

#RevelsConnects: Musical Connections Episode 4

Karim Nagi: Arab Future Folklore

Maggie Hotzberg, Interviewer

David Coffin, Dave Jamrog Producers

Maggie: Karim Nagi is a native Egyptian hand percussionist, composer, and folk dancer, as well as a gifted teaching artist. Karim was twenty when he immigrated to the United States and for the last two decades, Karim has been performing and teaching Arab music and dance for school assemblies, universities, community concerts, and festivals. He's been called a multimedia one-man cultural ambassador for Arab music and dance. Karim Nagi, welcome to Musical Connections!

Let's begin at the beginning with your early exposure to music. I was wondering if you were born into a musical family?

Karim: My father was a musician but he stopped playing music even before I was born, so he had an appreciation for it... but I never actually witnessed him playing music. Most of my family in Egypt are either engineers, doctors, some of them are in the Egyptian military and navy. But no professional artists.

Maggie: So how old were you when you first began to play percussion?

Karim: Well, there is a funny picture of me hitting a metal box with some kind of railroad spike during a song about dinosaurs. So maybe that's my official debut! But I kinda feel like it might have been later than that!

Maggie: So what was the first instrument you were actually trained on or took lessons on?

Karim: Well, our culture valued a lot of western music as a sign of progress... you know the post-colonial psyche and all this that we're trying to overcome. So I actually started with the piano.

Maggie: Well this leads me into something I want to ask you about, having to do with scales and modes... so it's some for a little cross-cultural music lesson.

Karim: Let's do it!

Maggie: Ok, so as we know, all music uses some kind of tuning system upon which the melodies are built. So in western culture, scales varied from say a seven-tone mode, like gregorian chant, or Celtic and American folk music. Or twelve-tone major and minor scales, European classical music and jazz. But as we move further east, things get more complex. Southeast Asian music uses ragas, and Arab music uses the maqam system. And both of those use semitones. So in my mind, it's like going from having a small box of Crayola crayons to one of those boxes with three rows of colors! Can you talk a little bit about microtones and if they're difficult to learn?

Karim: I would like to say that I prefer the color analogy than the food analogy, so thank you very much! Yes! We use the maqam system in Arab music, and what that means is, depending on the nerd level of the teacher, it could be twenty-two notes within an octave. Some people would divide it further or less. But the truth is that we have more options, and it's not just notes that you pass by in the bending for flavors or colors. But actually notes that you would land on, it could even be the tonic of your scale, the tonic of your maqam. Now maqam is an Arabic word, which actually means "location." You could use the same word for talking about coordinates for where a building lies in a place in the city. So these locations, this is where you would start your scale, end your scale, and then the intervals inside it could be a whole step, a whole step and a quarter, you know what we would roughly call "quarter tones." But actually, technically, they could be divided even further. We could say it's around twenty-two notes in an octave.

Maggie: That's hard to even comprehend, for people who have been raised with western major and minor scales. Is this something that is taught orally? By ear?

Karim: So when you say it's hard to learn, that's because you may be thinking of it as something that you would have to unlearn. That you are well situated within that

tempered scale, and now you have to start allowing other notes in. From our perspective, we learn it early and not necessarily in reference to western music, but in music that we hear all the time, aurally, but also we have conservatories too that are teaching it, and private teachers. And we learn it, not to mention we hear these maqams multiple times per day from mosque's call to prayers, multiple mosque's call to prayers simultaneously if you live in a town with more than ten people or a city, not to mention. So we're hearing the maqam all the time, we're hearing it, and it's a natural thing for us to hear if we grew up in the culture. It's not something we have to correct into but something that sounds natural.

Maggie: Okay that's a great analogy, that it's like learning a language, that's your native language.

Karim: Yes.

Maggie: That maqam system... so, simplistically in western music, we associate a major scale with happiness and a minor scale with sadness. But talk about the range of emotions associated with the scales in the maqam system.

Karim: For me, I do believe that every scale and every maqam has an emotion and a feeling that there... of course, other very nerdy academic interpretations that say this is your psychological inculturation associating with Mary and her lamb for the major scale, etc. But I actually believe that the distance you go with each note in relation to where you start creates tension and a feeling. For example, if your third note is only this high, whereas if your third note is that high, you still have five more notes to get to here. So have you only gone this far or have you gone that far? That creates a tension and a feeling. So with the major and minor scale, a very common maqam for us in the Arab world, is called "rast". And this is, you know... if you're starting in C - D - E half flat! And then continuing...but that E half-flat is somewhere between E natural and E flat. So in a way confounding this positive negative feeling that the scale has to be somewhere in the middle. So I do believe that they invoke certain feelings, yes.

