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THE INDEPENDENT MUSIC SCENE IN THE LEVANT BETWEEN 2003 AND 2023, DO-IT- YOURSELF WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE ARTS AND CULTURE ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract | Le début du XXI^e siècle a été marqué par l'essor de l'Internet et des technologies mobiles, ainsi que par l'expansion de la sphère numérique et l'émergence de la musique DIY. En même temps, des changements ont marqué la scène artistique et culturelle en général, et la production musicale en particulier au Levant. C'est l'ère de l'institutionnalisation de la production et de la diffusion artistique et culturelle. Cela a notamment vu la création d'organisations panarabes et régionales intermédiaires telles que Culture Resource (Al-Mawred Al-Thaqafy) et AFAC (Arab Fund for Arts and Culture), ainsi que la création de petits labels, studios d'enregistrement et collectifs par les musiciens eux-mêmes. Ces organisations ont fourni des subventions pour la production et la distribution, ainsi que des programmes pour les artistes et les professionnels de la culture.

Cet article vise à étudier les aspects de la production musicale, principalement entre 2003 et 2023 au Levant, en se concentrant sur le Liban, où sont basées les organisations artistiques et culturelles concernées. Cet article interroge la contribution des organisations artistiques et culturelles de la scène musicale du Levant, les genres ou styles financés et le rôle de ces organisations dans le fonctionnement de cette scène. Les conclusions de l'étude reposent sur l'analyse des données fournies par les organisations. Des entretiens avec des musiciens et des producteurs de musique ont permis d'approfondir et de trianguler les résultats de l'analyse des données.

Mots-Clés | Levant, musique indépendante, subvention, production, organisations arts et culture

Abstract | The beginning of the 21st century witnessed the rise of the internet and mobile technologies, as well as the expansion of the digital sphere and the emergence of the Do-It-Yourself music. Simultaneously, it experiences significant changes that reshaped the arts and cultural scene in general, and the music production in particular across the Levant. This period marked the institutionalization of arts and culture production and diffusion. It saw the formation of “intermediate” pan-Arab and regional organizations such as Culture Resource (Al-Mawred Al-Thaqafy) and AFAC (The Arab Fund for Arts and Culture), as well as the establishment of small record labels, recording studios, and collectives founded by musicians themselves. These organizations provided subsidies for production and distribution, in addition to programs for artists and cultural practitioners.

This paper aims to understand aspects of music production in the Levant, mainly between 2003 and 2023, with a focus on Lebanon, where most of the relevant arts and cultural organizations are based. The article explores the contribution of these organizations to the music scene in the Levant, the genres or styles funded, and their role in shaping the musical scene. The findings are based on an analysis of data collected from these organizations, complemented by interviews with musicians and music producers conducted to deepen and triangulate the data analysis results.

Keywords | Levant, independent music, grants, production, arts and culture organizations

Introduction

The beginning of the 21st century witnessed the rise of the internet and mobile technologies, as well as the expansion of the digital sphere. Simultaneously, it witnessed changes that reshaped the arts and cultural scene in general, and the music production in particular across the Levant. This period marked the institutionalization of arts and cultural production and diffusion. It saw the formation of “intermediate” pan-Arab and regional organizations¹ such as Culture Resource (Al-Mawred Al-Thaqafy, since 2003) and AFAC (The Arab Fund for Arts and Culture, since 2007), as well as the establishment of small record labels, recording studios, and collectives founded by musicians themselves. These organizations provided subsidies for production and distribution, in addition to programs for artists and cultural practitioners.

During the last two and a half decades of the 21st century, the arts and cultural institutions are believed to have played a significant role in shaping music production in the Levant. This occurred in contexts where public funds were either absent, alongside the absence of lack of cultural policies, as in the case of Lebanon², or insufficient and selective, as in the case of Syria and Palestine³. These institutions contributed to structuring the scene, setting the norms and patterns of the so-called independent music scene. They not only contributed to the development of the cultural milieu, but also to defining its boundaries and limitations.

An “independent” music scene

There are different approaches and perspectives for defining independent music. The most common definition among musicians and arts and cultural organizations in the Levant doesn’t necessarily describe a music genre or style (unlike Indie music in the global context). In this paper, we are using the term “independent music” to refer to music produced either independently from official frameworks or commercial labels, mostly with lower budgets compared to the mass production industry⁴. It also refers to the music that does not necessarily appear on the radars of the mass media platforms. The term, as used in this paper, doesn’t describe the creative process of independent music. It is also important to note that, with the increase in the digital platforms’ presence as sources of access to music production - in contrast to the traditional mediums such as radio, television, and printed albums - there has been an additional effort to fine-tune the definition of “independent” in order to qualify its nature and better articulate it in relation to the Levant cultural scene. The

1- ABOU HARB Areej, *Les espaces culturels à Beyrouth entre l'absence de politique culturelle et les opportunités du développement dans le secteur*, unpublished Masters’ thesis, Paris, Université Paris 3 Sorbonne Nouvelle, June 2014.

