

# Mahmūd Darwīsh and Marcīl Khalīfa: Art and Commitment

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We are in a stadium somewhere in the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> A dark night, spotlights, and the singer, composer, and musician Marcīl Khalīfa alone on the stage with his Arab lute:<sup>2</sup>

I long for my mother's bread  
My mother's coffee  
My mother's touch  
The childhood grows in me  
Days in the arms of the days  
And I love my life  
For if I had died  
I would be ashamed of my mother's tears.

The fully loaded stadium knows the poem and answers the singer, partly singing and partly reciting:

I'm getting old  
Give me back the stars of childhood  
So that I together with the small birds  
May take the road home  
... to the nest of your waiting.<sup>3</sup>

The text of the song *ilā 'ummi* (To my Mother), which Marcīl Khalīfa is singing and which he has sung at numerous similar events, is by the Palestinian Maḥmūd Darwīsh (1941–2008).<sup>4</sup> The poem is from the collection *'āshiq min filistīn* (A Lover from Palestine); it was published in 1966<sup>5</sup> and includes the most important poems which made

1 *Marcel Khalife. Voyageur*, DVD, ch. 19 'Ma Mere/Mother', Sabbah Media Production, 2004. The material includes neither information on author nor place of production.

2 He is playing on a modernized version of the short neck Arab lute *al-'ūd*.

3 Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Arabic are by the present author who therefore also bears the sole responsibility for them. However, I am indebted to my linguistic advisors, Daro Hansen and Sawzan Kassis, for patient help with the translation.

4 The transliteration from Arab has been done according the *IJMES transliteration system*. In quotations, titles etc. the transliteration follows the source. Some names are spelled according to commonly used Latinized forms.

5 Home-page of Mahmoud Darwish Foundation gives 1966 as the year of publication. The earliest edition I can verify is Mahmūd Darwīsh, *'āshiq min Filistīn* (Beirut: Dar al-Adāb, 1968).

Mahmūd Darwīsh known and loved in the Arab world as the voice of the Palestinian cause and which are still loved by a large audience: *jawāz safar* (A Passport), *rītā wa-l-bunduqīyya* (Rita and the Gun), and *wu 'ūd min al-'āsifa* (Promises of the Storm). These poems operate within the traditional poetic gamut of emotions on love, loss, and longing and relate this gamut with the political, moral, and existential themes associated with Palestine's recent history following the founding of Israel and the expulsion of Palestinians from the territory of the new state after the first Israeli-Arab war in 1948. Darwīsh has retained his popularity also in later, less explicit nationalistic and political phases of his authorship. He died in 2008, fifty-seven years old, but even today many in the Arab world hear his voice as containing a special moral authority.

There are many good reasons to assume that for modern Arab audiences there are strong political-moral elements in their resilient, emotional response to his poetry. In the case of the poem *ilā 'ummi* there is a story included: the poem was written while Darwīsh was living in Israel and was part of the Palestinian opposition or resistance movement. It was composed during one of Darwīsh's jail terms in Israeli prisons at that time. Thus the poem's yearning for *home* – that is, mother's bread and coffee and touch – is also the yearning for political freedom, and the yearning for childhood is also the yearning for the lost country. For the Arab audience the song is weaved in a political-emotional community connected with *al-qaḍīyyā al-filistīnīyya* (the Palestinian issue) and oriented between on the one side *al-ghurba* (expatriation) and on the other *'awda* (return).

The singer, musician and composer Marcīl Khalīfa (b. 1950) is Lebanese. He studied the Arab lute at the Academy of Music in Beirut and composition at the conservatory in Moscow and had his breakthrough in the 1970s as an artist with a political agenda, a kind of Arab 'protest singer'. The lyrics to his most loved songs are the poems by Darwīsh mentioned above. Many have become acquainted with Darwīsh's poems through these songs, and for many Khalīfa is a 'Mahmūd Darwīsh singer'. Darwīsh has acknowledged that Khalīfa has played a crucial role in the dissemination of his poetry:

Marcel Khalife's song may be one of the few remaining songs of our spiritual enlightenment ...

In Khalife's song there is useful beauty and clear purposefulness. When I wrote about my love for my mother from the prison, neither she nor I realized the effectiveness of this declaration until Marcel's song announced it beyond the personal relationship and the moment of prison. Khalife narrowed the gap, ever made wider by poets, between poetry and song. He brought back the absent emotional space needed to reconcile poetry with its alienated audience. Thus, poetry developed Khalife's song, while the latter mended people's relationship with poetry. Now, the streets sing with Marcel and the words need a podium no longer.<sup>6</sup>

6 Mahmūd Darwīsh on Marcel Khalife: [http://www.rockpaperscissors.biz/index.cfm/fuseaction/current.alt\\_press\\_release/project\\_id/185/alt\\_release/83.cfm](http://www.rockpaperscissors.biz/index.cfm/fuseaction/current.alt_press_release/project_id/185/alt_release/83.cfm), accessed 2 Oct. 2012. Concert programme note on Saturday 16 October at the University Music Society, University of Michigan; accessed at [http://ums.aadl.org/ums/programs\\_20041015b](http://ums.aadl.org/ums/programs_20041015b).

From a western point of view, Khalīfa is, moreover, a musician with an exceptionally wide range. His production spans from simple, popular songs to Mahmūd Darwīsh's early poems via orchestral music of various degrees of oriental local colouring to *oriental jazz*.

There are obvious parallels between the two artists. Both are known and loved by a wide, popular audience, both are connected with what in Arab is called *al-fan al-multazim* – the committed art, and in their production and public statements we find traces of a rather complex negotiation of the relationship between political and moral engagement and artistic autonomy. But basically the cultural status of the arts that they represent differs. The art of poetry possesses an undeniable cultural legitimacy, and in both traditional and modern Arab cultural-heritage structures it is assigned the role as *the* central vehicle for cultural recollection and reflection. The music has a stronger need for a justification. Its cultural legitimacy as such is partly challenged by Islam,<sup>7</sup> partly it cannot – as its European counterpart – refer back to a long evolutionary history of written culture.<sup>8</sup> The two artists relate to the same current set of political problems, and the same aesthetic and principal questions. However, as poet and musician respectively, they have very distinct historical premises.

#### THE POEM AND THE POET'S ROLE

In the international scholarly literature, which I have been able to consult, it is more or less agreed that in Mahmūd Darwīsh's poetic production we find traces of an artistic acted-out conflict between his role as a Palestinian national symbol and his role as a modern free artist who develops in dialogue with the sophisticated world literature of his time. The viewpoints presented in this literature are, of course, influenced by western academic agendas, but parts of the premises for the described conflict are related to conditions that are specific for the modern Arab literary 'institution'. It is partly concerned with the hierarchy of genre in which the poem – contrary to the novel and other prose genres – is celebrated in the Arab cultural heritage discussion as the old and endemic literary art form; and it is partly about the form and extent of the art of poetry's presence in the cultural field.

Poetry is simply present in the modern Arab everyday life, which I have studied on visits to Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt during the last years and by listening daily to Arab radio, in a different way than what we know from the modern western society, and Arab poets play a different prominent role as cultural icons. On the Syrian state radio, short spots, in which the voices of well-known poets recite pieces of their celebrated poems, interrupt the transmissions. And in 2013, while I was working on the present article, Bashār al-Assad's official Syria was burying the poet Sulaimān il-ʿīsā, who was closely associated with the regime and the Bath-party celebrating him as one of the great sons of the country ravaged by civil

7 For an insightful account of the theological dispute regarding the music (the so-called *sama'*-discussion), see Kristina Nelson, *The Art of Reciting the Qur'an* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2001 (1985)).

8 H.H. Touma, *Arabische Musik und Notenschrift* (Tutzing: Schneider, 1996).

war.<sup>9</sup> Poems and poets play a different, more prominent role in the modern Arab culture than they do in western culture, both in terms of the official as well as the dissident culture.

