In addition, negotiating/debating other possible notation solutions. Reductionist functional transcription is needed to move from a given temporal phase to the next, the duf and tabla mainly give the signal for such shift. When these songs are performed in a concert context, especially with non zar performers, they can use the suggested transcription enables the performers to re-live the actual folkloric flow and evocate its aesthetic.

Keywords: Zar songs, Egyptian folklore, Music transcription of folklore, Women folkloric ritual, Ywra Bek, Mamma, Ricosha, Hakim Basha, Temporal structure

Introduction

Zar is a communal healing ritual, mainly performed by women for women, that has a connection with the metaphysical world of spirits. Namely, some families of these capricious spirits attempt to manifest themselves temporarily in the human body. The result of such spirits’ touch (sometime is referred to as possession) is some form of illness/symptoms, mostly hysteria and panic attacks. Zar itself is defined as a specific class of spirits that humans (especially females) can touch accidentally in certain times or spaces, and then they need to be reconciled through the ritual of dance, drumming, singing, and sacrifice to leave the body (Mattar, 2021).

Writings on zar encompass over a century’s worth of transcripts, letters, descriptions of field visits, and other papers. The first mention of zar dates to a 1903 Awqaf Ministry publication as Muhammed Hilmi Zayn al-Din (Natvig, 1998) wrote about the harms of the practice. This same negative messaging around zar extends to the present day due to the influence of two main factors: the Wahabi cult and mass media.
communications. The former addresses zar as haram, while the latter depicts it as a con art or scam. These two factors have heavily influenced the scholarly writing on zar. Earlier knowledge generated within a broader hegemonic framework is hence impacted by this framework.

Despite these two influences, many musical nuances and layers of zar remain as a motivation to appreciate zar and to conduct this study. One aspect is the personal experience of attending mazaher ensemble concerts in Cairo for over a decade, attending special zar ceremonies, and reliving the ritual through the insightful writings of El Hadidi (2016), Al Masry (1975), Boddy (1988), Natvig (1987), Natvig (2010) and Kennedy (1967). All of these indicate that zar has a magic and wide allure as an oral, performative, musical ritual for communal healing devoted to the wellbeing of women. It is a uniquely structured musical performance that unfolds in infinite forms and shapes in real time as an interactive healing ritual. No extant musicological research has noted and analyzed these permutations. The interactivity of the patient shapes the nature of the performance, which survives beyond existing music notational methods. All these factors will shape current transcription choices. The transcription is critical to preserve the musical identity of zar, and indeed to grant it a second life chance.

Moreover, some of the extant musical analysis is based on over-simplified data and connections that require further examination and analysis before being validated. For instance, in zar rituals, the ethnicity of zar spirits holds importance to its participants because there is a lineage of zar spirits that is important to the function and desired outcome. El Hadidi argues that the ethnic background of a zar spirit relates to tonality and rhythm utilized in each song (El Hadidi, 2016), yet this claim oversimplifies the connection between musical elements and the spirits’ ethnicity. First, in making this claim El Hadidi was referring to Egyptian zar, yet further research encompassing Sudanese and Ethiopian zar is necessary to investigate this claim. For example, a Sudanese zar song invoking Moroccan/Egyptian spirit of Saint Al Badawy uses the tonality of pentatonic scale related to Nubia and sub-Saharan African countries. In other words, the musical data from which El Hadidi extrapolates a connection in it to the ethnicity of a certain spirit, in part could be understood within the tonal and rhythmic frameworks that appear in a variety of local musical contexts. Furthermore, this framework regarding zar and ethnicity does not account for a large corpus of zar, which is not limited to spirits; rather depicting feelings of pain as well as joy (Natvig, 2013). Lastly, in zar ritual, the function of the spirit matters far more than its name; for sometimes the spirits are referred to by different names. For example, example, the appellation “Umm el Gulam” refers to at least three different spirits of three different ethnic backgrounds (Natvig, 2013), yet the music in one set is inspired by or otherwise related to Sufi music. When faced with songs with ambiguous symbolism, how does the proposed mapping of ethnicity and musical features play out? El Hadidi offers compelling anthropological insights, and raises interesting points related to the music, yet, further richer survey and analysis performed by scholars of musicology/ethnomusicology is needed.