2- Idem.

3- Cf. cultural policies papers on Lebanon, Palestine and Syria published by the Culture Resource (Al-Mawred Al-Thaqafy) and available on their website www.mawred.org/research-publications/ and their sub-website dedicated to cultural policies www.arabcp.org

4- HESMONDHALGH David, *Indie: The Institutional Politics and Aesthetics of a Popular Music Genre*, *Cultural Studies Journal*, 1999.

term “independent music” is sometimes used interchangeably with “alternative music” in certain literature⁵.

The musicians’ perspectives

From the musicians’ side, two observations are worth mentioning. On one hand, we observe a number of young, emergent and established musicians who have structured their music projects, produced, and disseminated their work within the framework of the institutional programming and grants. On the other hand, some musicians and bands didn’t participate in the grant cycles over the years, instead producing their music independently or in collaborations with small labels. The genres, styles, topics and techniques are largely common in both cases, with a few genres exceptions such as the hip-hop and rap scene.

The research questions and the methodology tools

This paper aims to explore aspects of music production, mainly between 2003 and 2023 in the Levant, with a focus on Lebanon where the arts and culture organizations under study are based. This period marks two decades of the annual grant cycles by these institutions, during which different programs were designed to serve the independent music scene. It also coincides with the expansion of the Do-it-yourself (DIY) music production and growing use of social media, digital distribution and streaming platforms amid the region’s social, cultural and economic transformations. DIY music has provided artists with greater autonomy to the artists and has often represented a form of cultural resistance to mainstream norms.

The main questions guiding this study are: What has been the contribution of the arts and culture organizations to the music scene in the Levant? Which music genres or styles were funded? Did these organizations actively shape the music scene over the past two decades, or did they merely respond to musicians’ needs? To what extent were those needs addressed? What did musicians produce outside the grant cycles, and for what reasons? Did these independent productions tackle themes absent in the grants’ production world?

Given the lack of literature on arts and cultural organizations in the Levant and pan-Arab region - both regarding their models of governance and the dynamics of music production - this paper adopts a qualitative analytical approach to address the research questions.

The observations regarding the music produced with the support of the institutions were researched based on the data provided by the Culture Resource

5- STRACHAN Robert, *Micro-independent record labels in the UK*, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2007.

mainly through their dataset⁶, and on publicly available data published by AFAC⁷. The collected data was reviewed and analyzed from three angles: organizational budget allocations, the supported genres and styles, and the produced topics within the social, cultural and political changes. This secondary analysis aims to understand the current state of knowledge. It was then complemented by interviews with four musicians and music producers to get their input and perspectives aiming to triangulate the findings drawn from institutional data.

The findings of the paper

The research has shown that the music produced within the “independent music” scene, with the expansion of the DIY practices and the use of home studio tools, coincided with the creation of arts and culture institutions, and has been in close relation with the programs offered by the main institutions, whether through low budgets, diversified genres, or “glocal”⁸ styles. The concept of “glocalization” encompasses both local and global dimensions of music production and resonates with the neoliberal economy model, whereby the gig economy and small revenues shape musicians’ livelihood and work⁹. However, the relation shows complexities on many levels. The complex relation hovers between aspects of “randomness”, that some musicians and music experts have expressed during conversations,¹⁰ and those of “necessity”. The paper seeks to highlight this complexity in accordance with the institutions’ figures and the available data.

On the other hand, the observations regarding music produced independently from the granting organizations were examined through conversations with musicians and music producers. The research has shown forms of challenges in production and diffusion, but it also indicates innovative ways of creating and producing music, with or without funding, as many musicians and music producers have dealt with both cases. Alongside the available data collection analysis and these conversations, I have added commentaries and analysis from personal experience in the music scene in general and in the arts and culture organizations, drawing on projects and moments I have taken part in since 2009.”

6- When mentioned, the paper refers to the Culture Resource’s dataset that was generously shared by the organization upon my request. The content of the analysis and the paper don’t necessarily represent the organization’s views and opinions. Culture Resource have led a documentation and data collecting and categorization efforts that traced twenty years of the organization work. The data, soon to be shared on their platforms, is at moment available to researchers upon request. It is worth to mention that the data is not complete due to some documentation loss between Egypt and Lebanon when the organization moved its offices.

7- www.arabculturefund.org

8- BURKHALTER Thomas, *Local Music Scenes and Globalization: Transnational Platforms in Beirut*, Oxfordshire, Routledge, 2013.

9- HESMONDHALGH David, MEIER Leslie, *What the digitalization of music tells us about capitalism, cultural production, and the promises of the new technologies*, *Information, Communication & Society Journal*, 2018

10- Conversations with musicians and music producers were held in 2025 while writing this paper.

11- Since 2009, I have been working in the music scene as I organized series of concerts. Between 2018 and 2023, I was a programs manager at Culture Resource. And since 2015, I have co-founded and directed *me’zaf*, a musical cultural initiative for the authentic Levantine music (www.mezaf.org) whereby we produced music, but also engaged in music education and different aspects of the DIY convenience to the music genre in question.