Also a different emphasis on the performativity belongs to this view regarding poetry's different placement in the cultural landscape. Poetry on the modern Arab literary stage is to a much greater extent than in the western world a performative genre. The poet is in a different way intimately connected with his voice; the ability to convincingly recite own poems is an integrated part of the profession of being a poet, and *al-umsiya al-sha'riyya* (poem recitation evening) is a deep-rooted and living tradition cultivated in all shapes, from the most humble to the most pretentious such as in the national opera houses of Cairo and Damascus. Thousands of fans gathered when Mahmūd Darwīsh recited his own poems, and his voice and supreme command of the art of recitation may be heard and seen on numerous videos on the Internet. Incidentally, the Internet and the Arab satellite channels play a particular role in connection with the maintenance and dissemination of the art of poetry. The most striking example is the competition, *amīr al-shu'ara'* (Prince of the Poets), taking place in Abu Dhabi: the poets recite their own works to a very enthusiastic audience and are subjected to strict judges' assessment in a scenography very similar to that which we know from X Factor.<sup>10</sup>

The poem's or the poet's special status in contemporary Arab culture may be explained historically. In the Arab world the novel is a relatively new phenomenon linked with the efforts of modernization, reform, and revitalization that began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which the Arab speaking refer to by employing the concept *al-nahḍa*,<sup>11</sup> while poetic genres such as the qasida and ghazale may be traced back to the pre-Islamic age. It is said that since this remote past the poets have acted as the nation's voice, recollection, and conscience. The idea of poetry's central identity-forming importance is expressed in the saying, *diwān al-'arab*, which may be translated as 'the chronicle' or 'the register' of the Arabs. The entry 'Arabic Literature' in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* explains:

'The register of the Arabs' (*diwān al-'arab*) is the age-old phrase whereby Arabs have acknowledged the status and value that poetry has always retained within their cultural heritage. From the very earliest stages in the Arabic literary tradition, poetry has reflected the deepest sense of Arab self-identity, of communal history, and of aspirations for the future. Within this tradition the role of the poet has been of major significance. The linkage between public life and the composition of ringing odes has remained a direct one from the pre-Islamic era – when the poet was a major verbal weapon, someone whose verses could be invoked to praise the heroes of his own tribe and to pour scorn on those of their enemies – through the pre-modern period – when poetic

9 Syrian Free Press Network: 'Poet Sulaiman al-Issa Laid to Rest', 12 Aug. 2013, <http://syrianfree-press.wordpress.com/2013/08/12/poet-sulaiman-al-issa-laid-to-rest/>, accessed 5 Sept. 2013.

10 Blog: The Saif House: 'The Prince of Poets: Arab Poetry's Answer to American Idol', 10 Sept. 2007; <http://3quarksdaily.blogs.com/3quarksdaily/2007/09/the-prince-of-p.html>, accessed 5 Sept. 2013.

11 *Al-Nahḍa*; the literal meaning is 'awakening'.

eulogies not only extolled the ruler who patronized the poet but reflected a pride in the achievements and extent of the Islamic dominions – to the modern period – in which the poet has felt called upon to either reflect or oppose the prevailing political mood. In times of crisis it has always been, and still remains, the poet's voice that is first raised to reflect the tragedies, the anger, the fears, and the determination of the Arab people.<sup>12</sup>

The idea that the art of poetry has a historically conditioned special status is also cultivated among distinguished representatives of the younger generation of Arab intellectuals such as the political scientist, Tamīm al-Barghūthi (b. 1977), who develops the idea by explaining its origin in the pre-Islamic nomadic culture on the Arabian Peninsula. According to Tamīm al-Barghūthi there is a simple, causal relationship between the nomadic life and the special significance of the poet's words as the central factor for collective memory and identity formation. Nomadic people cannot make use of permanent buildings and monuments as symbols for a collective memory and identity. The poet's words, which merely require a good memory, a good voice and an animal to ride on in order to be transported from camp to camp, receive therefore a central place in the culture.<sup>13</sup> In addition, Tamīm al-Barghūthi embodies the role of the poet in which he describes and combines the role of an academic and intellectual with that of a politically committed poet. He received his popular breakthrough in 2007, when he won the fifth prize at the above-mentioned competition, *amīr al-shu'ara'*, with the poem *fī-l-quds* (In Jerusalem).<sup>14</sup>

The trend – that is, that current cultural phenomena are interpreted in the light of ancient culture historical occurrences, here represented by Tamīm al-Barghūthi – is so typical in contemporary Arab culture-theoretical discourse that the trend in itself requires reflection. In this context it is worth noting that the long historical perspective was also a factor in the establishment of the Arab modernism, which was one of the points of orientation in the literary circles of Beirut in the 1960s. It is significant of this particular kind of historical consciousness, characterizing modern Arab art theory, that a leading Arab modernist such as the Syrian-born Adonis (b. 1930)<sup>15</sup> established his own artistic position in direct dialogue with the ancient layers of literary history. His dissertation, *The Stable and Variable*,<sup>16</sup> focuses on the first three centuries after Islam's emergence, arriving at the viewpoint that the best poetry from the distant past embodies a time-independent modernity of immediate present relevance. This is a view which he expounds on in *An Introduction to Arabic Poetics* (1990), adding, however, that an inherent modernity in poets and canonized cultural icons, such as 'Abū Nuwās (756–814) and 'Abū Tammām (c. 796–845), was

12 Roger M.A. Allen, 'Arabic Literature', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <http://www.academicroom.com/topics/arabic-definition>, accessed 11 Dec. 2012.

13 Tamīm al-Barghouti, *The Umma and the Dawla. The Nation State and the Arab Middle East* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 8–10.

14 Listen to the poem on youtube, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7GGP89OhAaU&index=14&list=FLyh4O8\\_X\\_UMoqLZi1SdQRTg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7GGP89OhAaU&index=14&list=FLyh4O8_X_UMoqLZi1SdQRTg).

15 Pen name for 'alī Aḥmad Sa'īd 'isbur.

16 Adonis, *al-thābit wa-l-mutahawwil balḥth fī-l-'ittiā' wa-l-ibdā' 'ind al-'arab* (Beirut, 1986).

not available to him until he came into contact with western modernism and western literary theory and applied its viewpoints.

#### MAHMŪD DARWĪSH. ART AND POLITICS

Mahmūd Darwīsh was born in 1941 in Al-Birwa, one of those villages destroyed during the war in 1948. In his youth he actively participated in the internal Palestinian opposition to the state of Israel, and he let his first poems publish in the literary magazine, *Al Jadid* (The New), of the Israeli communist party. After several terms of imprisonment he left Israel in 1970, and after a year of studies in Moscow he settled first in Egypt and then in Lebanon. In 1973, Darwīsh joined the PLO later becoming a member of the organization's executive committee. He stepped down in 1993, however, dissatisfied with the Oslo-agreements. In 1995, he got permission to settle in Ramallah, the administrative capital of Palestine. He died in a hospital in Houston, Texas, following an unsuccessful heart surgery in 2008.

Darwīsh's early political marks of orientation are thus evident: the Palestinian cause, the communist party, and Moscow. It is more difficult to set his stylistic inclinations on a formula. Apart from some early works in classical Arabic style with the qasida's characteristic and fixed rhyme and metre, he expresses himself in what is termed 'free stanzas' which must not be mistaken for prose. Darwīsh works very consciously with poetic devices such as metre, rhyme, and assonance – in a dialogue with tradition, but freed from the conventional patterns.<sup>17</sup>

The language of his poems is often called 'classical Arabic' but a better term is 'modern standard Arabic' or *al-lughā al-'arabiyya al-fuṣḥā* which is a common language dominating literature and sciences and used in official political discussions. It joins the Arab countries together into a large language community though always distinct from the Arab vernacular language or dialects, spoken everyday in the different countries and areas.<sup>18</sup>

The question regarding literary influences is, of course, controversial. Among Arab literary models, I have seen the popular Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani mentioned side by side with the great Iraqi modernist 'Abd al-Wahāb al-Bayāti. Of names that are better known in the West, I have seen proposed Aragon, Neruda, and Lorca.

