

## Tarab

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The *tarab* is characteristic for Arabic, and more generally Arab-Islamist music, as played in the Middle East, Turkey, Iran and the Maghreb. This complex notion touches on the technical as well as psycho-aesthetic and literary aspects.

*Tarab* is usually defined as a 'lightness and agitation of the spirit following joy, sorrow or contentment'<sup>1</sup>, or as a 'lightness caused by great joy or sorrow'.<sup>2</sup> The keyword in this complex psycho-aesthetic state of lightness or emotion is *nashwa* (as result) and *al-intishaâ* (as process), both of the senses and of the mind. It is important to give the Arabic meaning before translating it, because from one culture to another meanings are very different and therefore extremely relative – which can of course open up new perspectives on the aesthetic approach to different kinds of music.

Etymologically, *al-intishaâ* refers as much to the ecstasy of drunkenness as to a very great joy, synonymous with euphoria and jubilation. The *nashwa* of the *tarab* can therefore be achieved via joy as well as sorrow! The rapture of the *tarab* transcends and overcomes its object, which is either sad or happy, and uses the power of its initial emotional impact to transcend it, without restraining it or counteracting it, and simultaneously to transfigure it through beauty. It might even be tempting to conclude that *tarab* is euphoria – gained through both joy and sorrow.

And this is where the limits of translation become evident, because in the West, euphoria precludes sorrow. In fact, the intersection of these two notions/states even creates a problem, given that it can (almost) only be understood if we accept a bipolarity. At this level the *tarab* – which from a psychological viewpoint does sometimes seem to be the musical expression of a 'bipolar disorder'<sup>3</sup> – illustrates the genius of the Arab-Islamist culture as concerns sensory and spiritual sensibility, because it is able to convert sorrow into a process of intoxication.

### The perception of transience and of the effect on the senses in the *tarab*

One of the most important characteristics of the *tarab* is the way in which the perception of time is created in the listener. Here, time – as well as space-time – is usually circular and non-linear. This circular attraction is much more than a linguistic metaphor: in reality, it characterises the earth and the structure of the musical phrases. The circular and stagnating perception of time goes hand in hand with tight control over the senses, which, inside, are

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معجم الرائد: خَفَّةٌ وهزّةٌ تُثيرُ النفسَ لفرحٍ أو حزنٍ أو ارتياحٍ. ويكالموس القاموس الحر  
[/https://ar.wiktionary.org/wiki/طرب](https://ar.wiktionary.org/wiki/طرب)

خَفَّةٌ تُعْترِي عند شِدَّةِ الفرحِ أو الحزنِ والهم. معجم لسان العرب لابن منظور. 2

3 Only on the level of the description of the external symptoms – and not, of course, beyond – especially in the strong opposition between euphoria and sorrow.

now drunk on a bubble of well-being. And leaving that bubble before complete saturation is not an option...

### **The technical tools of the *tarab***

The tools of the *tarab* or *tatrib* (i.e. the action or effect of the tarab) are linked organically to the specific characteristics of the singing itself. Thus, *I Ah ya leil* and *Ah ya ein*, which don't really mean much, form a perfect foundation for vocalises that allow the singer to show his virtuosity and emphasise the timbre of his voice – where charm and sensual seduction are often the norm. In addition, the *tatrib* cannot function without harking back to the richness of ornament and variation. We also hear this in the melodic instruments, while the regular rhythmic keynote softens the overall flow.

### **Literary and thematic basis of the *tarab***

The themes of love and longing dominate the *tarab*. Directly, by using poetic texts that deal with these topics. Or indirectly, metaphorically, if the subject is for instance wine, and the essence of the musical tarab and that of wine seem to come together as one.

Much of the Sufi song repertoire is also linked to the *tarab* of love and yearning! Here, one yearns for the divine and not the human, but the mechanisms – in contrast to the dimensions – of the yearning remain pretty much the same. The literary metaphors of sensitive and sensual order are still very important, like the appeal of the musical *tarab*, although they are characterised by a certain uplifting. In practice this uplifting is translated by the toning down of the sensual swaying of the hips that often characterises the lyrical *tarab*. The Moroccan *Samaâ* (in contrast to the *al-Âla*)<sup>4</sup> and the Tunisian *malûf al-jidd* (in contrast to the *malûf al-hazl*) illustrate this perfectly. We must also evoke situations in which the same poetic text is interpreted musically in two – or even more – ways and whereby there is a real decontextualisation of the literary source, also with a radical change, not just of the aesthetic aspect, but of the meaning in its entirety.<sup>5</sup>

In each case, the Sufi tarab, that tarab of the soul, can create an ecstatic dimension, because the *al-intishaâ* now emerges in the most exalted spiritual dimension. On yet another level, certain melodies of the *adhan* (call to prayer) can also strive directly for a sort of tarab of the soul, and give the impression of a profound bliss, whereby the technical possibilities of the actual tarab are nicely emphasised. The *adhan* is then 'purified' of everything that could suggest a possible amorous sentimentalism or sensual swaying of the hips, more than would be the case in singing based on Sufi poems.

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<sup>4</sup> Or Moroccan-Andalusian music.

<sup>5</sup> The *Borda* of Imam Bossiri (نعم سرى طيف من اهوى فأرقني), as he is interpreted in the Moroccan *Samaâ*, is no longer 'himself' in the interpretation that emerges from a quasi-erotic tarab, for example in Sabah Fakhri.