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# **The Sounds of *Mahragān*: Compositions and Musical Circulations in Egypt**

**Nicolas Puig**

**URMIS-IRD**

Summary: Mahragān - the plural mahragānāt is frequently used, and is often presented by the international media as electro-chaabi - has been developing in Egypt since the 2000s. This particular musical form has its origins in the practices of DJs who officiate at balādīs (local weddings, most often held in a portion of the street set aside for the ceremony) and gradually transform the simple greetings to the wedding audience into genuine melodic pieces, chanted songs that arouse the infatuation of audiences. This performance gradually took hold at wedding feasts (afrāḥ), and those involved in this nocturnal world simply referred to it as a "festival", mahragān. This text describes the aesthetic and sonic practices of the mahragān, and reinserts them into a social and musical genealogy. It describes this music from its beginnings until it percolated into other styles, such as trap and rap, to form what is today described as new mahragān.

Key words : mahragān – electro – anthropology of music – urban culture - Egypt

It was roughly eight o'clock in the evening in December 2016. I had an appointment to meet Shehta Karika (Shiḥta Kārīkā)<sup>1</sup> at a gymnasium in Madīnat Naṣr, a slightly upscale Cairo neighborhood on the road to the airport. He was scheduled to perform with Okka & Ortega (Ukkā wa-Urtīgā), two fellow stars of the Egyptian musical style called *mahragān*. He had been invited to play by a communications firm that hoped to improve its image among middle-class university students. Shehta and Okka & Ortega finally came on stage, well after ten p.m.

They were joined onstage by about ten dancers and a DJ sound engineer. They formed a compact group that was encircled by young members of the event staff who linked hands to form a human chain. As we entered the large gymnasium, where a hundred spectators were awaiting the next phase of the festivities, a Shehta enthusiast pulled me inside the moving group. A folk-dance performance had just ended, and our jubilant assembly quickly mounted onstage amid a frenzy of noise and gestures. I ended up on the side of the stage, my vantage point for an ear-splitting, hour-long concert that reverberated through the gymnasium. After pausing for selfies with members of the audience, the singers and dancers left as quickly as they had arrived. Once the crowd had settled down a bit, I approached an audience member who happily showed me a photograph on his smartphone showing him smiling and clutching Shehta by the arm. Suddenly serious, he turned and said, “They’re nice, but they can’t sing.”

The *mahragān* – the plural, *mahragānāt*, is often used as well – tends to be presented as electro-*sha ‘bī* by French and international media.<sup>2</sup> The style arose in Egypt in the late 2000s after originating among DJs working at *balādīs* marriages (local wedding ceremonies generally held in sections of a city street set up for the purpose). The term suggests an Egyptian form of authenticity that contrasts with Westernized, urban, middle-class musical styles. *Mahragān* musicians and composers have gradually transformed the simple salutations of street wedding audiences into melodic

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<sup>1</sup> When they are available, I provide Latin transcriptions found on social networks and digital platforms for the names of musicians, producers, and groups. Unless otherwise specified, interview excerpts are from conversations with the author. Academic transcriptions are in parentheses following first references.

<sup>2</sup> The dialogue between *mahragān* pioneers in the documentary film concerning the name of this musical trend is enlightening (after minute 24). The singer and producer Figo concludes, “We call it *mahragān* (...). These people [foreigners] called it *électro-sha ‘bī*.” Sadat: “That’s right.” In the opening scenes, Kanaka (of the group *Madfa ‘giyya*) underscores that the first thing to be said about this music is that it is called *mahragān*. *Cairo Calling*, Rinse x 100 Copies 2018. [[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rF1ZKGRI\\_c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rF1ZKGRI_c)].

compositions and songs that have been enthusiastically acclaimed by young Egyptian audiences.

*Mahragān* performances have subsequently gained widespread popularity as wedding party music (*afrāḥ*), earning its name, which denotes “festival.” The director of the *Makān* cultural center in Cairo suggested that the same trilateral root *h-r-g* also includes the idea of loudness or even hullabaloo. The verb *harrag-yeharrag* ‘*ala* means to silence someone by shouting louder than them, or to overwhelm something with noise. Figuratively, then, *mahragān* refers to a hurly-burly, hence the popular expression *ēh el-mahragān da*, loosely translated as “What is this mess?”<sup>3</sup> It is also possible, however, that, as charming as it is, this etymological explanation was a subtle means of discrediting the style by focusing on its raucously loud acoustics. This linguistic explanation has the advantage of underscoring the central role of the sound system in *mahragān* performances. Indeed, as an extension of public performances at weddings and *mouled* saint’s festivals, the style produces a sound amplified to near-saturation that includes electro-acoustic effects, particularly echo and reverb. More than other electronic musical styles, *mahragān* practices and sound technologies combine to generate a highly specific esthetic.

As a product of this festive environment, *mahragān* has evolved in tandem with an urban popular singing style called *sha ‘bī* that emerged in the 1970s. The *mahragān* style has been regularly updated since it first surfaced, attracting frequent criticisms of its musical potential and cultural legitimacy that are often based on the gritty urban environment that is allegedly vaunted by *mahragān* singers. Indeed, at a time when Aḥmad ‘Adawiyya, a *mahragān* pioneer and member of the Pantheon of Egyptian *muṭribīn* (in fact, Ḥasan Abū Su‘ūd, one of his composers, was president of the musicians’ union in the 2000s),<sup>4</sup> the rising popularity of *mahragān* has met with infatuation, but also consternation.

The movement initially developed in Alexandria and in Cairo, in Maṭariyya and Madīnat al-Salām, vast urban districts north of the megacity

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<sup>3</sup> One also hears “*šabāb ma ‘ba ‘d beyharragu*” (young people acting like fools together) (comments by Mohamed Johnny recorded after an acoustic itinerary through Cairo, Vincent Battesti & Nicolas Puig, Cairo, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> He noted that Aḥmad ‘Adawiyya had “modernized the *mawwāl*”; productions from the period are described as *néo-mawwāl*. See Puig Nicolas, “*Sha ‘abī*, populaire: usages et significations d’une notion ambiguë dans le monde de la musique en Égypte,” *Civilisations*, 1-2/LIII (2006), pp. 23-44, p. 28.

that are most closely identified with the *mahragān* style.<sup>5</sup> In the 1970s and 1980s, Maṭariyya, originally a village surrounded by agricultural fields, expanded greatly during unofficial, informal urban growth that transformed Cairo by creating vast, informal urban zones called ‘*ashwa’iyāt*. Madīnat al-Salām, by contrast, is a satellite city established in 1981 by the government in the desert west of Heliopolis. Its residents include former residents of ancient central Cairo neighborhoods that were destroyed by the 1992 earthquake.