A story of the organizational support in the Levant: the formation, the potential impact and the questions

Cultural Resource and AFAC, a brief presentation of two of the largest granting organizations in the Levant

Culture Resource (Al-Mawred Al-Thaqafy) is a pan-Arab arts and culture organization founded in 2003 which launched its activities in 2004. The organization, initially established by cultural actors, gradually expanded to cover the entire Arab region. Its offices were first based in Cairo, Egypt, before moving to Beirut, Lebanon, in 2016. Now, in its 21st year, the organization consists of a general assembly of 25 to 35 members from the arts and culture field, mainly from the Arab region¹², an artistic board of 7 members elected by the general assembly with precise governance cycles, an executive director appointed by the board, and a team recruited to manage and coordinate the work of the organization. Culture Resource is considered one of the largest intermediate organizations in the Arab region in terms of both scope of work and annual budget.¹³

Another organization of comparable size and annual budget is AFAC (the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture). It is a pan-Arab arts and culture organizations that was founded in 2007 and based in Beirut, Lebanon, after a short period in Amman, Jordan.¹⁴ AFAC operates with a board of trustees, an executive director, and a team, in a structure that closely resembles that of Culture Resource. It is remarkable that the teams of both organizations, although among the largest in Levant, include only about 20 employees each. In the absence of public funds and policies, and with limited economic investments in the Arab region, both organizations rely on international donors, such as the European Union, UNESCO, the Drosos foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Open Society Foundation.

As for their visions and missions, as stated on their official websites, both organizations share values of cultural diversity and freedom of artistic expression. They aim to promote and celebrate the arts and culture produced in the Arab region and its diaspora.

The idea of “intermediate” organizations

The term “intermediate” is used here to describe an aspect of the funding role performed by organizations such as AFAC and Culture Resource. Before the institutionalization of the arts and culture sector in the early 2000s, international donors typically funded projects, programs, and artists directly through their

12- A couple of years ago, Culture Resource have invited European members from Belgium to join its general assembly and then artistic board. The organization being registered in Belgium in addition to its registration in Lebanon.

13- The annual budget of Culture Resource isn't shared in their public reports. It is estimated that the budgets of Culture Resource and AFAC for the annual grants supporting the music sector (and other art disciplines) is between 200.000 and 400.000 USD per organization. This estimation is based on the amount of grants and their numbers per year with overhead margins.

14- Cf. <https://www.arabculturefund.org/About>

own granting programs. With the founding of entities like cultural Resource and AFAC, the funds for the arts and culture became more regionalized. These organizations, based in the Arab Region and staffed by local teams, secure their funds primarily from international donors. They have invested in programming annual grant cycles, among other activities, through which artists, collectives and smaller organizations could apply for support locally or regionally.

In this sense, these organizations can be described as intermediate bodies that kept the same funding sources and formats¹⁵ as in the pre-institutionalization era, while acting as mediators between the artists and local arts entities on one side, and the international donors on the other.

However, their role has grown over time through accumulated expertise. Throughout the years, the organizations have developed their programs to surpass the simple status of intermediary between the international donors and the artists. Although their budgets still rely on international donors¹⁶, they have managed to create partnerships both among themselves and with other sectors¹⁷. Efforts to diversify funding sources have been driven by a series of regional and global events. These efforts have also been shaped by local and regional cultural approaches¹⁸ that question the sustainability of the sector reliant on international funds, and that call for new ways of support aimed at reducing dependency on international donors as a form of colonial soft power.

Aspects of partnerships facing challenges

The collapse of the Lebanese economy in 2019, the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns in 2020, and the Beirut port blast of the same year pushed both Culture Resource and AFAC toward wider collaborations and partnerships. These efforts aimed to join forces in supporting artists in the Arab region and local organizations in Lebanon, helping them sustain their livelihoods during difficult times. This type of support¹⁹ relied on international donors but also included fundraising events, mainly in Europe²⁰; it brought the organizations closer to the field of humanitarian emergency aid a little far from the strict focus on arts and culture production and diffusion that had previously defined their work. This was an exceptional phase in which the organizations navigated a specific situation by addressing artists' and cultural structures' most basic needs: the need to survive a crisis without necessarily producing art.

15- ABOU HARB Areej, how does the cultural sector work in Lebanon and the challenges of the cultural scene in the Arab region, *Awan media platform*, 2020 (Arabic).

16- See the donors' lists on Culture Resource and AFAC's websites. It is also remarkable that both organizations are supported by almost the same donors.

17- AFAC have an experience with partnering with the private sector. On the other hand, Culture Resource have partnered with universities for instance.

18- On this issue, a very inspiring model was launched in Palestine in 2024 with echoes in the Arab region. It is the initiative "Owneh" that aims to "break away from the colonial funding system and gain independence of Palestinian civil society organizations" as per the initiative definition on their website www.owneh.org

19- Cf. the Lebanon Solidarity Fund that AFAC and Culture Resource have offered in 2020.

