Protection and Sustainability of Traditional Music among War-Displaced Syrian Youth: The Case of Nefes Music School in Gaziantep, Turkey

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Abstract: This article examines the relationship between forced migration and the sustainability of traditional music in the context of the Syrian conflict, with a focus on Nefes Music School in Gaziantep, Turkey, as a case study. Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011, several non-governmental organizations and individuals have offered different psychosocial programs in the form of music and art interventions to help young Syrian refugees overcome the horrifying experiences of the war and to help foster a cultural understanding between the refugees and their host communities. These programs took various approaches, including community music interventions based on Western music therapy, choral singing, and individual and group music lessons in the refugees' traditional musical traditions. This article focuses on the third approach: In particular, it examines how the sustainability of Syrian musical heritage through music education may aid displaced and war-traumatized Syrian youth through social and cultural empowerment and identity-building, promoting their healing from the trauma of war and displacement, helping raise their awareness of social diversity, providing them with a safe space and encouraging inter-cultural dialogue. The article explores the strategies employed by the Nefes Music School, a model of successful music education program development, in establishing an Arab music program in a non-Arab host country, and the ways music has helped students who fled Syria as young children to adapt to a new environment.

Keywords: *child cultural protection, forced migration, music sustainability, Nefes Music School, Syrian conflict, Syrian youth, Syrian refugees*

The Syrian conflict that started in 2011 and the ensuing massive refugee crisis have greatly impacted the lives and wellbeing of the Syrian people in general, and Syrian children and youth in particular, both inside and outside Syria. Whether they live in refugee camps or in other settlements, the Syrian people endure psychological, social, and economic challenges as they try to cope with the trauma of the war and ensuing displacement while adapting to their new

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environment. For the refugees[2] living outside of Syria, the pressure to integrate into the cultures of the host communities and to resist different sorts of discrimination add to their traumatic experience. According to a report by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, every Syrian child has been impacted by the violence, displacement, severed family ties and lack of access to vital services caused by massive physical devastation (UNICEF, 2022). Studies on the mental health of Syrian children refugees have shown high prevalence rates of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Burbage and Walker, 2018; Dehnel et al., 2022; Eruyar et al., 2018; Hamdan-Mansour et al., 2017). These have been further exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic and have especially affected the children, compounding their existing trauma (Bernardi et al., 2021).

Several non-governmental organizations and individuals around the world have offered different psychosocial programs in the form of music and art interventions to help these Syrian children and youth refugees overcome the horrifying experiences of the war and to help foster a better understanding between the refugees and the host communities. Various musical and pedagogical approaches have been implemented, including 1) community music intervention programs based on Western approaches to music therapy, such as the project implemented by Sounds of Change Foundation,[3] 2) choral singing, especially the different social projects run by Fayha Choir,[4] and 3) music programs offering individual and group lessons in vocal and instrumental traditional Arabic and Syrian[5] music, including Action for Hope's and Nefes Music School's projects.[6] Most of these initiatives were either short-term projects or were interrupted because of the COVID-19 pandemic; only a few have prevailed.

In this paper, I focus on the third of these approaches, in order to examine the relationship between the sustainability of traditional music and forced migration in the context of the Syrian conflict. While almost all music interventions to date have focused on children and young adult Syrian refugees living in camps, my discussion is focused on a program where students reside mainly in settlements and regular residences within a city (outside of Syria): namely, the music program run by Nefes Music School that was founded in 2019 by Syrian musician and music educator Ibrahim Muslimani, in Gaziantep, Turkey. Music 'interventions' such as these, which aim to benefit refugee populations from war-affected sites, have come under scrutiny for various reasons, including their characteristically 'service-provision' model, their complex intersections with national identities and interests, and the sometimes disparate agendas of their various stakeholders (e.g. Boeskov, 2018; Korum and Howell, 2021). However, in this article I specifically focus on how the sustainability of Syrian musical heritage through music education may aid

[2] In this article, I use the terms *refugees* and *displaced people* interchangeably to refer to all the Syrians who were forced to leave Syria since 2011 due to the war. According to the UNHCR, refugees are "people who have fled war, violence, conflict, or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country" (UNHCR, n.d. (b)). The term was also defined by the 1951 Refugee Convention as: "Someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion" (UNHCR, n.d. (a), para. 3).

[3] For information on Sounds of Change Foundation's work among Syrian refugees, see: https://www.soundsofchange.org.

[4] For information on Fayha Choir's project among Syrian refugees, see: https://www.fayhachoir.org/social-projects.

[5] Syrian music refers here to the music of the different ethnic groups in Syria, including Kurdish, Christian Syriac, Mardelli, as well as Syrian folk music. These music genres are different from traditional Arab art music that is shared by all Arabs and is based on the *maqam* system.

[6] For more information on Action for Hope's music program among Syrian refugees in refugee camps in Lebanon and Jordan, see: https://www.act4hope.org/2018/03/05/music-schools-2/ . Nefes Music School is the topic of this paper. For information on the School, see: http://nefes.org.tr/nefes-music-school/?lang=en

displaced and war-traumatized Syrian youth through social and cultural empowerment and identity-building, promoting their healing from the trauma of war and displacement, helping raise their awareness of social diversity (Grant, 2022), and encouraging inter-cultural dialogue. My discussion explores the strategies employed by the Nefes Music School in establishing an Arab music program in the host country, and the ways music has helped students who fled Syria as young children to adapt to a new environment.

I first provide a brief overview of the Syrian crisis and its impact on Syria's cultural heritage. I then discuss the role of Nefes Music School in safeguarding and transmitting this heritage in the host community while fostering intercultural dialogue and providing a safe space for its students. I finally discuss the challenges for the sustainability of such programs.

The Syrian refugee crisis and its impact on Syria's cultural heritage

In March 2011, anti-government protests inspired by the popular uprisings in different Arab countries, in what came to be known as the Arab Spring,[7] demanded the resignation of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. This was the beginning of a conflict that is still ongoing at the time of writing this article, causing massive destruction of Syria, hundreds of thousands of casualties, and one of the world's largest population displacements in recent decades (UNHCR, 2021). According to reports published by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, it is estimated that 13.4 million Syrians have fled their homes since the beginning of the conflict, about half of whom are under the age of 18, with more than 6.7 million internally displaced and 6.6 million refugees worldwide. The majority of the refugees (around 5.6 million) are hosted in neighboring countries, namely Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, while the rest are scattered across Europe, North America, and Australia.