Maṭariyya and Madīnat al-Salām are both considered to be located at the bottom of the city’s economic and social ladder, and their residents are often stigmatized by inhabitants of more established neighborhoods, as well as by government agencies.<sup>6</sup>

Such neighborhoods are reputed to be resistant to government initiatives, and their inhabitants are perceived as ill-suited to urban life. Like other densely inhabited peri-urban zones, they are often victims of social discrimination. Predictably, they also have proportionately fewer government-sponsored facilities, particularly schools, than more prestigious urban areas.<sup>7</sup> Youth unemployment rates are also elevated, and local youth suffer from social immobility that leads many young men to become trapped in “waithood,”<sup>8</sup> a protracted form of adolescence that eventually can culminate in marriage, although often at a relatively late age. *Mahragān* musicians, however, embrace their territorial roots, proudly proclaiming their connection to these intense social environments.

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<sup>5</sup> This also developed in Alexandria, the cradle of groups such as *al-muḥtarifīn* and *al-Dakhlāwiyya*, which is now in Cairo (information provided by Frédéric Lagrange; this article is based on empirical studies conducted in the Egyptian capital).

<sup>6</sup> Popular opinion distinguishes affluent neighborhoods from lower-class, “informal” neighborhoods (‘*ashwā’ī*), which are located at the bottom of the scale of urban legitimacy. Such categorizations are diffracted by diverse overlapping spaces defined by social and cultural criteria. As a result, the common meaning tends to associate a territory with a socio-economic level and a “culture.” Adjacent and more remote districts are subject to reciprocal descriptions in a hierarchical, urban game of mirrors. See Battesti Vincent & Puig Nicolas, “Comment peut-on être urbain? Villes et vies urbaines en Égypte,” *Egypt au présent, Inventaire d’une société avant révolution*, Paris: Sindbad-Actes Sud (La bibliothèque arabe, coll. Hommes et sociétés), 2011, pp. 145-183.

<sup>7</sup> See the exceptionally thorough article on the spatial encoding of inequalities of employment and educational opportunities in Greater Cairo: “Inequality of Opportunity in Cairo: Space, Higher Education, and Unemployment” [<http://www.tadamun.co>], 23 March 2018.

<sup>8</sup> “As more and more young people come of age, unequal opportunity will exacerbate ‘waithood,’ the period of delayed transition between adolescence and adulthood, caused by a long waiting period for permanent or ‘decent’ employment, delayed marriage (due to its high cost for young people and their families), and continued challenges in achieving social and political agency, confounded by the return to authoritarian/military rule,” tadamun, *ibid*.

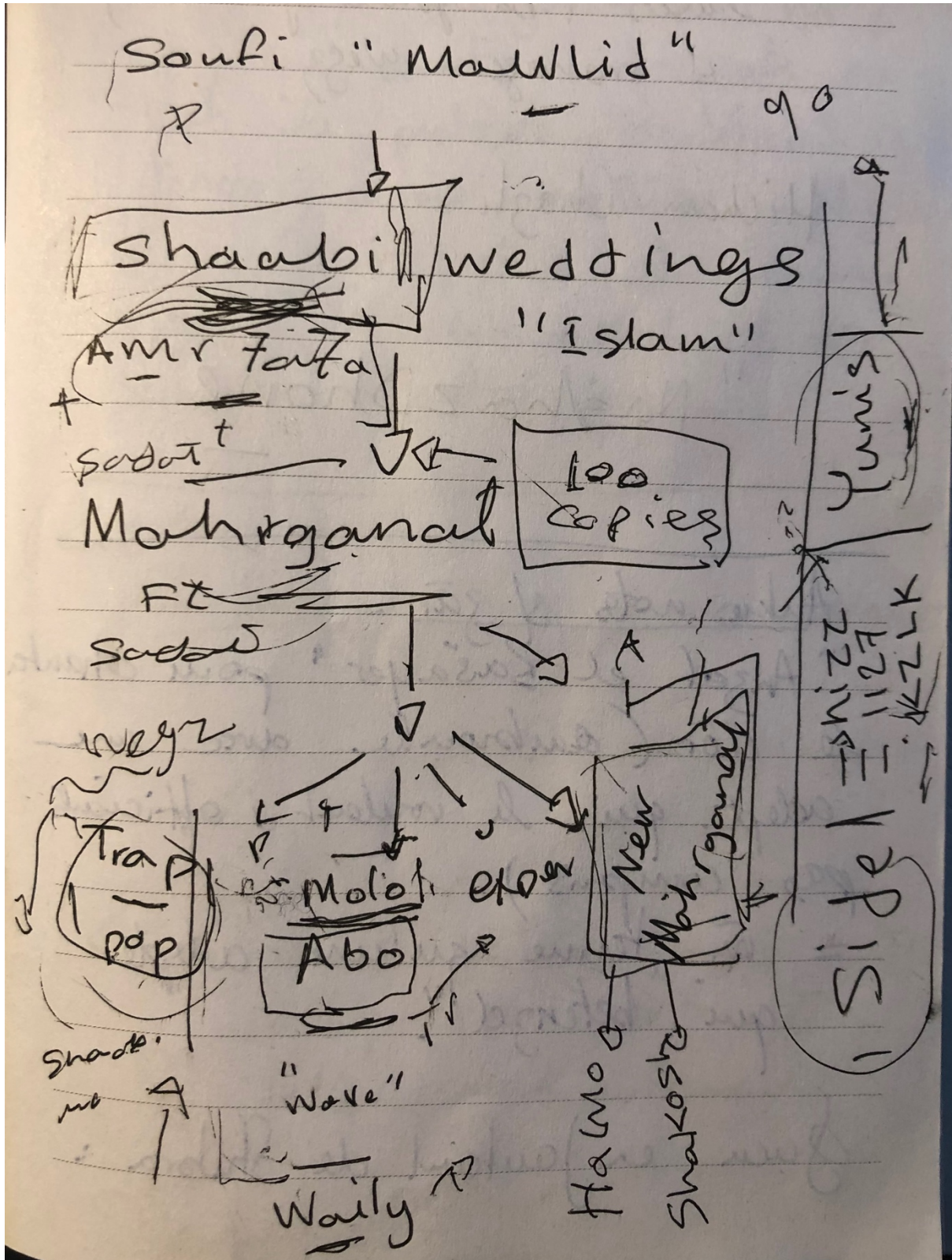
The promotion of these gritty urban districts is unsurprising in a city whose territorial divisions are based on strong local allegiances and identities, endlessly renewed during family celebrations.<sup>9</sup> This intense territoriality was initially an omnipresent feature of *mahragān* songs. Focusing on this sense of place also helps combat the delegitimation of *mahragān* by older popular musicians (most of whom have eventually accepted the new style, capitalizing on its newfound prestige by sharing billings at musical events), and above all, by top cultural acts, journalists, and artists. The style has also been acclaimed by musicologist and composer Ḥilmī Bakr, who wrote an influential, insightful appraisal of the genre.<sup>10</sup> Local references also help *mahragān* musicians counter criticisms centered on questions authenticity and their relationships with their audiences.

My purpose in this essay is to portray *mahragān* esthetic and musical practices while also situating them within a broader social and musical genealogy and explaining the evolution and technical dimensions of the *mahragān* sound. My focus is the “classical” form of *mahragān*, before it became diversified and associated with other musical styles such as trap and rap, a style sometimes referred to as the *new mahragān*.