20- Cf. several fundraising campaigns and events can be found on this website: <https://www.thefestivalacademy.eu/en/beirut/>

At the same time, political changes in the region and the beyond shaped the funding sources and destinations of these organizations. In a way, the mass uprisings in the Arab region beginning in 2011, known as the Arab Spring, influenced their programs. For example, Culture Resource led specific projects outside their usual core programs in response to specific moments and events such as the Spring Festival, Redzone Festival, and the Stand for Sudanese Artists initiative²¹. The initiatives were designed to respond to moments of political, social and cultural struggle.

Nevertheless, changes in the international donors' agendas and priorities have also affected these intermediate organizations. One example is the change in the European Union funding conditions in the past decade regarding Syria and Palestine due to new EU regulations²². These changes had a major impact on local organizations, such as Palestinian organizations working in the West Bank and Gaza. Regional organizations, like AFAC and Culture resource, are assumed to have more margins and more tools for funding diversification to mitigate these challenges. However, such changes inevitably affect the organizations' ability to support projects in certain areas.

Supporting the independent music scene with its own tools

The case of Culture Resource

In their core activities, Culture Resource offers grants for artists and collectives to produce their work (the Production Awards program,²³ active since 2004) and to diffuse it (the Wijhat (destinations) program,²⁴ active since 2018). The latter program emerged from two earlier travels grant programs: the Arab region travels grant Mawazeed²⁵ (2016 – 2018) and the international travel grant Tajwaal²⁶ (Circulations) (2006 - 2018). These programs receive applicants from music and sound art, performing arts, visual arts, literature, and cinema, as well as multidisciplinary practices.

In addition to these funding programs, Culture Resource offers support for the institutionalization of cultural entities through its Abbara program²⁷ (since 2011) and provides assistance to artists at risk through the Stand for Art program²⁸ (since 2016). These programs offer networking opportunities, mentorship and broader assistance to artists, cultural actors, and entities alongside financial support.

21- These initiatives can be found on: <https://mawred.org/past-initiatives/>

22- The sanctions on Syria and the European ban on Palestinian organizations are examples.

23- <https://mawred.org/artistic-creativity/production-awards/>

24- <https://mawred.org/artistic-creativity/wijhat/>

25- <https://mawred.org/past-initiatives/mawazeed-travel-grant-2/>

26- <https://mawred.org/past-initiatives/tajwaal-e/>

27- <https://mawred.org/cultural-organizations-management/abbara/>

28- <https://mawred.org/stand-for-art/>

Music, as a discipline, is consistently represented across Culture Resource's programs and initiatives, with a focus on the two main granting programs: Production Awards and Wijhat²⁹. The organization offers music production grants in each round of the Production Awards program that is held once per year. The grant targets emerging artists under 35 years old, whether individuals, collectives or bands. The budget allocated to each beneficiary artist or group runs up to 8500 Euros (~8780 USD). The Wijhat program, which runs three cycles annually, provides travel grants to musicians, music producers, and bands with no age limit. It supports both regional and international travel, with a maximum budget of 7000 Euros (~7230 USD) per project.

On average, five music projects receive the Production Awards grants each year, while approximately nine music projects³⁰ are supported annually by Wijhat. These projects come from the Arab region as well as from the diaspora. The number of applications is considerably higher: For example, the 2024 round of the Production Awards program received 386 applications (compared to 328 in 2023)³¹, while Wijhat received 197 applications in 2024, with some years exceeding 200 applications. averaging around 70 applications per round.

According to the data shared by Culture Resource, artists from the Levant are consistently represented among the beneficiaries' lists. Each round, two to three selected projects in each program are from the Levant, based on the residency or the nationality of the applicants. It is remarkable that the representation of Levantine musicians in the beneficiaries of the music discipline is higher than that of other countries in the Arab region such as Yemen, Libya or Algeria³².

On the other hand, Levantine music experts, established musicians, festivals directors and musicologists are present in the jury panels responsible for selecting beneficiaries, as well as to mentorships and training workshops. However, the presence of established musicians and festival directors appears to outweigh that of musicologists.

The case of AFAC

As for AFAC, the organization's core activities revolve around annual grant cycles that offer production grants through 9 different programs: Performing Arts, Visual Arts, the AFAC Documentary Program, Music, Research on the Arts Program, Creative and Critical Writings, Training and Regional Events, Cinema, and the Arab Documentary Photography Program. It also runs training initiatives, such as the Arts and Culture Entrepreneurship program.

29- The music discipline is also supported through other programs.

30- An estimation of 3 music projects per round.

