Deconstructing Egyptian Culture, Folk music and Nature

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A thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham for the degree of Masters by research

Abstract

This thesis is a portfolio of seven composition composed from 2018 to 2020. The following commentary includes the discussion of technical and aesthetical approaches employed in these compositions. The central idea is to explore and deconstruct my Egyptian cultural background, influence of Egyptian folk instruments and elements of nature in order to transform them into new ideas. A particular focus is given to texture, extended techniques and form.

Dedicated to my Father, poet Nabil Khalaf (1948-2020).
who is my only source of inspiration.

Flocks of birds running away from cold
Frogs jumping from cold mud
I take off my skin and I roll in the blowing of wind
Snow dolls cover me with withered leaves and the bodies of birds.

Nabil Khalaf, 2019

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude and deep appreciation for my supervisor Dr. Daria Kwiatkowska for her immense support and invaluable guidance throughout the study period. I do believe that this portfolio would not have been possible without her help and trust.

I am thankful for Dr. Alex Canon for his time and advice on my commentary.

Also, I would like to thank my mother and my sister for believing in me, particularly for their generous financial help during my studies.

Finally, I want to express my gratitude and love to my wife and my daughter.

List of Compositions:

The Habit for Ensemble (2018) 6'30''

Recitation I for solo Cello (2018) 10'

Murmuration for string quartet (2019) 7'

Wind Trio for Violin, Viola and Piano (2019) 7'

Recitation II for Ensemble (2019) 7'44''

Deferral I for Violin, Cello and Piano (2020) 8'

Deferral II minature for six musicians (2020) 1'43''

Deferral III for two amplified guitars, two bottlenecks and two condenser microphones (2020) 5'49''

Total Duration: 53'46''

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Introduction

This document represents an analytical commentary about my musical language of seven works composed between 2018 and 2020 at the University of Birmingham under the supervision of Dr. Daria Kwiatkowska and co-supervision of Dr. Alex Cannon.

My main approach is to explore the influence of the Egyptian music into my own compositions and consider the ways of finding my personal voice as a non-western composer of contemporary concert music. In the music that I have composed during recent years, I attempted an artistic deconstruction of the Egyptian cultural and musical elements in order to transform them into completely new ideas. These elements range from the varied sonic worlds generated by the Egyptian instruments as well as modern religious recitation, improvisation, electro sha'abi, and nature.

1. Culture as a resonance

I would like to illustrate my creative process with respect to cultural influence on my music and the development of this process over the last two years. I have undertaken a thorough analysis of Egyptian folk music such as Electro Sha'abi, modern religious recitation, and free instrumental improvisations. I have studied some Egyptian instruments such as arghoul, semsemya, and quartertone accordion. In addition to that, I have explored in depth composers from the 20th-century, such as Bartok, Sciarrino, Eötvös, Messiaen, Enno Poppe, Stravinsky, Georg Freidrich Haas, Liza Lim, and Unsuk Chin in order to establish how they perceive or employ non-western elements in contemporary music. Finally, I have read post-colonial studies by Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and ethnomusicological texts of Kofi Agawu as well as postmodern philosophical writings of Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze.

The following quote from Unsuk chin provides a good starting point for this discussion:

> Debussy learned from Southeast Asian music, Messiaen from Indian, Boulez from Japanese, Ligeti from Sub-Saharan African; and the result was magnificent. It's the opposite of musical colonialism: they took something foreign to them and turned it into their own subjective music. I recently read an article by a musicologist that dealt with and problematized this kind of work as "colonialist," with a lot of fancy terminology. It was absurd, to put it mildly. These composers never acted like they were doing anything besides their own thing. Their approach was the exact opposite of "world music," which throws all kinds of wonderful and terrible things into a pot, with the inevitable result that the amalgamation ends up being less valuable than the sum of its parts. (Unsuk Chin, 2017)

When Western composers borrow from other cultures, the questions of colonialism and orientalism could arise, as they supposedly are not fully aware of the complexity and the distinguishing characteristics of those cultures. Furthermore, in some countries (as in Egypt), folk music can't be fully comprehended solely with the use of theories; in fact, there are many social and cultural hidden layers that can't be theorized.

Nevertheless, I agree with Chin that the composers mentioned above have ideally overcome these negative notions by "learning" from those other cultures without imposing or underestimating them in their music. On the contrary, they sincerely transform what they perceive valuable, interesting inspiring in other cultures into a subjective and purely personal voice. Thus, these composers, as Chin said, make their own artistic statement informed by what pre-existed beforehand.

In other words, I believe that any composer has the total freedom to borrow from other cultures provided that a pre-existed artistic vision and a personal musical language precede this process.

Finally, I would like to quote the French director Jean-Luc Godard's words about his influences: "It's not where you take things from - it's where you take them to." Gordon E. Slethaug (2014)

But what about non-Western composers? How can they deal with incorporating their own culture into their music?

> How will I take the first step? By cultivating within my own sensitivities of those two different traditions of Japan and the West, then, by using them to develop different approaches to composition. I will keep the developing statues of my work intact, not by resolving the contradictions between the two traditions, but by emphasizing the contradictions and confronting them. Unstable steps perhaps, but no matter how faltering they maybe they will stop me from becoming a keeper of the tombs. (Toru Takemitsu, 1995)

While Takemitsu points out to the contradictions between the two traditions, he reveals the obstacles that any non-western composer might struggle with; dealing with specific cultural influences in music could diminish the sense of the originality of the outcome. Furthermore, it could be a sort of limitation for the whole compositional process because the composer deals with previously shaped and existing musical materials along with accumulated rigid traditional thoughts that originally came from the past.

