



# An Analysis of a New Style and Aesthetic in Arabic Fusion Music: Blue Flame by Simon Shaheen\*

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## Abstract

Few Arab composers have been able to create fusion music that preserves an essence of traditional Arabic music. In this paper, I analyze the fusion in Simon Shaheen's composition entitled *Blue Flame* in order to explore Shaheen's style. The core of this study is the transcription and in-depth analysis of *Blue Flame*. The following issues are discussed in the analysis: (1) large-scale form and, within it, the dramatic function of each section in the musical narrative; (2) the style and, within it, the issue of fusion; (3) tonality/modality, especially in terms of the fusion of the Arabic maqam and the Western major-minor system; (4) improvisation; and, (5) sonority/instrumentation. Other parameters of the music, including rhythm, tempo changes, rubato, dynamics, special effects, and more, will be treated when they are significant. I argue that Shaheen created a new Arabic fusion style that proved to be meaningful for both the Arab and the international public. Shaheen's music is an attempt to create a compositional and performance style that has strong roots in the Arabic tradition and that produces, in the modern milieu,

\* This article has been produced from the Mohammad's doctoral thesis. The dissertation has been accepted in 6 June 2018. A special thanks to my supervisor Prof. Judit Frigyesi for her consistent support and guidance during the running of this article.

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an ecstatic effect similar to the old Arabic tradition. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first study that is based on the transcription and analysis of Shaheen's composition and proposes an aesthetic appreciation of Shaheen's art

**Keywords:** Arab Music, Fusion Music, Oud, Blue Flame, Simon Shaheen

### **Arap Füzyon Müziğinde Yeni Bir Tarz ve Estetik Analizi: Simon Shaheen tarafından Blue Flame**

#### **Özet**

Az sayıda Arap besteci, geleneksel Arap müziğinin özünü koruyan füzyon müziği yaratmayı başardı. Bu yazıda, Shaheen'in stilini keşfetmek için Simon Shaheen'in *Blue Flame* adlı kompozisyonundaki füzyonu analiz ediyorum. Bu çalışmanın özü, *Blue Flame*'in transkripsiyonu ve derinlemesine analizidir. Analizde aşağıdaki konular tartışılmaktadır: (1) büyük ölçekli biçim ve bunun içinde, müzikal anlatıdaki her bölümün dramatik işlevi; (2) üslup ve onun içindeki füzyon meselesi; (3) özellikle Arap makamı ile Batı majör-minör sisteminin kaynaşması açısından tonalite/modalite; (4) doğaçlama; ve (5) ses yüksekliği/enstrümantasyon. Müziğin ritim, tempo değişiklikleri, rubato, dinamikler, özel efektler ve daha fazlasını içeren diğer parametreler, önemli olduklarında ele alınacaktır. Makalede Shaheen'in hem Arap hem de uluslararası kamuoyu için anlamlı olduğu kanıtlanan yeni bir Arap füzyon stili yarattığını savunuyorum. Shaheen'in müziği, Arap geleneğinde güçlü kökleri olan ve modern çevrede eski Arap geleneğine benzer bir vecd etkisi yaratan bir kompozisyon ve performans tarzı yaratma girişimidir. Bu çalışma, Shaheen'in kompozisyonunun transkripsiyonuna ve analizine dayanan ve Shaheen'in sanatının estetik bir değerlendirmesini öneren ilk çalışmadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Arap Müzik, Füzyon Müzik, Ut, Blue Flame, Simon Shaheen

## INTRODUCTION

The fusion of different styles in Arabic art music is not new to the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. However, fusion meant something different at the beginning of the twentieth century than what it means today. Before Shaheen's activity as a composer and performer, Arabic fusion music was rarely appreciated by audiences of Western popular music. It appears that Simon Shaheen is the first composer/performer to succeed in creating an Arabic fusion music that was received enthusiastically worldwide, and especially in the US, where he has been active since 1980. In spite of this, as of today, there are no scholarly transcriptions and analyses of Shaheen's compositions. Similarly, I found no study of his aesthetics. In fact, there is hardly any literature on contemporary Arabic fusion music. I hope that the present work will begin filling this gap.

The focus of this study will be an analysis of Shaheen's one major fusion composition, *Blue Flame*. The source for my analysis is the sound recording of Shaheen and his ensemble on the CD album that bears the same name as this composition: *Blue Flame*. The research has three components: transcription, in-depth analysis, and, on the basis of these, a discussion of Shaheen's aesthetics.

Notated sources for this composition – or any other composition by Shaheen – do not exist in libraries or online, nor can one find verbal accounts or information about his composition process in the public domain. I had the privilege to meet Shaheen and interview him. During these interviews, he gave me a two-page notational sketch for *Blue Flame*. This transcription, as I realized after having transcribed and analyzed the piece, is like a blueprint. It contains the main melody for the instruments, more or less according to where these appear in the course of the performance. This blueprint notation does not contain melodic or harmonic elaborations, guidelines for improvisations, and dynamics or other instructions, and it contains very little of the complex music of the percussion instruments.

The final forms of Simon Shaheen's compositions are created in the performance. The blueprint notation mentioned above is not the composition; it is merely some guidelines, a kind of reminder for Shaheen. The composition is worked out during rehearsals, and the final form – as much as there is a final form – is what is preserved on the recording.

For this reason, the first and also the most important and difficult stage of the analysis is the transcription of the work as it exists in the recorded performance. The transcription of such a complex, improvisational, and virtuoso work was an enormous challenge. Moreover, of course, it was impossible to reflect all of the minuscule details and effects of the sound experience in the notation. I tried my best to create a transcription that represents the details

but that, at the same time, is transparent and gives an image of the global structure of the work.

Ethnomusicologists, who attempt to transcribe complex musical structures, know that the transcription itself is analysis. Moreover, transcription is the most informative aspect of ethnomusicological analysis. The transcription presented in this article is a vital part of my argument. I discuss the specific problems of the notation of this composition later in the analytical section.

In the exploration of Shaheen's composition and aesthetics, I attempt to answer questions that have never been asked regarding Shaheen's art. I will ask and attempt to provide hypothetical answers to questions such as: How does Shaheen's music create moments of climax, and what is the character and meaning of this climax? What is the style of each section of the composition in terms of the traditional styles from which it evolves and those which it attempts to evoke in the listening experience? What is the dramatic function of each section within the composition, and what is the relation between this dramatic function and the evocation of a certain tradition? What is the meaning of fusion in this composition? Is it the superposition and/or co-existence of different styles, or is there a new style that emerges from the combination of styles? If so, how is this fusion achieved, and what is its meaning for listeners? Furthermore, how does the sequence of stylistically different sections create a continuous dramatic narrative? And in connection with this, how does the combination of different and seemingly incompatible styles produce a coherent musical language?

Shaheen is not the first musician to compose Arabic fusion music. It appears, however, that earlier Arab fusion composers aimed at some "westernization" of Arabic music by trying to introduce stylistic features that made Arabic music sound more familiar to the Western ear. The purpose was, most likely, to encourage or promote the entrance of this music into the Western concert/popular music milieu. For Shaheen, fusion means something different. First, it is the merger of Arabic music with not only Western classical concert music but also other non-Western folk and popular music styles. Second, and more important, the issue is not merely the broadening of the pool of sources but the overall style of the final product: Shaheen aspires to create an integral and completely new sonority and style that is idiosyncratic to his art.

It is not my aim here to discuss the works of Arabic fusion composers in general. The view of earlier Arab fusion music expressed above is merely my personal impression. The summary view of Arabic fusion music will be possible only after the music of each composer has been analyzed in its own right.

One technique that Shaheen uses to fuse different styles is improvisation.