31- According to the Dataset of Culture Resource

32- All the grants' results announcements can be found on Culture Resource's news page: <https://mawred.org/mawred-news/>

In 2023, according to AFAC's annual report³³, the organization received a total of 2478 applications³⁴ in the nine main programs as well as three pilot projects. From these, AFAC supported 171 projects, including 22 in the music discipline. AFAC supports established and emerging artists, with no age limit. In 2023, 14 music projects from the Levant received grants under the Music program. Each grant can reach up to 25,000 USD for individual musicians and groups, and 35,000 USD for collectives and institutions.

On the other hand, juries, trainers and experts collaborating with AFAC always include Levantine established musicians, music producers, festivals directors, and musicologists. In AFAC's case, similarly to Culture Resource, the presence of established musicians and festival directors outweighs that of musicologists.

A closer look at the supported projects: what do the numbers of the allocated budgets tell us?

The budgets allocated by the organizations to support the production of albums and the diffusion of music productions through travels or festivals vary between 7,000 USD and 35,000 USD³⁵ per project. For Culture Resource, the production fund targets emerging artists (under 35 years old), while the travel fund is available to artists and groups with no age limit. As for AFAC, all their grants have no age restrictions; individual musicians and bands may receive support of up to 25,000 USD.

These budgets would allow musicians to record and produce their music, though with limitations and boundaries - for instance, artists' fees are barely covered. Within a band or a collective work, musicians often work with low budgets seeking alternative and complementary support to complete their projects. In such cases, DIY models and exchanges within musicians' friends and communities become the sole option for artists to finalize the work.

Although the available allocated budgets of the organizations are designed to cover the Arab region and its diaspora, while balancing geography and gender,³⁶ they support the music scene in working with its own tools (the DIY and the communities' exchanges) rather than reshaping it. This indicates that organizational support is valuable as an adjunct to the music scene, however, this support does not have the agency to steer the music scene toward defined types of production.

33- <https://www.flipsnack.com/arabculturefund/afac-annual-report-2023-english/full-view.html>

34- This number is said to be the highest in AFAC's 18 years of existence as per AFAC's annual report of 2023.

35- This number concerns strictly music organizations running festivals and touring programs, such as the support of the Beirut and Beyond festival in different rounds of AFAC.

36- As per the organizations' descriptions of their grants' programs and their work values in general, there is a common emphasize on diversity and inclusion.

At this point, an important question arises: do the existing budget models meet the music scene's needs while remaining aligned with the organizational values? And do they lead us toward defining a music industry as per the organization's missions?

A closer look at the supported projects: what music genres and styles are supported?

Throughout the years of operation of the arts and culture organizations in question, diversity and inclusivity have had a main impact in shaping their support programs. According to the Culture Resource Dataset and the AFAC's published results, no single music style or genre appears to have benefited disproportionately from their support- except for hip-hop and rap which are almost absent. The question of whether the absence of the hip-hop and rap genres reflects musicians' lack of interest in seeking organizational assistance or the organizations' rejection of the genre, requires independent and further inquiry.

Nevertheless, both organizations have collaborated with hip-hop and rap artists on different occasions. For example, the celebration of AFAC's 15th anniversary in Beirut, in July 2022, featured a concert with a line-up composed entirely of hip-hop and rap artists, including one of the most famous rappers in the regional scene, El-Rass (Mazen El-Sayed)³⁷.

When returning back to the supported music genres and styles, the main aspect that would describe the music produced is the "glocalization"³⁸ of sounds- a mixture, sometimes balanced and sometimes not, of local cultural representations and sounds with global influences.

The data reveal a wide variety of music genres and styles: electronic, electro-tarab³⁹, jazz, classical Levantine, fusion, experimental, pop, alternative rock, punk, and others.

It is remarkable, mainly through the Culture Resource Dataset, that the music genre is not required to be specified by the applicant when applying for support.⁴⁰ Instead, they must provide a description of the music project, its aims and its production model, alongside a timeline for the execution of the project and a detailed budget. Moreover, applicants are required to share samples of the proposed project and of previous work. This practice is common to both AFAC and Culture Resource.

The question of genres and styles highlights a lack of advanced information and opens inquiries into the juries' expertise and profiles. Both organizations invite

37- <https://www.arabculturefund.org/News/182>

38- BURKHALTER Thomas, *Local Music Scenes and Globalization: Transnational Platforms in Beirut*, Oxfordshire, Routledge, 2013.

39- The term "electro-tarab" is commonly used by musicians who aspire from traditional and authentic Levantine music forms with the use of electronics.

40- From a personal experience while assisting musicians to apply to AFAC's music fund, the genre is not required to be mentioned by the applicant.

diverse and independent⁴¹ jury members to evaluate the applications. According to available data, Juries tend to include established musicians⁴², festival directors or producers, sometimes writers on music in magazines, and rarely musicologists. Thus, the question of genres and styles is answered by diversity: all applicants, regardless of styles and genres they perform, may be awarded grants. In this sense, as with the budget issue, the organizations are not actively shaping the scene; rather, they are working with what they receive. But doesn't this wide range, yet relatively limited, support reflect an absence of policies - thereby keeping the music scene away from developing into an established industry?

