Limits in Listening

Modernity generally was as much about trying to control sound as producing it...[1]

It comes as no surprise that Western/European modernity's relationship to sound, noise and music is one of control and separation. In the West, music was instrumentalised as a marker of European distinction, and was evidence of the West's exceptional status in world history. In eighteenth-century Europe, for example, musicology referred explicitly to 'a "fine art" at the centre of new aesthetic concerns and that designated, by the mid-nineteenth century, the finest art, the art to whose transcendental, spiritual capacities all others looked with envy.'[2] Under the context of the colonial modern, sound and music were further utilised as agents of control as far back as the onset of slavery and the colonial enterprise, as European and non-European musical experiences were distinguished in ways that fed the ideological dichotomy of civilised and primitive. Sound and music became important signifiers of colonial power that cultivated aural discrimination.

In European colonies, the performance of dance and music was considered disruptive by colonial authorities and the Catholic church. In the 1700s across the Caribbean, slave dances were outlawed along the with use or ownership of drums, horns and other loud instruments. In Trinidad and Tobago drums were banned in an effort to deter revolts. Several towns in Mauritius banned the playing of *sega*, a heavily percussion-driven music whose history lies in the African slave trade, while noise ordinances made allowance for the playing of Western instruments such as the violin and flute. Missionary schools and Christian churches extended their imperial power in stoic songs and hymns, as a means to discipline and control the movement, rituals, and expressions of enslaved and indigenous populations.

If music is a mirror to society as Jacques Attali proclaims,[3] then the reflection that the Egyptian musical elite of the early twentieth century yearned for was a societal image that was on musical par with its European peers. At the invitation of King Fu'ad I, musicologists, critics, composers, and musicians from Europe, North Africa and the Middle East met in Cairo in March and April 1932 to discuss the future of Arabic music. Conversations, debates, and performances filled the rooms of the Institute of Oriental Music for over two weeks.[4]

The Cairo Congress of Arab Music was one of the first scientific international events focused on non-European music. Its premise was to set in motion the revitalisation of Arabic music. Musical experts were invited by the King to discuss and develop measures that would bring Egyptian, and more broadly, Arabic music to a level of sophistication prevalent in Western music, or in words of Mahmud al Hifni, one of the Congress organisers, 'help civilize [Egyptian music], teach it, and set it on fixed and recognized scientific principles.'[5] Alongside burgeoning cultural and educational policies shaping Egyptian modern life during the early twentieth century, organisers of the Congress confidently regarded music and education as agents through which Egypt could carve out its national identity in line with other Western nations.

Two interrelated and contentious debates arose in the Congress around the systematisation of Arabic modes (*maqam*), which constitute a 'system of scales, habitual melodic phrases, modulation possibilities, ornamentation

techniques and aesthetic conventions that together form a rich melodic framework and artistic tradition',[6] and the appropriate use of instruments, including the piano. The latter and its twelve-tone equal temperament were thought to be the epitome of musicological sophistication, and thus took on the symbolic value of Western modernity's cultural achievement, and high culture. Embraced by Egyptian aristocrats and *effendiyas*,[7] the piano soon became a symbol of status for middle- and upper-class families in Cairo and was entrenched in Egyptian musical life from as early as the 1900s.

Members of the Musical Instruments Committee, however, held contrasting positions on the use of the piano in Arab music. Arabic instruments and musical intervals of the voice deviated from the European twelve-tone scale, and harmony – fundamental to Western music – was relatively incompatible with Arabic *maqam*. This lack of harmony was believed to be a sign of inadequacy by the Egyptian music reformers on the committee. These reformers held the attitude that the piano would help harmonise, re-tune and modernise Arabic music.

Could the piano accommodate Arabic scale and tonality? Would this Western instrument not contaminate the purity of Arabic music? Could it be used alongside local musical instruments, despite the piano's lack of *maqam*'s microtonal intervals? These were some of the questions that were raised by the committee. Ultimately the instrument was rejected at the Congress as inappropriate on the grounds that many of the notes of the Arabic scale did not coincide with those found on the keyboard, as the number of notes in use actually exceeded those offered by the piano.[8]

For some of the delegates, if re-tuned to accommodate Arabic intonations outside of the twelve-tone scale, a modified piano could perhaps be made suitable for the performance of Arabic music.[9] It proved difficult, however, to apply a fixed, universal theoretical scale across all Arabic modes that also differed between local regions. Wadî Sabrâ who headed the Lebanese delegation, presented a prototype that only managed to play only two of the 24 equal tempered 'quartertones'.[10] These blanketing attempts to systematise Arabic *maqam* to conform to an established, yet incompatible system, demonstrate both the strength of that aforementioned desire for a modern mirror image and the proliferation of Western standards. Standards are used as a measure for comparative evaluation, and in the case of Western and Eastern music, the ideological ruler against which Egyptian elites were measuring themselves was a Western one.

