



The Popularization of "Arab Music" on Colonial Radio in Egypt: Changing Concepts and Contexts

Kira Weiss

May 3rd, 2026, at 5pm

At CEDEJ

23 Gamal Eldin Abou Elmahassen, Garden City, Cairo

[\[https://maps.app.goo.gl/wax29Y3jLvSkwg787\]](https://maps.app.goo.gl/wax29Y3jLvSkwg787)

This paper examines the popularization of the concept of “Arab music” by the Egyptian State Broadcasting station (ESB), which operated under joint Egyptian and British administration from 1934–1947. This radio station monopolized the airwaves, putting an end to “community radio” (al-idhā‘a al-ahliyya). Comparing the station’s programming to its magazine (al-Rādiyū al-Miṣrī), this paper focuses on three dimensions.

First, a group of elite musicians “ran the show” at ESB, influencing the course of Arab music through their positions, performances, and publications. These musicians

distinguished themselves from professional, working-class instrumentalists (alātiyya). The directors of the station's Arab music program insisted on being called musical “amateurs” throughout their careers, representing a growing group of elite, formally-educated “amateur” musicians.

Second, ESB was a fertile ground for musical experimentation, particularly in terms of instrumentation. ESB established Arab music ensembles that were significantly larger than the standard ensembles of the time (takht). The radio often advertised eclectic combinations of instruments, particularly on the “variety shows.” Novelty was clearly a selling point and a point of pride. As such, ESB contributed to the dramatic growth of Arab music ensembles and the adoption of new musical instruments.

Music and Sound Seminar Series
The Popularization of "Arab Music" on Colonial Radio in Egypt:
Changing Concepts and Contexts

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The Music and Sound Seminar series is convened by
Sophie Frankford and Dalia Ibraheem

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Finally, the radio magazine's rhetoric often did not align with the station's programming. On the one hand, contributors to the magazine frequently denigrated Arab and Eastern music, espousing the Orientalist outlook that Eastern music was weak, effeminate, and had deleterious effects on the national, anti-colonial "spirit." On the other hand, the radio station frequently broadcasted the very genres and themes that the magazine discursively attacked. These contradictions invite questions about social positioning, strategic Orientalism, and the fracture between elite, nationalist visions and popular tastes.

Building on previous scholarship (Castelo-Branco 1993; Fahmy 2022; Shalabi 1999; Stanton 2013), this paper seeks to demonstrate Egyptian State Broadcasting's direct and long-lasting impact on the concept, context, and content of Arab music.

Kira Weiss is a Ph.D. candidate in ethnomusicology at University of California, Santa Barbara. Her research examines the transformation of the concept of Arab music (*al-mūsīqā al-ʿarabiyya*) in Egypt over the past century. She engages with issues ranging from (pan)nationalism to Orientalism, class, and gender. Shifting the spotlight away from star singers, the central case study of her dissertation examines how instrumentalists have shaped the trajectory of Arab music.

Since 2022, Kira has conducted research in Cairo with support from Fulbright and the American Research Center in Egypt (ARCE). As a cellist, Kira regularly performs with one of the national Arab music ensembles at the Cairo Opera House (*Firqat al-Mūsīqā al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Turāth*).

Registration link for online participation:

<https://zoom.us/meeting/register/aaEgSF-JTMKeh973S74qzQ>