Typically, Shaheen merges music traditions to which improvisation is central. For instance, in *Blue Flame*, he merges jazz, Spanish, and Arabic music. Although relying on traditional patterns, improvisation (like other aspects of the traditions used in Shaheen's fusion) rarely occurs without substantial modification. These modifications are not arbitrary; they represent mostly the "expansion" of the tradition, as will be explained below. For instance, Shaheen typically plays at least one, and sometimes more, *taqasim* (the improvisational section of classical Arabic music: singular: *taqsim*, plural: *taqasim*) during a composition. In his performances, the *taqsim* often precedes the composition, like it would in Arabic music. However, it can also occur before the coda – exactly where the cadenza would occur in a classical concerto in Western music.

Even in sections that are strictly within the Arabic tradition, Shaheen reimagines the style. For instance, one typical technique of his *taqasim* is the lack of resting points, especially when presenting the upper *jins* or *ajnas*. He modulates between *ajnas* extremely freely and, sometimes, by using melodic leaps. This is unusual in the tradition, but it can be heard as an expansion of an old idea.

These characteristics expose an important aspect of Shaheen's aesthetics. In the following analysis of *Blue Flame*, I will demonstrate the following basic compositional ideas:

### **The importance of instrumentation**

The importance of the instrumentation manifests essentially in three aspects: individual instrumental style with its tradition and associations, unusual global sound, and the centrality of the oud. For Shaheen, every instrument brings its distinct style — the style the instrument plays in the culture it traditionally belonged to. For instance, the saxophone evokes jazz, the oud evokes traditional Arabic music, the guitar evokes Spanish music, and the percussions, depending on their origin, might evoke African, South-American, or Arabic music, and so on. Style here also includes also performance technique and the associations these instruments evoke for the Western listener. The other important aspect of instrumentation is sonority. Shaheen pairs instruments that don't normally play together. As a result, the sounds are familiar to the listeners, but because of the unusual combination, the sonorities are novel.

In *Blue Flame*, as in Shaheen's compositions in general, the central instrument is the oud. The oud player is also the composer, Shaheen, and in performances, Shaheen often sits in the center of the stage. This idea lends these pieces a kind of concerto aspect. The oud normally already receives a major part at the beginning of the piece, and typically, although not always, the oud

presents the main theme of the composition. Yet this idea is counterbalanced by other aspects, and as we will see, in several sections in *Blue Flame*, other instruments lead and/or have important solo sections.

### Structure

The structural idea in *Blue Flame* is based on the frequent repetition of a few basic themes or motives. The theme that is presented at the beginning provides the framework for the form; it recurs in variant forms throughout the work. This basic idea of thematic repetition occurs in several of Shaheen's compositions; however, it is "composed out" in a different manner in each work. The result might be something like suite, rondo, or variation forms, although these schemes are rough approximations. The form of each composition is unique, and it is impossible to define what a typical Shaheenian composition would look like. Form-creating ideas always recur in new combinations and variations.

### Effect

Classical Arabic art music aspired for an effect that elicited an ecstatic response from the audience. In the traditional context, classical Arabic music was played in an intimate setting, normally at someone's home and for a small audience of connoisseurs. Silence and relaxation provided the basis for this transcendental experience. These concerts occurred within a different concept of time: there was ample time for silence and inward-turning attention. The listeners paid attention to every minuscule modulation, and there was time to process this information. There was an intimate relationship between performer and listeners. The listeners expressed their feelings and encouraged the performer by saying words such as "*Allah Aleek*" or "*Ya salam*". (It should be noted that the participants in these concerts – performers and listeners – were almost exclusively men.) In today's context of popular music in concert halls for hundreds of people, such silent and slow music simply would not work. The environment has changed: today's public has less time and less patience for slow, introverted music marked by moments of silence. The world has sped up and become louder.

Shaheen's music is an attempt to find a style of high-quality music with strong roots in the Arabic tradition that produces, in the modern milieu, something similar to the ecstatic effect of the old tradition. His solution is to speed up the tempo and, more importantly, compose music with a greater density of events. The listeners are unlikely to register all of the subtleties of these compositions, but the constant flow of new ideas – for instance, the fact that nothing recapitulates in the same way and modal shifts occur constantly – creates a global feeling of excitement.

### Aesthetics and Basic Stylistic and Structural Aspects of The Music

Blue Flame is a pivotal composition for Shaheen, and it is not an accident that the title of this piece was chosen for the title of the CD album on which it appeared.\* The album, which contains several of Shaheen's best-known compositions, like *Al-Qantara* and *Dance Mediterranean*, had great success, especially in the United States, and Shaheen himself regarded this album to be one of his most important achievements. The aesthetic ideal behind this composition was to create a meeting point between various musical cultures to produce a work with a coherent and new musical style, while simultaneously preserving the character of each culture.\*\*

The cultures are represented (or sometimes, their atmosphere evoked) by different instruments: traditional Arabic music (oud), American jazz (saxophone), African tribal music (percussion), and Spanish flamenco (guitar). In the course of the piece, the musical traditions/the performers enter into dialogue with one another. The effect is almost as if musicians from the different parts of the world were sitting in a room and conversing in music. However, as we shall see, the oud is the central instrument of the piece. It is not an accident that the oud opens the composition, inviting, so to speak, the other instruments to begin a conversation. Although Blue Flame became instantly successful in the United States, its reception in the Middle East was less enthusiastic at the beginning. The public in the United States seem to have been more prepared to hear the fusion of various cultures. In the Middle East, Arab musicians aspired to perform a "purer" Arab musical tradition and, in general, favored a more transparent style. I witnessed this attitude during my studies at the Academy of Music and Dance in Jerusalem in 2002-3. Several young musicians (I among them) were attracted to Shaheen's style, but the majority of the students dismissed the piece as a display of technique, and as such, detached from the Arabic tradition.

The primary "problem" was the novel style of the oud. Shaheen developed a virtuoso style that went beyond what was customary in traditional Arab music. Shaheen's idea was to transform the oud into a universal instrument, one that meets the technical challenge of various styles of music, including Western art music.\*\*\* This was not what Middle Eastern Arab musicians hoped to achieve at the time. Nevertheless, despite disagreements, many students tried to perform Blue Flame precisely because it presented a technical challenge. Gradually, the piece entered the repertory, and today it is regarded as a major composition of Arab music. This piece made young

\* *Simon Shaheen, perf. Blue Flame. Simon Shaheen & Qantara. Rec. 12 June 2001. Ark 21, 2001. CD.*

\*\* <http://www.simonshaheen.com/biography>

\*\*\* *This might have been one of the reasons for his decision to write a concerto for the oud: to demonstrate that the instrument functions in a Western instrumental and in the context of a genre of Western art music. [Concerto for Oud and Orchestra in C Minor].*

Arab musicians become aware of the potential of the oud and helped them realize that new and imaginative ways of using a traditional instrument do not necessarily contradict the tradition.\*

In this piece, like in many of Shaheen's compositions, the primary territory for the dialogue between musical traditions is the improvisation: Arabic taqsim on the oud, jazz improvisation on the saxophone, and African- and Arabic-style percussion improvisation. In these improvisations, Shaheen wanted the performers to play according to the style and technique of their respective traditions. In order to make this possible, he selected outstanding virtuoso musicians from each culture. The meeting of different virtuoso styles created a new style and new kind of virtuosity.

This meeting through improvisation was possible because of the inherent similarities between musical cultures. Although this will be shown later in the analysis, it is worth summarizing the similarities and differences here, especially between Arabic and jazz improvisation (which are the focal points of this composition). In jazz improvisation, the player has no specific rules as to how to shape the melody, but he has to create a logical sequence of tonal stations that lead to the final or dominant note (depending on the continuation of the piece). The adherence to the tonal stations allows the musician to create fantastic and imaginative melodies. Arpeggios, scales, and chromatic passages are essential elements in jazz. The accented beats are the two and the four, and the meter should be the two or the four.

