The National Arab Orchestra's cultural diplomacy at home and abroad

Presented at the University of Toledo, March 25, 2021

Christopher Witulski, Bowling Green State University

Since 2010, the National Arab Orchestra, based in Detroit, Michigan has navigated a complex set of representational strategies to play a nuanced and shifting role as a part of the Arab American community. The organization regularly works across different identities to show others a sample of Arab culture as it exists in the United States. At the same time, however, it innovates within the traditions that it represents. In doing so, its leaders and musicians show Arab America a variety of facets from within their own potential identities. I use this word, "identities," in its plural because of the networked way in which the National Arab Orchestra defines, straddles, and expands the community identifications of its listeners. The plural here also recognizes the nature of the Orchestra's audience. Even if it were solely made up of Arab American community members, they would draw from a wide breadth of experiences to understand and experience the ensemble's music in very different ways.

This project explores these identifications from the perspective of the Orchestra itself. Drawing primarily on interviews, it centers the "diplomatic" projects that are core to the organization's mission, outreach, and creative production. These efforts operate locally, across the United States, and globally as demonstrated by a handful of examples from the past few years. Taken together, they show how cultural diplomacy operates across boundaries and within what might otherwise appear to be cohesive groups of participants and listeners. In all cases, however, the National Arab Orchestra follows a common path taken by arts organizations: it engages audiences to broaden a sense of self though the reconsideration of others. By emphasizing a sense of unity and connection, they open space for new collaborative opportunities. This mirrors goals of international relations, though it widens the idea of "cultural diplomacy" in useful ways.

The project and my place in it

I'd like to situate this project and my role within it before moving on. First, I thank Gaby and Samir for their generous invitation to share some of my work here today. I see opportunities like this as spaces for exploring things that we, as a community and as a community of scholars, are working on. My goal is not to come with a finished product, but to invite a discussion and potential collaboration. So please forgive the very intentional "unfinished" nature of some of this work. Within scholarship, we rarely answer questions, we only struggle to ask better ones.

My past research has focused on a sacred healing ritual ceremony in Morocco, one whose music has become popular and influential despite the marginalized history and contemporary social position of its practitioners. Much of my work has been centered on discussions of race, power, and how people negotiate their own values and priorities as they relate to taste, popular culture, and faith. This paper is part of a larger effort to better understand the Arab American community that surrounds my new home in northwest Ohio. It's distinctly different from my research in Morocco. For one, most of the people I've collaborated with not only speak English well, they have answered many of these questions before, over and over again. This is a community that can speak for itself, even if there are not as many people listening as there should be. As I move forward with this, I am thinking of it

as a broad collaboration and I see my role as that of a facilitator, as a service that hopefully gets people's voices into spaces where they are currently unheard.

This is important because I come to a presentation like this in the spirit of collaboration and with an open invitation. I hope that these thoughts—both mine and those of the people who generously shared their time, expertise, and experience with me—I hope that they inspire discussion, questions, new ideas or directions, and maybe an answer or two.

Cultural diplomacy and difference

This specific paper came out of a conference on music and cultural diplomacy in the Middle East organized by Dr. Maria M. Rijo Lopes da Cunha and Prof. Søren Møller Sørensen in Copenhagen. Cultural diplomacy seemed, at first, to be an awkward fit for my thinking on this topic, but its power as a lens for understanding the goals that people bring to their music—and the difficulties that they face—became clear.

Some definitions of cultural diplomacy focus on boundaries that are quite literally grounded in place. In this study, I aim to explore how cultural diplomacy can be a helpful metaphor for understanding similar efforts in other contexts.[1] Four recent projects from the National Arab Orchestra demonstrate how an arts organization carries out a variety of types of diplomacy among and between different groups of people. Each project highlights the relationship between those who carry out the effort and whom they represent on one hand and the people who are "across" some type of boundary, on the other. There is an insider/outsider flavor to this that is problematic in many ways, but cultural diplomacy, by definition, aims to cross boundaries and, in some cases, work toward their erasure. I return to this erasure in a moment.