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<sup>9</sup> An extended neighborhood or urban zone corresponds roughly to the correspond *qism*-s (districts) of the agglomeration’s administrative organization and currently represent 500,000 residents. It encompasses “intermediate neighborhoods” whose size suggests, and partly overlaps with, *shiyākha*-s (districts), as well as “micro-neighborhoods” constituted by homes in small streets, that are historically called *hāra*.

<sup>10</sup> See the television broadcast: [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eTpXInot5eo>]. Musicologists have contemptuously accused the singers and producers Okka & Ortega of being ignorant, particularly with regard to rap and its historical background.



Schema by producer and musician Adam Shaalan, (discussion with author and Séverine Gabry-Thienpont, November 2021)

One approach to examining the *mahragān* system<sup>11</sup> is to observe the patterned ways in which it circulates in urban spaces, and in the virtual world. This twin perspective supports my overall conclusion that *mahragān* is an alternative culture that has greatly expanded the appeal of musical and vestimentary and behavioral codes since their origins in peripheral urban neighborhoods.

### **The Genealogy and Compositional Mode of *mahragān***

#### ***The origins of mahragān: the crucible of street weddings***

Electronic music pursues different tracks in Egypt linked partly with the socio-economic profiles of the musicians. But all these tracks now intersect more and more, with the tremendous evolution of the musical scene. Gabry-Thienpont and Abu Chabana have shown these complex musical circulations embedded in the Abo Sahar itinerary, a producer from Saïd Egypt<sup>12</sup>. Anyway, we can still distinguish musician from popular neighborhood and producer like Yunis, Kubbara or Mohamed Ragab (*Machine Eat Man*) from more comfortable social milieu. And it is difficult to attribute a specific category of the multidimensional artist Hassan Khan who pursues an international contemporary art career<sup>13</sup>.

Street weddings<sup>14</sup> have enabled a new generation of DJs to develop a singular genre through increasingly skilled mixing of current songs to produce a dance atmosphere at wedding parties.

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<sup>11</sup> This term is borrowed from Julien Mallet's analyses of *tsapiky* music in Madagascar. Mallet Julien, *Le tsapiky, une jeune musique de Madagascar*, Paris: Karthala, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> 2022, « The King of Trobby Music. Compositions électroniques et usages du numérique chez un musicien de Haute-Égypte », *Cahiers d'Ethnomusicologie*, 35, p. 65-83.

<sup>13</sup> His could be asked about his filiation with Halim el-Dabh (Ḥalīm al-Ḍab'), a pioneer of Egyptian electronic music, conducted the first sound experiments in Cairo (also among first in the world). He produced a piece in 1944, of which only one minute forty recorded seconds remain, by reworking incantations recorded during an adoricism ritual, *zār*. See my French-language article, "Recording Culture, Une figure égyptienne du XXe siècle: Halim El-Dabh, compositeur, collecteur et pionnier des musiques électroniques," *Annales Islamologiques*, n° 53, p. 113-136, 2020.

<https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-02928373>:

<sup>14</sup> This festive form is described as a "popular" wedding, *sha 'bī*, or *baladī*, from *balad*, a country or village depending on the context. Used in this way, the term signifies local or "authentic." These weddings are unique in that they are held in Cairo's working-class streets and alleys, either in medieval neighborhoods (Fustāt), more recently urbanized, unofficial residential districts such as Maṭariyya, or public housing zones such as Madīnat al-Salām. The celebrations appropriate sections of a street or alley, privatizing an area with extensive cloth enclosures to define a festive space, while also enabling neighbors to continue to circulate. Additional accessories and equipment help delimit the party, including amplified sound systems, thresholds, and reception areas.



Street wedding celebrations take various forms. One form involves significant costs and requires a *nabaṭshī* onstage who collects cash wedding gifts and publicly salutes the donors.<sup>15</sup> A second, simpler form requires at least one DJ to play wedding music who uses the sound system to salute audiences. The well-informed Arab music criticism site ma3azef.com described the style as follows:

“*Mahragānāt* began as an alternative to *nabaṭshī*-s at popular weddings. Then the lyrics and melodies developed and circulated before influencing singing in Egypt and elsewhere. *Mahragān* has become an essential ingredient of weddings. Film producers and artists include it in their creations.”<sup>16</sup>

This second approach has become increasingly popular since the 1980s, as DJs and *mikemen* holding microphones have replaced instrumental orchestras and *nabaṭshī*-s. They perform at weddings, saluting and welcoming guests in the same manner as traditional “ambieners”, citing wedding party members’ neighborhoods, cities, or regional origins and uttering other expressions such as “Party!” *al-farah*, “Welcome everyone!” *es-salām len-nās el-koll*, or “Madīnat al-Salām” and “Assiout” (a city in Upper Egypt), etc.

DJs developed a new formula in the 2000s for songs directly based on street weddings. The changes were initially only musical, with an original recorded track-backing lyric that channeled the ceremonial rhetoric of the *farah*-s. The recordings were live, with musicians using software such as *JetAudio* or *FL Studio (Fruity loops)* to record and replay loops. Songs later became increasingly sophisticated, while singing was increasingly rhythmic. Halabissa (Ḥalabissā), a *mahragān* pioneer originally from Maṭariyya, explains, “We had the idea of making a complete song, not just repeating words and names or saying this, that, and the other, but creating songs.” *Mahragān* offered an expressive arena for new signers seeking to represent their neighborhoods and age-groups.

DJs learned to write music, becoming full-fledged composers and producers, arranging tracks (*tracks*, *trāk*, pl. *trākāt* ou *tarākāt*) and

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<sup>15</sup> See Puig Nicolas, *Farah. Musiciens de noce et scènes urban au Caire*, Paris: Sindbad-Actes Sud (La bibliothèque arabe, coll. Hommes et sociétés), 2010. Regarding the use of sound effects as an aid in the scansion of *nabaṭshī*-s, see Puig Nicolas, “La ville amplifiée. Synthétiseurs, sonorisation et effets électro-acoustiques dans les rituels urbains au Caire,” *Techniques et cultures*, 67, 2017 [https://journals.openedition.org/tc/8504]

<sup>16</sup> 16. Sharīf Ḥasan, “Aqwā 20 mahragān fī 2017” (the 20 best mahragān songs of 2017), ma3azef.com, 29 December 2017.

creating original samples or lifting them from existing songs. Compositions called “*mahragān*” first appeared in the 2000s<sup>17</sup>. The track “*mahragān al-Salām*” (named for the Madīnat al-Salām neighborhood), dated 2004 is considered the “first *mahragān* in Egypt.”<sup>18</sup> . It was written and produced by Aḥmad Figo (Fīgū), who shared the microphone with Alaa Fifty (‘Alā’ Fīftī). At least that's the story as Fifty writes it, who calls himself Fifty the legend ("FIFTY El Ostora"), even if there's no denying that he was one of the pioneers of this music. The style is minimalist, and the lyrics center on territorial references and dedications. The voices are filtered to recreate a live saturation effect characteristic of wedding parties' soundscapes.

Songs employ a prolonged reverb effect that illustrates producers' quest for a new sound. The overall effect is a calm, semi-hypnotic sound that faintly echoes two of the DJs' major influences: Jamaican dub and house music.

