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ROUNDTABLE

Between Dependent and Independent: The Contemporary Music Scene in Egypt

Ayman Asfour*
*Corresponding author. E-mail: ayman.asfour.violinist@gmail.com
Translated by Katharine Halls, katharine.halls@gmail.com

Between roughly 2010 and 2016, there was a proliferation of writing and analysis about every musical phenomenon in Egypt that was not mainstream pop, and phrases like the "independent" music scene, the "alternative" music scene, and the "underground" music scene became increasingly common. In 2020, the music scene has become too complex to be given a single name, and the image conjured up by an independent music scene fails to capture a much broader and more complex reality. Until 2014, any musician or group making music with aims and processes that differed from the commercial mainstream was considered to be making alternative or independent music; now, some of these acts have been absorbed into the mainstream and have become active participants in the market, whereas other acts have emerged to replace them in the alternative and underground currents.

Numerous factors have shaped the musical experiences and experiments of the last twenty years that are considered alternative or independent. The first comprises the motive and vision that govern the moment of creation itself, regardless of genre or style: the ever-present impulse to escape repetition and tradition, whether by creating new materials or trying new production methods, or reviving old ones which, in a new context, create new results. For example, a classically trained string ensemble that usually plays with a symphony orchestra collaborates with a hip-hop group, or a classical Arabic ensemble covers a 1990s metal track. There are countless examples of this, but for those wishing to create new and alternative styles, beyond what was taught in music institutions and released by the mainstream music industry, there were at the time few opportunities to reach an audience.

The time and space in which this vision becomes a tangible creation constitute the second consideration. Musicians of all styles depend on places where they can meet to share music news and stories, discover new sources, learn to play instruments and to sing, hold rehearsals, jam, and exchange newly acquired techniques. Since most musicians cannot afford long-term studio rentals, finding this kind of space usually means hiring a studio by the hour or using a private home or a single room in a family house. Sometimes it can mean a room that is available nights and weekends at a bandmember's place of employment, be that a business, a lawyer's office, or even a doctor's surgery.

Musicians, especially those who work in a group, need time—to warm up mentally and musically both as individuals and as a group, to deal with distractions and disruptions, to set up sound equipment and to tune instruments—before the moment of creation occurs. In an expensive studio that has been hired out for two or three hours, there is pressure on musicians to make the most of the time they have, and many fall back on failsafe styles and techniques, or those that spring most easily to mind, those commonly used in the wider scene.[1] And so the real moments of inspiration and creativity often happen outside the studio, in places that are less ideal, such as a cramped room where musicians meet more spontaneously and for more time.

The places that have most helped new musicians emerge over the last ten years have been studios owned by three kinds of people: older musicians who realize how important this creative process is and have made their studios available over the long term, for months and sometimes years, to new acts, charging only a symbolic rent; younger musicians who have invested their savings in setting up studios that they can rent out at low cost, for longer hours and more regularly, to the bands they perform

[1]Examples include reusing a bass groove or chord progression that has been used in previous tracks instead of composing a new one.

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with and to friends and colleagues, giving these musicians a sense of familiarity with the place; and non-profit organizations that provide regular studio space for free or at low cost as part of their programming. These spaces were extremely limited in the early 2000s; we had maybe two or three such places in all of Alexandria.

In 2000, I graduated from Alexandria University's Faculty of Specific Education (*Kulliyyat al-Tarbiyya al-Nawʿiyya*) program, which trains school music teachers. Its curriculum is not designed to produce performing musicians or singers, but to teach the basics of musical practice and theory and the history of Arabic and European classical music. During my studies I met other students who were different and unusual—at least from the point of view of my personal experience—and who had all learned music before starting college. One was a pianist who played jazz, another played bass guitar, and another played guitar; one was a poet, and one was a singer. Since our college curriculum was classical, I did not know where my classmates had picked all this up. There was not even anywhere in Alexandria that taught music outside the college, except for the Conservatoire, which taught classical music performance. I began playing the violin in 2001 and we started a group. From practicing with my bandmates, I gradually discovered that they were all entirely self-taught and had never had any formal training.

There were several factors that together led to the emergence of gifted musicians who played instruments that were not taught in Egypt at the time. *Firqat al-Hubb wa-l-Salam* (the Love and Peace Band), an independent group popular in the 1980s and 90s, was an important part of an independent music scene active at the time, and the band inspired many independent musicians in Alexandria. There were vibrant metal and hip-hop scenes in Alexandria; at the time I did not even know what metal music was, since it was confined to a very specific social class, but I met many excellent players who had learned from and been influenced by metal musicians. They acquired videos and cassettes with help from relatives who traveled abroad, since there was no Internet at the time, and sources were extremely rare. There also was a distinctive theater scene in Alexandria at that time that often engaged musicians for performances; coming into contact with the world of theater encouraged musicians to experiment with new ideas and styles. Finally, some individual musicians traveled to the United States, where they encountered and were impressed by jazz music. Some set up private studios upon returning, usually in the basement or in their home itself, keen to pass on their newfound love of the music.

