

## **SOMETHING LIKE HOME**

**Navigating transgenerational war trauma through transcultural music  
collaboration.**

NEMAT BATTAH



Artwork by Hind Jaal ©

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Sibelius Academy, University of the Arts Helsinki.  
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Author: Nemat Battah.

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Supervisor: Nathan Riki Thomson.

## ABSTRACT

In this autoethnographic arts-based research, I return to the gift of music in my life and use it as the ultimate form of expression. I explore the process of navigating my own transgenerational trauma through composing and working with musicians from different musical and cultural backgrounds. Something like home explores the effect of finding common ground of love and compassion between my family members, especially those who have been navigating the traumas of war. I collected stories, memories, and impressions from my family's childhood, and I composed music that is inspired by them. In the first sections of this work, I discuss some concepts related to the transmission of war trauma, and Bowen's family system theory. Moreover, I relate to research and projects that have been concerned with trauma art therapy and dealing with cultural trauma through music, as well as presenting examples of composers who have been working with similar processes.

In this project, I unfold my compositional process, and I present some possibilities of dealing with harmonizing traditional Arabic music, using partials from the harmonic series. I also share my process of collaborating with a lyric writer and a videographer who have helped me to bring the stories to life.

Throughout the process, I discovered that engaging with the stories unlocked new artistic outcomes and some unexpected artistic practices, expressions, and results.

Another important outcome of this project was the need for coming up with approaches that were used for transcultural music-making and engaging the musicians with the stories but making sure to leave space for their own artistic identities to come across and shine. In the near future, I am hoping to use this project as a basis of my doctoral research project which will focus on memory expression through music by working with the diverse citizens of the Finnish community.

**Key words:** *war trauma, Arabic music vocalist, Oud, transcultural music-making, musical expression, storytelling through music, family therapy, autoethnography, musical cultures, Palestine.*

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# 1. CHAPTER ONE: PROJECT OVERVIEW

## I. Introduction.

“I am alive, and I am thriving”

That’s what Karla Hawley; a neurologic music therapist, said when she spoke about how a nostalgic piece of music helped her address and overcome the pain of childhood abuse.<sup>1</sup>

Music has probably saved me in a very similar way. I was born and raised in Jordan in a very loving but very dysfunctional family. My parents had to endure very heavy war traumas which were never addressed or talked about. My two oldest siblings were also born in a heavy warzone in Lebanon in the early 1980s.

In most Arab cultures, the family is the main system of support as no institution has replaced this. This emphasis on family is because it is the main source of support in Islam. Moreover, most Arab countries’ governments have been corrupted for a while and there is no sufficient financial, educational, health, and mental support offered to people, therefore the family becomes the main support system.

As scholar Elizabeth Fernea states: “There are today many signs of strain on the family system due to factors such as industrialization, urbanisation, war and conflict, and Westernization. Despite these pressures, however, the family remains the main system of support throughout the Arab world and for Arabs living elsewhere”.<sup>2</sup>

My parents’ families, like many other Palestinian families, had to endure a lot of traumatic events since 1948 when the occupation started. Forceful expulsion, deportations, intensified feelings of dispossession and exile from the homeland, loss of land and identity, death of family members and friends, and a state of hypervigilance for survival are just a few things to mention.<sup>3</sup>

Many Palestinians - especially the ones who still live in Palestine - feel very connected and feel oneness with their lands and with their villages. The villages were often a representation of their cultural identity. Each village has its own folk songs, its own specific dialect, cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Hawly, K. (2016). TEDxSnoIsleLibraries, Edmonds, Washington. *Trauma and Music Therapy: Let the Healing Begin*.

<sup>2</sup> Rassam, A. (1987). Elizabeth W. Fernea, ed., *Women and the Family in the Middle East: New Voices of Change* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985). Pp. 368. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 19(4), 507-508.

<sup>3</sup> Barron, I., & Abdallah, G. (2015). Intergenerational Trauma in the Occupied Palestinian Territories: Effect on Children and Promotion of Healing. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, 8, 103-110.

habits, dances, and even its own unique embroidery patterns.<sup>4</sup> When talking about Palestinian identity it is important to consider the historical, social, and cultural aspects. There is the identity that evolved resulting from the reaction to occupation and oppression, struggle, and the crucial abnormal realities that Palestinians face daily.<sup>5</sup> Having to deal with the loss of land for many Palestinians meant the loss of their cultural identity, which is very traumatizing and can affect the Palestinian psyche and in turn Palestinian family dynamics.

## II. Family History

I will begin this chapter by offering a brief overview of my family history, as a way to help the reader understand the background of the project, the stories the project is based on, and my positionality.

My Mother, Khadijeh was born in Deir Al-Balah, Gaza, in April 1951. She grew up in this region and stayed in Gaza until she was 19. At that time, she moved to Cairo, Egypt to study Sociology and Psychology and stayed there for 5 years. After concluding her studies, she went back to Gaza for 6 months, followed by finding a teaching job in Yemen where she met my father, and they were married in 1977.

My Father Emran was born in December 1941 in A'in Karem, Jerusalem. When the occupation of Palestine started in 1948, his family left to seek refuge in Jordan where he lived most of his childhood and teenage years. He received a scholarship from the *Democratic Front for The Liberation of Palestine organization* to study communication and electrical engineering in former Czechoslovakia. After finishing his studies, he moved to Syria where he worked at a radio and TV station. His work with the organization required him to travel often, therefore his next destination was Yemen where he met my mother who was teaching there at the time. Later that year, my parents moved to Lebanon where they gave birth to my older siblings, Shadi (1978) and Rana (1980). They stayed in Beirut until 1983, where they witnessed around a year of the 1982 war, which involved Israel invading for the purpose of attacking the *Palestine Liberation Organization* in Lebanon. They escaped the war with my older siblings to Syria and stayed there for a year. After that, they moved to Jordan where my father left the organization and found work as a teacher at the Arab Community college in Amman-Jordan. In 1984 they

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<sup>4</sup> Abudabbeh, N. (2005). Arab Families: An Overview. In M. McGoldrick, J. Giordano, & N. Garcia-Preto (Eds.), *Ethnicity and family therapy* (pp. 423–436). The Guilford Press.

<sup>5</sup> Raheb, M., Badr, L., Shomali, Q., & van Reisen, M. (2014). Palestinian Identity in Relation to Time and Space. *Palestinian Identity in Relation to Time and Space*.

gave birth to my brother Fadi in Amman. In 1987, they decided to move to Kuwait to seek a better job opportunity, where they gave birth to my sister Reem in 1988. In 1990, my parents went for a summer visit to Jordan and that same year in August the Gulf war began, forcing them to stay in Jordan. At that stage, my father went alone to Kuwait to collect our belongings. After that, my family settled in Amman, Jordan where I was born in 1993. My father had a very hard time finding work in Jordan, so he went to Gaza in 1996 and worked there in the ministry of communication until 2002, at which time he suffered a heart attack and a stroke, that caused him to have *Aphasia*, which then forced him to retire and return to Jordan.

As explained in *UpToDate* medical database: “Aphasia is the loss of ability to produce and/or understand language. This usually manifests as a difficulty speaking or understanding spoken language but reading and writing are also usually impacted. Aphasia can also impact the use of manual sign language and Braille”<sup>6</sup>. We lost my father to Covid in April 2021.

My siblings and I grew up in Jordan, but later in life each one of us left Jordan to seek a better life. At the moment, Shadi lives in the USA where he works as a pulmonary and intensive care physician. He has 3 wonderful kids: Sami, Ramzi and Zayne.

Rana lives in Canada where she is finishing her second master's in Leadership studies: Psychology of Adult Education & Community Engagement.

Fadi lives in Russia with his wife and two kids: Sophia and Amir, and he works in Finance.

Reem lives in Jordan with my mother, and she works as a regional HR manager.

### III. A brief overview about Intergenerational transmission of trauma.

There are four major theories that explain how trauma can be passed from one generation to another.

- 1- Psychodynamic: the psychodynamic theory describes how children can unconsciously absorb unresolved family and parental trauma which can affect their personalities and behaviour as adults.<sup>7</sup>
- 2- Sociocultural: The sociocultural theory of trauma transmission explains how cultural and social norms are passed down to children. For example, many studies have been

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<sup>6</sup> Clark, D. (2020, July 14). *Approach to the patient with aphasia*. UpToDate. Retrieved March 4, 2022, from <https://www.uptodate.com/contents/approach-to-the-patient-with-aphasia>

<sup>7</sup> Kellermann, N. P. F. (2001). Transmission of Holocaust trauma—An integrative view. *Psychiatry: Interpersonal and Biological Processes*, 64(3), 256–267

conducted on children who have been abused, which shows that many of these children grow up to be abusers themselves.<sup>8</sup>

- 3- Family system theory: Bowenian family system theory, named after Murray Bowen<sup>9</sup>, is a human behaviour theory that considers the family as an emotional unit and describes the unit's complex interconnections using systems thinking. It is in the essence of a family for its members to be emotionally intertwined.<sup>10</sup> According to Bowen, people frequently feel distant or estranged from their families, but this is more of a perception than a reality. Families have such a strong impact on their members' thoughts, feelings, and actions that it frequently feels as if everyone is sharing the same "emotional skin". People want each other's praise, support, and attention, and they respond to each other's needs, expectations, and disappointments. The interdependence of family members' functioning is due to their connectivity and response. When one person's functioning changes, the other person's functioning changes as well.<sup>11</sup>
- 4- Biological: The biological or genetic model assumes that trauma is transmitted purely based on the biochemical readiness of the individual or that genes have been transmitted from parent to child.<sup>12</sup>

#### IV. cultural background and project idea

Both my parents and my older siblings have witnessed activities of violence, loss, displacement, disposition of place and identity, and economic and physical oppression. This has surely affected their mental health, well-being, and ability to function effectively in life. Due to all this, our home was quite turbulent. Growing up, I had to deal with a lot of moving

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<sup>8</sup> Kahane-Nissenbaum, Melissa C., "exploring intergenerational transmission of trauma in third generation holocaust survivors" (2011). Doctorate in Social Work (DSW) Dissertations. 16.

