

World tour: Middle East

KS3

Simon Rushby

Introduction

This is the fourth stop in our World Tour series, which began over a year ago and has so far visited the Caribbean, Latin America and China.

This month we explore some of the vast and diverse traditional music of the wider Middle East region, which for the purposes of this trip we will take to span a huge swathe of land covering the Arabic-speaking world, Iran (Persia), Turkey and North Africa.

Within this resource there will be background information and lesson ideas for Key Stage 3 students, which introduce them to unfamiliar music and make links with music they may already know. Crucially, we will see how migration and fusion cause music to develop and change over time, and we'll also learn something about the close relationship between music and everyday life in this ancient, historical and populous region.

Religion and culture

Two of the strongest unifying factors across this diverse range of peoples, cultures and languages are religion and music. Despite the size of the region and the huge diversity between, for example, Iraq at its eastern end and Morocco in the west, there are many common features in the music. This is partly thanks to the sharing of musical and cultural heritage that was so important in the growth of Islam, the predominant religion in this region (as well as in much of the rest of Africa and Asia), which began from the time of the prophet Muhammad in the early 7th century.

With apologies for a necessarily vague overview, we will concentrate on identifying some of these common musical and cultural features. In the first few centuries of Islam, cultural centres grew, allowing musical fusion to take place between the ancient traditions of Syria, Persia and Mesopotamia. The singing of Arabic poetic language was popular, and Arab rulers began to employ poets and musicians.

Early Arabs were influenced by the ancient Greek system of modes, which they adapted and developed. Following conflicts and occupations such as the Crusades, there was a fusion of Arab and medieval Western culture which influenced the structures and instruments of the Arab world, particularly in North Africa.

The Ottoman Empire, which covered much of the Persian Gulf and North Africa from the 15th to the early 20th century, meant that what we now refer to as Turkish music heavily influenced Arab culture, and even more recently, the opening of the Suez Canal brought Middle Eastern culture into direct contact with European culture, with each influencing the other significantly. In many Arab cultural centres today, both traditional Arab music and Western music are taught.

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Some common features of Middle Eastern music

Singing and chanting



The Sultanahmet Mosque in Istanbul, otherwise known as the Blue Mosque

Vocal music is the most common kind of music in the region, and great importance is placed on the connection between music and the Arabic language. Chanting, particularly of the Qur'an, is a regular feature of daily life, for example in the **adhan** or call to prayer, chanted by muezzin from minarets throughout the Islamic world. Singers and poets are often revered, and more recently songs accompanied by Arabic and Western instruments have become a mainstay of popular culture, particularly in films.

Listening exercise: 'Ya tira tiri ya hamama' by Rouwaida Attieh

'Ya tira tiri ya hamama' ('Fly, fly away, my dove') is one of the **Qudud Halabiya**, traditional Syrian songs from Aleppo with lyrics that come from the classical poetry of Andalusia in southern Spain, which was a largely Islamic region from the 8th century until the end of the Middle Ages. Though the lyrics are mostly about love and longing, the melody is an ancient religious one.

Listen with your students to the first two minutes of this version (www.youtube.com/watch?v=zfWcR36T3aY), sung by Rouwaida Attieh, a popular Syrian singer.

Use the following guided questions to help build up an overview of the structure and instrumentation of the song, which students could do by discussing in pairs or small groups:

- ▶ Describe the instruments that are playing. Which instruments that you know do they look and sound like?
- ▶ Does the song sound like it is in a major or minor key?
- ▶ How would you describe the rhythms played by the percussion instrument in this video? Are they repetitive? Can you copy them? Is the song in a regular metre?
- ▶ The first line of the song is repeated, like a refrain or chorus. How many times do you hear it repeated? Is it always Rouwaida that sings it?
- ▶ When the instruments accompany the singer, what role does each instrument have? What happens when she finishes singing, at 1:35?

Background information: the secular musical genre of Muwashshah, which has its roots in both Aleppo and North Africa, features a singer, who tends to repeat a few chosen lines of a traditional text, and an ensemble that might include **oud** (lute), **kamancha** (fiddle), **qanun** (zither), **darabukkah** (drum) and **daf** (tambourine). This performance features oud, daf and a violin.

