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## Ruins on Record

### Copying Umm Kulthum's *al-Atlal*, Cairo 2019

*In Cairo, the music producer Ehab Nabil makes copies of some of the famous songs from the big Egyptian 20th-century tradition. This article is about his work with the song al-Atlal, one of the songs performed by the Egypt mega-star, Umm Kulthum, in the 1960ies. These acts of copying or re-enactment trigger questions about the dialectics of seclusion and dissolution of the places, where the copies are being made, and reflections on technically mediated intimacy.*

We are here with the music producer Ehab Nabil, working in one of the sound studios at Haram Street in Cairo. And for reasons that I scarcely can account for, the feelings of presence and the experience of the place-ness of this particular place make itself unusually strongly felt. It might have to do with the experience of the trip it took me to get here: the taxi through Cairo's smog and chaotic traffic, the walk at its end through the narrow and dusty streets. It might also have to do with certain physical characteristics of the venue. It is a well-reputed studio – but by no means fashionable or luxurious. It exhibits a laid-back coziness that one often finds in Egyptian semi-public places. It is around midnight and people – most of them musicians – are coming and going. Some are gathering in the front room, chatting and drinking tea or coffee that an amiable elderly employee permanently has on offer. Others proceed to the Holy of the Holies and find a seat in the couch that stand along three of this room's four walls. In the fourth wall there is a window that faces one of the studio's two recording rooms. Ehab Nabil sits with his back to us and his face to the mixer and the window. In the recording room behind the window, three violinists are playing. Two more musicians are taking part – but in another room and therefore invisible to me. The smoke of joints that continuously are being prepared fills the room and mixes with subdued chatting and joking and with the strangely high-pitched and slightly aggressive sound from the monitor speakers.

The strong impression of presence and seclusion, however, is a contested one. From the perspectives of dominant music cultures, be they Western or Arabic, this place, so strongly experienced as a place, could very well be considered out of place. Obviously, we are far away from the globally dominant circulation of Western or westernized musics. Likewise, we are away from the official, government controlled and heavily politicized scene of Arabic music in Egypt. We also

are at distance from the big business of Arabic pop, represented by international firms as the Rotana Company. However, and more important for the point that I want to make in this article, what is going on musically at this place in itself penetrates the venue's seclusion and links it with multiple elsewhere.

### **An Originating Moment**

The music – physically present and mentally mirrored in our minds and memories – is split between the qualities of 'here and now', that sound scarcely can escape, and a pronounced quality of coming from somewhere else. Not only is the music we hear from the monitors well known by everybody present, that is: *heard, played and learned by heart through a chain of mediations*. The very sound of it bears witness to an origin far away in chronological as well as in spatial terms.

The recording session that we witness is part of an unusual project of re-enactment. In the monitors, we hear the sound of the instrumental part of Umm Kulthum's performance of one of the most iconic songs from her repertoire: *al-Atlat (The Ruins)*. In the two recording rooms, the five violinists are investing all their skills in imitating the violin-parts of the original recording heard through the headphones. The project's purpose is to make an exact copy of this recording of this particular performance of the song – though, as mentioned transposed a fifth up to fit the voice of the Jordanian singer, Omar al-Abdlat, that Ehab Nabil later will add.

From here, the place and presence dissolves into a dense network of spatial and temporal relations. The song in question itself is a palimpsest. It is a neo-classical qasida with words and music by Ibrahim Nagy and Riad al-Sunbati. The first: a minor name in mid-twentieth-century Egypt poetry. The second: one of the most central Egypt composers in the 20th-century and a major contributor to the repertoire now identified with the Arabic megastar, icon of the modern Egyptian nation-state and harbinger of cultural identity throughout the Arab world: Umm Kulthum (Danielsson 1997; Lohmann 2010). Al-Sunbati composed the music in the mid-sixties. The poem is about twenty years older. It was first published in a collection called *Layali al-Qahira (Cairo Nights)* in 1944. It is a romantic poem but it is cast in the template of the classical qasida, a poetic form and genre that can be traced back to the earliest days of Arabic civilization on the Arabian Peninsula, to the time before the prophet Muhammad and Islam – or what the Arabs call *al-jahiliyya* [the time of ignorance]. Accordingly, its language is the classical Arabic and its thematic arrangement is tripartite as in the classical panegyric qasida: 1: standing on the ruins of the deserted camp the poetic I contemplates and mourn a by-gone love that happened here and maybe even dimly sees the marks of the loved ones dress in the sand besides the cold camp fire. 2: Travelling through the desert contemplating the situation and scolding the bad camel with which he has been bestowed. 3: Arriving at a new campsite and offering the local chief his newly composed poem as well as his loyalty as a gift to be exchanged with protection. This