Besides these obstacles, I believe that the problem of orientalism can also be discussed with respect to some non-western composers, who also

may be guilty of such musical trespassing, whether by intention of blending Eastern and Western cultural elements or by imposing their non-Western identity in their music.

I had the same struggles and concerns when I have started my research. I had many questions regarding my identity as a non-western composer as well as the dichotomy of East and West, past and present, folk music, and contemporary music. But, later, I found out that, there is no final answer to these questions. On the contrary, I believe that the function of music and art in general is to pose these kinds of controversial issues without a solution and creates a sort of deferred situation that leads to no resolution for either the listener or the composer.

For all those reasons, I have decided to avoid any intentional thinking of direct cultural influences or dialectical issues in my music. Instead, I worked on abstract ideas extracted from these influences in order to continuously exploring them in my music.

In other words, my final aim is neither to affirm my identity nor to imitate certain musical styles and not even to explore binary divisions such as the East vs. the West and/or the past vs. the present. Rather, I consider it a creative process; free association of multiple - if not infinite - interconnected relations including the artistic, cultural and philosophical aspects of the whole. The moment I start to compose, these binaries and issues cancel each other, allowing for total freedom of expression and free association for all my influences. I can even go further to say that in my music; I cancel my identity, my thoughts as well as myself. It's as though my identity is always deferred and my culture only exists in the resonance of my music.

"The self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities." (Gilles Deleuze, 2004)

2. The state of modern Egyptian culture
Depicting a culture struggling to overcome a colonial past while confronting modern alienation.

<div align="right">Constantin von Barloewen, 2012</div>

Egypt has a long history of resisting colonialism. As the result diversity of cultures has contributed to shaping and influencing modern Egyptian culture. Moreover, globalization and the influence of modern Western culture influence are also significant factors in the current face of Egypt.

The struggle and the interaction of old traditions with these foreign elements make both Egyptian culture and music retained a static condition and undeveloped forms substantially in parallel with the dynamic developments of technological and social aspects during the last century.

Consequently, these factors led to a series of complex relations of deep contradictions in modern Egypt: religious and secular culture, heritage and modernity, vulnerability and dominance, impurity and sacrum. The ambivalence of all these emotions and expressions is inescapably present in the Egyptian sonic and musical environment.

From my experience working with Egyptian musicians, I noticed that there are two categories of musicians: the first perceives of Western music as superior to the Egyptian music and as a result, this pressured them to exaggerate the sense of preservation of their own tradition, and they only perform a purely traditional music. On the other hand, the second category believes that modernizing Egyptian music will be possible only by directly blending the Western elements with Egyptian music or by adding technological elements to the sound. All of these trials, whether it is preservation or modernization, have created chaotic implications of profoundly contradictive ideas within the music

For example, Folk Musicians and Quran reciters fall into the second category (those believing in modernization of music). They apply modern technology to traditional music, such as adding technological aspects to the

sound. Such as adding echo to Quran recitation and overdrive effect to semsemya, or using square wave sound to play modal improvisations in Electro Sha'abi.[1]

In my opinion, the interaction of all these ambivalent factors along the struggle for modernization led to a cultural vulnerability, deficient forms, variable identities, and a deferred state, which leads to irresolution and limits all possibilities of evolution.

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[1] Shaabi means "of the people". (i.e "folk music") Electro Shaabi is an Egyptian music genre derived from traditional Shaabi combined with hip-hop attitude and punk-like spirit. They extensively use square wave sound to play improvisations in Arabic modes. This genre evolved after the Egyptian revolution in 2011 and become very common at the present.

3. Music and concepts

3.1 Extended techniques in the context of limitedness and the variable identities

Limitedness is a central idea for all my compositions, explicitly referring to the use of unusual instrumental techniques. I have always been intrigued by the limited sonic worlds of Egyptian instruments, such as the sound of bike brake steel cables of semsemya, the narrow dynamic range of the thick drones of arghoul, the unstable intonation of rababa[2] and the airy sound of nay. I don't imitate these sounds in a direct manner; I rather tend to explore their limited qualities within other instruments and change their identities by using a different limited and vulnerable instrumental techniques borrowed from folk instruments, such as the sound of strings behind the bridge and inside the peg box, unstable multiphonics in woodwinds and strings, natural and artificial harmonics in string instruments and percussive sounds in brass and woodwinds.

Thus, the use of extended techniques in my music is purposeful and not decorative. I intend to deconstruct the attributes of these sounds and subjectively transform them in other instruments. This process allowed me to discover new sounds as I always explore how limited the instruments are and to what extent their identity can be malleable.

In *Recitation* II, for example, the floating state in many parts of the piece is consistently generated from the limitedness of specific physical attributes of the instruments, such as the strings sound in the peg box and behind the bridge, whistle tones and air sounds in the flute and the flapping gestures of the accordion bellow.

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[2] See appendix 1 for pictures and more details about Egyptian instruments

In *Deferral* III, I have used bitones[3], multiphonics and harmonics to explore the fragile side of the instrument. Also, I aimed to make the two guitars sound like one detuned twelve-string guitar throughout the piece.

In *The habit* for ensemble, I aimed to change the identity of the whole ensemble by borrowing playing techniques of semsemya and argoul and imposing them to be played by the ensemble.

