

1 Introduction

‘They say punk is dead, I say *tarab* is dead and I am trying to bring it back.’ This is how the Syrian electronic musician Samer Saem Eldahr described his musical mission when I first met him in Beirut in November 2016, a time when his hometown Aleppo was caught up in the Syrian war.¹ The Arabic term ‘*tarab*’ has no adequate equivalent in English. Roughly translatable as ‘ecstasy’, it is applied to different urban art music repertoires of the Middle East as well as to the feeling of enchantment that these repertoires are said to generate in its performers and listeners. Besides these more generic definitions, *tarab* has also, as we shall see, been mythologised as Aleppo’s endemic musical tradition. It is especially within this context that Hello Psychaleppo’s musical mission should be understood. Taking his statement about ‘wanting to bring back *tarab*’ as its point of departure, this Element explores how Aleppo’s musical legacy has been re-activated in times of conflict and displacement.

Throughout the past several years, Samer Saem Eldahr, better known under his artistic name Hello Psychaleppo (and referred to in the following using both names interchangeably),² has become an influential actor within the growing alternative and transnational Arab electronic music scenes. With his so far four albums *GOOL L’AH* (2013), *‘HA!’* (2014), *‘TOYOUR’* (2017) and *JISMAL* (2021), he is regarded as the pioneer of ‘electro-*tarab*’. Conceived as an homage to the musical legacy of his hometown of Aleppo, this eclectic and experimental musical style combines global electronic dance music styles such as dub, dubstep, drum & bass, trap and trip-hop with (digital) Arab musical aesthetics. The latter consist, for example, of computer-generated microtones, *taqasim* (instrumental improvisations) played on a midi keyboard and, most importantly,

¹ Personal conversation, 16 November 2016. In addition to one extensive interview, which I conducted with Hello Psychaleppo in Beirut, my analysis draws from several more informal conversations held with him as well as other displaced Syrian musicians, artists and music aficionados between 2016 and 2021, attendance of two of Hello Psychaleppo’s concerts (in 2016 and 2019 respectively), digital media content, as well as our joint public conversation on ‘Electro-Tarab and the Role of Sampling in Times of Displacement’, presented on 10 November 2020 in the framework of the London Middle East and Central Asian Music Forum. Interviews were conducted in both Arabic and English. In times when Syrians find large parts of their social and musical lives operating online, a state that has been propelled further by the Covid crisis, Internet platforms such as SoundCloud and YouTube constituted additional and important sites of digital fieldwork.

A brief note on transliteration: I have adopted the system of the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (IJMES), but, for matters of technical simplicity, left out diacritical marks indicating long vowels and emphatic consonants (for example, ‘*tarab*’ is rendered as ‘tarab’). At times, I derive from this standard in order to convey local variants and colloquial dialect. For the names of Arab authors and musicians I have adopted the most widely accepted transliteration in English.

² I use Hello Psychaleppo when writing about his artistic practice and Eldahr when referring to his personal background (e.g. childhood memoirs).

samples from old recordings, ranging from songs by local Aleppian musicians to the pan-Arab hits of Egyptian star singers such as Um Kalthoum (ca. 1904–1975), Abd al-Halim Hafiz (1929–1977) and Asmahan (1912–1944). Trying to characterise this fusion of styles, international media outlets have described electro-tarab in ways that evoke popular music icons, night club imagery and, at times, the sensationalist undertones of mainstream war reportage: ‘Massive Attack meets Abdel Halim Hafez’,³ ‘Um Kalthoum on Acid’,⁴ ‘Tripping on Tarab’,⁵ ‘dubstep that makes you want to both shake your booty while reading an encyclopaedia on Syrian history’⁶ and, in the headline of a 2013 VICE article, ‘Music to Listen to While Your Country Burns’.⁷