tripartite thematic arrangement easily translates into a love-story. 1: ‘Standing on the ruins of a by-gone love’. 2: Elaborating memories of love and betrayal in a kind of grief work. 3: Finding reconciliation in the belief that everything is in the hands of destiny or God. Such a translation is what happens in *al-Atlal*. It reveals its palimpsest character from the very first stanza, recalling the the topos of *waquf ‘ala al-atlal* [standing on the ruins] and mourning the bygone love story: “You my heart do not ask where love has gone / it was a mirage that dispersed // Water me/ and let me sing on its ruins as long as tears are running” (Nagy 1944, translated by the author).

The music composed by Riad al-Sunbati represents a comparable yet different kind of rewriting or emulation. Its form is a version of what usually is referred to as *al-ughniyya* or *al-ughiniyya al tawila* [the long song] and often, it is interpreted as a kind of emulation of the *ṭarab waṣla*. The *ṭarab waṣla* is a suite of vocal and instrumental improvisations and compositions arranged with a maximum of emotional effect in sight. *Al-ughiniyya* combines elements corresponding to the separate parts of the *waṣla* in one piece, but in an additive way leaving ample space for improvisation – including numerous improvised repetitions of disparate parts – and craftily leading from one emotional peak to another. Thus, the *waṣla* as well as the *ughiniyya* serves that esthetics of enchantment, emotional transportation or ‘ecstasy’ to which the Arabic word *ṭarab* refers.

Both text and music are embedded in network-like structures of emulations and adaptations that blur its belonging to a particular cultural or geographical space and questions the issue of origin. However, it is pertinent to link it with an *originating moment*, in the sense once proposed by popular music scholar Richard Middleton when studying cover-versioning. An originating moment in this sense is an origin, that does not represent a “‘first cause’ but more a transiently privileged moment of departure with networks of repetitions, Signifyin(g) and remixing.” (Middleton 1999, 83) The originating moment of *al-Atlal* is Umm Kulthum’s performance of the song during her concert tours in the late 1960ies in the aftermaths of the Arabs defeat in the Six Days War with Israel. Here the song gained its popularity and its status as an indispensable part of the repertoire of Arabic music as it has been cultivated in official Egypt music institutions. Here also started the story of its reception as harbinger of a modern Arabic identity and the attribution of still new layers significance.

### **On Technically Mediated Intimacy**

Most of the time, the gathering in the studio is silent, quietly talking and joking or almost inaudibly humming along with the music in the monitors. However, at a certain moment, having reached a part with a particularly distinct minor motive in the music, some of the present sing along with clearly discernable text: “Grant me my freedom, release my hand. I gave you everything and I held nothing back!” From recordings of Umm Kulthum’s performances in the 60ies, we know that this

particular part usually triggered enthusiastic applause; and arguably, the words were heard, not as the derided lover's quest for the slackening of the ties to the unworthy object for his desire, but rather as a political statement. (Lohmann 2010). The hands that were to be freed in this interpretation were those of the defeated Palestinian part, deprived of land and dignity. It is uncertain if this political interpretation is a stable part of the song's reception in the Arab world today. In my later meeting with Ehab Nabil, he denies this, but concedes that it might have been so previously, in the era of President Nasser.

This later meeting with Ehab Nabil takes place in his own cozy and homely studio in another Cairo neighborhood, al-'Aguza, closer to the Nile and the town-center. Here I learn that his work with al-Atlal and the recording session that I attended at the studio at the Haram Street is part of a project that has been ongoing for six years. In these years, he has made similar copy versions of 15 songs from the repertoires of Umm Kulthum, Muhammad abd al-Wahab (Ambrust 1996), and others, all songs that are also considered being part of the Egypt's most precious cultural heritage by the government-driven cultural institutions in Egypt. Asked about his objectives, Ehab Nabil promptly answers: "To revive cultural heritage" and he adds that the project's idea is his own and that he developed it together with some of the participating musicians. 'Reviving cultural heritage' is a standard phrase in Egyptian cultural discourse and has been so for decades. Thus, it is also fully in line with the rhetoric of the official cultural institution in Egypt. Ehab and his project, however, is obviously situated somewhere else. Ehab Nabil's modest but acknowledged studio is one of the hubs in an international network of musicians with which he is constantly communicating through the cheap modern means of communication. In our talk, he in a completely unaggressive way hints to his critical stance to the artistic standards of the official scene for the very same kind of Arabic mid-20th-century music that his project of technically facilitated emulations revere. Moreover, his versions sounds differently, and to my ears more alive than many of the standardized live-performances of the same repertoire that I have heard on the official scene.