Listening and comparison exercise: 'Ya teira tiri' by Zein Al-Jundi

Now, here's another version of the same song (www.youtube.com/watch?v=sDVvjXbuE1A), by another popular Syrian singer, Zein Al-Jundi. Don't be confused by the different spelling of the title – this is common in English translations of Arabic. Again, focus on the first two minutes, up to the end of the instrumental.

Get students to compare this to Rouwaida's version, led by the following questions:

- ▶ How does the use of percussion differ in this version? (There is a much bigger variety of drums and tambourines, with a lot of syncopation and rolls.)
- ▶ What kinds of instruments play melodic solos? (We hear a flute-like instrument, probably a **ney**, and violins.)
- ▶ How is Zein's version similar in terms of melody, key and structure? (It is in a minor key but pitched higher than Rouwaida's. The structure is very similar, with the repeated refrain very prominent, though the section where the group sings is longer.)

If interested, students may also want to listen to a performance of this song by Syrian singer Sabah Fakhri (www.youtube.com/watch?v=7wqYW9IBvhA) who performed it regularly from the mid 1960s onwards (he is now 86 years old). Fakhri is credited with being one of the key performers in popularising traditional Arabic music, especially the Qudud Halabiya.

Common instruments in Middle Eastern music

There are, of course, a large and diverse range of instruments in music of the Middle East region. In this listening exercise we will meet some of the most common.

Identifying Middle Eastern stringed and wind instruments

On the next page, there's a worksheet that you can print off and get students to fill out as they listen to the six extracts listed below. For each extract, they need to use as much musical vocabulary and prior knowledge of instruments as they can to describe the instruments they see, the way they are played, and the role they have in the music. There is further information after the worksheet to help you guide the students.

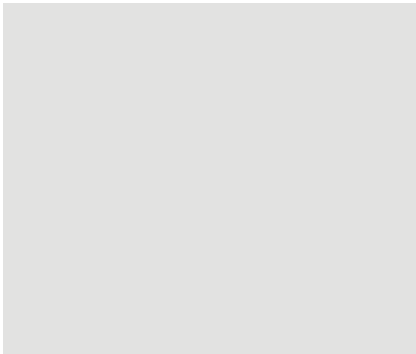
Here are the extracts, in the order that they appear on the worksheet. Around a minute or so of each should be sufficient for students to build an overview:

- ▶ Oud (www.youtube.com/watch?v=doZn3_mriXM)
- ▶ Qanun (www.youtube.com/watch?v=VS3LafxrMIs)
- ▶ Santur (www.youtube.com/watch?v=95amB7kUu-k)
- ▶ Kamancha (www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAYb_GU7Vcs)
- ▶ Ney (www.youtube.com/watch?v=wYQ_ol3L9Ag)
- ▶ Mizmar (www.youtube.com/watch?v=MAdOXoSXMeg)

Some stringed and wind instruments of the Middle East

Watch and listen to each extract and note down your thoughts about each instrument in each of the three columns. The questions to think about are:

- ▶ **What is it like?** List any instruments similar to this one that you already know.
- ▶ **How is it played?** Describe how the player gets sound from the instrument. Go into as much detail as you can.
- ▶ **What does it play?** Describe the sound of the instrument and what role it might have in a performance – does it play melody or harmony, or both? Use musical words as much as possible.



Name	Picture	What is it like?	How is it played?	What does it play?
Oud				
Qanun				
Santur				
Kamancha				
Ney				
Mizmar				

Here is some background information to help discuss the students' findings.
The picture below could also be helpful.



The **oud** is one of the commonest instruments of the region, and it dates back to medieval times, being an ancestor of the European lute. It has a pear-shaped body and a bent-back pegbox with violin-like tuning pegs. Normally there are four to six pairs of strings (tuned in unison) and a single low string, and it is fretless and plucked with a plectrum. It probably emerged in its present form in Andalusia, though a medieval version called a **barbat** was present in Persia in the 7th century. We will look at the oud in more detail later in this resource.

The **qanun** or **kanun** is a three-octave zither plucked with two horn-shaped picks. It is particularly common in Turkey. A complicated system of levers allows the instrument to be tuned to different maqamat (modes). If you added a keyboard to this instrument it would become very similar to a harpsichord. It is similar to the Chinese **yangqin**, which we met in the last World Tour resource (*Music Teacher*, December 2020).