Additionally, gaps in the research remain regarding finding deep musical structure/s. Although some attempts to analyze zar songs yielded a rudimentary description of phrasing and form, these paradigms have not consistently considered the relevant context, as we see in describing the repetitive nature of one melody in Sudanese zar songs (Al Safy, 2008), which is a characteristic associated with folk songs. In addition, the interactivity of patient/musicians takes the perceptions of form from just simple theme and variations structure to a complex dramatic subtle structure. The main reason for such rushed deduction is that these researchers do not belong to the musicological field, and hence conducting music analysis out of context. Another example, the length of a song in zar is not indicated in its notation, so the healing ritual described by Al-Safi would take place in ten seconds, which is clearly erroneous.

Problem and Significance

Although the folkloric nature of zar music, but unlike the usual simple temporal structure of
such music, it is very complex. In transcribing such oral musical tradition, one is always faced with difficulty regarding how these kinds of folkloric music flow so differently than systemized western music. Composers/ethnomusicologists have been trying to consolidate such gap; especially that temporal elements, especially meter, as it is usually associated with the local used language/s. Accordingly, in this study ways of notation and transcription were utilized to represent several functions of the style of zar music.

Goals

In a previous paper, the overall structure of the temporal element is some Egyptian zar was explored. In current paper, we shall dive into specifics and challenges related to elaborative rhythmic and meter notation. In addition, negotiating/debating other possible notation's solutions.

Sample

Even there will be transcribing to four samples; but the paper will focus in one temporal process that dominated two songs of the given sample and gave a different folding to the music as the video recording indicated different length and tempi utilization by the same band. The samples are of the independent cultural Center ensemble, MAKAN, and the ensemble is called Mazaher. The songs are: Ricosha, Ywra Ya Amar, Mamma, and Hakim Basha.

Literature Review

A more recent paper (Al Sayad, 2021) dealt with transcribing Mazaher’s songs, as a tool to document the ensemble. However, it used one shorter version of Ywra song, as a result it did not cover the utilization of poly meters which exists in a longer version under the name of Ywra Ya Aamer (Ywra you are beautiful like a moon).

Most of the studies that transcribed some of zar songs, were not discussing transcription challenges, and were trying to document and preserve some aspects of the heritage. In Yaqot’s paper (Yaqot, 1979), the focus was to differentiate local styles of zar ensembles and styles. No mention to elaborate temporal structures used, but pointing to poly rhythm, which is inevitable with such oral heritage that depends on the creativity and embellishment of the performer. I can even debate, it is more of a rhythmic heterophony than polyphony. Yet, in this paper more attention will be focusing on bi-meter and how should it be to preserve creative performance, as the ritual of zar is extinction, and we do not have enough recording of different ensembles.

Some other more recent studies occupied itself with studying the social/cultural need of a given society and the healing attribute related to zar. Even, this is of psychiatric filed, but again, why then specific patterns of drumming in given cultures is related to achieving wellbeing of its people (mostly women)? It seems to me that it is important to understand the modern interpretation of zar, in which psychiatric gives to us the ability to understand its function. Therefore, we reach a better musical organization/representation on paper transcription. One of these recent studies (Mianji and Semnani, 2015) was occupied with cultural-sensitive issues related to healing through discussing Group Distress, Culture-Bound Syndrome or Cultural Concept of Distress. “In the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR), zar is addressed as a culture-bound syndrome. DSM-IV contains symptomatic descriptions of 25 culture-bound syndromes. Furthermore, there is a more distinction about the modern interpretation of zar: zar as a class of spirits cause illness, than the
first canon of the seventies relating zar’s world to mental illness. In that study the author states: “Although zar is not considered pathological in local cultures, depending on its severity, it can be perceived outside of the cults in which it develops as a symptom of more serious mental health problems, such as psychosis and/or dissociative identity disorder.” (Mianji and Semnani, 2015) It is clear that paradigm change of knowledge has approached its peak in recent canon of zar studies that the discourse now look at early studies to be a result of a legacy of colonial psychiatry, while now it has a new label: cultural syndromes, cultural idioms of distress, and/or cultural explanations (Mianji and Semnani, 2015). In this current study, it is important that some musical shift is made to approach the healing medium: drumming, through understanding these new discourse shifts, make us read more in depth and actualize how the folk group utilized temporal element to serve their needs.

One more short interdisciplinary study (Al Safy, 2008) that was a handbook for public published under the Sudanese Ministry of Health, contained some basic transcription of zar songs. It did identify the name of tonality and the rhythmic cycle used, but no transcription of the poly rhythmic patterns, even not mentioning any bi-meter usage or such elaborated tool; just the melodic transcription of a given main melody.

