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Arabic Choral Music: A Worthwhile Endeavor

When choir directors seek to include music in languages other than English, they naturally turn to works in other European languages, most often Spanish, French, German, or Italian. These languages are familiar: most trained vocalists learn diction in these languages, and most high school students study at least one. Pronunciation, if not immediately obvious, is at least readily accessible. Repertoire is widely available. Arabic choral music, in contrast, is few and far between. It contains non-English phonemes and the musical style is often unfamiliar. However, despite these difficulties, incorporating Arabic music into concert programs is a worthwhile challenge that provides unique rewards.

Arabic is a Semitic language spoken by over 200 million people across the world today (Versteegh vii). Related to Ethiopian, Aramaic, and Hebrew, it developed (appropriately enough) on the Arabian peninsula (Versteegh 10-11). Although one of the last Semitic languages to develop, its use in the Qur'an and Islam caused it to spread across the world in the later centuries of the first millennium (Versteegh 1, 11). The writing of the Qur'an resulted in a standardization of Arabic (now known as Classical Arabic), and it came to represent "a supra-tribal language that served as a binding factor for all those who lived in the Arabian peninsula" (Versteegh 42). This distinction between a unifying language and a wide variety of regional dialects persists to the present day: Modern Standard Arabic is the language of the media and the language taught in schools, but a variety of dialects exist for use in everyday discourse – many of which are

mutually unintelligible (Versteegh 241-242). Thus, Arabic is a unified language only in name – although dialectical studies are only recently beginning due to cultural bias (Versteegh 175).

Arabic music developed relatively independently of Western music, and this divergence is clearly evident today. Right off the bat, new listeners to Arabic music will notice unfamiliar pitches. Unlike traditional Western music, Arabic music is not based on an equally-tempered scale. Rather, each piece is written in a distinct mode, or *maqām* (Touma 18). The idea of a *maqām* is more similar to the concept of Indian ragas rather than Western scales and modes: a *maqām* is defined not by pitches but rather by its intervals. There are still seven notes within each octave, but each *maqām* has a range of two octaves that need not be equivalent, and the descending form may be different (like melodic minor), and often ends on a different pitch than it began on (Touma 29-36). To make matters even more interesting, many intervals are approximately three-quarter-tones, leading to a mixture of minor, “medium”, major, and augmented seconds (Touma 37). The placement of these three-quarter-tones is variable and “does not have a fixed size that holds for all *maqām* rows” (Touma 23).

All of this makes the notation of Arabic pitches difficult in Western notation. Indeed, “[i]t wasn’t until the second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century that some Arabian musicians attempted to notate their music” (Touma 18). Even then, traditional Arabic music is not based on fixed pitch (e.g. A=440 Hz); rather, the lowest note of the mode is matched with the lowest note of a singer’s range, and any other instruments are tuned accordingly (Touma 18). This lowest pitch, *yakāh*, is often notated as a G, but in practice it may be as much as a fourth away in either direction (Touma 18). This gives the arranger significant flexibility in pitch level.

Pitch-notational issues aside, one of the first concerns for the would-be Arabic choral arranger is the simple issue of how to present text. Arabic, like most Semitic languages, is written right-to-left in an alphabet totally different from our Roman alphabet (“A Guide to Arabic”). Even if we were literate in Arabic script, pairing right-to-left text with left-to-right music presents significant difficulties. Thus, some sort of transliteration is required.

Unfortunately, no standard transliteration system exists (Versteegh xiv), and even the use of IPA has inherent imperfections due to the wide variety of regional dialects (Perkins 47). Additionally, Arabic uses a number of vowels and consonants unfamiliar to English speakers, particularly from the throat, presenting pronunciation difficulties (Perkins 47). However, this difficulty can at least partially be overcome by the free availability of recordings.

Additionally, the selection of texts is critical. Specifically, setting text from the Qur’an is verboten. Although to outsiders it may sound as if the Qur’an is regularly sung in religious ceremonies, Muslims consider this recitation to be something wholly separate from music – indeed, those who perform the Qur’an are never called singers (Touma 153). Most available published choral works in Arabic are settings of traditional tunes, and it seems that (absent an intimate knowledge of Arabic culture) that this is likely the safest route to go for the aspiring choral arranger.