In *Wind Trio,* the initial idea of the composition was inspired by the cumulative sonic clusters and fluctuated rhythms that result from the uncontrollable and unavoidable impact of the wind on musical objects such as Aeolian harp and wind chimes. The repetitive patterns of the prepared piano imitate the sound of wind chimes and the extended techniques such as circular bowing and harmonics; imitate the sound of Aeolian harp. In some parts of the piece, the three instruments are integrated to sound as one mega instrument.

3.2   Improvisation

Imperfection as an Influence

> It's not easy to improvise; it's the most difficult thing to do. Even when one improvises in front of a camera or microphone, one ventriloquizes or leaves another to speak in one's place the schemas and languages that are already there. There are already a great number of prescriptions that are prescribed in our memory and in our culture. All the names are already preprogrammed. It's already the names that inhibit our ability to ever really improvise. One can't say whatever one wants, one is obliged more or less to reproduce the stereotypical discourse. And so I believe in improvisation and I fight for improvisation. But always with the belief that it's impossible. And there where there is improvisation I am not able to see myself. I am blind to myself. And it's what I will see, no, I won't see it. It's for others to see. The one who is improvised here, no I won't ever see him. (Derrida, 1982)

I have conflicted feelings towards improvisation. I am both in favour and against it. Nevertheless, folk music improvisation has influenced my

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[3]Bitone: In string instruments and guitar, when a string is pressed down by the left hand onto the Fingerboard, when not muted; there are two pitches, the pitch on bridge side of the string which is the most often articulated, and its Bitone, which is the side facing the nut. When muted; it will only produce the bitone without the articulated pitch on bridge side of the string.

musical language and therefore deserves further explanation. I completely agree with the above statement by Derrida regarding the impossibility of improvisation especially in the case of folk music. Folk music comes from the past while improvisation exists in the present. Moreover, the burden of heritage carried by folk musicians makes them incapable to create new paths for traditional music. Thus, their improvisation is, by default, based on variations of the same materials, without any prominent mutations.

Italian composer Salvatore Sciarrino (2013) goes even further in this respect, radically rejecting the idea of improvisation. He considers it "a conceptual error" rather than a creative method.

In my music, I affirm the influence of improvisation by negating it: instead of focusing on the conscious and deliberate methods of improvisation as well as the modal melodic developments, I rather concentrate on the subconscious behaviour and "errors" of Egyptian improvisation that occur for example in the music of Upper Egypt, the rural music in Delta and Electro-Sha'abi in Cairo. An instance of subconscious behaviour would be the imperfection of instrumental construction and techniques, such as the unstable intonation in woodwinds and string instruments together with unintentional mistakes in rhythm that occur in repetitive passages such in the case of Synthesizer improvisations in Electro Sha'bi.

Likewise, I am equally interested in the intuitive ornamental techniques; in order to enrich their improvisation, Egyptian instrumentalists tend to use ornaments such as the quartertone tremolo and the microtonal glissando in arghoul and accordion music and the textural variations in Quran chanting[4]. These techniques are employed in all my pieces such as microtonal scordatura, glissandi and tremolo in strings as well as alternating time signatures to imitate the unintentional mistakes in rhythm found in Electro Sha'bi.

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[4] Quran reciters tend to change the texture of their recitation by switching between different vowels in long notes.

Figure 1. Alternating time signatures to imitate unintentional mistakes found in Electro Sha'bi.

3.3 Alternative tuning as a functional and aesthetical device

3.3.1 Microtones

Deficiency and indeterminacy as influences

The employment of Arabic quartertone systems plays a major role in all my compositions. Generally, I consider microtones a symbol of a "deficiency" compared to the strict equal-tempered tuning system. Traditionally, in Egyptian improvisation context, folk musicians deal with the tuning of the quartertone subjectively. It varies from one musician to another, and every mode has its adjustment to the quartertone. There is no theory or documented information about this approach, but what I had noticed when I collaborated with folk musicians is that they tend to use different tunings for the quartertones within different modes and contexts. For example, they detune the quartertone in the standard tuning by 50 cents, considering it to be a strong deviation context for the mode such as in Rast and Sikah Ajnas[5]. However, they sometimes detune it in a range from 30 cents to 40 cents as a subtle deviation, such as in Bayati Jins. Another example of undefined interval adjustment is the Jins Sikah Baladi. This Jins is derived from Sikah mode and its micro intervals are indeterminate. (Johnny Faraj, 2001)

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[5] The Jins (plural Ajnas) is a maqam scale fragment of 3, 4 or 5 notes. The *jins* is the basic melodic unit in Arabic music, as a maqam is really a pathway among many ajnas. Each *jins* is defined by its intervals, which don't change when it is transposed and give it its distinct and recognizable character. (Johnny Faraj, 2001) See Appendix 2 for most common Arabic Ajnas.

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Figure 2. Jins Sikah Baladi shows indeterminate interval sizes.

Also, some Egyptian folk instruments are difficult to be perfectly tuned due to the cheap materials and the instrument's low technology, such as semsemya, rababa and arghoul. Therefore, they are not consistently tuned. Thus, the concepts of "deficiency" and indeterminate tuning can be found in some extended techniques that I use, for example bitones, playing on the strings behind the bridge and in the peg box in string instruments and guitar, as well as in multiphonics and natural harmonics in Woodwinds. These techniques naturally produce a variation of microtonal intervals.