Musicians in these scenes aspired to create something different, shunning both university curricula and the commercial cassette market. The venues that embraced them were the French, German, Greek, Russian, and Jesuit cultural centers and some of the (state-run) culture palaces (*qusur al-thaqafa*), all of which encouraged experimentation and helped create an audience for the emerging bands. Each band probably had no more than a hundred fans—but it was enough for them to keep making music.

In 2005, I returned to Alexandria after three years spent studying in the Faculty of Musical Education program in Cairo, which was essentially a slightly better version of the college I had attended in Alexandria. Most of my university classmates were now performing with Egypt's biggest pop stars. By that point I was a proficient violinist and was offered the chance to perform with several pop stars in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world. I found the way pop music was made in Egypt unsatisfying: every choice, from lyrics to melody, was made with the aim of emulating previous commercial hits so as to achieve the maximum possible popularity in the minimum possible time. Even the style of performing on stage was copied, and when auditioning a new member for a pop star's backing band the criterion used was how much he or she resembled or could imitate other well-known musicians.

Meanwhile in Alexandria, as in Cairo, new and ambitious musical acts were emerging, due in part to the activities of venues like the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, and in Cairo El-Sawy Culture Wheel (Saqiyat al-Sawi), a private cultural center that opened in 2003. Their music was driven by a singular process in which composition, genre, and performance grew from the musical inspiration and ambition of their members—not from imitating pop hits.

I started a band called Station with a number of fellow musicians whose drive and ideas deserve the credit for making it happen. We all came from different backgrounds: the percussionist was a law graduate, the guitarist was a computer engineer, the keyboard player worked in a bank, and the bassist was a programmer. Only the tabla player was a professional musician who had been performing since childhood; he came from a family of gypsy musicians, a group that has largely disappeared from Egypt.

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Our musical tastes were very different, as were our social classes, and so we decided to make fusion music. Like many bands at the time, we struggled to find a place to rehearse that would grant us the time and space to experiment. We saved for weeks to afford a few precious hours in a music studio; there were only a couple in Alexandria at the time. Prior to rehearsing in the studio, we would sit in coffee shops such as al-Tugariyya and Abu Ragab for hours to rehearse virtually—percussing on tables, softly humming tunes—all the while laughing at ourselves for how crazy we must have looked.

There were about ten other bands active in Alexandria at the time, each of which had its own style of music and lyrics. In 2010, a docufiction film called *Microphone* (dir. Ahmad Abdalla) was released. A significant record of this period, the film sheds light on these bands and the "undergroundness" of the scene in Alexandria.

In early 2011, political conditions in Egypt and the Arab world began to change, and the pop market—and much of its audience—began to pay attention to new acts whose music and lyrics offered something different. There were now more venues for listening to and finding out about music that was nothing like the mainstream music that had previously dominated. Companies also started using some of these acts in their commercials—contracts worth millions of Egyptian pounds that were previously only offered to pop megastars. For me, this kind of commercial attention was a significant sign of change that made me uneasy. Whereas previously musicians would move to Cairo to perform in the commercial scene, I began to notice that musicians were now moving to Cairo to tap into this emerging market for independent and alternative music.

That year, I became music coordinator and director of musical activities at a venue in Alexandria called al-Kabina (The Cabin), which provided free studio rehearsal space so that bands could make music without worrying about money and without any conditions related to style, taste, or standard. The only condition was that the space could not be used to make pop covers, since there were many young cover bands around at the time who performed in hotels and similar spaces. Al-Kabina was a performance venue with space for fifty people, which was a novelty. The number of bands had grown to roughly thirty, and the venue allowed them to play small gigs where they could experiment and gradually build a following. Another wonderful thing about these gigs was that it allowed the audience to get up close to musicians, changing a setup that had been standard in Egypt since I was a child: concerts that took place in huge auditoriums with large audiences who watched the musicians from a distance, like creatures in space. This was one of the reasons experimentation had been so rare from the 1980s to that point in time. The main chance for listeners to discover a new band, singer, or genre of music was when they supported a star in a concert with an audience of two thousand. I remember seeing composers and musicians devote long hours to making works specifically to catch a particular star's attention, crafting the work to fit the latter's taste, in the hope of one day being given the chance to perform at one of their concerts.