Maggie: And talking about musical literacy and Arabic speaking countries and communities, do most people, general public, understand... I think you already answered this... these maqams and their emotional association, like is that universal?

Karim: It is a non-academic universal I believe. I think that everyone feels it on some level, I mean you see it in audience reaction when people sort of swoon and remonstrate, to songs and go, "AH Allah! Salim *i'ewah*? They do these reactions similar to what you would hear in flamenco music or jazz clubs or in a comedy club when the joke is good or not good. You know these biological reactions and these verbal reactions you get from people... you see that actually, those people feel what's happening in the music. Would they be able to explain it and name the maqam and all that? Probably not. But definitely they feel it because of the lifelong exposure.

Maggie: Thank you, that really helps. As you note in your performances and lectures, countries throughout the Middle East are united by the Arabic language, yet each country has its own distinctive geography. Food-wise, dance forms, music tradition, right? I was flabbergasted by your ability to demonstrate the unique rhythms of eleven countries in the Middle East. And I was wondering, is that like the ability to speak like eleven different languages?

Karim: Haha! Well if I wanted to flatter myself I would say that! Yes, I speak it. So let's think of this terminology first. So we have the Arab world. The Arab world are the countries where Arabic is the national language. Middle East is kind of a different geographic category, not quite sure Middle East of what, but the Middle East would have countries in it that don't speak Arabic like Turkey, Greece, etc. Now in the Arab world, yes, there are over twenty countries all over North Africa, the Western part of Asia, and we have a classical Arabic language that unites us, but every country has spoken dialects, spoken versions of Arabic language. And also versions of culture too. Different type of food perhaps, or different types of rhythms in music. So what I like to pick up on is the different music styles and rhythms from around the Arab world. The world where Arabic is the official language. From Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Mauritania, Sudan, Djibouti, Somalia, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Iraq,

Yemen, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, these countries where Arabic is the official language, there are rhythms you can find unique to each of those areas. And this is what I like to seek out, this diversity within a unified group.

Maggie: I'm thinking about here, you know, and you going into schools. We're not very literate, we're not very knowledgeable in our elementary schools about this. Which is why what you're doing is so incredibly important.

Karim: Thank you.

Maggie: It seems like educating people about Arab culture and diversity is a very important part of your work. Talk a little bit about how you feel the arts can help fight cultural xenophobia.

Karim: I believe strongly that the arts can fight cultural xenophobia, whether it's something as specific as promoting Arab culture like I do, or promoting a pan-culturalism like the Revels does. I really believe in this. First of all, the music is inclusive music and dance and theater and the arts, they are inclusive in that people can engage in it without having to commit to a political ideology or commit to a religious ideology. So I feel that it has this power. And then with younger people, rhythm specifically is just so engrossing. I mean people have the biological reaction to it, and for any of us who have been around our own children or other people's children, you know that they will dance and move until you tell them to stop! You know? It's the adults that tell them they shouldn't be moving. The children don't have that restraint. So you see the power of rhythm. So I will use this power of rhythm to get young people, and people of all ages, interested in this momentum and this feeling, and then tell them that it's part of a culture! If you like the rhythm, maybe you will like the rest of the culture too! And if you like the rest of the culture you'll like the people. And if you like the people you won't be afraid of the people. And then we'll have few conflicts in the future.

Maggie: Talking about the frame drum, the daf, I was curious... Tell us about, in some pieces you were spinning it! As you're performing, in the places there are rests. Describe that, why you do that.

Karim: So there's the physicality of music, which I know a lot of people in the performing arts believe a lot in, and it's in theater and dance and music, the physicality of playing music. So the daf, which is a big frame drum, I would spin it, put it over my head, behind my back, there's a visual element that makes people take interest and that's power enough. But also it engrosses the player, it gets you into the process and then the music has this bigger degree of momentum and commitment to it. So I would hit the daf and spin it within the rhythm or part of the rhythm, but most importantly, enhance the music. And then if it's part of a ritual, which often is in the Arab world, a wedding, a birthday party, a sporting event, a religious ritual, it gives that much more involvement and commitment to a ritual that could be empty if you don't give it commitment.

Maggie: Well it's almost like dancing at the same time that you're playing. In a way?

Karim: Yes.

Maggie: It's adding a dance element.

Karim: True!

