

The Muwashah: A Story of a Musical Poem

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The Muwashah is a vocal musical deriving from Arab poetry dating back to the rule of the Umayyad Arabs on Hispania (or Andalusia) (Farraj & Shumays). The name Muwashah comes from the word “Wishah” (وشاح) which means scarf in Arabic. Due to the growing wealth during the Umayyad Dynasty, fashion and clothes were at their peaks, thus, scarves were popular as a form of accessory. Therefore, a Muwashah literarily means an accessorized piece. The name was given to the poetry form because back then it was the mainstream form of flirting between lovers, where the lover accessorizes his poetry, compliments and feelings to their partner or the person they are feeling so much pain for in order to be with. The Muwashah was born under the Arab rule during the Umayyad Dynasty and Abbasid Dynasty. Based on Islamic history, back then the rule was based on the Quran and its laws, and it was around the time when corruption was beginning to take place in the government. Thus, paying too much attention to Islam and its rules means keeping up with the government’s actions. Consequently, the government’s strategy was to distract the public from political matters through legalizing alcohol, brothels and other worldly matters and the Muwashah’s sexual and flirty poems and music were part of the results of such actions and we can find the Muwashah “Mala El-Kasat” as a perfect example since the topic is describing a beautiful lady who fills up the cup of alcohol for the singer/poet. There are multiple theories concerning where exactly the Muwashah came from and how each form developed depending on the Arabs’ invasions and complex intertwining historical events. The Muwashah is very diverse and artistic Arab music form, consisting of different types and forms with various structures and themes; however, a traditional structure became the mainstream through time.

The Muwashah is one of the many cultural advantages of the Arab rule on Andalusia. The Arab rule began going far back to the Umayyad Dynasty then the Abbasid Dynasty (Dahami). The Umayyad Dynasty was from 661 AD to 750 A.D. and was the first Caliphate Islamic Dynasty in the history of Arab rule (Hawting). It expanded its rule over the region from the Middle East, to North Africa, to reach what we know today as Spain (Hawting). Despite this spread of Islam, the Umayyads did not force their religion upon other beliefs; thus, Spanish Christians and Jews were allowed to practice their religions freely (Dahami). In addition, during the Umayyads’ rule, Arabs

were very advanced in astronomy, medicine, philosophy, art and poetry; thus, the non-Arab citizens were interest in learning the treasures of Arab advancement through investing in learning the language and Arabic books (Dahami). The freedom of expression in during the Umayyad Dynasty has introduced the region to an age of civilization, musical connection and knowledge.

Then the Abbasid Dynasty took over and lasted between 750 AD and 1258 (Islamic Caliphate). After vanquishing the Umayyads, the Abbasids chose to move the capital of their Caliphate from Damascus to Baghdad in 762 in order to be near the individuals who supported the Abbasids' power (Islamic Caliphate). Baghdad was the main location for education and an ideal spot for exchange (Islamic Caliphate). Type and paper flourished in Baghdad, mainly for the perseverance of religious texts and the House of Wisdom was built which was organized by the Abbasids to be a translation institute, a library and a research center (Islamic Caliphate). Eventually, since Baghdad became the capital of education in the Abbasids' rule, education and intellect grew and spread. This period is historically considered as "The Golden Age".

This educational advancement did not skip music and poetry of course. Through the constant interest in the Arabic language and the investment in books the Muwashah or Andalusian Muwashah was created and developed as one of the oldest and most popular forms in Arab music. "The Muwashah was created by the Aleppans, and that despite it being the oldest, it does not start off the Wasla" – Kamil Al-Kula'i's claim explained on AMAR Foundation for Arab Music Archiving & Research Podcast. This conclusion that it originated in Syria would be reasonable, considering that the Muwashah was first formed in Aleppo around the 8th and the 9th century A.D. then taken to Andalusia with the Umayyads' where it merged with Hispania's culture and music forming the Andalusian Muwashah. However, the melodies of these Muwashahat (plural for Muwashah) only date back to the last century or two from Aleppo (Syria) and Egypt (Farraj & Shumays). It would be reasonable to conclude that the Muwashah is a mixture of Arab oriental melodies and Andalusian poems.

The Muwashah is a musical form originating from Andalusian poems yet it consists of a simpler form than poems (Farraj & Shumays). Some Muwashahat follow the traditional rules of poetry and rhythm while others do not, and some Muwashahat poems constant of full fusha (classical

Arabic) poems while other can include different dialects and Arabic slangs without following basic structural poetry rules (Farraj & Shumays).

The Muwashah is considered as one of the most creative forms in Arab music for its diversity in development through history and its different structural formations. Some resources also mention the fact that some of the Muwashahat texts and melodies were of Sufi origins (Alnasir). This theory might be possible due to the Sufi presence in Aleppo during the Umayyad and Abbasid Dynasties (Alnasir). It is interesting to find all these scattered theories and historical presumptions because the style changes and eventually the perspective towards each Muwashah changes as well.

The Muwashah is usually the first singing section in a Wasla, (a Wasla is an Arab music form containing other forms played consecutively lasting between 5 minutes to one hour), but it is not always the case based on Kamil Al-Kula'i's claim mentioned above. This complicated debate goes back to the theory of whether Muwashahat melodies originated from Andalusia or Aleppo and the confusion between the melody and the text of the Muwashah (AMAR).