The style evolved quickly based on this initial form. Lyrics were increasingly refined, covering a range of topics from young people's daily lives. At times roguish, they celebrate the youthful quest for debauchery, including marijuana, alcohol, and dancing (Okka & Ortega), as well as the problems understanding women encountered by young men: “You've seen girls today, you're dying from malaria bro; Their eyes are hooks that drive young neighborhood dudes crazy (...).” This song, by Sadat and Fifty, portrays a young woman imploring a boy to be with her: “Hello... Yes, darling... Can't you come over? I miss you a lot. I'm all alone. Waiting for you.”<sup>19</sup> Frédéric Lagrange underscores the recent appearance of “a group of pornographic *mahragānāt* (...) that express a masculinist perspective (...).”<sup>20</sup> Although not precisely in this category, this type of

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<sup>17</sup> Abdu Nigar (‘Abdu nīgar), producer and dj of mahragānāt indicates that originally this music was named “mundial” (*mondial*), because many people gather, but this word was not familiar so they choose “mahragān. (*Egypt from Tarab music to the art of “festivals”*, BBC news arabi, 6'00: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=soQrt3DMfgs>) .

<sup>18</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QnyAs2pwsR8> official YouTube channel of Alaa Fifti : <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC8ZqyRxiOdP4HGyJqwzBkFA>

<sup>19</sup> *Mesh harūh* by Fifty, as-Sadat, az-Zaim (2013), see [\[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpOiTXH3kRU\]](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpOiTXH3kRU). The song was broadcast in a wedding scene in El Sobkey Productions movie : the nightingale's nest, عش البلبل [\[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8GuWp-pDMBA\]](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8GuWp-pDMBA)

<sup>20</sup> Frédéric Lagrange, “Chanter le désir, mimer l'obscénité. Fantômes masculins et agaceries féminines dans la chanson Egyptienne, de l'ère des almées aux danseuses satellitaires et chauffeurs de toktok,” *Les mots du Désir, La langue de l'érotisme arabe et ses traductions*, Lagrange F. & Savina C. (Eds.), Paris: Diacritiques, 2020.

*mahragān* unquestionably belongs to a similar trend. In terms of production, performance, and the topics covered by the texts, *mahragān* is a resolutely masculine phenomenon. It features very few women composers or singers, contributing to a more gendered atmosphere than in classical *sha‘bī*.<sup>21</sup>

At times, the lyrics are simply ironic, including this evocation of the frustration associated with surfing the Internet with an extremely slow connection, an irritating situation familiar to every young Egyptian until recently (“If you wanna go on the Net, get in a jumbo-jet,” one of the recently remixed tracks by Shāri‘ 3).<sup>22</sup>

The original minimalist music became increasingly complex, accompanied by an ever-widening array of sound effects. The slower rhythms of earlier songs accelerated and now allow faster, near-tectonic dance moves in a radiant, energetic style. As Aḥmad Karākīb, the manager of Madfa‘giyya, noted, “they have a power you don’t find in other musical styles. They use their power.” The sound is produced by a robust sound system that is part of a trend towards more powerful amplification at street weddings, with Chinese replicas of Montarbo or JVC speakers gradually giving way to DJ speaker-walls. New singers perform at wedding parties for ever-larger crowds at events that resemble festivals—i.e., *mahragān*...

As Halabissa observes, style’s name underscores singers’ efforts to develop and sustain relationships with their audiences, even beyond their original neighborhoods, where *mahragān*’s fan-base continues to expand, because “they know you’re one of them” (Halabissa, 2017).<sup>23</sup>

While references to rap are ever-present,<sup>24</sup> particularly to Tupac--an icon for Middle Eastern rappers--and T-Pain, who a master of the application of Auto-tune (Dezel, one of the principal current performers, learned to produce hip-hop beats before playing *mahragān*), other electro-musical

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<sup>21</sup> A transitory group of young women called *el-hawsāgeyya* disappeared from the digital world after 2014. The name is derived from “house,” the musical inspiration for an Egyptian style of music that the three musicians claimed was “where East and West meet.” *El-hawsāgeyya* met with some success, including a television appearance posted online. Comments on the YouTube video illustrate how difficult it is for women to gain access to Egyptian performance spaces and stages. See [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6CozxfcsHMg>].

<sup>22</sup> Shāri‘ 3: [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0v3IRAzqnPw>]

<sup>23</sup> *Mahragān* shares a number of features with Arab rap, including the idea that remaining rooted in urban territory certifies authenticity and proximity to audiences.

<sup>24</sup> The rise of satellite television in the early 2000s helped introduce musicians to *mahragān* and other global electronic music trends, including rap.

styles and genres have also contributed to *mahragān*'s compositions, including house, another DJ genre. The original idea was to use software to use sampling to create a specifically Egyptian electronic musical form: “We integrate rap into *sha ‘bī*, we mix hip-hop and *sha ‘bī*. People here wouldn’t understand hip-hop, and a lot of them do rap or house better than me. We’re developing our own style” (Dezel, 2017). Dezel embraces the idea of being musically related to *sha ‘bī*. He acknowledged that his rhythms are composed using software and machine-generated, although the music itself is played on an electric organ (*urg*).

The point appears to be to avoid being associated with *sha ‘bī*, as Sadāt observed in the video *Cairo Calling*, (Rinse x 100 Copies, 2018) in a dialogue between *mahragān* pioneers: “whether it is a *sha ‘bī* without *mawwāl*, without singing, and without [being familiar with and using] *maqāmāt* [Eastern modal scales]!” Asserting membership in *sha ‘bī* style would thus be akin to “getting stuck” and, as Dezel put it, “What are you gonna do if they ask you to sing some *nahawand*?”<sup>25</sup>

It is nevertheless true that the notion “popular” can be interpreted in a number of ways. Ahmed Adawiyya presented himself as a *mawwāl* singer who had the *ṣaltāna* (an aptitude to crisscross musical styles), whereas Sha‘bān ‘Abd al-Raḥīm, who continues the style created by Adawiyya that is proclaimed as a “popular, popular” music. *Mahragān* musicians currently argue that their sound is distinct from “popular” genres because they do not perceive the two styles as similar (i.e., that they play a contemporary form of electronic music, as opposed to *mawwāl*). From their perspective, *sha ‘bī* is a respectable musical form with which they would not dare to associate their own music.

These two musical trends constitute two poles of a popular cultural continuum that flows through shared stages and territories, including common values such as authenticity and localness.<sup>26</sup> Even according to their fans, *Mahragān* and *sha ‘bī* music thus share the same cultural space, albeit without being closely identified with each other.

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<sup>25</sup> *Cairo Calling*, *op.cit.*

<sup>26</sup> See my article on the blurred boundaries and ambivalence surrounding the notion of *sha ‘bī* in Egyptian music. Puig Nicolas, “*Sha ‘abī*, “populaire”: usages et significations d’une notion ambiguë dans le monde de la musique en Égypte,” *Civilisations*, 1-2/LIII (2006), pp. 23-44.

