

Politics of the Apolitical in Post-Tarab Spaces

Alexander Krentsel

Department of Music, University of California, Berkeley

May 2025

Abstract

This essay examines AWTAR, an amateur tarab band of first- and second-generation Arab immigrant musicians in the San Francisco Bay Area, drawing on ten months of participant fieldwork as a violinist in the group. Tarab – a genre built on the modal language of *maqam* and oriented toward collective musical ecstasy – carries deep ties to memory, religion, and homeland for the band’s members. Yet the group performs this music of joy against a backdrop of distress over the conflict in Palestine, and has explicitly chosen to remain apolitical, declining to program resistance songs or stage political fundraising in favor of creating a space of musical refuge. Through thick description of rehearsals and a sold-out concert, I argue that this apolitical stance itself functions as a political act. Reading the band’s practice through Rancière’s account of politics as the configuration of a common space, and through Figueroa’s notion of “post-tarab,” I show how the group’s gatherings assert Arab presence and generate what Papacharissi calls an “affective public” and Frishkopf terms “social resonance.” In a diasporic context where Arab existence is hyperpoliticized, the choice to let the music simply be music emerges not as an absence of politics but as a distinct mode of claiming cultural space.

Keywords: tarab, ethnomusicology, Arab diaspora, post-tarab, affect, *maqam*, San Francisco Bay Area

On a warm California Friday evening, a pair of young Egyptian and Tunisian engineers drive an hour after work from Sunnyvale to Oakland with their collection of nays and an oud in tow. A Jordanian architect in his early 30s, with a short, curly reddish-brown beard drives down from Pinole with his qanun, a portable amp, and a microphone. An older Palestinian limo driver with a shiny, bald head and deep, rumbling laugh smokes a cigarette outside before coming in and sitting down at his tabla as a few others come in. The oud player starts strumming a tune as the group chats, and slowly the other musicians join in – some reading from music, others by ear. *Rehearsal has begun.*

The group rehearsing is AWTAR¹, an amateur Tarab band based in the San Francisco Bay Area. The group was founded in mid-2024 by a handful of musicians who met as members of a large (30+) community music group that performs Tarab music for orchestra and singing ensemble. AWTAR organized a successful 200+ attendee sold-out show in Fall 2024, performing 10 musical medleys from famed Tarab singers including Umm Kulthum, Fairuz, and others. This rehearsal setting represents a confluence of intersecting tensions: young musicians playing music beloved by older generations; music of the past in the present; sounds of the Middle East and North Africa in an Oakland rehearsal space and San Francisco performance hall; blending traditional instruments with contemporary musical influences. Most striking, however, is the contrast in mood: playing music of ecstasy and lightness amid a backdrop of distress, destruction, and loss in the Palestinian conflict. Despite these tensions, the group has explicitly chosen to remain apolitical, eschewing programming Palestinian resistance songs or fundraising for political causes in favor of creating a space of

¹ We use a pseudonym for the band name, and pseudo-initials for band members, to protect privacy.

musical refuge. In this work, I report on my experience rehearsing and performing with the AWTAR band, and the ways in which this explicitly apolitical stance itself functions as a political act in a ‘post-tarab’ musical space.

I write from a dual position in the band; as a member of the group playing violin since its founding in mid-2024, I hold an “insider” position in the music rehearsing, performing, and decision making processes. However, as a half-Ukrainian half-Russian American trained exclusively in Western Classical playing, I am very much at the same time an outsider in an otherwise all-Arab band and performance space, and as such frequently take a “student” role in the group, observing the creative decisions made. My reflections come from approximately thirty rehearsals, five interviews, and two concerts over a period of twelve months.