The types of diplomacy I describe here can be grouped geographically. The Orchestra recently traveled to Saudi Arabia to perform. They crossed national boundaries and, as such, represented both the Arab diaspora and the United States to citizens of another country. Within the United States, however, the group has growing relationships in Houston, San Antonio, Toledo, and other cities. When performing within the country, the Orchestra represents a number of communities to a number of different other communities within their audiences. For example, a "MidEast x MidWest" collaboration with the Toledo Symphony Orchestra in Ohio (the American midwest) shows non-Arabs a collaboration between Western and Arab musical traditions. The Orchestra reaches across racial lines to broaden a sense of inclusion for non-Arab Americans. Thirdly, the ensemble regularly performs at home, in Detroit and Dearborn, to members of the Arab American community itself. Through different projects aimed at different audiences within that group, the Orchestra represents diverse Arab American identities across lines of age, class, economic status, and so on that highlight the role of memory and innovation to the community itself. In each of these cases, the NAO represents targeted and idealized values to specific audiences. At the same time, the proximity of the group to these various communities and the differing expectations of participants themselves present real challenges. Following a discussion of diplomacy as a metaphor for these types of engagement, this paper reflects on each of these projects in turn.

If we accept that two common purposes of cultural diplomacy are reaching others to create new collaborative opportunities and facilitating a broadened sense of understanding between people, we are left with some powerful corollary aims that arts organizations often find themselves pursuing. Crossing a boundary, for example, can also be imagined as erasing a boundary, though some actors within the world of international relations have reasons to enforce the very boundaries that they cross. I take a more general approach here. While it does run counter to many understandings of diplomacy itself, I would like to

[1] Discussions of public diplomacy, and cultural diplomacy by extension, regularly appear within international studies, leading to definitions that emphasize nation-states, such as "the process and practice by which nation-states and other international actors engage global publics to serve their interests" (Snow 2020). In this same essay, however, Nancy Snow goes on to critique the failures of a one-way diplomacy in majority-Muslim countries, highlighting the flexibility of a nation-state-centric understanding of public diplomacy in the face of more complex identities.

start with a positionality within diplomacy that suits arts organizations particularly well: that of *listening*. Both goals mentioned above (fostering collaboration and understanding) foreground listening, albeit in different ways. To return to more formalized structures, public diplomacy, the umbrella that contains cultural diplomacy work, can be defined as a one-way "deployment" of resources (Mark 2010) or as a form of self representation as propaganda (Corse 2014). Milton Cummings maintains a focus on international relations, but describes cultural diplomacy in terms that allow for an "exchange of ideas" and art "in order to foster mutual understanding" (Cummings 2009). Each of these approaches, from the militaristic to the conversational, requires listening, though the purpose of that listening might change, especially when it comes in the form of surveillance and data collection (Cull 2019).

In all cases, these efforts attempt to instigate or catalyze change in a community's understanding of itself by addressing individuals as individuals. Some projects are certainly more impactful or effective than others, of course, and there can be a wide disagreement over appropriate techniques, especially in terms of propaganda. Cultural diplomacy, however, generally attempts to create mutual understanding—however ill-defined that might be—by going further than crossing boundaries: when someone's sense of self identity expands to include a connection with another person, certain boundaries disappear even while others persist. In this way, I argue that these types of projects aim to erase boundaries that exist within an expanded self-identity. As a network of relationships expands, nuances of a self-identity are a part of those connective branches. This broader reading of cultural diplomacy aligns with international relations-centric definitions because at their core, these efforts work to broaden the circles of association between (and within) groups. In doing so, they aim to enable more cohesive identities and practical opportunities for collaboration.[2]

In these projects, the NAO pushes at the edges of participants' sense of self, hoping to nudge them toward greater inclusivity. It is, of course, an open question as to whether these kinds of arts projects do their job. Past ethnomusicological research has shown the potential for peace- and unity-building musical events to be superficial or representative of a specific type of neoliberalism that can resist change itself (Kapchan 2008; Shannon 2011, 2015). Pursuing cultural diplomacy while simultaneously cultivating their own sustainability is one of the central struggles that these types of arts organizations regularly face. Another, of course, is balancing the change that they may facilitate against "small-c" conservative pressures within organizations and their audiences, especially when that change is slow, opaque, or dispersed.

To step back more broadly, I'd like to bring cultural diplomacy into conversation with the imagination of and performance of difference. In Ruth A. Solie's introduction to *Musicology and Difference*, she draws on Martha Minow (1990) to question "when different treatment stigmatizes, and when similar treatment stigmatizes by disregarding difference" (Solie 1993, 2). In the present case, the sheer number of potential layers of identity—and, therefore, boundaries of difference between identities—highlights the importance of different and similar treatments. For some projects described below, the National Arab Orchestra utilizes multiplicities of meaning to address various identities within individual audiences members simultaneously. They recognize and operationalize a nuanced sense of difference and identity to achieve a range of goals.