In addition to the massive refugee crisis and the great number of human losses—at least 350,000 have died since the beginning of the war (United Nations 2021)—the conflict has been devastating to Syria's rich cultural heritage and history. Destruction and damage to ancient cities and archaeological sites and looting of museums were widely mediatized soon after the beginning of the war, and the community and concerned governments were mobilized to address them. On 30 March 2012, the Director-General of UNESCO, Irina Bokova, issued an appeal for the protection of the cultural heritage of Syria (UNESCO, 2012), and on 20 June 2013, the World Heritage Committee placed the six World Heritage sites of the Syrian Arabic Republic on the list of World Heritage in Danger (UNESCO, 2013). In response, on 1 March 2014, UNESCO launched The Emergency Safeguarding of the Syrian Heritage Project, a three-year project funded by the European Union whose main objective was to "contribute to restoring social cohesion, stability and sustainable development through the protection and safeguarding of cultural heritage" (UNESCO, 2014).

Whereas the destruction and threat to Syria's tangible cultural heritage immediately mobilized the international heritage community, threats to Syria's intangible cultural heritage (ICH) were less widely considered and did not get the attention of the international community

[7] *Arab Spring* is a term that was given to the wave of demonstrations and protests that began in Tunisia in December 2010 demanding the resignation of President Zayn al-'Abidin Bin 'Ali and calling for political and social reforms. It quickly spread to other Arab countries, including Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria. Scholars have later questioned the validity of the term, because what started as a popular demand for political reforms and social justice resulted in more wars and violence and a crackdown on people who dared to speak out (Amnesty International, 2016). For more literature on the Arab Spring and its aftermath, see Gelvin 2015; Jones 2012; Totten 2012.

until later (Chatelard and Hassan 2017, p. 4). On 13 May 2016, UNESCO organized a one-day "first aid" support meeting at UNESCO headquarters in Paris with the aim of "enhancing the safeguarding of Syrian traditional musics" (UNESCO, 2016). The meeting brought together seven leading musicians and music experts, from different cultural backgrounds and regions of Syria, with representatives from the International Music Council, UNESCO specialized staff, and UNESCO institutional partners, to discuss strategies for sharing and preserving Syrian traditional musics and music communities. Subsequently, the UNESCO Intangible Heritage Section commissioned a "survey" to find ways to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage of displaced Syrians, involving interviews with 60 displaced Syrians and some members of the host communities (Chatelard and Hassan, 2017, p. 4). In its recommendation section, the published report stressed the important role that ICH can play in "coping with displacement and enhancing bonds between refugees and host communities as well as providing a sense of belonging, mitigating psychological, social, and economic resilience, and in many cases helping mediate conflicts by fostering intercultural communication and mutual appreciation" (Chatelard and Hassan, 2017, p. 4).

Several music intervention projects were implemented in the Syrian refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey both prior and following the 2016 support meeting at UNESCO; however, as mentioned earlier, most of these were short-term projects that were terminated once the proposed period expired. Whereas most of these projects lacked long-term visions and therefore did not fulfill UNESCO's recommendations, Nefes Music School has succeeded in maintaining continuity in its program despite financial challenges, the latest of which was caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research methodology: Nefes, the Arab music school in a Turkish city

Nefes Music School was launched in 2019 as an educational project developed by Ibrahim Muslimani, an accomplished percussionist, composer, and specialist in Arabic and Syrian traditional music, as well as a former refugee who had fled the war in Syria and arrived in Gaziantep, Turkey, in 2014. Collaborating with a group of Syrian and Turkish musicians, artists, and cultural activists, Muslimani developed this program within the Nefes Foundation for Arts and Culture, a non-profit organization that he co-founded in 2016 in Gaziantep. The Foundation aimed to create spaces suitable for cultural activities and events, encouraging the openness of children and young people toward other cultures and enabling them to express their own culture in the communities they live in, and contributing to the cultural reconstruction of communities affected by war and conflict (Nefes Foundation for Arts and Cultures, 2021 (a)).

Gaziantep's location makes it a critical site of study. In the westernmost part of Turkey's Southeastern Anatolia Region, located approximately 60 miles north of Aleppo, Syria, Gaziantep has been one of the cities most affected by an influx of Syrian refugees. Known for its textile industry and pistachio farming, Gaziantep has attracted large numbers of Syrian refugees mainly because of its proximity to Aleppo and for its need for unskilled labor (The Guardian, 2019). As of April 2022, there were 462,697 registered Syrian refugees in Gaziantep, making up around 21.5% of the city's population (Refugees Association, 2022).

I chose Nefes Music School as my case study for the following four reasons: First, almost all of the music interventions involving Syrian people have focused on Syrian refugees living in camps in neighbouring countries, whereas young refugees living in urban settings don't get much attention, despite the fact that they too face significant, though different, challenges, including discrimination and the necessity to adjust to a new social environment. As of 2021, the majority

of the Syrian refugees live outside of the camps, with only one in twenty accommodated in refugee camps (UNHCR, 2021). Second, according to my key informant for this article, Muslimani, the Nefes school is located in an ethnically and economically diverse community with a mix of affluent, middle class, poor, and extremely poor populations. The majority of the students come from marginalized backgrounds; the school offers grants and low tuition fees (Muslimani, Interview by author, 4 February 2022). While most of the students are Syrian refugees, the student body also includes Turkish (around 30%), Egyptian, and Lebanese students. This allows for interaction between the refugees and other groups in the city in a safe space, which can help break cultural barriers between the different students. I believe that the unique diversity of the student body at Nefes adds to its utility as a microcosm through which to explore the interactions that break down cultural barriers. Third, the school's objective to provide *al-ḥimāyah al-thaqāfiyyah lil-aṭfāl*, translatable as "children's cultural protection," and its approach toward realizing this goal (which I will discuss later), are worth examining, especially as they help traumatized children and young adults overcome their distress and gain self-esteem. Finally, whereas other music projects that focus on traditional music education among Syrian youth refugees were short-term projects, thus lacking sustainability, Nefes Music School has so far succeeded in continuing its program despite financial challenges, the latest of which were a consequence of the pandemic.