I do not have a determined ideology concerning the use of the quartertones derived from Arabic music. I tend to use Arabic quartertone systems freely and I don't restrict myself to the use of the exact tuning and order of intervals for every mode. Rather, I tend to deconstruct and transform them into a micro fragments. For example, in Murmuration, I have used ¾ tone interval as a primary element for all melodic fragments regardless the intervallic order of Ajnas such as Bayati, Rast and Sikah.
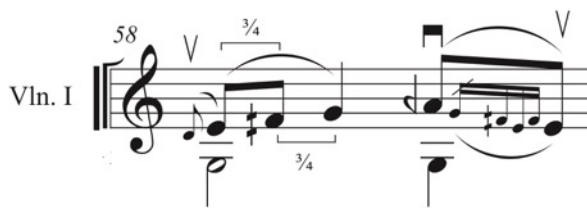
Figure 3. Example of the employment of 3/4 tone intervals in melodic fragments in *Murmuration* for string quartet.

In *Recitation I & II*, I imitate the human voice of a reciter chanting in different Arabic modes. My aim is to give my personal impression of Arabic Ajnas in recitation rather than just imitate the way of chanting directly. In order to achieve that, the melodies of Arabic Ajnas such as Bayati, Rast and Sazkar are fragmented into repeated notes using narrow intervals such as ¾ tone and ¼ tone.
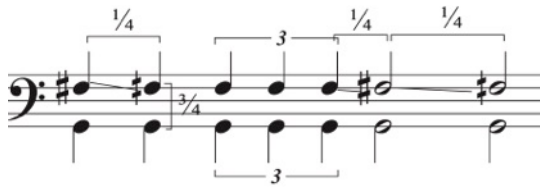
Figure 4. Example of the employment of 3/4 and 1/4 tones in repeated notes in *Recitation* I for solo Cello.

Figure 5. Example of the employment of 3/4 and 1/4 tones in melodic fragments in *Recitation* I for solo Cello.

Figure 6. Another example of the employment of 1/4 tone in *Recitation I* for solo Cello.
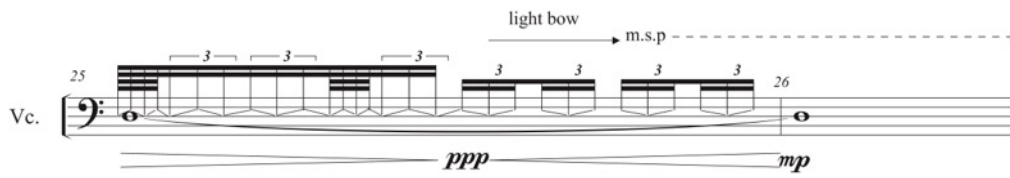
Figure 7. Example of using microtones and changes of texture in more abstract ways in *Recitation I* for solo Cello.

In *Deferral* series I used the repeated pattern of three notes, often found in electro sha'bi.

Figure 8. Example of using three repeated notes found in Electro Sha'bi music in *Deferral I.*
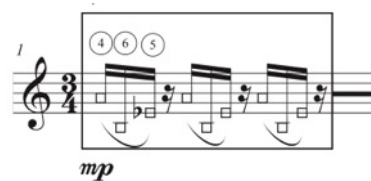
Figure 9. Example of using the three repeated notes found in Electro Sha'bi in *Deferral III* played in "bitones" technique.

3.3.2 Scordatura

Many contemporary composers have used scordatura as a functional and aesthetical device in their works. In his program notes, Georg Freidrich Haas demonstrates the aesthetical reasons for his tuning systems in Quartet for 4 guitars (2007). He indicates that the purity of the sound of the detuned open strings needs to be 'blurred' in order to create a sound rich in beat phenomena. (Georg Freidrich Haas, 2007)

Also, in his *Solo* for viola d'amore (2000), Haas employs a different microtonal tuning system to represent parts of the harmonic row of pitch E.

In *Sequenza XIV* (2002), Luciano Berio requires the G string to be tuned up to a G♯, in order to imitate the kandyan drumming of Sri Lanka, but also to create extreme dissonances over all four strings. (Rohan de Saram, 2003)

An example of scordatura as a functional device can be found in the opening of the third movement of *Xnoybis* (1964): Giacinto Scelsi requires the violin to be tuned to pitches f–g^1–b^1–d♯^{2} to allow unisons and quarter-tones to be played more easily among the upper strings, while distorting the sound with a special mute. (Franco Sciannameo and Alessandra Carlotta Pellegrini, 2013)

Similarly, the use of scordatura in my compositions is both functional and aesthetical. The idea is to produce a primordial sonic environment imitating the imperfect intonation of Egyptian instruments by playing on detuned open strings as well as easily engaging quarter-tonal natural harmonics. The tuning used for violin, viola and cello in *Murmuration* for String Quartet and for cello in *Recitation* for a solo Cello are good examples of this procedure.

In *Murmuration* for string quartet and *Recitation I & II*, I devoted a lot of time experimenting with different tunings for strings[6]. My purpose was to

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[6] See appendix 3 for changes in scordatura applications in *Murmuration*.

design an alternative tuning would enable microtones to be produced easily by playing open strings and natural harmonics. The fundamental intervals used in scordatura and quartertone melodic fragments are ¾ tone and ¼ tone- common intervals in Arabic Ajnas such as Bayati, Rast and Sika. In *Wind* Trio, I have employed a scordatura for Violin and Viola to imitate the sound of Wind Chimes. *In Deferral I*, scordatura has been applied to Cello to provide microtonal variations to performing techniques such as natural harmonics and playing on open strings. Finally, in *Deferral III*, the function of scordatura is distinctive, as it resembles the indeterminate tuning quality of folk Egyptian instruments and Arabic Ajnas. Moreover, contrasting tunings have been utilized for both guitars to make them sound as a detuned twelve strings guitar as well as engaging variations of beatings between narrow intervals.