Solie continues with a discussion of essentialism, drawing on Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak, that problematizes both essentialism itself and reactions against it.[3] Ignoring difference does not solve the problems that difference and essentialism present: as she notes to the contrary in reference to the American "melting pot" ideal:

[2]It is worth reiterating, however, that the techniques used and end goals of different cultural diplomacy projects can range widely. Where some aim to foster peace, others might be more aligned with global corporate interests within a larger neoliberal system. Even these two visions of cultural diplomacy, however, are difficult to untangle (Shannon 2011).

[3]See also, the "genealogies of musical difference" presented by Olivia Bloechl and Melanie Lowe (Bloechl and Lowe 2015) and the exchange between Kofi Agawu and Veit Erlmann on the history and implications of difference and sameness in musicological representation (Agawu 2003; Erlmann 2004)

> White Anglo Protestants in the United States were hardly expected to 'melt' into something resembling Eastern European or Asian immigrants; rather the reverse. By the same token, calls for 'unity' are often decodable as demands for acquiescence.

To borrow a quote from Barbara Johnson used by Ruth Solie, "The starting point is often a binary difference that is subsequently shown to be an illusion created by the workings of differences much harder to pin down. The differences *between* entities ... are shown to be based on a repression of differences *within* entities" (Johnson 1992, x, quoted in @solieIntroductionDifference1993, p. 17). The examples in this essay show difference as part of a fluid conception of identity and self-identity. An arts organization operates as a representative (and representation) of a sliding scale of communities. At different points, it is America, it is Arab America, it is a group of musicians coming together over a love of a style of music and its history, and so on. The organization understands its audiences in similarly fluid ways: they might be international, American, Arab American, white, old and wealthy white Americans, old and wealthy Arab Americans, young Middle Easterners, or some other other combination of potential identities. The diplomacy here, then, is the strategy: how does a group representing so many different identities do so toward so many different other identities? How does an organization reach across and sit within within these boundaries of essentialized sameness and difference to create opportunities for collaboration and a broadened sense of self that is more inclusive of others, whether as Arab American, American, or human?

The National Arab Orchestra

The National Arab Orchestra is a young organization that has grown quickly. It began in 2009 as a university group founded by Michael Ibrahim during his time as a student at the University of Michigan. Just last year (2019), it celebrated its 10th anniversary. In 2010, Ibrahim created a non-profit organization under the name of the Michigan Arab Orchestra and expanded the group. At the same time, he developed a smaller *takht* ensemble, a chamber group based on the classical Arab tradition, to broaden the types of performances that the organization could provide. By 2012 and 2013, it had moved into its new home in Detroit's Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts and found major financial support through a grant from the Knight Foundation.[4]

According to the National Arab Orchestra's stated mission, it is

> dedicated to preserving and integrating Arab culture by creating memorable musical experiences through education and performance with emphasis on the musical traditions of the Arab World (National Arab Orchestra 2018).

The organizational overview highlights the scope of its work and centers the importance of some of the projects I describe below in a statement about collaboration (which is undoubtedly invoking fundraising efforts, as well): "With the support of our generous partners, the NAO is performing across the country helping youth and communities build a brighter future."

I asked Michael Ibrahim, the founder and musical director, about this focus on "integrating Arab culture" and what it meant. His initial response focused on the place of the Arab American community in America. "We want to break the cycle of narrative where Arabs are on the defense." Referencing the stereotypes about Arabs and Arab Americans in the news, he emphasized this need to actively show who "we" are, as a community.[5]

> We've always got our dukes up, but we're just waiting for somebody to accuse us of something and then we say "No, no no!" instead of actively showing who we are. It's

[4] I have heard this story described by members during informal conversations, but it is also outlined in more detail on the organization's website (National Arab Orchestra 2018).

[5] For more on media representations and stereotypes as they apply to Arab and Arab American communities, and creative responses using the same forms of popular culture, see Armbrust (2000); Garofalo (2007); Hammond (2007); van Nieuwkerk and LeVine (2015).

> sort of like we're not practicing our own sense of hospitality that we extend to each other on a personal level. [...] Through that non-threatening, enjoyable medium [of music], you shift the reality and the focus from being on the defensive and rather than just saying, "This isn't who we are," you start to say, "This is who we are." (p. c. October 23, 2020)

This unifying experience and the need to change the narrative extends into the group's work. As described later, however, it is not the only understanding of the Arab American community that inspires the NAO's activities. The NAO itself represents a diverse coalition of partners, from musicians to board members, who value the organization's educational and artistic efforts. The NAO's description of itself includes the following, highlighting a diversity of repertoire, for example:

> The NAO is dedicated to preserving and performing the classical and contemporary traditions of Arab music, and provides opportunities that will bridge social and cultural barriers through music.