The young Darwīsh established himself on the literary stage which was not only influenced by politically committed literature but also on which the concept of the socially committed literature was a central and pivotal point in the art-theoretical discussions. The concept *al-adab al-multazim* (the committed literature) is still employed in conversations on art's role, although the younger generation today associ-

17 Subhi Hadidi, 'Mahmoud Darwish's Love Poem: History, Exile and the Epic Call', in Hala Khamis Nassar and Najat Rahman (eds.), *Mahmoud Darwish: Exile's Poet. Critical Essays* (Massachusetts: Olive Branch Press, 2008), 95–122.

18 For an insightful analysis of the cultural implications of the Arab *diglossia* (the relation between the local Arab popular languages and the modern standard Arab, which is only mastered by well-educated elites), see Walter Ambrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 37–62.

ates it with the spirit of – from their point of view – a finished phase characterized by Marxism, socialism, and pan-Arabism. In its original contexts, it was marked by a strong conviction that the social and political commitment was a driving force in the renewal processes of art; its commitment to the social and political presence necessitated and conducted a break from effete and conventional forms. Thus the point of departure was not the idea of an antithetic relation between commitment and artistic freedom; on the contrary, art liberated itself from the convention and developed new forms of expression when it reached out towards new subject matters and committed itself to social change.

It is impossible to know to what degree the young Mahmūd Darwīsh experienced such a balanced relationship between politics and aesthetics. However, there is evidence to suggest that his role as the voice of Palestine became a problem for him later in life, and that the matter was integrated into his poetry in various ways and made subject to poetic reflection. It is this development in his authorship which usually is pursued in research literature dominated by western scholarly discourse. In this literature, there is a strong consensus to describe Darwīsh's development as a gradual liberation from the problematic binding to a political and nationalistic agenda; but there are different proposals as to the character and chronology of this process. Some point out that the Oslo-agreements in 1993 were a decisive turning point. As mentioned earlier, these agreements, which meant PLO's recognition of Israel's right to exist and which led to the home-rule agreement that is still in force, had two consequences for Darwīsh: 1) the break with PLO; and 2) the possibility to return to Palestine, settling in Ramallah. This seems to have led to a soul-searching and to the acknowledgement that the former mythical, romanticizing notion of Palestine had prevented a sober look at the realities of life and a free poetic reflection on them. In an interview from 1997, he said:

Peace was supposed to resolve the tension of Palestinian identity, to withdraw us from our mythical existence, to remind us of our real condition, and to teach us that reality is richer than any text. We effectively began to ask questions about how to move away from a mythic text of victims and executioners to a commonplace history, to a common people worried about their everyday life. ...

I ... don't know if we would be able, once return is possible, to continue to oppose exile to homeland. It is still too early to raise these questions and to answer them; Palestine has to be entitled to a homeland that they will curse or hate in their own way. As for me, I cannot praise exile as long as it is impossible for me to curse the homeland. But, the dreamed Palestine comes to my mind more readily when I write than real Palestine.<sup>19</sup>

The possibility to return home, which became a reality for Darwīsh though he never acquiesced the premises of the Oslo-agreements, appears here as the big trouble-maker, as the prosaic reality querying the dichotomous constructions behind the mythologising exile poetry: *ghurba* and *'awda*, expatriation and return, victim and

19 Mahmūd Darwīsh quot. in Hadidi, 'Mahmoud Darwish's Love Poem', 108–9.

executioner. It forces Darwish to a poetic self-reckoning or, as he mentions, to write ‘better poetry’. As Subhi Hadidi underlines, the late poems are characterized by a new autobiographical orientation or, as Angelika Neuwirth explains, they constitute a ‘poetic rewriting of his past’ linked to an explicit renunciation from ‘... his rank of the mythopoeic poet of his people’ and questioning ‘... an essential part of his own mythic production’.<sup>20</sup>

The tendency towards a critical poetic, autobiographical rewriting is explicit and clearly present in Darwish’s late production characterized by a distanced, critical self-reflection that impairs the poetic knack commonly found in the early production. Faysal Darraj calls the knack ‘romantic’ and describes it as relying on a poetic identification between the exile poet’s lost home country as the object of love and the poet as the coveting lover; thus the poem *qasīdat al-ard* (The Poem about the Land): ‘I am the land / and the land is you ... / – the Galilee air wants to speak on my behalf / the Galilee gazelle wants to break my prison today / ... / The smell of the land / in the early morning / awakens me, my iron chains / Awakens the land in the early / evening / ... I am the awakened land ... plough my body. /... I am / ... / the family apricot blossom / ... / I am the hope of the vast meadow / ... / I am the land awakening / ... / I am the eternal lover / I am the witness of the massacre.’<sup>21</sup>

Mahmud Darwish’s final long poem *lā’ib al-nard* (The Dice-Player) is explicitly autobiographical and spoils effectively the romantic mechanism of identification. Now it is about the random and porous relation between the poet and his world. The twenty-seven page long poem is a melancholic, at times ironic ambiguous retrospect on life as a series of accidental events with a poetic effective tension between the prosaic sensing and the thick layers of literary and religious references which still come into play. It starts pathetically and beautifully with the words ‘man ’anā li-’aqūla lakum mā ’aqūla lakum?’ (Who am I to tell you what I tell you?) And continues: ‘I’m not a stone sanded by water / so that it became a face / or a reed in which the wind / wore holes / so that it became a flute / I’m nothing else than a dice-player / One time I win / the next I lose / I’m just as you / or perhaps a little less!’<sup>22</sup>

Edward Said has suggested that we may understand Darwish’s late poem by employing Adorno’s concept, *Spätstil*, which he developed in connection with Beethoven’s late works. According to Said’s interpretation this implies the combination of ‘the conventional and the ethereal, the historical and the transcendently aesthetical’ leading to an ‘astonishingly concrete sense of going beyond what anyone has ever lived through in reality’.<sup>23</sup> In my opinion this suggestion makes

20 Angelika Neuwirth, ‘Hebrew Bible and Arabic Poetry: Mahmoud Darwish’s Palestine – From Paradise Lost to a Homeland Made of Words’, in Nassar & Rahman (eds.), *Mahmoud Darwish: Exile’s Poet*, 170–71.

21 Quotation in English translation according to Faysal Darraj, ‘Transfigurations in the Image of Palestine in the Poetry of Mahmoud Darwish’, in Nassar & Rahman (eds.), *Mahmoud Darwish: Exile’s Poet*, 60.

22 The poem is published in a bi-lingual German–Arab edition with translation and foreword by Adel Karasholi; Mahmoud Darwish, *lā’ib al-nard/Der Würfelspieler* (München: Ar Verlag, 2011).

23 Edward Said, ‘On Mahmoud Darwish’, *Grand Street*, 48 (Winter 1994), 112–15.

sense artistically as far as the late poems are concerned which strangely combine a form of objective soberness with poetic pathos, creating a metaphysical place of resonance for the described occurrences in life. Referring to Adorno, however, also pushes the critical questions on context of interpretation and the right to interpret to the extreme. The invocation of Adorno's aesthetic theory was and is linked with the great symbolic power in the western dominated academic world in which Said was active.

This opens up to a type of meta-critique: the story about Darwīsh's development as it is told here is shaped on the basis of the narrative of liberation in which the artist gradually liberates himself from the straitjacket of political commitments, while his art develops its modes of operation from the appeal to emotional response and identification to critical self-reflection and detachment. But it is not reflection and detachment which Darwīsh's audience is searching for, and it is not what they get at the concerts or arrangements of poem recitations which I mentioned in the introduction. Other contexts of interpretation are at play here, and other cultural needs are met. For many, Mahmūd Darwīsh – his (mythical) character, his poems and his voice – is still a meeting point for a political-moral-emotional community, strengthened and confirmed by the familiarizing oneself with the early poems' amalgamation of sound and meaning.