My discussion is based on phone and Zoom interviews I conducted respectively in 2018 and 2022 with Ibrahim Muslimani, the founder and music director of Nefes Music School, and on our follow-up phone conversations and WhatsApp text messages. I also draw on virtual ethnography and interviews I have undertaken since 2018 on different music interventions among the Syrian refugees in refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. Constraints imposed by the pandemic, ethical restrictions on interviews with vulnerable children, and the challenges of access to the field in war-affected settings have imposed some limitations on this study, which I tried to mitigate to some extent by closely consulting social media platforms and by following up on interviews and communication. Scholars have raised important concerns about uncritical accounts of music and art programs in international development contexts and about relying on the perspectives of these projects' organizers rather than their participants (Ware and Dunphy, 2020). Others have been critical of studies on music and conflict transformation that only give voice to the facilitating artists and organizers and neglect the views of the participants (Bergh and Sloboda, 2010). Whereas the perspectives informing my findings are drawn mainly from one informant, Ibrahim Muslimani, who is also the project's founder and director, my research is significantly informed by my previous work on the use of children in songs for war propaganda in the Syrian conflict (Moufarrej, 2018) and on my ongoing research on music programs among Syrian refugees. My native fluency in Arabic and my cultural background as a Lebanon-born scholar have also enabled my access to different musical and cultural programs and have greatly informed my research.

Music transmission, cultural identity, and forced migration

During the past few decades, the dramatic increase in the waves of refugees and asylum seekers,[8] and the expanding field of ethnomusicology into contexts marked by socio-political, economic, and environmental crises (Christidis, 2021) have resulted in the emergence of a new area of study on music in the contexts of forced migration (Baily, 2016; Christidis, 2020; Frishkopf, 2018;

[8] According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), by the end of 2021, it was estimated that global forced displacement has surpassed 89.3 million, of whom 53.2 million are internally displaced people and 27.1 million are refugees (UNHCR, 2022).

Hemetek, 2015; Impey, 2019; Pettan and Titon, 2015; Pistrick, 2020; Stokes 2020; Ugolotti, 2022). This new field of study, characterized by the increasing role of international bodies such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), was pioneered in the 1980s by ethnomusicologist Adeleida Reyes (Christidis, 2021). Motivated by the emerging refugee minorities and their musical expressions in New Jersey, USA, Reyes called for ethnomusicological attention toward refugees as a group distinct from other migrants (Reyes Schramm, 1989, p. 25). In discussing the process of cultural transmission in the context of forced migration, Reyes argued that "the disruption and loss of control, the traumas of escape, and the trying circumstances surrounding survival in a new and possibly hostile environment impede the usual channels through which traditions pass from one generation to the next" (Reyes Schramm, 1986, p. 91). She noted, however, that the fact that "traditions persist nonetheless suggests the existence of mechanisms or capabilities inherent to tradition that allow it to adjust to and withstand extreme conditions" (p. 91). Recently, scholars have discussed the ability of refugees and asylum seekers to achieve "a sense of dynamic traditionalism through artistic expressions including music-making" (Lenette and Sunderland, 2016, p. 33).

Further, recent scholarly discussion on music sustainability has proposed a multifaceted relationship between music sustainability, human rights, and social justice. Music educator and scholar Catherine Grant discusses, in the context of music sustainability and human rights, the impact of displacement on "individual and collective cultural identities, cultural vitality, and cultural viability, as families are rent apart, populations are dispersed, and people endeavor to establish their new lives in new, unfamiliar settings," and notes that displacement may also "jeopardise that human right most directly related to issues of musical and cultural sustainability" — namely, cultural participation (Grant, 2022, p. 115). Grant proposes the concept of "future justice," which she defines as "making economic, social and cultural advances for present generations while securing and strengthening the life quality and conditions of future generations" (2022, p. 116). Considering, on one hand, Reyes' and other scholars' assertions about cultural transmission and music authenticity in contexts of forced migration, and on the other hand, scholarly discourses on sustainability, human rights, and social justice, this article aims to show, through the examination of a grassroots initiative, the role of music in enabling refugees to negotiate their cultural and social space in their host communities, build bridges with members of the host community, and plan for future generations.

There remains the issue of the sustainability of such initiatives themselves, which often depend economically and financially on the support of global organizations. The funding challenges for arts-based projects have been elucidated by music therapist Alpha M. Woodward, who opined that the arts are marginalized in the policy-making and community-building initiatives of larger international NGOs. Thus, she suggests, "thinly funded arts-based projects" do not get the support that allows for the longevity and sustainability of their efforts, impeding their potential to contribute to post-conflict recovery (Woodward, 2012). Furthermore, even when funding for arts and music-based projects is available, it often seems to be influenced by "asymmetrical power relations" (Reyes, 2010, p. 38) between vulnerable refugee minorities and dominant majority groups, including in some instances NGOs, who benefit through different channels from big donors at the expense of individual or local initiatives, despite the latter's great potential for success and positive impact in the community.

Nefes Music School: Safeguarding and transmission of Syria's musical heritage

Nefes is the Arabic term for "breath." According to Nefes Foundation's opening statement on its website: "Through breath, man realized his soul and while trying to understand his breath, he blew into the cane[9] and music was born" (Nefes Foundation for Arts and Culture, 2021 (a), para. 1). The objectives of Nefes Foundation for Arts and Culture are summarized in its mission statement, which stresses the important role of artistic and cultural productions in the stability and well-being of society, especially societies that have faced psychological trauma and isolation and loss of identity, as well as in recovery and prosperity. Another objective of the Foundation is the restoration of the "authentic" cultural heritage of Syria and its preservation "away from the trap of museum heritage and touristic folklore," while seeking at the same time to present it in new forms, and to share it with others (CultureCIVIC, 2022, para. 7). These objectives have been the focus of Muslimani since he arrived in Gaziantep in 2014, fleeing his war-torn country. His first contact with Syrian refugee children outside of Syria was through music classes he offered in different schools in Turkey and in refugee camps in Lebanon. In 2016, he was the leading force behind the establishment of Nefes Foundation, and in 2017 and 2018 he organized and directed various projects which culminated in the establishment of Nefes Music School. In this section, I discuss briefly the four projects of the Foundation that Muslimani considers as the forerunners of the School. These projects—"Two Languages, One Breath," "Oriental Breaths," *Qanun Bila Ḥudūd* ("Qanun Without Limits") and *Bayt Byūt* ("House of Houses")— were realized with the support of several organizations from Turkey and other European countries, and were aimed at introducing Syrian music and musicians to the host community and at building intercultural bridges. They involved Syrian children and young adults as well as university students and professional musicians from Syria, Turkey, and Europe.