## *Auto-Tune, Sound design, and Parabolas*

*Mahragān* is notable for a specific approach to working with sound. The most noticeable effects are produced using Auto-tune,<sup>27</sup> a system for controlling the voice that entered widespread use in the late 1990s, appearing in Egypt in the 2000s. Initially sold by the firm Antares in 1997, Auto-tune permits “real-time correction of the melody sung by a musician” by performing “a detection/correction of the notes.” Studio sound engineers in various regions of the world use the program to match the pitch of the voice to the melody and to correct the less accurate passages of songs. Composers and musicians, including the singer Cher and the rapper T-Pain, soon discovered specific ways of applying the program<sup>28</sup> that surpass simply reworking the accuracy of singing by creating distortions of the voice and adding a metallic sound. In this way, “The device is used as an audible effect.”<sup>29</sup> Auto-tune is readily accessible and is now included in most digital audio stations or can be downloaded as a plug-in.

The technology was gradually adopted by *mahragānāt* composers who, like Cher and T-Pain (whom they cite), used it to create what the Cairo composer and producer Twinz describes as a “plastic” sound (*sawt blastik*).

Reportedly, the first Egyptian musician who created innovative sound effects using Auto-tune was the composer Aḥmad Ḥāḥā, a computer scientist and *mahragān* pioneer. Its use later became a distinctive musical trend--and a target of criticism--that makes Auto-tune a sensitive subject. Today’s managers and performers are discrete about how they use it and prefer to emphasize other aspects of the meticulous mixing involved in creating a *mahragān* song. This circumspection about certain features of the *mahragān* sound can be partly explained by a desire to avoid reducing the subtleties involved in mixing to mere Auto-tune effects, but it is also clearly a response to criticisms. Although in a show in 2013 on the channel

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<sup>27</sup> Auto-tune was created by Antares, although a wide range of sound-processing software programs now include its voice-correcting functions since it first came out in 1997, including Pro-tools and Live (Ableton).

<sup>28</sup> By reducing the return speed function to its lowest level, a “weird” result can be obtained that completely deforms the voice. In the Antares 2003 edition of the manual, this setting is called the “infamous Cher Effect,” a reference to her 1998 pop success, *Believe*.

<sup>29</sup> Vincent Coralie, “De l’anti-pop à l’Auto-tune™: voix (chantée) et ingénierie du son,” *La voix chantée, entre sciences et pratiques*, Paris: De Boeck, pp. 123-142, p. 133 (as well as the two previous quotes). Author note: the program was highly controversial in the world of hip-hop.

*al-Qāhira wa-l- Nās* – during the same show the composer Ḥilmī Bakr virulently criticized *mahragān* – Ortega steadfastly defended Auto-tune: “For us, there’s a filter called Auto-tune. We use it. It embellishes the sound like [...] a computer program [...] like T-Pain [...].”<sup>30</sup> Several years later, *mahragān* musicians preferred not to advertise their use of the program. The perception of Auto-tune as a modern esthetic sound effect is probably already somewhat dated in terms of the current evolution of *mahragān*, which has led to what producers now describe as *new mahragān*<sup>31</sup>.

This perception initially established a persistent affiliation with rap, and both Dezel and Twinz<sup>32</sup> to continue to offer tributes to the genre. According to Maḥmūd Rif‘at, who has produced *mahragān* with his production company since 2010, *Mīt Noskha* (100 Copies), Auto-tune was viewed by young singers--at least initially--as “chic, brilliant, and modern” (2017).

Like for most contemporary music, however, Auto-tune is indispensable for *mahragān*, primarily due to its ability to correct the pitch of the voice. Indeed, this was its first application before it began to be used to produce more exotic effects, such as the “infamous Cher effect.”

The use of Auto-tune in Egypt now extends far beyond *mahragān*, including as a sound effect (*rai* composers have been using it since the early 2000s). In fact, its conventional applications as a corrector of vocal melodies is now systematically used in Egyptian and Arab variety music, including religious music.<sup>33</sup>

The ways in which *mahragān* songs are mixed have attracted composers’ interest since the outset. The song “*al-Riḥla*” (the Excursion)--whose

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<sup>30</sup> See [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DzlicKV0ggq4>], beginning at 10’30

<sup>31</sup> Author interview with Ahmad Shaalan and Séverine Gabry-Thienpont, Cairo, October 2021

<sup>32</sup> Producers, composers/mixers for Madfa’giyya groups and Sharia 3 (*shāri’ talāta*).

<sup>33</sup> Carolyn Ramzy has signaled its use in Coptic chants by the Coptic priest Maher Fayez, although listening to the lyrics does not indicate whether it was used simply to correct the voice or as an audible effect like *mahragān*. If it is used to produce a sound effect, this suggests that the style is influencing other musical fields, including religious music. Correcting the sound of religious singing and preaching is commonplace, typically to add depth to the voice reciting a sacred text, particularly echo and reverb effects, creating an enhanced sense of presence rather than deforming the voice as with the Cher effect. Ramzy provides no examples, and a web search was unable to detect the use of Auto-Tune as an audible effect in Coptic chants. Ramzy Carolyn, “Autotuned Belonging: Coptic Popular Song and the Politics of Neo-Pentecostal Pedagogies,” *Ethnomusicology*, 60/3 (2016), pp. 434-458.

recording session I observed in September 2017--is a prime example of the most successful sound that *mahragān* is currently able to produce, despite somewhat limited access to musical and visual stylistics effects. Dezel employs a variety of sound effects, including Auto-tune as well as reverb and compression. He applies filters to elevate the profile of the voice, which is precisely modified as though it was a separate soundtrack. Listening to the Madfa‘giyya song<sup>34</sup> *al-Rihla*, reveals certain effects, such as centering, doubling with redistribution on the right and left, and the expansion of the voice: respectively at 0’25 (emphasis on gentlemen), 0’45 (change of singer) or 1’04 (refrain). In the song by *mish harūh* referred to earlier, “I don’t want to go there,” a young man repeats this sentence in response to a young woman’s whispered request on the telephone, “Don’t you want to come over”? At 0’50 and 3’20, there is a noticeable telephone filter effect (young woman’s voice on the telephone: “Hello. Don’t you want to come over?”) as well as a lowered pitch (a digital simulation of a DJ slowing a vinyl record) at ’22, marking the beginning of a new couplet.<sup>35</sup>

Composers write melodic sequences—samples--that form the foundation of a piece, sometimes borrowing excerpts from famous songs such as *Despacito* by Luis Fonsi and *Ma‘allem* by the Moroccan Arab pop singer Saad Lamjared (Sa‘d al-Mjarrad).<sup>36</sup> The style has been harshly criticized despite this trend, particularly for systematic overuse of Auto-tune, supposed lack of control over singing, and a clumsy, imported version of a foreign approach to composition that is often associated with rap, i.e., with exogenous music. These debates detract from *mahragān*’s reputation, but musicians counter questions about their local cultural legitimacy by pointing out Western and Arab interest in their music and foreign endorsements (members of Sharia 3 participated in the musical show *XFactor* recorded in Lebanon in 2014, another program about them on an Arab channel). The criticisms belong to a broader, recurrent rivalry over rights to urban culture and over economic, social, and cultural domination and, in turn, the geographical implications for poorer Cairo

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<sup>34</sup> I would like to offer my profound gratitude to Coralie Vincent, who generously contributed her time and wisdom to *mahragān* recordings, for comments on the two songs reproduced here and explaining the functioning of Auto-tune.