Tarab Musical Genre and Musical Experience

Much literature exists that describes tarab music comprehensively, most notably works by Scott Marcus (Marcus 2004, Marcus 1993). In brief, tarab is a genre of music that was widely popularized through the 1900s in the Arab world, often featuring a singer over top of a band containing the qanun, nay, oud, violin, and darbuka or other percussion. Indeed, the AWTAR band contains this set of instruments with a rotating cast of singers over top. Musically, tarab is characterized by its complex set of melodic ideas, particularly the use of 24 unique quarter-step spaced tones to construct sets of 4-note tetrachords (known as *jins*) which span 10 quarter steps, and which are combined together as pairs plus an additional whole-step interval to make up *maqamat* (plural of *maqam*). These *maqamat* translate roughly to ‘scale types’ in the Western

musical system, akin to Major or Minor scales, but are much more numerous and musically diverse. To Western audiences, maqam Hijaz is the most recognizable, evoking “distant desert” according to N.Z., one of the oud players in the band. However, the most common maqam and thus the “most Arabic” according to H.A., the band’s qanun player, is Rast, because it contains two quarter-tones. The word *tarab* translates literally to “state of euphoria,” and much of the music is comparatively long (up to and over ten minutes) and takes its time in building to a place of euphoria.

However for the band members – a mix of first and second generation immigrants from Arab countries – tarab is something more personal, connected to some earlier part of their lives. H.A., the band leader, shares his story: tarab was the music of an older generation for him. Growing up in Jordan, “my grandma had [tarab] records, and we’d play around with them and try to get it to go.” He recounted one of his earliest memories of tarab as being a particular Abdel Halim medley that he was drawn to when he heard it on the radio at 12 years of age. For S.I., the experience was similar, though he grew up in the US to Arab parents. He recounts, “I did not used to play [tarab] on my own time, so the only place where I would hear is when my parents would play CDs in the car, putting on maybe a couple hours of music. Some of the things were catchy.” S.I. did not pick up *performing* tarab music until starting college at the University of California, where he studied nay performance in addition to his main degree in computer science. However, for S.I., the music also has a religious context: “we would go to the masjid mosque, a lot of the time we’d hear the Quran being recited using Maqamat.” In this way, tarab music’s modes are even more strongly interwoven with Arab identity through religion. As Scott Marcus concurs in his book on Music in Egypt

(Marcus 2007), the maqamat are used in the daily prayer recitations five times a day, broadcast on speakers across all cities in the Arab world. Thus, the very musical language of tarab music calls forth a core sensory experience and cultural aspect of life in the Arab world.

Politics and Meaning

To engage with the question of political meaning-making, we must first define what we mean by politics. I turn to Rancière, who defines politics by writing that “Politics is primarily conflict over the existence of a common stage and over the existence and status of those present on it” (Rancière, [1995] 1999, p. 26). Steingo and Moreno explain this further, writing, “Rancière defines politics in aesthetic terms. ‘Politics is not the exercise of, or struggle for, power’, he declares, but is instead ‘the configuration of a specific space, the framing of a particular sphere of experience, of objects posited as common and as pertaining to a common decision, of subjects recognized as capable of designating these objects and putting forward arguments about them’” (Steingo and Moreno 2012, p. 3). In this way, the politics I refer to in this work is the act of defining a physical and musical space and granting or claiming authority over that space.

The space in question can be sliced in many different ways, and indeed past scholars have put forth productive and pertinent slicings. In particular, Michael Figueroa presents an ethnographic study in which he explores the “connection between the diasporic intent of the setting [of a performance of a United States tarab band,] and the band’s experimental Arabic musical practice, with its focus on the use of tarab to transform the concert space to a mutual aesthetic engagement between performers and

listeners” (Figueroa 237). He coins the term *Post-Tarab*, defining it as the “extension of [tarab’s] affective register into twenty-first-century discourse on Arabs’ hyperpoliticized existence, both within the white supremacist society of the United States and in relation to increasingly distant memories of home”, and notes that it has an “explicit diasporic imperative” (241). It is in the context of this post-tarab space that I explore the notion of the political in this work.

These two ideas are deeply intertwined in this particular time and place of the United States in 2025. *Post-tarab* itself refers to the way tarab music as a genre functions for the Arab diaspora in the United States. Rancière’s theoretical lens situates the work that post-tarab is doing squarely in the political, and frames it as a site of meaning-making where Arab presence on the common American stage is asserted and legitimized.

