

The *Maqam* Phenomenon

Habib Hassan Touma

The *Maqam*, a characteristic musical phenomenon in Arabian music, has interested several Western scholars since the beginning of the century. The methods applied in approaching the *Maqam* are manifold. They often suffer from incompleteness, and this leads to misleading definitions of the phenomenon. Perhaps this has happened because Western musicologists used to think and still think in Western musical concepts: they try to analyse this phenomenon by applying Western musical terms which apparently do not fit. Therefore, in order to give a clear and comprehensible account of this phenomenon, it is above all necessary to avoid the definitions and technical terms used in Western music and rid oneself of the opinions expressed on this subject by Western writers and their Arabian imitators. This phenomenon can certainly be most aptly illustrated and determined by a description of its latent structural elements.

The term *Maqam* designates a modal framework in the music of the Arabs. It denotes not just the intervallic distances between tones of a specific order, but rather the mood created through realization and presentation of the modal framework based on such an order of intervallic distances, which themselves make up what I call the *Maqam*-row or the *Maqam*-mode. From a historical point of view, the term *Maqam* became the common property of Arabic-Islamic musical scholars in the fourteenth century. Concerning the provenance of the word *Maqam*, a "traditional" theory has established itself, a theory which has been quoted by many musicologists of this century and still has a place in the most recent publications. It asserts that the term *Maqam* was transferred from its function of designating the "erhöhter Standort" (Indelsohn: 1913/14), "the name of the stage" (Sachs: 1943), or "Standort des Sängers vor dem Kalifen" (Riemann Lexikon: 1967) to the domain of music. Such assertions, however, are contradicted by history, for the singers and musicians usually remained concealed behind a curtain and were rarely allowed to appear in front of the Caliph. Communication between the Caliph and the musicians was established by the *sattar*, an intermediary who passed on the orders of the Caliph. When it happened, however, that an especially gifted singer was permitted to stand opposite the Caliph, he never took up his position on a raised platform (Kitab-al-Aghani: tenth century).

The *Maqam* represents a unique improvisatory process in the art music of the Arabs and in the art music of a large part of the world which includes the countries of North Africa, the Near East and Central Asia. In this vast area the *Maqam* is widely cultivated. The development of the *Maqam* is determined by two primary factors: space (tonal) and time (temporal). The structure of a *Maqam* depends upon the extent to which these two factors exhibit a fixed or free organization. The tonal-spatial component is organized, moulded and emphasized to such a degree that it represents

the essential and decisive factor in the *Maqam*, whereas the temporal-rhythmic aspect in this music is not subject to a definite form of organization. In this very circumstance lies the most essential feature of the *Maqam* phenomenon: i.e. a free organization of the rhythmic-temporal and an obligatory and fixed organization of the tonal-spatial aspect. The *Maqam* is thus not subject to any rules of organization where the temporal parameter is concerned, that is it has neither a regularly recurring and established bar scheme nor an unchanging tactus. The rhythm characterizes the performer's style and is dependent on his manner and technique of playing or singing, but it is never characteristic of the *Maqam* as such. This is one of the reasons why, from the Western point of view, the *Maqam* has sometimes been regarded as music improvised without form—particularly since clear and fixed themes, together with their subsequent elaboration and variation, are absent. The absence of a fixed rhythmic-temporal organization has hampered and still hampers many musicologists, who have drawn astonishing conclusions, which unfortunately have been accepted repeatedly as self-evident. In this way to the *Maqam* have unjustly been attributed certain temporal features, namely "motivic groups", "definite tempi" and "definite variations", "melodic pattern", "melodic models" or "tono melo syndrome". These designations do not correspond to the actual and latent structural elements of this phenomenon, because the *Maqam* phenomenon is a form which is represented by a fixed tonal-spatial organization peculiar to the respective *Maqam*-row (*Maqam*-mode). The singular feature of this form is one which is not built upon motifs, their elaboration, variation and development, but through a number of melodic passages of different lengths which realize one or more tone-levels in space and thus establish the various phases in the development of the *Maqam*. The *Maqam* is mainly based upon a systematic realization of tone-levels which gradually move upwards from the lower to the higher registers, or downwards from upper to lower registers, gradually ascending to the higher registers, until the climax is reached, at which point the form is completed.

A tone-level can, for instance, be set up around the note D and extend over the tonal range (g-a-b-c-e-f-g), whereby D becomes the pivotal point being encircled and emphasized by its neighbouring tones. It is not unusual, however, for a tone-level to have more than one tonal centre; for example, one of the tones of the group (g-a-b-c-e-f-g) can form a secondary centre, which functions as a kind of satellite to the central tone D and gives the entire tone-level its characteristic colour through the intervallic relationship arising between the primary and secondary centres. The full exploration of the possibilities of such a tone-level represents a new phase—with its characteristic central tone—in the building up of the *Maqam*. Some musicians develop a particular phase at length, others do so quite briefly; some extend the range of the tone-level and move quite a distance away from the central note, others restrict themselves to a narrow ambitus around the centre. But in all cases the central tone of a tone-level is of the utmost importance for the musicians, because it is the nucleus of the entire phase.

The aggregate of the phases determines the form of the *Maqam*, a form which is shaped by the succession of the central tones of the tone-levels. Each central tone is encircled by neighbouring tones and is sustained

for a duration determined by the musician. One musician may take seven seconds to present a tone-level, another forty seconds.

In every *Maqam* the central tones stand in different relationships to one another and always produce at least two different intervals: for example, a third plus a second, a fourth plus a second, a third plus a fourth or a third plus etc. These intervals are dependent upon the structure of the *Maqam-row* (*Maqam-mode*) and this upon the tonal system of Arabian music. They determine the mood of the *Maqam* and the structure of the nucleus of the *Maqam*. The nucleus consists of the sum of all central tones which can be reduced to three or more notes.

The first and last tone-levels of a *Maqam* are centred on the first degree of the *Maqam-row* (*Maqam-mode*). The *Maqam* is divided into melodic passages, the number and length of which are not predetermined. In each melodic passage, one or more tone-levels are combined and contrasted, and they can also replace one another. The number of tone-levels, without repetitions, is predetermined in every *Maqam* and can be reduced to a nucleus. Native audiences recognize the standard of the originality and ability of a musician in the way he or she illustrates, combines and contrasts the tone-levels or the phases. Therefore, all possible combinations and repetitions of the tone-levels, as well as their departure from and their return to the first tone-level, proceeding to the highest tone-level—the climax of the *Maqam*—are regarded as standards by which the performer's creative originality, ability and musicianship are judged. The realization of a truly convincing and original *Maqam* requires a creative faculty like that of a composer of genius. Nevertheless, this phenomenon can only in part be considered as a composed form because no *Maqam* can be identical with any other: each time it is recreated as a new composition. The compositional factor shows itself in the predetermined tonal-spatial organization of a fixed number of tone-levels without repetitions, while the improvisational aspect freely unfolds in the rhythmic-temporal layout. The interplay of composition and improvisation is one of the most distinctive features of the *Maqam* phenomenon.