3.4   Expressing culture within nature
Landscape is the culture that contains all human cultures

Barry Lopez, 2014

The dichotomy of culture and nature is a central inspiration for my music. I am compelled to explore the vulnerable, inconsistent and ambivalent sides of culture and nature through birdsong and other natural phenomenon in general. In my opinion, both culture and nature are dynamically interacting sources of inspiration as they are related to each other. Quarter-tonal Arabic modes are influenced by the natural phenomena of harmonic series as well as the micro tonality that exists in birdsong.

Table 1. Quartertones found in the harmonic series.

Harmonic					Interval	Note	Variance cents
1	2	4	8	16	Octave	C	0
				17	Minor second	C#, Db	+5
			9	18	Major second	D	+4
				19	Minor third	D#, Eb	-2
		5	10	20	Major third	E	-14
				21	Fourth	F	-29
			11	22			-49
				23	Tritone	F#,Gb	+28
	3	6	12	24	Fifth	G	+2
				25			-27
			13	26	Minor sixth	G#, Ab	+41
				27	Major sixth	A	+6
		7	14	28			-31
				29	Minor seventh	A#, Bb	+30
			15	30			-12
				31`	Major seventh	B	+45

3.4.1 Birdsong

The birds are the opposite to Time; they are our desire for light, for stars, for rainbows, and for jubilant songs

Oliver Messiaen, 1958

Throughout music history, birdsong has long been an inspiration for many composers including Handel, Beethoven, Liszt and Ravel. In the modern and contemporary repertoire, various new and more subjective approaches have been employed: Carola Bauckholt for example, used recorded sounds of birdsong in her piece *Zugvögel* (2011) in order to create chaotic atmospheres of natural and everyday sounds; other examples include accurate rhythmical imitation of birdsong in John Luther Adams' *Songbirdsong* (1974-1980) and Oliver Messiaen's *Catalogue d'oiseaux* (1956-1958) as well

as sampled synthetic transcriptions of birdsong in Jonathan Harvey's *Bird Concerto* (2001*).*

My approach to utilising birdsong is to imitate only its microtonal and textural properties of birdsong while excluding its rhythm and dynamics. In *The Habit* for Ensemble, for example, I imitated textural and microtonal properties of the cooing of pigeons, and incorporated them into the clarinet and flute parts.

Figure 10. Example of imitating the cooing of pigeon in the Clarinet part in *The Habit* for Ensemble.
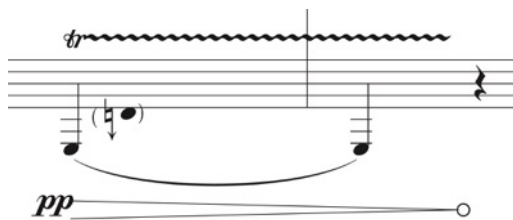
Figure 11. Another example of imitating the cooing of pigeon (*The Habit* for Ensemble, Clarinet part).

Figure 12. Example of imitating the cooing of pigeon in the Flute part (*The Habit* for Ensemble).

In *Deferral I*, the sound of Eurasian curlew calling is the main inspiration for the rhythmic repeated segment in the Violin and the Piano.

Figure 13. Eurasian curlew calling sound in the Piano part (*Deferral* I)*.*
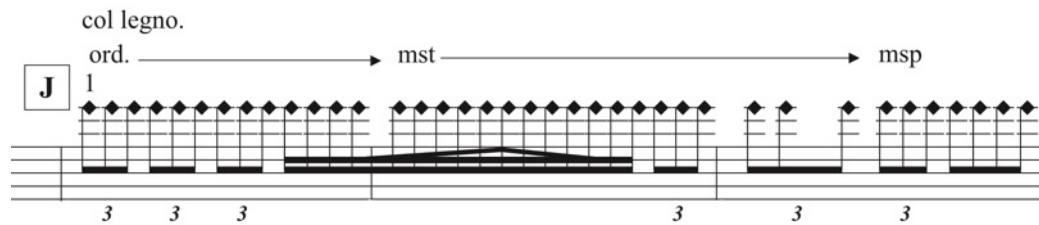
Figure 14. Another interpretation of Eurasian curlew sound played by Violin I in *Deferral I.*

3.4.2 Natural Phenomena

Taking inspiration from certain natural phenomena is a primary method employed in my compositions *Murmuration* for string quartet and *Wind* Trio. It's not a scientific approach or a celebration of natural phenomena. Rather, it is a symbolic journey of abstract ideas and heightened form of experience to interact with the listeners.

Murmuration for String Quartet

This piece was composed to be part of a reading session and competition with Quatuor Bozzini at the University of Birmingham. As a result of the competition, the composition department and Quatuor Bozzini members have chosen it to be performed by Callino quartet in May 2019 at Bramall music building, Birmingham.

The main inspiration for this composition comes from the mesmerising and mysterious phenomenon of the starling murmuration; it is a remarkably harmonious technique in which birds shape patterns and dance bizarrely in unison. Typically, it is interpreted as defence mechanism behaviour against possible predators. Nevertheless, the manner in which they perform these movements remains an unsolved mystery for scientists. I have always been intrigued by this phenomenon not only because of the beautiful shapes that birds form but also because of the symbolism behind the resistance of the "weak" birds through their fluid movements against the "absent" predator.[7] For a human observer, this ultimately turns into an aesthetic experience expressed by the beautiful patterns and mysterious movement techniques of

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[7] The predator is not existent and therefore does not directly cause the murmuration behaviour.

birds.

