

# Farewell to the Quarter-Man « The Civil Arab

*Ahmad Damen*

If you have been exposed to the songs of Fayrouz and the music of Ziad Rahbani of Lebanon, Qasabji of Egypt or Khammash of Iraq then you definitely have been introduced to the “quarters”.

The Arabic music is characterized by several factors and is unique in its own way. It includes the use of sounds called “quarters”, which lie between the black and white keys on a regular piano. Arabic music is defined by its rich melodic tunes that have been a central part of the Arabic culture for centuries, way before the famous singer Ziryab of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. This field of study formed its own version of music theory and was the attention of many great scholars like Al Farabi in the 9<sup>th</sup> century with his “The Great Book of Music” (*Kitab Al Musiqat Al Kabir*).

The use of quarters was also common in certain parts of Europe. Sometime along the way, the regulation of Western music theory (by composers like Johann Sebastian Bach) abandoned the quarter-tones. The desire for experimenting with new sounds in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries tempted Western composers like Reiner and Ives to reuse quarters in their works.

I remember one day visiting the museum of music history in Prague and coming across a piano that has been designed especially to include Quarters. The piano was designed by a Czech company in 1924. Many clarinets, trumpets and horns were also designed accordingly. I felt really proud of my heritage and the richness of my musical identity and its vast variety of sounds.

What we see today is the emergence of young Arab bands of artists who are trying to produce quality work of music and lyrics in order to create a new identity for Arabic music. This is a good alternative to mainstream TV songs which are designed for “show” and entertainment purposes rather than an artistic and serious consideration of the musical heritage.

Most of these bands, however, are not using the musical heritage that has been prospering and developing for thousands of centuries in the region. Rather, they are simply creating Western tunes and melodies to accompany the Arabic lyrics. Many of these songs aim at our love to the land, freedom and resisting occupation and prejudice. The melodies and chords they embrace are in no way even close to the Arabic music, and in my opinion, are not doing well in accommodating the Arabic language and eastern instruments in their productions. They only want to ride the successful wave of Western evolution of music to the atonal scales, electronic music and beyond.

Now before jumping to conclusions and accusing me of being old-fashioned and resistant to positive changes in tastes, hear me out!

I’m NOT totally against this new trend of musical development. I see no harm in any band wanting to do metal, pop, rock or any other genre of music. What I fear is that

we are trying to make failed copies of Metallica, the Eagles and Pink Floyd. We do not use our musical heritage to push these genres to new dimensions, and we are not even creating our own new genres.

When the families I know come to me for advice about their children's musical education, they are interested in teaching them guitars and pianos. They do not approach music for cultural education or to put their children on the road of spirituality and inner peace. They want to make more copies of Western success! They abandon themselves in search of a false belief... and do you know what these instruments lack?

RIGHT!

They lack the fundamental quarters and the ability to use the full scales of Arabic music which children would require to form their future musical identity.

This resulted in an overwhelming majority of alternative Arab bands that are abandoning the "Quarter-Man" with all he has to offer and jumping to the "Middle-Man" directly instead. I know Arabic music is not only about quarters, but even the melody and music form they are using are totally Western.

This is not about whether I like this trend or not, but it is about preserving our music and culture. There are few bands who have tried to remain faithful to that heritage, and the ones who succeed mainly imitate and reproduce the old Arabic classics. The bands who are trying to reach a genuine Arabic musical identity that responds to the tastes and developments of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are few and dwindling.

I will end this by a story I heard about the renowned Iraqi oudist (lutist) Munir Bashir. When young Munir moved to Europe in the 1960s and offered to perform his music in a radio station, he used his oud and compositions to play rock music. The producers were upset by the result. They told him that if they wanted him to do rock, any guy on the street there would beat him in that genre. They wanted to hear what he REALLY had to offer, and this is how Bashir pushed Iraqi Music into a new realm and introduced it to the world.

If Bashir went on to try to be a rock star, I don't think we would have heard about him or enjoyed his music today!

The "Quarter Man" is currently in a coma. He's immortal and I doubt he'll ever cease to exist. But if we were to abandon him, or use him only to repeat old tunes from the past, then I don't see any future legacy for these Arab bands. This is not the way to revive our sense of identity and deliver quality of music and lyrics. Their music will most probably leave little legacy and far more less of a contribution to world music.

\* Ahmad Damen is a musician, soundtrack composer and an award-winning film director from Ramallah, Palestine.