These "social and cultural barriers" cut many ways. In his answer to my earlier question, Ibrahim focused on the line between Arab Americans (and Arabs more broadly) and non-Arabs. The NAO includes musicians from across the country and from diverse racial backgrounds or musical experiences and foregrounds collaborations with schools and symphony orchestras. In doing so, it demonstrates a multi-faceted conception of community that traverses a host of boundaries in addition to that singular and somewhat obvious one.

International diplomacy

One of the most significant recent projects undertaken by the NAO was a concert in Saudi Arabia in November, 2019. Because it crosses national boundaries, this is the clearest representation of cultural diplomacy, as it is understood from the perspective of international relations. As is to be expected, some of the most significant challenges were related to logistics. Furthermore, the programming choices themseives show the types of messaging and negotiation that come out of diplomatic opportunities like this. Michael Ibrahim described his desire to create a program on the theme of "Arab Women in Music." "They loved the idea, but they didn't want to outwardly promote that," he told me. "Instead, they just narrowed it down to the music works by Asmahan and Umm Kulthum, two great female artists in their world." But his influence came through, despite this negotiation.

> However, they did use the rhetoric we gave them for the "Arab Women in Music" program, they did use that in their program book. So when the audience came and read, they were like, "Oh, this is highlighting these Arab women, specifically."

He went on to describe the concert as a substantial success. Both nights sold out. People were singing and clapping, taking pictures with the orchestra, and sharing content on social media. He told me that they are still asking about when the group can return.

> So it was successful [...] Seeing an American institution represent Arab culture in the Middle East, it was a source of pride for the community. For the Arab American community and for Arabs in the Middle East. [...] It's a source of pride for them to see the culture being preserved so well and seeing an American institution really be a steward of that faction of Arab culture.

Building bridges at home

Like many arts organizations, the National Arab Orchestra carries out work in the community that goes beyond its major public performances. This includes collaborations with other arts organizations in Detroit and elsewhere, the development of local "chapter" organizations in other cities, educational activities in school districts, and the training of young musicians who are interested in pursuing Arab music. The NAO regularly fuses these projects into its performances by featuring young artists and choirs from area schools

to build longer-term relationships. As a whole, these fall under the umbrella of "Building Bridges," a title that demonstrates the alignment of these efforts with a more localized conception of cultural diplomacy.

Michael Ibrahim describes this as training the audience and building a community to support the arts:

> Remember that this immigrant community, compared to others, is relatively young.[6] Whenever a community wants to get established, their focus is on capital gains, influence, wealth. You know, they really want to establish themselves. So maybe the arts aren't a priority because of that. Maybe they aren't a priority because music is looked down upon or has taken a downturn for some reason. I don't know, I can't really speak to that. But what I do know is that there is a lack of institutional support in general across the board for the arts.

While this may sound harsh or dismissive, I believe that he is addressing common opinions and those involved in other arts organizations may find these words familiar. The talk of a "downturn" in music, for one, references a generational change in aesthetics related to popular culture. The NAO has tried, with varying degrees of success, to push back against this attitude. It could and should do more, according to Reginald Tiessen, who was, until recently, the Assistant Program Director. In part because progressive collaborations are difficult to sell to the group's audiences, he criticizes a focus on well-known mid-century Arab repertoire, even going so far as to call the programming choices "nursery rhymes" (Reginald Tiessen, p. c. November 13, 2020). Reflecting on a concert that I was a part of in 2019, the audience was engaged and responded well to programming that included Egyptian "Golden Age" repertoire, a new composition by Ibrahim, and more recent popular music from the Gulf region. It was broad repertoire, but nothing pushed the envelope of audience expectations like the collaboration with Tunisian rapper Medusa Tn, which I'll come back to later. As Musical Director, Michael Ibrahim is clearly attempting to stretch his audience's tastes with newer projects, but he must remain cognizant of the audience's demands.

Beyond speaking to the Arab American community, who make up much of the audience in Detroit performances, and their expectations, the orchestra must directly confront the lack of institutional support. This requires building these bridges between organizations and with an ever-wider swath of the population. Locally, the NAO addresses this through the public schools. Ibrahim frequently works in collaboration with local districts to teach Arab music and culture. Going beyond presentations and workshops, he has been able to incorporate entire choral programs into NAO concerts. Not only does this bring students into closer proximity with their Arab American neighbors in Detroit, building an understanding of an unfamiliar culture, it also brings students' parents, friends, and relatives to a professional concert. Notably, NAO concerts follow in the Arab tradition of interactivity where audience members clap, dance, sing, and otherwise respond to what they hear on stage, sometimes loudly.[7] These concerts are joyous and welcoming events.