Different and heterogeneous reasons, such as the literary quality of his poems, the great symbolic importance in the Arab world regarding the Palestinian cause, the Palestinian diaspora and the many Palestinian intellectuals living in Europe and the US, have provided Darwīsh with a special position, both in the Arab world as well as in the western. This also implies that the right to interpret, both in terms of his person and his literary work, is in particular subject to conflicts of interest. Where should we turn if we wish to understand Darwīsh's cultural importance – to his mass audience who use him in their daily political-moral-emotional economy? Or should we turn to literary scholars who downplay the importance of the political commitment and the popular appeal? The question cannot be answered, but it may help us to realize that the mass audience has already lost if we uncritically accept interpretations based on a narrative of liberation in which the art frees itself from its societal obligations, developing as art. Alternatives are sought for, and in that connection one may find inspiration in Subhi Hadidi who suggests that we look at the matter as a question of negotiating the relation between two sets of equally legitimate rights: the poet's, who rightfully demands his artistic freedom; and the audience's, who in difficult times rightfully claims a poet in the 'Arab sense' of the word:

It was a time when Arabs considered poets as prophets, when Arabs identified themselves with the unique voices of their poets, trusting their prophecies in order to contemplate their own past and prepare for the future. It was a time when Arabs made poets their guides and followed them down the roads of the unknown that only poets knew how to travel. Whether in victory or in defeat, it is to the poets the crowds turned. All cultures, like Arabic culture, attributed a special role to their poets at particular moments in their history. It became incumbent upon poets everywhere to speak

for their communities, to find answers to existential questions, to give poetry a power that was national, cultural, spiritual and material and informative.

Circumstances, both personal and impersonal, have led Darwish to occupy a position of significance similar to the great poets of the Arab past. Perhaps the reader is obligated to defend the unique position granted to the poet, as the voice of Palestine ... , the lover from Palestine ... , the steadfast one from Palestine, and the transcendent symbol ...<sup>24</sup>

#### MARCİL KHALĪFA

Khalīfa became famous in the middle of the 1970s, that is a few years after his studies at the Academy of Music in Beirut which he finished in 1971 and supplemented with composition studies in Moscow. At the same time, he established the close link with Mahmud Darwish that since then has been his trademark. The first compositions with text by Mahmūd Darwīsh were *Aḥmad al-ʿarabi* (1973) and *ʿarās* (Weddings) (1973) which both are for soli, choir, and orchestra and both linked with the Palestinian case. Angelika Neuwirth reckons the poem *ʿarās* among Darwīsh's 'most overtly mythopoetic poems'. The subject is the Palestinian freedom fighter who 'through his self-sacrifice qualifies as a sacred, superhuman figure, the true lover of the homeland, indeed her bridegroom, who through his violent death consummates a mythical marriage with her'.<sup>25</sup> The freedom-fighter martyr and his heavenly bride is a returning subject in Darwīsh's poetry and a key symbol for the Palestinian resistance movement.

From the outset, Khalīfa was a politically committed artist in a politicized cultural environment, and his works, actions, and opinions are constantly subjected to political interpretations. A couple of his songs, including the song *ilā ʿummi*, have been downloadable from Hezbollah's website.<sup>26</sup> As UNESCO's World Artist for Peace, he travels around the world promoting music's humanistic importance and peace-making role. His name became internationally known and linked to the resistance against Islamic motivated suppression of free speech when he, at the court in Beirut in 1991, had to defend himself against charges of blasphemy due to having set music to and sung Darwīsh's *ʿanā Yūsuf, yā abī* (I'm Josef, Father) which contains a stanza from the Koran.<sup>27</sup> Many western commentators view in Marcel Khalīfa a spokesman for the most esteemed humanistic values; thus Pierre Dupouey for instance. In the booklet to the documentary film *Marcel Khalife Voyageur*, Dupouey depicts Marcel Khalīfa as 'an artist rooted in his culture', and

24 Hadidi, 'Mahmoud Darwish's Love Poem', 97.

25 Neuwirth, 'Hebrew Bible and Arabic Poetry', 179.

26 <http://forum.qawem.org/showthread.php?15493>; according to the information on the home-page, the songs were uploaded in May 2009. The dead links are gathered under the heading 'The most Beautiful of the Fantastic Marçil Khalifa's *anāshīd*? *Anāshīd* is the common word for religious and political songs or 'hymns'.

27 Marçil Khalifa won the trial and was acquitted; regarding the reasons for the judgment, see Jonas Otterbeck, 'Battling over the Public Sphere: Islamic Reactions to Music of Today', *Cont Islam*, 2 (2008), 211–28, DOI10.1007/s11562-008-0062-y. In spite of the outcome of the court case, the desire for a censorship intervention has gained ground. On the compilation CD, 'The Best of Marcel Khalife', the section with the Koran-stanza has been removed.

a deep innovator ... [i]ndependent of factions scattering this region, an unwary fighter for democracy and freedom in a region where exclusion, fanaticism and intolerance seldom [sic] rule. His fights are for us to share.<sup>28</sup>

The American right-wing commentator, Debbi Schussel, has another view. She comments on one of Khalīfa's visits to the US under the heading 'Singer/Composer/Playwright of Islamic Terrorists Hosted by Tax-Funded Arab Museum/Social Agency'.<sup>29</sup> According to Schussel, Khalīfa is an accomplice of the most arrant Islamic terrorism, and she presents him as 'a pan-Islamist version of Wagner', whose anti-Semitism in passing is held responsible for the Nazi genocide on the Jews.

In Lebanon, too, his political position is still discussed. On the Lebanese blogger Atallah al-Salim's blog, a post of August 2011 reports about a crisis in the relationship between Marḥil Khalīfa and his traditionally left-wing audience. 'No other artist's name', the blogger explains, 'is so closely connected to a political current as Marḥil Khalīfa's to the Lebanese communist party'.<sup>30</sup> In recent years, however, he has moved away from his political line arguing that 'music in itself is a humanistic issue'.<sup>31</sup> It is also explained that the crisis in the relationship between the left-winged audience and Khalīfa – who earlier had been 'the revolutionary voice' whose songs 'echoed'<sup>32</sup> at the left wing's (and in particular the communist party's) demonstrations – must be seen in the light of the Left's general decline following the Lebanese civil war. The blogger hopes, however, that a close relationship between Khalīfa and a political committed mass audience will rise again when he appears at the celebrations of the twenty-ninth anniversary for the establishment of the 'Lebanese National Resistance Front'. It was a military organization founded in 1982 by the Lebanese communist party and other left wing groups.

#### PROMISES OF THE STORM

Khalīfa is very visible in the Arab media where his extensive international touring activity is noted and commented on, but Khalīfa's music has not been subjected to a scholarly, critical analysis influenced by western academic agendas similar to Darwīsh. There are, however, abundant Arabic sources on the composer's own interpretation of the works' genesis, their purpose, and their place in music history. This fact, which from the viewpoint of the history of science is interesting, forces me to a rather radical change of perspective: with a few exceptions, the second half of my article is based on Arabic sources including a couple of the many interviews which Khalīfa has given to Arab newspapers and journals throughout the years, as

28 *Marcel Khalife. Voyageur*, DVD, booklet notes. The French text reads 'l'intolérance sont souvent la règle'.

29 Debbie Schlusel, <http://www.debbieschlussel.com/3097/marcel-khalife-islams-wagner-singercomposerplaywright-of-islamic-terrorists-hosted-by-tax-funded-arab-museumsocial-agency/>, accessed on 1 Aug. 2013.

30 <http://atallahalsalim.wordpress.com/2011/08/17/>, accessed on 1 Aug. 2013.

31 *Ibid.*

32 *Ibid.*

well as hour-long programmes of conversation on Arab TV channels. But even if the sources change character, the basic structure of the discussion remains the same. It is still the complexity of problems of ‘the committed art’ that is negotiable.