<sup>9</sup> Murray Bowen was an American psychiatrist, and a professor in psychiatry at Georgetown university, who was among the pioneers of family therapy. He developed family systems theory, also known as Bowen theory. This theory was very important to my work in this project, as it have explained to me so much about my own family entanglements and complex connections.

<sup>10</sup> Barron, I., & Abdallah, G. (2015). Intergenerational Trauma in the Occupied Palestinian Territories: Effect on Children and Promotion of Healing. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, 8, 103-110.

<sup>11</sup> Brown, J. (1999). Bowen family systems: Theory and practice: Illustration and critique. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, 20(2), 94–103.

<sup>12</sup> Kahane-Nissenbaum, Melissa C., "exploring intergenerational transmission of trauma in third generation holocaust survivors" (2011). Doctorate in Social Work (DSW) Dissertations. 16.



between cities, houses, and schools. I Had to deal with people leaving, my father getting sick and not being able to work, as well as constant arguments and tension between my family members. At the end of 2015, a couple of months before I was going to finish my bachelor's degree, I got my first diagnosis of clinical depression. I was not surprised; it was about time. I did not take that seriously though and I decided that I will manage without therapy or medication. One month after my graduation my symptoms became physical. I started having very strange neck, back, and arm pain. The intensity and the nature of the pain made me suspect that I may have a tumour because I was having a lot of problems with my nerves. Half of my face, including my tongue, would go numb, with shooting pain down my arms, and legs. My first panic attack did feel like a heart attack for sure. I was terrified and had no clue what was going on. However, all my tests came back normal. There was nothing physical going on! I had no reason to whine about it. I also didn't have the time to complain! I was going to move to Sweden in August to do my master's degree! I also went to a couple of folk camps that summer, feeling sick, helpless, and in a lot of pain, but I guess I was self-medicating with an intense dose of folk music and dancing! After being in Sweden for a year I had a terrible mental breakdown that led me straight into a psychiatrist's office. In 2017, I officially started to take my depression and anxiety seriously and I started seeing a therapist on a weekly basis. Since then, I have never stopped therapy. It has changed my life so much, and I am so thankful for that.

Naturally, the topic of family and experiences from my childhood and early adolescence came up during my therapy. I was also having a lot of conversations with my oldest sister and sharing thoughts and feelings. I was very angry and felt very bitter about certain things that had happened at our home. The feelings of unworthiness and being unloved that I endured and didn't know about until I left Jordan. Dealing with these feelings was extremely difficult. It is a daily struggle. Wanting to function normally in this world while carrying these heavy feelings around and not being able to share them with anyone was not an easy task. In a conversation that I had with my sister, she said to me: "I am sorry, we simply didn't know better!"<sup>13</sup>

My family simply did not know any better. In fact, they loved me, and they did their ultimate best to protect me. But they have been dealing with their own inner demons at the same time. I wanted to forgive and move on. In order to do that, I needed to understand what they had to endure, and if they ever overcome these difficulties. Did they really mean to hurt me?

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<sup>13</sup> Battah, N. and Battah, R. (2019). Personal communication by phone.

As I have mentioned before, Music has saved me. Since I was 8 years old, I was always involved in the school choir, and in some private music centres. I was singing wherever and whenever I could, probably not knowing that this was my safe escape.

Therefore, in this project, I wanted to return to the gift of music in my life and use it as the ultimate form of expression. Here, I decided to collect stories, memories, and impressions from my family's childhood, and compose music that is inspired by these stories. I called this project "*Something like home*".

## V. research purpose and questions

The aim of this research is to investigate the process of navigating my own traumas through composing and collective improvisation. In the project *Something like home*, I return to my familial roots and the gift of music in my life as a healing agent for inspiration. *Something like home* explores the effect of finding common ground of love and compassion between my family members, especially those who have been navigating the traumas of war.

This research explores the effects of understanding the dysfunctional relationships I've had with my family members, who have been navigating the traumas of war each in their own way. The aim is to find a more peaceful and compassionate way of understanding them and expressing this through music that is composed based on stories from their childhood.

From a musical point of view, the process of this project was very eye opening and helped me push my boundaries.

Engaging with stories unlocked new artistic outcomes and some unexpected artistic results. My focus while composing was honouring the stories, and I wanted to make sure that the music reflects the emotions and the impressions that I can see in the stories. Therefore, there was not so much space for my own ego there. I also enjoyed working with a diverse group of professional musicians, whom I picked carefully and engaged in the process early on.

The core research questions in this project are:

1. How can engaging with the stories, traumatic memories, and joyful moments of my family's history and childhood experiences be a catalyst for new artistic explorations, approaches, expression, and healing?

2. How might the resulting artistic vision from these stories be used as a framework to bring musicians from diverse backgrounds together?

In which ways can I facilitate the process of the musicians engaging with the stories both personally and artistically, even though they haven't experienced them directly, and how does this affect the artistic outcome?

As a sub-question, I ask the following:

Can music and storytelling be a vehicle to help family members repair the hardships that they have been through?

## 2 CHAPTER TWO: RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

### I. Research approaches

My research draws on the approaches of arts-based research and performative autoethnography. Some of the approaches and terminology of arts-based research include artistic research, practice-based research, practice-led research, practice as research, research-creation, and performance research. These approaches all support the idea of creating new knowledge through bridging between the artistic processes and outcomes, which includes embodying the art either through performance or recording or other means of documenting it and using text to analyse and articulate the research process and findings. These approaches are mostly used when the aim of the research is to explore, describe, evoke, unsettle, or provoke.<sup>14</sup> Autoethnography, is a qualitative approach to research and writing that seeks to describe, explore, and analyse the personal experiences of the author as a way of understanding cultural and personal experiences. These personal experiences are then used to compare and contrast with the experiences of others<sup>15</sup>. My research falls under the approach of performative autoethnography as a way of studying and analysing my personal experiences and trauma responses connected to my family's history, and transmitted war trauma. My aim was to explore the possibilities of creating a safer space for communication between my family members, by trying to see and acknowledge the family members' individual personalities and life stories, in separation from their family roles as siblings or parents.

The research started in 2019 and went through different stages. Some of these steps happened separately but at most times the elements were intuitively interwoven. These stages include:

- Finding inspiration for the idea through participating in a story telling café.
- Forming and shaping the project idea.

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<sup>14</sup> Leavy, P. L. (2017). Ch.7. Arts-based research design. In *Research design: Quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, arts-based, and community-based participatory research approaches*. essay, The Guilford Press.

<sup>15</sup> Thomson, N.R. (2021). *RESONANCE: (Re)forming an Artistic Identity through Intercultural Dialogue and Collaboration* [Doctoral thesis, Sibelius Academy, University of the Arts Helsinki];

Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An Overview. *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung*, 36(4 (138), 273–290.

- Collecting the stories from family members.
- Processing, reflecting and improvising music to the stories
- Composing the music/ discussing instrumentation and harmonic possibilities for Arabic *maqam*-based music.
- Thinking about images and discussing ideas with the videographer.
- Lyric writing process
- Rehearsing with active input from the musicians.
- Finalizing the work for a performance setting.

I will be discussing these elements in detail in the next chapters.

## II. Data collection methods

The participants in this research are made up of my family members, including four siblings, my parents, a group of eight musicians, and a videographer. Interviews were semi-structured, where I asked each of my family members to choose a story or an important event that they remember from their childhood, which they feel connected to, and that reveals their essence. Due to my father's health condition, I had to collect the story by using his written diary, then film a short interview with him back in January of 2019 in Amman, Jordan. For collecting other stories, I followed different processes, including phone calls and recorded zoom interviews, for example. The process of collecting the stories was very difficult and took several tries with some of my siblings, due to not being able to see each other because of living in 5 different countries, as well as some difficulties in opening up emotionally for some of them. My initial observations were written in the form of small reflections, recorded improvisations using my voice and oud, and videos of myself speaking about my interpretation of the stories. The final observations are in the form of lyrical, instrumental, and improvisation-based compositions. The compositions were accompanied by video art derived from the stories. The project premiered in November 2021 in Caisa cultural centre, Helsinki, Finland.