These educational outreach programs are not just about building bridges to non-Arab members of the community. As Ibrahim explains:

> [We're] getting kids to sing together, getting Arab American kids to sing about the culture. They learn about the culture, then they actually physically experience it as if they're living in the Middle East, singing with a professional orchestra in Arabic, you know? That's essentially what we do. That's the tool we use in order to promote these ideals.

[6] For more on the history of Arab immigrant populations in Detroit, Toledo, and the United States more broadly, see Abu-Absi (2010); Awada (2009); Rasmussen (1991); Rasmussen (2016). See also Hemmasi (2020); Malek (2015) for details about the Iranian American population, especially as it exists in Los Angeles.

[7] Much of the National Arab Orchestra's repertoire draws on the so-called "Golden Age" of Arab music from the mid-20th century Egyptian scene. This engaged listening practice and the music that animates it both fall under the term *tarab* (see Danielson 1997; Racy 2003).

Collaboration

The group is also developing "chapters" in other areas, some of which have substantial Arab and Arab American populations. Most notably now are the programs developing in San Antonio and Houston. In each of these cases, Michael Ibrahim works with local school districts to carry out similar outreach programming. The smaller *takht* ensemble, a select group of musicians performing works from the classical tradition, also travel to these locations for concerts and other events, with the goal of building a larger and more sustainable community in each city, mirroring the work that the orchestra has been doing in Detroit. These efforts have been successful and, had it not been cancelled by the COVID-19 pandemic, they had reached a point where the entire orchestra itself was to visit Houston for a performance in the fall of 2020. In this way, work that Michael Ibrahim describes above—using music, teaching, and performance to promote ideals about collaboration with and among the Arab American community—is truly a national project as well as an international one.

One of those collaborations was with the Toledo Symphony Orchestra, based in Toledo, Ohio. Sara Jobin, who was Resident Conductor at the Toledo Symphony at the time and who is now Principal Conductor at the Center for Contemporary Opera, described the event as transformative. Members of Toledo's Arab American community who had seen the NAO perform in Michigan proposed the project. "Toledo has always welcomed its immigrants and the Arab American community has a long history in Toledo," Michael Ibrahim told the Toledo City Paper before the event (Koros 2016).[8] Jobin emphasized the impact that the concert had on its audience given its timing in November 2016.

> So what was amazing about the concert date is that it was scheduled for the weekend after the 2016 election and that was not by design. [. . .] It was put on the calendar before anyone realized the rhetoric that would be used leading up to the election [. . .]. [With the election, there were] all kinds of people feeling all of the sudden that they were not welcome in this country, which is not true, and it became this wonderful, like, everybody came to the concert because people just needed to come together and celebrate Arab culture and Arab music. People just needed to celebrate. [. . .] [P]eople came out for this concert because it meant something to them.

The Toledo Symphony Orchestra and the National Arab Orchestra split the program before joining together for a performance of Kareem Roustom's "Hewar," a piece commissioned by the NAO. The TSO's repertoire included a movement of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*, but they left the rest of their choices of music to a guest soloist, Lubana al-Quntar, a Syrian refugee and opera singer. Jobin recalled learning of her through the Refugee Orchestra Project in New York directed by Lidiya Yankovskaya.[9]

> So [Lidiya Yankovskaya] started this orchestra in New York. Lubana al-Quntar was the singer, soloist, and so I got her information and we invited her early on and some of the repertoire came really from her, collaborating with her. What does she want to sing? [. . .] It was a standard Puccini aria about coming to America and not finding what one expected. [. . .]

The piece was Puccini's "Sola, perduta, abbandonata" (Alone, lost, abandoned) from *Manon Lescaut*. It begins with the following lines:

> Alone, lost, abandoned.
> in this desolate plain!
> Ah, the horror of it! Around me the day darkens.
> Alas I am alone!

Later, the aria continues:

> Ah! I do not want to die,
> no, I do not want to die.

[8] For another example of media coverage on this event, see Handel (2017).

[9] For more on the Refugee Orchestra Project, see https://lidiyayankovskaya.com/rop.