Murmuration is an expression of randomness, weakness and presence (prey) in the face of strategy, power and absence (predator). For that reason, I have used mostly fragile sonic effects such as harmonics, circular and vertical bowing techniques, extreme sul tasto swishing sounds and bowing on strings behind the bridge.

The varied transformations of wide and narrow intervals and low and extreme high registers created by various extended techniques construct the fluid and continuously transforming form of the piece.

The main idea is to imitate the random wavelike shapes of birds' murmuration with an aim to create continuous transformations of texture, harmony and rhythm.

Table 2. The formal outline of *Murmuration* for string quartet.

Sections	A	B	Interlude I	A'	Interlude II	C
Bars	1-25	26-38	39-43	44-81	82-87	88-end

Wind Trio

A composition for Prepared Piano, Violin, Viola, two rattle drums and wooden rattle[8]. *Wind* trio was commissioned and performed by Ensemble Linea in a workshop at Etchings music Festival in France, June 2019.[9]

The cumulative sonic clusters and random rhythms that result from the uncontrollable impact of wind on musical objects such as Aeolian harp and wind chimes inspire the initial idea of the composition. My aim was to imagine all instruments as if played by the impact of wind rather than by real musicians. I added rattle drums and wooden rattle to the instrumentation to emphasise this uncontrolled condition to the overall sound. The piano is prepared to imitate the sound of wind chimes.

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[8] See Appendix 1 for instruments pictures
[9] Unfortunately, the sound engineer of Ensemble Linea has lost the recording.

The form is constructed clearly in five sections and every section has its own character and sound colours:

Table 3. The formal outline of *Wind Trio*, with explanation of every section.

Sections	A	B	C	D	E
Bars	1-37	38-49	50-91	92-101	102-128
	Imitation of wind chimes and Aeolian harp.	Instruments unite together acting as a one mega Wind chimes.	Free interpretation of wind's impact on all instruments.	Introducing rattle drums and wooden rattle.	Instruments unite together acting as a one mega rattle drum.

3.5 Texture and form

The starting point for all my compositions is texture. I think about music as contrasting soundscapes juxtaposed in different temporal states, and these soundscapes are primarily influenced by Egyptian folk music and nature

My own approach to drawing from Egyptian folk music can be compared to that of Peter Eötvös, who uses elements of Gamelan, Gagaku, and other musical cultures to expand his perceptions of sound. (Peter Eötvös, 2019)

In my music, I construct an entire section based on sonic attributes influenced by a single folk instrument. For example, I imitate the shimmering sound of semsemya by playing on strings behind the bridge and inside the peg box along with high register pitches on piano and harp. I imitate the airy unstable texture of nay by playing multiphonics and natural harmonics in woodwinds and strings. And mostly, I build my harmonic surfaces in a narrow, intervallic manner similar to clusters, to imitate the thick and persistent drones of arghoul. I also use these techniques to imitate elements of nature such as the hollow and round sound of pigeons, the fluid and wavelike shapes of murmuration and the sonic impact of wind on objects: imitating these sound sources provides for me with new musical concepts as well as guidance on how I treat my materials and create the formal outline.

This process of textural imitation is not a representation or reproduction of these sounds. It's a transformative process that expands the sonic possibilities to generate a formal organic outline from within. These contrasting textural materials are mostly struggle between stasis and motion, as this struggle never resolves throughout the different sections of the piece. It transforms at the very end into new materials to function as an outro for the whole piece; as the closure always attempts to introduce a sort of transcendence and alludes to new struggles to begin.

In greater detail, I tend to construct my pieces in adjacent sections based on varied soundscapes. They don't develop in a traditional manner, as I tend to treat the cluster of sounds in every section as a living organism in time; they are born, proliferate, thrive, and then disappear to allow new sounds to be revealed in the later section. These sections could overlap, or consecutively follow each other or gradually transform one into another. Eventually, they never develop or resolve, as I incline to pose every section in a suspended state,[10] and I postpone a sort of resolution until the end of the piece.

The Habit for Ensemble

This piece has been premiered in March 2019, performed by the New Music Ensemble at the University of Birmingham, conducted by Daniele Rosina.

In *The Habit* for Ensemble, I construct the form and the structure of the whole piece by imitating textures of different sound sources such as semsemya, arghoul, nay, and elements of nature such as bird songs and rain, in order to draw an imaginary landscape consisting of those sound sources.

Every soundscape has its own palette of sounds. They are dispersed vertically to fluctuate throughout the music, exhibiting a unity for the overall

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[10] Further explanation will follow in the chapter on the concept of deferral.

sonic image. The soundscape of semsemya includes the friction of the strumming hands on the Harp, pizzicato notes played by strings behind the bridge, and the texture of high accumulative pitches played by piano and vibraphone. The soundscape of arghoul includes long notes with exaggerated vibrato in strings and wa-wah effect in trumpet. The soundscape of nay includes high pitches with microtonal trills and timbral trills in woodwinds and strings.

Finally, microtonal trills in clarinet and flute accompanied by woodblocks and high-pitched string pizzicati imitate elements of nature such as bird songs and rain sounds.