Indeed, born in Aleppo in 1989 and a former student at the city’s Faculty of Fine Arts, Eldahr’s musical practice and career developed against the background of the Syrian war. The way his musical life has unfolded throughout the past decade reads like the now hauntingly familiar story of forced migration, resident permits, visa applications and rejections. Having left Aleppo in 2012, the year that marked the outbreak of fighting between armed oppositional groups and Syrian regime forces, he first went to Beirut, not foreseeing that what was originally intended to be a temporary stay – he was setting up an exhibition in Beirut and had left many of his recordings back home – would last almost three years. Then, in 2015, a year after new visa restrictions imposed on Syrians under Egyptian president Sissi forced him to cancel his participation in the prestigious D-Caf festival for alternative music in Cairo, Lebanese authorities rejected the renewal of his residency permit. Forced to leave Beirut but unable to return to his war-ravaged hometown, Eldahr was eventually able to migrate to the United States where, despite being in possession of a green card, he was soon exposed to new travel restrictions. Donald Trump’s 2017 travel ban not only forced him to cancel a show in the newly opened Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg (he feared he would not be able to re-enter the country afterwards), but also made it impossible for his parents to join or even visit him in the United States.

As indicated by his artistic name Hello Psychaleppo, it was Eldahr’s musical practice that offered him a way to stay connected to his hometown from a distance. As he wrote in 2015, the year he moved from Lebanon to the United States:

³ www.shubbak.co.uk/shahba/.

⁴ www.ozy.com/good-sht/music-thats-like-umm-kulthum-on-acid/62358/.

⁵ www.beirut.com/1/28824.

⁶ <https://readopium.wordpress.com/2015/03/10/hello-psychallepo/>. The authors of the platform in which this interview was published have deleted their website. As a result, the online link to the interview is no longer available.

⁷ www.vice.com/en_us/article/vdpev3/psychaleppo-music-to-listen-to-while-your-country-burns.

Music from Aleppo during the Syrian War

3

If you listen to my music very closely, you will find Syria behind every musical sign [*'alamah*] containing the memory of the place, the time and the people. I gather inside a musical note [*nutah*] what I could not take with me in my travel bag. This music is my consolation on my journey into the unknown [*al-majhu*].⁸

Scholars have studied (urban) musical styles as a means through which displaced populations, refugees, migrants and diasporic communities across the world re-enact a relation to their homeland and maintain a sense of community and cultural identity (see Baily & Collyer 2006; Hirshberg 1990; Levi & Scheduling 2010; Lidskog 2016; Rasmussen et al. 2019; Reyes 1999).⁹ Within this context, many have focused on musical performance and/or rituals of collective music-making, often framing their analyses in the pertinent but familiar tropes of preservation and acculturation. This Element approaches the relation between music, memory and displacement from a different angle, through a focus on one of the most significant characteristics of Hello Psychaleppo's music (and of contemporary Arab urban electronic music in general): the practice of sampling. In outlining how, with his use of samples, Hello Psychaleppo not only recontextualises historic tarab recordings but also aims at composing a musical memory of his hometown from afar, this Element contributes to the growing body of studies on the musical practices of Syrian diasporic and refugee communities, which to my knowledge have so far exclusively focused on Syrians living in Istanbul (Habash 2021; Hajj 2016; Ögüt 2021; Shannon 2016, 2019).

1.1 Aleppo from Samples

From the rise of the sound collage techniques of *musique concrète* developed by Pierre Schaeffer and others in the 1940s, the revolutionised use of the sampler as the 'quintessential rap production tool' (Rose, 1994: 93) of black US hip-hop scenes in the 1980s, to the now widespread co-option of pre-recorded music by global music mass industries, throughout the past century, the practice of *sampling* (the [digital] copying of portions of a pre-existing sound recording to be re-used in another composition or song) has been an integral part of diverse musical traditions. In contrast to scholars who have studied sampling practices through the lens of ownership and copyright (McLeod & DiCola 2011) or viewed them as symptomatic of postmodern self-referentiality (Manuel 1995), a global age of digital reproduction (Goodwin 1988), or the seductions of neoliberal and consumer culture (Taylor 2016), my analysis follows scholars who have looked at sampling practices in a more localised context. Arguably one of the most important scholars to cite here is

⁸ www.syrianeyesoftheworld.com/2015/01/23/samer-saem-eldahr/. Translated from the Arabic citation.

⁹ The sources here only constitute a selection. For a recent overview of existing literature on the subject, see Stokes 2020.

