



(LYRCD 7374)

TAQASIM THE ART OF IMPROVISATION IN ARABIC MUSIC Ali Jihad Racy, Buzuq and Simon Shaheen, 'Ud

TAQASIM

Taqasim (singularly, Taqsim) are non-metric improvisation. Traditionally, they have been used to introduce a piece of music or to make a bridge between pieces within a suite. Until the early part of this century, lengthy taqasim were a common feature of Arab music. Since the advent of the record industry, however, brief taqasim have been the rule in both recordings and public performances. Longer taqasim have generally been reserved for small gatherings of connoisseurs. In this recording, Simon Shaheen and Ali Jihad Racy have provided the rare opportunity to hear the extended reflections of two virtuoso performers.

A taqsim is the purest expression of two important values in Arab music; individual interpretation and the linear development of melody. The basic element in Arab modal theory is the tetrachord, a series of intervals spanning the melodic range of a fourth. Tetrachords of different scale types and pitch levels are combined to create maqamat (singularly, maqam), or melodic modes. The scale tones of a given tetrachord are selected from a theoretical scale with twenty-four pitches to the octave. At least four different sizes of scale-steps are used: the augmented second, major second, minor second, and a step of intermediate. The latter interval, roughly three quarters of a tone, imparts a special quality to the music. Performers and theorists differ among themselves about the exact number of pitches per octave and the size of the intervals produced. But it is clear that the

flavor of Arab music is spiced with subtle gradations of pitch that are, for the most part, unknown in Western music.

More than a simple scale, the maqam is a complex set of rules for composition and performance. The opening and the final notes of a piece, as well as other prominent notes, are determined by the maqam. The maqam also governs the overall melodic flow, the choice of specific characteristic phrases, and modulations to other, related modes. A performance of taqasim is judged in part on the musician's choice of modulations and on the subtlety with which he makes the transition from one maqam to another.

The unmeasured flow of melody in a taqsim permits a leisurely exploration of the characteristics of a maqam. When two or more musicians perform taqasim together, each takes a turn as soloist while the other holds a drone or softly echoes short phrases from the solo passage. A performer begins his improvisation with a few concise phrases centered on one of the pitches the maqam, and then gradually expands both the range and length of melodic invention. This pattern may be repeated as each new pitch area is introduced, but it provides only a loose formal framework for the taqsim. Unfettered by the rules of the maqam, the limits of his own technical skill and imagination.

THE INSTRUMENTS

Both of the instruments heard here are pear-shaped, plucked lutes, but that is where the similarity ends. The ud, better known as the oud, is the deeper and mellower-sounding of the two. The instrument has eleven strings arranged in five double courses with a single bass string. The four highest courses (tuned ADGC) are used primarily for melody. The fifth and sixth courses are usually tuned an octave below the second and third (that is D and G), but Simon Shaheen varies his tuning according to the maqam, to echo important notes of the mode. The short neck is fretless, facilitating both the intonation of microtonal intervals and the creation of a vibrato and portamento with the left hand.

The basic design of the modern ud was developed as early as the 8th century A.D. The name (which literally means "a piece of wood") goes back two centuries earlier, to the time when an indigenous Arab lute, previously covered in skin, was given a wooden face. Later, brought by the Muslims to Spain, the instrument gave both its name (al-ud) and its form to the European lute. Today the ud remains the most widely used lute in the Arab world, the favored tool of composers, and the essential instrument in virtually every art and popular ensemble.

The origins of the buzuq are quite different, both geographically and socially. Like its name sake, the Greek bouzoukee, the buzuq is probably derived from a Turkish instrument of the saz type. All three instruments have small, deep bodies and long necks fretted with tightly wound nylon line. These frets limit the buzuq's flexibility of microtonal intonation, but contribute to the brilliance of its sound. Jihad Racy's buzuq has three double courses tuned variously according to the maqam. The lower two courses are used to produce the shifting drones characteristic of buzuq performance. The melody is confined almost entirely to the first course of steel strings. The performer's left hand moves along the length of the neck rather than fingering across the strings, as on the ud.

Traditionally, the buzuq has been played primarily as a solo instrument among villagers and gypsies of Syria and Lebanon. Jihad Racy demonstrates here that the buzuq is equally suited to the performance of the most refined and delicate music. Nevertheless, this is very likely the first time that the ud and buzuq have been recorded together in a taqasim duet.

THE PERFORMERS

Simon Shaheen, one of the finest young violin and ud players in the Near East, is well versed in both Arab and Western music. He was born in Haifa and began his studies with his father, Professor Hikmet Shaheen. Since coming to the United States in 1980, Mr. Shaheen has been studying at both the Manhattan School of Music and Columbia University. He has also maintained an active performance schedule, including appearances in New York, Paris, London, Washington, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. He is particularly concerned with extending the repertory of the ud as a solo instrument, and is writing a book on ud technique.

Ali Jihad Racy, acknowledged as a leading virtuoso on the nay (a reed flute) and buzuq, is equally adept on the mijwiz (a double clarinet) and other Near Eastern instruments. In his native Lebanon, Dr. Racy appeared frequently on radio and television. He continues to perform widely in concert throughout the Near East and North America. Dr. Racy is a graduate of the American University of Beirut and holds a P.H. D. in ethnomusicology from the University of Illinois. He has taught ethnomusicology and performance at several American universities, and is at present a professor of Music at UCLA.

TRACKS

1. Maqam Kurd 20:20
2. Maqam Nahawand 13:10
3. Maqam Bayyati 8:53

CREDITS

The performers are grateful for the cooperation of Robert Browning of the Alternative Museum in New York City, where these recordings were made.

Cover Design, Duy Ngo

Back cover photography by Karim Douglas Crow and Barbara T. Racy

Recorded by Phillip D. Schuyler

Digital Mastering by Digital Sound Works, New York City



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