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Soundtracks of Our Lives: Music-Making and Musicians in MENA Cinema

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Cinema

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## DOSSIER THÉMATIQUE :

Soundtracks of Our Lives: Music-Making and Musicians in Cinema of the MENA Region

### INTRODUCTION

## SOUNDTRACKS OF OUR LIVES: MUSIC-MAKING AND MUSICIANS IN MENA CINEMA

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**Abstract** | This introduction to the special issue, “Soundtracks of Our Lives: Music-Making and Musicians in MENA Cinema”, outlines some of the reasons for lack of detailed consideration given to music in research on films from the region. It highlights the intervention that this special issue makes, offering a brief review of the existing scholarship on which it builds and seeks to fill gaps. Finally, it introduces the articles that form the body of the special issue.

**Keywords** | Film music, musicians, soundtracks, Middle Eastern cinema, Arab cinema, Iranian cinema, MENA region

**Résumé** | Cette introduction au numéro spécial « Bandes sonores de nos vies: création musicale et musiciens dans le cinéma MENA » expose certaines des raisons du manque de considération détaillée accordée à la musique dans la recherche sur les films de la région. Il met en lumière le contenu de ce numéro spécial, en proposant un bref examen de la recherche existante sur laquelle il s’appuie et cherche à en combler les lacunes. Enfin, il présente les articles qui constituent le corps du numéro spécial.

**Mots clés** | Musique de film, musiciens, bandes sonores, cinéma du Moyen-Orient, cinéma arabe, cinéma iranien, région MENA

I grew up listening to Fairuz every day. That's how my mom comforted two children through years of civil war. I still run to Fairuz's voice when life is tough. Her voice is my shelter.<sup>1</sup>

Just as it permeates our everyday lives, music inhabits most films. It supplies their “heartbeat”, the sound theorist Michel Chion says, even when it escapes notice.<sup>2</sup> This is particularly applicable to the MENA region where, despite longstanding synergies between music and cinema, the topic has received surprisingly little scholarly attention. In this introduction to a special issue of *Regards*, “Soundtracks of Our Lives: Music-Making and Musicians in MENA Cinema”, I firstly suggest a few reasons why writings on MENA cinema rarely centre on music. Then I situate the special issue in relation to existing areas of research on the topic, highlighting the intervention it makes and tracing the intellectual inquiries running through it before discussing each article in turn.

The lack of detailed attention to interactions between film and music may owe at least partly to the fact that the topic straddles two different artforms with distinctive specialisms. Film Studies scholars are not always inclined to study music, while musicologists, if they turn to cinema at all, seldom do so with the tools of film analysis.<sup>3</sup> Music often takes a subsidiary role in film studies, where the story, characters, dialogue and visuals are typically the primary objects of attention.<sup>4</sup> The existing body of scholarship on film music largely focuses on US and European films, marginalizing huge swathes of the world's film production.<sup>5</sup> While this imbalance is gradually being addressed, MENA cinema is yet to benefit substantially from those efforts. As Kamran Rastegar argues in this special issue, film music's association with melodrama has provoked a reaction against

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1- BOU AKAR, Hiba [Tweet]. 1 September 2020 (accessed 1 September 2020). The architect, urban planner and academic Hiba Bou Akar wrote this tweet on the occasion of Fairuz's meeting with President Emmanuel Macron after the 4 August 2020 Beirut Port Explosion.

2- CHION, Michel, *Music in Cinema*, edited and translated by GORBMAN, Claudia, New York: Columbia University Press, 2021, p.11.

3- Among musicologists, two notable exceptions are Laudan Nooshin and Martin Stokes who have productively combined music studies and film/cultural studies perspectives in their work on Iranian and Egyptian cinema, respectively.

4- Claudia Gorbman claims that music often takes a “backseat” during film viewing because it is usually relegated to the background of the viewer's sensorium. See GORBMAN, Claudia, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987, p. 31.

5- Some of the canonical works on Hollywood film music are: GORBMAN, Claudia, *Unheard Melodies*, *op. cit.*; KALINAK, Kathryn, *Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood Film*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992; BROWN, Royal S., *Overtones and Undertones: Reading Film Music*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994; and SMITH, Jeffrey Paul, *The Sounds of Commerce: Marketing Popular Film Music*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. Since the turn of the century, more diverse approaches have appeared, although none of these, to date, have centred on Middle Eastern cinemas, including: WOJCIK, Pamela Robertson and KNIGHT, Arthur (eds), *Soundtrack Available: Essays on Film and Popular Music*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2001; DICKINSON, Kay (ed.), *Movie Music: the Film Reader*, London: Routledge, 2003; SLOBIN, Mark (ed.), *Global Soundtracks: Worlds of Film Music*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008; and HARPER, Graeme, DOUGHTY, Ruth and EISENTRAUT, Jochen (eds), *Sound and Music in Film and Visual Media: A Critical Overview*, London: Bloomsbury, 2009.

it in art cinema practice, resulting in its diminished role: “Film Studies scholars might adopt a similar suspicion and, even where music is incorporated, they may consciously or unconsciously exclude it from the centre of their consideration.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, in the turbulent, crisis-afflicted MENA region, other topics can impress themselves as more urgent. This special issue seeks to overturn some of these inhibitions and perceptions. With its interdisciplinary focus on the role of music-making and musicians in MENA cinema, bringing together film specialists, musicologists and sound practitioners, it builds on scholarly foundations in both music studies and film studies that have often been separated from each other.