<sup>35</sup> *Al-Rihla* (2017): [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7vgJutrsllw>].

<sup>36</sup> 36. Sample of *Despacito*: [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xpIMVbjr7tA>]. Sample of *Ma‘allem* [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BFU4RtTI01A>]. Original song (2015) : [[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_Fwf45pIAAtM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Fwf45pIAAtM)]

neighborhoods. An article on unequal opportunities in Cairo labeled this pattern of criticisms as a reminder of the prevailing “spatial injustice” in the capital.<sup>37</sup> Not only are musical practices and esthetics not exempt from social and cultural hierarchies, but they tend to reinforce them.

## **The *Mahragān* System and Marketing Methods**

### ***Mahragān* on the city’s surface**

Although *mahragān* has been the subject of cultural and moral controversies, it has achieved distribution extending far beyond its territorial and social origins in street weddings in poor urban neighborhoods. Indeed, it is precisely because of its reputation as a popular, locally rooted musical movement that *mahragān* has gradually been able to dominate the contemporary music scene in Cairo and Egypt in terms of both circulation and communications.

*Mahragān* has infiltrated itself into the many surfaces of the city. Like “classical” *sha‘bī*, it spreads almost through a type of capillarity. Small vehicles blare music from mobile sound-systems crisscrossing neighborhoods, outlying districts, and even the city center. In the 2000s, *sha‘bī* was even portrayed in the Egyptian media as “microbus music.” Evidence of the persistence of this image was an October 2017 CBC Egypt television broadcast, “*Live min al-duplex*” in which the comic marionette Abla Fāhītā parodied a *mahragān* song and the Jordanian actor Iyād Naṣṣār played a microbus driver.<sup>38</sup> *Mahragān* is currently also associated with rickshaws (*toktok*), scooters imported from India that have proliferated in Cairo streets and are personalized by their young drivers and equipped with speakers playing the latest hit songs. By broadcasting *mahragān*, urban forms of transportation thus support and shape the urban soundscape, amply complemented by other amplified sounds such as calls to prayer, traffic noises, and street criers.

Concerts and festivals sponsored by large companies such as Stella beer are held in various locations around the city, including the concert portrayed in the introduction to this article. The first *mahragān* performances for larger audiences than wedding parties began in 2010,

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<sup>37</sup> See *tadamun* article, *op. cit.*

<sup>38</sup> [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AD-Fckgv2zc>].



when Maḥmūd Rifʿat, a drummer in 1990s Egyptian metal bands who later became a music entrepreneur.<sup>39</sup> Rifʿat organized his first festival at the Scheherazade cabaret in central Cairo called “Disco Cairo.” He has since sponsored a dozen or so such events, including an encounter between prominent *mahragān* performers and British electro music composers during a trip to England, the subject of a documentary entitled “Cairo Calling.”<sup>40</sup>

Like some older popular musical genres, *mahragān* maintains an ambiguous relationship with other culture industries. The film and advertising industries have taken note of the economic interest of movements that are able to represent a new culture: “It’s the culture of the young. It’s real youth culture. Because what you see on TV, not what you see in the West, is the t-shirt and trousers, the fake Nikes (...), and the track where the bass has to be pounding. It’s the culture that they’re nourished by, where they get their knowledge and create a language, a new vocabulary, where they develop a language and clothing.”<sup>41</sup> The telecom company Etisalat, for example, staged a parody of gangsta rap in a *mahragān* clip in which the actor Muḥammad Ramaḍān sings “the strongest [telephone] cards in Egypt” (2018).<sup>42</sup> In 2012 Okka & Ortega appeared in a clip made to mark the month of Ramadan, a hymn to post-revolutionary national unity. In the clip, the same refrain is repeated by representatives of various Egyptian music styles, from Port-Saïd fishermen to Nubians from the south and including *mahragān*, rap, and soccer-fan songs.<sup>43</sup> Also in 2012, the film producer Aḥmad al-Subkī enhanced *mahragān*’s reputation in the film ‘*Abduh Mōta*, which featured the same opening act, Okka & Ortega. The appearance of singers from the group Shubbēk Lubbēk in the film ‘*Tyāl ḥarrīfa* by Maḥmūd Salīm (2015, al-Subkī production) helped integrate *mahragān* into mainstream culture.

Egyptian films often feature popular cultural trends, often using actual musicians and artists for greater authenticity. In the 2000s, for example, Sha‘bān ‘Abd al-Raḥīm played a thief in Dāwūd ‘Abd al-Sayyid’s film,

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<sup>39</sup> He founded the 100 copies label (*mīt nuskha*) referred to earlier. Based in Cairo, he promotes experimental music.

<sup>40</sup> See note 2.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Maḥmūd Rifʿat, October 5, 2017 (and previous quotes).

<sup>42</sup> See [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aNv-L18kSyk>].

<sup>43</sup> See [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G-eWMIgZkJo>]. Okka & Ortiga at 2’29.

*Muwāṭin wa-mukhbir wa-ḥarāmī* (The Citizen, the Narc, and the Thief, 2001), which caricature the popular life.

Although somewhat dated, Peter Manuel’s analysis of Indian cinema is relevant to the Egyptian context. Manuel notes that the values and esthetics of current Indian cinema tend to influence lower-class culture, but that the lower classes play no role in film production, which is limited to an oligopoly of Mumbai producers: “Film culture may be produced to some extent for lower-class Indians, but it is certainly not produced by them (nor, for that matter, about them). It would be naive, if not a huge distortion, to regard commercial Hindi films as ‘tales that lower-class Indians tell about themselves.’”<sup>44</sup>

The *mahragān* musicians whom I met systematically reported experiencing difficulties with the official culture industry, both financially—because they perceive themselves as underpaid and undervalued—and in terms of social capital. They ultimately feel that they are treated with some degree of class-based disdain. Maḥmūd Rif‘at, whose goal is to produce *mahragān* “a good distance away in a healthy environment” points out that “the guys are rock legends. They walk in the street like legends. They don’t need to be in movies, and the way it’s done doesn’t help intellectually. Nor does it help economically.”

