Musical Interpretations of Visual Art

By diving head first into the realm of Islamic art, it is impossible, for me at least, to not see connections between visual art and auditory art. It’s as if sound naturally emanates from all objects, supplying information about its past present and future. For this reason, my project focuses on creating musical compositions that directly correspond to pieces of art. Through understanding the context of a certain piece of visual art, a supplemental piece of music can be composed that aids in encapsulating that context through stylistic practices and musical aspects that are culturally synonymous with certain emotions and understandings.

Before going into any more detail about the project, I will give a brief example of the general process of turning visual art into auditory art. Let's say, for example, that I want to write a piece of music that is meant to express an equilateral triangle, positioned so a point is positioned upwards, like this △. The most striking thing about an equilateral triangle is that it has three sides all of equal length and also three points. Because of this the general form of the musical piece will be ABA, structured with the same symmetry as the triangle. Since viewing this triangle from left to right, it ascends and then descends; the general pitch of the piece would do the same. Another aspect I can draw from the triangle is the use of triads (coming from the 3 points) as opposed to 7 chords or other types of chords. All of this was extracted from only the visual aspect of an extremely simple. In creating a piece of music in this fashion there are many different aspects of a piece of art that you can draw on for inspiration. Because of this, this is no correct or incorrect “answer” per say, but there must be valid evidence to support how and why a
piece of music relates to a piece of art. Not only will the pieces of art that I am examining be infinitely more complex than a triangle, but I will also be incorporating the history of the piece and the culture into the composition, giving for a vast array of information to pull from.

Of the three pieces of art that I have chosen to focus on, two lie within Khirbat al-Mafjar, and the third is a coin that was current during the time period. I will go into detail about these three pieces later while I am discussing their compositions, but first, the general setting needs to be established.

The Umayyads were the first Islamic Caliphate, coming to existence in approximately 650 C.E. and lasting until 750 C.E.¹ The Institution of the caliphate was born after the death of Muhammad when there was a need for someone to become his successor and continue as the current leader of Islam. The general role of the caliph was to correctly lead those beneath him as motivated by the faith of Islam. The definite form of the Umayyads was not until after the Rightly Guided Caliphs, the four caliphs that followed immediately after Muhammad. Mu’awiya was the first caliph of the Umayaads, coming from the Banu Umayya clan, which is actually where the phrase Umayyad originated. While in power, one of the first orders of business was to relocate from Medina to Damascus. This was done simply because Medina was not ideally located for conquest and was an inconvenient location to try and rule an empire from. When Mu’awiya was nearing the end of his reign as caliph, he nominated his son, Yazid, to be the next caliph. The concept of the caliphate staying within a specific family made people very uncomfortable. When Yazid eventually did become the caliph, a man by the name of Husayn, who was the son of the Rightly Guided Caliph Ali, decided to challenge Yazid seeing that simply being the son of a caliph did not make one fit to be a caliph. Husayn’s unfaithful supporters

stood no chance against the Iraqi forces that were fighting for the Umayyads. Husayn’s entire family, including his infant son, was slaughtered. Although Yazid did not feel that this act was fully justified, being that he was the caliph, he took much of the blame, and the reputation of the Umayyads was tarnished. Two of the later caliphs, Hisham and his son al-Walid, are also of interest here, historically because they helped lead to the demise of the Umayyads and also because Khirbat al-Mafjar was built during their time (it is currently still under debate whether the palace was originally built for Hisham or al-Walid). The reserved and humble Hisham was in great contrast to his infamous nephew al-Walid. Al-Walid had a very indulgent personality and did not have a particularly strong connection to religion before becoming the caliph. It was this personality that led to conflict and ultimately his murder by his own cousin. Soon after, the Umayyad caliphate fell and the Abbasids came to power³.

In understanding the Islamic art itself it is important to keep in mind that although Islamic art is unique in and of itself, it drew very heavily from previously existing cultures. Although this is almost always the case with the arts, it is more notable so in this case because the Islamic culture also highly incorporated many aspects of previous cultures into their new kingdom. They were extremely tolerant of other religions and made a very public point that they were in no way attempting to erase what already was, but rather to build on it⁴.