Meaning-Making In the Rehearsal Space

The rehearsal space itself of the group acts as a site for this kind of post-tarab political meaning-making. I turn to a thick descriptive account from an evening band rehearsal during the first week of Ramadan:

thirsty. dry air on the 7th floor of an oakland building, a hot afternoon.
speakers blasting keyboard synth imitating orchestra, phrases repeated up and over. S.I. and I get up at the same time, but for opposite purposes; he sets aside his Nay, and walks for the glass door to a patio, setting out his jacket and kneeling to pray. I beeline for a faucet, filling a water cup and gulping it down. I feel

awkward; it is ramadan, and most other band members sit suffering in thirst and hungry, S.I. prays, and I take water.

the band takes the chance to pause all together, set aside instruments and chat. H.A. places the qanun on an empty table, grabs an Oud, and begins arguing with F.T., our main Oud player, about some way of playing ornamentation. room bubbles over with conversation as all 7 of us converse in small groups. fatigue setting in, only second hour of rehearsal but a day of fasting leaves little energy

rehearsal begins to peter out, 15 minutes till food, everyone is tired. during Ramadan, S.I. tells me, all of the Arab world shifts into a low-power schedule; restaurants all closed during the day, work hours restricted to 6 hours a day. wives and girlfriends come in and join, food is set out, and as sunset comes we begin to eat, excitedly breaking the fast

...

at some point, I can hear the shuffling of a tambourine being pulled across a table under the excited chatter. L.D. gives the tambourine a few shakes. conversation continues, but a signal has been placed in the air. conversation continues somehow, but each musician reaches to grab their instrument. L.D. begins to play; dum-tak, - dum, dum -, tak -. a few rounds and people begin to quiet down. L.D. ornaments, as H.A. strums his qanun, and a different male singer picks up the mic and begins to sing. at first it is just the singer and L.D. together, then others join in. I try to join by ear but struggle; after a minute or so, F.T., who plays the oud and knows some things by ear but mostly plays from music too, stops to find some music for the two of us, so we begin to play together.

no women participate in the core music making; despite two of the women present being singers in our group. and yet, they are fully present in the experience of the music, perhaps not joyous but deeply engaged, moving with the music, at times with their hands up. they join in for some choruses when the entire band sings.

playing continues long into the night, past when I leave at 10pm to return to berkeley as classwork awaits



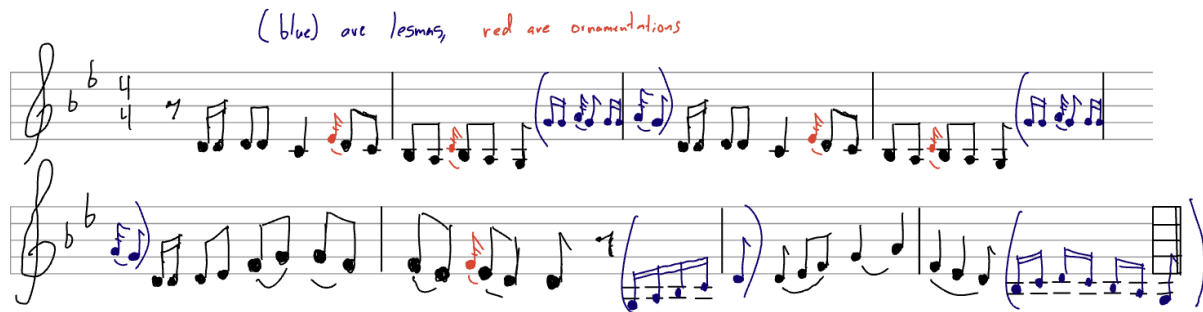
Stillframe image from AWTAR music-making during Ramadan break-fast dinner after rehearsal. Not shown is a singer at the microphone, percussionist on tambourine, and qanun player, as well as ~6 friends and family.