In Arabic improvisation, *taqsim*, there is more freedom in the tonal progression, but there is a global style of melodic elaboration and melodic style that has to be respected. The *taqsim* has to adhere to the maqam, but within it, there is ample possibility for tonal freedom: by using different *ajnas*, the player can create a feel of quasi modulation or modal shift.\*\* The accompanying rhythm provides the metric feel, but, superposed on it, the melody is in free rhythm. However, the *taqsim* has to remain in a particular rhythmic style and tempo, and the performer has to respect the atmosphere/character of the given maqam. Neither Arabic *taqsim* nor jazz improvisation can be performed from transcription. The player has to live within the culture and

\* *Blue Flame and Shaheen's other compositions for the oud also encouraged instrument makers to develop the instrument. This is what Abu `Alaa Fedi, one of the most renowned oud makers in the Arab world, argued when I visited him in Baqa al-Gharbeyya in May 2015. Additionally, in August 2015, when I participated in the Arabic music retreat at Mount Holyoke College in western Massachusetts, USA, this was one of the issues that Najib Shaheen, Simon's brother, talked about. He is an internationally respected oud restorer, and he takes care of Shaheen's ouds, repairing and developing them when necessary. It is important to mention that the oud that Simon most often uses and that he used to record the Blue Flame album was made by the respected nineteenth-century Syrian oud maker Na`hbat, and Najib built a new face (the front resonance area of the oud) for it.*

\*\* Karl Signell L. *Maqam: Modal Practice in Turkish Art Music*, (Seattle: Asian Music Publication, 1977).



understand the meaning and musical “behavior” as well as the “appropriate spirit” of the improvisation.

As mentioned above, *Blue Flame* is the meeting of cultures through the meeting of instruments — each representing its culture and pulling its characteristic playing techniques within the given style into the piece. Hence, the global “cultural map” of *Blue Flame* is rather clear, and we can draw this map by listing the instruments and their respective cultures/performing styles:

- Oud – represents Arabic music
- Soprano Saxophone – represents jazz in general and American jazz in particular
- Flute – allusions to Western European music with a special role in connecting Arabic music and jazz. The flute is paired mostly with the saxophone but occasionally with the oud. (The oud-flute combination is common in Shaheen’s compositions; over the years the combination of oud + flute has become a special sonorous characteristic of his music).
- Guitar- represents Spanish Flamenco (The guitar has a special and somewhat ambivalent place in the ensemble. Being a plucked instrument, it competes with the oud. To give an equal role to both the guitar and the oud would have resulted in too many “plucked strings,” disturbing the balance of the sonority – at least Shaheen apparently felt this to be true. As a result, the guitar is used less prominently, and it is the only instrument that does not play a virtuoso solo improvisation in this piece. Nevertheless, the guitar has an important role: it answers, responds, contradicts, and intercalates the musical process with motives and ornaments. These intercalations are in the style of the flamenco, using typical flamenco ornaments, motives, and rhythmic effects.)
- Contrabass – has a connecting function between Western music and jazz. The contrabass provides the bass line for the harmonic progression and stabilizes the underlying rhythm, as it would do in Western music and in jazz. The bass line is often thematic (as we shall see in the analysis). The bass has a short improvisation in the style of jazz.
- Percussions: besides the Arabic *durbakka*, the percussion instruments are Afro-Cuban or African. The percussion group has a major part in the form: it responds to the call of the melodic instruments and plays intercalations that signal the end of sections. The percussions are treated mostly as a group and play one “group-solo” improvisation. The style of this solo improvisation and their playing throughout are intensive and highly polyp-honic. Although there is an Arabic instrument in the group (*durbakka*), in addition to the Afro-Cuban instruments, the percussion improvisation evokes the sound of tribal Africa. However, unlike in the case of the oud and the

saxophone, whose music and improvisation are based on the experience of a concrete musical tradition, this “tribal African” percussion music is “imaginary,” meaning that it does not represent any concrete African tradition but merely evokes the “feel” of African music as it is known in the West.

List of percussions:

- Hadjira drum with cymbals and Hadgini\*
- Bongos
- Bell
- Durbukka
- Caxixi
- Cymbal
- Brushes
- Djembé

I must add at this point that the transcription of the percussion parts was one of the biggest challenges in conceptualizing this piece. It was extremely difficult to fix in writing the minuscule details (ornaments, rhythmic subtleties) of the music of the percussion section. Each instrument has an independent style, but the sonorities of the different instruments merge, and sometimes it is nearly impossible to separate the voices. It took a long time and intense focus to be able to separate the color of each instrument and establish which instrument played what motive. In the end, in order to transcribe this section, I realized that I had to study these instruments. I began learning their playing techniques, first with the help of websites that offer instrument instruction. During the next stage, I visited music departments in order to try the instruments and asked for the help of percussionists who were familiar with them. This learning process alone took three months.

After this training, I transcribed each of the percussion instrument voices separately. Nevertheless, because the addition of so many lines would make the score extremely large and hard to use, and because only a few percussion instruments normally play at the same time, I decided to represent the percussion section in three lines. The two lower lines contain the continuous percussion material, while the top line is reserved for special percussion effects (those that have a formal function).

The tonal framework of the composition is *maqam nahawand* in C. *Nahawand*. Theoretically the same as the minor scale, it, therefore, lends itself naturally to mediate between the tonal sensibilities of different cultures. The oud performs this tonality more or less like the traditional Arabic *nahawand*

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\* These instruments are derived from the Udu African percussion family. See: Agordob Alexander Akorlie, *African Music: Traditional and Contemporary*, (Nova Publisher 2005), p. 81.

with the microtones associated with the *maqam* and also in accordance with the possibilities of the tetrachord structure of the *maqamat*.

In the Arab tradition, each *maqam* is imagined as the combination of (normally two) tetrachords. The Arabic term for tetrachord is *jins* (plural: *ajnas*). It is characteristic of Arabic music that the player changes one of the *ajnas* in the course of the improvisation within a particular *maqam*. There are typical solutions as to what other *ajnas* could be introduced into a given *maqam*. In the case improvisation in *nahawand*, it is customary to change the upper *jins kurd* to *hijaz* or *bayyati*, without, however, producing another complete *maqam* (see table 1 below). In this piece, Shaheen exploits these modal possibilities in accordance with traditional Arabic practice.

The image contains five musical staves, each representing a variation of Maqam Nahawand. Each staff begins with the lower tetrachord (Jins Nahawand) consisting of the notes C4, D4, E4, and F#4. The upper tetrachord is then altered in each case:

- Staff 1:** Upper Jins Kurd (G4, A4, Bb4, C5)
- Staff 2:** Upper Jins Hijaz (G4, A4, Bb4, C5)
- Staff 3:** Upper Jins Bayati (G4, A4, Bb4, C5)
- Staff 4:** Upper Jins Rast (G4, A4, Bb4, C5)
- Staff 5:** Upper Jins Ajam (G4, A4, Bb4, C5)

Table 1: Maqam Nahawand with alterations in the upper jins\*.

\* The overturned flat accidental in any transcription or illustration into this article means and equal to a half flat.

At the same time, the oud often plays chromatic passages and ornaments that do not come from the microtonal aspects of the *maqam* or the *ajnas* and enhance the auditory experience as ornamental (grace) notes to the main *jims*. Chromaticism is also characteristic in the style of the other instruments, but, in most cases, this is not Western music-style chromaticism. It is a melodic chromaticism that is not connected to harmonic processes. In particular, the saxophone improvisation is so rich in melodic chromaticism that the underlying harmonic progression, though present throughout, sometimes becomes entirely blurred.