Tricia Rose, author of the pioneering *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994). Rose argues against the mischaracterisation of sampling within US hip-hop cultures of the 1980s as simply a by-product of global digital and technological developments. Instead, she points out how early rap producers used sampling techniques in ways that affirmed, built on and re-shuffled existing musical, oral and poetic traditions of Afro-diasporic people while at the same time articulating their own social realities, worldviews and approaches to sound and community (Rose 1994: 104). Rose's call to understanding the sampling practices of early US rap scenes as a form of cultural and intertextual reference is directed at a US context, yet her insistence on the need to *historicise* sampling practices is of great importance to my argument.

Following her approach, this Element analyses the sampling practices of Hello Psychaleppo (as well as some of his contemporaries) in three different but interrelated ways: (1) as a way to narrate memories of Aleppo's musical history in times of war; (2) as a technique that allows for the emergence of new urban musical styles at times when access to local musical knowledge has been lost; and (3) as a form of musical 'coding' that can forge and sustain, if only temporarily, a sense of home and community in times of displacement. Focusing less on their sonic than their symbolic quality, I include in my analysis not only the digitally sourced sound extracts that Hello Psychaleppo integrates into his music, but also other visual, literary and tactile references that form part of his and other contemporary Syrian electronic musicians' artistic practices.

This Element is divided into three main sections. Section 2 provides an overview of the Syrian war and its effects on Aleppo's musical life, outlining how the city's mythic legacy as one of the cradles of tarab music is perpetuated and revived inside and outside of Syria. This will provide the necessary background to return to the work of Hello Psychaleppo and outline how he roots electro-tarab in the musical worlds of his hometown. Beginning with a description of an audio-visual homage to Aleppo that Hello Psychaleppo published in 2015, Section 3 identifies electro-tarab as part of a transnational alternative Arab music scene. It demonstrates how for Hello Psychaleppo and many others, the practice of sampling is an aesthetic strategy which, conditioned by a history of migration and displacement, allows them to affiliate with a cultural heritage and different notions of 'tarab' in times in which access to local musical knowledge and practices has been lost. Presenting the reader with ethnographic snapshots of a concert in Beirut in November 2016 at a time when Aleppo was under siege, Section 4 traces the particular *afterlife* that the city takes in electro-tarab, by exploring the different historical connections that take shape around some of the samples used in this concert. Whether fragments of a non-metrical *madih*, a praise of the prophet Muhammad as it was once recited in an Aleppian mosque, a Palestinian poem,

excerpts from a speech by the former Libyan president Ghaddafi or a song by the Egyptian superstar Um Kalthoum, I will outline how these samples pave a path of (nostalgic) return to the places and communities that Hello Psychaleppo and many other Syrians have left behind while also functioning as a commentary on the history of displacement that currently shapes the lives not only of Syrians but of many others in and from the region. I conclude by reflecting on how the culture of tarab, by integrating an experience of loss into musical pleasure and a shared sense of intimacy, lives on in new musical and social contexts.

1.2 Tarab in New Contexts

By situating Hello Psychaleppo's electro-tarab both in the socio-historical context of the Syrian war and a contemporary history of musical hybridity and electronic experimentation in the Arab world, this Element adds a new angle to existing studies on tarab. Scholars have explored tarab as traditional Arab music's 'ecstatic feedback model' (Racy 1991); they have identified it as 'enchantment' provoked by the legendary Um Kalthoum (Danielson 1997); they have studied its roots in Sufi musical rituals (Frishkopf 2001); they have traced its correlation to the perception of cassette sermons of the Islamic Revival movement in Egypt (Hirschkind 2006: 32–66); and they have analysed its role in formulating collective claims to alternative concepts of modernity in post-colonial Syria (Shannon 2006), to name some of the most prominent English-language studies.

Despite these diverse and wide-ranging approaches, no scholarly publication has yet been dedicated to the role of tarab in contemporary (electronic) popular music cultures across the Middle East and its diasporas.¹⁰ Indeed, focusing on pre-2000s musical practices, most studies of Arab music have adopted a rather narrow approach, whether by exclusively associating tarab with high-art, pre-First World War repertoires or by rationalising it as 'traditional' and opposed to Western music. As Racy states at the beginning of *Making Music in the Arab World*, which counts as the standard work on the subject: 'Totally extraneous to this domain [the tarab community] are Western and Arab performers and composers of European music' (2003: 15).¹¹

In outlining the ways in which electro-tarab is at home both in an Aleppian musical culture and in the Arab world's transnational electronic

¹⁰ For a noteworthy exception, see Fulton-Melanson 2021.