## III. Research Ethics

Verbal and informal written consent was asked from all my family members to use their stories, share them, and share their names in the research and the performance booklet that was distributed to the audience members in the Caisa cultural centre show. First consent was collected via email on 12.10.2019. After that verbal consent was collected through face-to-face

interactions, phone calls, and WhatsApp communication. My reflection and interpretation of the stories were also shared with my siblings and my mother. Moreover, corrections in the text were made based on their input.

#### IV. Relative research

Since creative arts therapies offer a non-threatening way for people to access and express their trauma<sup>16</sup>, there has been plenty of research and projects supporting the use of art for trauma therapy in different contexts. Furthermore, many studies and initiatives have been conducted about how music helps refugees and asylum seekers cope better with their new environment and circumstances.<sup>17</sup> For instance, the Pavarotti Music Centre in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, was created to use music and the arts to address the traumas resulting from the Civil Wars. The Centre's music therapy department addressed intergenerational trauma in children following the wars.

Another example is Susanna Välimäki, a Finnish musicologist, lecturer, and researcher, who discusses the role of music as a vehicle for dealing with collective trauma, in her article "*Musical representation of war, genocide, and torture: Treating cultural trauma with music*". She found music representations of trauma that are related to war, torture and genocide and analysed them by combining trauma theory and cultural music analysis. In her own words: "I approach music as a cultural practice that is especially capable of processing collective traumas and burdens transmitted from generation to generation." (See footnote 16).

One of these musical examples was "*different trains, 1988*" by *Steve Reich*, composed for string quartet and tape which is one of the best-known compositions to describe the holocaust.

A quantitative study was done by Castro-Vale, I., Severo, M., Carvalho, D and published in *Annals of general psychiatry* journal to investigate the intergenerational transmission of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from parents to their offspring 40 years after the war-related trauma. the research was conducted to examine the association between war exposure and lifetime PTSD in veterans and the psychological characteristics of their children.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Välimäki, S. (2015). Musical representation of war, genocide, and torture: Treating cultural trauma with music. *Acta Translatologica Helsingiensia*, 2015, 122–136.

<sup>17</sup> Sunderland, N., Istvandy, L., Lakhani, A., Lenette, C., Procopis, B., & Caballero, P. (2015). They [do more than] interrupt us from sadness: Exploring the impact of participatory music making on social determinants of health and wellbeing for refugees in Australia. *Health, Culture and Society*, 8, 1-19.

<sup>18</sup> Castro-Vale, I., Severo, M., Carvalho, D. *et al.* Intergenerational transmission of war-related trauma assessed 40 years after exposure. *Ann Gen Psychiatry* **18**, 14 (2019).

The outcomes of this study suggested that children are more likely to experience psychological suffering if their parents have been exposed to war, but this suffering depends on the exposure intensity and not the lifetime PTSD that the parents would suffer.

In the article, *Introduction: music and migration*, John Belly and Michael Collyer review some literature that is studying the relationship between music and migration from different angles. Migrating to a different country can evoke big questions about identity, cultural heritage, and traditions. There have been plenty of productions to understand the way migrants view their own migration, in the light of being in a new host society, the culture they have left and how they are perceived by the new host culture. For instance, creative literature has been one of the most famous forms of art to understand that phenomenon.<sup>19</sup> One of the most important examples from the Arab world is *The Mahjar* poets. *The Mahjar* (literally translates to the Arab Diaspora) was a literary movement that was developed after many Arab-speaking poets from Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria immigrated to the United States around the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>20</sup>

Another relative example is György Ligeti, a Hungarian-Austrian contemporary classical composer, who composed a piece called "*Apparitions*" where he draws inspiration from a childhood dream where he dreamt that he couldn't make his way to his crib because the whole room was filled with a finely twisted but dense and extremely tangled web. Other live animals and things were entangled in this gigantic web, including moths and beetles of various kinds, which were attempting to get to the room's faintly flickering candle; and enormous damp, filthy pillows, whose rotten stuffing was coming out through tears in the covers. Ligeti is known for conducting a dialogue on two layers, musical and verbal, both in relation to others' contributions and in his own works. He can develop his own idiomatic story by referencing childhood and youth, as well as synaesthesia, dreams, and imaginings.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Baily, J., & Collyer, M. (2006). Introduction: Music and Migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 32(2), 167–182.

<sup>20</sup> Allen, R. M.A. (2022, January 11). Arabic literature. Retrieved March 30, 2022, from Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/art/Arabic-literature>

<sup>21</sup> Schreiber, E. (2019). Childhood Memories and Musical Constructions. Autobiographical Threads in György Ligeti's Notes on His Works. *TRIO*, 8(1-2).

### 3. CHAPTER THREE: PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND DATA COLLECTING PROCESS

#### I. The inspiration

In October 2019, Finnish cello player, Mila Hussien Laine and I were invited to perform in a celebration for international women's day that was organized in Espoo. The event was a story telling café and we were asked to play 3 sets of 10 minutes of music. The idea was that we split in 3 tables and answer some questions that were designed to make us tell stories from our childhoods, our relations with our families and home, and some other questions that were aiming to make it an interactive story telling. Breaking the barrier between the audience and us performers was very inspiring, and it suddenly felt very safe to perform to these women, because I felt that I know them, and the fact that I trusted those people- whom I met for the first time- enough to reveal some of my personal childhood stories for them, made me feel quite emotional and gave me this amazing idea for my own musical project. During this time, I was just speaking with my therapist about my relationship with my family, and the things that I started to notice about myself which are connected to some of the past experiences that I had in my difficult upbringing environment. I kept wondering and questioning things. I started thinking about this story telling project and the HOW behind this project? How do I make this mine? And how do I reflect this beautiful concept in my own life to bring me some ease and perspective? Compassion, and understanding were the key words here. I wanted to get to know my family, really know them! Ask them to hear stories from their childhood that reflect their essence.

For the past couple of years, I've thought a lot about my identity; I am the only musician in my family, I play traditional Arabic music, but have been familiarised with a lot of other elements of different music, due to my travels and living abroad between Sweden, Denmark, and Finland for the past four years. I thought a lot about finding creative ways to process all these emotions from the past that are constantly coming back to me, most of it has to do with my family and my upbringing environment. How to connect my artistic multicultural musical identity with my childhood and my family? In an attempt, to raise awareness to this issue and try to have a better understanding of my holistic identity, I came up with the idea of collecting stories from my family and my childhood and composing music that draws inspiration from those scenes and impressions.



## II. Musical background & project description

Performing Traditional Arabic music is a passion that I have developed throughout the years of my music practice. Nevertheless, I have been engaging in a lot of distinct music genres, either by listening to or performing them. The characteristic of Arabic music resonates with me. For example, rich melodic phrases including microtonal *maqamat*, and odd metric patterns have always been very interesting to my ears. I feel most comfortable in this area of musical culture, therefore I draw most of my inspiration from it. On the other hand, I have developed a set of different musical skills during the past years through playing, arranging, and composing Arabic-inspired music for different global music ensembles and orchestras and leading different transcultural groups using my own arrangements of traditional Arabic pieces.

For the past three and half years, I have been very fortunate to be in Finland and be surrounded by a lot of great talented musicians, who are open-minded and eager to try new things. Some of the most important outcomes of these encounters is working with Juhani Nuorvala on two of the compositions in this project. Juhani has helped me to find a completely new and fascinating way of harmonizing microtonal Arabic music, using the harmonic series chords. Juhani has also helped me discover the abilities of the amazing Finnish folk instrument; Kantele, which was featured in some of my compositions. Kantele has a very similar sound to an Arabic folk instrument called “*Simsimeyya*”, which is used mostly in folk music in coastal cities and looks very similar to Lyre.

Please click on the following link to listen to some musical examples of the *Simsimeyya* instrument.

3.1 An example from Egypt: أبويا وصاني | أبناء الإسماعيلية

Abuuya Wassani by Abna'a al Ismailiyya.

3.2 An example from Jordan: فرقة عشاق السمسمية بقيادة سفيان جابر

A'gbawi ya Khal by Ushaq al simsimiyya band led by Sufian Jaber.

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/shared/c1ecc86288f3b7b7db975a756dff413>

The flexibility of re-tuning the kantele to be able to play some of the microtonal Arabic scales, and its beautiful timbre of it made me choose this instrument to have featured in some of the compositions.

### III. Collecting the stories from family members.

Collecting the stories from my family members happened during different periods, where some stories were easier to collect than others. My reflection process was different for each story. For example, in some of the stories I immediately started to imagine the music to it, while in some others I needed to reflect on it by writing small interpretations in my diary and then sharing them with my siblings to see how they feel about it. Therefore, during the whole process, I tried to be as transparent and inclusive with them as possible. Another reflection method I used was to first read the story, then record a small improvisation on my phone using my voice, Oud, or sometimes Piano. Some of these improvisations became the basis of the compositions later.

This is the text of the first email that I sent to them to present the idea of the project on 12.10.2019:

“Hello, dear Siblings!

I hope you are doing well!

I finally have an idea for my final exam concert in December 2020!

I will compose original music, and the theme will be based on stories from your childhoods and mine, and I will also ask mom and dad to write one for me!

What I need from you is to write to me one memory of your childhood, preferably the first memory you have! it doesn't have to be a happy one! All memories are welcomed!