All soundscapes are vertically weaved together from the beginning to the end to create a sort of frozen state, repeated with no sense of development. However, in some parts, an individual soundscape prevail. For example, in rehearsal number 17 (bars 40 - 42), the texture of arghoul takes over the music by playing long notes with vibrato in strings:

Figure 15. Imitation of arghoul in strings section in *The Habit* for Ensemble

From rehearsal number 21, cumulative layers of natural harmonics arpeggio in violin, bird songs, and rain sounds prevail until the end:

Figure 16. Imitation of elements of nature in the final part in *The Habit* for Ensemble.

3.6   The study of the excessive decay

Egyptian reciters tend to add an echo effect when they recite through a microphone in various religious events. I have always been intrigued by the excessive accumulated echo patterns that naturally follow the short phrases of their austere reciting style and how these patterns only exist in the resonance of the sound.

I attempted to explore this notion of the "excessive decay," as I name it in my works *Recitation* for solo Cello *and Recitation II* for Ensemble *"study for what comes after".*

Recitation I **for solo Cello**

Recitation for solo cello is fundamentally a process of disintegration starting from the full sound of fragmented Arabic modes to almost "unheard" sonic residues. The formal outline of the piece is shaped by the process of the excessive decay that disintegrates into three phases: Recitation, Echo and After-Echo. Each section begins with recitation and then disintegrates into two phases; Echo and After-Echo. In the After-Echo, the music further breaks down into sonic residues influenced by the previous phases. Every section has its own sonic world as each one explores different process.

Table 4. The formal outline of *Recitation I* for solo Cello.

Sections	A			B			C		
Bars	1-22			23-44			45-83		
Micro form Sections	Recitation	Echo	After-Echo	Recitation	Echo	After-Echo	Recitation	Echo	After-Echo
Micro form Bars	1-11	12-16	17-22	23-24	27-36	37-44	45-50	51-56	57-83

In Recitation section, I transform the human voice of a chanting reciter into short phrases played by the cello. The idea is to introduce this static sonic environment in an austere way and to focus more on the texture rather than pitches. "Echo" section is the middle section that introduces cumulative segments of the previous section's "recitation" proceeding to the last section "After-Echo". Here, the music breaks down further into sonic residues influenced by the previous phases and becomes extremely fragile.

Recitation II **for ensemble "study for what comes after"**

This piece has been chosen to be performed as a part of the annual academy of contemporary music at Hochschule Luzern. It has been premiered on 22/02/2020 at Neubad in Luzern, Switzerland.

The idea of *Recitation II* is based on a process of repetitions that always comes after a prior austerity and transforms it into an act of fluency similar to the resonance of the echo. The main event occurs persistently at the very end of the decay and is always carried out by intensive and accumulative layers.

Unlike *Recitation* I, the form of *Recitation* II is very fragile. I attempted to capture the resonance state throughout the whole piece without explicitly referring to the original sound source. The initial idea originally came from my imagination of what could be heard while the sound decays, and even after it ends. It's sort of microscopic view of sound decay. I sought to create this floating state consistently by employing cumulative layers that demonstrate the instruments' vulnerable side, such as the sound of the low-pressure bow along with extreme sul tasto in cello, the whistle tones and the air sounds in the flute, and the very soft arpeggios in the low register of the accordion.

For example, from letter F to letter H, this process clearly introduced by very soft microtonal arpeggios played by flute and cello, and later accompanied by double bass and accordion to draw the ephemeral and cumulative atmosphere of echo. Furthermore, from H to the end and similar to the introduction of the piece, I particularly tried to focus only on the limitedness and the austerity of the sounds as well as exploring how these sounds would act in vital motion and scattered environment.

3.7   The concept of deferral

As I mentioned earlier, the concept of deferral comes from the concerns and struggles that I experienced in my research as well as in my personal life. I have faced several questions regarding my identity, the musical form, and binaries such as East and West, folk and modern music. After many trials and musical experiments, I have arrived at this concept, which provided a form of conclusion to all these issues.

This concept is largely inspired by Derrida's idea of deferral; Derrida concludes that the accomplishment or fulfillment of desire or will is inevitably and infinitely deferred (Derrida, 1985). In extension to this idea, I believe that

everything is suspended: identity, truth, form, and conclusion. Thus, nothing is complete, and everything is insufficient. There is no perfect ending for any occasion; the outcome is always deferred. Nothing gets wholly resolved, and there is still a later event that is always influenced by the former.

Deferral series

This was the central concept of my three last pieces in *Deferral* series. The music is based on series of interconnected musical gestures, patterns, and sections with no resolution; they decay slowly, stop for some time, or transform into new patterns, but they never get concluded until the end of the piece.

Deferral I for Piano Trio
"Study for consecutive unresolved episodes"

I composed this piece for the 11th international composition competition "Franz Schubert and modern music" at Graz and it has been shortlisted in the final stages of the competition.

The initial idea is based on a piano figure that resembles the Eurasian curlew calling and develops throughout the piece. This figure is the only element that develops clearly and connects all different unresolved sections together. Every section transforms into a new one by adding a short transition or total silence between them.

Table 5. The formal outline of *Deferral I*, with explanation of every section.

Sections	I	II	III	IV	V
	Introducing the curlew motif in piano.	Transmitting the curlew motif to violin with different interpretation. Piano plays the curlew motif along with improvisatory patterns influenced by the same motif.	Dented rhythmic passage played in mechanical way in contrast with the former episodes and alternates between motion and stasis.	Development of curlew motif in piano along with improvisatory patterns. The episode ends with a static transition to episode V.	Introducing Electro sha'bi three-note pattern transformed in violin along with improvisatory piano patterns.