The **santur** is a hammered dulcimer or zither mainly found in Iran and Iraq, with its history dating back to ancient Mesopotamia 500 BCE. Different versions exist depending on the region, but most have multiple strings and moveable bridges, allowing for retuning and pitch bending. It is played by hitting the strings with two mallets.

The **kamancha** (there are various spellings according to region) is a spiked fiddle-like instrument found mostly in Iran and its neighbouring regions. In Turkey it is called the **rabab**. It has a long neck and four metal strings with tuning pegs at the top. It is usually tuned like a violin but played sitting down like a cello or viol.

The **ney** is a very ancient end-blown flute (though more like a recorder) made of wood. Dating back some 5,000 years, it's one of the oldest instruments still used today. The Persian ney has six holes, one on the back for the thumb, while the Turkish and Arabic version has seven. Sometimes a plastic or brass mouthpiece is added to prevent the wood from getting too soft.

The **mizmar** is a double-reed instrument, like the oboe or the ancient European shawm. Common in the Eastern Mediterranean countries, it is a loud instrument most often associated with celebrations and festivities. You will often see the mizmar played in an ensemble with drums for dancing.

Percussion instruments are diverse – the most often seen are the **tabla** (a hand drum similar to Indian tabla and also called **darbukkah**), a double-headed drum called **tabl baladi** and a tambourine called **riqq** or **daf**.

Rhythm and melody

The music of the Middle East is essentially all about rhythm and melody, and much of it is very rhythmically exciting. There are a number of rhythmic modes, a little like the rhythmic cycles or *tala* of Indian classical music. These are called **iqa'at** (or **usul** in Turkey), and each one has its own pattern of beats and accents, usually emphasised by drums and tambourines. Some modes are regular and quite straightforward, but there are many that are irregular and very complex.

Melody in Middle Eastern music sounds quite different to melody from other parts of the world. It holds a very important role and is always prominent, kept clear from other parts and from complex textures. It is usually highly decorated with ornaments and other subtle changes of pitch. There is a lot of improvisation, but much Arabic music is composed, often with complex structures.

Most traditional Arabic and Turkish music uses melodic modes, the organisation of which is often called **maqam** (plural: **maqamat**, and **makam** in Turkish). These modes can be traced back to the music of ancient Greece and Persia, and most are seven-note scales that repeat at the octave and have strong sounding 'tonic' and 'dominant' notes, just as in Western diatonic and modal music.

One big difference, however, is the common inclusion of **microtones**, which are pitches smaller than semitones, such as quarter-tones. Maqam scales rarely use any kind of even tone or semitone pattern, and for this reason they are usually taught orally and through listening and copying.

For more information, get your students to watch this video (www.youtube.com/watch?v=KA5VdzRHh-U). For the first four minutes or so, the presenter, Brandon Acker, talks in detail about the oud, which is a good example of an instrument that can play microtones since it is fretless, like a violin. From around 4:14 onwards, however, he talks about the different maqam patterns he has discovered as a relative newcomer to oud music. This is a valuable introduction to how maqamat can be used for playing and improvising, and he takes us from quite simple ones which exactly resemble the Western **aeolian** and **phrygian** mode to a more complex maqam that uses microtones. In a moment I will suggest some performing and improvising activities that build on this information.

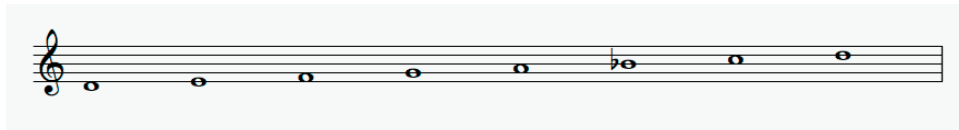
Like Indian raga, each maqam can also have a particular character or mood, and associated motifs that performers frequently repeat. In some Arabic genres, the performer will modulate from a home maqam to another, and back again, just as much Western music does between keys.

Though there many maqamat, a smallish group are most commonly used with names such as **hijaz**, **rast**, **nahawand** and **saba**. A lot of these names originate from Persia which was a key influence in Middle Eastern culture as this melodic system developed.