In 2012, Station disbanded when many of the band's members left Egypt or moved away from Alexandria. Around that time, I received a British Council grant to visit and study a number of music festivals in London. I returned full of enthusiasm, planning to organize a festival with colleagues from al-Kabina and its nonprofit parent organization, Gudran Association for Art and Development. The first season of the Oufuqy (Horizontal) music festival took place in Alexandria, organized with the help of my colleague Khaled Kaddal, now a well-known sound artist in Egypt and Europe and formerly Station's guitarist. Our plan was for the festival to last for several days and take place across a large number of venues so as to host as many independent acts of as many genres, styles, and sizes as possible.

The festival ran successfully for six years and had a major impact on the city. Oufuqy was one of the only festivals in Alexandria that took place over ten days in over ten different venues, featured numerous genres of music, and was free. The festival also drew in independent acts from Cairo and from other Arab states, as well as London, Copenhagen, Berlin, and Amsterdam. These musicians took part in events, workshops, and roundtables as well as performing in concerts. Over the course of ten days, attendees formed new friendships, spoke to musicians, and shared their opinions. By the fourth year of the festival, there were so many people wanting to attend that we were forced to turn large numbers away at the door due to limited space, a stark contrast to the scene's limited audience of the early 2000s.

With six years of experience as director of a music festival, program coordinator, and music teacher and fifteen as a violinist and performer, I have seen what is called the cultural scene in Alexandria, and in

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Egypt more generally, from several perspectives. The changes I have personally witnessed in the music scene raise for me several questions.

There are many acts that have transitioned from making music purely as a form of personal expression to making music as a primary profession and source of income. In doing so they come into contact with the market and its demands, new audiences and venues, marketing and promotion, and the various financial pressures involved in running a commercial endeavor. These factors all oblige musicians to make compromises—be it with their time, their energy, or their musical vision—to pay the bills. For example, by making a different kind of music or by writing a jingle to advertise a product that they would never recommend to their friends.

Similarly, there are acts that began with a tiny fanbase made up mostly of friends and acquaintances, playing the handful of cultural centers that offered space for experimentation. Over the period from 2009 to 2014, with the increasing number of venues open to new genres and the growth in interest unleashed by music festivals (including in the wider region and in Europe) in music representing the Arab Spring, these acts have found new audiences and markets. In many cases this has led to a shift in the kind of music these musicians are making, in terms of music and lyrics and even in their appearances. There are numerous examples of acts whose music has gradually drifted toward pop.

Must bands whose audiences grow to the thousands necessarily change their music simply because of the switch to bigger live venues and the tremendous power of popular tastes? What chance do they really have of touring regional or European festivals, or even touring Egypt, when travel and accommodation costs are so prohibitive and visa requirements so restrictive? If bands need to fit their music to certain marketable themes, obtain visas, and apply for funds, are soft skills and a feel for the market becoming essential skills? How do you reach an agreement with a manager (band managers remain a rare breed in Egypt), and how do you guarantee that he or she will do what is in the best interests of the group's creative vision, especially when commercial sponsors make specific demands of the acts they work with?

One thing that I have noted is that some musicians and bands have adopted certain musical styles and directions, and certain looks and ways of acting, as if this is an absolute necessity, as if there is a universal consensus. To diverge from or ignore these criteria is considered tantamount to falling short in one's profession or creating an inferior product. This appears to be reproducing what happens in the pop world. It is all the more remarkable given that ten years ago many of these faces represented the dream of independence from constraints like the ones that they now espouse. The funniest example I have witnessed is experienced musicians telling hopefuls that, if they want to be successful, they should wear a hat on stage.

What is the psychological effect on talented performers who have built a profile and a mass fanbase? As their audiences and reputations grow, do they become progressively more wary of truly experimenting in their performances? Musicians in this position often stick to techniques that have gone over well with audiences at previous concerts, or write songs like the ones that were most successful on previous albums. Are they discouraged, then, from taking part in collaborations because they feel they will not receive sufficient attention?

In 2020, there is a generation considered by veterans of the experiments of 2010 onward to be heroes and considered by others to be fools. Which voice is right? The voice of the market, of audience numbers, of fame, and of success with all its relativities of time, place, and social, political, and cultural conditions? Or the inner voice that tells a musician to follow one's passion?

Ayman Asfour is a violinist, composer and producer for theater and contemporary dance. In 2010, he became the Musical Events Manager and Programmer at the Gudran Association for Art and Development, where he helped found and manage al-Cabina cultural space and the Oufuqy music festival.

Katharine Halls received the 2017 Sheikh Hamad Award for Translation for her translation, with Adam Talib, of *The Dove's Necklace* by Saudi author Raja Alem.

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