The bass line of the main theme of the piece, which is also its refrain, is identical to the bass line of the saxophone improvisation. The tonal stations of this bass line outline a sequence of chords typical for jazz: C minor, Db major, Bb minor, Ab major, Db major, C minor. As we shall see, the “lyric theme” that will return on several instruments throughout the piece and that is presented on the oud with an “Arabic feel” at the beginning of the piece is also accompanied by this jazz-inspired bass line.

Thus, it is not an exaggeration to say that this piece has a tonality of its own. It uses a global tonal framework that is basic in both Western and Arabic classical music: *nahawand*/minor, but the actual tonality is created through variants and colorations of this framework. At times the music sounds closer to the Western minor mode, at other times it is like *nahawand*, and again at other times it sounds like “jazz minor.” Additionally, sometimes entirely new tonalities emerge, like the superposition of Arabic *maqam* and jazz bass or melodic super-chromaticism – these would be impossible to interpret in any culturally established tonal framework.

The piece, therefore, has an idiosyncratic and unique style – the style of Shaheen. Listeners are able to instantly identify the style of the lead instruments according to their respective traditional culture, yet the totality of the experience is not something heterogeneous and arbitrary. The work has stylistic integrity. Besides the form, tonality, and performance techniques, one major reason for this impression of integrity is the work’s stable and characteristic sonority – the way these instruments from different cultures sound together. I will return to this point later in the analysis.

### Analysis

The form of *Blue Flame* is similar to rondo, containing the alternation of rondo theme(s) and episodes, with the episodes being solo improvisations. This form is also connected to Arabic music and jazz. In Arabic music, it is close to the so called *tahmilah*, which consists of refrain and *khanat* (intermediary sections or small movements).<sup>\*</sup> In this case, the *khanat* are *taqasim*

<sup>\*</sup> About the possible origin of this genre in Arabic music, see Qustanti Rizq, *al-Musiqa al-Sharqey-*

(improvisations) and the refrain is the *tutti* unison theme resulting in the scheme: A B A C A D A. Another aspect that links this form to Arabic music is the manner of development: within each section, there is a sense of intensification; the listener has the feeling that it is leading somewhere, until, at the climactic point, the new section begins. Thus, the refrains lead to the improvisations, and the improvisations lead to the return to the refrain. This constant process of intensification leading toward moments of climax is typical in traditional Arabic music.\*

When we consider the sections of *Blue Flame*, it is immediately apparent that although the underlying formal scheme is the periodic return of themes and ideas, it is a free reinterpretation of these models. The form of the composition is summarized below. In this summary analysis, I give a fantasy name to each section – this name represents the “character” of these sections according to how they make me feel and in relation to some objective criteria explained below.

### Introduction (MM. 1-22)

- A 1-8: Dialogue
- X 9-22: The virtuoso oud: presentation of the *maqam nahawand*

### Part1. Preparation For the Saxophone Improvisation: The Rhythmic Ostinato, The Jazzy Theme, and the Lyrical Theme (MM. 23- 61)

- A Mm. 23-29: The rhythmic ostinato
- B Mm. 30-45: The jazzy theme
- C Mm. 46-61: The lyrical theme

### Part2. Sax Improvisation and Varied Return of Themes and Ideas (MM. 62- 122)

- I-1 Mm. 62-92: Sax improvisation – American jazz
- C Mm. 93-110: The return of the lyrical theme
- A + B Mm. 110-121: The return of the idea of the dialogue and of the former “jazzy” theme

### Part3. Oud *Taqsim* and The Percussion Improvisation (MM. 122- 254)

- I-2 Mm. 122-207: The oud *taqsim*
- I-3 Mm. 208-228: Percussion solo - African style

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*yah wal-Ghena'a al-'Arabi, Ma al-Seerah al-'Dateyya lel-Fannan 'Abdu al-'Hamuli [The Eastern Music and the Arabic Singing, and the Biography of the Artist 'Abdu al-'Hamuli] (Cairo: Maktabat Madbouli, 2000), pp. 40-43.*

\* Vector Shibab, *al-Anwa' wal-Ashkal fi al-Musiqa al-'Arabeya [Genres and Forms in the Arabic Music] (Beirut: Dar al-'Hamra, 1997), pp. 36- 37.*

### Quasi Recapitulation and Coda (MM. 224- 257)

A + B Mm. 224-243: The return of the dialogue and the “jazzy” theme

X (B) Mm. 244-257: The return of the virtuoso oud theme, the consolidation of *nahawand* C, and closure with the jazzy theme.

As can be seen, I divided the piece into introduction, three main sections, and recapitulation with coda. I separated the introduction (mm. 1-22) from the following section called “preparation for the saxophone improvisation” (Part 1, mm. 23-61) primarily on the basis of their formal “feel.” The several-measures-long dialogue and the opening oud figurations that establish the basic *maqam* seem introductory, while the following section (Part 1) strikes me as being more thematic. Nevertheless, all of the musical materials and ideas presented in these sections serve together to create something like a rondo-theme complex. The materials and/or compositional ideas of the dialogue, the jazzy theme, and the lyrical theme return as recognizable thematic materials, whereas the rhythmic ostinato is present practically throughout the piece, except for the solo improvisations. Consequently, Part 1 is the presentation of the themes, Part 2 is improvisation (the would-be episode in rondo form) followed by the varied return of themes (the would-be rondo theme), and Part 3 contains two improvisations without the return of the rondo theme complex within them.

The theme of the virtuoso oud returns only at the very end of the piece, at the end of the section that I call “recapitulation” for lack of a better term. What is meant here is obviously not sonata recapitulation. I use this word in order to express that this is the *last* return to the themes, the consolidation of structural ideas, and the final closure.

In the above analytical chart, I assigned letters to the thematic sections. The rhythmic ostinato did not receive a letter because it is prominent throughout the piece. The oud figuration is marked “X” because of its special role and position (opening and closing the entire piece and being played by the lead soloist). All improvisations are marked by the letter “I”. As the chart below illustrates, the form is an inventive variant of the rondo idea:

A+X, B+C I<sup>1</sup> C+A+B I<sup>2</sup>+ I<sup>3</sup> A+B+X (B)

In the following analysis, I discuss the composition in its entirety, section by section, as it progresses in time. Since the effect of the temporal auditory experience is crucial in this piece, and since this experience is partly improvised during the performance, it is important to understand how the events of the composition follow one another. The analysis below might, at times, seem too detailed and tedious in its focus on minuscule details. However, it is

these details that create the effect in the auditory experience. It is impossible to demonstrate the basic aspects of Shaheen's style without exploring these details. I analyze the introduction in a more detailed manner than the rest of the piece because I feel that it is important to highlight Shaheen's techniques at the beginning of the analysis.

### **Introduction (Mm. 1- 21)**

#### **1- 8: Dialogue**

It is significant that the work opens with dialogue between instruments, and it is no less important that this dialogue highlights the central place of the oud. The first statement is the oud's ornamental figure in the high register of forte dynamics. This is the entry of a virtuoso with strong presence, although the melody is only a fragment at this point. The oud is answered by the ensemble of the guitar, the contrabass, the hadjira drum, and the bongos. The sonority of this combination of instruments is exceptional and imbues this beginning with a special "color" or "flavor." This is not a traditional sonority in any musical culture, and certainly not in traditional Arabic music. In my interpretation, the dialogue's structure and the instrumentation of this opening have symbolic meaning. Although the Arabic tradition is the most important source in this piece, the opening suggests that this tradition only becomes alive through dialogue within a society of musical cultures. Furthermore, this dialogue results in an entirely new musical style with new sonority and atmosphere.

The motive of the oud circles around the note C, first pointing toward it by touching on B natural and ending on D, thus leaving the motive open (m. 1, 3). It arrives at the pitch C only in measure 5 and, even then, only passingly. There is no clear feel of tonality but merely an undercurrent of an emerging *nahawand maqam*: the descending motives of the contrabass outline the pitches C-B flat-A flat-G (m. 2) and F-E flat-D-C (m. 4), which are the pitches of the two *ajnas* of *nahawand*.