So all is over.
I thought this would be a land of peace.[10]

During the concert, Al-Quntar described her recent experiences as a refugee from Syria. The musical fusion combined with the presence and narratives of the "building bridges" project did have the power to change perspectives. Not only was it meaningful to the Arab American audiences who set in motion the event itself, it impacted non-Arabs as well. Jobin remembered one audience member in particular who shared a dramatic shift after the concert.

> There was one person in the audience who shared something with me about it later. I can't help but get into the political situation at the time. This particular person [...] was an ardent Republican who was listening to the presidential rhetoric leading up to the election and really had only heard negative things about Syria and people from Syria, and really whether you should care about them. This particular person was so moved by the singer that she told me that it changed her, it completely changed her perspective. She was so emotionally moved. Because Lubana talked about the fact that she had fled her country because she had to and because, I mean there were bombs everywhere, it was war. She had to run for her life. She couldn't go back, but she never intended to stay in America, she wanted to go back to her country. And she talked, Lubana, in the introduction to one of her songs, she talked about how when she came to America and had to leave her country, she literally lost her voice. She's an opera singer, but she couldn't sing and she was so disheartened. And then the only way that she could sing again was to bring awareness about her country to other people. In Syria, at that point, things were awful [because of the civil war ...] So she could find her voice as a way to sing for her country. It makes me cry now when I say it. I mean, it made people cry. It had a transformational effect on at least one audience member and probably more.

A window and a mirror

The "Building Bridges" programming described above shows an effort to reach beyond the Arab American community to local students or Toledo Symphony audiences, they provide a window, a way to see, hear, and experience something new and different. They have the intentional side effect of addressing Arab Americans directly, acting as a mirror to reflect a potential ideal of community, of Arabness, and of Arab Americanness. Just as the orchestra works to broaden an American self-identity to include Arab America and other immigrant populations in the face of racism, political rhetoric, and other forces of division, these projects carry the potential to ignite new possibilities for the Arab American community itself.

So far, the projects discussed show an effort to transmit a cultural history that relates to Arab music's classical or "Golden Age" tradition. These emphasize certain types of pride, identities, and histories to establish a connection to the Middle East. The orchestra presents an interactive listening experience that is more similar to Arab tradition than audiences would see in a symphony concert.[11] But teaching young Arab Americans about a Middle East that they may have never visited is not the only goal here. In programming contemporary popular music and through new composition and collaboration with popular artists from America and abroad, the orchestra also works to expand the self-identity of those who may disregard newer musical styles and tastes. It aims to reflect a changing Middle East and a changing Arab America. In this way, some of the most difficult bridges to cross can be those that are over generational, social, or class-based boundaries.

In the fall of 2018, I was tangentially involved in a project that brought Medusa Tn, a hip hop artist from

[10] Translation from *Classical Music and Musicians* (2018).

[11] This, itself, is an important part of audience development and ignoring it leads to a different experience entirely, or even feelings of confusion or failure on the part of musicians (Shannon 2003).

Table 1: Arab American populations (2010 Census)

State	Arab pop.	Rank	% of pop.
US Average	*1,646,371*		*0.533*
California	269,917	1	0.616
New York	160,848	2	0.830
Michigan	153,713	3	1.555
Florida	114,781	4	0.610
Texas	102,367	5	0.407

> the "Intersection" project is very, very powerful. And when they talked to me about it and asked if I was interested or not, I said "This is a magnificent suggestion. I mean, we are not able to perform all the time with musicians and with an orchestra and with the National Arab Orchestra of America! So this was a big, big moment and chance for me, yeah. (Medusa Tn, p. c., November 13, 2020)

The reception of the piece speaks to the difficulties presented by both the institutional structures of arts organizations and by the specifics of the Arab American communities that were involved. The performance was in San Antonio, Texas and not the orchestra's hometown of Detroit. Where Detroit's history of Arab immigration begins roughly a century ago and includes generations of layered identities, San Antonio (and the community in nearby Houston, which was also involved) is more explicitly linked to Texas's oil industry. It is quite large, as well. For context, according to the 2010 US Census, the Arab population in Michigan (which includes Detroit) was roughly 150,000. Texas had just over 100,000 identify as Arab for about 0.4 percent of the population (see Table 1).

In an interview, Reginald Tiessen described the response to Medusa Tn's performance with the National Arab Orchestra in San Antonio succinctly.