Maggie: Now that I mention dance, I want to ask you...It's clear that you teach, and you perform a variety of Arab folk dances. I was wondering, are they a mix of participatory dances? With other actual performative pieces like you'd see up on a stage.

Karim: Yes, most of the dances that I do are participatory social dances, but then you know as we are here trying to share culture and in the West and things become imbued with stagecraft, and so all of these folk dances in participatory dances have a possibility for the practitioner to make a solo piece from them. And a lot of people will then believe

that the solo piece is part of the tradition and to some extent it is. So that the performance of an individual doing these social dances has a lot more craft to it than choreography but at its core it tends to be done amongst people.

Maggie: That makes a lot of sense, because in certain traditions there are folk dances and then there are... they often use the word classical dance, and that's the divide there. It sounds like most of what you're doing is folk dance but also tied to rituals and celebrations you know, weddings with all the things you mentioned.

Karim: Exactly right.

Maggie: I wanted to talk a tiny bit about ornamentation. One of the backdrops you have for your performance is this beautiful graphic, so we see ornamentation is part of Islamic architecture, and calligraphy, and we hear it in the music. So I was wondering, is there something common in the way ornamentation is expressed in material culture versus the performing arts in the Arab world?

Karim: That's a great question! So for example, my backdrop, these are fabrics that have layers of patterns on them. And in our visual art, in our textual art, in our writing of the Arabic language, in our music and our dance, we have ornament in that there is a basic skeleton of everything. And in the delivery of that skeleton, in the delivery of that core, we are supposed to embellish, we are supposed to decorate. So if you had someone who would just go, *musically* "dun dun dun dun dun dun dun" for example, well that would be considered just a communication of the music. But when you go to perform it, *musically with more flourish* "dun dun dun dun dun dun " That ornamentation version of it is thought of the real music itself. It may not be written down but that's part of it. So it's a very core aspect to the delivery of our art. And in Islamic culture specifically, which is a distinct term other than Arab, so, for example, I could be Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Atheist also. But the Muslim culture expands beyond the Arab world, and beyond geography, and has a specific ethic in that we as Muslims do not portray in our art human figures specifically. The Shia Muslim sometimes have pictures of the additional nephews of the prophet, big topic to talk about. But we in

general in islam use geometry, we use floral designs, and we use text in our imagery. And so deliver those we have a lot of embellishment and decoration to expand upon in order to make a full piece of artwork out of them.

Maggie: Very helpful to understand that, thank you! I wanted to not let this go by, that I absolutely love your rap piece, Oriental Magic Carpet, which calls out anti-Arab, anti-Muslim stereotypes that we're all familiar with here in the west in the mainstream media. When did you write that and how has it been received?

Karim: I'm not a hip-hop artist because I didn't grow up in that world, but I like using spoken word, I like delivering in English so that people in America can understand. So Oriental Magic Carpet and other songs that I have in English are actually part of a theater piece, a play I wrote and it was actually performed twenty times last year, 2019, called "The Detour Guide" where I take people on a tour around the Arab world, but not the landmarks you know, like pyramids and [things like this, but social issues, and topics about mis-portrayal in the media, and topics about poverty, and current things. So this is one of my many songs. It's like a musical theater, and Oriental Magic Carpet is one of the scenes. I wrote it in 2015, I wrote the whole thing between 2014 and 2017. Utilizing English language but inside Arabic music.

Maggie: That's great! I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about how you're received in elementary and middle schools? They can be, especially the middle schools can be a tough audience. And kids can be cruel. So I was wondering how they react when they are confronted with what might be unusual dress such as the traditional Muslim men's long tunic or head coverings.

Karim: I know David is not watching sports because he laughed at the time we talked about middle school and he's probably been tortured by middle school kids too. Yes, actually elementary is easy and high school is easier. The toughest audience is the middle school audience. And I've even gotten professional coaching on how to deal with them and how to recover my first trials of that. I believe, and I'm not a child psychologist, I believe the middle school and this age group, they're starting to be less interested in

the approval of adults and more interested in the approval of their peers. That's the beginning of that era, whereas in elementary school, they're trying to make an adult happy. So basically in that era, they're talking amongst themselves and how funny they can be and how silly this person is. It's always at someone else's expense. So I have a different cadence and trajectory of my presentation based on the age group. And for that age group, I am starting to engage intellectually and getting them participating, getting them to see things and asking questions and also making them take ownership of their impression, like, why are you thinking like this? Why are you reacting like this? And get them to think about it. And then just also know the more I leave it open to them, the more they're going to tease me. And I'm ready for it now!