The first project, *Two Languages, One Breath*, represented a collaboration between the Higher Institute of Music at the University of Gaziantep, which Muslimani was attending at the time as a graduate student in Film Studies, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Netherlands. Over the span of three months, the project provided the Syrian and other young participants training in Arabic *īqa'āt* (rhythmic modes), folk singing, and folk dancing, and ended with a stage performance under the guidance of Muslimani.[10] The second project, *Oriental Breaths*, involved training a group of children and young adults to perform Arabic and Turkish solo pieces to the accompaniment of professional musicians.[11]

Qanun[12] *Bila Ḥudūd*, "Qanun Without Limits", was the third project launched by Nefes Foundation. It was supported by "Spaces of Cultures," an organization funded by Turkish and European institutions, which aims to establish sustainable programs that value diversity, inclusivity, and cultural exchange.[13] *Qanun Bila Ḥudūd* was a recording project that took place in

[9] The "cane" refers to the *ney* or *nay*, an end-blown flute made out of reed and widely used across the Middle East both in traditional art music and in religious settings, in particular among Sufis.

[10] This link shows the final concert by the percussion students: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Czo7dRjzmeI. The percussion ensemble was led by Ibrahim Muslimani playing on the *riqq*, a frame drum.

[11] The following performance featured a young boy singing an Arabic song to the accompaniment of professional musicians, including Ibrahim Muslimani playing the *daff*, a frame drum used in Arabic and Turkish music: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ksxBZ0XGEhg.

[12] The *qanun* is a trapezoidal zither that consists of 26 rows of triple strings. It is played by placing it flat on the knees or a flat surface. The strings are plucked by two plectra, one attached to the forefinger of each hand.

[13] The funding institutions for Spaces of Cultures include Goethe Institute, the Consulate General of Sweden in Istanbul, the Institut Français de Turquie, and the Embassy of the Netherlands, in cooperation with local Turkish foundations such as Anadolü Kültür and Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts. See https://spacesofculture.com/about/

the summer of 2018 and featured Yammen, a renowned Syrian *qanun* player, along with Muslimani on the *riqq*, a *ney* performer, a violinist, and a pianist.[14] The album aimed to document the *qanun* player's journey from Syria to Turkey as he fled the war in his country, "to unite his spiritual journey and the physical one" (Nefes Foundation for Arts and Culture, 2021 (c), para. 4). The album consisted of an international repertoire that included classical Western as well as Turkish, Arabic, and Azerbaijani music, and featured musicians from Syria, Turkey, and Europe. *Qanun Bila Ḥudūd* tried to show the potential of the *qanun* to build cultural bridges.

Finally, *Bayt Byūt*, "House of Houses", was conducted during the summer of 2018 and provided training on Arabic *īqā'*, choral singing, and drawing for 25 children between the ages of 7 and 15. As part of the program, the students visited the Mosaic Museum in Gaziantep to learn about the local culture and the concept of cultural heritage. The main aim of *Bayt Byūt* was to create a nucleus of Syrian children who would go on to participate in a future project that would aim to reinforce integration among Syrian and Turkish children and boost their morale through art-oriented training (Muslimani, Interview by author, 30 September, 2018). A stage performance was set to showcase the work of the children who sang traditional Syrian songs, including *muwashshahāt*,[15] Sufi poems, Syrian and Turkish lullabies, a 120-year-old poem performed in the form of a *mawwāl* or vocal improvisation, and an English song titled "Tell Me Why." Local Turkish musicians were invited to attend the performance as a way to introduce them to Syria's cultural and musical heritage. Muslimani noted that his guests were very pleased with the program's outcomes and expressed interest in having their children join the program. He also remarked that during the lessons, "none of the neighbors complained about the sound of the singing or the percussion instruments" (Interview by author, 30 September, 2018). This remark reflects Muslimani's and other refugees' concern about disrupting the sonic space of the host community and their relief at knowing that they are welcomed. *Bayt Byūt* was conceived as a pilot study for the establishment of Nefes Music School, and its success was the main incentive for the founding of the school.

All of these projects reflect Nefes Foundation's desire to build bridges and to establish cultural and social relations between the Syrian refugees and their Turkish hosts. They also reflect Nefes' founders' goal to present to their hosts and to the world their rich cultural and musical heritage. At the same time, for Muslimani, who had been working since 2008 on documenting Syria's musical heritage, the foundation's other main objective was to document and safeguard Syria's musical traditions and to transmit them to the young generation before they become forgotten and lost (Interview by author, 30 September 2018). Thus, music became a means for Muslimani and consequently the Nefes Foundation to negotiate their identity and social space in their new environment, to help war-traumatized and marginalized children and young adults overcome their fear, trauma, and distress through community-building, to transmit their cultural and musical heritage to the young generations, and to foster social cohesion and cultural relations between the refugees and the host culture. As I explore further later in this article, the music curriculum has been continuously requiring adaptation and re-contextualization (Schippers, 2006) in order to ensure the vitality and viability of the various musical traditions it engages with.

[14] The album tracks can be accessed at the following link:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bi8twM0bZMw&list=PLTMGsM3ZNxQE7rmj7EzRkydfCKhOhe4v2

[15] The *muwashshahāt* (pl. *muwashshaḥ*) are poetic song-forms with medieval Andalusian roots.