In the existing literature, scholars have acknowledged the importance of music to the development of movies in the MENA region. During the mid-twentieth century, about a third of Egyptian films were musicals, lending a central place to songs and vocal performance.<sup>7</sup> At this time, Egyptian cinema dominated the Arab world. Its use of popular songs played a crucial role in capturing audiences and their imaginations. Many big stars were also singers, the most distinguished among them being Mohamed Abd al-Wahhab and Umm Kulthum. Abd al-Wahhab inaugurated the Egyptian musical genre by starring in *al-Warda al-Bayda* (*The White Rose*, 1933), which Walter Armbrust has described as an Egyptian modernist text that harnesses music to tradition (*turath*) and bestows upon it a “revolutionary transformation”.<sup>8</sup> From the 1930s through to the early 1960s, Abd al-Wahhab featured, as a star or musician, in nine films, establishing a path in cinema followed by other superstar singers, including Umm Kulthum, Farid al-Atrash, Layla Murad, Huda Sultan, Nagat al-Saghira and Abd al-Halim Hafiz. During a brief period in the 1950s and 60s, Lebanese cinema came close to Egyptian cinema in popularity with musicals that, in the 1960s, featured the Rahbani brothers and the singer Fairuz.<sup>9</sup> Singing stars have become the subject of biographies and even biopics while, in music studies, there are works on individual musical performers and national musical traditions.<sup>10</sup>

Martin Stokes has explored how Abd al-Halim’s voice exploited the power of the microphone, and has suggested that any attempt to explain these films’ lasting popularity must factor in their musical content – their appeal to audiences not only as viewers but also as listeners capable of appreciating vocal and instrumental artistry along with the history and conventions of the region’s

6- See RASTEGAR, Kamran and CHAUDHURI, Shohini, “Opening a Space for the Audience: A Dialogue with Kamran Rastegar about Composing MENA Cinema Soundtracks” in this special issue.

7- STOKES, Martin, “Listening to Abd al-Halim Hafiz” in SLOBIN, Mark (ed.), *Global Soundtracks: Worlds of Film Music*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008, p. 329.

8- ARMBRUST, Walter, *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 94.

9- SHAFIK, Viola, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity*, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2016, p. 105.

10- For example, for an evaluation of both printed and filmic narrations of Umm Kulthum’s life, see LOHMAN, Laura, *Umm Kulthum: Artistic Agency and the Shaping of an Arab Legend, 1967–2007*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2010.

classical and popular music.<sup>11</sup> In her analysis of the Tunisian director Moufida Tlatli's *Silences of the Palace* (1994), Anastasia Valassopoulos remarks that "issues of recognizability" are central when tracks by legendary Arab singers such as Umm Kulthum are heard in that film since they address Arab audiences "attuned" to the meanings of the songs and who originally sang them.<sup>12</sup> She implies that Arab and non-Arab audiences interpret these moments differently, an insight applicable to the range of evocations provoked by songs in MENA cinema and the layering of experiences and memories encoded in them. Yet, scant academic attention has been paid to the cultural and political aspects of songs in the MENA region generally, let alone their use in film.<sup>13</sup>

Soundtrack scholarship has largely focused on Hollywood, where Max Steiner, Erich Wolfgang Korngeld, and Alfred Newman are the composers generally credited with establishing classical film score conventions in the 1930s – the early sound era when film music began to be synchronized to images through continuity editing. Their chosen style was the symphonic idiom of composers such as Richard Wagner and Richard Strauss; Wagner's leitmotif (a melody announcing a particular character that plays with variations when they appear) was adopted as a common resource.<sup>14</sup> The symphonic idiom has been exported around the world, even predominating in Soviet cinema where, Mark Slobin surmises, "Marxist ideology might have dictated dumping the elite orchestra for humbler, worker-and-peasant-based ensembles".<sup>15</sup> It was also adopted in the commercial Egyptian film industry to which "Soviet advisors flocked".<sup>16</sup> However, composers also go "beyond this style by exploring dissonance, harmonic ambiguity, even atonality, and scores using jazz, electronic music, and music of other cultures", as Claudia Gorbman notes.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, since the 1960s, the compilation score using popular songs from outside cinema has largely replaced the previous film score model or has been combined with it.<sup>18</sup>

In Iran, sound films from Egypt, India and the United States helped to create expectations for music in film narrative, giving birth to what became known

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11- STOKES, Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 315.