Maggie: Can you give us an example of being confronted by some mean, stupid kid, and how you might've turned that around in front of all of the kids?

Karim: This is what you do: you just stop. I'm not going to, you know, fight with a 7th grader in front of 300 kids in a gymnasium. That just is not a good procedure. Basically, you know, I say something and if they talk among themselves and giggle and whatever, you just stop. You stare forward, and they all sort of get quiet. And then you resume at a lower tone of voice. And you do that pacing a little more slowly and then you sort of capture the attention that way. So basically the key is to stop, and let everything calm down. And then show them that you're serious.

Maggie: That's good. I think people will benefit from hearing that! It sounds like from what I can tell, performing and teaching is done to educate and entertain those who are less familiar with Arab culture. I wonder, how is it different performing in Arabic speaking, culturally informed audience, and do you get to do that?

Karim: I still get to do that! My original career, the beginning of my career, especially in the United States was performing just for Arab audiences in the diaspora and parties and events. And I never dreamed that anyone other than them would be interested in what I'm doing. And so it was the cultural outreach and those efforts that came afterwards. But I started out with that, and I like to go back to the Arab audience

sometimes because I want to make sure what I'm doing is still relevant and that I can still connect with them and that I haven't just become some kind of cultural totem. Or some museum tour. That I still can connect with my people and those sensibilities. Their needs are different. Sometimes their needs are nostalgia, and they want to experience what they left behind, so it might be very important for me to not perform my own original works, but to perform traditional works. Or maybe a different segment of them is tired of traditional and wants to feel that they're modern and new, and so I would have to address that as well. Many times, when you are performing for the non-native audience, they are most interested in having an authentic experience. Think of the time that you have walked into a Japanese restaurant and the sushi chef is not Japanese, and how people react to that. You know, this is a cultural topic, and a marketing topic as well... you know, "is my Mexican food made by people from Mexico or not?" And people have these standards when they are having a cultural experience, and in America, they want to have something authentic. They are not necessarily as interested in the new version. So I have to be aware of these things and I also have to be brave enough to give the new version because I am not a monolith, I am not mummified in a museum, I am a living person who has the right to create new things. And every traditional artist at the time they were making the tradition, it was something contemporary. In the past it was contemporary, but now it is tradition. So if we don't make contemporary things, we won't have a tradition in the future.

Maggie: Do you have a, well not right now because of COVID, but do you have a group of musicians that you perform with? I know you lead the Sharc Ensemble in the Boston area... but are there some musicians that you enjoy playing Arab music with where you live?

Karim: Yes very much so! There are Arab musicians all over America and I connect with them and most of them already know me for some reason... And we all find common repertoires we don't need to rehearse because we know we're going to play these songs and things like that. And so, yes, I'm still able to find musicians and perform with them. I don't try it so much online because of the latency issue, I do mostly solo

work or pre-recording. But definitely I stay connected with my musicians, and I'm looking forward to that time where we can be in a room together again.

Maggie: As we all are! What do you love most about what you do?

Karim: I love most about what I do in that it makes other people happy at the same time that it makes me happy. That I'm not just serving other people to make them happy at my own expense, and I'm not just in some kind of personal psychosis, making myself happy, not paying attention to others, and not meeting others. It feels organic, it feels holistic in that I am happy doing what I'm doing is at the same time making people happy. So this is the important realization of this profession is that you can have both.

Maggie: Well I mean, one thing that is so clear about you that you're a great communicator, and also from this conversation, it sounds like you're very attentive to your audience and meeting them where they are. And that's not an easy thing necessarily to do. So I commend you on that!

Karim: Oh, thank you!

Maggie: And as we're getting close to the end of this conversation, if there's anything that I haven't thought to ask you that you'd like to add?

Karim: I'd like always for people to feel that they can learn about someone else's culture and participate in the learning process for more than just their own entertainment. Like I'm hoping to get allies from this process, I'm hoping to get advocates for the Arab world in that when people are confronted with the news or confronted with negative imagery, or something divisive that they see you know like terrorism or civil wars in places like Syria and Yemen, that they also have another perspective, a human perspective in that. So that they've met someone like Karim, myself, or others, and they see what we do and they realize we're humans and not just political topics. We're not just news items, we're humans like them. And that therefore, if we're humans, then our needs are valid, and we're worthy of friendship and

consideration. This is the process that I want to be part of. Not just making things to entertain people, but gaining advocates and allies and making friends.

Maggie: Well we thank you for it and you do a really great job of it! So thank you for meeting with us today.

Karim: Thank you, Maggie! Thank you very much!