#### **9- 21: The Virtuoso Oud: Presentation of The Maqam Nahawand**

The second section of the introduction presents the full **maqam** and the entire ensemble, and also brings the oud's first virtuoso passage. In measures 9-12, the oud's figurative motive from the previous section recurs, but now it circles around the G. The G is the second main note both in C minor (dominant) and *nahawand* (recitation note). As my analysis will show, the musical progression throughout this piece highlights the meeting points between two musical cultures: Western and Arabic. The oud figuration G-A-B-C, B flat – A flat (e.g. in m. 10-11) presents the *ajam*, while these four measures (9-12)

simultaneously have the feel of C minor. This feel is created by various aspects of the music: the coincidence that this *jins* allows for a melody that is a perfectly traditional Western melodic motion in minor (the use of A natural and B natural in ascent and B flat and A flat in descent), the repeated descent of the contrabass from A flat to G, and the melodies of the flute and the soprano saxophone (circling on the pitches B natural-C-D-E flat, in opposite motion) that results in the appearance of the C-minor dominant/G major chord (mm. 10 and 12).

In measure 13, the oud's melody turns toward a new tonal direction. The fragmentary motives gradually evolve into longer ascending figurations and reach the melodic climax with the pitch A flat (measure 16). Beginning with this A flat note, a long melodic descent outlines the complete scale of the *maqam naharwand* (m. 16-19) and arrives at the cadential note C (m. 19). A measure earlier (m. 18), the sounds of the bell signal that we are about to reach a turning point. This is the first appearance of what I call the "signal effect" – a technique that will recur several times in the piece (As mentioned earlier, in the transcription of the percussions, the upper line is reserved for percussion motives that have such a signal-effect function.). However the note C note, which was reached after much figuration and preparation, is rushed over, and the next measure (m. 20) brings a surprise: the reiteration of the note G.

The tonal development goes together with dramatic processes in orchestration and texture. Measure 9 brings together, for the first time, the entire color spectrum of the ensemble (though not all of the percussion instruments). In the section that follows (the tonality of which was analyzed above), the oud's figurations are counterpointed by the flute and the saxophone and supported by the rhythmic background of the contrabass, guitar, and percussions. Although the melody of the flute and saxophone is modelled on the oud's earlier motives, the effect is new. The novelty results from the slower-paced rhythm (quarters and eights) and the unusual color of the combination of the flute and the saxophone, which, combined with the percussion sound, imbues these measures with a sense of expectation and nervousness that is simultaneously full and beautiful (because of the melody and the flute-saxophone sonority). It only lasts for a few measures, but, surprisingly, the accompanying instruments fade out, and the oud is left alone (with only the bass) at the moment of the melodic climax (m. 13), where, as I have shown above, it descends to the tonic C (m. 19).

At the moment when the unexpected tonal change occurs (from the long-awaited C to back to G in mm. 19-20), there is also an unexpected new color. In the figurative motive that leads to the G (mm. 19-20), the oud is joined by the flute (for the entire motive) and the bass (for the end of the



motive), and just before reaching the G, new percussion instruments (durbakka, caxxixi) enter with quasi tremolo that intensifies and then dies away (crescendo-decrescendo, mm. 19-20). In addition, unexpectedly, after the “correction” of the cadence to G, the guitar “throws in” a virtuoso figuration, reinforcing this G (mm. 20-21). During the guitar figuration, the percussions fade out, and the guitar’s closing G at the end of its motive sounds in an empty space with piano dynamics. The sudden emergence of the guitar at a tonally and formally crucial moment, with a very short but agitated (crescendo-decrescendo) gesture and its strange loneliness and “fading out voice” toward the end create an almost Chaplin-esque after effect of delayed response – it sounds almost like a mistake.

All of these might seem to be minuscule details, but it is precisely these details that create the energy and the beauty of the piece. Multiple superposed elements occur constantly, each evoking different musical memories, while simultaneously following a dramatic plan that directs change rapidly and unexpectedly in terms of tonality, color, and the dramatic character of the instruments. The ending of this section described above is surprising tonally but no less surprising in terms of its use of instruments and colors. It has an almost theatrical dramaturgy, with an extremely dense sequence of events, colors, and gestures — reminiscent of witnessing a conversation between people of different characters.

### **Part A. Preparation for The Saxophone Improvisation The Rhythmic Ostinato, The Jazzy Theme, and the Lyrical Theme (MM. 23- 61)**

#### **MM. 23- 29: The Rhythmic Ostinato**

At the beginning of this section, the hitherto virtuoso oud transfigures into an accompanist playing something like an ostinato pattern (mm. 23-25). At measure 26, the contrabass joins the oud’s ostinato, and a “signal effect” (cymbals) is reinforced by the motive of the flute and saxophone with an ascending call motive. At measure 30, the oud ostinato fades out, but by then the bongos and the hadjiri drum have picked up the ostinato rhythm (m. 28), which they continue to play until m. 109.

#### **MM. 30- 45: The “Jazzy” Theme**

In measure 30, the rhythmic ostinato of the bongos and hadjiri drum is complemented by the rhythmic pattern of the brushes playing an elaboration of the traditional Arabic rhythmic pattern (*iqā*, plural *iqā’at*) called *masmou-di sagbeer*. This is the rhythmic background to a new material played by the flute, soprano saxophone, and guitar, accompanied by the contrabass – the

oud is now conspicuously silent. The motives of this otherwise continuous melody, like those that came before, evoke somewhat different tonal nuclei in almost every measure, passing through different *ajnas* and Western tonal formations (see the analysis in the notated score). In measure 38, the cymbals' signal effect announces the entry of oud: the melody that began in measure 30 is repeated almost in its entirety. However, the character of this melody is new: it is jazz-like, lighthearted, easygoing, and playful.

#### MM. 46- 61: The Lyrical Theme

In measure 46, a new section begins that is unusual in several regards (while the background percussion ostinato continues to play in the same style throughout). The oud takes the lead again; however, here its material is not virtuosic but lyrical. The melody mirrors an emotional song composed of long notes. There is something distinctly "Arabic" about the character of this song: it is composed of long, drawn-out notes moving in second intervals (outlining the lower *jins* of *nabawand*); the notes are reached by and/or continue in an ornamental figure; and, finally, the function of these ornamental figures is to highlight the emotional intensity of the long note.\* In measure 54, the oud is joined by the flute, and for the rest of this section, the two instruments play together in unison. The entry of the flute further enhances the song-like quality of the melody, and the combination of the two instruments – one that is unable to produce long notes and the other that is the master of long and beautiful notes – imbues this section with a special beauty and lyrical quality.

In the meantime, throughout this section, the saxophone plays short melodic fragments. Here and there, these seem to be responses to the melody of the oud (m. 48 answering the oud motive in m. 47, m. 50. answering m. 49), but mostly the saxophone is on its own. It is as if the instrument is wandering around its own terrains, trying out motives and ideas.

The contrabass provides a peculiar bass line, alluding to a different chord in nearly every two measures. This is a flashback recalling the descending minor second motion of the oud melody from the beginning of the piece (from m. 9 onward). The tonality is different (there it was A flat and G, while here it is D flat and C – see the lower notes of the note pairs), but the repeated descending second motion creates a sense of similarity between these melodies. The flute is essentially "filling" in the chords, which are suggested by the contrabass, with fragmentary figurations and note repetitions.

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\* Long notes in Arabic music are perceived by the Arabic listener as an integral element when producing the drama in musical emotions. In the Arabic aesthetic, such music invites one to meditative listening by focusing on each note, one by one. Fragments before and after the long notes are considered to be embellishments that pave the way toward the next tonal-emotional station.

