

## Music in Performance: A Saudi Women's Wedding Party

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One by one the conversations around us stopped, as the crowd strained to hear distant drumming, in a majestically slow  $4/4$  rhythm, that announced the bridal procession. From the same distance came women's cries of joy, *zagharit*, filling the pauses between drumbeats. The drumming grew louder, and the crowd turned toward the back of the reception room at the Meridien Hotel in Jidda. An Iranian friend and I also turned, to look beyond the hundreds of Saudi women, unveiled and formally dressed, who had gathered there to celebrate the marriage of a young Saudi couple from the prosperous merchant class. All of us had waited several hours for this moment, and we had passed the time in the traditional way by enjoying the sights and sounds of a Saudi women's wedding party, a *haflat al-zaffar*.

It was 1979, and I was gathering material for a story about Saudi women's music for the *Arab News*, a Saudi English-language daily published in Jidda, where I was then living. Since this music is most frequently played at *haflat* attended by women only, I had been angling for invitations to parties where Saudi women singers who were famous throughout the kingdom would be performing. So far, the few weddings I had attended featured singers whose popularity was only local; but now my editor had gotten me an invitation to this wedding party, where Sāra 'Uthmān, a rising star from Riyād, was being flown in to sing and play the *'ūd* with her orchestra of women drummers. I had brought my Iranian friend with me, to be a second pair of outsider's eyes.

Our gilded invitation in hand, we had arrived at the hotel an hour later than the official starting time of 9 P.M., but we were still quite early. We made our way into the reception room, which was large enough to hold the eventual crowd of three hundred women easily. As soon as we sat down, a servant came by with fragrant aloe-wood incense, which (like the instrument) is known as *'ūd*. We waved it over us, as is traditional for women guests who are presented with incense on entering a friend's home or arriving at a party, and again on leaving. The air was filled with its rich fragrance; and it would cling to our gowns for days afterward—an indication of good-quality (and very expensive) *'ūd*. While we waited for the orchestra to arrive, servants brought soft drinks, juice, tea, and Saudi coffee. The rustling of voluminous taffeta and satin gowns could be heard at every turn as the guests streamed in to greet friends and family and then to find good seats close to the stage.

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About an hour later Sāra 'Uthmān walked on stage. Her entrance elicited no reaction at all from the audience. She wore a full-length white dress that contrasted with her dark skin; her hair was cut in a simple chin-length bob. She sat down and began to tune her *'ūd* and test the microphones. Then her drummers walked slowly onto the stage, each carrying a few frame drums (*tārāt*; singular, *tār*). One drummer also had a *darbukka*, and another had brought a *daff*. A brazier of live coals was brought to the stage and set down there; this was to enable the drummers to tune their skin drumheads, which quickly go limp in Jidda's humidity, even in this air-conditioned hotel. The drummers arranged their chairs in a row on either side of Sāra 'Uthmān and began to tap the drum skins, holding them over the coals and raising the pitch of each drum as the skin tightened. Well out of sight of the women, a young man set up equipment to make a cassette recording of the evening's performance; this cassette would be on sale in Jidda's marketplace within days.

Sāra 'Uthmān began the performance with a simple *taqāsīm* on her *'ūd*, exploring the notes of the melody she was about to play. It seemed more like a warm-up than a serious exploration of the song's *maqām* 'mode'. Then she played the metrical melody. The drums came in, one by one, adding rich layers of polyrhythms from high to low. The audience reacted immediately with cheering, clapping, shouting, whistling, and *zagharī*.

The musicians repeated a single melodic phrase throughout each song. Sāra 'Uthmān sang the refrain and verses, and her chorus repeated the refrains. Each song lasted ten or fifteen minutes. The crowd seemed to urge the orchestra on, and the musicians played songs with progressively livelier rhythms. There were thrilling 6/8 patterns that I was told were Kuwaiti, and 4/4 patterns that I would later learn were called *'adani* [see WOMEN'S MUSIC OF THE ARABIAN PENINSULA]. Although each song remained in just one steady rhythm, the drummers varied their playing with syncopation, fitting multitone drumbeats into every nook of each rhythmic pattern. With the livelier rhythms, one of the drummers would play the *daff* and add the bright jingling of its cymbals to the mix. Others would pound smaller, high-pitched *tārāt* to accent the syncopation in the offbeats. I noticed that one of these small *tārāt* was bright-green—unlike all the others, whose natural skin tone had been left unpainted. When the music inspired them, women in the audience would add another layer of syncopation with rhythmic clapping (*tasfiq*). On top of this rhythmic complexity, audience members occasionally let out boisterous whistles and *zagharī*.