A closer look at the supported projects: what social, political and cultural topics are supported?

OAs with the questions of budgets and genres, the data have shown a variety of topics tackled by musicians who received support over the years. Instrumental works were fewer than the vocal productions, and the latter often tackled themes of individual and communal suffering in the face of crises, wars and traumas. The topics also tackle the questions of belonging, personal and communal identities, struggles for freedom, and revisiting the "repertoire of the Levant"⁴³ either for the sake of representing it or using it as a source of aspiration.

Differences in these topics become clearer when examining the data on Lebanon, Syria or Palestine across different periods and political and social moments. In this sense, the Syrian music production that preceded 2011- the year that waned and shaped the country - was mainly focused on revisiting and reviving the local traditional⁴⁴ repertoire with Western influences and formats. Was this what Jonathan Holt Shannon called a "tension between tradition and modernity"⁴⁵? Or was it a moment of calm and uncertainty that preceded the eruption? After 2011, displaced Syrian musicians increasingly produced music to narrate the struggle for freedom and the suffering of the Syrians on political, social, cultural and humanitarian levels, both inside and outside the country. This was music that sought to imagine new horizons while bearing the burden of mass suffering, a music searching for its lost voice.

As for Palestine, over the past two and a half decades, music topics have revolved around dispossession, identity, freedom, exile, belonging, and brutality of occupation. This has been the quest to safeguard a culture under threat of

41- From outside the organizations' team members.

42- Sometimes a previous grantee of the organization.

43- Many writings can be referred to for the term "repertoire of the Levant", those of Nidaa Abou Mrad. For example: ABOU MRAD Nidaa, *Formes vocales et instrumentales de la tradition musicale savante issue de la Renaissance de l'Orient Arabe*», *cahiers d'Ethnomusicologie*, n. 17, 2004.

44- A comprehensive documentation of the traditional music in Syria, from a cultural perspective and not a musicologist point of view, is written by ABBAS Hassan, *Traditional Music of Syria*, published in Arabic, UNESCO, 2018

45- SHANNON Jonathan Holt, *Among the Jasmine Trees: Music and Modernity in Contemporary Syria*, Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 2006.

annihilation while experimenting with sounds. Identity seems to be the central theme of the music that was produced. The music seems what Martin Stokes describes as a mean to “constructing and expressing identity”, a music that “constructs a place” (Stokes 1994)⁴⁶ - a place imagined, an identity rising from under the rubble.

In Lebanon, instrumental music has a stronger representation than vocals, according to the data. Although the genres and styles are diversified, the music production often appears as a search for words. Topics of diaspora, search for hope, and Western influences take over other productions, the ones from the Levantine repertoire. Here, music functions as a form of leaving a sound trace, a memory note, in the midst of a chaotic social and political landscape marked by crises and wars over the past quarter of the century.

A music out of the closet – the musicians’ and music producers’ perspectives

This section documents a series of conversations held in January and February 2025 with:

- Rust Duo⁴⁷, a duo formed in 2020 by Petra Hawi, a Lebanese singer and music therapy graduate, and Hani Manja, a Syrian Czech electronics music producer and composer.
- Ghassan Sahhab⁴⁸, a Lebanese musician, qanun player, musicologist and composer. He co-founded *me’zaf* in 2015 and led its artistic direction, music trainings and school “*madrasat al-musiqā*”⁴⁹, alongside his university teaching position at the Antonin University.
- Sharif Sehnaoui⁵⁰, a Lebanese musician, experimental performer, music producer and festival director. He founded and has directed the Irtijal festival⁵¹ for experimental music and free improvisation since 2000.
- Amani Semaan, a Lebanese festival director and music producer. She founded and has directed the Beirut and Beyond⁵² international music festival for world music since 2013.

The conversations focused on their music work as musicians and producers, the genres they produce, the way they produce music, individually or through platforms and channels, whether with or without the support of the organizations, and the way they perceive the support. The format of the conversations was private, conducted with each participant alone through open questions and exchanges.

46- STOKES Martin, *Ethnicity, Identity, and Music: The Musical Construction of Place*, Berg, 1994.

47- www.instagram.com/rust_duo/

48- www.youtube.com/@GhassanSahhab

49- www.mezaf.org/madrassa

50- www.youtube.com/channel/UCRca4M3EYsiAJlQntbgYScQ

51- www.irtijal.org

52- www.beirutandbeyond.net

The aim of these briefed and selected conversations was to open a door – one that appeared to be a door of a “closet”, as the title of this section suggests – apart from the data showing the organizational support in quantity and quality. It was about considering the perspective of the people directly in the field: musicians and music producers. Their diverse inputs and commentaries ground the research’s central question: “Do the organizations actually shape the music scene?”.