In this rehearsal account, we can see how the band's rehearsal serves to reconfigure space and "center a particular sphere of experience," per Rancière's words. It is more than just a musical rehearsal, more broadly maintaining what Professor of Political Science Zizi Papacharissi calls an "affective public" (Papacharissi 2015). As

Figueroa explains, “Musical traditions could be reframed as sonic practices geared towards congealing and maintaining [this] ‘affective publics’ (Berlant 2008, Papacharissi 2015), [which are] collectivities where belonging is articulated through shared feeling” (Figueroa 238). Here, the musical and cultural traditions mix, together articulating shared feeling to create collective belonging.

This also happens in other ways through the musical aspects of rehearsals. It is interesting to note the music *re*-making process that occurs in the rehearsal space. To illustrate this, I recount one rehearsal in March, as the band gathered in a large conference room in a shared building lounge on the 2nd floor of an apartment complex in Oakland. We were seated around a large rectangular table; at the head sat our band leader H.A.. Our percussionist, M.A., who usually plays cajon, told us he was feeling sick an hour before rehearsal, so H.A. brought his own tabla in addition to the qanun he usually plays, and switched between them. H.A. set up a speaker and microphone for our singer. Clockwise around the long table, we had H.A. on qanun and tabla, R.Z. and N.B. singing, N.Z. and F.T. on oud, S.I. on nay, and me on violin. We rehearsed for approximately 3 hours. For much of this rehearsal, we focused on the unwritten that is so core to the feel and experience of Tarab music: the ornamentation and improvisational “lesmas” in the gaps of melodies, which act as a response to the melodic call played before. We focused on a piece called “The Gulf Sea Melody,” working out the ornamentation we would use for the opening music section. We played through the opening section of the piece a half dozen times, trying different lesmas each time, until a particular lesma resonated with the majority of the band members. We went around in a circle, trying out different lesmas, improvising short musical ideas that fit in

the rests between the core melody, and then converged on those that stood out to us. I transcribe what we settled on below, showing the original melody in black, our added ornamentation in red, and our lesmas in blue in parentheses:



Transcription of The Gulf Sea Melody, as ornamented by AWTAR in rehearsal.

In this way, rehearsals serve to be not just space to perfect musical execution as a group, but also as a place to define aspects of the music. This kind of group work is required because, despite the popularity of the music genre, sheet music is difficult to come by. Much of the genre's sheet music is volunteer-transcribed and exchanged at an old online forum, sama3y.net. As F.T., our oud player, told me in an interview, the administrator of this website passed away in the mid-2010s, so the website lives on un-updated, without the ability to create new accounts – only existing accounts can access all of the content on the forums. As the bandmates call them, the “sheets” contain many errors and typos that need to be caught and corrected while playing through, ranging from extra or missing beats to incorrect accidentals. Ornamentation and lesmas vary from performer to performer, thus there is no canonical reference for them in the available sheet music. To complicate matters further, there is a wide range of sheet music reading knowledge in the band, with some members knowing nothing by ear and thus requiring sheet music, while others play entirely by ear and cannot read

sheet music. Thus, the band rehearsals also function to define the *musical* space the band inhabits.

I note here further that the transcription does not capture well the “conversation” happening in the music. Tarab music has no harmony in the Western classical sense – it is a single melody with call and response, where response is brought out in a big swell by the band. The *lesmas* function as the response to be brought out, so are played louder, with more presence and force.

Post-Tarab Performance Space



AWTAR band during a concert in Fall 2024 at a community theatre in San Francisco, with the audience in the background.

It is in the performance hall that the politics of the band’s apolitical decision become most visible. The AWTAR band performed to a sold-out crowd of over 200 in San Francisco’s Marina district in the Fall of 2024. The concert’s opening introduction included a sentence recognizing “coming together in difficult times,” but otherwise did not explicitly mention Palestine or program Palestinian music. I asked H.A., the band

leader, about this decision. He explained, “I knew I didn’t want to make it political. I wanted to give people a break, a chance to celebrate the songs: come and remember what we like to listen to. The songs you listen to, we will play.” H.A. observed the function that this decision played for the community, noting that it provided a “safe space to take a break from politics.” Another band member echoed these sentiments to me, also describing complex feelings around being “fatigued” at the centrality of conflict discourse in other musical group performances. Keeping the concert “apolitical” to him relieved the music of that fatigue.

