Instruments of Exchange

The Impact of the Middle East on Western Music

Cameron Joseph Verbeke

Cameron Joseph Verbeke is currently a senior at Marquette University studying history, economics, and law. His areas of study include Britain, Ireland, the Soviet Union, and especially the Middle East and North Africa. Following graduation, he plans to attend law school.

Throughout history, the Middle East has had a substantial—if sometimes unappreciated—impact on the Western world. In certain areas, especially chemistry, astronomy, philosophy and medicine, this contribution has been well documented. However, one particular area remains largely ignored: the many contributions of the Middle East to the music of the West. Through the preservation, innovation, and reintroduction of music theory, the Middle East has continually helped to shape Western music, from antiquity to the present. After the fall of the Roman Empire, the achievements of Western music theory were in great danger of being lost. However, scholars living under the Byzantine Empire and Abbasid Caliphate showed a great appreciation for the West's work and sought to preserve it by translating vast amounts of Greek and Latin text into Arabic. It is because of their efforts that we still have access today to the musically

relevant works of great Greek thinkers such as Pythagoras, Euclid, and Ptolemy.[1] Yet the thinkers of the Middle East did not simply seek to preserve these groundbreaking studies; they also sought to expand upon them. Many famous Muslim philosophers—most notably al-Kindi, al-Farabi, and even the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun—made considerable innovations to the field of music theory, using the Greek treatises as their basis. Al-Kindi, for example, added a detailed fret board to the oud (an Arab precursor to the guitar).[2] He also proposed the idea of a one-eighth time signature; that is to say, one that uses eighth notes rather than the standard quarter notes.

Al-Farabi continued the development of music theory, incorporating Ptolemaic ideas to create a new way of tuning the oud using microtonal intervals to create a diatonic scale.[3] And in the thirteenth century, the renowned Turkish musician Safiuddin al-Armawi added subdivisions amongst the intervals of the Pythagorean scale in order to create new melodic modes.[4] He also created an early form of musical tablature in which he represented various positions on the fretboard with the first ten letters of the Arabic alphabet. These are only three of the many philosophers of the Middle East who contributed greatly to the development of the music of the West by expanding on some of the earliest studies of music theory.

While the musicians of the Middle East greatly expanded on the theory behind the music, they also began to produce new musical instruments that served as predecessors to many contemporary Western instruments. While it is nearly impossible to pinpoint an exact date and location for the creation of many of these instruments, early records show that they began spreading around the world from the Middle East at various points in antiquity. For example, the oud—a form of the lute that originated in Persia—served as the foundation for the modern-day guitar and mandolin. Indeed, the word "guitar" itself may come from the Arabic word "qitara," the precursor of the Spanish word "guitar."[5] The violin also has ties to the Middle East, as its early construction was based off the rebab, an instrument that originated somewhere in the Middle East and North Africa in the 8th century and spread along trading routes.[6] Other Middle Eastern instruments with Western counterparts include the qanun and the harp/auto-harp, the santour and the hammered dulcimer/piano, the nay and the flute, and the zurna and the trumpet/horn.[7] As these instruments began reaching Europe, largely through Sicily or Spain, they quickly gained popularity, even winning over the Frankish kings Pepin and Charlemagne. Both of these great kings began to incorporate various Arab instruments into Christian church music, and by the 11th century, many of these instruments were in use by the church, which helped spread them across Europe.[8]

The impact of the Middle East on Western music is not limited to the medieval period. The numerous Ottoman incursions into Europe from the 16th to the 18th centuries left distinct cultural impressions within the areas they conquered. While the Ottomans themselves were never able to breach the gates of Vienna, some elements of their culture did. The most explicit form of Ottoman

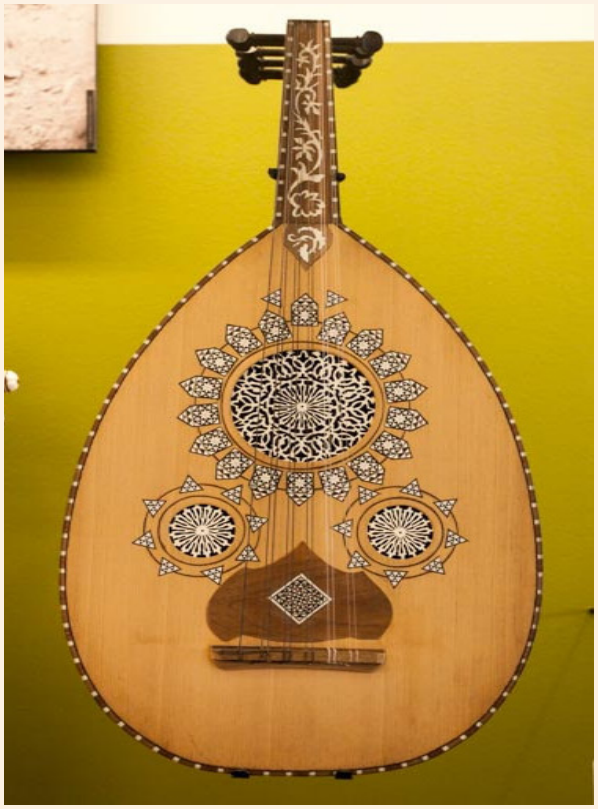
"In addition to the rebab and violin, other Middle Eastern instruments with Western counterparts include the qanun and harp, the santour and piano, the nay and flute, and the zurna and trumpet."