12- VALASSOPOULOS, Anastasia, "The Silences of the Palace and the Anxiety of Musical Creation", in DICKINSON, Kay (ed.), *Movie Music: The Film Reader*, London: Routledge, 2003, p. 106.

13- One exception is MASSAD, Joseph, "Liberating Songs: Palestine Put to Music", in STEIN, Rebecca L. and SWEDENBURG, Ted (eds), *Palestine, Israel, and the Politics of Popular Culture*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2005, pp. 175–201.

14- Roy Prendergast has argued that the leitmotif and other aspects of the symphonic idiom were adopted for practical reasons, as those composers had "solved almost identical [dramatic] problems in their operas". PRENDERGAST, Roy M., *A Neglected Art: A Critical Study of Music in Films*. New York: New York University Press, 1977, p. 39.

15- SLOBIN, Mark, "The Steiner Superculture", in SLOBIN, Mark (ed.), *Global Soundtracks: Worlds of Film Music*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008, p. 11.

16- SLOBIN, Mark, "The Steiner Superculture", *ibid.*, p. 12.

17- GORBMAN, Claudia, *Unheard Melodies*, *op. cit.*, p. 4

18- For an account of the shift towards the compilation score in Hollywood, see SMITH, Jeffrey Paul, *The Sounds of Commerce: Marketing Popular Film Music*, *op. cit.*

as *filmfarsi*, a popular form of cinema with song-and-dance elements.<sup>19</sup> In her research, Claire Cooley has tracked the sonic and material links between *filmfarsi* and other film industries in the Middle East and South Asia.<sup>20</sup> Likewise taking circulation as a starting point, Kaveh Askari has explored transformations that occur in networks of exchange, devoting one chapter of his book *Relaying Cinema in Midcentury Iran* to the sampling of Hollywood film scores in 1950s and 60s *filmfarsi*.<sup>21</sup> As Askari reveals, the Iranian film industry did not regularly compose its own scores until the late 1960s, when distinguished composers such as Esfandiari Monfaredzadeh emerged. Instead, sound editors recycled and repurposed fragments from imported film scores or commercial recordings already familiar to audiences through their distribution in Iran; these fragments were deployed for nearly all non-diegetic music and some diegetic music without following classical conventions or copyright restrictions. Askari highlights sound editors' use of code switching and ironic citations of classic Hollywood scores and how these trends in Iran travelled in an opposite direction from Hollywood: using compilation scores when Hollywood practice was to compose original scores, then developing composed scores when Hollywood reverted to compilation soundtracks.<sup>22</sup> For instance, singer and actress Delkash performs several songs diegetically in *Afsungar (The Enchantress, 1953)*, while symphonic recordings by Hector Berlioz, Zoltán Kodály and Johannes Brahms, and film score fragments from *Spellbound (1945)* and *Duel in the Sun (1946)* provide nondiegetic music. Iran's sound editors edited recognizable instrumental scores "to set mood, provide leitmotifs, and mark reversals in the narrative".<sup>23</sup> Pop singers added further layers to citations by performing sampled songs, as Gogoosh did in her debut film role as a child star in *Bim va Omid (Fear and Hope, 1960)*, singing the title song from *Johnny Guitar (1954)* among other numbers. She went on to become one of Iran's most popular singers as well as featuring in several more *filmfarsi* era films.

The censorship and control of music production and consumption, particularly motivated by Islamic suspicions of music, is another area that has received attention. Although the Koran does not mention, let alone forbid, music or dance (and neither do the *hadiths*), religious leaders have sought to prohibit them. According to some Islamic theologians, some sonic practices are *halal* ("legitimate"), including religious chants and the call to prayer (which are

19- The term *filmfarsi* was popularized in the 1950s by the Iranian film critic Hushang Kavusi. See PARTOVI, Pedram, *Popular Iranian Cinema before the Revolution: Family and Nation in Filmfarsi*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2017, p. 4.

20- COOLEY, Claire, "Soundscape of a National Cinema Industry: *Filmfarsi* and Its Sonic Connections with Egyptian and Indian Cinemas, 1940s–1960s", *Film History: An International Journal*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (2020), p. 44.

21- ASKARI, Kaveh, *Relaying Cinema in Midcentury Iran: Material Cultures in Transit*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2022, pp. 81–113.

22- ASKARI, Kaveh, *ibid.*, p. 95. To some extent, the compilation soundtrack was a revival of sound practices during the silent era, when films were exhibited with live accompaniment of assorted music.

23- ASKARI, Kaveh, *ibid.*, p. 104.

deemed to be non-musical) as well as wedding and military music but other musical forms, such as vocal and instrumental improvisations and music belonging to pre- or non-Islamic origins, are either controversial or *haram* (“illegitimate”).<sup>24</sup> Hardliners have supported their opposition to music with the Koranic phrase “idle talk”, which characterizes music as useless and sinful.<sup>25</sup> In these discourses, music is associated with emotional excess, capable of exerting a dangerous influence, therefore necessitating control, and music-making is a dubious occupation. Anthony Shay argues that the historically low social status accorded to musicians in Middle Eastern societies predates Islam; instead, it is rooted in “the ambiguous and negative attitudes toward the public entertainer [which] existed in the ancient Mediterranean world” due to their exposure of their bodies to the public gaze, regarded as tantamount to prostitution.<sup>26</sup> Anxieties about music mirror anxieties about women, especially singers or dancers.<sup>27</sup> By circulating in public, the singing and dancing female transgresses traditional ideas of moral virtue and gendered rules of private and public space.