It was not long before young girls and teenagers approached the stage area and began to dance in pairs. Some of them were wearing party dresses. Others had put on the traditional long dancing dress, the *thōb nashal*, a caftan-like garment worn over an evening gown; such dancing dresses are in bright colors like hot pink, turquoise, blue, red, orange, and purple, as well as in black, and are lavishly embroidered with gold thread and dotted with sparkling sequins. The dancers lifted their skirts an inch or two and began to swing them from side to side. When they twirled and their gowns



FIGURE 1 Cassandra, an American dancer, captures the joyful spirit of Arabian women's dancing. Photo by Zone V Photography; courtesy of Cassandra Shore, artistic director, Jawaahir Dance Company and the Cassandra School.

floated around them, they looked like bright flowers in full bloom. Even the older women in the audience sang and clapped.

That night, the pounding 6/8 rhythms inspired the most dancing. During these songs, the girls would swing their hair back and forth in the traditional bedouin way, winning more encouragement from the audience. There were also 4/4 rhythms, and during one 4/4 piece, two young women did a simple pair dance while both played finger cymbals. My Iranian friend found that some of the 4/4 rhythms were familiar to her, since they are also played in Azerbaijan, a region of Iran that is close to Iraq and Kuwait. Late in the evening, the orchestra played popular pan-Arab pop tunes that inspired one teenager to get up and perform an Egyptian-style solo dance with a scarf tied around her hips.

The audience continued to socialize all through the evening's performance, alternating between watching silently, clapping, letting out *zagharit*, whistling, dancing, and talking with friends. After the applause for each song, the musicians took a break to tighten their drums, take a glass of tea, and retune the 'ūd. The audience seemed to expect the musicians to stop between numbers, breaking the musical spell for a few minutes. As soon as the musicians began playing again, the intense excitement returned.

The evening passed in this way until well after midnight. It was at this point, during a break between songs, that we heard the distant drumming in a slow 4/4 rhythm. At last the bride and groom appeared at the back of the room and made their slow, stately procession to the stage. The *zagharit* and the deep tones of the *tārāt rang* through the room. A dozen women walked with the couple, including the drummers as well as others who carried large, thick candles in tall candlesticks. The audience murmured in admiration and let out occasional *zagharit*. The bride wore an exquisitely ornate Western-style white wedding gown. Her brilliant diamond necklace and earrings, wedding gifts from her husband, sparkled in the candlelight. Her makeup and hairstyle were as glamorous as a film star's. The groom wore the traditional formal Saudi men's costume—a full-length white silk *thōb*, a headdress (white *ghuṭra* and black *agāl*), and a fine brown cloak (*mishlah*) of lightweight wool. He smiled broadly, probably both from the excitement of the moment and from the pleasure of seeing his female relatives and friends dressed up and unveiled, in honor of himself and his bride.

As the procession entered, cameramen filmed it on video, and some older women among the guests, not wanting to appear in the video, quickly covered their hair and faces. Many Saudi women still prefer not to be photographed; and out of deference to the more conservative guests, someone at the microphone in front of the room said, "No photos, please," to warn off any amateur photographers in the audience. The groom and the video cameramen were very careful not to stare at the dazzling sea of unveiled faces around them.

As the procession reached the stage, the drumming changed to a faster 3/4 rhythm. The bride and groom posed for some still photographs before sitting down in two formal chairs that had waited on stage all night for them. Then the music and dancing began again for another hour or so, in honor of the couple. When the bride and groom paraded offstage to their wedding chamber, the guests were invited to a sumptuous feast. But many of the young women stayed behind, begging the musicians to keep playing.

My friend and I stayed to talk to the musicians. Sāra 'Uthmān was happy with the performance: "I like to experience my audience. I enjoy the fact that they never want the parties to end, as you have just seen here tonight. We are happy when the audience reacts this way." One band member, Jawāhir, added that the most important thing "is the audience members' response. They feel as though the time has gone quickly. After all, the artist is up there for the sake of the audience."

At this time, Sāra 'Uthmān was twenty-eight years old. She had begun to play for her own family at the age of twenty. After playing for a few private parties, she had been asked to perform for prominent clients and eventually had been offered engagements outside Riyāḍ. We spoke to her at the height of the wedding season, the month before Ramadan. She and her group—made up of her friends and relatives—were flying around the country, playing three or four nights a week. She had even traveled to Egypt to give some public concerts, at which she performed several songs composed especially for her. Her group spoke of a possible trip to the United States, for a private engagement.

As we parted, Sāra 'Uthmān gave me the high-pitched green-painted *tār*. I remembered that the drummers had used this instrument to hit distinctive accented beats that seemed to float above the deep pounding of the other drums. Then one of her drummers handed me a *daff* and insisted that I keep it as a memento of the evening. We left the hotel at the same time as the performers did, just as the glow of dawn was spreading across Jidda's skyline.