The genesis of the album *wu'ūd min al-'āsifa* (Promises of the Storm) is a recurring theme in the interviews of Khalifa. In one given to the Lebanese journal *al-mustaqbal al-'arabi* (The Arab Future) in 2003, Khalifa tells about his lonely life in Paris in the years after the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war, and how with ‘caution bordering to fear’ he approached the modern Arab art of poetry which Darwīsh represents and tried to set it to music: ‘[I] had nothing with me in my retreat at this time at the beginning of the Lebanese civil war but my lute and a collection of Mahmūd Darwīsh’s poems. From time to time I opened one of them and found a suitable piece or sentence making comparisons between the linguistic and signifying rhythm and the musical rhythm.’<sup>33</sup> Still, according to Khalifa’s testimony in this source, the songs were recorded an early morning in August in *Le Chant du Monde*’s studios, and they were performed for an audience for the first time at a festival arranged by the newspaper of the French communist party. It was ‘on the scene in the Lebanese pavilion in the beginning of September 1976 by the celebration of the newspaper *l’Humanité* close to stalls with hummus and *ful* [spiced horsebeans] and falafel’.<sup>34</sup> The audience consisted mainly of young Arabs who stayed in Paris for various reasons.

These flashes of memory provide valuable information on the political and cultural landscape in which the young Khalifa put himself. The connection to the political left wing is apparent, and so is the address to one of the Arab immigrant communities which throughout his career was one of his fixed points. A certain connection to the area, which we later have been accustomed to call ‘world music’, is also implied by the name of the record company, *Le Chant du Monde*: they helped channel ‘third world music’ to the politicized western youth culture at that time. They also suggest how Darwīsh’s modernity<sup>35</sup> has involved a compositional-technical challenge. Neither the character of the challenge nor the technical solution is explained; but the work process is suggested: the composer reads through the texts and gradually finds the musical phrases that correspond to the poems’ linguistic and ‘sense-related’ rhythm. This procedure, reflecting music’s heavy dependence on the text (that is, both formally and semantically), does not deviate much from the classical Arab *tarab* tradition from which Khalifa in other instances distances himself. However, Khalifa apparently felt that Darwīsh’s free stanzas – poems without a fixed metre and strophic framework – did not, at first, offer a basis for satisfactory musical form.

In the case of the song *ilā 'ummi*, Khalifa solves this problem by dividing the poem into four stanzas and by providing the work with a short instrumental introduction which together with parts of the text and music to the first stanza is used as a refrain

33 The interview has been reissued with the title ‘hiwār m'a Marcil Khalifa’ (conversation with Marcil Khalifa) in *silsila kuttāb al-mustaqbal al-'arabi* (37): *al-musīqa al-'arabiyya 'as'ilat al-'aṣāla wa-l-tajdīd* (The book series of the Arab future (37): The Arab music: question about authenticity and renewal); quot. from this version, p. 22.

34 Ibid.

35 Khalifa includes Darwīsh’s poems under *al-shi'r al-'arabi al-ḥadīth* (The modern Arab poetry).

enforced with an added, stepwise descending fourth, C-G, to the words *'ummi, 'ummi, 'ummi, 'ummi* (my mother, my mother, my mother, my mother). The resulting musical form is supported by the tonal disposition. The tonal material of the introduction and the first stanza – and hence also in the refrain – is borrowed from maqam<sup>36</sup> nahawand (here it corresponds to C minor), while stanzas two and three borrow their tonal material from maqam bayati on the dominant G (here it corresponds to G minor with the second step approximately a fourth whole tone lower). Furthermore, the dynamism of the form rests on a gradually increasing melodic activity and a gradual extension of the gamut upwards. This simple form provides abundant possibilities for instrumental and vocal improvisation. The improvisational aspect reaches a climax in stanza three where the fundamental note G of the bayati sections is stressed as a pedal-point, and Khalifa improvises in a style with references to the classical tarab-tradition's *mawwāl*.<sup>37</sup>

#### THE MUSICIAN AS A COMMITTED ARTIST

'Marcel Khalife's song may be one of the few remaining songs of our spiritual enlightenment ... In Khalife's song there is useful beauty and clear purposefulness' – big words that Darwīsh threw at Khalīfa's songs which, in spite of the different mode of production, have superficial similarities to the *sing-a-song* genre and which by western distributors were promoted as *folk*. There is, however, a good correlation between the thematic and rhetorical level of style in Darwīsh's approving words and Khalīfa's own explications on his cultural role and significance. 'Useful beauty' and 'clear appropriateness' are the committed art's features, and Khalīfa is convinced that his music holds a special form of rationality and contributes to a project of enlightenment.

Khalīfa's own aesthetic interpretations are characterized by a certain rhetorical weight which is not unusual in modern Middle-Eastern cultural criticism and art-theoretical discourse. It is also burdened by a precarious assignment which Khalīfa has taken on. He wants to show himself as a modern, committed Arab artist with a clear humanistic message, and at the same time he wants to distance himself from the music culture with focus on vocal music, preferring music aesthetics with emphasis on the text-less music's independent articulateness.

Arab art or the Arab artist has two roles: the artistic or aesthetic role and a moral role; that is to say, if I ask an American artist 'what is your role', he would say 'my task is the artistic work, I develop my artistic tools and I have no moral role'. No, the Arab artist is always held answerable – or the poet or the erudite – for a humanistic moral role and an artistic role ...<sup>38</sup>

36 An introduction to the concept 'maqam' is outside the aim of the present article. The concept is central for modern Arab music's self-perception and identity construction and as such subject to conflicting interpretations.

37 *Mawwāl* is a traditional, rhythmical free, vocal improvisation.

38 Interview with Marcīl Khalīfā, *Al Jazeera*, 8 Oct. 2012. *Dawr al-fan fī zaman al-thawrāt* (The role of art in the times of revolutions); here quoted from a transcription downloaded from Al Jazeera's home page <http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/pages/3d970136-290f-46da-bae8-394dd7456121>, accessed 30 June 2013.

Khalifa presents this statement in an interview with the title, *dawr al-fan fī zaman al-thaurāt* (the role of art in the times of revolutions), broadcasted on the Qatar-based Arab Satellite channel Al Jazeera on occasion of his US tour in 2012 with new songs to texts by Darwish.<sup>39</sup> The interview refers back to the starting point of the 1970s' 'committed art' and thus also to the question concerning the relationship between music and politics in a specific Arab context including, now as ever, the large Arab immigration communities outside the Middle-East.

On one of the concert recordings edited and included in the interview, we hear a piece of *rīta wa-l-bunduqīyya* (Rita and the Gun) which is one of the chart songs from *wu'ūd min al-'āṣifa* (Promises of the Storm). It is about the Palestinian poet's relationship with his Israeli sweetheart of his youth.

The town swept all its singers away. And Rita.  
 The town swept all its singers away. And Rita.  
 Between my eyes and Rita is a gun.  
 A gun, a gun.

Resting assured that the viewers' familiarity with this song and those that are included on the album, the interviewer continues:

In relation to these concepts – the longing for the homeland, the longing for the mother, the longing for mother's bread, for a passport – do they all interact in the mind of the people that live in the exile and remind them that perhaps some of them feel that they have found a citizenship abroad and more than in the original homeland, even if they long for the original homeland?<sup>40</sup>

Khalifa answers this somewhat linguistically vague question affirmatively:

It is true that these feelings or sentiments are always present ... That is to say, I never enter the stage except when I have something that needs to be revealed to the audience ... And at the same time, the thing that I say corresponds to the feelings of the audience. And for that reason you see this bond and this unity between the stage and the audience; that is: the members of the audience are not just ordinary recipients that with their cravat enter and sit down in their official dress, No! They return to the squares of their villages, the plazas of their towns, to their memories. The longing is not, for example, I am also from Lebanon; the longing is not after the *kibbeh* mortar and the village well, No, no! It is a longing for the true homeland, a longing for the true beauty ...<sup>41</sup>

According to Khalifa, the artist fulfils his moral duties when he is united with his audience of Arab immigration communities in a common understanding of feelings centred on *ghurba* (expatriation), *hanin* (yearning), and *'awda* (return/homecoming) – the latter concept of Khalifa's characteristic rhetoric unites real political, utopian,