Methodology

The transcription is focused on understanding the main pattern/s of the rhythmic accompaniment in each sample and transcribing most of these embellishments pattern/s that the ensemble is using. It is the believe of the study that the music of zar, as any oral heritage, is based on improvisation, so it is important to point at the main and sub patterns used to better document the flow. Furthermore, to consider and understand the elastic nature of the performers inconsistent flow embellishments- particularly in each bar - and various personal tempi rubato that are done by each performer of the three or four drummers. This results in a specific overall phrasing leading to unsystematic elaboration that would be so unpractical in noting such nuance changes in each line in each bar. Therefore, the research applied a reductionist technique in the given transcription rather than a detailed one; a nonlinear approach than linear one could cap-sulate some of the dynamical essence of the original music style.

Transcription

Ricosha

This song is a video recording on YouTube. Its length is 2:50 min. It is distinguished with a rhythmic opening section that is so vivid and fun. No wonder, Ricosha is a girl, and usually this spirit is associated with one of the known self-defense psychological mechanisms: regression (Fig. 1).

The second and third sections (Mattar, 2021) (Fig. 2) are the most steady and stable. They represent the main component of the song. The rhythmic cycle (RC) is bamb, with some ornamentation of the duhlat tabla. As for the role, the tambourine joins the main the two instrument in playing the RC, with some rests.

In the fourth section, an accelerando happens for 32 s, and while the bamb is steady, the accentuated bamb in duf brings different color in the high register of the instrument (the upper edge, near the frame), with certain hands and body gesture of the performer. All indicating reaching the climax of the song, and all will lead to a sudden drop of the tempo played only with percussion, with unison tutti of certain rhythmic pattern, which is an augmentation of bamb to end the 5th and final section of the song (Fig. 3).

Ywara Ya Amar

In Ywara Ya Amar, there is two meters used simultaneously; melodic line in two four sung by the main singer and choir, while percussion, same singer/choir, is playing a rhythmic cycle of eight eight, beginning with upbeat, and divided into three, three, two (Fig. 4). Five seconds after listening to the singers for three minutes, the irregular new RC is introduced making a huge shift in intensity, as the two meters are played rubbing against each other. Syncopation and sometimes ornamentation, as
well as bringing an element of the bamb RC, is introduced and interplayed by the percussion ensemble. This used of the eight eight RC with two four meter melody, has dominating the entire song in the first two main tempi. The first tempo is so slow, while the second tempo is going toward andante moderato feeling.

The tonality of the melody is around ajam.\(^6\) The singer is using a lot of tremolos and trills to elaborate on the long notes, especially it is largo, resulting in a very adlibitum, grandeurs style. While, the choir is using aleatoric trills and tremolos building certain dissonance and beating effects.

The song consists of eight sections (Figs. 5 and 6). The first itself is three sections which are not sequential but layered in its appearances.

This song begins with the singing part in antiphony between the solo singer in the first section, followed by repetition from the choir in the second section, then the solo returns in the third section. All sections last for three minutes and there is no rhythmic accompaniment form the percussion at all (Fig. 8). Beginning from the fourth section, the previous three sections continue to happen, while the percussion introduces the RC in eight eight, to shift the intensity of the work to a new level.

The next section (see section 5) is in the same entire previous setting, especially in the percussion, but in a faster tempo; andante moderato (Fig. 5). Again, the singing is still accumulated in the same manner with some slight changes of the length of the phrases. With the fifth section we are getting ready to reach the climax, which happens suddenly when meters are united in two four in the sixth section (Fig. 6) with tempo reaching allegro con brio and only bamb is used; and an acceleration of tempo is happening in the seventh section and the singing is done, to be

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\(^6\) which is almost a major mode, with slightly flatten third; yet not the same as famous half flat third of rast.
followed by the final section of sudden slowdown in tempo and unison of rhythmic pattern from percussion only.

*Mamma*

This song is almost 9 min in length. It utilizes the basic feature of bi-meter as *Ywra Ya Amar*; the main singer and the choir sings in two four, while the percussion perform in eight eight. The tonality of the song is *ajam* from the beginning till the end.

There are main six temporal sections. The first section has the solo singing then the choir reply, for almost a minuet and half (Fig. 7). After two minutes the third section appears, where the entire tempo is becoming moderato instead of andante moderato. Same melodic and rhythmic settings, with the appearance of shorter melodic phrases due to the text used.

Then at 20 after seven minutes, the fifth section appears where the meter is unified to two four with *bamb*. It starts to accelerate for more than a minute, then it slows down suddenly to end the song (Fig. 8).