¹¹ The anthology *The Arab Avant-Garde: Music, Politics, Modernity* (Burkhalter et al. 2013) is an example of a piece of scholarship that attempts to challenge such perspectives. Tracing a history of musical hybridity and globally engaged innovation within the Arab world – from the Egyptian Nahda composer Sayyed Darwish, the Lebanese Rahbani family, to the Iraqi-born performer Aida Nadeem – the authors formulate a critique of the totalising perspective of the scholarship on 'traditional' Arab music that obscures other, more experimental musical practices in the region (for instance, Farmer 1930; Racy 2003; Touma 1996).

music scene, this Element proposes to shift the focus away from discussions of authenticity that characterise existing literature towards an investigation of the (political) spaces and imaginaries that are associated with this musical culture today. Hello Psychaleppo has a far smaller audience than many other actors in this scene, not to mention the many tarab artists that he samples. However, as I will discuss, his musical practice (as well as the artistic responses and fan reactions that it has provoked) have worked to create a language that helps conceptualise the role tarab music has come to play in the context of the Syrian war and illuminates some of the main socio-aesthetic parameters that characterise contemporary Syrian/Arab urban electronic music cultures.¹²

A powerful example that illustrates this is a piece of artwork (Figure 1) that the Syrian graphic designer Sedki al-Imam produced for the 2018 song ‘Ya Wela’, a collaboration between Hello Psychaleppo and the Jordanian-Palestinian vocalist and member of the band 47 Soul, El Far3i. The graphic shows a music control panel whose buttons are labelled as follows: ‘*Halab* [Aleppo]’ and ‘*ghazza* [Gaza]’; ‘*muqawamah* [resistance]’; ‘*tahjir* [displacement]’ and ‘*al-‘oudah* [return]’, as well as ‘Taha Hussein’, the name of a twentieth-century Egyptian writer and intellectual who, as a key figure of the Arab/Ottoman period of cultural and political reform known as *nahda* [‘renaissance/rebirth’], is being remembered as having promoted the selective adoption of Western culture, ideas and techniques with the aim of strengthening the Arab world’s own politics, religion, art and culture (Burkhalter et al. 2013: 15).

The connection drawn between Aleppo and Palestine, the evocation of shared histories of forced migration and resistance, the production of new, global, but culturally rooted Arab musical forms, and the wish to return to places that were left behind or destroyed during war: as the following pages will demonstrate, these themes are not only encoded in Hello Psychaleppo’s electro-tarab, they also shape the practices, narratives and memories of many other (electronic) musicians and aficionados from the region.

2 ‘*Im al-Tarab*’: Musical Myths and Afterlives

With over 300,000 civilians killed, 6.7 million internally displaced and more than 6.6 million refugees worldwide, the Syrian war has generated one of the

¹² Adopting this language as one of my analytical frameworks helps to establish this book’s conditions of ‘coevalness’, a term which, coined in Johannes Fabian’s *Time and the Other*, runs counter to what he refers to as the ‘persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse’ (Fabian 1983: 31, quoted in Behdad 1994: 6).



Figure 1 Cover art for ‘Ya Wela’ Courtesy of Sedki al-Imam

largest human catastrophes and histories of forced migration of this century.¹³ Although the roots of the conflict reach back far into the past century (see Munif 2020: 96–119), its more immediate historical context has been the transnational movement of anti-government protests which, in late 2010, began to stretch from Tunisia across Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain and Libya, and which became known as the Arab Spring.