Music from a closet, they do it themselves

The home studio of Rust Duo, where much of their production takes place and earns a meaning, is literally a closet in their diaspora apartment in Prague. In 2023, the duo left Beirut where they initially met and begun their collaboration. The closet, emptied from inside and lined with blankets fixed with cloth tongs for sound isolation, is where Petra records her vocals while Hani performs the electronics. Above the closet sits a pile of luggage bags. This set-up describes how the duo’s music is made. They do their music themselves, using their apartment and its furniture, relying on continuous touring and live concerts in Europe and the Arab region. The luggage must be used constantly; they even composed a song about it⁵³. The concerts and continuous touring provide their main source of their livelihood, funding the purchase of equipment needed and the development of new projects. The duo signed with a label that produced 7 songs for them, yet the royalties and revenues have proven disappointing. Also, the labels they work with do not cover the cost of production; –rather, they handle distribution and the opportunity to release vinyl copies of their albums instead of relying only on the digital platforms.

As for the grants, the duo applies to AFAC, Culture Resource and other organizations. They received only one grant in 5 years - from Culture Resource in 2023 - to produce their album “Masar”. The duo explains how this grant allowed them to produce and record the album at Fadi Tabbal’s Tunefork studio in Beirut and cover design and marketing costs. However, the allocated budget was insufficient to pay themselves for the time and effort, even though they are only two members. As a result, they must sustain live concerts and consistent touring regardless of external support.

At the beginning of their career, the duo received the support of “Beirut and Beyond Festival” which they say “put them on track”. The festival supported local artists in Lebanon during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2021, commissioning Rust Duo to produce one original song to a compilation album of twenty tracks. This was their first professional support and it pushed them to formalize their identity as a duo, produce an original composition (as their previous productions consisted mainly of covers), and later participate in residencies and festivals abroad.

53- www.youtube.com/watch?v=1tqzOeoOn_w

At the crossroads of travel and production, the duo believes that organizational support is a necessity for musicians. However, they believe current grants do not offer adequate artists fees or the time needed for research into lyrics, themes, and technical skills development. For them, they use the cultural heritage, the traditional and authentic music, and the Levantine “repertoire” as an aspiration, a “tarab” aspiration for an electronic use and production.

Music outside the markets’ boundaries and with critical definitions

For Ghassan Sahhab, who started his musical journey at the start of the 21st century, more than 20 years ago, and who’s now engaged in research and university teaching as a PhD holder in musicology, composition and ensemble music artistic trainings, the music he produces is, in his words, “timeless”: in the sense that it doesn’t belong to a wave, or a specific moment in history. At the same time, according to him, it is “music outside the markets’ boundaries,” since he doesn’t publish his works frequently, but rather leaves gaps of several years between one complete album and the next. His focus on music production is balanced with other commitments, such as research and teaching.

Ghassan applied for organizational support only once, in 2016, to produce his instrumental album “Sharqi” (My Orient). He received the AFAC grant and produced his album over a period of two years with an ensemble, releasing it in 2018. For him, the grant covered the technical aspects of the production, while the release concert and album sales generated good revenue in the first year. After that, however, online streaming and distribution revenues barely covered the membership fees for the streaming platforms. For him, this online presence serves as access for audiences in different places. Before and after the album, he released many single compositions, sometimes in collaboration with other artists, and sometimes solo.

In 2023, just before the October 7 operation in Gaza, Palestine, that was met with a genocide of Palestinians and a major Israeli attack on Lebanon, he had completed the recording and the mastering of his second album “Tajreeb Maqami”⁵⁴. He decided not to publish it during the war. Although it is still unpublished, the album tracks – as is his usual practice - were performed in concerts and festivals before studio recording, allowing him to receive feedback from musicians and listeners.

For his work, he doesn’t adopt a “do-it-yourself”. On one hand, he has little interest in the technicalities of production; on the other, he prefers working with a professional studio to complete his compositions. He relies on his other work, mainly the research and the teaching, to cover the production costs. At the same time, he doesn’t seek out labels and producers. The music genre he performs and composes is the Levantine authentic music, yet these experimentations within the genre, particularly with the maqam, often exceed the traditional boundaries, exploring new sounds, approaches, and even noise.

54- “Tajreeb Maqami” can be translated into *Maqam experimentations*.

For him, organizations do provide a needed support, but they do so “randomly”, without a deep focus on genres and styles. From his perspective as a researcher, this reflects confusion in terminology, stemming from the lack of clear definitions of music genres and styles being produced in the Levant. He observes that artists themselves sometimes describe their work with a terminology that doesn’t accurately fit what they present. In his opinion, questions of cultural identities and musical tastes, as well as the interrupted knowledge accumulation in the music scene, are central to understanding how the music scene is performing – though in his view, these two pillars may not always be connected.

A music scene, a music industry?

