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

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**Abstract**

Since its founding as a non-profit organization in 2010, the National Arab Orchestra has represented the complex nature of doing cultural diplomacy within the United States. This project's focus on an American organization lends insight into how cultural diplomacy operates along a wide range of vectors depending on the specific project, setting, goals, and target audience. It also highlights how the identities of the participants are layered and contextual. Through interviews with organizers, donors, audiences, and the professional musicians who regularly travel from across the country to perform with the NAO—and my own experiences as an occasional performer with the group—this work outlines the wide range of priorities and expectations that are laid upon a single organization representing both an art form (Arab music) and a minority community (Arab-Americans), even when the group's makeup is far from heterogeneous. I focus on four efforts. First, through professional collaborations with the Arab-American community in Houston (TX) and the Toledo Symphony Orchestra (OH), the NAO's "Building Bridges" program extends awareness of Arab-American communities and culture in areas with significant Arab-American populations. Second, workshops, collaborations, and mentorship programs in schools introduce youth to the music of their recently-arrived or longstanding Arab immigrant neighbors and classmates. Third, a recent tour to Saudi Arabia presents an example of the ensemble shifting its own representational strategies as it considers its role as an American organization in the Middle East. Finally, collaborations with popular artists—including North African women rappers—and new compositions demonstrate an intentional effort to innovate within the Arab classical tradition, something that represents a different kind of cultural diplomacy, one that aims to connect the art form to younger audiences and bridge the wide generational gaps within immigrant communities because of individuals' dramatically different life experiences in the United States.

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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 faces of their own 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.

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 can operate in different ways. These include across community boundaries (both national and otherwise) and within what might 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: that of engaging 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 a conception of cultural diplomacy that centers the nation-state and widens the utility of that term itself.

**To do: brief overview of paper structure**

## Cultural diplomacy and difference

This case study focuses on three "levels" of cultural diplomacy as carried out by the National Arab Orchestra through four recent projects. Since communities are networked and nested, these levels are abstract efforts to clarify who the various participants are in different situations. That these lines between communities might be strokes on a map or something far less defined becomes apparent when examining the actualization of these types of diplomatic strategies. While some definitions focus on boundaries that are quite literally grounded in place, I aim to explore how cultural diplomacy can be a helpful metaphor for understanding similar efforts in other contexts, as well.[1]

[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

While recognizing the networks of identity that prevent a clean division of community boundaries, I imagine these levels based on who is "within" the group doing the diplomacy—who is the National Arab Orchestra representing at any given time—and the groups of people who are "across" some type of boundary. There is an insider/outsider flavor to this that is problematic in many ways, but it is the center of cultural diplomacy projects to cross boundaries and, in some cases, work toward their erasure. I return to this erasure in a moment.

These levels can be geographically scoped. 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 case, the National Arab Orchestra represents sets of idealized values in an effort to broaden connections within audience members' sense of self-identity. At the same time, the proximity of the group to these various communities and the diverse expecations of differing audiences themselves demonstrate real challenges.

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 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 in the form of propaganda (Corse 2014). Milton Cummings maintains a focus on international relations, but describes cultural diplomacy in terms that allow for an "exchange of ideas"

complex identities.

and art "in order to foster mutual understanding" (Cummings 2009). Each of these approaches, from the militaristic to the conversational, require 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, certain boundaries disappear even while others persist. In this way, I argue that these types of projects erase boundaries—or at least aim to—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 the case of the National Arab Orchestra, projects and performances span national borders, regional identities, and different intersections of Detroit's own Arab American community. In each case, the ensemble pushes at the edges of participants' sense of self, hoping to push it 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 its own sustainability is one of the central struggles that these types of arts organizations regularly face. Another, of course, is balancing the change that it may facilitate against "small-c" conservative pressures within the organization and its audiences, especially when that change is slow, opaque, and dispersed across communities. The discussion of a hip hop collaboration later in this essay shows these conflicts within this particular setting.

This case study shows cultural diplomacy as intersecting 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—

[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).

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:

> 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.