## Partb. Sax Improvisation and Varied Return of Themes And Ideas (MM. 62- 122)

### MM. 62- 92: Sax Improvisation- American Jazz

In measure 82, the saxophone begins its solo improvisation, which is a new style in the piece. It is significant that Shaheen chose Billy Drews to participate in his ensemble. Shaheen wanted a famous virtuoso jazz player – someone who has the technique and the courage to assert his musicality in the midst of other styles. At this point in the composition, Shaheen wanted to open the music up toward an atmosphere markedly different from that of Arabic music and also immediately identifiable by the audience. The oud, guitar, and flute are silent in this section, which means that the instrumentation is pure jazz sound: saxophone, bass, and percussion. The jazz feel is reinforced by the style of the melody and the chordal progression.

At the same time, there is a strong cohesive element that ties this section to the core of the composition. The bass line and chordal progression are almost identical with those of the lyrical theme (mm. 46-61, see harmonic analysis in the score), and these chords and the chordal progression in its entirety would be typical in jazz. The lyrical theme, which is in the bass line, recurs twice (the lyrical theme was sixteen measures long, the sax improvisation is 32: mm. 63-77, 78-93). The melodic material, however, is not based on the lyrical theme but is entirely new. Another connecting aspect is the percussion accompaniment that continues without interruption, with the bongos playing the same rhythmic accompaniment as before. The brushes, however, switch from the Arabic *masmoudi sagheer* to a syncopating pattern typical in jazz.

The melody of the sax improvisation was extremely difficult to notate. It was necessary to listen to fragments of the melody sometimes for hours in order to conceptualize the rhythm. The reason for this is that the rhythm is not entirely free, but it is also not rubato, nor is it entirely measured. There is a strong sense of meter and beat and syncopation, while at the same time the actual value of the notes cannot be fit into this metric system. A pair of notes that sounds like an “upbeat” might not exactly fall on the upbeat. I hope that the notation comes as close to representing the auditory experience as possible. Nevertheless, it would be impossible to reproduce the performance using this score. Jazz improvisation cannot be learned from score. It is a skill that one acquires through playing and listening; it amounts to something that could be better called “feel” than “technique.”

The sax improvisation in this piece is both technically and musically advanced. Its virtuosity functions as a parallel to the virtuosity of the oud. In some general sense, these two types of improvisation are similar. In both cultures, improvisatory solo sections are expected to be individual, virtuoso,

rhythmically complex and subtle, and highly expressive. Moreover, one learns improvisations orally in both cultures. However, apart from these general similarities, the styles of jazz and Arabic improvisations are different.

First, the tempo here is extremely fast. Arabic *taqsim* might be virtuoso, but it does not feature an overall fast tempo. Emphasis on the 2/4 rhythm (highlighting the feel of the beat), syncopation, and sudden melodic jumps (often arriving at unexpected notes) are typical in jazz but would be atypical in Arabic *taqsim*. For instance, the emphatic jumps that occur in measures 68–69 or 72, 76, and especially the syncopated jumps in measures 86–88, would be inappropriate in *taqsim*.

In measures 92–93, the sax melody becomes chromatic and leads to the note G (the dominant of the piece and the tonic of the lyrical theme), and in measure 92, the cymbals enter, signaling the end of the section.

### **MM. 93- 110: The Return of The Lyrical Theme**

In measure 93, the brushes switch back to the *masmoudi sagheer* rhythmic pattern. The lyric theme from measure 46 returns; here it is played by the flute and the sax in unison, while the oud plays an ornamental and figurative elaboration of the melody. The primary effect, however, is not that of a recapitulation but something new and dramatic: it is as if the oud that was listening to the virtuoso exuberances of the sax came forward and, feeling liberated from its listener status, let out its energy in the notes.

### **MM. 110- 121: The Return of The Idea of The Dialogue and The Formerly “Jazzy” Theme**

Measure 110 is like a new beginning; it brings back the idea of dialogue between instrument groups — the idea that began the composition. Here, the dialogue is between the theme played in unison by the melody instruments and the percussion section (hadjira drum and, later, djembé). While the textural idea comes from the beginning, the melody is derived from the theme that appeared in measure 30, the “jazzy” theme that anticipated the sax solo. However, the melody here is much faster, and because of the tempo, texture, and dialogue setting, the theme no longer sounds “jazzy.” The emphasis is less on the melodic content than on the effect, which is reminiscent of call-response: it is as if the melody instruments are calling to the percussions and the percussions are answering, until, at the end of the section, all of the instruments play together.

**Part C: Oud Taqsim and The Percussion Improvisation (MM. 122- 254)**

Nahawand F (Fm) 125

130 *mf* *gliss.*

135

*gliss.*

140

Jins Hijaz on C

145 Nahawand on F

150 Nahawand C

155

160

Hijaz C 165 Jins Nahawand C (Cm)

170 Jins Nahawand C

175

Jins Hijaz G

180 Jins Rast C Jins Rast C

Jins Nahawand C Back to Jins Hijaz G 185

Jins Bayat G 190 Jins Kurd G

Jins Bayat G 195 Preparing for Nahawand C (Cm7)

The image displays a musical score for an oud *taqsim*. It consists of three staves of music in 2/4 time. The first staff shows a melodic line with several triplet markings. The second staff, beginning at measure 200, continues the melodic development and includes a *dim.* (diminuendo) marking. The third staff, starting at measure 205, features a section labeled 'Nahawand C (Cm)' and another labeled 'Jins Ajam G (1?)' with a *mp* (mezzo-piano) marking. The piece concludes with a double bar line and a '16' measure count.

Table 2: The oud *taqsim*

### MM. 122- 207: The Oud *Taqsim*

By now it must be clear to the reader that despite Shaheen's ideological aspiration to be culturally inclusive, two cultures dominate this piece: Arabic traditional music and American jazz. This is perhaps because these traditions place great emphasis on solo improvisations. It was crucial for Shaheen to give the opportunity for self-expression to as many cultures as possible and bring them together in a coherent work. At the same time, Shaheen had another aesthetic aim, namely, to create a musical style that, in spite of fusion, is markedly Arabic. And there is yet another aspiration: to create an Arabic style that is appreciated by the public at large, specifically a public used to Western (art and pop) music. Shaheen wants Arab music to achieve what jazz has achieved – a distinct and original style that is nevertheless part of cosmopolitan Western culture.

The oud *taqsim* in this composition can be interpreted as an innovative expansion of the Arabic tradition. It faithfully follows the tradition of Arabic classical music in its basic concept and form, as well as its techniques of melodic, rhythmic, motive, and tonal developments. The traditional concepts are expanded to include new ideas. Some of these ideas are common to Shaheen's musical language in general, while others are unique to this composition.

The *taqsim* is based on three tonal centers: F-G-C. The global tonal plan evolves from the processes of arriving, then strengthening, and then moving away from these tonal centers. The idea of structuring the musical process around pitch centers is basic to the classical Arabic *taqsim*, but, traditionally, the *taqsim* would begin and end on the tonic of the same *maqam*.

The first two measures are a statement of the pitch F that will prove to be the tonic of the *maqam nahawand* on F. To emphasize a tonal center with tremolo is characteristic of a traditional oud *taqsim*, and in this work, Shaheen uses the tremolo effect on a long note to signal the major arrival points throughout the composition. The first section of the composition is in *nahawand* on F, and it ends with the tremolo on F in measures 144-146. This section presents traditional techniques for elaborating the *maqam*: scale-like figurations circling around main notes, occasional introduction of the raised seventh (here E natural) in melodic motions leading to the final note, glissandi, introduction of minor seconds above a note for the sake of emphasis, chromatic (almost microtonal) descents between minor seconds, descending motions with motivic sequences, and so on. For instance, the descent of note pairs with glissando in measure 138 or the descent in triplets in measure 141 are entirely classical traditional effects.