Nefes Music School: Student body and organization of classes

Nefes Music School was launched in June 2019 following the success of *Bayt Byūt.* The school offers music education to children from various backgrounds in Gaziantep. It seeks to provide a safe space for its students and encourage them to express and exchange experiences in order to enhance cross-cultural interaction and create new artistic scenes (Nefes Foundation for Arts and Culture, 2021 (b), para. 4). The student body is made up of 30% Turkish students from underprivileged communities, while the remainder are Syrians (Muslimani, Interview by author, 4 February 2022). The age group of the students has expanded from between 7 and 15 at the time of *Bayt Byūt* to between 6 and 70 at the time of writing. This indicates the inclusive policy of the school and its desire to give the opportunity to anyone in the community to learn music. The students are instructed by a mix of Syrian and Turkish music teachers (at the moment, four of the instructors are Syrians and ten are Turkish). They are taught in a co-educational environment. Studies on music education in Muslim communities have shown restrictions on musical activities among girls, as such activities are considered as *haram* (forbidden) and as having the potential to incite inappropriate behavior (Brøske, 2017; Harris, 2006; Izsak, 2013). At Nefes Music School, however, where most of the students are from a Muslim background, female students make up between 50 and 55% of the student body (Muslimani, WhatsApp Communication, 24 August 2022). On this topic, Muslimani remarked that, unlike in Syria where music education and music performance by girls is forbidden in many areas and communities, the Syrian girls in Gaziantep are encouraged by their parents to attend music classes. He added that the cultural space that Nefes is providing to its students has motivated even conservative parents to send their daughters to the school, knowing that this would be a safe place for their daughters and sons, and in the belief that this kind of education would boost their self-esteem and open opportunities for them in the future.

At first, seven different music classes were offered, including *ʻūd* (a pear-shaped and short-necked, and fretless type of lute), *qanun*, *nay*, percussion (including the *riqq*, the vase-shaped drum *darabukka*, and the *bendir,* a frame drum that is also used in Turkish music), voice, choir, and solfège. In 2020, more classes were added, including guitar, *kamanjah* (the Arabic name for the violin), piano, cello, flute, *baglama* (long-necked lute), and Turkish singing. The introduction of classes on Western musical instruments, and on instrumental and vocal Turkish music, aims at giving the students a choice to select their preferred instrument or music style. Muslimani further explained that they are offering such classes because some of the Turkish music instructors are trained in classical Western music too (Interview by author, 4 February 2022). By adding classes in Western and Turkish music, Muslimani is advancing his aim to create an inclusive and intercultural environment for his students, and to probably get more support from the local government, support that could be key to the school's survival and integration into the city landscape and culture.

In 2021, a group class titled *dars al-thaqāfah al-musiqiyyah*, or "cultural music class", was introduced as a core course that should be attended by all students. This was a way to ensure that the students continued to get exposure to, and develop an appreciation for, Arabic music and culture. In this class, the students meet to discuss various music-related topics, to learn to sing and play *iqaʻāt* (plur. *īqāʻ*), and to seek any kind of help, be it personal or musical. Muslimani considers this class to be truly transformative for the students as they learn to appreciate the beauty and richness of the cultural and musical traditions of the Middle East, to respect diversity, and to learn the importance of cultural differences. He explains:

> For example, in one of the sessions we discussed a song by Jalal al-Din al-Rumi, a 13th century Sufi poet mystic from Persia, performed by the renowned Iranian performer Houmayoun Shajarian. As you know, during the war, the situation between the Iranians and the Syrians was a little difficult [alluding to the involvement of Iran in the war in Syria]. I tell the students, be careful: despite the fighting and killing in Syria, this great Iranian singer, who himself is in the opposition, is an international singer and we should appreciate his work. (Interview by author, 4 February 2022)

Teaching methodology and curriculum

The teaching methodology at Nefes Music School consists of a mix of aural training and a conservatory teaching style that consists of playing from musical scores. The students spend the first month of classes getting acquainted with their instrument and playing by ear in order to develop their aural skills; later, they start playing from music sheets that Muslimani prepares after consulting different historical sources, which he shares with the other music instructors (Muslimani, Interview by author, 4 February 2022). The curriculum includes traditional Arabic and Turkish instrumental and vocal pieces, including folk songs. Muslimani explains that since the curriculum includes teaching traditional music based on the *maqām* (melodic modes) system that is shared by the Arabic and Turkish music systems, he prefers to use the Turkish music repertoire from prior to the establishment in 1923 of the Turkish Republic, which he refers to as Ottoman music repertoire. Examples of musical pieces taught at Nefes Music School can be found in Appendices 1, 2, and 3. The variety in the music repertoire (folk and traditional Syrian music as well as Ottoman music) reflects the school's efforts to perpetuate Syrian musical heritage, and at the same time connect with the host culture through a repertoire of Old Turkish (Ottoman) music (which was also performed in the Levant under the Ottoman Occupation of the region).

Cultural transmission and forced migration

Nefes Music School's mission is to provide what Muslimani calls *al-ḥimāyah al-thaqāfiyyah li-ṭiffl*, or "cultural protection for the child." This is made possible through creating a safe space for the students to express and exchange experiences through various activities and workshops (Nefes Foundation for Arts and Culture (a), 2021). Muslimani explains: "There are 4 million Syrians in Turkey. We need to show the Syrians and the Turks that we have cultural tools that allow us to live together. The more open-minded we are, the more we can give and enrich our lives" (Interview by author, 4 February 2022). He proceeds:

> When the Syrian child goes to school, he [or she] will be learning everything Turkish. Teachers in primary school are shocked to hear our students sing a 500-year-old Turkish song. They go through a cultural shock. Thanks to the Turkish teachers in our school, I was able to acquire two cultures and have two identities so I can learn what distinguishes these two cultures and provide these *jawāhir* ["gems"] to the children. (Interview by author, 4 February 2022)

By creating a safe space for the students, Muslimani and his staff help the Syrian children process the horrific experience of the war, loss, and displacement, and prepare for their integration into Turkish society. Admitting Turkish students—who also come from underprivileged communities—into the program, and hiring Turkish instructors, further assist in the integration process and encourages social cohesion, since these children and adults get the opportunity to

interact in a safe space. Muslimani gives extra support to students who are experiencing social, financial, and psychological issues. He tries to help them as much as possible through the music lessons and by providing them with a safe and positive environment. This approach seems to have brought positive results among the students. He noted, "A father told me that he cannot imagine that I was able to understand his son more than he did" (Interview by author, 4 February 2022). In this same interview, he also stated:

> We had a boy who, at the beginning, he would not talk or express himself or communicate. Now he sings, and talks, and raises his hand. We also had a girl who was born and lived in *al-Ghūṭa* in Syria under siege, and knew nothing about the world. At the beginning, she would not communicate or speak and she had this strange look in her eyes. We worked with her, and her teacher (who is Turkish) volunteered to teach her for free. This girl suffered immeasurably [Muslimani became emotional] and we wanted to help her, and she improved a lot. Thank God. To me this is more rewarding than earning millions. (Interview by author, 4 February 2022)

Other testimonies by Nefes' students (available on the school's social platforms) attest to the psychological support they received from the school and its teachers, and the difference this made in their lives. One girl named Shahd said: "Nefes has really changed my life because before I came I was a different Shahd. I have nothing to do with that person. Now all my life is music" (YouTube comment, 17 December 2021).[16] Other students also mentioned that the school helped them gain self-confidence and that it became their second home.