Deferral II miniature for six musicians

I composed this piece as a part of "miniatures in isolation" event at the University of Birmingham. The piece was conducted by Daniele Rossina and performed by the university students. It has premiered online on 16/09/2020

The music is constructed by two contrasting temporal states that function in parallel fashion. The surface layer consists of accelerant patterns in flute and strings that are gradually fading away. The other layer in the background representing a sort of frozen state, consists of drones of two musical glasses. Eventually, these drones of the background layer dominate the texture at the end of the piece.

Deferral III for two amplified guitars, two bottlenecks and two condenser microphones

This is the last piece that I composed in my research. I performed and recorded the two guitars. The music is formed into three overlapping sections and an interlude between section II and III.

Table 6. The formal outline of *Deferral III.*

Sections	I	II	Interlude	III
Bars	1-78	79-106	107-133	134-end

In section I, I employed the Electro Sha'bi vigorous three-note pattern to make the impression that music is persistently trying to move forward towards the future. In contrast with section I, the next section starts with tranquil and static materials suggesting an effect of withdrawing and contemplation. The interlude begins with animated and quite random patterns of bitones and playing on strings in the nut. Finally, in the last section, new materials that influenced by the materials in section I have been revealed to suggest a sort of reconciliation between the two contrasting former sections.

4. Conclusion

In search of my own tradition

Traditions are good, but the problem can arise where you have difficulties thinking outside the box. Bartók, the Great Russian composers of the late 19th century, Sibelius, Janáček—the lack of an established classical tradition certainly didn't damage them, they just searched for their own tradition and created it. But this requires a radical spirit: you have to question everything, be a cosmopolitan, and work on yourself an insane amount. (Unsuk Chin, 2017)

Deconstructing my culture and the sound worlds of Egyptian folk instruments were my main objectives in the search for my own voice. During this journey, I attempted to redefine myself and reformulate my convictions. In order to achieve that, I was obliged to question everything, but the more specific questions that were always in my mind are the following: How can I shape the musical form out of my cultural influences? How can I deal with the endless binaries that inherently exist in my culture and myself? How can I create my own tradition out of deficiency? Is there a constant state of identity?

In my music, I worked on three main elements form, texture, and extended techniques. I intended to use a closed-form while still deferring the resolution. The texture in my music is influenced by different sources to create new sonic clusters that function organically in time, and the extended techniques are a symbol of limitedness and imperfection.

My future plan is to compose directly with Egyptian folk instruments. In the last two years of my research, I have learned to play arghoul, semsemya, and accordion. Although I have already started on some sketches for a composition for four arghouls, I have intentionally postponed this step until I have a clear vision and establish my own musical language. I will use the same compositional techniques used in my former compositions, such as exploring the limited attributes of the instruments and the deferral state within a closed-form. A graphic notation will be my choice to communicate with Egyptian folk musicians, as they can't read conventional notation.

Finally, I am aware that composing with cultural elements is an arduous task. In many cases, dealing with previously existed materials may work against the creativity and the originality of the music and limit the composer's imagination. However, my goal is to create a holistic parallel world embracing all my influences and my ideas: a world of my deconstructed culture heightened by elements of nature. Moreover, in my research, I aim to influence all composers interested in composing with cultural elements. I believe that the employment of any culture's sound would undoubtedly enrich the contemporary music scene and generate a new musical aesthetics and novel composition techniques.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Egyptian Instruments & other instruments:

Semsemya is an Egyptian traditional plucked Lyre. semsemya players usually use bike brake steel cables as strings.

Figure 17. Seven string semsemya.

 Arghoul is a single reed instrument and it has used since ancient Egyptian times. It has two pipes; one to play melody and the other for a continuous drone that requires a circular breathing technique. Its sound is similar to Bassoon.

Figure 18. A set of different sizes of arghoul.

Rababa is an Egyptian string instrument. It has only two strings and held in upright position. The small rounded body is usually covered in membrane made by sheepskin.

Figure 19. Rababa

Figure 20. Rattling drums

Figure 21. Wooden rattle toy

Appendix 2: Common Arabic Ajnas

Figure 22. Most common Arabic Ajnas

Appendix 3: Changes in scordatura application for *Murmuration*

I composed *Murmuration* for string quartet to be performed by Quatuor Bozzini in a workshop at the university of Birmingham.

At first, I made a heavy scordatura for violin I, viola, and cello in the following tuning:

Figure 23, Heavy scordatura, Murmuration for string quartet.

The members of Quatuor Bozzini refused to play with this heavy scordatura on their instruments because they said that it might eventually harm their instruments. Therefore, they required cheap instruments to apply this tuning on. Additionally, they advised me to change this tuning to be more practical for future performances. They also (and later other string players) advised me not to tune any string up or down than a semitone.

For that reason, I've changed the tuning in the version intended for a performance by the Callino quartet in the following way (this is the version submitted in the portfolio):
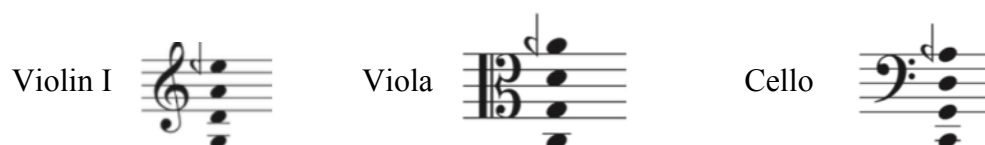

Figure 24, Second scordatura, Murmuration for string quartet