Sharif Sehanoui started Irtijal⁵⁵ festival in 2000 in Beirut. The festival is an annual platform for experimental music, free improvisation, free jazz, contemporary music, and other forms. It hosts line-ups of local and international artists. The DIY approach, according to Sharif, was an inevitable choice: “we had to work with what we have”. The festival seeks support and collaborations every year from organizations, but also relies on a community of interested musicians and on ticket sales. The festival has received support from AFAC and Culture Resource on different occasions, and for Sharif, this support is “a necessity with the absence of public funds, although it cannot cover the scene’s needs”. He argues that the role of organizations like Culture Resource and AFAC is in some way a substitution to the absence of a state that is engaged with the cultural scene. Thus, their support is important, yet insufficient. Musicians, whether himself or others, cannot rely solely on this support to produce. Hence, DIY tools are necessary, and hence musicians rely on other income sources to continue working. This funding challenge seems unsolvable, knowing that the organizations themselves face difficulties in securing funds. For him, the core issue is that the music scene remains excluded from the economic cycle due to the absence of public policies. For Sharif, music production in Lebanon can, and should be viewed from an economical perspective, as it contributes to the country’s overall production.

As for Amani Semaan, who started the Beirut and Beyond International Music Festival in 2013, the question of support goes beyond the grants that are offered by these organizations. In her opinion, musicians should benefit from DIY techniques for their knowledge of the production lines and processes only, but should also be supported by professionals in recording, mastering, management, rights, marketing, distribution and touring. This, she argues, would create a genuine music industry capable of growth, rather than small opportunities for one-shot support. The Beirut and Beyond organization, which oversees the festival, works on the different pillars mentioned by Amani to establish a professional network and environment in which musicians can thrive. In this sense, she is not a strong advocate of DIY, although she acknowledges that this

⁵⁵- Irtijal means improvisation.

is how the scene currently works. Instead, she aims to build a music industry with diversified and professional roles across different entities. In her opinion, these essential jobs would form a real industry, rather than the “one-man-show” that musicians are often expected to perform.

Conclusion

In the past 25 years, the “independent music” scene in the Levant has been shaped by musicians, music producers, support organizations, and a long list of needs, burdens of unanswered questions, and a series of local, regional and global events and changes that seem to hover around a missing core: does this scene form a functioning cultural system⁵⁶? The answer to this question isn’t straightforward.

On one hand, music production in the Levant has continuously found ways to persist, despite many challenges and difficulties both inside and outside the region. On the other hand, supporting organizations have consistently provided the scene with limited, yet diversified funds. These funds have helped musicians produce their work. However, they don’t appear able to shape the music scene or sustain its development - either quantitatively or qualitatively. Thus, the support schemes seem random, lacking a clear vision or direction, yet they remain necessary and inevitable for continuity. It is worth mentioning that these organizations paved the way for initialization and were pioneers in handling and assuming responsibility for the independent cultural scene, despite the lack of resources and the absence of public policies.

The findings of this paper detailed different aspects of music production within the framework of organizational support and from the perspective of musicians and music producers; however there remains a need to further explore the absent genres, like hip-hop, and missing questions, those related to the audience and its reach.

Since this work is new, it paves the way for other research to examine additional aspects and deepen knowledge in this field, especially given the scarcity of previous literature on organizational work in the Levant. The paper sought to draw attention to an interesting topic that needs further exploration and understanding.

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ملخص | شهدت بداية القرن الحادي والعشرين صعود الإنترنت وتقنيات الهاتف المحمول، فضلاً عن توسع المجال الرقمي وظهور موسيقى "افعلها بنفسك". وفي الوقت نفسه، شهدت هذه الفترة تغييرات كبيرة أعادت تشكيل المشهد الفني والثقافي بشكل عام، وإنتاج الموسيقى بشكل خاص، في جميع أنحاء بلاد المشرق. وقد تميزت هذه الفترة بمأسسة إنتاج الفنون والثقافة ونشرها. وشهدت تشكيل منظمات "وسيطّة" عربية وإقليمية مثل "المورد الثقافي" و"الصندوق العربي للفنون والثقافة"، بالإضافة إلى إنشاء شركات إنتاج صغيرة واستوديوهات تسجيل ومجموعات أسسها الموسيقيون أنفسهم. قدمت هذه المنظمات دعماً مالياً للإنتاج والتوزيع، بالإضافة إلى برامج للفنانين والممارسين الثقافيين.

تهدف هذه المقالة إلى فهم جوانب الإنتاج الموسيقي في بلاد المشرق، خاصة بين عامي ٢٠٠٣ و٢٠٢٣، مع التركيز على لبنان، حيث توجد معظم المنظمات الفنية والثقافية المختصة، وتستكشف المقالة مساهمة هذه المنظمات في المشهد الموسيقي في بلاد المشرق، والأنواع أو الأساليب التي تمولها، ودورها في تشكيل المشهد الموسيقي. وتستند النتائج إلى تحليل البيانات التي تم جمعها من هذه المنظمات، بالإضافة إلى مقابلات مع موسيقيين ومنتجين موسيقيين أجريت بهدف توثيق نتائج تحليل البيانات

الكلمات المفتاحية: | المشرق العربي، الموسيقى المستقلة، المنح، الإنتاج، المنظمات الفنية والثقافية

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