After the 1979 Revolution, Iran sought to shape its cultural policy according to its interpretation of Islamic principles. In the early Islamic Republic, music, like cinema, was “branded as un-Islamic and a form of cultural imperialism”.<sup>28</sup> Instruments were culled, music schools were closed and musicians were harassed by the authorities.<sup>29</sup> Over the years, government restrictions have shifted according to internal and external pressures, and both music and cinema have undergone a revival under the regulation of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG) which, since 1983, has issued permits for films, public performances and commercial recordings. Certain types of music (especially pop music) were banned outright, while others were restricted, even Persian classical music, otherwise seen as free of Western influences.<sup>30</sup> New laws prohibited female solo singing except to all-female audiences and drove popular pre-revolutionary singers, many of were women, to emigrate and relaunch their careers in the diaspora, as Googoosh eventually did, or retire from public performance, like

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24- OTTERBECK, Jonas, “Music as a useless activity: conservative interpretations of music in Islam” in KORPE, Marie (ed.), *Shoot the Singer: Music Censorship Today*, London: Zed Books, 2004, p. 12.

25- OTTERBECK, Jonas, *ibid.*, p.16.

26- SHAY, Anthony, “Foreword” in BREYLEY, G.J. and FATEMI, Sasan, *Iranian Music and Popular Entertainment: From Motrebi to Losanjelesi and Beyond*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2016, p. xiv.

27- NOOSHIN, Laudan, “Prelude: Power and the Play of Music”, in NOOSHIN, Laudan (ed.), *Music and the Play of Power: Music, Politics, and Ideology in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia*, Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009, p. 3.

28- NOOSHIN, Laudan, “Windows onto Other Worlds: Music and the Negotiation of Otherness in Iranian Cinema”, *Music and the Moving Image*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (2019), p. 38.

29- YOUSSEFZADEH, Amenah, “Singing in a theocracy: female musicians in Iran”, in KORPE, Marie (ed.), *Shoot the Singer: Music Censorship Today*, London: Zed Books, 2004, p. 131.

30- For an accessible overview of Iranian music after the 1979 Revolution, see NOOSHIN, Laudan and BROUGHTON, Simon, “Iran: the Art of Ornament”, in BROUGHTON, Simon, ELLINGHAM, Mark and LUSK, Jon (eds), *The Rough Guide to World Music: Africa and Middle East*, London: Penguin, 2006, pp. 519–32.



Delkash.<sup>31</sup> During the reformist Mohammad Khatami's presidency (1997–2005), restrictions on the arts were eased: pop music was legalized but restrictions on female musical performance remained.

Many Middle Eastern art-house films, especially those influenced by neo-realism, tend to make minimal and mainly diegetic use of music to enhance the effect of everyday realism. This tendency was exemplified in the art cinema movement known as New Iranian Cinema.<sup>32</sup> Restrictions on music added another layer to the existing complexities of obtaining permits from the MCI, so filmmakers often tried to avoid it. Laudan Nooshin has elucidated that the cultural attitude to musicians was another factor that created a reluctance to collaborate with them.<sup>33</sup> As this indicates, labour conditions and working practices for musicians are an under-investigated area. Despite, or because of the restrictions, music often carries a powerful and meaningful charge when it is deployed in New Iranian Cinema, Nooshin argues, evoking a scene in *Do Fereshteh* (*Two Angels*, 2003), where an adolescent boy, Ali, secretly practises the *ney* (flute) at night, hunched under a blanket to mute the instrument so that his parents (particularly his religious father) cannot hear: "This single image encapsulates centuries of religious censure that has forced Iranian music into the most private and intimate spaces."<sup>34</sup>

As the censorship and control of music by the state and religious authorities suggests, music has a subversive power and offers a means of resistance to oppressed people. A growing body of scholarship exists on music as a form of cultural resistance in the MENA region. Some of this work draws on Stuart Hall's concept of popular culture as "the arena of consent and resistance".<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, the anthology *Music and the Play of Power: Music, Politics, and Ideology in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia*, edited by Nooshin, takes a Foucauldian approach. It explores the ways in which power permeates music from above and below: "how music becomes a site of social control or, alternatively, a vehicle for agency and empowerment".<sup>36</sup> One area of musical resistance that has attracted attention is Palestinian hip hop: "Hip-hop has become the 'Palestinian Al Jazeera' ... a tool for sharing news of social and

31- SIAMDOUST, Nahid, *Soundtrack of the Revolution: The Politics of Music in Iran*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017, p.31.