While writing it down, try to describe the place you were at, the environment, anything you can remember from that story, try to be as detailed as possible, and as personal as possible, it will help me compose better!

You can write it in Arabic or English, it doesn't matter! and you can send it to me in a separate email or you can just reply here to this one!

I know this is very intimate and private, but I feel that this is a perfect project for me, both artistically and personally! and if it sells well, you can get your share haha!

I will share with you the memory I chose for myself!

I will give you a deadline! The deadline will be 12th of December "THIS YEAR" , haha!

Let me know your thoughts!

Many hugs to all of you <3

Love,

Nemat”

## 4. CHAPTER FOUR: THE STORIES

In this chapter, I will present some of the stories that were collected and how I interacted with them.

### I. Story number 1

This was the first story I got from my brother, Fadi.

“Well, I don’t know why I always remember this memory when they killed my chickens because they were noisy! The neighbours were complaining about it always until dad came and killed the chickens and Mum cooked on them *Maftool*<sup>22</sup> and I refused to eat because I was very sad”<sup>23</sup>

I honestly didn’t know how to interpret this story at first, and I was a bit confused and thinking about whether I should mention it or not. I started to doubt my process and think that this might not be a great outcome. But later, I gathered more stories about my brother’s childhood from my mom and my other siblings, and I came up with some conclusions. I do not claim to be able to analyse people’s personalities based on childhood stories, but my understanding of this was based on several stories about him. My brother doesn’t like to talk about emotional stuff very much, he is more comfortable making them into funny situations, and he is mostly capable of talking about his childhood memories in a family setting where all of us are there and can have a good laugh about it. Like in every family, some members of the family are more difficult to connect with. I know that due to some turbulence that was happening in our family as I have mentioned before that I am was not able to connect with Fadi on a deeper level, therefore the process of composing the piece connected to him was the most difficult one for me. I was afraid of misinterpreting things, and at the same time I was not ready to delve into our relationship deeper. Also, not living in the same country contributes to feeling more disconnected.

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<sup>22</sup> Palestinian couscous with chickpeas and chicken.

<sup>23</sup> Battah, N. and Battah, F. (2019). Conversation through email.

This was my reflection entry in the diary<sup>24</sup>

“He is tender, sensitive, protective, and soulful. He has a wide imagination; he is very funny”

I tried so many ways to improvise this, but none of the melodies I came up with felt true to the story. I always felt a gap between my interpretation and between the music that I was trying to write for this text. I also must admit that I dismissed the story he told me about the chickens and tried to look for something else, because it was extremely difficult for me to understand or analyse it. But after hearing a couple of other stories about his love for animals as a child, his wide imagination, and his tenderness, I came up with the reflection above, but I still did not fully know how can I represent this musically? After some talks with my therapist and my supervisor about this, I decided that it is also okay, and in fact it is a part of the process not to know. And I decided to have this piece as a completely free, unplanned improvisation. The only guide I had for myself, and the musicians was that we want to play something light and tender, something that resembles a loving, caring, sensitive, soulful, and funny person. And it is fine to feel uncomfortable and confused in this process because that is how I feel about it as well. I felt very uncomfortable because I have never publicly performed a free improvisation. I am way more comfortable performing music that has a clear structure, melodic and rhythmic elements, because this is how traditional Arabic music works. Even the *taqsim* and *mawwal* which are the freest forms of improvisation in Arabic music, have some kind structure and expected pathways and melodic idioms within the *maqam*, which in Arabic music theory we call *sayr*. But I needed to leave my ego aside, and only think about the best way to represent the text musically, even if it meant that I had to do something that I am not totally aligned, or comfortable with. I did not use any pre-composed material for this piece. Instead, I wanted to throw myself in the process of being uncomfortable with the unknown. I did sing quite high notes in the performance of this piece, something that I was never comfortable with before. I am very glad this this project made me push my boundaries and step away from my comfort zone, but I still feel that I am not 100% comfortable with free improvisation, especially after hearing the recording, I feel that perhaps I need to have a bit more direction to where the music is going and not to leave it completely free.

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<sup>24</sup> Battah, N. (2021). Diary entry.

Please click on the following link to listen to an excerpt of the outcome.

#### 4.1 *Something like home – Unknown Laughter. Caisa cultural centre, November 2021*

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/shared/c1ecc86288f3b7b7db975a756dff413>

## II. Story number 2

My father was born in Ai'n Karem, Palestine<sup>25</sup> in December 1941. When he was 6 years old the war in Palestine started. In his own words, translated from Arabic “When I was 5,5 years old, I went to enrol in school, but the school declined to let me enrol because I was not 6 years old yet, which was the required age to attend school back then. My grandfather: Sulaiman, took me with him and asked me to keep him company. Therefore, I started going out every morning with him to the dawn prayer in the mosque, then we went to work in our orchards in Al -Khilleh region which was around 2 km away from home A'in Karem. I was supposed to start going to school when I was 6 years old but the war with Israel started then”. My father then goes on to describe how the Palestinian people and leaders back then were fighting to keep their villages and homes safe, he was also describing how he would go to the top of the mountain with his brother to watch what was happening. He wrote “I was sitting at my grandfather Suleiman's home, then my grandmother, A'aisha came and started screaming and calling me in a loud voice and she told me: go to your grandfather Suleiman and tell him that the Zionist paramilitary men have committed a massacre in *Deir Yassin*<sup>26</sup> and we must leave our village A'in karem.... After that, women, kids, and elderly people left the village and we all started to walk towards Battir<sup>27</sup> village. I remember that we left everything behind and left our home, we were told that we will be back after 2-3 days. The men stayed in A'in karem to defend it, and I remember that my brother Suleiman stayed with them. I remember that I left behind my “spinning top toy” at home”<sup>28</sup>. My father goes on to describe their trip within Palestine, stopping at different villages, and sleeping in a Monastery for a while where a priest kindly

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<sup>25</sup> A village southeast of Jerusalem, Palestine.

<sup>26</sup> Deir Yassin massacre took place on 09.04.1984 where approximately 107 Palestinians were killed.

<sup>27</sup> Battir is a Palestinian village in the west bank, 6.4 km west of Betlehem.

<sup>28</sup> Battah, E. (2003/2004). Diary entry.

hosted them. They had hoped to return to A'in Karem but that hope vanished when they heard that the village was now fully occupied. Then they decided to seek Asylum in Amman-Jordan.

Reading this story was extremely painful for me. I remember the first time I read it when I was visiting my oldest brother in Alaska in 2017. He arrived home to find me weeping on the couch holding these papers. It was especially painful because I never had a fair chance to know my father. I was seven years old the last time I visited him in Gaza where he worked back then and was healthy. As I mentioned earlier, in 2002 he suffered a heart attack and a stroke that caused him to have *Aphasia*. He went from a very smart engineer who spoke three languages fluently; Arabic, English and Czech, to a man who couldn't express himself, couldn't say a word and had to learn to read and write again. After a long process of working with a speech therapist, hours and hours spent copying full articles from newspapers, and reading books he was able to communicate slowly... very slowly but the amount of resilience he had was quite impressive. Because my father was away most of my childhood, him not being able to communicate, and having a turbulent relationship with my mother was not the best combination for me to get to know him better. I tried, but I was also too busy building my survival mechanism growing up in a home where things were quite often very tense. I was also getting busy being a teenager! Maybe I did not know him well, but I knew about the traumas and the heavy things he had to go through as a Palestinian refugee. I knew how difficult, scary, and traumatizing it must've been for him to witness so many different wars in Gaza from 1996 until he got sick in 2002. Therefore, I really wanted to have more compassion, I wanted to honour his story which can be the story of so many war refugees especially in his generation and in our Arabic culture where mental health was not at all a topic that you can discuss or mention to anyone. I believe that these traumatizing events of war and losing his ability to express himself and communicate with his loved ones have caused many of his anger and frustration episodes. Of course, every family has their own turbulence, but when war trauma is at the essence of it, things can get way more complicated. I was lucky enough to record small videos with my father during my visit to Jordan in January 2019 of him telling bits and pieces of their journey from A'in Karem to Amman.

Please follow the link to see an excerpt from my conversation with him in 2019, and handwritten notes by him of the story in Arabic.

3.3 Conversation with Emran Battah. January 2019

3.4 Emran Battah, diary entry; 2003/2004

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/shared/c1ecc86288f3b7b7db975a756dff413>

This piece was the first one I composed for this project. I started the process in the autumn of 2019. I made up this sketch of how the piece will look like. Following is the first compositional sketch of the piece from *A'in Karem to Amman*.