39 The album *An Arab Coffeepot* which includes among others the above-mentioned song 'I'm Josef'.

40 Khalifā, *dawr al-fan fī zaman al-thaurāt* (The role of art in the times of revolutions), 4.

41 Ibid.

and metaphysical visions of homecoming in vague combinations. *al-ʿawda* is a key concept in the Palestinian, political discourse, and *ḥaqq al-ʿawda* [the right to return] is a maintained political demand of the Palestinian part in the conflict with Israel. But in Khalifa, it is just as much about the yearning for a utopian, democratic, and cultural thriving Arabia or about an abstract, existential yearning for ‘the true fatherland ... the true beauty’. The problems associated with this combination of political and historical conditions – that is, the yearning of the exiled – with a metaphysical and religiously coloured dream of redemption – that is, with Palestine as the lost Paradise – is a recurring theme in the academic literature on Darwīsh. And it is a literary theme in both Darwīsh’s production and in that of the poet and politician, Murīd al-Barghūthi. In his novel, *raʾaytu Rāmallah* (I Saw Ramallah),<sup>42</sup> al-Barghūthi reflects on the relation between immigrant communities’ idolization of Palestine, the remembered Palestine from before 1948, and the Palestine he experienced himself in 1996 when he had the opportunity to visit the Palestinian home-rule territory after thirty years in exile. In Khalifa, however, the metaphysical nuances of meaning, which in the quotations are linked to the concepts of yearning and homecoming, are not subjected to criticism. They remain as a kind of metaphysical sounding board in the compound set of ideas that he develops in defence of music’s cultural mission and his own dignity as an artist.

‘Art is always above and beyond all barriers,’ Khalifa explains, and he continues after having rejected that the Arab spring should have had any direct influence on his art:

That is, the artist does not wait for a political role in the sense that he waits to see the way politics goes so as to see what he shall do. As I told you in the beginning, I want to tell something, I have something that I want to reveal. It is not the audience that teaches me. I speak, and, of course, the thing that I consider to be the sources of my project or the sources of my inspiration do not come from the music, they are present in the life, present in the child ... present in the revolution, present in the resistance, present in many things, present in nature ...<sup>43</sup>

In his own understanding, Khalifa is a committed artist who focuses on people’s life by employing means special to music and hence contributes to enlightenment, development, and democratization of the Arab societies. But as the blogger Atallah Salim rightly noted, the moral engagement, which according to Khalifa characterizes the Arab artist, is not necessarily linked to an explicit political art. The humanizing role is up to the music *per se*, though under certain particular conditions.

#### THE AUTHENTICITY CONSTRUCT AND THE THEORY OF REALISM

I Khalifa’s own interpretation of his aesthetic position, which is apparent in the various interviews and statements, the question regarding authenticity is constantly present. And the question on *artistic* authenticity, on the artistic expression’s validity

42 English translation by Ahdaf Soueif, *I Saw Ramallah* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005; Cairo: Cairo University Press, 2000).

43 Khalifa, *dawr al-fan fī zaman al-thawrāt* (The role of art in the times of revolutions), 8.

and genuineness, is constantly coupled with the issue concerning *Arab* authenticity – that is, on the ‘origin’<sup>44</sup> of the expression in Arab culture and history. It is a version of those modern Arab notions of authenticity which, as Christa Salamandra notes in a brief summary of the problem, reflect ‘the perceived failures of Enlightenment rationality and modernization projects’.<sup>45</sup> Also when in strong opposition to the West, ‘were [they] constructed within and from an intellectual climate engendered and strongly influenced by European thought’.<sup>46</sup>

The view on Arab music history that Khalifa presents in support of his assertion of authenticity and his project of modernization combines two relatively disconnected perspectives. A long historical perspective is present as a relatively unspecified reference to Arab musical, cultural heritage. This aspect is obvious in, for instance, his comments to the work, ‘The Andalusian Symphony’, celebrating the memory of the Arab music culture’s late flowering in Andalusia in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. A shorter historical perspective refers to the beginning of the twentieth century and the Egyptian singer-composer Sayyid Darwish (1892–1923) who falls within a story-telling context which is basically a joint ownership for the *insiders* of modern Arab music culture. In its more specific shape, it is found in the works of the Lebanese music critic Nizar Mruwwas (1931–92). He was a strong advocate of the Rahbani brothers and their music theatre which he inscribed in an Arab music historical narrative with clear nationalistic goals and with surprisingly clear echoes of J.G. Herder’s ideas on the people and its authentic expression in the popular languages and popular art of poetry that mingled with evidence of influence from the Soviet doctrine of realism.<sup>47</sup> In Mruwwas’ perspective, Sayyid Darwish – and in particular Sayyid Darwish’s music theatre – is the first part of a musical reform liberating the Arab music from Turkish influence, breaking with the *tarab* aesthetics’ one-sided focus on expression of emotions and emotional response, and making the music favourable towards the people’s needs for expression. This is accomplished partly by referring it back to the sources of popular music and partly by developing the popular exemplar, so that it may meet the needs of the music theatre for a musical characterization of person and situation. Moreover, in Mruwwa’s musical modernization project, the Arab music theatre is intended the role as a necessary part of the development which, when the time is mature, will lead to an authentic Arab symphonic music.

The main elements of the music aesthetics which appear in Mruwwa’s historiography is also found in Khalifa’s exposition of himself. The claimed Arab authenticity is thus not an ‘authenticity for the sake of authenticity’ but rather an ‘authenticity serving expression’. For instance, he explains the role of the Arab instruments and traditional forms on the recording *wu‘ūd min al-‘āṣifa* in this way:

44 The Arab word for authenticity, *āṣala*, derives from the stem *‘a-ṣ-l*, the meaning of which includes concepts such as ‘origin, source, descent and root’; the adjective, *‘aṣli*, signifies ‘authentic or genuine’.

45 Christa Salamandra, *A New Old Damascus. Authenticity and Distinction in Urban Syria* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 17.

46 Ibid.

47 Nizār Mruwwa, *fi-l-mūsīqa al-lubnāniyya al-‘arabiyya wa-l-masrah al-ghina‘i al-Rahbāni* (On the Lebanese-Arab music and the Rahbanis’ song-theatre) (Beirut: Dar al-Farābi, 1998).

The present changes that confront the Arab man of our times force us to define our position towards Arab music in general and how to make it a music that has a contemporary language and at the same time is distinctive and able to embody the ambitions of the present and future generations. From the beginning, therefore, and even before the first album ‘Promises of the Storm’, I devoted myself to writing music for the ensemble *Karnkalla* from the early ’70s for the Arab lute and the other Arab instruments such as the *qanūn* and the *nay* using the traditional forms. And the high ideal that called me to compose music wasn’t the ideal of a pure aesthetics or the musicians’ desire to express themselves. Before all this, it was an observation of the life surrounding me, and the imitation of it. I tried to depict the East in an authentic way.<sup>48</sup>

This idea about the authentic Arab material’s special ability to authentically express Arab popular aspirations works in connection with the concept on the popular music tradition’s particular needs for the development of a form of musical realism:

And perhaps all this has brought the music closer to the living reality that I experienced from close quarters. The thing that was important for me to highlight through these works was the melodies of life, not the classical melodies – melodies that I remember from the first days of my childhood, when I with passion and mighty love listened to hymns and carols and recitation of the Koran. And this love was an indescribable pleasure and joy, and when I looked at this artistic heritage I tried to unearth it and to transform this musical civilisation into a vibrant musical moment and to place it where it could represent the personality of the contemporary Arab human being and the cultural changes in the world.<sup>49</sup>

#### REALISM AND ‘THE PURE MUSIC’

In light of Khalīfa’s association with the communist party and Soviet’s great influence in the Middle-East between the end of World War II and Soviet’s disintegration, it seems reasonable to inquire about the extent and character of the influence that Soviet cultural politics and aesthetic doctrines exerted on contemporary Lebanese musical life. The material, which I have had opportunity to study for the present article, clearly reveals a coincidence between parts of the aesthetic positioning, both in Mruwwa and Khalīfa, and central elements of the Soviet doctrine of realism. In both cases, a project is framed in which a classical musical heritage with the incorporation of folk-musical elements is transformed to a kind of musical realism; in both cases, the music is intended an educational role; and in both cases, it is concerned with a very conscious use of music as a means of establishing a modern national awareness. The latter issue points specifically to having been influenced by Soviet cultural politics in the non-Russian – and in particular the Muslim – Soviet states where the culture was an important tool for Soviet nationality politics. The means was establishing national institutes and ensembles, and the development of national influenced idioms with ‘ethnic markers’ imported from local traditions. According to Dorotea Redepenning, the result was an area of style in which ‘das

48 ‘*hiwār m’a Marcīl Khalīfa*’ (Conversation with Marcīl Khalīfa), 17.