While the late 1800s saw territorial borders being constructed across Africa, the early 1900s saw boundaries being placed on musical repertoires. Western intellectual frameworks monopolised elements of representation of reality that included aesthetic and symbolic realties.[11] Its musical standards proliferated and became the norm or default, against which other cultures and traditions were measured. 'Scientific' Western musical principles were favoured and leveraged against local, vernacular and indigenous ways of being. Who draws the line, or sets the standards? And from what position? These questions are important to understanding who is framing how we see and listen to the world.

During the plenary session of the Congress, Egyptian member of the Musical Instruments Committee Muhammed Fathi addressed attendees with the following statement:

> First, do not judge our music with your own ears or through your own feelings and emotional criteria. It is imperative that you judge it through our own ears and to use our own feelings as criteria,

because every nation has its own sentiments and feelings.[12]

Even though Fathi's statement leans towards a national attitude, he calls upon the delegates to consider the position from which they are listening, and the criteria from which they discern. His address is a reminder that there are different registers of listening, not all of which can fully grasp the nuances of social, cultural and spiritual difference.

It could be argued that a majority of the Egyptian elite who were invested in the Congress were listening to Arabic music through the ears of a Western musician or critic. Even though the Congress did not fully manage to implement the revival it set out to achieve, the events of March 1932 clearly mark the asymmetrical tilt of value given to Western traditions.[13] The 'locus of enunciation' from which Arab music was being assessed, was to be found in Europe. This expression employed by Walter Mignolo asks us to question the position from which someone is speaking: 'Who is the speaker and who is configuring our world view?'[14] Of course, the position from which we listen is just as important to the position from which we speak, as succinctly noted by comparative musicologist Robert Lachmann: 'Eastern intonation strikes the European ear as faulty.'[15]

The Cairo Congress of Arab Music raises timely questions around the construction of tools and instruments, and their inherent limits,[16] including the authoritative bodies that privilege and give precedence to certain knowledges and practices over others. Wadî Sabrâ's prototype makes clear that instruments, systems or software are often built with a specific user in mind that excludes those outside the creator's purview. 'How can we listen to what is outside the monopoly of representation, to other geo-genealogies of thought?'[17] Rolando Vazquez's question is a critical reminder that beyond the

sounds, music, tools, systems and aesthetics we are presented with, there are other trajectories, possibilities and realities. Powers of the colonial modern render itself as invisible, while invisibilising other registers of existence. Such seemingly universal bodies of knowledge are neither neutral nor objective, but authoritative, whose subject-less positioning observes the world 'from everywhere and nowhere, and from which bias is "removed" through obfuscation.'[18]

This is the case with digital music tools today, which are predominantly built according to seemingly universal Western standards. For musician Khyam Allami, and creator of *Comma*, a custom-coded micro-tuning software patch designed to allow the usage and manipulation of modal/scale-based microtonal tunings in real-time, default systems we are presented with are not always neutral:

Today, ET [equal temperament] is the default system for all fixed-tuning Western instruments (piano, guitar, most wind instruments etc.), including all analogue and digital music-making software or hardware that uses a piano keyboard as its principle input device or grid. But the fact that it is the 'default' does not mean it is neutral.[19]

The 'default' frames how we are presented with choices or options, and assumes an agreed upon value when none has been given. It presumes a standard. Digital music tools built with 12-tone scales, such as Ableton Live, are commercially and market driven, leaving more off-centre musical practices on the periphery of consideration. The codes and algorithms which underlie digital music tools are designed and written by people with inherent biases and vantages.

Writer, artist and DJ Jace Clayton also came to the understanding that Western music software developers in Berlin, Hamburg and Silicon Valley had little to no interest in groups or

traditions that lie outside of the Eurocentric norm:

> Yeah – and you know what it's like we're not talking about the aspect of Berber folk culture that goes worldwide and changes the ways guys in Silicon Valley are programming databases. Unfortunately, you know, it's still this kind of a center-to-periphery flow. I'm very interested in the ways in which all sorts of digital peripheries can sort of like re-inscribe, retranslate and pull apart some of these structures that are given.[20]

In response, Clayton developed 'Sufi Plug Ins', a program that adds additional capabilities to the existing software by modifying the notes played on a keyboard with a 12-tone scale. Each plug-in opens up the possibilities for Arabic melodies, giving precedence to non-Western musical culture and traditions by expanding the software's potentials. Clayton's 'Sufi Plug Ins' embraces Arabic musicians as users, from the interface to the available *maqams*. The plug-in and the patch thus stretch the boundaries of standard systems. They make inherent biases visible and ask us to listen beyond the options given to us, challenging our assumptions of how music is supposed to sound.

Listening practices are learned and habituated. There are cultural and individual pre-sets for listening and impervious thresholds that limit what we allow ourselves to hear. These tilt our listening in different directions, affecting how we hear a piece of music, noise in the street, or someone's opinion. When noise is converted into signal it signifies a shift in what is given precedence in relation to its surroundings. Listening is never a neutral exercise.

