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Egyptian Music History - The Marvelous Egyptian Oud

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Audio Feature

This Audio feature aims to explain the importance of the Egyptian oud in Egyptian music throughout the years. It also explains the love that I have for the instrument, its history, and how it originated to become the unique sounding instrument it is today. The audio documentary also includes stories of people from the modern era of Egyptian music and how they are trying to preserve its history and importance from completely disappearing due to the drastic changes to Egyptian music that have been caused by Egyptian contemporary music.

*SND BITE: Egyptian Oud playing in the intro.*

Do you hear how exotic that sounds?

*SND BITE: continuation of the Egyptian Oud being played.*

The sound is so beautiful, so unique, so amazing.

The oud is an instrument native to the Middle east that is criminally underrated.

*SND BITE: higher pitched sound bite of the Egyptian Oud being played. Then stops.*

So that was the Egyptian Oud being played. It sounds like a string instrument or a guitar that has a more oriental tune to it. Listen to the difference between them.

First, let's listen to the guitar.

*SND BITE: The sound of a note being played on a guitar.*

Now, let’s listen to the oud.

*SND BITE: The sound of a note being played on the Egyptian Oud.*
The sound is vastly different from the guitar. Not only is the sound different, but the shape, the number of strings, and the way it’s played is different.

The oud has no frets, 12 strings, a smaller neck, and it’s played with a resha, which is the pic for the oud.

Egyptian classical music is full of the marvelous oud. It was a very necessary instrument that has been a part of many historical songs and was used by many artists in the past like Farid El Atrash, Mohamed Abdelwahab, and Said Darwish.

I fell in love with the oud when I heard my mother listening to some classical Egyptian music at home that featured a lot of instrumentals including the oud and the tabla. She loves that kind of music, the classical Egyptian music sound that cannot be recreated by anyone except the greats like her favorite Hamza El Din.

*Madiha Mansour (MM):* I fell in love with the oud from Hamza El Din Specifically. Of course other big musicians played classical also, but Hamza El Din was an Egyptian composer, oud player, a tar player and a vocalist. He's a Nubian who lived between Egypt and Sudan on the border and studied in Japan, Italy and in the United States.

Hamza was not the most known name when it came to the greats, but he has travelled the world with one goal, to give everybody a chance to listen to the amazing oud in his music.

My mother, Madiha Mansour, also loves the sound of the oud and always has it playing either live or recorded.
To encourage oud again in Egypt, I bring a lot of great oud musicians like Karam Murad and Abdullah Noali. These are very young. I mean, they’re from 20 something years old to 40 years old. And we’re trying to revive the oud back in the Egyptian music. I’m an oud enthusiast. So during all these events and outings I have I like to encourage musicians and oud players like Karam Murad and Abdullah Noali to come and, and you know, play live at the event and revive this whole era of the oud in Egypt.

My mother wishes the oud makes a comeback to become one of the most played instruments in modern Arabic music. However, as technology advances, and electronic music takes over, the sounds of Egyptian music have changed drastically.

(MM): Egyptian music is great and very expressive, but I think nowadays it lacks what the old and other instruments give us. It lacks this, you know the beauty of the notes and so on.

I personally think that globalization is an issue affecting the presence of the oud in Egyptian music nowadays. American influence has changed music globally. Music in the Middle East, India, Korea has many similarities now. Things like electronic techno beats, or fully computer produced music have taken over as demand for more western modern type beats arise. This in my opinion makes K-pop music, for example, sound a lot like modern Egyptian music. It’s killing the traditions and heritage that these countries have had in their music for hundreds of years.
The history of the oud has been in Arabian music for hundreds of years. I was recently very lucky to get the chance to interview and talk to the very talented and skillful oud player, Karam Murad, where he talked to me about the origins of the Egyptian oud.

*Karam Murad (KM): I am a nephew and a pupil of Hamza El Din, the father of Nubian and music and a master oud player. Today I will talk about the most important instrument of Arabic music or Egyptian music, the oud. There are many theories about the roots of the Arabic oud. The most famous one comes from the barbat, the barbat is an instrument from Iran.*

Karam explains that the Egyptian oud has originated from the Persian instrument the barbat. When the Persian empire invaded Egypt in 525 BC, they brought with them a huge number of cultural influences, and the barbat was one of them.

It has taken many years for the Egyptian oud to become the amazing instrument that it is today. Not only was the oud influenced by the Persian barbat, but the Ottoman and the Arabian oud as well. The Egyptian oud is a great example of the history that Egypt has had over the years. It is a representation of the various cultures and empires that have been in this amazing country throughout the years in one beautiful sounding instrument, the Egyptian oud.

This audio feature was produced by Seif Abuelwafa for the Audio Production course at The American University in Cairo, taught by Professor Kim Fox in the spring semester of 2021. Special thanks to Madiha Mansour and Karam Murad for their insightful interviews.