Performing activity: Üsküdar'a Giderken

The first maqam introduced in the video is **nahawand**, which is identical to the aeolian mode or natural minor scale. Brandon Acker plays it (from 5:21) on D. Get students to play and familiarise themselves with this maqam – obviously string players and guitarists will be able to take a lead on this as their instruments are most similar to the oud, but any tuned instruments will do:

Using notes from this maqam, he performs the Turkish song 'Üsküdar'a Giderken' from 4:13.



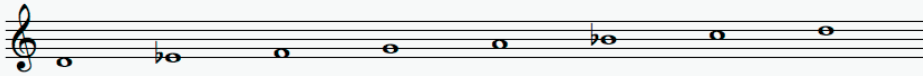
Watch the segment from 4:13 to 5:43 again, with the class, and then set them to work learning the basic song, which is loosely transcribed below, along with a simple drone-like accompaniment for those less comfortable with playing the full melody:

Once students have had time to master this, you can:

- ▶ Introduce tambourines and drums to add rhythmic drive.
- ▶ Perform in groups or as a class.
- ▶ Find ways to embellish the melody (as shown on the video).
- ▶ Set more musically confident students the challenge of improvising solos using nahawand.

Moving towards microtones

Now introduce the **kurd** maqam, which is the same as the Western phrygian mode. It is the same as nahawand except that it starts with a semitone – the second note is flattened. So based on D, as introduced by Brandon from 5:48, it looks like this:

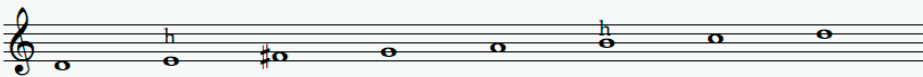


Get students to play kurd, followed by 'Üsküdar'a Giderken' in this maqam, which is achieved simply by changing all the Es to E flats:

Discuss how it changes the sound of the song. At this point, you could compare with Spanish flamenco music, a lot of which is phrygian. The prevalence of phrygian music in Spanish flamenco has a lot to do with the Moorish settlement there.

Next, from 6:15, Brandon introduces the concept of microtones, which reside between our Western semitones. He explains this very clearly and shows them on his oud, revealing the concept of **half-flats**, which are sharper than flats. In other words, B half-flat is somewhere between B flat and B – a little sharper than B flat.

Brandon goes on to play a small part of 'Üsküdar'a Giderken' with B half-flats – can your students hear the difference? He then introduces the **hijaz** maqam, which uses two half-flat notes – E half-flat and B half-flat:



As you listen to him play this maqam, see if your students can see how the real character and sound of much Arabic and Turkish music comes through now we have these microtones in place. How might students be able to create microtones – and therefore play in the hijaz maqam – using their instruments? It won't be possible on keyboards unless there's a tone-wheel or pitch-bend arm, but guitars, or orchestral stringed, wind and brass instruments will all be able to do it to an extent. Get them to experiment! Even tuned percussion can be persuaded to go sharp – how?

Brandon plays an excerpt from a song called 'Halfaouine' and mentions a Tunisian oud player called Anouar Brahem – you might like to show students this video (www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Z7RJOAkXMo) of Brahem performing the song. You can tell from the audience reaction that it is very popular with Tunisians.

Composing work

Hopefully students will have plenty of information about Middle Eastern music to experiment with writing in one of the maqamat we have covered. If so, encourage them to write melodic music that is simple and repetitive, perhaps with a refrain like the song ‘Ya teira tiri’, which we heard at the start of the resource. Group performances of their compositions can include unison melody, singing, improvisation and rhythms from hand drums and tambourines.

A final listening exercise

Here’s an exercise that summarises all we have covered in this resource, and gives students a chance to demonstrate their learning. It is based on this video (www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGK4xku1rA) from the beginning until 2:14.

This is the beginning of a medley of Qudud Halabiya songs (the traditional Syrian songs mentioned earlier) by a US-based ensemble. The four members come from Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and Morocco.

- ▶ Name the three tuned instruments played in this excerpt.
- ▶ The percussion instrument being played is similar to a tambourine. What is it called?
- ▶ Which instrument plays the melody most prominently in the first part of the excerpt? How does the player vary the melody?
- ▶ When the singer starts, what is the role of the blown instrument?
- ▶ The singer often sings intervals that are smaller than a semitone. What is another name for these intervals?
- ▶ What is the name for an Arabic mode or scale, on which melodies are based?