However despite this explicit reasoning on the part of the band, the concert clearly felt political to at least some portion of the audience. A particularly illustrative experience at the concert stuck with me; after the concert, a couple in their mid-30s came up to me to ask about my involvement in the group, and at the end of the conversation, said “You’re so brave for taking a stand with Palestine.” The conversation then wandered off to other topics, but their interpretation of the playing (and attending) of the concert as a political act surprised me given what I knew of the band’s own intentions for the concert. My own interest in the circular question of the politics of the apolitical for this ethnography was born of the experience.

To get more at the idea of the meaning of the band and its performances, I asked some of the band members a broad question about how they would describe what the band is ‘about’ to someone unfamiliar with the group. In response, one of the band members tied the goal of the group to satisfying what the community needs explicitly: “Our goal [last concert] was to satisfy the audience’s need to hear the familiar songs, the favorites – that’s why we did medleys, because we want to hit all of the favorites ...

a lot of people said, we needed this, in some form. We needed some form of celebration, some place where the community can come together.” He also addressed the importance of the decision to keep the concert apolitical to satisfying this need, describing how other Tarab groups in the San Francisco Bay area were putting on concerts of “Watani” Arab music, which “was all very national, almost depressing songs – ‘I will save my country’ vibe, with people crying.” Our group’s position was in contrast to that, that “people need a break from that, some opportunity to just forget and have fun, something more, up, easy. And you saw at the end that ... [how it was received] was crazy.” Indeed, the audience’s reaction during the concert was strong, as people were moved to their feet, dancing and singing along late into the night as the concert ran nearly three hours.

At the same time, this apolitical decision was not a simple one for the band members. Multiple band members, unprompted by me, mentioned feeling guilty at times about letting the music just be (joyous) music while the conflict in Palestine continues, including the band member I quoted above. The complexity of the feelings was evident in one of my interviewee’s vacillating responses: “sometimes I feel guilty that maybe I should be participating in the [political music]...because at some point I was like, enough, we’ve had enough of this Palestinian music. But the war was still going on. But is the music really going to change anything?... [but] to me it was like, this is too much. This music is not good musically, it’s just good because you want some message. And I was already not convinced that the message is going to become more clear because we’re playing this Palestinian music. But I can also see the counterarguments...” I note that this was not due to vacillation on which side of the conflict to support; all of my

interlocutors expressed that despite the existence of some regional differences, they and the Arab world are united on the side of Palestine. Rather, the complexity was specifically around the idea of what music ought to be performed in Arab spaces in this place and time. A politically active audience member I interviewed also mentioned discomfort with the very minimal acknowledgement of conflict. Interestingly enough, both band members who said that to me then justified the band's decision by saying that they feel that the music ought to be able to stand independently. As one band member put it, "some of the people dying may be listening to this same music as they die in the conflict," implying that the music doesn't stop even for the people experiencing the conflict, so it shouldn't need to stop here. They did mention that other musicians in the community may not agree, and in the past other Tarab groups in the San Francisco Bay area have navigated the decision differently, with some members choosing instead to leave musical groups that they felt did not sufficiently address the war in their performances.

I also interviewed an audience member who attended the concert live. A first generation immigrant in her late 30s, she spoke cogently about the effect of the space created by the musical performance. "I think music has been healing to our community, bringing us together regardless of our differences. Having spaces like AWTAR really creates that communal sense of community, that sense of together-ness, and brings people out of their isolation." I pushed her to elaborate further on how that happens. "You're listening to things you grew up with, things you grew up with. You're meeting people that you may know in your community, but you don't really see them often. Like, for the longest time, I was kind of isolated, because of what's going on, but then things

like AWTAR do actually create safe and happy spaces for the community [to gather] when it's much needed." While this sounds like the cliché that "music brings people together," I want to note the deeper importance of this gathering space; as my interviewee mentions, it creates space for Arab people at a time and place where space may be squeezed out elsewhere.