In Syria, the first larger-scale protests broke out in the southern town of Der’a in early March 2011, after security forces arrested and allegedly tortured fifteen schoolchildren who were accused of having graffitied ‘*al-sha’b yurid isqat al-nizam*’ [the people want the downfall of the regime]’

¹³ These numbers are based on a 2021 UNHCR and a 2022 OHCHR report (though questioned by many and considered to be higher). The death toll does not include non-civilian and indirect deaths (i.e. those that resulted from a conflict-related lack of access to essential goods). Most externally displaced Syrians currently reside in neighbouring countries, above all Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. Others have fled to Europe, especially Germany, or sought refuge elsewhere across the world.

onto the walls of a local school – a slogan which by then was being chanted by millions of protesters across the Arabic speaking world.¹⁴ The outrage that the children’s arrest and torture sparked among their family members and local citizens, who took to the streets to demand the children’s release and the persecution of those responsible for their abuse, was met with brutal state violence and eventually led to country-wide solidarity protests. The towns of Der’a, Homs, Hama, Lattakia, Idlib, Deir az-Zor, as well as Damascus and later Aleppo – the country’s two largest cities – saw hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of people take to the streets, and civil activists formed so-called Local Coordination Committees to organise a popular movement they hoped would end the autocratic rule of Bashar al-Assad and the military-Baathist dictatorship he had inherited from his father, Hafiz al-Assad, who had ruled Syria from 1971 until his death in 2000. Yet the repression of protests continued, and the regime’s escalating use of violence against dissidents, activists and civilians eventually led to the formation of armed oppositional groups made up of military defectors and volunteers, most prominently the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Their violent confrontation with regime security forces, the gradual co-opting of the uprising by radical Islamic groups, as well as the growing involvement of foreign actors, especially Russia, eventually turned what had started out as a largely peaceful struggle for citizen rights and political transformation into a full-scale militarised war.

Aleppo, Syria’s largest city, became a key centre of the regime’s counter-insurgency campaign, when in the summer of 2012, armed oppositional fighters – many from Aleppo’s poorer and more conservative rural hinterland (Yassin-Kassab & al-Shami 2016: 94–5) – gained control over East Aleppo. Now effectively divided into a regime-held West and an opposition-held East, Aleppo was drawn into a conflict that lasted more than four years, killed tens of thousands of its residents and drove hundreds of thousands out of their homes and, in many cases, out of their country and into exile. In late 2016, when the Syrian military’s offensive on East Aleppo was entering its final phase, images that showed heavily bombarded neighbourhoods and the ordeal of those residing in areas under siege circulated widely across the world. Then, on 13 December 2016, a ceasefire marked the beginning of

¹⁴ For an excellent analysis of the Arab Spring and its violent aftermaths, see Achcar 2013 and 2016. For works that specifically focus on the Syrian uprising and war, see, among others, al-Haj Saleh 2017; Ismail 2011; Munif 2020; Pearlman 2017; Wedeen 2019; and Yassin-Kassab & al-Shami 2016. For the role that art, including music, has played within the Syrian protest movement, see Halasa, Omareen & Mahfoud 2014; Lenssen 2020; Parker 2018; Silverstein 2012; as well as ‘The Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution’, an online platform that archives Syrian revolutionary art: www.creativememory.org.

a (forced) ‘population transfer’ of more than 35,000 residents from East Aleppo to the western countryside and Idlib province, and Aleppo was officially retaken by the Syrian regime.¹⁵

2.1 Aleppo’s Legacy: Tarab in Times of War

While the effects of the Syrian war on Aleppo’s infrastructure and inhabitants have been devastating, it also left a profound impact on the city’s cultural and musical life. Before the war, Aleppo had long been regarded one of the musical centres of the Middle East, as expressed in one of the city’s famous nicknames. Besides *al-Shahba* [‘the Grey/White One’], referring to the colour of the city’s characteristic marble stone architecture, Aleppo is also known among residents as ‘*Im al-tarab* [the mother/cradle of tarab]’. As stated earlier, tarab, roughly translatable as ‘ecstasy’ in Arabic, is an aesthetic expression with a variety of meanings and uses. First, it denotes particular musical styles, repertoires and performance contexts. Once used to refer to art music traditions rooted in the Eastern Arab world *prior* to the First World War, the term is today applied more generically to urban art repertoires native to cities such as Aleppo, Damascus, Beirut, Jerusalem or Cairo. Second, tarab signifies musically induced moments of emotional uplifting, enchantment and rapture that are traditionally believed to be produced when performing and/or listening to these repertoires (see Racy 2003).