influence was the spread of a style of music known as "Turkish March." As the name would imply, the style was derived from the music played by musicians within the Ottoman Janissary corps.[9] Turkish motifs first appeared in two separate pieces of music in 1775—Mozart's *Violin Concerto No. 5* and Haydn's *L'incontro Improvviso*.[10] The style remained popular for decades and was notably favored by Beethoven, who used it in his 1812 *Marcia alla Turca* and in the final movement of his famous *9th Symphony*—in which the chorus is accompanied by the faint sound of Turkish instruments.[11]

Even to this day, the Middle East continues to inspire many artists in the West to experiment utilizing elements from the East. One prominent example of this trend is the story of Dick Dale, known to fans as "The King of Surf Rock." Dale, born Richard Monsour, was the son of an immigrant from Lebanon. Dale, who was raised in Boston, grew up speaking Arabic in his family and learning about the music of Lebanon from his uncle. His uncle taught him how to play the Lebanese goblet drum, but Dale's real passion came from watching his uncle play the oud.[12]

One song in particular piqued Dale's interest: "Miserlou," a tune popular among Greek refugees from Turkey. The name of the song translates as "The Egyptian" from Turkish.[13] According to Dale, a young fan once approached him and asked if he could play an entire song using only one guitar string. Dale promised the fan that at the concert the next day he would get his wish. Dale thought back to his uncle playing "Miserlou" on the oud, and quickly taught himself how to play it using only the high-E string of his guitar. At the concert the following evening, the song was so popular with the crowd that Dale quickly decided to record a studio version for his next album.[14] "Miserlou" became be a hit in the United States following its release in 1962, and enjoyed a resurgence after its use in the 1994 Quentin Tarantino film Pulp Fiction. The song would also go on to influence future acts like the Beach Boys and Jimi Hendrix, who both sought to either cover their own versions or write news songs similar to "Miserlou."[15]

While Dale laid the groundwork for the adoption



A classic oud, relative of the guitar. Wikimedia Commons, Kovalchek, 2014.

of Arabic musical elements into popular music, it was not until the end of the decade when many popular acts began to incorporate Eastern scales with Arabic quartertones into their songs. Two of the most popular tracks to use these scales were "Paint it Black" by the Rolling Stones, and "White Rabbit" by Jefferson Airplane.[16] However, Arabic influence in the 1960s was by no means limited to these two groups. Another band that drew influence from Arabic music were the Doors. In an interview with author Jonathan Curiel, Doors' keyboard player Ray Manzarek spoke about how the Doors often used a mix of Latin-American and Arabic themes in their songs. Regarding Doors' songs such as "When the Music's Over" and "The Mosquito," Manzarek said, "We were all into Arabic-style playing because it's so much fun to play with Arabic rhythms and Arabic harmonies. From a keyboard perspective, and certainly from a guitar perspective, we were using Arabic modal lines."[17]

The Middle East's influence on modern American music does not end there. The Grateful Dead album *Blues for Allah*—dedicated to Faisal al-Saud, king of Saudi Arabia and a noted fan of the band—features many songs that utilize quartertones and Arabic scales.[18] Both Bob Dylan and Robert Plant (of Led Zeppelin) were fans of legendary Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum, and incorporated her influence in their own songwriting. Peter Gabriel and Eddie Vedder (of Pearl Jam) both collaborated with Pakistani singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan on their songs.[19] In the 1990s and 2000s, the heavy-metal band System of a Down sold tens of millions of albums while making heavy use of Armenian melodies and traditional instruments such as the duduk (a double-reeded variant of the oboe). In 1999, rapper and hip-hop artist Jay-Z prominently featured a motif from the 1957 Egyptian song *Khosara Khosara*, by Baligh Hamdi and Abdel Halim Hafez. And following the September 11th terrorist attacks, Bruce Springsteen released his song "Worlds Apart," which criticized Islamophobia and attempted to musically reconcile East and West through the heavy use of Qawwali background singing, a 700-year old style originating in Sufi Islam.[20]

While many today continue to polarize the West and the Middle East, those who do so fail to appreciate the rich exchange that has existed between these two entities throughout their shared history. The many ethnic groups that have lived in the Middle East and North Africa have made significant contributions to many fields of academia including chemistry, astronomy, philosophy, medicine, and beyond. But to this day, some of the most important contributions of the Middle East to the West lie in their rich, shared musical traditions. From antiquity to the present. The scales and theory, instruments, and even contemporary rock songs of the modern West all owe a considerable debt to the influence and contributions of the Middle East. ✦

Endnotes

1 Rabag Saoud, The Arab Contribution to Music of the Western World (Manchester: Foundation for Science Technology and Civilization, 2004), 3.

2 Saoud, 3.

3 Ibid., 4.

4 Ibid., 5.

5 Farmer, 137.

6 Ibid., 140.

7 Saoud, 14.

8 Ibid., 7.

9 Henry Farmer. Military Music (London: Parrish Publications, 1950), 28.

10 Ibid., 29.

11 Ibid., 32.

12 Jonathan Curiel, Al' America Travels Through America's Arab and Islamic Roots (London: The New Press, 2008), 120.

13 Ibid., 120.

14 Ibid., 120.

15 Ibid., 122.

16 Gary Laderman and Luis Leon, Religion and American Cultures: Tradition, Diversity, and Popular Expression, 2nd edition (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2014), 970.

17 Curiel, 124.

18 Ibid., 125.

19 Laderman et al., 972.

20 Reed, "System of a Down's 'Toxicity: Ten Things You Didn't Know," Rolling Stone, September 4, 2016.

21 Holston, "What Does Islamic Music have to do With Blues, Jazz, and Surf Rock?" DMagazine, 4/7/12.