Ehab Nabil is generous with his time while demonstrating for me the marvels of the multichannel studio technique. One can hardly think of a more tangible demonstration of the aesthetic stimuli that phonographic transmission can offer. While the music is playing, Ehab Nabil shifts smoothly between originals and emulations. At one moment, we hear the sound of the famous ensembles of Umm Kulthum and Muhammad abd al-Wahab (Ambrust 1996), in the other, the newly recorded copies of the ensemble or individual instrumental parts of them; or we shift between the well-known voices of Umm Kulthum and Muhammad Abd al-Wahab and newly recorded emulations of their performances.

These voices, the intimacy of the studio, the feeling of being here and nowhere else: Are we in the womb of technically mediated intimacy? The high resolution of the studio monitors triggers a listening mode with focus on the details. A kind of microscopic examination of the actual sound production in the singers' voice organs that – at least for my part – is accompanied by a sort of silent mimicking of it.

The technical perfection of the vocal technique comes to the fore as we surrender to the conspicuous technically mediated presence of embodied voices of conspicuously absent singers!

All this, the project in itself, its products and the particular listening positions it conditions, point at the complexities of a music culture where phonographic works have been a major means of transmission. It is a well-known fact that Arabic music did not use musical notation before Western influence introduced or imposed it. Arabic music so to speak stepped directly from oral transmission to transmission through the means of ‘mechanical reproduction’. Other authors have described the importance of modern media thus given. (Castelo-Branco 1980, Castelo-Branco 1983, Danielson 1997, Stokes 2009) Here it suffices to say that record industry emerged in Egypt as early as in the West and that early 20th-century recording of artists within the Arabic and Ottoman tradition of these years now function as sources to historical performance practice. This gives them a function comparable to the role played by much older written and iconographic sources in Western early music movements. It is also worth to mention that even today when notation is widespread in many sectors of Egyptian musical life, scores typically are bestowed with less authority than an ‘authorized’ recording – here meaning a recording by the author or by the artist to which it was originally written. The story of the long line of mediations – record, broadcast, LP, TV, cassette, CD, until now mainly has been described from the side of ethnomusicology. These studies mainly bring the societal aspects to the fore, leaving out the issues of the sound of these mediations and the dialectics of remembrance and forgetting that is in play when we listen to media representations where layers of the sound qualities of different media are superimposed. A work on this issue from my hand is pending.

### **Between Conservative Preservation and Playful Presence**

The role of phonographic works in Arabic 20th-century music history can hardly be overestimated. But whatever the dominant mean of transmission might be, it never stands alone. This is true for transmission through notation and it is true for phonographic transmission that in this case goes hand in hand with oral transmission and inherited musical artisanship. Reproducing the individual parts of the original examples only by ear demands the highest degree of familiarity with the style and playing techniques in question. The musicians in the project are all – but in different ways – empathetic to the musical milieu of the original recordings. Family relations link some of them with it. The producer, Ehab Nabil, is the son of one of the musicians from the ensemble of Umm Kulthum, one of the violinists is the son of Ibrahim Mugi – one of the composers who wrote for Umm Kulthum. Still another of the violinists played himself with the great diva.

Viewed from outside, Ehab Nabil’s project could seem to be the summit of conservative preservation, and, indeed, in some respect it clings to the past in a literal and heavy-handed fashion. However, Ehab Nabil’s hands on the mixer levers are

light and playful, and he stresses repeatedly that this is an amatory project, from which he expects no economic gain. Copyright issues rule out commercial distribution of the results.

This being said, still many flanks are open for attack. Representatives of other independent music scenes in the Arab world will blame it for conservatism and see in it still an example of Arabic music's dependence on a minor number of authoritative recordings – what, in the view of some commentators, is even more petrifying than the ideology of *Werktreue* in Western music. Representatives of traditionalists who focus on the particular performance practices of the tarab live concert – the emotional response of the audience and the interaction between stage and audience play here decisive roles – will consider the studio reproduction a cardinal sin. Other observers will rightfully say that this kind of studio reproduction implies an autonomization when alienating the sound-event from its original performative, situational context.

These criticisms may be right from their sides but they all miss the playful character of a project that primarily is made for the fun and professional satisfaction of making it. They also seem to miss that the kind of emulation here observed, is much more than mere imitation. Met in the process of its being, and probably unintentionally, it constitutes a showcase for that dialectics of presence and non-presence that follows on the human condition of living in a world of mediations.

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