32- New Iranian Cinema (known in Iran as *sinema-ye motefavet*, literally "alternative cinema") is generally dated from 1969, the year when Dariush Mehrjui's *The Cow* was released, and continued into the early 2000s.

33- NOOSHIN, Laudan, "Windows onto Other Worlds", *op. cit.*, pp. 38-9. There has since been an improvement in musicians' social status in Iran; music and music-making are not as stigmatized as they have been in the past. Nooshin notes that this coincided with the establishment of music as an academic discipline in Iranian universities.

34- NOOSHIN, Laudan, "Windows onto Other Worlds", *op. cit.*, p. 39.

35- EL HAMAMSY, Walid and SOLIMAN, Mounira, "Introduction: Popular Culture – a Site of Resistance", in EL HAMAMSY, Walid and SOLIMAN, Mounira (eds), *Popular Culture in the Middle East and North Africa: A Postcolonial Outlook*, New York: Routledge, 2012, p. 9.

36- NOOSHIN, Laudan, "Prelude: Power and the Play of Music", *op. cit.*, p. 3.



political realities, as well as a tool for political critique and mobilisation”, Helga Tawil-Souri writes.<sup>37</sup> The documentary *Slingshot Hip Hop* (2008) follows Palestinian rappers and hip hop groups in the Occupied Territories and Israel, among them DAM (from Lyd) and P.R. (from Gaza), and their attempts to make music and perform together in the face of travel restrictions, bans and arrests. As Rowena Santos Aquino states in her analysis, “the film title designates how hip hop, like the slingshot, is one of the few political and material weapons for the Palestinians against the occupation”.<sup>38</sup> In her book *Soundtrack of the Revolution: The Politics of Music in Iran*, Nahid Siamdoust shows how music has functioned as an oppositional space for the duration of the Islamic Republic.<sup>39</sup> Nooshin has explored the “underground” music that developed alongside “the newly legalized ‘mainstream’ pop”, in the form of bands that struggled to obtain permits or sought to operate in margins “by choice”, accessing their audiences through the internet and other unofficial networks.<sup>40</sup> The Iranian underground music scene is depicted in Bahman Ghobadi’s docudrama *No One Knows About Persian Cats* (2009) with its story of two young musicians seeking to leave the country. While this film has received international critical acclaim, within Iran it has been criticized for “its sensationalist portrayal of the Iranian underground popular music scene”, especially its “fetishist exoticization of resistance aimed largely at audiences abroad”, highlighting ethical issues around how the problems facing musicians are framed.<sup>41</sup>

In scholarship, there is a particular focus on musical resistance at times of political upheaval, when popular songs have become a vehicle for collective dissent, voices of past musical icons have reverberated with the revolutionary mood, and musicians have become symbols against political oppression. During the 1979 revolution, the 2009 Green Movement and 2022 protests in Iran and the 2010–2011 Arab uprisings, old songs were revived to connect with earlier struggles and new songs were composed “to fit the spirit of the new movement”.<sup>42</sup> Most writing on this topic, however, is dedicated to music, separate from cinema. For example, Walid El Hamamsy and Mounira Soliman have focused on protestors’ choice of songs by Sheikh Imam and Salah Jaheen in the first phase of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution: Salah Jaheen is regarded as “the bard” of the 1952 revolution with his lyrics sung by Abd al-Halim Hafiz, “the duo coming to represent the ‘voice’ of that revolution”, while the blind Marxist singer Sheikh Imam, together with

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37- TAWIL-SOURI, Helga, “The Necessary Politics of Palestinian Cultural Studies” in SABRY, Tarik (ed.), *Arab Cultural Studies: Mapping the Field*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2011, p. 149.

38- AQUINO, Rowena Santos, “Contested topographies, collaborative testimonies: Remapping the politics of movement, music and the road (movie) in the Middle East”, *Transnational Cinemas*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2012), p. 153.

39- SIAMDOUST, Nahid, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

40- NOOSHIN, Laudan, “‘Tomorrow is Ours’: Re-Imaging Nation, Performing Youth in the New Iranian Pop Music”, in NOOSHIN, Laudan (ed.), *Music and the Play of Power: Music, Politics, and Ideology in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia*, Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009, p. 247.

41- NOOSHIN, Laudan, “Windows onto Other Worlds”, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

42- SIAMDOUST, Nahid, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

his songwriter, the poet Ahmed Fouad Negm, was detained during President Mubarak's regime, representing "the marginalized, dissenting citizen".<sup>43</sup> While music gets the spotlight at times of political unrest, Mohamed Chamekh has called for attention to a longer history of musical resistance that has paved the way for later revolts through his focus on the Tunisian underground before the uprising. Awled Al Manajim's music, for example, expressed Tunisian working-class grievances and contested the Ben Ali regime's narrative of contentment and prosperity, forming a possible inspiration for the 2008 Gafsa Mining Basin revolt, a forerunner to the 2010–11 Tunisian Revolution.<sup>44</sup>