> I mean, Chris, you should have seen the audience in San Antonio when Medusa gets up on stage in her traditional garb of Tunisia and starts this epic collaborative monster piece of music. There were as many that I think would have grabbed the puke bucket as there there were that were just ready to go, "[. . .] Like, this is awesome!" [. . . The orchestra members] were all really really refreshed by it, because it was new. New. And they knew it was provocative and they knew it was on the edge and it was on the line and it was sharp. Its edges were sharp. What I watched, it, I'll go as far as to say "fail" in San Antonio. It failed.

When I asked about why it failed, he said that it was too aggressive and that, from his reading of the audience's opinion, they believed that:

> a young Arab woman shouldn't be singing with so much aggression. She should be more poised and more elegant. She should be a songstress. And then, can we just address the elephant in the room? An Arab woman should not be singing rap.

He described the audience as representative of an "Arab elite," referencing the wealth and oil industry connections in Texas. "This is a different Arab community and I gained an appreciation back to our diaspora, to our community back in Dearborn and greater Detroit," he said.

Medusa Tn had a similar perspective on the piece's reception, though it fit into what sounded like a more familiar experience for her. As a woman rapping in Arabic, she was quick to note that her music is largely unknown in her native Tunisia. She lives in France now and finds opportunities across Europe and North America. In fact, she had just finished another tour of the United States and had some additional events cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. When I asked her about her description of the audience as "shocked," she addressed some of the same points as Tiessen.

> Some people get shocked and they just didn't deny it. I mean, they just don't accept it and some people, even my rap, not only with "Eden" and the Konqistador project. I believe that I am talking to a small community

> that will accept my style, because here in [the Middle East and North Africa], they are used to seeing girls wearing dresses like Barbies and singing love songs or something that is really soft. [...] I think I prefer to be not very well known and to do my committed songs and to talk to a small community that is accepting difference [rather than] talking to everybody and saying "copy-paste" things.

As she described it, the performance was "magnificent."

> The people [were] a little bit shocked, to be honest, because it was a concert of Arab orchestra [music]. And people used to listen to old Arab music like Umm Kulthum or Nagat El-Sagheera, I mean, really big divas. And then we came with rap and scream with Lizzy [Ray, member of Konqistador], so it was really special. So, like for one minute people were watching with no interaction. And then they really liked it and they were yelling and screaming and everything, so it was really special.

The difference between how Medusa Tn and Tiessen remember the audience's reception of the piece could be a result of her being caught up in the energy of performing. More likely, however, it demonstrates the expectations of these two figures. One, Medusa, is constantly working to expand an audience for something that is unfamiliar, whether she is pushing for access as Tunisian, as a woman, and so on. She is constantly pushing boundaries and appreciative of opportunities to move beyond them. Reginald, however, was an organizer for the orchestra and hopeful for an audience that was open to a new sound, meaning that he was disappointed when they did not engage as fully.

Conclusion

While including popular styles that speak to a broader audience addresses the organization's mission, it is also increasingly necessary for arts organizations like the NAO for financial reasons. Even so, Ibrahim identifies these musical activities as both a window and a mirror. Not only do they open a space for "outsiders" to see and better understand something different, they reflect that difference back on the community itself. The fact that the community's lines of difference run in so many directions simultaneously only adds to the opportunities for reflection. Even though, or perhaps because, the Arab American community is relatively young when compared to other immigrant communities in the United States, especially those that have been able to navigate and enter into the category of "whiteness,"[ˆwhiteness] members of the community have dramatically different life experiences. Those who came for work 100 years ago, for example, will find a different place in their new home than recent refugees. By showing contemporary popular music, work from women, innovation coming from the Middle East and North Africa, and generational change, the "mirror" of the arts has the power to broaden a self-identity, just as a "window" can do the same for those who have never seen, heard, or spoken to an Arab other than on screen or in the news.

References

Abu-Absi, Samir, ed. 2010. *Arab Americans in Toledo: Cultural Assimilation and Community Involvement*. 1st ed. Toledo, OH: University of Toledo Press.

Agawu, Kofi. 2003. *Representing African Music: Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions*. New York: Routledge.

Armbrust, Walter, ed. 2000. *Mass Mediations: New Approaches to Popular Culture in the Middle East and Beyond*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Awada, Hanady M. 2009. "Planting the Cedar Tree: The History of the Early Syrian-Lebanese Community in Toledo, OH, 1881-1960." Master's thesis, Toledo, OH: The University of Toledo.

Bloechl, Olivia Ashley, and Melanie Lowe. 2015. "Introduction: Rethinking Difference." In *Rethinking Difference in Music Scholarship*, edited by Olivia Ashley Bloechl, Melanie Diane Lowe, and Jeffrey Kallberg.

New York: Cambridge University Press.