Challenges and sustainability

Financial stability remains one of the biggest challenges for the school, which strives to provide music education to as many students in the region as possible, but lacks financial resources. Low tuition and the fact that half of the students receive grants that come from the other students' tuition payments add to the financial burden. Also, the instructors have agreed to be compensated with one-third of what they are paid elsewhere. In some cases, they even volunteer their labor (Muslimani, Interview by author, 4 February 2022). The addition of new classes and the increase in student enrolments required a bigger space, which caused an additional financial burden. The pandemic has worsened the financial challenge. Whereas the school was able to secure some funding at first to implement online instruction due to lockdown, it struggled later on, especially during the first months of 2021: student enrollment dropped because of technology exhaustion, since students were doing other online schooling as well. The instructors were also greatly affected: the lack of opportunities to perform and earn their living from other teaching opportunities made it difficult for them to continue to volunteer at the school. At the same time, the imposed lockdown due to the pandemic isolated the students, for whom the school had become a place to socialize and build connections with their peers and teachers. External funding from local and international donors became almost impossible. The financial challenge also prevented the school from accepting new students, which was heartbreaking for Muslimani. In order to save the school from closing its doors, Muslimani spent all his savings, including his personal savings (Interview by author, 4 February 2022). Thanks to a recent grant from a Turkish organization called CultureCIVIC, the school was able to secure rent and other expenses between March 2022 and August 2022. Even with a small budget, Muslimani is hoping to expand the number of students

[16] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-AnE_r_Uy8

from 60 students in 2021 to 100 students in 2022. As of 4 February 2022, Nefes Music School had received more than 300 applications, but unfortunately, it was able to only take in 40 students (Interview by author, 4 February 2022).

Conclusion

In this article, I have examined the relationship between music sustainability and forced migration in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis. Syrian refugees have spent a decade in displacement, living in liminality and uncertainty, "in a sense suspended between country of origin and country of resettlement" (Reyes Schramm, 1990, p. 7). In this "interim", to use Reyes Schramm's term, refugees risk losing their sense of belonging as they try to integrate and gain acceptance in the host community, while striving to stay connected to their roots. It should be acknowledged, however, that some refugees who leave behind horrific memories of torture and suffering may try to dissociate themselves from their past and their roots, which may also result in crises of identity. The matter of identity is arguably even more complex for children and young adult refugees who have either left their home country at a young age or were born in refugee settlements, as they negotiate their identity and social space while trying to overcome the atrocity of war, displacement, and loss. The discussion in this article suggests that music initiatives like Nefes Music School can restore some sense of dignity and pride among these refugees and can help them regain self-confidence.

Furthermore, Nefes Music School has shown how the musical heritage of displaced people can enable them to build bridges with the host culture and to foster cultural exchange between the two cultures. Benefiting from government programs that support music and art-based projects, Muslimani and his colleagues at Nefes Music School have used those projects to show their host community their openness and appreciation of its culture, and at the same time, they were able to use this platform to preserve their own musical heritage and share it with the young generation of Syrians and with others. Muslimani speaks proudly of his Syrian heritage: "We com[e] from a very diverse and rich culture. We have been exposed to all types of music: Christian Syriac, Armenian, Kurdish, Turkish, Church and Mosque music, music of *Dhikr*, *muwashshaḥāt* and *qudūd*, and so on" (Interview by author, 4 February 2022).

In this way, Nefes Music School is helping the current generation of Syrian youth to heal from the wounds of war, displacement, and loss. By creating a safe space for the students and by helping them connect to their musical traditions, Muslimani and his colleagues are empowering these children and young adults and are providing them with an education that fosters openness and appreciation of others, thus preparing them to become good citizens. In this way, the school is contributing through music sustainability to "future justice" (Grant, 2022). During our most recent interview, Muslimani explained that his vision for the next ten years is to build a music community through the activities of the School. He explained:

> If we now have one hundred students at the school, this means we are raising cultural and musical awareness among one thousand people since each student can influence at least 10 people, including their father, mother, and other family members. In ten years, the thousand people will become tens of thousands. (Interview by author, 4 February 2022)

Grassroot initiatives like Nefes Music School can play a significant role in promoting wellbeing and in fostering resilience among young refugees and underprivileged people who live on the margins of society. The sustainability of these programs contributes to the sustainability and safeguarding of the musical and cultural traditions of the refugees. Financial stability and institutional support are crucial for the sustenance of these programs, and require assistance from the international community, including cultural institutions around the world, in the hope of helping prepare a future generation capable of building a better world.

By tracing the development of Nefes Music School since its conception in 2018 as a pilot study until this day, I have illustrated some possible impacts of such initiatives on both displaced people and their host communities. In so doing, I hope to draw more international attention to such grassroot initiatives and their contribution to their communities, and how they could serve as models for future projects among displaced and marginalized people. Community-based cultural initiatives that prioritize inclusion and build trust between host communities and their refugee populations could become one successful response to the threats displacement presents to intangible culture and cultural relations. In doing so, these initiatives could address UNESCO's concerns about ICH sustainability in a way that also foregrounds the sustainability of host-refugee relationships and the future well-being of displaced victims of conflict and war.