Building on and filling in some gaps in the existing scholarship, this special issue aims for a sustained engagement with the interactions between music and cinema in the MENA region. Firstly, it pays attention to the cinematic representation of musical performance and practices of listening called forth by film narrative. Secondly, it explores how films render music as part of everyday, lived experience, pervading society and culture as "the soundtrack of our lives" during particular eras and building communities of common feeling. On the one hand, music is personal and subjective; on the other, it creates a sense of public experience through mass media, forming affective "imagined communities" across space and time, both within the nation and beyond.<sup>45</sup> Thirdly, music is part of how we fashion our social identities, live, act, dream, aspire and imagine. This special issue explores how music is used as a means of narrating cultural history and identity onscreen. Fourthly, since music can support the status quo as well as expressing dissent, contributors engage with its different political functions: how cinema represents music as a site of hegemony and resistance. Finally, the special issue deals with the practical processes and challenges of creating soundtracks to MENA films for composers and sound designers – practitioners whose below-the-line and often unsung labour shapes not only the soundtrack but also a film's overall storytelling, aesthetic impact and affective appeal.

The special issue begins with Kamyar Salavati's article, "Iranian Music, Silence, and the Representation of the Traditional Masculine Figure of the Pahlavan: A Case Study of *Dash Akol* (1971)". Hitherto, representations of masculinity have not been analyzed in relation to Iranian classical music, neither in music studies

43- EL HAMAMSY, Walid and SOLIMAN, Mounira, "The Aesthetics of Revolution: Popular Creativity and the Egyptian Spring" in EL HAMAMSY, Walid and SOLIMAN, Mounira (eds), *Popular Culture in the Middle East and North Africa: A Postcolonial Outlook*, New York: Routledge, 2012, p. 253. See also VALASSOPOULOS, Anastasia and MOSTAFA, Dalia Said, "Popular protest music and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution", *Popular Music and Society*, Vol. 37, No. 5 (2012), pp. 638–659.

44- See CHAMEKH, Mohamed, "Underground Music in Tunisia: The Case of Awled AL Manajim Under Ben Ali", *Middle East Critique*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (2020), pp. 371–94.

45- FRISCHKOPF, Michael, "Introduction: Music and Media in the Arab World and *Music and Media in the Arab World as Music and Media in the Arab World: A Metadiscourse*", in FRISCHKOPF, Michael (ed.), *Music and Media in the Arab World*, Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 2010, p. 22. Frischkopf is adapting Benedict Anderson's notion of the nation as an "imagined community". See ANDERSON, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1991.

nor film studies. This article breaks new ground by exploring the use of Iranian classical music to depict traditional notions of masculinity in the Iranian director Masoud Kimiai's film *Dash Akol* (1971). Along with *Qeysar* (1969), *Reza Motorcyclist* (1970) and *The Deer* (1974), *Dash Akol* is part of a cycle of films that Kimiai made revolving around themes of chivalry and manhood. An archetype that recurs in these films is the *pahlavan*, a specific embodiment of traditional ideas of Iranian masculinity that combines physical prowess and robust morals. Salavati's article focuses on the sonic features integral to the characterization of the *pahlavan* figure in *Dash Akol*, itself an adaptation of a 1932 short story of the same name by Sadegh Hedayat, Iran's foremost twentieth-century short fiction writer. As Chion says, "Music in film should also be considered in relation to the continuum of speech through intermittence, interruption, or silence".<sup>46</sup> Salavati examines how the use of sound and music creates expressive possibilities for representing masculinity in cinema: firstly, through a study of the gendered representations in the musical score by the composer Esfandiar Monfaredzadeh; and, secondly, through a consideration of silence and non-verbal communication, which play a significant part in the story and characterization along with film music.

Ardavan Mofidi Tehrani's article, "The Politics of Popular Music in Iranian Cinema: A Case Study of Dariush Mehrjui's *Santouri* (2007)", tackles the presence of Western-style popular music in Iranian cinema, a seemingly contradictory element in a strictly state-regulated industry belonging to a country known for its anti-Western rhetoric. Tehrani contextualizes the issues through a historical overview which (among other things) refers to the Western arrangements and instrumentation in film music during Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's reign (1941–79) when Western-style popular music was regarded as a sign of modernity, particularly in *filmfarsi*. After the 1979 revolution, the restrictions imposed on both music and cinema marginalized popular music more than any other musical form, as the Islamic Republic sought to expunge the traces of the Pahlavi era. Tehrani argues that, in the years following the revolution, cinema has played an important role in highlighting the restrictions on popular music as part of its social themes. He explores the use of popular music and its restrictions through a case study of Dariush Mehrjui's *Santouri* (2007), a film that was unprecedented for its time in depicting the (fictional) life of a popular musician. In *Santouri*, the musician's regression into drug addiction and separation from his wife is triggered by his hardships as a professional musician. While few writers have touched on the music in this film,<sup>47</sup> Tehrani analyzes the film from several angles: the film's social themes, which deal with musicians' marginal social status in Iran; the controversy over the soundtrack sung by Mohsen Chavoshi who at

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46- CHION, Michel, *Music in Cinema*, op. cit., p. 247

47- For example, Anne Démy-Geroe categorises *Santouri* in relation to films about drug addiction, rather than music. See DÉMY-GEROE, Anne, *Iranian National Cinema: The Interaction of Policy, Genre, Funding and Reception*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2020. Laudan Nooshin has also briefly discussed this film. See NOOSHIN, Laudan, "Windows onto Other Worlds", op. cit., p. 39.

the time had no official permit to perform; and analysis of the soundtrack itself, which mixes traditional Iranian music with Western instruments. He thus draws out different political, cultural and social aspects of the film which led to its censorship and afterlife on the black market.