In deciding on what pieces to focus on, I immediately thought some form of currency, whether it be paper money or a coin, would make for great inspiration for a corresponding composition. On a day to day basis, money exchanges hands extremely often. This is usually done with very little thought of what it represents. Of course, there is the power of the money itself, the ability to purchase things with it, but there is another aspect that often goes overlooked

which is the wealth of information that currency can provide about a culture. When was the last time you took the time to look in depth at an American one dollar bill, for example, and tried to understand what it really meant? Who is this “Washington” that is depicted, why are there signatures on the bill, what is the significance of “Washington D.C.”, why are there texts in two different languages, why are there depictions of an eagle and of a pyramid? As you can see, a myriad of questions can be raised after just seconds of inspecting an American one dollar bill. This gave me the hunch that possibly currency from the Umayyads would also raise a plethora of questions about their culture. After researching this topic, my hunch proved to be correct.

During the rise of the Umayyads, the Dirham, a coined form of money, was common in the area; specifically, this coin was made and used by the Sassanians under Yezdigird III. The Umayyads began minting these coins on their own as a continuation of that form of currency. At this point in time, the faith of Islam was still very new and still had a lot to learn about itself\(^5\). Because of this, it wasn’t until a few years later that the mention of “God” and “Muhammad” and the banishment of figural representation on the coins developed. It is commonly know that depictions of Muhammad are not approved of by the Islamic faith, but in actuality, representations of humans and animals as a whole are not approved of\(^6\). On the specific coin that I used for my composition, one side of the coin translates to “There is no deity except/ God alone/ He has no equal” on center of the coin and “In the name of God. This Dirham was struck in Wasit in the year three and nine” in the margins of the coin. The opposite side translates to “The eternal and indivisible, who has not begotten, and/ has not been begotten and never is there/ His equal” on the center of the coin and “Muhammad is the messenger of God. He sent him with guidance and the true religion to reveal it to all religions even if the polytheists abhor it” in the

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It is clear to see the level of intensity of the Islamic faith being that such powerful phrases where placed onto their currency. While furthering my research, I came across an account of a very interesting event that was related to the Dirham. There was an occasional in which those responsible for minting the Dirhams failed to make them to the correct purity but placed them into circulation anyway. Upon the discovery of these impure coins, each of the 100 workers involved were issued 1000 lashes. When solely looking at something as seemingly simple as a coin, it is incredible to think of it having such a violent history.

In my composition, I tried to mirror the progression of my understanding of the topic, moving from very little to a high understanding of the context and history behind this coin. For this reason, the piece begins very minimal and ambiguous being that upon beginning my research, I knew very little and did not have any preconceived notions about the topic. It is unclear whether it is in a major or minor key and the time signature is also very unclear. As the piece progresses, it becomes clear it is in a melodic minor scale, also known as the Mohammedan scale, being that it was very popular in Islamic societies soon after the rise of Islam. There is then a very distinct change in which the instrumentation changes from solo guitar to guitar, percussion, and zurna, a traditional Middle Eastern instrument. This change along with the change in dynamics from piano to forte and the modified church chords that are being played are meant to represent God’s power and superiority, as inscribed on the Dirham. Additionally, the rhythm in the percussion is a pattern that was common in the time, utilizing the “dum” and the “tak”. This section ends as the zurna dies out and the other instruments quiet. The rhythmic complexity builds as the notes sounding become more and more dissonant, finally ending with a

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11 Issam El-Mallah, Arab Music and Musical Notation, (Munchen University, 1997), 26.
very dissonant chord. This final passage is meant to express the incident mentioned above regarding the minters who were whipped for producing impure coins.

The next piece that I focused on was a window of Khirbat al-Mafjar. Unfortunately, the specific piece did not have much information that was unique to itself aside from the rest of Khirbat al-Mafjar. The window itself can be broken down into three individual parts, excluding its support structure. There is a large outer circle, a six pointed star within that circle, and a small circle in the center. All parts appear to be made of stone and all three parts have raised circular patterns on them.