Highlighting difference and focusing on essentialized representations of one's own community can be "a powerful tool in the hands of the oppressed themselves (Solie 1993, 6). In a work flush with examples of Latin American composers navigating difference, Carol A. Hess directly links efforts to highlight and essentialize flattened identities through difference and, conversely, the push toward the"bourgeois liberalism" of universalism to international diplomacy, the "Good Neighbor Policy" in this case. She focuses on the "edges" of Pan Americanism, presenting a useful technique for engaging the "quirky range of representations" that cultural diplomacy-oriented institutions and communities may attempt to essentialize away (Hess 2013, 7). In the face of dramatic and overarching power structures, these corners do more than illuminate outlier cases. They, themselves, represent the difficulty of essentializing. Whether the case involves the removal of difference in service of unity or the highlighting of difference for the sake of distinctiveness, the innumerable layers of identity that coincide in any given moment for any given person show the difficulty of representation. Because considering all individuals individually all of the time is impractical, however, efforts to essentialize people as groups continue. Recognizing someone's membership in many "human groups," any of which may determine which characteristics are essentialized at any time, becomes central to the project of understanding difference (Minow 1990; Solie 1993, 16–17).

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

[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)

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 combination of potential identities that I fail to recognize in this short paper. 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, the organization 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

[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).

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 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. By including contemporary and classical traditions, musicians from across the country and from diverse racial backgrounds or musical experiences, and through collaborations with organizations from schools to symphony orchestras, the National Arab Orchestra demonstrates a multi-faceted conception of community that traverses a host of boundaries in addition to that singular and somewhat obvious one.

**To do: incorporate interviews with musicians, board members**

- Now national in scope with players from within and outside of Arab ethnic identities and musical traditions
- A microcosm of the project that the group is attempting
- Introduce difficulties described by organizers

## The orchestra's international diplomacy

One of the most significant recent projects undertaken by the National Arab Orchestra 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: because of changing dates and fluid gigging schedules on the part of its core

[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).

personnel, the orchestra needed to hire a small handful of musicians from Lebanon to join in the concert. While it remained a National Arab Orchestra project (and not a collaboration of some type), this did impact the event. Rehearsing and performing created additional layers of networked relationships.

Similar realities informed presentational choices and show the types of messaging and negotiation that come out of diplomatic opportunities like this. One telling example involves the programming choices themselves. 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 the 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.

This expanded the role of the National Arab Orchestra and potentially shifted some ideas about America abroad. Tellingly, Ibrahim explained to me that these organizations in Saudi Arabia have fairly easy access to outstanding performers of classical music from nearby areas. Egypt, for example, in his understanding, has "a monopoly on musical production in the Gulf. There's a certain unwritten monopoly." Bringing a group from the United States to perform is not only different, it carries another set of meanings, one that links to this pride that he explained. They have other choices "in their own backyard, but they chose to bring us."

**To do: incorporate elements of musician interviews and other participants about their experiences and interactions while abroad**

## 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, described later. As Musical Director, Michael Ibrahim is clearly attempting to straddle his audience's demands with newer projects and he comes across, at least in casual conversaion, as equally energized by older repertoire that he loves and challenging new projects.

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

[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.

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.

At home in Michigan, these bridges extend in all directions. The ensemble is caught in something of a web of identity, one that marks and erases difference across a number of lines. In some cases, balancing these efforts in programming and collaboration lead to fruitful new relationships, like those with schools. They continue, in part because Ibrahim lives and works in the area and is able to regularly visit, teach, and even defend local music programs in school board meetings. But these balances also prevent some other opportunities because of the pressure to be both progressive and preservationist. As is the case with other orchestras that I have been a part of, meeting audience demands and expectations becomes a necessity for continued financial support. Neoliberal market-based thinking, therefore, can promote or hinder targeted efforts to achieve other goals, like pushing the boundaries of what "counts" as Arab American, especially when considering youth culture or other repertories that are not a part of the "Golden Age."

**To do: Add material on the mentorship program and interviews with students or educators**

## 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,

[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).

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. [...] I think Arab Americans came from all over Ohio and probably some from Detroit. I was really impressed, I was amazed at the performance to hear how far people had come. Some people had driven 100 miles. I can't remember the exact details, but people came out for this concert because it meant something to them. It was sold out for that reason.