3.5 Fom Ain Karem to Amman-First sketch, parts 1&2

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/shared/c1ecc86288f3b7b7db975a756dff413>

My first thoughts were that I wanted to make the story into different scenes, and the main elements to think of were “Change” and constant moving. I decided to use *maqam rast* as the basis of this composition, because *maqam rast* is the father of all *maqamat*, and because I felt that this *maqam* if used in a certain way, can represent being rooted, and that’s how I wanted to represent my father’s story. In his life, there was a constant and drastic change and moving but he always felt rooted in Palestine. The first scene was represented by my father going to the mosque with his grandfather for the dawn prayer, and for that scene, I chose to add a call of prayer sound and to add some layers and echoes to it to represent how the call of prayer sounds when it comes from different mosques in a city. The second scene is when the instruments start to play a melodic theme that is based on a rhythmic pattern called *hacha’* which is traditionally used often in Sufi music. But the way I hear this rhythm is that it fits the pace of walking but the fact that it only contains one “*Dum*”<sup>29</sup> sound that is played on the first beat makes it sound a bit heavy and rooted, which is what I wanted to convey in this scene where my father is walking slowly with his grandfather to their orchard and I imagined that his grandfather is talking to him about their village A'in Karem, and sharing some wisdom of life. At the end of the second scene, the music changes to a faster pace and uses a more dramatic

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<sup>29</sup> Dum is often used to describe the bass/lower pitch sound of the rhythmic instrument played, while Tak is used to describe the higher pitch sounds.

sound by making a melodic modulation to *maqam nawa athar*. The third scene is supposed to convey the image of war, chaos, and fear. Since the music was composed before starting to write the thesis and coming across similar projects, I made some changes, which will be present at later performances. When I read the diary that my father wrote I noticed that he didn't tell any emotional details. He was just mentioning the events as they happened, narrating his story, but in the middle of all the narrating I read this sentence "I remember that I left behind my spinning top toy at home". My heart broke! I can still feel the squeezing feeling that I had in my stomach and the number of tears I had. No child should ever have these kinds of memories, and experiences. I decided to have this as the emotional peak of the piece and as the last scene. I knew that whatever I put there, it needs to be expressive, and emotionally intense. I couldn't compose that part at first. It took a while and I didn't like any of the results, therefore I decided to leave it for a while and come back to it later, a process that worked very well for me during this whole project.

Please follow the link to listen to the result which was presented in the concert "*Something Like Home*" concert, Caisa cultural centre, November 2021.

3.6 From Ain Karem to Amman, Last scene, Audio, "*Something Like Home*" concert, Caisa cultural centre, November 2021.

3.7 From Ain Karem to Amman, Last scene, Video, "*Something Like Home*" concert, Caisa cultural centre, November 2021.

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/shared/c1ecc86288f3b7b7db975a756dff413>

### III. Story number 3

My sister Rana immediately knew which story she wanted to share with me. She had a full text describing the story in her own words. Rana says: "I was born in a war zone and spent the first years of my life there. Surprisingly, my brain managed to preserve memories from my early childhood, which represented extreme fear or extreme feelings of safety and love! Since I was 40 days old, I had a nanny called Randa. When someone asks me about my childhood, she is the first person to come to my mind accompanied by a warm feeling in my heart. The memory I have was in her house, she put some water and soap on the floor, and I was holding the mop to help her clean the floor. I was in my pyjamas, I turned my trousers up in order not to get wet, and was wearing a big slipper, most probably hers :) My Mom came to pick me up and I opened the door, she smiled and asked me: "What are you doing?!", I answered with happiness: "Randa



is cooking *Mlokheyyeh* (a traditional dish) and I am cleaning the floor" I still remember Randa's features...White skin with dark hair falling down her shoulders, and a petite body. When the airstrikes used to exhaust the city and my parents could not reach me, she used to take care of me until they could contact us. We left the war city by the end of the siege and took refuge in a neighbouring country before we continued our journey to other ones. As I was growing up, Randa was always on my mind, I wondered how she was doing! Does she still remember me! I know I do! I could always visualize her...and as I do, I feel warm, safe, and very, very loved! I had a dream to meet her again, I could even imagine the details of our warm meeting! How I will tell her about our family's long journey and how things eventually ended up well. I wanted to thank her for taking care of me and for the love she surrounded me with! So, as I became 18 years old, I decided to visit the city I was born in and search for her! During that summer, my parents were travelling to meet some friends who survived the war like we did, so I insisted on asking them about Randa, maybe they can give me a clue about where she is before I start my search for her. A couple of days later, my mother called me. I was extremely excited and asked her immediately: Mom, did you ask them about Randa? Do they know anything about her? My mother kept silent for a few seconds before answering me, and with a sad voice, she said: Yes, I did. Rana dear, I apologise Randa got killed in the war, after 3 months of us leaving the city.

I felt sharp pain hitting me, and I cried my heart out for Randa as if I had lost her at that specific moment, 15 years after our last meeting. I wished I had the chance to only tell her that I was fine! To tell her how much I loved her and to thank her for the love she surrounded me with.... Randa died at the age of 17, but she saved my soul before. Later on, I came to know in psychology that they call beautiful souls like Randa "Life Savers," they are the humans capable of surrounding kids with enough love and care that can separate them from the challenging surroundings, like the case of wars. Hence, protect them from being affected negatively by what's going on around them.

Randa was my Life Saver and with her love and care she separated me from the ugliness of reality, with her tenderness she replaced my feelings of fear with safety and transformed my memories of war into memories of love and warmth...every now and then I send Randa my love and gratitude through sincere prayer, or a donation made in her name. Whenever I visit the city of my birth, I can feel her soul around me, and I know she is looking at me from heaven with a big smile :)

I still close my eyes and imagine our meeting in a beautiful garden, I listen to the long conversation we'll have! I can hear our laughs, and see the stories we'll tell each other...

To the soul of my beloved Randa...With love”

My Reflection:

“When I think about my sister, I see the innocence of a child in her. She is super caring in her essence, super loving, and has always been like a second mother to me. It feels as if Randa managed to transform her magical love powers for her, somehow you see Randa’s soul sparkling in her eyes. I think of my sister here running in a huge field filled with flowers of all colours, surrounded by butterflies, she is running like a child, laughing, having an overflowing feeling of love and ecstasy. These feelings are her prayers to Randa’s soul!

It feels like in a parallel universe, she is Randa.

In this specific piece, I decided to compose a very light melody, that goes over the Balfolk Mazurka  $\frac{3}{4}$  rhythm. The heaviness of the story is contrasted with celebrating Randa’s life and the way she helped Rana survive. <sup>30</sup> Imagine Rana and Randa dancing the Mazurka to this song.”

#### IV. Story number 4

Shadi was born in Lebanon in 1978. According to my mom and my sister Rana, he was very social and talkative as a kid. He liked to open things up and study their mechanisms, and he was an extremely smart child. He was 4 years old when the 1982 Lebanon war began, so he had his share of being exposed to war. When I asked him to tell me a story from his childhood, he chose to tell me a story about his first feelings of flirtation and love when he was 13 or 14 years old. We lived in a poor neighbourhood in the eastern part of Amman, Jordan. I was not born yet! My mom gave him money to go and get bread from the bakery and he started walking to the bakery. It was a gloomy day, cloudy and a bit cold; he said. In the bakery, there was a beautiful girl with black braided hair. They looked at each other and smiled. The girl offered him chewing gum and asked him his name. His heart was racing. The girl left the bakery and they never saw each other again. This was a new feeling, one that changed his day.

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<sup>30</sup> Battah,N. (2020). Diary entry.

Following is a video from my conversation with him about the story.<sup>31</sup>

### 3.8 Conversation with Shadi Battah, narrating his story.

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/shared/c1ecc86288f3b7b7db975a756dff413>

## 4 Story number 5

My sister Reem didn't tell me a full story of memory, but instead, she told me bits and pieces of what she liked to do as a child. She mentioned a lot that she was a very calm child. She said that she liked to imagine things, for example, the trees would be speaking to the animals in the forest. She said to me that she loved the feeling of the breeze on her face when she was walking to school in the morning with the neighbouring girls.<sup>32</sup> These facts about her surprised me because as a grown-up, she was not at all a calm person. She also, like all of us in the family, endured her share of traumatic events. Her share might have been more intense than some of us. This piece took me time to digest and reflect on. One reason was that my sister was not ready to talk at first. I needed to be patient and understanding and accept the fact that I might not get anything from her at all, which was frustrating at first, but I came to peace with it in the end. I needed to think about all this, and think about how I could translate this into music? I was trying to come up with something that has two dimensions: the first one is to remind her of that calm space within her, that she can always dive back to it and find this child who felt that morning breeze, but at the same time to honour the other part of her and not to dismiss her traumatic experiences. I started the process by listening to a forest soundscape in the background and tried to improvise something on top of it using the piano. I came up with an ostinato part in 6/4 that I liked which used Eb minor pentatonic scale as its basis. I started to add layers of small phrases that come on different beats of the bar. My idea for the first section was to use some elements from minimalist composing techniques, to create a repetitive, cyclical, and meditative atmosphere. In the second part, I did not want to have a dramatic change to indicate that this is a different section. I wanted to keep the floaty atmosphere but decided to play with the harmonic structure, by playing a harmonic series chord and making sure to play the 11<sup>th</sup> partial which has a very close intonation to the microtone used in Arabic

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<sup>31</sup> Battah, S. and Battah, N. (2019). Zoom video call.

<sup>32</sup> Battah, N. and Battah, R. (Reem) (2021). Face to face conversation in Jordan, and several phone calls.

*maqamat*. Nevertheless, this chord would create enough tension and point to that conflicted part of my sister that I wanted to refer to and honour.