In “Songs of Nostalgia: Creative Activism and Exile in Elia Suleiman’s *It Must be Heaven* and Panah Panahi’s *Hit the Road*”, Hania A.M. Nashef reflects on the use of songs as a musical expression of exile, a theme that unites these two ostensibly dissimilar films made by a Palestinian and an Iranian director, respectively. Particularly in Suleiman’s films, with their largely mute protagonist E.S. (played by Suleiman himself), “the soundtrack delivers another form of narration”.<sup>48</sup> Nashef explores the role of songs in expressing characters’ unspoken thoughts and emotions relating to exile and dispossession and how songs add further, virtual dimensions to the visual image. Since songs are a widely shared and accessible artform, they can also act as a link to collective experience, bridging time and space, and evoking places and eras that are no longer reachable. Nashef shows how, in *It Must Be Heaven* (2019) and *Hit the Road* (2021), songs narrate cultural history and identity both for those who have permanently left and those exiled within their country. Music acts as a form of resistance against displacement, as shown by the young people asserting their Arab-Palestinian identity while dancing ecstatically in a Haifa bar to “Arabyon Ana” (“I am an Arab”) by Lebanese singer Yuri Mrakadi in *It Must Be Heaven*. Meanwhile, the road movie *Hit the Road* taps into the Iranian tradition of listening to old songs on car journeys, endowing pre-revolutionary hits with qualities of resistance as well as nostalgia. Using close textual analysis, Nashef unpacks the choices of songs included in the films, the meanings encoded in the lyrics, and the interactions of the songs with the scenes, characters and visuals. In both films, she argues, the songs offer “a small window of freedom” under oppressive regimes.

The final three articles in the special issue are transcripts of interviews with practitioners, highlighting the importance of hearing their perspectives on musical cultures and soundtrack practices. In “Opening a Space for the Audience: A Dialogue with Kamran Rastegar about Composing MENA Cinema Soundtracks”, I talk to Kamran Rastegar who, as well as being a comparative literature professor, is a musician and composer of experimental electronic and instrumental music inspired by Middle Eastern cultures. Rastegar recounts his Iranian-American background, musical influences and training, his roles as composer, music supervisor and musician, and his process of composing soundtracks for independent MENA cinema, particularly his collaboration with the Palestinian director Annemarie Jacir. He elucidates his practices of orchestrating Western and Middle Eastern instruments (in small ensembles) and digitally reworking them, along with location sounds, to render checkpoints,

48- See NASHEF, Hania A.M., “Songs of Nostalgia: Creative Activism and Exile in Elia Suleiman’s *It Must be Heaven* and Panah Panahi’s *Hit the Road*” in this issue.

the Nakba and other aspects of Palestinian experience. Together, Rastegar and I reflect on film-critical approaches to music and Jacir's films *Like Twenty Impossibles* (2003), *Salt of this Sea* (2008) and *When I Saw You* (2012), adding detailed analysis of sound-image relations and musical choices to the body of scholarship on her work.

“Ways of Listening: An Interview with Sound Designer Rana Eid” focuses on the practice of Rana Eid, who has worked as a sound designer or sound editor on numerous films from the MENA region and internationally and has released her own feature documentary, *Panoptic* (2017). In this article, I talk to her about her distinctive approach to sound design and the different challenges of working on Lebanese, Arab and international films. The interview traces Eid's personal and professional journey into sound, which began during her childhood in the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) and, following her training, led to her co-founding DB Studios, a facility for sound and music post-production in Beirut. Eid discusses the different roles in audio post-production, her preferred working practices and storytelling through sound, elaborating her conception of sound design as providing the image with a specific identity, one that has ethical and political ramifications. Frequently, music and sound are used to stereotype the Middle East, especially in Hollywood cinema. Eid underscores the importance of attentive listening to Middle Eastern cities, to our environments more generally and to each other. In classical film conventions, Chion writes, the soundtrack is “ordered hierarchically” with ambient sounds and sound effects functioning on the lower rungs and frequently integrated with the music, “which locks them into their *proper* place in the score”.<sup>49</sup> In film post-production nowadays, music and sound are professionally separated, a specialization that Eid argues is necessary. However, music and sound can perform similar functions, and the musicality of Eid's own sound design has been noted by her peers in the sound community. In this article, she highlights her inspiration by *musique concrète* (a technique of composing music using recordings of real-world sounds, pioneered by French composer Pierre Schaeffer) which led her to practise sound design as a form of musical composition. Finally, Eid and I discuss the ethics and aesthetics of sound design in documentary and to what extent it differs from fiction.