Although Arabic choral music is just emerging as a genre in the Western world, several choirs have established themselves. Dozan wa Awtar (based in Amman, Jordan) and the Fayha Choir (based in Tripoli, Lebanon) are two of the most well-known today. Shireen Abu-Khader conducts Dozan wa Awtar, and seeks to preserve significant elements of Arabic musical traditions in her arrangements. Thus, her arrangements often focus on horizontal lines rather than vertical harmonies, particularly in the non-melodic parts. Traditional instrumentalists often play

with the choir (Perkins 47). In contrast, Edward Toriguian (arranger for the Fayha Choir) more typically sets traditional melodies in Western harmonic contexts. Additionally, the choir performs almost exclusively a capella – and therefore the rhythmic elements are contained within vocal parts rather than in auxiliary percussion instruments (Perkins 47-48).

Regardless of the degree of “authenticity”, performing Arabic choral music represents a significant opportunity for cross-cultural education and understanding. Especially in our post-9/11 world, it is important to encourage tolerance, and choral singing is an ideal vehicle. According to a study sponsored by the State Concert Agency of Norway, intercultural music produced far more significant impact on students than intercultural discussion, reaching them at an emotional level (Perkins 46). Although Arabic music presents some “barriers to entry”, overcoming these raises a slew of new opportunities – for instance, collaboration with native Arabs in the area or bringing in a guest lecturer or expert. Additionally, in this age of technology, recordings of native speakers and traditional music can serve as an authentic reference and learning aid, making this music more accessible than ever before. Take a risk, reach out, and try programming some Arabic choral music – the rewards are well worth the challenges.

Appendix 1 – Selected Bibliography of Published Arabic Choral Music
(Alphabetical by Title)

Title: Adinu
Composer/Arranger: Shireen Abu-Khader & Andre de Quadros
Publisher: Earthsongs
Scoring: A cappella

Title: Ai'yu
Composer/Arranger: Mohamed Abdelfatah
Publisher: Earthsongs
Scoring: SSAATTBB a cappella

Title: Al-Amira Wa Al-Gharaji
Composer/Arranger: Subaram Raman
Publisher: Earthsongs
Scoring: SATB/Piano

Title: Fog Elna Khel
Composer/Arranger: Salim Bali
Publisher: Earthsongs
Scoring: SATB a cappella

Title: Lammaa Badaa Yatathannaa
Composer/Arranger: Shireen Abu-Khader
Publisher: Earthsongs
Scoring: A cappella

Title: Lammaa Badaa Yatathanna
Composer/Arranger: Joy Ondra Hirokawa
Publisher: Hal Leonard
Scoring: 2-part/Piano; Opt'l. violin, cello, dumbek

Title: Lao Rahal Soti
Composer/Arranger: Shireen Abu-Khader
Publisher: Dozan wa Awtar
Scoring: SATB a cappella

Title: Sih'r Khalaq
Composer/Arranger: Jim Papoulis
Publisher: Boosey & Hawkes
Scoring: SSAA/Piano

Title: Ya Hinna
Composer/Arranger: Shireen Abu-Khader
Publisher: Dozan wa Awtar
Scoring: SAB a cappella

Title: Yal Asmar Ellon
Composer/Arranger: Edward Torikian
Publisher: Earthsongs
Scoring: A cappella

Appendix 2 – Links to Resources

Dozan wa Awtar

Home Page: <http://www.dozanwaawtar.com/>

YouTube Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCCSIrxhoTvV-Nm1YiNSJIIQ>

Fayha Choir

Home Page: <http://www.fayhachoir.org/>

Works Cited

"A Guide to Arabic - The Arabic Alphabet." BBC News. BBC, 2014. Web. 15 Oct. 2015.

Perkins, John. "Engaging with Arabic Choral Music." *International Choral Bulletin* 31.4 (2012): 46-49. Web. 15 October 2015.

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Versteegh, Kees. *Arabic Language* (2nd Edition). Edinburgh, GBR: EUP, 2014. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 7 October 2015.