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]

[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 [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 Giacomo 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.
> 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

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

> 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.

**To do: incorporate elements of interviews with NAO musicians, board members, community choir, public school teachers/participants, and students about these experiences.**

Perhaps it's unsurprising that Arab Americans would drive from far to see this type of collaboration. For some, the fact that Toledo is an hour and a half closer than Detroit by car may simply make seeing the NAO live feasible in a way that it normally is not. But this project was about building musical bridges as well as social ones. It is an example of the power that music can have on people and represents a success for the National Arab Orchestra based on its own mission. The confluence of audience expansion and "building bridges" is an important part of this, as both groups saw a collaborative opportunity to broaden their reach. Based on ticket sales, interest, and responses during interviews, this was a success for both organizations.

The success comes in part because these two classical music arts organizations operate in similar spheres, even if the specifics of their repertoires and audiences differ. Class and age largely align (though I am oversimplifying here), especially when considering the 100-year history of Arab America in Detroit and Toledo. Expectations for what a concert feels like, looks like, and sounds like are similar: classical musicians perform classical musics in dark theaters. But, returning to the NAO specifically, the Arab American community is more diverse than the NAO's audiences. Bringing other musical styles to the concert stage and presenting them through the vehicle of the orchestra can be far more difficult, though potentially more rewarding.

## A window and a mirror

Throughout our conversations, Michael Ibrahim shifts seamlessly between a sense of an Arab American community as a unified whole pushing for stability and acceptance in a larger America and a one of a diverse group that struggles against its own internal fissures. This, of course, can be an accurate understanding of any group and shows the role of intersectional positionality as individual people both fit within and sit outside of different layered identities. Notable in regards to his orchestra, though, are the ways in which the NAO addresses these layers simultaneously. They build bridges across a range of nested communities, whether they are ethnic bounds in Detroit, generational ones with the Arab American world, or international lines that depend on politics.

The "Building Bridges" programming described above show an effort to reach beyond the Arab American community to local students or Toledo Symphony audiences. They have the intentional side effect of addressing Arab Americans

directly. Inviting Arab American youth into an experience of singing these songs and feeling a sense of embodied cultural belonging or showing the NAO's audiences a collaborative view of their place within the Western classical arts scene in America by bringing them to a Toledo Symphony event are two ways in which the NAO targets long-term change in Arab Americans' self-identity. Not only is the orchestra carving out a place for Arab music in the arts scenes of a handful of American cities, it's attempting to redefine what those arts can and should look like. In turn, it shows its audiences a window toward a new set of possibilities. Just as they work to broaden an American self-identity to include Arab America and other immigrant populations that suffer from racism and political rhetoric, these projects carry the potential to ignite new possibilities for the "American" side of Arab American.

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 that focus on memory to establish a connection to the Middle East. Performance practice itself is wrapped into this as the orchestra fosters interactivity in listening to present an experience that is more similar to Arab tradition than audiences would experience in a symphony concert. 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). 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 generational.

In the fall of 2018, I was tangentially involved in a project that brought Medusa Tn, a hip hop artist from France and Tunisia, to Detroit for a collaboration with the National Arab Orchestra and Konqistador, an electronic industrial group made up of musicians within the same Detroit orbit. My part in this was minor: I arranged a lecture, class visits, and a performance at my home institution (Bowling Green State University). For the NAO, this visit was part of a new effort to invite Middle Eastern and North African women hip hop artists. It began with Lizzy Ray and Reginald Tiessen, members of Konqistador. Tiessen was also Assistant Program Director with the National Arab Orchestra at the time, leading to that group's involvement in what became the "Intersections" project (Reginald Tiessen, p. c. November 13, 2020).

Konqistador's intended result was a series of collaborations, both with the NAO and other North African rappers, showing an impetus to foreground innovation, creativity, and sounds from outside of the "Golden Age" tradition. See, for example, the music video for "Eden, Woman's War" from Konqistador and

Medusa Tn.[11] Aesthetically and stylistically, this is distant from the sounds that appear on the Music Hall stage with the National Arab Orchestra. As Michael Ibrahim describes these types of collaborations, he uses metaphors of politics and division ("both sides of the aisle") and creative opportunity ("you never know what thought might inspire somebody").