4.8 Following is an audio excerpt from the piece: Dive, and a sketch of the compositional process.

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/shared/c1ecc86288f3b7b7db975a756dff413>

## 5 Story number 6

My mother, Khadijeh, is from a refugee camp in Gaza called Deir al Balah. She was born there in 1951 and grew up with 6 siblings in a small house. My grandparents were very poor and didn't have great resources for the family. My mother left Palestine to study in Egypt, and she was there during the war in 1973. She was also unfortunate to witness the war in Lebanon with my father in the early 1980s where she gave birth to both of my older siblings.

She has described bits and pieces from her childhood: how they used to go to the sea with her siblings to collect stones and shells and make accessories, how they'd have to walk long distances with pottery jars on their heads to bring drinking water.

Sometimes they'd go fishing with their neighbours, help them sell it in the fish market after, and in return, they'd get some fish.

She described how my grandmother took old clothes and made them into toys because they couldn't afford to buy new ones. My mother said they were poor. It was wartime, but they were happy, they were content! In my initial reflection, I wrote some keywords to what kind of words did this evoke in me.

I wrote: "minimal, simplicity, poverty, sacrifice, love, warmth, kindness, a bit of sorrow"

<sup>33</sup>When I started to think about the composition process for this piece, I knew that I wanted to use Kantele to resemble the sound of the Simsimiyya instrument that I have mentioned earlier in the text. I imagined the music to be divided into scenes, but it is all happening in my mother's memory. The first scene starts with my mother running to the beach with her siblings when they were children. When the lyrics start my mother is standing Infront of the sea and speaking to it: "I wish someone would take me back to our home, to our doorstep". In the following scenes my mother is still standing by the sea, wondering how many harbours and countries she has lived in and escaped from, and longing for the waves to take her back to her home in Deir

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<sup>33</sup> Battah, N. (2020). Diary entry.

Al-Balah. The last scene resembles the children running back home, with the sounds of the waves fading out' and all that's left are the memories and stories that I will carry within me as her youngest daughter.

4.9 The following photo is my mother's handwriting, taken in January 2019-Amman/Jordan.

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/shared/c1ecc86288f3b7b7db975a756dff413>

## 5. CHAPTER FIVE: THE MUSIC AND VIDEO-MAKING PROCESSES

### I. Deeper into the composing process.

The composing process was a journey of discovery, including finding new harmonic possibilities for Arabic music vocabulary, new processes, inspirations, and challenges, which stretched over a period between November 2020 to August 2021. There were so many elements to consider but the main goal was to bring the stories to life. I used Arabic *maqamat* as the basis of the compositions. But I didn't always follow the pathways that are used when composing in a traditional way. Sometimes it was difficult to follow the exact intonation of a *maqam* since not all the instruments had flexibility in playing the micro differences in the intonation. For example, in one of the pieces, I used *maqam jiharkah*. This *maqam* has its first tetrachord sounding almost like the first 5 notes of a major scale. I say almost because when traditionally played in Arabic music, the third and fourth notes are lower than those that are used in an equal-tempered major scale. But I did keep the second tetrachord which starts on the fifth note of the scale as it is with the 7<sup>th</sup> note as a quarter-tone flat. Which makes the interval between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> notes 3 quartertones; a very important interval which gives Arabic music its unique sound. Therefore, in my composition, I played the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> notes as a major 3<sup>rd</sup> and a perfect 4<sup>th</sup> interval. I used a lot of traditional rhythmic cycles as well as using some polyrhythmic figures. In some pieces, the melody dictated the rhythm, and in other pieces, I started with a rhythmic pattern and then wrote the melody or a bass line on top.

One of the most interesting elements that I worked with was the harmonic structure of some of the pieces that used microtones. Microtonality is an essential part of Arabic music, but it has been also studied and used in many other musics of the world. I was fortunate to work with Juhani Nuorvala on some of the compositions. Juhani is a Finnish composer and composing teacher at Sibelius Academy. His compositions are influenced by microtonality, American minimalism, new romanticism, popular music, and techno. With Juhani we experimented with using the harmonic series chords to harmonize phrases that have microtones and are derived from the Arabic music culture. In the harmonic series of any note, the 11<sup>th</sup> partial is -49 cents lower than the equal-tempered, which is the closest to the distance between two successive notes in the historical 24-quarter tone Arabic scale (50 cents). The eleventh harmonic of a series

on A, for example, is 551 cents above A, a quartertone between D and D#. <sup>34</sup> For instance, if I am composing a phrase using *Jins Rast* (which has its third as a quartertone lower (approx. - 50 cents) than the natural third), I would use a fundamental note that has its 11<sup>th</sup> partial as this specific microtone and build a chord using mainly 4ths or 5ths intervals from the fundamental note + the 11<sup>th</sup> partial. <sup>35</sup>

Writing lyrics is not one of my strengths, therefore I asked my best friend and study colleague Ra'ad Al Zaben<sup>36</sup> to write lyrics for this project. Ra'ad's style of writing lyrics is very suitable for this project. He is also a very close friend, and he knows my family as well, therefore he is emotionally close to the topic. The way we worked was that I would call him, tell him the story of one piece and leave him to work on it for a while. We only had a deadline for the whole lyric writing process, but we didn't have a separate deadline for each piece because he prefers to work with moments of inspiration that would come naturally. It was sometime difficult for me to have to wait, but I needed to trust his process. Some of the songs had already melodies to them and the lyrics came after, and in some others, he wrote the lyrics to a rhythmic pattern that I instructed him to use. The lyrics were written beautifully, and they were a great representation of the stories. Here is a translation of one of the pieces "*Distorted Memories*", which reflects on my own childhood memories. The first scene "Lullaby" is talking about the bedtime stories that my mom told me and the way her hands would brush my hair. The song represents the strong motherhood image portrayed in a Palestinian woman.

"Tell, me the tale of the shepherd

The one who's grazing by himself

In the wide lands

Him and his love that's in his mind

And the tale of the neighbour's girl

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<sup>34</sup> Gann, K. (2019). *The arithmetic of listening: Tuning theory and history for the impractical musician*.

<sup>35</sup> It is important to note that the intonation of Arabic music microtones is not exact, and it varies based on the maqam, region, style of music and sometimes even between players from the same region.

<sup>36</sup> Ra'ad is a Jordanian music composer who takes a lot of interest in Jordanian music; be it songs or pieces. He has worked in the field of collecting and analysing the local musical heritage of the Jordanian desert, countryside, and coastal areas, including musical instruments, poetry, melodies, dances, and rituals.

And how her quiff was stolen

And the horses in the valleys

That were tamed by the beautiful girl

Mom, extend your hands and undo my braids

And search my hair.. mother, look what is left in there?

From the colour of the henna and the rings on your hands, when I was a kid

And from your perfume, mother, smell what is left in my hair

And from your whispers, oh mother

When you were telling me those tales

Mother, what is left in my hair?

Search, look and count the quiffs of my hair”

## II. Expanding my musical techniques

As a person who has travelled and lived in different countries, I got to experience a large sum of different genres and music from different parts of the world. Although my largest influence remains to be traditional Arabic music, I was bound to have my musical identity affected by my interaction with different musical cultures.

Moreover, new musical innovations happen when a person migrates from their original culture to another place, whether it was a voluntary or involuntary migration. The new experiences and being able to see oneself in a different position can lead to cultural innovation.<sup>37</sup> For a very long time, I was afraid to try anything out of the ordinary when it comes to playing the Oud. The Oud is a very important traditional instrument in the Arabic music repertoire, and there are certain ways that an Oud player is expected to play within the culture. This also applies to other traditional Arabic instruments like Qanuun. Nevertheless, there are some wonderful examples

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<sup>37</sup> Bailly, John and Collyer, Michael (2006) *Introduction: music and migration*. Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 32 (2). pp. 167-182.



of how these rules were broken, and the instrument was used as a means of musical expression regardless of its historical and cultural background.

For instance, Shafeeq Al-Sa'adi; a Palestinian Qanun player and composer based in Sweden, has done his master's research exploring the many different potentials of the Qanun. He writes: "Over the course of many years of playing the qanun, I have noticed how often the instrument has been played within its modal traditional framework, leading me to a perception that the qanun and myself are prevented from discovering more techniques and new potentials. I, hence, have been attempting to explore the traditional manners of treating the instrument with regard to timbre, playing techniques, and different harmonic orientations while trying to maintain its true qualities and not lose sight of its traditional soul. My aspiration, as well as my method, is to be open to what one can do with the instrument rather than to take a specific approach. The qanun had shown an untapped capacity for expanded techniques and a broader range of sounds that enrich and revitalise the instrument's sounds library. This research has enabled me to stretch my boundaries and explore unknown possibilities, which has helped in the expansion of my own self-expression as a composer. It also paved the way for me to investigate further unexplored potentials of the instrument as this research emphasizes showing the qanun's enormous capabilities that have yet to be realized"

Please follow the link to listen to a sample of Shafeeq's work.