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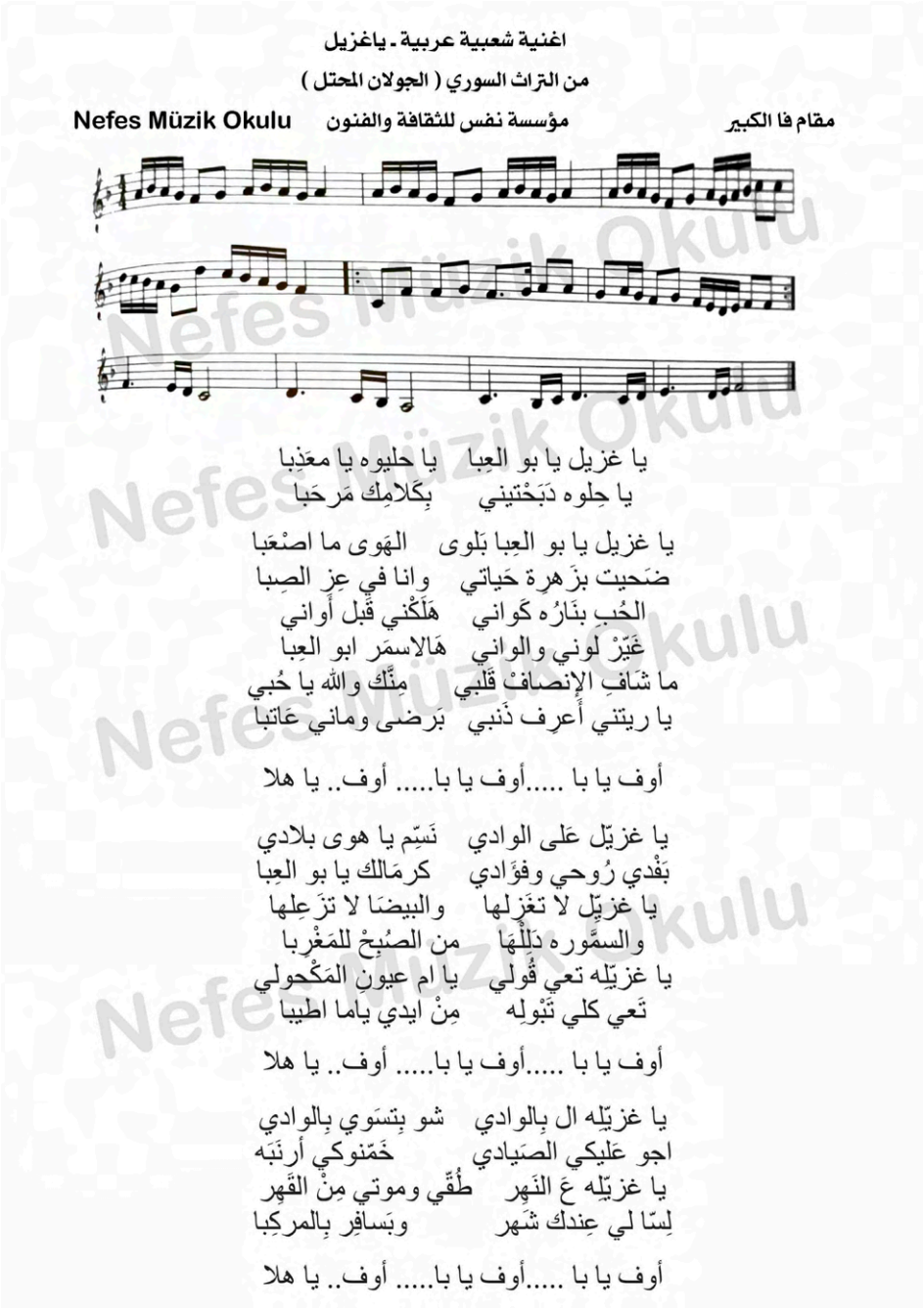
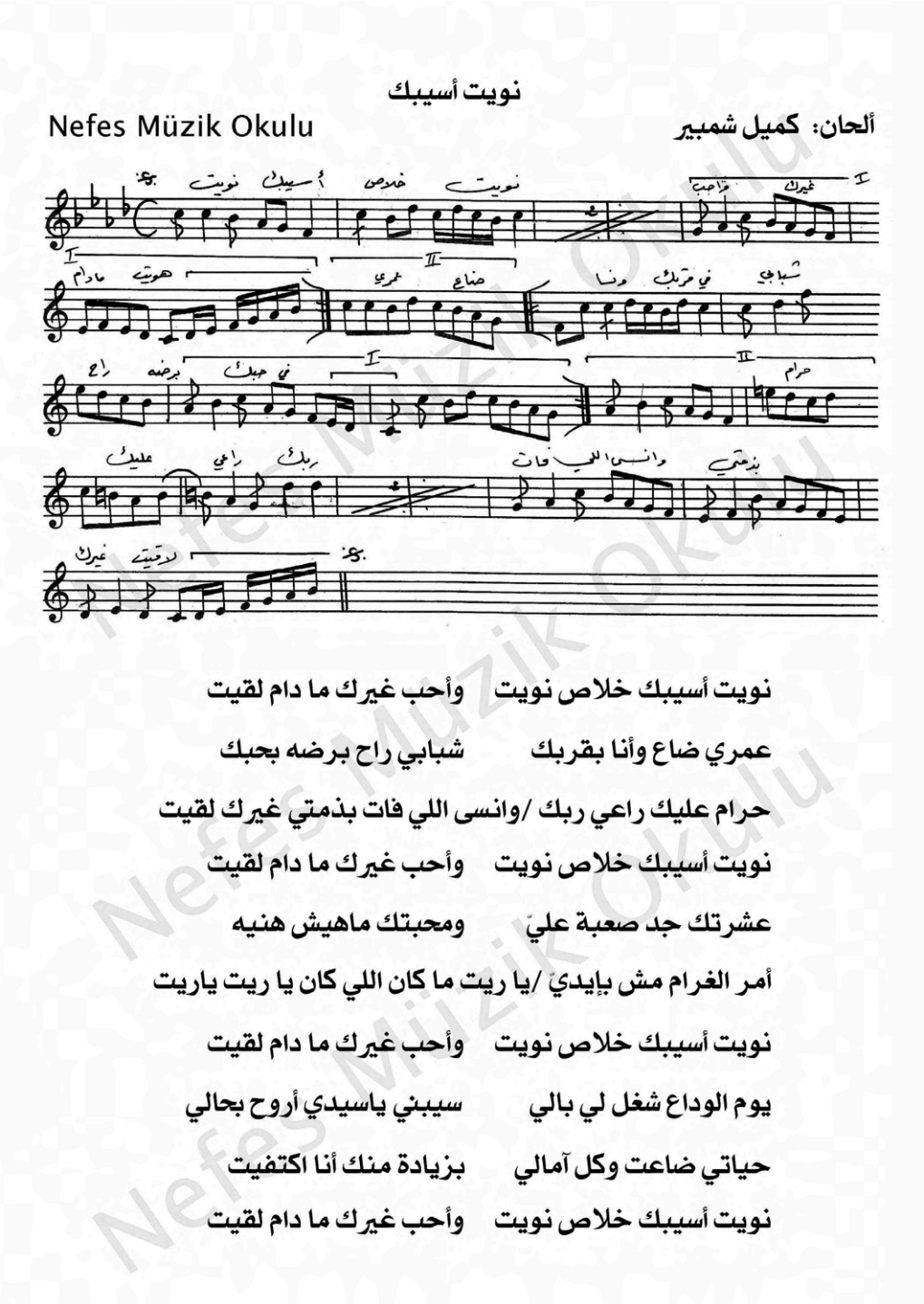
Appendix 1



