

In Search of a Generative and Analytical Model for the Traditional Music of North Africa

Xavier Hascher^{*1}

^{*}*GREAM Laboratory of excellence, Université de Strasbourg, France*
¹xhascher@unistra.fr

ABSTRACT

Background

Music-theoretical studies of traditional music are still infrequent since this particular repertoire has mainly been the domain of the ethnomusicologists, who indeed have drawn the attention of the scholarly community to it. Yet, while the ethnomusicological approach may legitimately incorporate analysis – sometimes to a large extent, or of a very refined kind – it differs in its aims and perspectives from the approach of music theory, and does not, for instance, normally address its object by means of a formalized system. However, such publications as Tenzer (2006) show a nascent interest on the side of music theorists for styles and genres that lay outside their usual field of investigation, at the same time that non-Western researchers express a desire to look at their own musical tradition in direct analytical or theoretical terms, without adopting an ethnomusicological viewpoint. Feki (2006) and Al-Nabulsi (2010) provide examples of such an evolution in the case of the Arab world.

Aims

The purpose of this paper is to apply a general model of modal monody to a linear, reductive analysis of pieces taken from a given repertoire, namely the traditional Arab Andalusian music of Tunisia, or *mālūf* ('customary'), in order to test its validity in this environment. This model has been constructed deductively from a theory of the generation of musical scales that relates to recent work on diatonic theory as illustrated by Carey & Clampitt (1989). A need for such a model has all the more been felt since the tools developed historically in the context of Western tonality – especially Schenkerian analysis – are inoperative due to the specific, non-harmonic and non-tonal nature of the musical system involved. If used, these tools would therefore yield inappropriate results (such difficulty has already been met in the analysis of pop-rock music). Although no claim of universality is made, the model that is proposed is not directed exclusively to a particular area or period, and former application has been to the seemingly remote repertoire of Western mediaeval plainchant (Hascher, 2012). However, the analytical process needs, of course, to be adapted to the object at hand, as well as certain concepts to be modified accordingly. After a summary of previous analyses presented elsewhere, a new piece is examined, a *shghul* ('well-wrought song', a form related in style to the *nūba*, the main genre of the *mālūf*) in the characteristic *ašba'ayn* mode, based on the transcription provided in Guettat (2000). (Other fundamental or historical notions can be found in D'Erlanger (1959/2001) and Davis (2003)). As this analysis permits a deeper grammatical understanding of the musical language employed, a subsequent aim is to derive from it a generative

model that allows at least a partial reconstruction or recreation of the piece, or of some similar one, which would ideally be in keeping with the various constraints of the tradition as it has been transmitted orally over the centuries.

Main Contribution

By providing a model for a reductive type of analysis, the paper endeavours to go beyond the limitations inherent to the customary approach in terms of modes (*tubū'*, or *maqāmāt*) and genres (*'udūq*, or *adjnās*), or the breaking down of form into sections, which is used for Arab music. While retaining some complementarity, or compatibility, with this approach, the model presented here seeks to address aspects of a more structural kind and to clarify the musical hierarchies at work. What is ultimately sought for is a finite vocabulary of structural gestures and a syntax that regulates their articulation, in order not only to perform a reduction of a given piece, or improvisation, to the fundamental model that underlies it by following a 'bottom-up' process, but also, and conversely, to reconstruct a plausible piece from the model in a 'top-down' manner.

Implications

In addition to likely music-theoretical and analytical import, potential implications concern the perception of musical form (including culturally oriented perception such as discussed in Ayari (2008)), music modelling and computer modelling, as well as the understanding of the cognitive processes involved in the production of grammatically coherent musical 'utterances' and 'statements' in a given musical language. Implications are also political or cultural in that similarities and differences between North African music and Western music can be better apprehended, and by lessening what has been hitherto considered a seeming irreducibility of one to the other, contribute, even to a small extent, to the improvement of relations between the West and the Arab world.

Keywords

Arab Andalusian music – theory of musical scales – linear, reductive analysis – structural modelling – generative grammar of music.

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