49 *Ibid.*

Mugam, die dazuhörende Vortragsart, Instrumente, Klangfarben, Rhythmen' became a 'Couleur locale im Ensemble der sowjetischen Kultur'.<sup>50</sup>

I am not aware of any academic work investigating the extent and character of the Soviet influence on Middle-East musical life. Hints in theory and practice, however, call for further investigation.<sup>51</sup> One of these hints leads, via the folkloristic stylized Lebanese folk dance of the Rahbani brothers' music theatre, to the Soviet use of folkloristic dance performances in order to present national characteristics and 'harmonize' them within the Soviet popular community. Christopher Stone draws attention to the Rahbani brothers' creating a style of the Lebanese folk dance, *al-dabka*, that happened through an immediate participation of the Soviet educated dancers. Mruwwa mentions a visit by the 'great Soviet artist, Igor Moiseyev' and his dance company, claiming that it was he who drew attention to the Lebanese *dabka*'s 'expressive and performative possibilities'.<sup>52</sup>

But this aspect of realism, closely linked to the concept of the politically and morally committed art (*al-fan al-multazim*), is in Khalifa connected to the idea of a music historical development that will free the music from its dependency on the poetic text and displace its domain of expression from the emotional towards the rational.

In one of the articles from the 1970s, in which Nizar Mruwwa praises Khalifa as one of the rising stars in the tradition of the Rahbani brothers, a section is written with the motto: 'A project that will overcome the external oriental *tarab*'.<sup>53</sup> It is explained how the vocal and instrumental parts of the composition for choir, 'a' *ras* (Weddings), are integrated and united in terms of motif 'under the control of the musical composition'. According to the author '... these structural forms [are] part of Marcil's project to defeat the usual external *tarab* in present Arab music and transform it to a rational *tarab* that provokes the listener to be aware of what the vocal text intends to make him understand of new information and an intensive awareness of the world'.<sup>54</sup>

As already mentioned, the *tarab* tradition emphasizes music's reliance on the poetic text. The interpretation of the text (*tarjamat al-naṣṣ*; *tarjamat al-kalimāt*: interpretation/translation of the text; interpretation/translation of the words) as regards the

50 Dorotea Redepenning, *Geschichte der russischen und sowjetischen Musik. Band II. Das 20. Jahrhundert* (Laaber: Laaber Verlag, 2008), 321.

51 This also pertains to questions regarding the development of modern institutions for cultivating Arab national musical heritage. It was a surprise for me when visiting the place to learn that the department for Arab music at the academy of music in Damascus is modelled on the Soviet republic Azerbaijan, and that the academy's leading professor is the Azerbaijanian-born Askar Ali Akbar. In a concert brochure one may read about the history of the academy: 'The Higher Institute of Music sought help from professors of oriental musical instruments from Central Asian countries (previous USSR, Azerbeidjan in particular) which had already developed their own music of Arabic origin on a modern and systematic basis'; quot. from *The First Annual Gala Concert of Arabic Music* (Damascus 2008).

52 Mruwwa, *fi-l-mūsīqa al-lubnāniyya al-'arabiyya*, 123; Christopher Stone, *Popular Culture and Nationalism in Lebanon. The Fairouz and Rahbani Nation* (London & New York: Routledge, 2008), 64–65.

53 Mruwwa, *fi-l-mūsīqa al-lubnāniyya al-'arabiyya*, 23.

54 Ibid. 240.

elaboration and variation of the emotional content is music's main task as well as that of the musician and vocal soloist, who in composed genres also have a great freedom for improvising. The purpose is to affect the audience producing visible and audible expressions of elevation, rapture, or ecstasy which are central elements of meaning on the Arabic word, *ṭarab*. But Khalīfa wants more than that: he wishes to go beyond the tradition from inside and transform the 'external' and the emotional *ṭarab* to an 'internal' and 'rational' one. It is not absolutely evident what the latter means; yet, it is fairly obvious that it is about an arbitration of the relation between the emotional and the rational, and that Khalīfa wants more of the latter. The desire for a 'rationalized *ṭarab*' is a recurring theme in Khalīfa who associates it with the wish for a stronger focus on music's independent power of expression. In an interview from the middle of the 1990s, he explains that he believes to have realized some of this in the little song on Darwīsh's poem, 'Rita and the Gun', in which we find more '... musical composition and less reliance on the *Mawāl*, which causes listeners to utter cheers after each section'. In this work, *ṭarab* 'is internal both in spirit and idea'.<sup>55</sup>

Thus yet a thread of discourse is added to Khalīfa's colourful web. The mind-sets that Khalīfa is working out are remarkably similar to the set of ideas which the German musicologist, Carl Dahlhaus, summarized as 'Die Idee der absoluten Musik'.<sup>56</sup> Dahlhaus relates it to an episode in German cultural life around 1800 when part of the cultural elite sought to promote a new understanding of music with two main elements: 1) that pure instrumental music, music without text, can be a valid artistic expression; 2) that music is not only an expression of emotions but equally a tool for the thought. In the specific cultural-historical context (the German Romanticism) these two points were associated with the notion of music's 'transcendental' qualities. 'Absolute music' was not only to be a self-contained, text-less artefact of thought; it should also have a metaphysical direction towards 'the absolute'.

Khalīfa repeats the basic features of this mind-set. In Germany around 1800, it was, however, the vocal music's emotional aesthetics of the eighteenth century which was criticized, while it was the Arab vocal music's oriented *ṭarab* aesthetics in Lebanon at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century that came under fire.

For the audience, who primarily knows Khalīfa as a figure on the Lebanese left wing and as the committed musician who set music to Darwīsh's poetic contribution to the Palestinian resistance in the 1970s, it is perhaps surprising to see his 'Rita and the Gun' as included in an ideology of reform aiming at an authentic Arab *pure, wordless, or 'absolute' music*. But Khalīfa insists that 'Rita and the Gun' has a special value as a musical *composition* in relation to *improvised*, text-dependent genres such as the *manwāl*; and he insists on seeing this popular work as part of a process,

55 The interview given to the Lebanese newspaper, *al-nabār*, is referred to in Elia Chatala, 'Marcel Khalife Discusses the New and the Old in Arabic Music in a Leading Literary Supplement. The Rationalizing of Arabic Music', *Al-Jadid Magazine*, 1/1 (Nov. 1995), on the home-page <http://www.aljadid.com/content/marcel-khalife-discusses-new-and-old-arabic-music-leading-literary-supplement-rationalization>, accessed on 17 Oct. 2013.