### 5.1 Forest mind (solo in the woods) - Shafeeq Alsadi

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/shared/c1ecc86288f3b7b7db975a756dff413>

Another example is the Jordanian musician with Iraqi roots, Layth Sidiq. Layth is an award-winning violinist, composer and educator and the current artistic director of the New York Arabic Orchestra. He has a versatile style of playing that consists of Arabic music, Western classical music, Jazz, and other genres. Recently Layth has been recording short improvisations on his violin using his Thumb to play everything. He is using very common Oud phrasing and tremolo technique to play on his violin, something that is a bit out of the norm when it comes to the traditional way the violin is played in the Arabic music repertoire.

Please follow the link to listen to an example of Layth's thumb technique.

### 5.2 Layth Sidiq-Maqam Rast using the thumb

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/shared/c1ecc86288f3b7b7db975a756dff413>

Naseer Shamma, Iraqi musician and Oud player have also been experimenting with playing oud using only his left hand on the fingerboard. It creates a more percussive sound. Here's an example of one of his compositions where he uses this technique. The piece is called: Qissat Hub Sharqiyya, which translates to "A middle eastern love story".

### 5.3 Naser Shamma using only left hand on the fingerboard of the Oud

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/shared/c1ecc86288f3b7b7db975a756dff413>

In "*Something Like Home*", using my voice and the Oud to express the story and try my best to bring them to life, dictated that I play and sing in a new way for me. For instance, in the third scene of the piece "*Distorted memories*" where I reflect on my own childhood memories, I used the body of the Oud to create percussive sounds which represented a scene from my childhood where I was running around the neighbourhood with my friend, wearing shoes that were made of wood (clogs). Following is a sample from "*Something Like Home*" concert in Caisa cultural centre, November 2021.

### 5.4 *Distorted memories / wooden shoes scene.*

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/shared/c1ecc86288f3b7b7db975a756dff413>

Another example is using the higher register of my voice while singing Arabic lyrics.

I have been told by voice teachers in Jordan and other Arabic singers that using the lighter upper register of the voice doesn't fit the criteria of success when it comes to singing Arabic music. I was not at all encouraged to explore that upper register, because I was afraid that I would be judged harshly. And while in other educational systems you might be encouraged to find out for yourself and not take the teacher's words as a bible, in Jordan the education system is different and there is a lot of hierarchy. But since I have been working with my voice teacher Jennifer Moir, we explored my voice in new ways. Some of the themes we worked on were Fear, identity, and learning perspectives. How can I change my learning perspective to have more curiosity and compassion instead of fear and judgement?

We also worked on vocal expression, voice placement, strength vs lightness, and self-confidence using big gestures. During the summer of 2021, I took some online lessons with the very respected Arabic music singer from Lebanon; Rima Khcheich. During these sessions, we discussed the use of mixed and lighter voice qualities in Arabic music and looked at some examples, which confirmed to me that these voice qualities are used by very respected singers

in the Arabic music scene. In the piece, “*A prayer to Randa*”, which tells the story of my sister’s nanny during wartime in Lebanon in the early 80s, I used my upper register in a verse which I thought would fit the lyrics perfectly to give it a bright expressive high-pitched sound.

Here is an audio excerpt from “*Something Like Home*” concert in Caisa cultural centre, November 2021.

### 5.5 A prayer to Randa-higher pitch part.

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/shared/c1ecc86288f3b7b7db975a756dff413>

## III. The video-making process

I met Mohammad Moe Mustafa with a friend in a concert that I was playing in Roihuvuori, Helsinki in September 2020. When I was searching for a videographer to work on creating visual material for this project, he reached out and showed me his work. I was extremely happy to find him and decided to work with him. Mohammad has a very similar background to mine. His family are Palestinian refugees who have lived between Kuwait and Jordan. He lived most of his life in Jordan, so we have the same dialect, humour, and very similar experiences. We started the process by building a storyline. I explained to him the stories of the pieces and showed him the composed music for each one. Mohammad had wonderful ideas to bring the stories to life. In the piece, “*A new feeling on a gloomy day*”, where my brother, Shadi, talks about his first feelings of flirting with a girl from his neighbourhood. He saw her at the bakery, she had a big black braid. They had a small talk and a flirtatious moment, then he never saw her again. Mohammad suggested that we film a video of hands braiding black hair. The braiding process will go on until the end of the music where the hair will disappear but only the hand movement will stay, suggesting that even though the girl was never to be seen again, things will keep moving and life continues.

Mohammad and I liked the idea of playing with contrasting imagery to the music. For instance, if the music is rhythmic and livelier, we used slower movement in the video. In the piece “*A prayer to Randa*” instead of having two girls dance Mazurka, we asked twin sisters to dance in a semi-choreographed way. The reason I picked twins was that I wanted to convey the idea that my sister Rana and her caretaker Randa are very similar in their essence but are also two different people.

Following are two videos of the process of filming “*A prayer to Randa*”.

5.6a "A prayer to Randa" filming- frame painting

5.6b Laura and Anni- A prayer to Randa

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/shared/c1ecc86288f3b7b7db975a756dff413>

#### IV. Rehearsing with the musicians.

In the beginning of my thesis, I posed two main research questions. I will now focus on the second question, namely: how might the resulting artistic vision from these stories be used as a framework to bring musicians from diverse backgrounds together? In which ways can I facilitate the process of the musicians engaging with the stories both personally and artistically, even though they haven't experienced them directly, and how does this affect the artistic outcome?

Finding tools to cooperate with the musicians and creating an atmosphere for them to interact with the stories and contribute to the music with their own unique artistic identities was an important component of this project. It was evident that merely handing out sheet music and expecting them to play the notes as written on the page would not be enough. I wanted the musician to have the possibility to interact with the stories and for them to have the space to contribute to the music with their own special artistic identities. Therefore, I started the process by holding a collective meeting to explain the idea of the project and to tell a bit about the stories before we start rehearsing. I was also particularly interested in knowing if they have any similar experiences in their families or friends' families that they know of or if they can relate to the topic of generational cultural/war trauma. The meeting got very emotional for me and some of the participants, but it was a beautiful moment of sharing that got us all to be open and willing to embrace the stories and commit to bringing them to life. The saxophone player shared with us that one of her close friends has a Palestinian parent and they often speak about this topic. Other participants appreciated that we held this meeting because they felt it was necessary to the process.

My choice of musicians was not random. My focus for the melody section was to find musicians who can play microtones on their instruments because that would save a lot of time if they were already familiar with microtonality. I also was interested in musicians who are

comfortable with contemporary music and free improvisation, and who are open to learning new musical languages. For instance, Anna-Sofia Anttonen, the saxophone player was familiar with contemporary music and interdisciplinary projects, and she has a great ability to find different microtones on her saxophone. Juulia Salo, the Kantele player, has been playing classical and contemporary music and she was very open to finding a way to play the microtones on her instrument. Juulia came up with a prototype cardboard piece that she placed in-between the levers to play the required quarter tone. She tested several thicknesses until she arrived at the best one to use. It was also great to have Veli Kujala in the project who played the 24-microtonal accordion. Oscar Beerten played violin and was able to comprehend and recreate the intonation of Arabic music microtones and I think that his ability to play the microtonal Norwegian folk music has helped him in this regard. I also asked Devina Boughton to join the team. Devina is an American trumpet player who has studied contemporary microtonal music in the United States and has been studying in the Arabic ensemble course that I teach, as well as studying trumpet with Ilkka Arola<sup>38</sup>. Therefore, it was easier for them to find the intonation of the Arabic microtones. Some microtones were easier for Devina than others because they didn't have an extra valve on their trumpet. As for the rest of the team, I had the honour to have Nathan Riki Thomson on the double bass, and Teemu Mustonen on the drums. Nathan has a wonderful ability to play odd rhythmic patterns, a rounded understanding of music expression and a unique way of playing his prepared double bass. In his own work, Nathan has been focusing on (re)forming his artistic identity through engaging in intercultural dialogue and transcultural collaboration, with the focus on studying resonance as a physical phenomenon and as a way to connect with the world around us. Nathan's positive attitude, curiosity, and respectful way to collaborate have made the process much more relaxed and exciting to play. Teemu is a jazz drummer who has a very good understanding of polyrhythmic patterns and an open mind to learn new rhythmic patterns. We worked on finding the best sounds on the drum kit that best translates the Arabic rhythmic patterns that I used in the compositions. Teemu has listened to a reference list that I made for him that consists of traditional Arabic pieces which used the same rhythmic patterns that I used. Most of the music was precomposed, but I made sure to leave space for the musicians to have solos and gave them the freedom to express their unique identities. I also was open to receiving ideas about the

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<sup>38</sup> Ilkka Arola Ilkka Arola (b. 1988) is a Finnish trumpet player and multi-instrumentalist.

Travelling in the Middle East and Africa has had a great impact on his music as well as recognizing his own roots in Nordic culture. His special Quarter Tone trumpet and flugelhorn allow him to play Arabic maqams and other microtonal music.

arrangements. For each piece I gave the musicians the imagery and the elements of the stories without dictating how things should sound. I wanted them to have the space to interact with the stories and to have freedom in adding their own sounds.

## 6. CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS

In the beginning of the thesis, I presented the following core research questions for this project:

1. How can engaging with the stories, traumatic memories, and joyful moments of my family's history and childhood experiences be a catalyst for new artistic explorations, approaches, expression, and healing?
2. How might the resulting artistic vision from these stories be used as a framework to bring musicians from diverse backgrounds together?