Success that led to somewhat ambiguous recognition produced a temporary breakthrough for *mahragān* singers with musical institutions. In fact, for several years they were ranked as *mughannī mahragān* (*mahragān* singers) in the musician’s union, a rank that, unlike the rank of *muṭrib* (variety singer), does not require an audition. The union recently modified this status, however, and now demands that prominent *mahragān* performers have a DJ membership permit. The DJ permit was established in 2009 to officialize the rising number of professional DJs over the past twenty years.<sup>45</sup> Union registration is a vital source of income and support

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<sup>44</sup> Peter Manuel, *Cassette Culture*, Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> 1,111 DJ membership permits were distributed in 2017 in Cairo. The conflict between the *mahragān* singer Ḥammū Bīkā and the musician’s union in October 2019 exemplifies the problems faced by *mahragān* stars in achieving institutional status for their music. After being forbidden from performing in the city of Dumyāt, Ḥammū Bīkā filmed himself in front of union headquarters, accusing the union of demanding a bribe in exchange for the membership permit required for legal performances. The union responded that Ḥammū Bīkā had not passed the audition for admission as a singer and performer and filed a complaint against him. Ḥammū Bīkā then changed his story and claimed that he wanted a DJ permit instead of a singer permit. Beyond these details, the story demonstrates the union’s power in imposing norms of artistic legitimacy that are directly related to economic concerns. The union’s labeling of different musical trends and compositional methods

for *mahragān* wedding party performances. As the singer/composer Dezel explained, “We play in hotels and concert halls, but our thing is the *farah*, the street.” A syndicate permit is also preferable to than risking professional sanctions. Playing street weddings enhances musicians’ celebrity by maintaining crucial proximity to their audiences.<sup>46</sup>

The physical dimension of celebrity based on the proximity between singers and audiences serves as a public distribution system. The *mahragān* system centers on powerful competition between musicians, each seeking to produce the current hit song. The musician who wins over the audience “understands the street” (Twinz). This aspiration can affect the content of songs, including frequent vulgarity, as well as direct or indirect sexual allusions.<sup>47</sup> Some older musicians such as Halabissa and members of his group, Sharia 3, often refer to these strategies in the quest for legitimacy and recognition: “Like the previous generation, there are singers who attract attention by throwing bizarre stuff out there. People think they’re flinging insults around, but we don’t do that” (2017).<sup>48</sup>

The competitive environment increases the drive to dominate the street sound and online networks, fueling a steady supply of new songs. Musicians vie for fame using sound-equipped vehicles in city neighborhoods to ensure that the entire population hears them. Successfully producing a hit and having an impact on urban soundscapes requires this public presence. When a track catches on, it leads to YouTube views downloads, further enhancing a group’s celebrity and ultimately leading to more wedding party gigs, which are the economic bedrock of *mahragān*: “It was competition in the street... If you distribute your track, you get weddings. You have something to hang onto, you can eat--it’s meat and potatoes and bread. Not just one track, but maybe you throw down [compose and distribute] nine or ten (Maḥmūd Rif‘at, 2017).”

Song production is distributed among dozens of home studios scattered around the city, typically, but not always, in musicians’ home neighborhoods. More successful groups convert rented offices into studios

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crystalizes these tensions. (See the television broadcast on the An-Nahar channel [[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=La47kHIyN\\_A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=La47kHIyN_A)]).

<sup>46</sup> See also Puig Nicolas, “Ahmad Wahdan. Maestro among the Frenzied streets of Cairo,” *Lives in Music: Mobility and Change in a Global Context*, Le Menestrel S. (Ed.), Routledge, 2020, pp.119-141.

<sup>47</sup> Lagrange Frédéric, *op. cit.*

<sup>48</sup> Interview, October 6, 2017.

(Madfa‘giyya records is in Gizr al-Suways, for example, which is more central than Madīnat al-Salām, where the band members are originally from. The Alexandria group Dakhlāwiyya’s studio is on Avenue al-Haram on the west side of the city).

Recording studios and mixing booths, equipped like home studios in private apartments, are key landmarks for *mahragān* musicians and their teams and close friends. A computer, a large screen, a microphone (the latest model), and above all software like Fruity Loops (FL studio) or Acid Pro suffice to produce *mahragān* songs. The relatively simple equipment and the artisanal approach to putting songs together contrasts sharply with the popularity of more successful *mahragān* musicians. The modest settings in which the songs are produced also contrasts with their auditory power, a value that *mahragān* composers explicitly embrace.

Recording sessions are often held in home studios. For example, “The Excursion,” which relates the story of a group of friends at sea, was recorded at the Madfa‘giyya studio. The singers took turns at the mike to add their voices to the soundtrack created by Dezel. Lyrics are composed on smartphones and forwarded by Shanti, who writes most of the songs. They are occasionally improvised only seconds before being performed. For one song, the group included a featured guest, Mekkawy, a grandson of the celebrated blind composer and singer Sayyid Makkāwī (1927-1997) who pursues a discrete musical career between Egypt and Dubaī. Although Mekkawy is a “classical” variety music singer, he is pleased with the collaboration, which will help him gain fame because of the hundreds of thousands of views generated by each of the group’s songs. Like rap, featuring is a common practice in *mahragān*. Dezel was busy adding Mekkawy to the track, with a light but noticeable Auto-tune effect. Appearing pleased with the result, Dezel asked the singer’s opinion of how he treated his voice: “Do you like Auto-tune?”

## **Digital Broadcasts**

*Mahragān* singers and managers systematically rely on the distribution of their music through social networks. They typically use Facebook to follow current updates about groups and singers and YouTube to post tracks, sometimes in the form of music clips. One illustration of this growing popularity is the now omnipresent musical site *ma3azef.com*, which began to post top-20 *mahragān* clips in 2017, when the list was

topped by the duo Okka & Ortega, whose fame extends well beyond Egyptian borders.<sup>49</sup>

The competition between singers and bands is just as intense in the virtual sphere. Most professional groups have a team that oversees their dress style and haircuts, but above all their social media profiles. Aḥmad Karākī, the manager of Madfa‘giyya, amasses impressive YouTube statistics<sup>50</sup> that have earned an award for attracting over 100,000 subscribers. YouTube is a steady source of income for the group that transforms its social media profile into cash. Despite this potential source of profit and fame, virtual media are not the primary marketing site for *mahragān* performers, who remain popular singers and continuously evolve along with young stars of street weddings, presumably enjoying a ripple effect from their wide distribution. YouTube also functions as an online archival resource of a group’s entire history and as the primary medium for songs’ notoriety, quantified by the number of views, particularly by comparison with Facebook or Soundcloud. This archival function is in addition to--although it does not replace—the use of back-up hard drives. Madfa‘giyya’s musical history is preserved on his YouTube account, but not on studio albums, which are already saturated with multiple sound samples.

This “official” home of better-known groups is accompanied by individual, fragmented fan posts or posts by young adults who have grown up with *mahragān* and upload the songs of their teenage years. In this way, older soundtracks and videos resurface, including the track *mahragān al-salām*, which was posted on the “heritage of *mahragān sha ‘bī*” (*turāth al-mahragān al-sha ‘bī*) YouTube channel.

Such posts underscore the democratizing influence of the Internet by “consigning authority”<sup>51</sup> that is represented by the archive. Pierre France has written of the importance of digital archival practices throughout the Arab world, where posts by anonymous individuals have contributed to the survival of various musical forms on the Web for over ten years. Referring to nostalgia as one of the driving forces behind for archival practices, France calls attention to this key motivation of YouTubers. This

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<sup>49</sup> See [[ma3azef.com](http://ma3azef.com)]

<sup>50</sup> Over 66 million views in 2017, 90% of which were in Egypt.