To better understand what is being said here, I turn to Michael Frishkopf's idea of "social resonance", which he defines as "an intensive cognitive affective social state resulting from cycles of sonic feedback through a social network" (Frishkopf 2019, p. 306). Tarab does this not only musically – through call and response between musicians, musical riffing on one another, and interacting with the audience during improvised *taqasims* (similar to cadenzas) – but also socially, providing a space for the Arab community to connect, both with themselves and literally with each other.

An Unknown Musical Future

AWTAR's rehearsals and performances, therefore, demonstrate how the eschewing of explicit political statement itself creates a significant political space. In this post-Tarab context, where Arab identity and existence are hyperpoliticized, the act of gathering to play and share this music configures a "common stage" and "sphere of experience" (Rancière) distinctly separate from overt political discourse. By centering the shared musical language and cultural resonance of Tarab, the band fosters an "affective public" (Papacharissi) and generates crucial "social resonance" (Frishkopf), providing a much-needed space for connection, healing, and temporary refuge for the diasporic Arab community. This is not an absence of politics, but rather a distinct mode

of political action – one that asserts the right to create and occupy a cultural space defined by shared feeling and heritage, even as external pressures intensify.

Looking forward, however, the future of this important space is uncertain. In an increasingly chilling national political climate that views presumed 'otherness' with suspicion, the ability of spaces like AWTAR's concert hall to continue providing this refuge and connection faces potential challenges. Can the stage carefully constructed through this apolitical stance endure if the boundary between internal community life and external political pressure becomes harder to maintain? The negotiation of this tension – between the desire for cultural expression, communal healing, and the realities of diasporic existence – will undoubtedly continue to grow more complex in the coming months and years.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to the musicians of the ensemble discussed here for welcoming me into their rehearsals and performances and for the many conversations that shaped this work. Thanks also to Professors Juan David Rubio Restrepo, Marié Abe, and Jocelyne Guilbault in the Department of Music at UC Berkeley for their guidance and support in conducting this fieldwork and their feedback which improved earlier drafts, and the Music department graduate students for the many conversations that shaped my perspective on ethnomusicology. Any errors are my own.

References

Berlant, Lauren. 2008. *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Danielson, Virginia. 1998. "The Voice of Egypt": Umm Kulthum, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century." University of Chicago Press.
- Figueroa, Michael; Post-Tarab: Music and Affective Politics in the US SWANA Diaspora. *Ethnomusicology* 1 July 2022; 66 (2): 236–263. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5406/21567417.66.2.04>
- Frishkopf, Michael. 2019. "Music for Global Human Development and Refugees." In "Call and Response: SEM President's Roundtable 2016, 'Ethnomusicological Responses to the Contemporary Dynamics of Migrants and Refugees.'" *Ethnomusicology* 63 (2): 279–314.
- Kahel, Darin. 2021. "Music Is Feeling: Tarab: A Phenomenon of Arab Musical Culture."
- Lohman, Laura. 2010. *Umm Kulthūm : Artistic Agency and the Shaping of an Arab Legend, 1967-2007 / Laura Lohman. Music/Culture. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.*
- Mahmoud, Dina A. 2023. "On the Animating Affect of Ṭarab and Its (Un)Translatability." *Middle Eastern Literatures* 26 (2): 151–73. doi:10.1080/1475262X.2024.2304842.
- Marcus, Scott L. 2007. "Music in Egypt: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture". Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Marcus, Scott L. "Solo Instrumental Improvisation (Taḡāsīm) in Arab Music." *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 27, no. 1 (1993): 108–11. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026318400027127>.
- Moreno, Jairo & Steingo, Gavin (2012): Rancière's Equal Music, *Contemporary Music Review*, 31: 5-6, 487-505.
- Papacharissi, Zizi. 2015. *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rancière, J. (1999). *Disagreement: Politics and philosophy* (J. Rose, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (Original work published 1995).
- Shannon, Jonathan H. 2003. "Emotion, Performance, and Temporality in Arab Music: Reflections on Tarab." *Cultural Anthropology: Journal of the Society for Cultural Anthropology* 18 (1): 72–98.
- Steingo, Gavin. 2016. *Kwaito's Promise: Music and the Aesthetics of Freedom in South Africa*. Chicago Studies in Ethnomusicology. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.