The Muwashah musical form developed through time and was mostly popular in Aleppo (AMAR) and in 17th century Syria and Egypt (Farraj & Shumays). A mainstream Muwashah performance consists of a vocalist accompanied by backing vocalists and a Takht (Arab oriental band consisting of six main instruments; the Oud, the Qanoon, the Tambourine, the Kamanga or fiddle, Durbakah, and the Nay or flute). The general structure of a Muwashah starts with a Dawr (Egyptian composed vocal form) mainly follows the "Tafrid" practice which consists of a composed melodic section (Khanah) repeated a few times and then followed by modulations (Ghata) deriving from the main maqam, these modulations can either be going to a Qarar (an interval lower or octave) or to a Jawab (upper intervals or octave). The Muwashah usually ends with a "Taslim" (means passing on something in Arabic) or Qafla (closure in Arabic) which consists of improvisations going back and forth between the Takht instrumentalists and the vocalists until the closing of the song (Farraj & Shumays). The structure is summarized as follows: Dawr, Khanah (means section in Arabic), Ghata (means cover in Arabic), and Taslim (or Qafla) (Farraj & Shumays).

The Muwashah usually uses odd rhythmic meters (or Doroob; plural for Darb) such as 5/4, 10/8 or even 17/8. What makes the Muwashah significant melodically is using maqam (scale) Rast

mainly and other complex maqams (scales) that contain the oriental three-quarter tone. Usually the melody follows the rhythmic pattern of the Darb meter.

There are three main forms where the Muwashah originated from; the Basit, the Qawl and the form developed after the Nahda (Arab Renaissance) (AMAR). The Basit or Bastah form originated in Iraq and Turkey during the Abbasid Dynasty. The form follows the same melody throughout the Muwashah while repeating lyrics or singing some sort of vocal ornamentation such as “ya leil, ya ein” or “aman”. There is a debate discussed between musicologists that Arabs began using the “ya leil, ya ein” (means “oh night” “oh eye”) instead of “aman” (word from Turkish origins meaning something similar to “oh”) to have an Arab identity in the music and break free from Turkish adaptations while they were under their rule and after. An example of the Bastah form is Muwashah “Ahinnu Shawqan” by Sheikh Sayid Al-Safti. The second form was also originated and developed during the Abbasid Dynasty called the Qawl (AMAR). It follows the same structure as the Bastah but with more than one melody played called Tarannum where the singer only sings the ornamentation mentioned above (AMAR). Many consider the combination or the mixture between both forms as the standard Muwashah form used today (AMAR). An example of this Muwashah form is Muwashah “Hat Ya Ayyuhal Saqi” by Abd Al-Hayy. The third form of Muwashah is the form dating back to the Nahda era, composed by Muhammad Uthman (AMAR). This form was influenced by the instrumental form called Sama’i (Sama’i is one of the longest instrumental forms of Ottoman origins that follows the sama’i “Darb” or beat meter) (Farraj & Shumays). A very popular example of this form is Muwashah “Mala Al-Kasat” which follows meter or “Darb of Sama’i Thaqil and Rast Maqam. The Rast maqam is very common in Muwashahat form that it is called the Muwashahat Maqam (AMAR). Despite the development of other Muwashahat forms after the Basit or Bastah, musicians still use the Bastah form in their Muwashahat compositions (AMAR). The structure of this mixed Muwashah between Bastah and Qawl is as follows; Dawr 1 – Dawr 2 – Khanah – Tarannum or Khanah – Khatima or Qafla or Taslim. The first Dawr consists of a vocal improvisation or Tarannum or a few lines of poetry instead, then the second Dawr repeats the first Dawr with different lyrics with the same melody (AMAR). Then comes the Khanah or verse with a different melody and lyrics, it can be as long as a Dawr or even double its length (AMAR). If the Dawr did not have a Tarannum, then a Tarannum line is composed just for the Khanah, however it can be skipped and played in the Katima instead

(AMAR). The Khatima is the outro or the conclusion of the Muwashah which repeats fully or partially the first Dawr with different lyrics (AMAR). The structure is well represented in the Muwashah “Hat Ya Ayyuhal Saqi” mentioned earlier.

There is a reason why the Muwashah is still popular amongst Arab musicians today. It is popular to the extent that modern Arab music composers from the 19th and 20th century composed Muwashahat following its traditional structure from a Dawr to a Taslim. An example of modern Muwashahat is “Ajaban Li Ghazalin” Muwashah composed by Fouad Abdel Majid. The Muwashah first originated during the Arab rule, under the Umayyad Dynasty to be exact. From the Umayyad Dynasty to the Abbasid Dynasty, the Muwashah has evolved and developed adapting to surrounding historical, cultural and even geographic events and elements. The most enjoyable part about the Muwashahat is analyzing different theories about the origin of the Muwashah collecting historical facts and assembling puzzle pieces to come up with a different reasonable picture every time. Based on these various theories, the structure and form of Muwashahat has differed as well. The structure of a Muwashah differs from Dawr – Khanah – Ghata – Taslim to Dawr 1 – Dawr 2 – Khanah – Katima, however this difference is only slight and a result of the diverse historic nature of the Muwashah. This slight structural difference mainly exists between the three main origins of the Muwashah which are Bastah (or Basit), Qawl and post-Nahda form. Usually musicians mix the Bastah form with Qawl to form one of the mainstream structures of Muwashah today. However, Basit form is still used as its own form until today (AMAR). There is something captivating about Muwashahat, it is either the odd and complex Darb meter used, or the rhythmically melodic maqams chosen or it could be the interesting and controversial poems and lyrics. All we know is that there is a reason it is still studied and performed until today and it is probably worth more in-depth study and research.

Reference

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