The descent in measures 136-137 has a slight jazz fell; this kind of jump and the emphasis on single notes is not typical in the classical *taqsim*. The pattern of upward jumps in measure 135 is an idiosyncratic feature that can also be found in Shaheen's other compositions. Another typical Shaheen move occurs in measures 142-143. The melody arrives to the C, which is the second main note in *nahawand* F, and this arrival occurs by using the *jins hijaz* C. After the C is reached, another descending melody leads back to F, to the cadential note of *nahawand*. Nothing is unusual in this progression. In *taqsim*, it is customary to make such minor tonal "colorations" in order to highlight a main note, and the emphasis on C is also in accordance with the principles of exploring *nahawand*. What is unusual here is the intensity and density of events. After having reached the second major note of the *maqam*, and especially after doing this through a new modal entity (*hijaz*), the player is expected to make a calm landing on the proper cadence with a long note and rest. Shaheen, however, rushes through the final note.

Measures 148-152 could be called modulatory: they emphasize the F so strongly that it almost calls for its "dominant" note C, which will indeed be reached at measure 152 (*nahawand* C), only to lead, in the following measures, to a section of exuberant tremolos and glissandi that circle around, lead to, and emphasize the note G. From measure 160, it hints at the *jins hijaz* C, where it finally arrives in measure 164. Just as the *jins hijaz* established the arrival at C in the earlier section (although, thereafter, it detoured to *nahawand* F), here it also leads to the arrival at C, which is reinforced by the reiteration of various *hijaz* motives (measures 164-166) until the C is stated as the central pitch, with an extended tremolo in measures 166-67. What follows between this and the next reinstatement of C tremolo (mm. 175-176) is a series of reinforcements of the note C (with B natural) and the *jins nahawand* on C, which



is the original tonality of the piece.

Not unlike what sometimes happens in Western music for the sake of a special dramatic effect, the goal tonality (*nahawand* C) is reached too suddenly after a long section in another tonality (*nahawand* F) and, more importantly, without sufficient emphasis on the secondary tonal center of *nahawand* C: the note G. Now, the music belatedly turns toward G, reaching it with *jins hijaz* G (m. 178). With this motion, a new section begins (mm. 176-194), and it is the most tonally dynamic section of the *taqsim*, emphasizing primarily the pitch G but also the note C. We are led from *jins hijaz* G (mm. 178-180) through *jins rast* C (mm. 180-182), *jins nahawand* C (mm. 182-183), *jins hijaz* G (mm. 183-186), tremolo on G (mm. 187-188), *jins bayat* G (189-190), *jins kurd* G (mm. 191-192), and, finally, to *jins bayat* G (m. 194). Significantly, unlike the other tone centers, the G is reinforced with tremolo only once (mm. 187-8).

In this sequence of modulations, the moment of *rast* C is especially important (mm. 180-182). Shaheen evokes here the most basic *maqam* of classical Arabic music and does so with the use of the structural microtone of this *maqam*. Another interesting compositional idea occurs in the three-fold repetition of a descending motive (mm. 180-183). Each repetition begins one note higher than the one before (F-G-A flat), but the last repetition of this essentially same motive is no longer in *rast*; instead, it outlines the *maqam nahawand*. Another interesting idea is the arrival to *jins bayat* G (mm. 189-190). The first part of the motive uses the traditional *bayat* scale with its microtone, but just when the cadence is reached, the microtone is “corrected” to A flat, which imbues the ending with a more Western feel.

The preparation for the *nahawand* C begins in measure 196. The section from this moment until the final tremolo statement of the tonic C note (mm. 204-205) is the most traditional part of the *taqsim*. Everything is pure and entirely classical: the figurations, the melodic processes, and the flow of the music. It is as if this last section would bring the calming of the energies and a point of stylistic arrival.

This last passage is in place also in another sense: although it is completely in accordance with Arabic practice, the playing style is reminiscent of Western music. The figurations are played evenly and clearly, and there are no glissandi or tremolo; it is almost a Mozartian passage. By now it must be clear that a similar “coincidence” is exploited in the tonal design: the F-G-C tonal centers, which are entirely acceptable in the *maqam nahawand*, coincide with the subdominant-dominant-tonic progression of classical Western music.

Then, suddenly, in measures 206-207, the oud throws in a figuration that is completely out of place. This is not the ending of the *taqsim*, however. It

is part of Shaheen's idiosyncratic style that he does not allow the music to rest until the very end of the piece. Whenever the music arrives at a convincing resting point, a new gesture cancels out this arrival. The function of this gesture is to awaken the listeners from feeling too comfortable in one style and prepare them to enter a new style (Such disturbance at the end of section occurred previously: see the discussion of the guitar figuration in m. 20-21.).

### **MM. 208- 228: Percussion Solo- African Style**

Both the sax and the oud improvisations occur after introductory sections that prepare them. After the oud improvisation, however, without transition or introduction, in measure 208, the percussion improvisation begins immediately. This is the third and last improvisation in the composition. The oud, guitar, flute, sax, and contrabass are silent, which emphasizes the separateness of this music from the world of jazz, Arabic, and Western music.

As in the case of the melody instruments, Shaheen chose virtuoso players for the percussion section: Steve Sheehan to play caxxixi, brushes, cymbals, djembé, and durbakka and Jamie Haddad to play hadjira drum, cymbals, and hadgini. The idea behind the percussion improvisation was similar to that of other improvisations: to give space for a musical style to express itself at its best. However, it was not feasible to work with original tribal African musicians. As a result, the music here is the evocation of African tribal music rather than real tribal music. The improvisation employs techniques that are known to be the general characteristics of African music: the superposition of several voices, each being composed of short, stable rhythmic patterns that repeat in continual variations. The result is a complex polyrhythmic texture. Although the auditory experience here is different from that of the Arabic *taqsim* and jazz, the percussion improvisation achieves the impression of an integral, idiosyncratic, and, for the public, identifiable "ethnic" musical style.

As described earlier, the transcription of the percussions was extremely difficult and needed serious preliminary study of the instruments (see above in the section on instrumentation). One difficulty of the transcription, which was not explained earlier, is that among the superposed percussion voices, some are played with a clear beat while others are rubato or in various rhythms without precise measure.

In the improvisation, the hadjira drum and the caxxixi together provide the continuous stable rhythm (mm. 208- 223), allowing the other percussions to play more freely. The durbakka opens the section with a short and free rhythmic pattern (mm. 208-209) and then falls silent, giving the stage to the djembé that is the soloist of this section (mm. 210- 223). The rhythmic style of djembé is like speaking: its virtuosity is expressed in the subtleties of rhythmic freedom and articulation.

Typical of Shaheen, he adds another, almost alien, color to the integral sonority of the trio of the hadjira drum, caxixi, and djembé: starting with measure 212, the cymbals play a beat that mildly contradicts the inner patterning of the measures (4 + 6 eighths superposed on the 6 + 4 eighths of the hadjira and caxixi). The cymbals accentuate this division according to an 8-beat cycle: two beats per measure, and six beats followed by two beats of rests. The idea of the superposition of a rhythmic beat of somewhat different patterning is very African, but the sonority is a unique idea of this composition.

Although very different in character, there are several similarities between the percussion improvisation and the other improvisations. One connecting aspect is, of course, the presence of a virtuoso soloist, and the fact that all three improvisatory styles are learned orally and cannot be played from musical notation. However, we should also notice a strong affinity between the rhythm of the djembé solo and the sax improvisation. In both cases, there is a clear sense of beat and metric system with ample syncopation, while the rhythmic patterns of the solo do not match this system. I became particularly aware of this similarity during the process of transcription. I encountered the same problem in both kinds of improvisation: what sounds like the beginning of a measure in the solo improvisation does not coincide technically with the beginning of the measure in the steady accompanying beat, or a pair of notes that sounds like an upbeat might not actually fall on the upbeat.