As a domain, music does not only consist of sound but also has “non-sounded dimensions” that include “the physical and gestural” in musical and dance performance, and the “discursive formations within which music is embedded and which saturate the spaces around it, tying it to the social fabric”.<sup>50</sup> These are the dimensions into which this special issue's third practitioner-based interview takes us, with its focus on a documentary about punk subculture in Morocco, *Dima Punk (Once a Punk, 2019)*. In “*Dima Punk – a Conversation about Music*

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49- CHION, Michel, *Film, a Sound Art*, translated by GORBMAN, Claudia, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, p. 5.

50- NOOSHIN, Laudan, “Prelude: Power and the Play of Music”, *op. cit.*, p. 6.



Documentary, Subcultures and Street Language in Morocco”, the director, Dominique Caubet, a sociolinguist specialising in Moroccan Arabic, talks to Stefan Pethke, programme director of Germany’s oldest music film festival, UNERHÖRT!, based in Hamburg. In Morocco, an underground music scene dating from the mid-1990s paved the way for a cultural movement called *Nayda* (“Rising”) in 2005–2007, an era of relative freedom of expression. Along with other music festivals around the country, the Casablanca-based festival *Le Boulevard des Jeunes Musiciens (L’Boulevard)* provided a platform for this alternative culture. Although it faced a backlash from Islamists and did not fulfil its promised hopes, *Nayda* prompted a re-thinking of Moroccan identity and gave a new status to Darija (the Arabic dialect spoken in Morocco), inspiring Caubet to study Darija’s role in the cultural milieu of the *L’Boulevard* Festival, particularly for its punk groups and rappers. In 2007, she initiated a documentary, *Casanayda!* (“It’s rocking in Casa!”), about the movement, directed by Farida Belyazid and Abderrahim Mettour and written by Caubet herself. *Dima Punk*, her first film as a director, focuses on *Nayda*’s aftermath: the predicament of urban youths who found themselves marginalized and outcast by the system for their different musical tastes and fashion. Its protagonist, Stof, a young punk from Casablanca, escorts us through his world, moshing at punk concerts, being reunited with old friends, and struggling through unemployment and a prison sentence. In 2020, *Dima Punk* was screened at UNERHÖRT!, which seeks to incorporate films from South America, Africa, and Asia, particularly the MENAP region, into its programming in order, as its curator Stefan Pethke says, “to understand better what is happening on this planet through the prism of diverse musical styles, and through images of these musics being performed”.<sup>51</sup> Pethke’s interview with Caubet is based on their Q&A during the festival which, like many other events, took place online that year due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It explores music as a site of hegemony and resistance and as a means of fashioning identity through its focus on punk in Casablanca, Moroccan street language, and the adaptation of Western musical subcultures in the Global South.

As conceived and put together, this special issue seeks to offer a sustained engagement with ways of understanding and listening to music in MENA film: how cinema renders music’s ability to permeate everyday life and generate common feeling, how it uses music to narrate cultural history and identity and how it represents music as a site of both hegemony and resistance. Furthermore, the practice-based interviews aim to elucidate the practical processes and challenges of creating soundtracks for MENA films. As guest editor, it is my hope that the articles in this special issue will contribute to a new and enhanced understanding of the interactions between film and music in cinema of the MENA region and beyond, productively laying the ground for more research in this relatively under-studied area.

51- See PETHKE, Stefan and CAUBET, Dominique, “*Dima Punk – a Conversation about Music Documentary, Subcultures and Street Language in Morocco*” in this issue.

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As this journal issue was in production, we learned that Dariush Mehrjui, one of Iran's leading filmmakers whose film *Santouri* is the subject of one of the articles, was tragically murdered along with his wife and screenwriting partner Vahideh Mohammadifar. This special issue is dedicated to them and others who have lost their lives during these last turbulent weeks in the region.

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**ملخص** | توضح هذه المقدمة للعدد الخاص، «الموسيقى التصويرية لحياتنا: صناعة الموسيقى والموسيقيون في سينما الشرق الأوسط وشمال أفريقيا»، بعض أسباب عدم الاهتمام التفصيلي بالموسيقى في الأبحاث المتعلقة بالأفلام من المنطقة. وهو يسلط الضوء على التدخل الذي يقدمه هذا العدد الخاص، حيث يقدم مراجعة موجزة للمنح الدراسية الحالية التي يبني عليها ويسعى إلى سد الثغرات. وأخيرا، يعرض المقالات التي تشكل متن العدد الخاص.

**كلمات مفتاحية** | موسيقى الأفلام، الموسيقيون، الموسيقى التصويرية، سينما الشرق الأوسط، السينما العربية، السينما الإيرانية، منطقة الشرق الأوسط وشمال أفريقيا

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