56 Carl Dahlhaus, *Die Idee der absoluten Musik* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1978).

which gradually liberates Arab music from being dependent on text, and developing it from being limited to expressing emotions to being an art-form with independent cognitive potentials. A large, and an increasing part of Khalifa's production of the last decades, is instrumental music. In the interview of 2003 appearing in the journal *Arabia's future*, he is asked whether it may be interpreted as indicating an aesthetic change of position in favour of a 'pure', 'abstract', or 'absolute' instrumental music (*mūsīqa mujarrada*).<sup>57</sup> The interviewer explains that Khalifa's turn towards instrumental music is not surprising, since also Khalifa's vocal music 'provides ample space to the instrumental music' and because Khalifa has sought to 'integrate "song" in "music"' and transforming the concept of song itself by letting its structure be subservient to the 'demands of the musical composition'. He continues:

... the tendency to compose pure instrumental music [*al-naṣṣ al-mūsīqi al-mujarrad*] has become more dominating in later years. Allow me to remind you that in the last six years – for instance – one record with vocal music (An Arab Coffeepot) was released, while three records with instrumental music were. Have you begun gradually to distance yourself from vocal music?<sup>58</sup>

Khalifa responds in detail, and his wording makes it clear that according to his opinion it is more than just about personal preferences: it is a matter of cultural mission to lift Arab music and its audience from the lower cultural stage of vocal music to that of instrumental music. 'Any attempt to diagnose the situation of Arab music' must necessarily take its point of departure from vocal music and the human voice's central position, he explains, continuing: the Arab music is focused on 'the glorification of the human voice with all its contents and in all its forms without giving the instrumental side – the music liberated from the word – the same degree of artistic appreciation'. Khalifa therefore sees Arab music constrained to developing the vocal focus: '[T]he Arab ears' relate to 'the material meaning [*al-m'ana al-madīa*] of the content of the songs', and 'has not transcended [*lam yasmū*] ... to the level where the abstract [*tajrīdī*] and illustrative [*taṣwīrī*] meaning gain artistic appreciation'.<sup>59</sup>

The words link the music to the matter while the wordless instrumental music has the possibility of transcending to an unspecified higher realm. Here we are very close to the German Romanticism's notion of absolute music. Without wanting to imply anything about a connection of influence, I am tempted to say that it *is* the notion of absolute music which Khalifa has formulated based on his Arab mother tongue's concepts. As his German predecessors, Khalifa gets hooked on the idea of a music which is not only able to manage without words as an expressional crutch but is also able to do something other and more than merely words.

57 The critical adjective, *mujarrad*, important for my exposition, derives from the stem *j-r-d* with the basic meanings 'to peel off', 'to liberate from', 'to make nude'. According to Hans Wehr's Arab-English dictionary, *Mujarrad* may be translated as 'denuded, bare, naked, freed, free (from), pure, mere, nothing more than, sole, very absolute, abstract, selfless, disinterested'.

58 'hiwār m'a Marcīl Khalifa' (Conversation with Marcīl Khalifa), 16.

59 *Ibid.* 16–17.

## COMMITMENT AND REFORM IDEOLOGY

How does this strong adherence to instrumental music, which is standing on its own legs, harmonize with the duty to engage in society and the moral role in which all Arab artists ought to participate according to Khalīfa? Poorly, one should think. The movement away from the conceptual seems indeed to be a movement away from the negotiation of the world-view's moral and political problems.

But there is a way between the two opposing poles. It leads over the narrow – yet in the edifice of Arab art-theoretical discourse strongly built – bridge named 'reform'. The interviewer draws attention to the Arab audience associating Khalīfa's production with 'the concept of commitment to the national and Arabic identity', asking whether he should rather be seen as 'committed to the ideas he fought for?' Khalīfa responds:

Allow me to approach the question from another side and to clarify that it is not justified to describe a song as political ... only because it deals with a hot, political or national issue. And this is because all the jumps to a better intellectual or musical stage done by Arab music are political jumps – also when we do not take into consideration direct political statements in the content of the songs, and this because they happened through hard labour and struggle to overcome traditional forms.<sup>60</sup>

The power of conviction in Khalīfa's answer depends on the perceptiveness of the reform ideology which is behind it. Basically, Khalīfa is arguing that artistic renewal is *per se* political, since it has the same form and condition of creation as the political renewal ('they happened through hard labour and the struggle to overcome traditional forms'). This thinking does not see art as a subject with an autonomy permitting it to function as counteractive to the societal development and the wise or unwise of politics; rather, it sees it as a contribution to a common project of reform containing elements of *tatwīr* (development), *tanwīr* (enlightenment), *nahḍa*, and *batḥ* (awakening, reborn, renaissance). The mind-set is a strong integrating factor in a wide field of discourse on modern Arab art.

It is also the subject of a recurrent disagreement between the cultural agents from Europe and the Arab countries. Ali Jihad Racy noted how already the renowned congress on Arab music in Cairo 1932 was marked by a controversy between the Arab scholars and musicians, for whom the aesthetic discourse was coalesced with a discourse on renewal or modernization, and European scholars (primarily German music ethnomusicologist of the comparative school) insisting that artistic development had to be self-growing and organic.<sup>61</sup> The European scholars vehemently opposed the common idea suffusing modern Arab musical life on the necessity of rationally conceived reforms based on a cogent understanding of the historical conditions and of music's current societal role.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 28.

<sup>61</sup> Ali Jihad Racy, 'Historical Worldviews of Early Ethnomusicologists: An East-West Encounter in Cairo 1932'; in Stephen Blum, Philipp V. Bohlman, and Daniel M. Neuman, *Ethnomusicology and Modern Music History* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 68–91.

‘IT WAS A COINCIDENCE THAT I WAS ...’<sup>62</sup>

Where poetry is cultivated as a performative art, the affinity with music is emphasized. When the sound of language and the voice is physically present, we are physically exposed to all that which the language is besides being a system of arbitrary signs. Arab culture has a profound historical sounding board of thinking and practising the affinity.

Hence, it is striking and thought-provoking that the scholarly literary discourse concerning Darwīsh is not in a direct dialogue with the musical discourse. I have already called it ‘interesting from the viewpoint of the history of science’ that the source situation forces me to write two very distinct histories. The quantity of Western language literature on modern mainstream music in the Arab world is still small, and only seldom does it offer detailed analyses of the scenes’ theoretical and aesthetic discussions in question. In the context of the present article, the differences might have been reduced, if it had been possible to compare the reading of English-language literary criticism with a selection of Arab language sources on Arab reception of Darwīsh’s works. However, that would most likely have diminished but not put an end to the differences. In spite of the variances, there is nevertheless a connection. Both histories are basically about a negotiation of the art’s societal obligation.

Khalifa handles the question on political commitment and societal relevance rhetorically. Hence the development of an authentic Arab music with an independent ‘pure musical’ power of enunciation appears as an integral part of a planned societal improvement, leaving the left-wing blogger bemused. Darwīsh reflects on the Arab poet’s role as one of the conditions he incidentally was born into, confusing the public which only wants to know him as the voice of Palestine. Darwīsh arranges the role as a poet in the long series of coincidences which are enumerated in the late poem *lā’ib al-nard* (The Dice-Player): name, sex, love, family relationship, and family defects – all were incidents just as the ability to write poetry, life, and survival itself:

It was possible that I didn’t exist  
 that our division was  
 ambushed, and that the family had been  
 that son less  
 who is now writing this poem  
 letter by letter and by drop of blood by drop of blood  
 on this settee  
 with black blood which neither is raven’s ink  
 nor its voice  
 but is the night  
 pressed drop by drop with fortune and talent.<sup>63</sup>

62 ‘Kānat mušādafatan an akūn ...’ is a recurring formulation with various designations in the *lā’ib al-nard* (The Dice-Player).

63 Darwish, *lā’ib al-nard*/Der Würfelspieler, 26.

Life's coincidences, which made Mahmūd Darwīsh a poet, made him precisely *this poet* with precisely these *life experiences*. This includes the story about the politically conditioned tragedies which Darwīsh's poems reflect in all phases of authorship, the story about his particular role as an Arab poet, and the story on the negotiation of art's societal commitment in Arab art-theoretical discourse from the 1960s until today.

#### SUMMARY

The Lebanese composer, musician and singer Marcīl Khalīfa (b. 1950) has for decades been a central figure in Middle Eastern music. Early in his career he became acquainted with the poetry of the Palestinian poet Mahmūd Darwīsh (1941–2008) and set some of his most beloved early poems in music. Some of the resulting songs such as *ilā 'ummi* (To my Mother) and *jamāz safar* (A Passport) are still beloved and often played and heard.

This article takes issue with political and aesthetic positions of these two artists. Both take their point of departure in the political left and both are strongly committed to issues of modern Arab national identity and particularly to the Palestinian issue. But in their works, in their public statements, and in the critical discourses on them we also find a negotiation of the relation between political commitment and societal responsibility and modern artists' rightful claim on artistic autonomy. The article traces this negotiation in Western as well as Arab sources.