*Hakim Basha*

The transcribed recording of *Hakim Basha* indicates an eleven-minute length. There is a tonality of *bayatti* in the opening melodies, and then with the fast section the melody adapts

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7 Bayatti is a maqam that centers on d, with a micro-tonal second (e half flat).
This song has a lot of tarab, and the rhythmic cycle is fixed all over it, but with different pacing. It is set on bamb.

The temporal structure of Hakim Basha is in six sections. The first one is in andante moderato solo singing and then choir reply to it. No accompaniment of percussive instruments is present. The first section lasts for five minutes and half (Fig. 9).

With the second section, the percussion enters with bamb in allegro con brio pace. The third section is marked by the short phrases between solo singer and choir. The fourth section enters after almost two minutes in a slightly faster pace (Fig. 10), and at 18 after 10 min, the music accelerates to reach the final section and suddenly slow down (Fig. 11). Note that the melody of section four is the same of Ricosha's. Also, the acceleration happened by percussion only.

Discussion

The most elaborated feature in the metric of two of the chosen zar songs is bi-meter. This bi-
meter is not happening by juxtaposing of the two meters, as a two-bar in four meter contains 8 eighths in which we can say that eight eight meter is just a subdivision in it. Yet, the eight eight meter begins with an upbeat, so a shift has been made to the beginning of the second meter, indicates a different count. Even both lines, the vocal and the percussive, begin with upbeat, however the consistency of the RC used in the percussive made it very clear is not a subdivision of the double meter.

The reason for choosing such transcription is explained in the following:

1- The vocal line phrases flow is indicating a duple meter rather than quadruple.
2- The other option that it could make sense, yet it is complicated, that the vocal line in this current section and tempo, is based on one melody that
is being repeated each 14-quarter note; therefore, it could be combined at a RC of fourteen four.

3- The percussive line could be of a smaller beat, yet making the beat as an eight, gives us easily the relationship of the rhythmic motives that relates to \( \text{babm} \), and in which is recalled at any successive of four eighths with any kind of variations either in ornamentation or adding a slight length to any end of the motive used without syncing this tempo rubato to the entire group. It is significance to notice that the last two beats of this eight eight RC is accentuated to bring everyone together to the next downbeat.

4- The suggested grouping of the eight eight rc to 3 3 2, for example Fig. 4, is deducted to enhance the syncopation that actually happen of the rhythmic motives by the performance.

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*Fig. 7. Transcription of 1st, 2nd and 3rd sections, Mamma.*

*Fig. 8. Transcription of 5th & 6th sections, Mamma.*
5- Another perspective of the meter is that the percussion could alternate between two eight and six eight meters, but this might create complication with the upper vocal line, and it would cancel the holistic flow of the eight eight RC.

6- All previous points are followed also in Mamma’s transcription.

7- One song has an introductory percussion section alone (Fig. 1), Ricosha, the provided transcription to this introductory rhythmic section is
associated with pointing to the direction. It is predicated that each time the song is performed, this section could be longer, or even have more embellishment. Yet, the most important thing is to preserve the intensity curve, so when we try to reproduce it, the suggested transcription should give guide to the un-folkloric performer. Two main rhythmic cycles are used, Malfof and Bam, do share the same meter. Both are very well known to the local Egyptian music culture, as well as traditional Arabic music. Accordingly, the beat is a quarter note for the transcription. On a theoretical level, they could be considered as one cycle with different ornaments. The intensity level is gradually introducing the Malfof, then ornamenting it to have the babm, to build the climax with the equal accentuation that result in adding a contrasting line erasing the normal pattern of the simple double meter.

8- As for the instruments’ role. Usually, tabla is the main line here, in exchange with the duf. The remaining instruments are secondary in the texture, and most of the time they keep the beat or the parts of the beat; Ricosha. Fig. 1, and in Hakim Basha, Fig. 10.

Conclusion

It is vital to keep the five fixed temporal stages of the intensity level, directing toward the climax in any reproduction of the song. Reductionist functional transcription is needed to move from temporal phase to other, the duf player should signal that, tabla can as well here. It is important to practice cues pre the concert. In actual zar ritual, not in concert as in the sample, these phases and pacing will be sensitive to the progress of the movement of the patient.

When these songs are performed in a concert context, especially with non zar performers, they need a transcription that will enable the performers to re-live the actual folkloric flow and evocate it’s aesthetic.

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* For more details, please look up: Mattar, Ibid. p. 92.