Classical Music and Musicians. 2018. "Manon Lescaut (Puccini)." Classical Music and Musicians. 2018. https://classicalmusicandmusicians.com/2018/06/17/puccini-manon-lescaut-sola-perduta-abbandonata/.

Corse, Edward. 2014. *The Battle for Neutral Europe: British Cultural Propaganda During the Second World War*.

Cull, Nicholas John. 2019. *Public Diplomacy: Foundations for Global Engagement in the Digital Age*. Cambridge, UK ; Medford, MA, USA: Polity.

Cummings, Milton C. 2009. *Cultural Diplomacy and the United States Government: A Survey*. Cultural Diplomacy Research Series. Washington, D.C: Americans for the Arts (formerly Center for Arts and Culture). https://www.americansforthearts.org/by-program/reports-and-data/legislation-policy/naappd/cultural-diplomacy-and-the-united-states-government-a-survey.

Danielson, Virginia. 1997. *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthūm, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Erlmann, Veit. 2004. "Resisting Sameness: À Propos Kofi Agawu's Representing African Music." *The Journal for the Society for Music Theory* 26 (2): 291–304.

Garofalo, Reebee. 2007. "Pop Goes to War, 2001-2004: U.S. Popular Music After 9/11." In *Music in the Post-9/11 World*, edited by Jonathan Ritter and J. Martin Daughtry, 3–26. New York and London: Routledge.

Hammond, Andrew. 2007. *Popular Culture in the Arab World*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press.

Handel, Barbara. 2017. "Taking up Causes in New Year." *Toledo Blade*, January 11, 2017, Web edition.

Hemmasi, Farzaneh. 2020. *Tehrangeles Dreaming: Intimacy and Imagination in Southern California's Iranian Pop Music*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Johnson, Barbara. 1992. *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading*. 3. print. Baltimore: Hopkins Univ. Press.

Kapchan, Deborah. 2008. "The Promise of Sonic Translation: Performing the Festive Sacred in Morocco." *American Anthropologist* 110 (4): 467–83. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27564052.

Koros, Sam. 2016. "The Toledo Symphony Orchestra and the National Arab Orchestra Celebrate Diversity During Mideast X Midwest." *Toledo City Paper*, November 10, 2016, Web edition. https://toledocitypaper.com/music/the-toledo-symphony-orchestra-and-the-national-arab-orchestra-celebrate-diversity-during-mideast-x-midwest/.

Malek, Amy. 2015. "Claiming Space: Documenting Second-Generation Iranian Americans in Los Angeles." *Anthropology of the Middle East* 10 (2). https://doi.org/10.3167/ame.2015.100203.

Mark, Simon L. 2010. "Rethinking Cultural Diplomacy: The Cultural Diplomacy of New Zealand, the Canadian Federation and Quebec." *Political Science* 62 (1): 62.

Minow, Martha. 1990. *Making All the Difference: Inclusion, Exclusion, and American Law*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

National Arab Orchestra. 2018. "NAO History." National Arab Orchestra. 2018. https://araborchestra.org/history/.

Nieuwkerk, Karin van, and Mark LeVine, eds. 2015. *Islam and Popular Culture*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Racy, Ali Jihad. 2003. *Making Music in the Arab World: The Culture and Artistry of Tarab*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

Rasmussen, Anne K. 1991. "Individuality and Social Change in the Music of Arab-Americans." Ph.D. Dissertation, Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles.

———. 2016. "The Music of Arab Detroit: A Musical Mecca in the Midwest." In *The Music of Multicultural America: Performance, Identity, and Community in*

the United States, edited by Kip Lornell and Anne K. Rasmussen, 2nd ed., 109–36. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Shannon, Jonathan. 2003. “Sultans of Spin: Syrian Sacred Music on the World Stage.” *American Anthropologist*, New Series, 105 (2): 266–77. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3567501.

———. 2011. “Suficized Musics of Syria at the Intersection of Heritage and the War on Terror; or "A Rumi with a View".” In *Muslim Rap, Halal Soaps, and Revolutionary Theater: Artistic Developments in the Muslim World*, edited by Karin van Nieuwkerk, 257–74. Austin: University of Texas Press.

———. 2015. *Performing Al-Andalus: Music and Nostalgia Across the Mediterranean*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Snow, Nancy. 2020. “Public Diplomacy.” In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, by Nancy Snow. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.518.

Solie, Ruth A. 1993. “Introduction: On "Difference".” In *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, edited by Ruth A. Solie, 1–23. Berkeley: University of California Press.