In which ways can I facilitate the process of the musicians engaging with the stories both personally and artistically, even though they haven't experienced them directly, and how does this affect the artistic outcome?

Engaging with these stories was very important for my healing process. A process that is still ongoing and will take time for sure. But understanding my family's narrative was a huge first step on the path of healing. War trauma is real, and it affects the way people communicate and live their lives. Therefore, having compassion and understanding towards anyone who had to endure this is important. Moreover, on a professional level, this process has unlocked many artistic approaches for me. Whether it was composing, performing, or leading, I needed to learn how to be curious again and how to explore and step out of my comfort zone to honour the stories and commit to the process.

Composing music for stories was a new thing that I immersed myself in during this project. I needed to build images, sensations, smells, and textures in my head to come up with how all this would sound. It was a very exciting and valuable process, and I learned a lot about how to use different instruments to convey a specific musical image. Moreover, learning new possibilities of harmonic structures that could go well with Arabic microtones was very eye-opening and made me interested to learn more about different tuning systems. Breaking out of the tradition while maintaining the core elements was a very important thing that I have learned

to embrace. For example, I used the Oud as an instrument of expression in disconnection from the traditional way of how this instrument is expected to be played all the time, but I still played some of the compositions in a traditional way. I based most of the compositions on the maqam tradition and the Arabic rhythmic cycles in their traditional form, but I was also open to the different possibilities of using harmonic structures when it felt suitable. Some of the compositions were based on free improvisation which has very few guidelines written, and this was a relatively new ground for me to explore and cover.

I was very happy that I managed to unlock some new vocal possibilities as well. Using my higher register was important for expressing some of the stories and that was something new for me to explore. There have been several things that did not go as expected, but overall, the outcomes of this project have exceeded my expectations.

After listening to the concert recording, I am not completely sure that I am happy with the free improvisation bits of the project. I feel that in the place where I am now in my musical career, prefer to have at least some guidelines or a framework when I do improvised material, and that is how I developed the improvised material for the next performances.

In the premiere concert, I decided not to talk at all during the performance and to leave the audience with just a booklet about the stories, which is something also that I have never done in any of my previous performances. I am glad that I tried it out, but I feel that this has made me a bit disconnected from the audience and left me with a bit of a cold feeling.

I feel that this project with all its elements has made me explore, discover, and dare to embrace my own musical identity and ideas, which is also a part of my healing journey. Because the cultural and other types of traumas that I have suffered in my past can block creativity and build a lot of self-doubts, but this project was liberating in a very unexpected way.

My compositions are mostly inspired by the Arabic *maqam* and systems and rhythmic patterns used in traditional Arabic music. Nevertheless, since I have been travelling to many international folk music camps and playing with musicians from different parts of the world, I have been influenced by other diverse musical traditions. Moreover, during my journey, I discovered that there are different approaches to achieving the best result when collaborating with musicians from diverse cultural and musical backgrounds.

These approaches may differ in practical, theoretical, and geographical contexts, but many ensembles face the same obstacles, including how to combine culturally different concepts, aesthetics, tuning systems, playing techniques, and ways of conceiving music.<sup>39</sup>

Using improvisation as a means of transcultural music-making is a good approach in these situations. In this project, it was important to use the stories as the main element to bring the ensemble members together. Furthermore, the musicians were given space to improvise and interpret the stories. The stories were discussed in the first meeting and during each rehearsal, mental images and sensations were given to the musicians to work with. In the last couple of rehearsals, we also used some of the video art during the improvisations.

My sub-question was to investigate if music and storytelling can be a vehicle to help family members repair the hardships that they have been through? I am not sure I have a definite yes or no answer to this question. This is a thing that is quite difficult to measure and understand. The process of forgiving and healing is a long process, and not everyone is ready to go through it at the same time. One thing I understood for sure during this project is that you cannot force anyone to go through a process that they are not ready for. Especially when this process involves bringing up past traumas. I can only speak about my own position, and how engaging with the stories helped my own healing process. Understanding what my siblings and my parents went through as kids, in separation from their relationship to me, was very important in this process. I needed to see them as individuals, to understand and interpret their essence based on the stories that they have told me. I did my best to share my interpretations with all of them to keep the authenticity and make sure I didn't misunderstand anything. Some of them were ready to talk in-depth about it and some weren't. I am not even 100% sure that all my siblings understood the importance of this project to me, or what exactly I was trying to do, but this shouldn't matter. I was at points questioning my process and wondering if this project would have the intended effect on our relationships. But I needed to believe that this uncertainty is part of the process and that this project won't solve everything, but it is the first step on a long journey of healing together with my siblings, by accepting and respecting their process, and not taking anything for granted.

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<sup>39</sup> Heldt, K. (2018). Transcultural Music-Making in Contemporary Music Ensembles: Five Approaches in Germany, the Netherlands, Uzbekistan and Turkey. *Circuit*, 28(1), 45–57.



This project was very important for my development as a composer and as a performer. Writing music with an image or a story in mind was something new for me. I usually compose music by focusing only on the musical elements, so I am thankful that this project opened a new horizon for me. Sometimes it was a bit challenging to compose things that would match exactly the image I had in mind; due to the instrumentation I chose. I prioritised working with musicians who could play microtonal music, regardless of their instrument. As I have mentioned earlier, in this project I explored my voice and the Oud in new ways and broke some of the mental barriers that I had because of some previous perceptions about how I am supposed to sound when playing the Oud or singing Arabic lyrics. Moreover, I learned a lot about the topic of war trauma, cultural trauma, and different approaches to family therapy. For instance, I learned that what I did in this project is called therapeutic joining, which refers to making a therapeutic alliance with the family that involves building trust, making the family members feel comfortable and forming a safe working relationship. It is a way of intervention. <sup>40</sup>

There were some limitations in the data collecting process, that is collecting the stories from the family members. Due to geographical distances, personal differences, and relational differences some stories were easier to access and collect than others. Although I was often reflecting on the process with my therapist and my supervisor and sharing my frustrations sometimes, I feel that this could be improved in the future. For example, a continuous discussion can be held with a therapist who has extensive knowledge of family therapy and trauma work, about how to approach a person in your family whom you have a less close relationship with.

Looking ahead, I envision that this project will serve as a foundation for a community project that I will facilitate, which will be held in Helsinki. The project will be called “memory expression through music”. In this project, I will be working with therapist Marja Väänänen, who has a wide variety of experiences in couples, family, and individual psychotherapy. Marja has Lived in Finland, the UK, Middle East, and the US, therefore she has lots of experience in helping people from different cultural backgrounds.

Furthermore, I will be working with people on expressing their memories through musical improvisation using their bodies, voices, and some percussion instruments.

The goal is to help them process the emotions that these memories stir and have no fear in expressing them. The target group will be young adults and adults in Finland.

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<sup>40</sup> Greif, G. L. (1990). Twenty-five basic joining techniques in family therapy. *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, 22(1), 89–90.

The working language will be English, but participants are encouraged to use their own languages throughout the musical process parts.

I envision that this project will be the basis of my future doctoral research project which will most likely be community-based research.

*Something like home*, is my way of finding my voice within myself, my family and in this world. It is my attempt to heal from past traumatic events. It's my attempt to get closer to my family, to understand them and choose compassion and love as a way of communicating, using music as the ultimate vehicle.

I hope this inspires you to go on your own healing journey.

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## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

1. **Jins, pl. Ajnas:** is a maqam scale fragment of 3, 4 or 5 notes. The *jins* is the basic melodic unit in Arabic music, as a maqam is really a pathway among many *ajnas*. Each *jins* is defined by its intervals, which don't change when it is transposed and give it its distinct and recognizable character.
2. **Maqam:** The Arabic Maqam (pl. *Maqamat*) is a system of scales, habitual melodic phrases, modulation possibilities, ornamentation techniques and aesthetic conventions that together form a rich melodic framework and artistic tradition.
3. **Sayr:** the established and habitual melodic motion/behaviour of a *jins/maqam* (literally, "course, motion").
4. **Taqsim, pl. Taqasim:** A traditional and virtuosic instrumental improvisation anchored in a maqam.
5. **Mawwal, pl. Mawawil:** a traditional vocal improvisation performed on a poem in colloquial Arabic dialect.
6. **Jins Rast:** is a very popular and widely used 5-notes *jins*. The intervals between its notes are (1 tone-3/4 tone- 3/4 tones-1 tone).
7. **Maqam Rast:** Maqam Rast is by far one of the most popular and common *maqamat* in the Arabic repertory. It is also the main maqam in the Rast Family. It consists of *jins rast* on the tonic and *jins rast* on the 5th scale degree.
8. **Qanuun:** A middle eastern stringed instrument. The Qanuun is related to the ancient Egyptian harp. Since the 10th century, it has been an important aspect of Arabic music. The Qanuun's body is made up of a trapezoid-shaped flat wooden board across which 81 strings are stretched in three-string groups, with 24 treble strings each consisting of three strings. The instrument is set flat on the musician's knees or on a tiny table. Two plectra are used to pluck Qanuun strings.