For his and the NAO's part of the collaboration, Ibrahim arranged "Eden, Woman's War" for the orchestra and brought Medusa Tn to perform it at a concert in San Antonio, Texas. Medusa Tn described the collaboration as an artistic challenge, but it was clearly one that she was proud of.

> You have to know that the original song is some industrial rap and rock and metal music. It's so much different. And when we hear it, we can't imagine that this can be reproduced with an orchestra and this was the challenge. I really love the way that the song was transformed by the orchestra for our collaboration on stage and [its] success. So this all started with Konqistador. And 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 or 1.5 percent of the state population. Texas had just over 100,000 identify as Arab on that Census for about 0.4 percent of the population. Both numbers are high, with only California and New York above Michigan and Florida between Michigan and Texas. (As a percentage of the population, Michigan ranks first in the United States and the more populous Texas is below the national average.)

Despite a similar size, the communities have differing histories.

**To do: present additional specifics about the history of San Antonio's Arab American community to clarify the distinction.**

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

[11] Konqistador, "Eden, Woman's War X Medusa Tn": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2_0OBb7a9us

> 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, "Fuck yeah! Like, this is awesome!" But I saw it. I saw it in real time. And that was the point where I understood that... First of all, the orchestra all loved it. I spoke to them all after. They loved the piece that Michael had bore out of our original piece, which is like an epic neoclassical electro-assault. [... 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, it appeared that 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 MENA region [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. And I am very, very engaged. I mean, I am committed to my song. [...] When you bring something different, you are not accepted, for sure. I believe that it's good for me. 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 open audience to a new sound and disappointed when listeners did not engage as fully.

**To do: revisit this and revise or flesh it out after seeing the video.**

Like the projects mentioned above, the inclusion of popular styles can speak to a broad and expanding audience. Not only can this address the organization's mission, it is increasingly necessary for the NAO and arts organizations like it because of, in part, the financial realities of operating today. Again, Michael Ibrahim describes these types of projects as central and important:

> If we want to establish ourselves as the 'go to' Arab arts institution, we have to take on that mantle of including all kinds of forms of genres. [. . . ] But that also has an effect on both sides of the aisle, towards the Arab American community and towards the non-Arab community. Towards the Arab American community [it is making them] aware of all the diverse things that happen, not just as Arabs living in the Middle East, but [as] Arab Americans [and] what they've done here and how some aspects of American culture continue to influence Arab culture, as they have throughout history. [. . . ] A person who listens to classical music isn't so much necessarily going to listen to rap or hip hop. [. . . ] We expose them to all kids of different arts, not because they don't know about it, but because that exposure is part of the cultural game. You want to expose people to all kinds of things because you never know what thought might inspire somebody just randomly sitting there.

He continued, thinking about how this bridges difference with non-Arab audiences, and used the metaphor of food before addressing people's interest in new tastes

and ideas. The orchestra, through collaborations like the one with Medusa Tn, tries to provide some of those new tastes for its potential audiences.

> When England invaded India, the Indian's invented *korma* for the British people. Basically, *korma* was like Indian food without all the spices. So you do Arab things meshed with non-Arab things that are familiar to the non-Arab ear. You're making it a little bit easier for somebody to want to come in and figure something out. [...] People want to try different things and if you make it a little more comfortable for them, they might buy a ticket to something they never experiences before. [...] It works as a window, an opportunity for the non-Arabs to look into the Arab world. That's an opportunity for me to reflect inward a little more and experience the diversity that we really do have as a people.

Ibrahim places these musical activities, the work that his orchestra does at all levels, as both a window and a mirror. Not only does it open a space for "outsiders" to see and better understand something different, it reflects 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,"[12] 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.

## Conclusion

**To do: describe the challenges presented by the "mirror" and how these efforts of diplomacy are made more difficult by the financial constraints and realities born out of working to reflect your potential donors/clients/audiences. Return to struggles of sustainability and the problems of measuring slow change. Return to issues of essentialism and difference to consider how they are woven through these projects.**

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[12] Here I am thinking of the changing place of Irish, Italian, or Eastern European immigrants in American social structures, for example.

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