'Listening to cacophony and noise tells us there is a wild beyond the structures we inhabit and that inhabits us.'[21] Citing Fred Moten, Jack Halberstam speaks of the right of 'refusal of the choices offered,' to refuse order and interpellation, to refuse the distinction between noise and music.[22] The wild exceeds the framework of control, much like sound and noise that is evanescent, slippery. For them, to refuse interpellation is to challenge the modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system. 'Sufi Plug Ins' and the Comma patch are a refusal of the choices offered by software systems. The implementation of discipline and order through enclosures, boundaries, borders and limits exist in systems and structures that are not always explicitly visible, despite the perceptible effects they have on how we move, how we sound, and how we listen.

I imagine the hum of the world in the first couple of months of 2020 to be remarkably quieter, with global lockdown restrictions and various cultural and economic sectors paused in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Sounds of eerie, uncharacteristically deserted streets in New York, Paris and Cairo circulated online, intimating solidarity as campaigns to stay at home spread globally. These sounds were soon countered with those of protest, starting in Minneapolis, spreading nationally and globally against institutionalised racism and anti-blackness. For some, the protest chants and the blare of car horns signify dissent and unruly behaviour that should be controlled or subdued. For others, these are the sounds of solidarity and resistance, of a planetary sonic alliance.

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[1]

Mark E. Smith, *Sensory History*, (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2007), 32.

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[2]

Gary Tomlinson, *Music and Historical Critique: Selected Essays* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 285.

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[3]

Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 4.

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[4]

Participants included prominent musical experts from Germany (Curt Sachs, Eric Moritz von Hornbostel, Paul Hindemith and Robert Lachmann), Hungary (Béla Bartók), Britain (Henry George Farmer), Egypt (Muhammad 'Abd al-Wahha b, Mustafa Rida bey), Iraq (Muhammad al-Qubba nji), Turkey (Mehmed Rau f Yekta bey) Syria, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco.

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[5]

Ali Jihad Racy, 'Historical Worldviews of Early Ethnomusicologists: An East-West Encounter in Cairo, 1932', in *Ethnomusicology and Modern Music History* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 69.

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Johnny Farraj, 'Maqam', *Maqam World,* n.d.

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[7]

At the turn of the twentieth century, Egypt was in the process of developing a new social group called the *effendiya*, an urban middle class, that were also tied to a nation-building effort that saw increased opportunities for new professions such as teachers, journalists and lawyers. The *effendiya* also arose out of a reaction to European attitudes about Egyptian inferiority. Imagining oneself as comparable to a European was equated with joining the ranks of the middle class, and being middle class was equated with being modern in terms of participating in new forms of urban life.

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See Robert Lachmann, 'Program 1: On first hearing a genuine piece of Oriental Music, 18 November 1936', in *The Oriental Music Broadcasts, 1936-1937: A Musical Ethnography of Mandatory Palestine,* ed. Ruth E. Davis (Middleton: A-R Editions, 2013), 3-6.

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[9]

Musicians had begun modifying the piano's tuning capabilities as early as 1912. Lebanese musician Abdallah Chahine began testing prototypes of modified pianos that could play quartertones from the 1930s. His prototype would later be commercially manufactured in cooperation with Austrian manufacturer Hoffman in the 1950s.

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Many *maqamat* include notes that can be approximated with quartertones although they rarely are precise. The difference between the Western music scale and the Arabic scales is the existence of many in-between notes, often referred to as quartertones.

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Rolando Vázquez, 'Listening as Critique', *Buried in the Mix* (Memmingen: MEWO Kunsthalle, 2017), 44.

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[12]

Ali Jihad Racy, 'Historical Worldviews of Early Ethnomusicologists: An East-West Encounter in Cairo, 1932', *Ethnomusicology and Modern Music History* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 79.

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[13]

Anas Ghrab, 'The Western Study of Intervals in "Arabic Music," from the Eighteenth Century to the Cairo Congress', *The World of Music* 47, no.3 (2005): 55–79.

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[14]

Vázquez, 'Listening as Critique', 44.

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[15]

Robert Lachmann, 'Program 1: On first hearing a genuine piece of Oriental Music, 18 November 1936', 4.

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Examples of non-neutral defaults are found in colour film photography of the 1960s, designed and built with a bias towards white skin. The racial bias in Kodak film up until the 1960s was built and predicated on white skin, in accordance with the Shirley Card, named after Shirley Page, a Caucasian woman who was used by Kodak's photo labs to calibrate skin tones, shadows and light during the printing process. Shirley was the standard, and variations were not prioritised. It was only later in the 1970s that companies began to reassess their film and standards to reproduce a skin tone for everyone appropriately. And before the Shirley Card, there was the first band-aid. The innocuous, yet ubiquitous, band-aid was invented in 1920 by Earle Dickson to help his accident-prone wife.

[17]

Ibid., 44.

[18]

Marie Thompson, 'Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies', *Parallax* 23, no.3 (2017): 272.

[19]

Khyam Allami, 'Microtonality and the Struggle for Fretlessness in the Digital Age', *CTM Magazine* (2019): 56.

[20]

Damon Krukowski, *Ways of Hearing* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019), 81.

[21]

Jack Halberstam, 'The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons', in *The Undercommons*: *Fugitive Planning and Black Study,* eds. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013), 7.

[22]

Ibid., 7.