<sup>51</sup> Derrida Jacques, *Mal d’archive*, Paris: Galilée, 2008 (1995), p. 14: “By consignment, let us not only refer, in the everyday sense of this word, to the fact of confining someone to their residence or confiding something to someone for storage in a place and a medium, but to the act of consigning by assembling signs.”

is not—or is no longer--limited to intergenerational timeframes, but now refers to an individual's biographical experience. Posting old *mahragān* tracks demonstrates the development of this connection between archiving and personal life. Comments often highlight nostalgia for lost youth such as their high-school years that were eased by *mahragān* music, the ten-year soundtrack of an Egyptian generation. Other comments tag posts as “souvenirs” (*zikrayāt*) of the best years of authors' lives. Such online practices constitute a somewhat reflexive individualization and fragmentation of archives, in which posted sounds and images are linked to YouTubers' and commentators' biographies. *Mahragān* online compositions thus function as much as traces of their own existences and pasts as they do to preserve memories and archives. The result is a scattered body of songs and tracks connected by the tag “*mahragān*.” In some ways, such links are merely performative because they allow the music to exist autonomously. They also demonstrate *mahragān*'s grip on a generation of young Egyptians and its ability to transcend its original territories to conquer far broader social and virtual spaces.

## Conclusion

*Mahragān* created its own brand of musical modernity by extending an esthetic of electrification that has influenced both profane and sacred popular celebrations (*mouled*) by combining acoustic saturation, echo effects, and reverb to create the auditory images that define these singular urban rituals.<sup>52</sup> This electro-acoustic transformation is made possible by hacking Auto-tune, a computer program originally intended to adapt the voice to a melody. A specific adjustment cancels the vibrato aspect of the voice, giving it an electronic timbre. Various gradations can currently be observed in innovative applications of Auto-tune. Twinz, for example, meticulously adapts Auto-tune to the music with exquisite precision. Because *mahragān* has now accumulated a history of over ten years, producers have learned to manipulate sound effects and fine-tune their compositions, which have grown from a handful of tracks to over fifty for a song such as *al-Rihla*.

This continuous refinement illustrates *mahragān* producers' growing professionalism, even as they continue to depend on popular weddings for their livelihoods. This remains true even in the face of justifiable claims

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<sup>52</sup> Puig Nicolas, “La ville amplifiée. Synthétiseurs, sonorisation et effets électro-acoustiques dans les rituels urban in Cairo,” *op. cit.*

that *mahragān* circulates widely among Egyptian real and virtual audiences.

A large number of concerts and festivals also enliven central Cairo evenings, including an event called “People’s Night” in April 2016, held on the campus of the prestigious American University in Cairo (AUC) on Tahrir Square. The event featured *mahragān* singers, the initiator of *sha’bī*, ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ Ḥammūda, and the virtuoso electric organist Islām Chipsy. The audience consisted primarily of young members of the middle and upper classes, especially AUC students. Arguably, these performances of otherwise controversial music indicate that *mahragān* is channeling a form of “counterculture” or “alternative culture” among a segment of Egyptian youth disenchanted by the aftermath of the 2011 revolution whose political ideals were quashed by renewed authoritarianism in Egypt. This is perhaps due to a form of reverse stigmatization in which cultural expressions from Cairo’s informal urban zones and popular neighborhoods are spreading throughout the city and the rest of the country. At the same time, the status of Cairo’s informal zones are seen through the lens of a new urban paradigm. Indeed, some Egyptian and international experts have noted their “durable” nature and “compactness, multi-functionality, pedestrian home-work travel patterns, and intra-zonal transportation systems such as *tuktuk* and minibuses.”<sup>53</sup>

It is also true that music from peri-urban zones has attracted increasing attention. In the mid-2000s, many cultural commentators were contending that music remained attached to the urban territories in which they supposedly arose following an implicit categorization: “Aḥmad ‘Adawīyya represented songs of the true historical neighborhoods (*al-ḥārāt al-ḥaqīqiyya*), and Sa’d al-Ṣughayyar, Sha’bān (‘Abd al-Raḥīm) and (‘Imād) Ba’rūr based their success on *‘ashwā’iyya!* (15 November 2006, the Egyptian weekly *al-Dustūr*.)” According to Miller, however, a less stigmatizing approach was emerging at the time: “Although the term *‘ashwā’ī* retains connotations of anarchy, (...) it turns out that the official power and social classes associated with it are so discredited by widespread corruption and mafia-style practices that popular “anarchy” is

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<sup>53</sup> Barthel Pierre-Arnaud, “Relire Le Grand Caire au miroir de la densité,” *Confluences Méditerranée*, 75/4 (2010), pp. 121-135.

increasingly fashionable and sought-after, including among young musicians associated with counterculture.”<sup>54</sup>

Post-revolutionary *mahragān* exploded this trend by publicly embracing the youth and alternative culture of the city’s outlying districts and zones. The “circulation and dissemination of cultural and linguistic influences” from informal neighborhoods throughout Egyptian society via *mahragān* grew exponentially.

Indeed, between 2006--when Miller wrote her article--and 2019, informal urban zones became more closely tied to the city, and ramifications of the 2011 revolution have continued to be felt throughout present-day Egyptian society. It seems likely that these ripple effects have changed the reception of cultural expressions from poor, marginal urban areas of Cairo and the rest of the country.

The boundaries of “popular” culture are notably unstable. As is the distinction between what is acceptable and what is desirable (i.e., that potentially represents an authentic, respectable Egypt), and between the vulgar and the unacceptable (i.e., that is unsuitable for representing the nation’s modernist cultural aspirations). The 2011 uprising accentuated the tensions and perplexities that lie between these two polarities. As Winegar notes, the relationship to linguistic vulgarity changed as numerous protesters used rawer, cruder linguistic forms to voice opinions about the political situation that were previously associated with the lower classes. She wrote: “What has been especially notable is the circulation of these words and phrases in public—in graffiti, on social media, in cartoons and songs. Before 2011, for example, it would have been extremely shocking to read or hear words such as “fuck this” (*aḥa*) being publicly uttered or accepted by anyone trying to be respectable according to middle-class norms. She notes a paradoxical relationship between this tendency and a parallel tendency towards “purity” that often translates, depending on how it is expressed, into “*acts of aesthetic ordering*” that she believes contain an appeal for attention that was among the forces behind the uprising. This circulation has led to wider acceptance of the cruder, more prosaic contents of *mahragān* songs that are nevertheless extraordinarily inventive.

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<sup>54</sup> Miller Catherine, *op. cit.*



*Mahragān* is unquestionably the contemporary electronic soundtrack of the city's poorer districts. Its relationship to cultural and urban legitimacies helps it shape--and be shaped by—at least a century of Egyptian society's ambivalence regarding popular cultures. *Mahragān*'s power to enthrall audiences is clearly tied to the festive alternative model that it represents, which is in turn related to a new vision of the contributions of informal and outlying urban communities to wider cultural circulations and urban questions.

*Mahragān* is henceforth an integral part of the social fabric of Egyptian cultural and artistic expression, despite musicians' attempts to avoid becoming enmeshed in a complex and often conflictual field to pursue less polarized careers. Even at the risk of becoming disconnected from their original urban audiences, who appreciate their music's character and who helped them attain their astonishing celebrity.