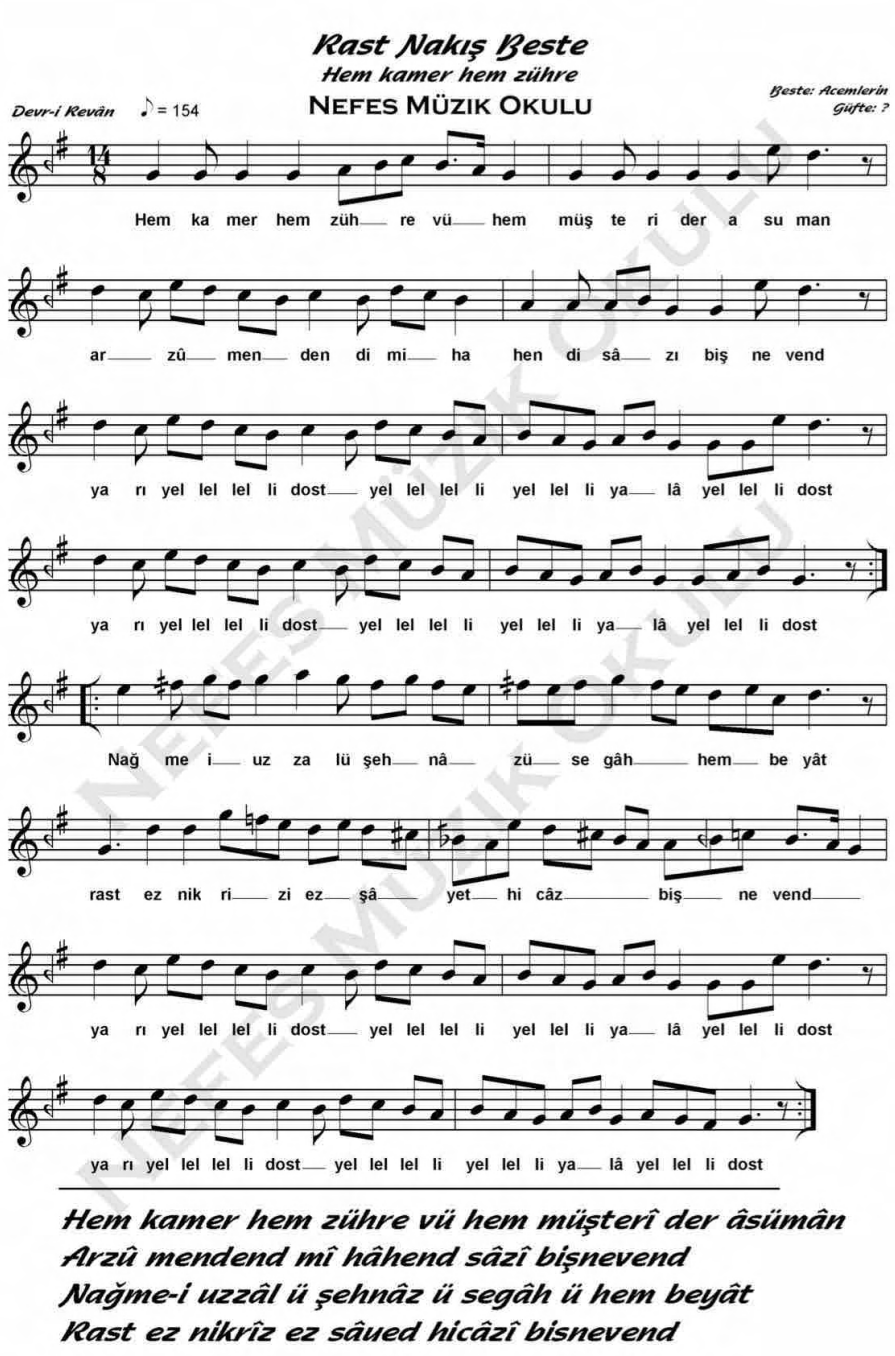
Syrian folk love song from the region of the Occupied Golan—a hilly area overlooking the upper Jordan River valley on the west. It was part of extreme southwestern Syria until 1967, when it came under Israeli military occupation. The song is titled *Ya Ghzayyil*. The word *ghzayyil* is a diminutive of the word *ghazāl*, which means deer in Arabic. In Arabic culture, the deer is a metaphor of beauty; therefore, it is common to use the word *ghazāl* or *ghzayyil* to address one's lover. The notes are played left to right, but the text, typed in Arabic, reads right to left. Music example provided by Ibrahim Muslimani, 12 March 2022. Used with permission.

Appendix 2



Traditional Syrian composition in a genre called *Ṭaqṭuqa*, a genre of vocal music sung in regional or colloquial Arabic. It was composed by Kamil Shambir (1892-1934), a famous Syrian composer from the city of Aleppo. Similar to the piece in Appendix 1, the music is written left to right while the text below it reads right to left. Music example provided by Ibrahim Muslimani, 12 March 2022. Used with permission**.**

Appendix 3



Old Ottoman song based on a centuries-old Ottoman melody that is set to texts in Arabic and Farsi. Music example provided by Ibrahim Muslimani, 12 March 2022. Used with permission.