Aleppo’s musical nickname operates on several geographical levels. First, it highlights the city as one of the region’s historic centres of tarab music: particularly during the first half of the twentieth century, Aleppo was home to some of the Middle East’s most famous tarab musicians and composers. Omar al-Batsh (1885–1950), Bakri al-Kourdi (1909–78), Ali al-Darwish (1872–1952), Muhammad Khairy (1935–81) and Sabah Fakhri (1933–2021) are renowned across the Arab world for their musicianship, especially for their mastery of repertoires typical to Aleppo. These include the pre-composed *muwashshah* and the improvised *mawwal* – both poetic vocal forms sung in classical Arabic – as well as the *qudud ḥalabiyah*, a genre of light popular songs usually performed in local dialect. Commonly integrated into a suite known as the *wasla*, these vocal genres are performed in both sacred and

¹⁵ A detailed timeline of the conflict in Aleppo is provided by the Aleppo Project based at the Centre for Conflict, Negotiation and Recovery of the Central European University’s School of Public Policy in Budapest (since 2019 and due to changes to the National Higher Education law under Hungary’s prime minister Viktor Orbán, the university has relocated to Vienna). The Aleppo Project is a collaboration between Syrian refugees, Syrian and non-Syrian students, academics, policy experts and others aiming to preserve and collect material on Aleppo’s cultural heritage as well as explore possible ways of rebuilding urban life after conflict: www.thealeppoject.com/conflict-timeline/.

secular contexts (Poché 2001; Shannon 2003a).¹⁶ Second, Aleppo’s musical nickname gives insights into Syria’s cultural identity on a national level. In *Among the Jasmine Trees: Music and Modernity in Contemporary Syria*, a pioneering (and currently the only) monograph-length English ethnography on music performed inside Syria, the anthropologist Jonathan Shannon (2006: 27) writes the following about Aleppo’s musical status:

Although some Syrians questioned my interest in Arab music and even the existence of ‘Arab’ music altogether, almost no one questioned my desire to study that music – of whatever origin it might be – in Aleppo. . . . Although Damascus, as a result of the traditional rivalry between the two ancient cities, might challenge Aleppo’s claim to fame in architecture, literature and cuisine – to just name a few domains – few would challenge Aleppo’s role as a great center for music. Indeed, Damascenes and others from elsewhere in Syria commonly assert their musical identity by praising Aleppo’s achievements, especially in contrast to the more often recognized achievements of Egyptian musicians. Aside from recognizing the ‘Big Three’ of famous modern Arab musicians – the Egyptian artists Umm Kulthūm, Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, and ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Ḥāfiẓ – many Syrians argue that ‘true’ Arab music is found in Syria, not Egypt.

Unsurprisingly, ask a proud music aficionado from Cairo and you are likely to receive a different history lesson. Yes, the response may be, Aleppo *was* an important centre of traditional Arab music, but its status as *the* cradle of music is an exaggeration, a myth believed to have been spread by the Aleppian composer, nay-player and music theorist Ali al-Darwish during his participating in the First International Congress of Arab Music in Cairo in 1932. There, he, alongside the French musicologist Baron d’Erlanger, presented a classification of Arab modes and rhythms that, as some would claim, were far from being ‘objective’ but heavily influenced by Aleppian musical practice (see Katz 2015: 122–3; Iino 2009).

Yet as the American anthropologist William Bascom (1965: 4) once asserted, it is one of the main characteristics of a myth that it is only necessary for it to be believed by the society in which it is told. Thus, on a third level, and as an expression that is predominantly self-descriptive, Aleppo’s musical nickname gives insights into the cultural and social consciousness of its residents. As one of them once explained to me: ‘Tarab is one of the pillars of life in Aleppo [*waḥid min arkan al-ḥayah*], you know, like the five pillars of Islam. We cannot live without it.’ Indeed, whoever investigates the reasons for their city’s musical

¹⁶ For a collection of Aleppian *muwashshahat*, see the song book *Min kunuzina: al-Muwashshahat al-Andalusiyyah* [From Our Heritage: The Andalusian Muwashshahat] (Raja’i & Darwish 1955). A collection of transcriptions of Aleppian *qudud* can be found in Dalal 2006a.