### **Quasi Recapitulation and Coda (MM. 224- 257)**

#### **MM. 224- 243: The Return of The Dialogue And The “Jazzy” Theme**

At measure 224, a passage begins that is similar to the dialogue in measure 110, but here the dialogue is between the jazzy theme, played in unison by the melody instruments, and the percussions. The first four measures of this section (mm. 224-227) could be interpreted as a postlude to the percussion improvisation or as the beginning of the dialogue. Several unexpected ideas occur in this extremely brief passage, each of them having metaphorical significance within the context of the composition. The meter changes back to 2/4 from the asymmetrical 6 + 4 (4 + 6) eighths of the percussion improvisation (suggesting that the new section begins here, although one is inclined to consider the appearance of the jazzy theme to be the beginning). The sonority of these four measures is remarkable: the continuous pattern is played now only by the hadjira drum, the bongos enter with a counter-beat, the durbakka, which was silent during the solo, returns here, but it now plays a traditional Arabic rhythm (*malfouf*), and, superposed on all of these, the cymbal highlights the beginning of each measure. In addition, the contrabass enters for one measure at the beginning (m. 224). It is perhaps this “gesture” that will

be paralleled in the next section by the hadjira drum's entrance on the last measure of the contrabass solo (231-233).

After these measures, the jazzy theme is played by the melody instruments (mm. 228-230); however, the answer comes not from the percussion instruments but from the bass (mm. 211-233, with the one-measure addition of the hadjira drum as mentioned above). Then, the jazzy melody returns (mm. 234-236) and is answered by the hajira drum alone (mm. 338-340).

In jazz, the contrabass is both a harmonic/rhythmic supporting and melody instrument; the bass is normally given the possibility to play solo improvisation during the performance. It is interesting that Shaheen puts the contrabass in the percussion role of answering the jazzy theme, while the bass also plays in the jazzy theme. This dual role of the bass – being able to be both percussion and a melodic instrument – is characteristic of the function of the instrument in traditional Arabic music.\*

#### **MM. 244- 257: The Return of The Virtuoso Oud Theme, The Consolidation Of Nahawand C, And Closure With The Jazzy Theme**

In measure 244, the “recapitulation” of the opening theme of the piece begins (mm. 9-21): the virtuoso theme of the oud. In its first four measures (mm. 244-247), the melody is played by all of the melody instruments in an almost unison fashion (with the sax playing the counter-theme from the beginning). This is a unique effect and statement: all instruments join, like a chorus, in performing what was earlier the oud's distinctly individual solo melody. After this symbolic unification of forces, the theme continues solo similar to its first appearance in the opening section.

At the beginning of the piece, the oud figurations consolidated the *maqam nahawand* C with a melody that ended on the note C, and then, suddenly, this C was “corrected” to G (mm. 18-22, see discussion above). Here, however, the oud figurations arrive directly at the G, which is the “dominant” of *nahawand* preparing its “tonic” on C. As if the C was corrected to G in an abrupt manner at the beginning of the piece, here the oud arrival at the G is corrected to the tonic C. At the beginning, the G was reinforced by a gesture that was somewhat alien and surprising: the melodic figuration of the guitar. Here, the final gesture is played by all of the melody instruments except the guitar. This final gesture is based on a melody that is reminiscent of the jazzy theme. As with the guitar figuration, there is an element of surprise here: the jazzy theme played by the chorus of the melody instruments is a sudden break with the figurative style of the oud. But there is also fulfillment and cohesion in this final gesture. It is heard almost like a *tutti* closure of a Western

\* About the acceptance of the cello to the classical Arabic tradition, see the works of Salwa EL-Sharwan Castelo-Branco.

piece with a motive not too emotional but familiar from the composition. At the same time, this is a meeting point of the crucial ideas of the piece: the ideas of dialogue and togetherness.

### Conclusions

Despite my analytic focus on tonality and form, I think that the most unusual and novel aspect of *Blue Flame* is its instrumentation. The instrumentation and the sonority of a composition are often considered to be of secondary importance. Most analyses regard form and pitch to be the essential aspects of musical structure. However, although creativity in form and tonality are crucial to Shaheen's art, I think that it is the instrumentation and the sonority that allow us to penetrate his aesthetics.

This piece includes a kaleidoscopic selection of instruments from different cultures: the sax, flute, and contrabass are instruments of Western music, but they are also typical in jazz, while the percussions represent African and Arabic music, and these are combined with the Spanish guitar and the Arabic oud. Besides the sheer delight in such a conglomeration of cultures and in the beautiful sonority that their combination produces, Shaheen has an ideological agenda: in his eyes, these many different instruments and cultures playing the same melody together is cultural cooperation through music, and Shaheen creates dialogue among them.

Nevertheless, this piece is first and foremost Arabic music with an extension toward jazz. This is felt in the prevailing dominant sonority throughout and manifests also in the conception of the global form. Here, as in most of Shaheen's other compositions, the central instrument is the oud. Despite all of the ideological considerations and aspirations for universality and equality of music cultures, Shaheen places the oud – that is, himself – in the center. The oud plays the main themes, the most important variations, and the most impressive improvisations (although, as we have seen, the saxophone comes close in importance to the oud).

Such centrality for the oud in an ensemble is actually not traditional in Arabic music. In the traditional Arabic ensemble, the oud had a secondary role. Thus, while Shaheen combines instruments from various cultures, he also develops the technique of the oud so that it can become the ensemble's main soloist. Paradoxically, this is not a traditional Arabic ensemble precisely because of the extreme virtuosity and centrality of the oud. Traditional Arabic music has an entirely different energy that is based on the intensity of much slower-moving music. It is not an accident that the oud, which is a quintessential virtuoso instrument, only rarely assumes a central role in the ensemble.

It is common in Shaheen's compositions that the introductory section

contains the core of the piece in a nutshell. *Blue Flame* opens with the dialogue between the oud and the ensemble and with a passage that displays the virtuosity of the oud. This material recurs several times in the piece. More importantly, however, these initial musical gestures contain the aesthetic idea: dialogue between virtuoso improvisations from different cultures. The introduction that appears at the beginning announces the two elements that will be basic throughout the composition: dialogue and virtuosity.

In Arabic music, when a composer does not follow the scheme of an established traditional form, like *longa*, *sama`I*, *bashraf*, or *tabmilah*, he composes in a free form. With Shaheen, the situation is different. Although he does not follow any clear formal pattern, every work has a well-thought-out large-scale form. In the case of *Blue Flame*, at first sight, this form seems to result from the merger of Western music forms.

In addition, in Arabic music, it is not common for the modal system to be subjected to any organizing roles, especially when introducing the tonal-spatial aspect.\* In contrast, *Blue Flame* is a well-organized and well-composed work; the tonality and temporal rhythm both have fixed organizations. However, the composition's new style is restricted to roles in which the soloist is free but still obligated to the harmonic progression that shapes the composition. Even the free improvisation – the *taqsim* of the oud, which is not subjected to any roles in the Arabic art music tradition, is subjected to a harmonic progression in order to save the form and the structure of *Blue Flame*'s character. This is why *Blue Flame* is an example of fusion in Arabic music.

Based on this in-depth analysis, it is clear that the composition of *Blue Flame* leads instrumental Arabic fusion music of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century to new frontiers in meaning and brings a new genre into Arabic music. Shaheen's style and method of composition were not common in twentieth-century instrumental Arabic music; however, Shaheen's other compositions, as well as the compositions of other late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century composers should be examined in relation to the aesthetics of *Blue Flame*.

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\* Habib Hassan Touma. "The Maqam Phenomenon: An Improvisation Technique in the Music of the Middle East." *Ethnomusicology* Vol. 15 (1971): 38-48.

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