For the window I drew primarily on its visual content and only partially on the historical content, mainly because the history that is unique to this piece is not very extensive. I tried to capture the essence of a powerful and content ruler looking out upon his glorious land. This was done by using a moderate tempo in a major key. The lack of percussion also makes the piece as a whole more fluid. Visually speaking, the number six, drawn from the six pointed star, became very important, mainly because it is what really defines this piece. The general format of the composition is meant to correspond to the window spatially from the left side to the right. The key signature of the composition in is in 6/8 and is divided into six distinct pieces. There are also three voices in the piece which comes from the fact that there are three distinct parts of the window, as I described earlier. Possibly the most obvious similarity between the window and the composition is their related symmetry. Since the window is symmetric down the y-axis, the composition is too, the second half is essentially the first half recorded backwards. This is made additionally obvious by one of the voices actually being reversed in post-production rather than just being recorded backwards. Lastly, since this composition did not draw greatly on the history of the piece, I did not find it necessary to limit myself to traditional scales and rhythms.
The last piece that I decided to depict with music was the centerpiece of the bath hall of Khirbat al-Mafjar. If is often considered as the most extravagant building of all of Khirbat al-Mafjar. Although often referred to simply as the bath hall, it actually served many more purposes in addition to bathing. It is extremely lavish with both private and public entrances and outfitted with extensive seating areas. The area actually set aside for bathing is a very small part of the building as a whole. One interesting aspect of the bath hall which has raised many questions about Khirbat al-Mafjar is how disjoint it is from the rest of the palace; there is no direct access to the bath hall from the main quarters. Because of this, it is believes that the bath hall may have been built after the rest of the palace, as a sort of addendum. Being that the bath hall was more of an area for social gatherings, there were often musicians and poets that would perform there. Fittingly enough, this would be done on the centerpiece, the focus of this composition.

The mosaic consists of a large decorative circle that is in the foreground and a more square and rectangle oriented object that made to appear behind the circle although the mosaic is only two dimensional. The rectangle beneath the circle is composed of a series of squares, five high by an undistinguishable number wide. Upon close inspection of these squares it can be seen that they are in fact made up of smaller circles layered on top of each other, really just creating the illusion of a square from afar. Within each of these circles there is additional decoration; sadly these are difficult to depict from pictures alone do to either a lack of clarity or decomposition of the piece as a whole over time. The circle in the centered is bordered by a section that contains a long meandering ribbon and plants that are interspersed throughout the outer circle. The inner circle is made of triangle of varying colors that decrease in size as they approach the center of the piece, becoming extremely minute and near impossible to distinguish. In the very center there are five very distinct dots that are surrounded by a number of circles.

Robert Hillenbrand, "In Early Islamic Syria: The Evidence of Later Umayyad Palaces," *Blackwell*
Similar to the last piece, I drew slightly more from the visual aspects of this piece that I did its history. The fact that this part of the bath hall was often used for extravagant gatherings inspired me to compose a piece that had an overall upbeat, happy, and even playful feel too it. Since this location was actually used as a sort of performance hall as well, I tried to imagine what it would be like to hear music in this setting. The fact that the building as a whole is so open and large led me to the conclusion that there would be a great amount of reverberation, so I in turn put a good amount of reverberation on my composition in post-production.

The form of the composition is ABA, coming from the same general format of the mosaic. There is a short transition between the A section and the B section, and a similar transition when going from the B section back to the A section. This is indicative of the outer circle that separates the A section from the B section in the mosaic. Once the composition “enters” the main circular part of the mosaic, the composition slowly begins to become more rhythmically complex while the number of notes increase. This represents the increasing complexity of the mosaic as it approaches its center. This section climaxes when both voices in the composition are playing constant sixteenth notes and then suddenly hold a chord, which represents the entrance into the very small void before the five small dots in the very center of the mosaic. These very small five dots are then expressed by five successive notes that are nearly inaudible. After these notes, both of the voices pick back up with high complexity just where they left off. As the rest of the B section plays out, it becomes increasingly simple in the same way that the mosaic does. Note that the word simply is used relatively here since both works of art are still fairly complex during this section on a broader scale of art as a whole. There is then a small transition as before, showing the outer circle that separates the A section from the B section. The A section now repeats, ending the composition.
To reflect on this project, I would like to say that it was much more challenging than I would have originally thought. While doing my research and simply by looking at the images there were a multitude of things that I wanted to incorporate into my compositions. Of course, given the assignment and the time scale that I was working with, it would have been impossible to do this. Resultantly, I was forced to try and choose what appeared to be most important to each piece and make sure that those aspects were clear in the compositions. Another challenge was appropriately incorporating traditional music into a modern style. This attempt ultimately resulted in one piece that was very notably traditional and two others that, without any background information, sound completely contemporary. Although this was not my original intention, I feel that in the end it provided for a more than satisfactory technique, the reason being, after all, that those pieces were more contemporary because I was drawing more on the visual aspect than the historical aspect. To conclude, it can certainly be said that, if the correct methodology and reasoning is employed, a piece of music can be composed such that it aids in the overall understanding of a visual piece of artwork.

Works cited:


