

# The Musical Analysis Magazine

## Arabic Music and Lo-fi Hip Hop



## Introduction

Much like language, music is something that brings people together through shared experiences. It is something that is continuously evolving to grant its listeners something new to look out for, whilst looking back upon itself for inspiration to perhaps invoke a sense of nostalgia. In this magazine article, I will be comparing and contrasting two seemingly random musical cultures and evaluate the extent to which these musical cultures are connected through certain musical devices. I will be doing this through the music of Lo-fi Hip Hop and traditional Arabic Music.

## Lo-fi Hip Hop

Lo-fi Hip Hop or Chillhop is a subgenre of Lo-fi music which became popular in the late 2010's (Winkie). "Lo-fi hip hop music is built on the aesthetic of degraded cassette tapes and tape machines", giving the music a sort of vintage *out of tune* sound (Neely). This *out of tune* sound has become increasingly common in Lo-Fi hip hop music as YouTube channels such as "ChilledCow" have boomed on the streaming platform, accumulating millions of subscribers (Winkie). This sense of the music being *out of tune* or *microtonal* is something atypical of western music, but something quite common in other musical cultures. In western music we generally tend not to find *microtonal* music as we rely on twelve-tone equal temperament, a

musical system which divides the octave into twelve equal parts (Rubinstein), hence its name, but, perhaps due to the influx of lo-fi hip hop, microtonal (or *out of tune*) music will start to become increasingly popular in the western realm. The surge of this genre began when YouTube allowed their creators to start live streaming content, which caused YouTube to gain a radio-like quality ultimately causing the genre to gain a wider audience as live streams such as “*lofi hip hop radio - beats to relax/study to*” and similar content started to become more accessible (Winkie).

## Arabic Music

Arabic music describes the plethora of genres and musical traditions that have emerged from and are performed in the Arabic world (Faraj and Shumays). Arabic music uses similar musical devices as the western world, such as melody, rhythm, texture and timbre, but interestingly lacks harmony due to the excessive use of microtones (Faraj and Shumays). A microtone simply refers to an interval that is in between the western semitone (Merriam-Webster). This is made possible as the instrumentation used in Arabic music generally tends to be fretless, theoretically causing an infinite amount of notes to be played. The extent to which how sharp or flat a microtone is played lies completely in culture, as Arabic music is regional and does not belong to one country, different countries in the Arabic world culturally have different intentions for these microtones (Acker). This means that an experienced listener of Arabic music would be able to identify which country a certain piece of music is from by listening to the intonation of the microtonal accidental.

# Link 1:

## Tonality

Okay by Cochu is in the key signature of D-major, with a time signature of 4/4 and has a BPM of 132.

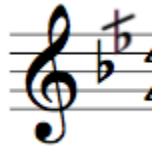
The image displays two systems of musical notation for the chords of the song 'Okay by Cochu'. The first system is labeled 'Keyboard' and the second system is labeled 'Kbd.'. Both systems are in 4/4 time with a tempo of 132 BPM. The notation shows a treble and bass staff. The first system shows a D-major-9 chord in the treble staff and a whole rest in the bass staff. The second system shows a D-half-flat major 9 chord in the treble staff and a whole rest in the bass staff. The notation includes various microtones and chromatic movements.

*Fig 1.1. Okay by Cochu Chords. Transcription by Author.*

Figure 1.1. is a transcription of the chords of Okay by Cochu. The chord progression lasts 8 bars and repeats throughout the song. The first chord is a D-major-9 chord, meaning that the notes in the chord are the 1-3-5-7-9 from the respective scale. Cochu almost exclusively uses these major-9 chords in this song. The second chord present is a D-half-flat major 9 chord. This is the first instance of microtones used in this composition. *It is important to note that the notations of the microtones are approximations and are not accurate to each cent.* After the D-half-flat major 9, the tonic-9 chord repeats again, then the D-half-flat major 9 follows, before a series of descending chromatic (and microtonal) chords play. The first chord in this sequence is a D-half-flat major 9, followed by a C-half-sharp major 9, then a B-minor 9 followed by an A9 chord, which then resolves in a perfect cadence (V-I) back to the D-major 9 chord. There is a loose sense that this piece is in D-major as the perfect cadence of the V-I gives listeners the idea that the D-chord is *home* due to the resolution, however due to the extensive use of microtones, the sense of a key-signature seems partially ambiguous.



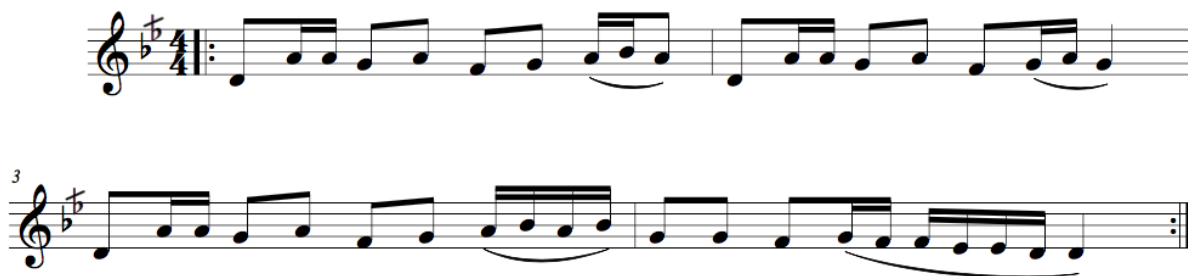
Saalouni el Nas is an Arabic song written by Lebanese composer Ziad Rahbani for his mother Fairuz who happens to be one of the most prominent singers in the Arabic world (Mroue).



***Fig 2.1. Maqam Bayati. Transcribed by Wassim Njeim***

Fig 2.1. is an illustration of the Maqam Bayati scale (as denoted within the parameters of western notation). As seen, the B note is flattened, and the E note is half-flattened, giving it its characteristic sound. The Maqam Bayati scale starts on the note D, then ascends following this pattern: D, E-half flat, F, G, A, B-flat, C, then d again.

Saalouni el Nas is in the time signature of 4/4, with a key-signature of Maqam Bayati and has a BPM of 108.



***Fig 2.2. Kamanja (Arabic Violin) in Saalouni el Nas. Transcribed by Wassim Njeim.***

The transcription above (in fig 2.2.) is a depiction of the kamanja line of this song. This kamanja line is diatonically in Maqam Bayati, giving a sense of stability in this microtonal key-signature, especially since this kamanja line always resolves back to the tonic (the D note). This is similar to Okay by Cochu, as at each cycle of chords (in the case of Okay), they resolve back to the tonic, and in Saalouni el Nas, we can observe that the same thing is occurring. The constant reference to the tonic creates a sense of *home* as it guides the listener into subconsciously understanding the place where this music feels the most resolved: the tonic.



**Fig 2.3. Melody for Saalouni el Nas. Transcribed by Wassim Njeim.**

This (fig 2.3) melody consists of four two bar phrases. The melody is mostly diatonic but it does stray away from the key-signature as it uses a G-half flat in bar 6 and a B-half flat in bar 11. This is very similar to the use of microtones in Cochu's Okay as these notes microtonal stray away from the key-signature to create a sense of dissonance. Interestingly, unlike Okay (and most western music), Saalouni el Nas does not feature any prominent use of harmony in terms of distinct chords. It rather utilizes the kamanja and the double-bass to fill out the texture. Both the kamanja and the double-bass follow the melody line sung by Fairuz. The kamanja is more prominent than the double-bass as the double bass accents important notes (generally the tonic and the word "habibi" meaning *my love* in Arabic). The tonality of the composition once the vocals come in slightly less diatonic and therefore less stable due to the use of the G-half flat and B-half flat (both being notes outside of the maqam bayati), which can be compared to the microtonal (non-diatonic) harmony yet diatonic melody in Okay, as in this instance (in reference to Saalouni el Nas), the introductory diatonic kamanja line juxtaposes the slightly more dissonant chorus (fig 2.3).

## Link 2:

### Cyclical Rhythms



*Fig 3.1. Okay By Cochú Drums. Transcription by Author.*

Fig 3.1 is a transcription of the drums of Okay by Cochú. In this song, there is one four bar drum phrase which repeats. The rhythms are quite simple, as it features straight quarter notes on the hi-hats, with bass drum hits on the one, on the four, on the and of four, on the one again, on the two, on the one again, on the four again, on the and of four again, on the one again, on the two again, then finally, on the and of three. The snare placement is on beat three throughout. This simple cyclical rhythm grounds the listener as it gives them a sense of stability and familiarity, as the drums do not stray away from this that much throughout the song.

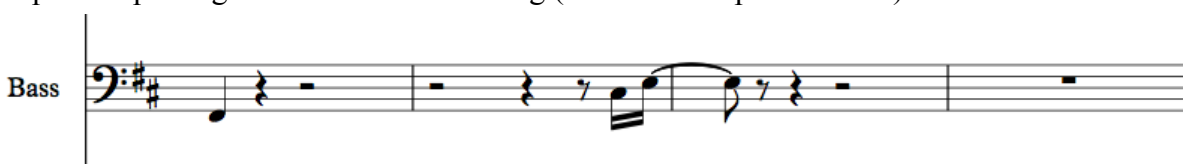
A musical notation for the chords of 'Okay by Cochú'. The notation is in 4/4 time with a tempo of 132 BPM. It shows a repeating four-bar phrase. The first bar has a bass line with a quarter note G, a quarter note A, a quarter note B, and a quarter note C. The second bar has a bass line with a quarter note G, a quarter note A, a quarter note B, and a quarter note C. The third bar has a bass line with a quarter note G, a quarter note A, a quarter note B, and a quarter note C. The fourth bar has a bass line with a quarter note G, a quarter note A, a quarter note B, and a quarter note C. The notation uses a grand staff with a treble and bass clef. The tempo is marked as 132 BPM.

*Fig 1.1. Okay by Cochú Chords. Transcription by Author.*



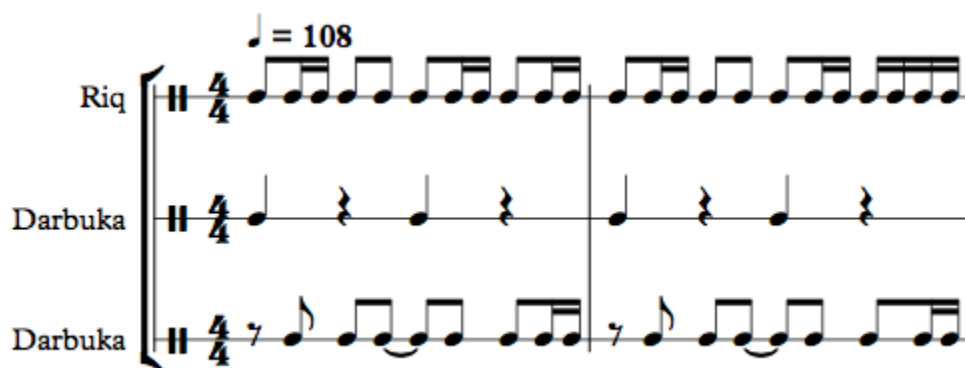
*Fig 1.2. Okay by Cochuh Bassline. Transcription by Author.*

In fact, the entire composition is rooted in cyclical rhythms from the drum part, to the chord progression, the vocal melody and the bassline. If we look back to the chord progression in fig 1.1, we can see that this 8 bar cycle repeats throughout the song, playing the same rhythms each time around. This is also prominent in the bassline depicted by fig 1.2 as the same 8 bars of bass keeps on repeating until the end of the song (with the exception of fills).



*Fig 3.2. Okay by Cochuh initial bassline. Transcription by Author.*

Perhaps the only place the rhythm strays in this composition is in the initial bassline, played from bars 9-16 (seen in fig 3.2.) has a far more sparse rhythm than the bassline following it.



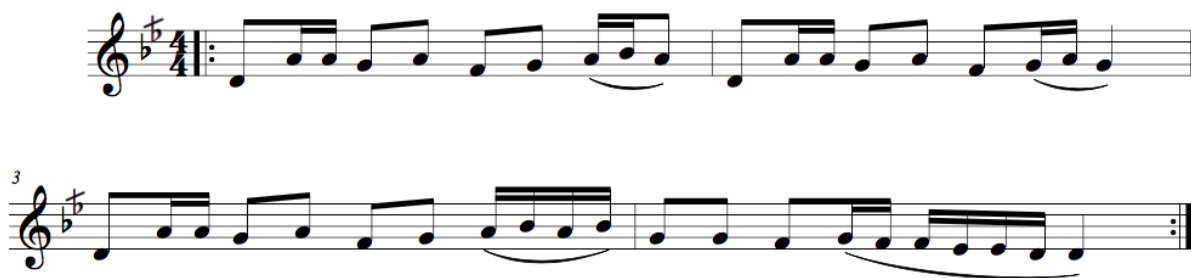
*Fig 4.1. Percussion instruments in Saalouni el Nas. Transcription by Author.*

The transcription above denotes the different percussion instruments used in Saalouni el Nas and the different rhythms each of them plays. In this composition, there is one Riq (a type of traditional tambourine used in Arabic music), and two Darbukas (a goblet shaped



membranophone) (Darwich). The rhythms in Saalouni el Nas follow a cyclical two bar pattern, in which they essentially play the rhythms illustrated in fig 4.1 for each cycle, but occasionally add ornaments. The Riq initially plays an 1/8th note followed by two 1/16th notes, then two 1/8th notes, followed by another 1/8th note followed by two 1/6th notes again then this is repeated. To finish the Riq cycle the initial three groupings of notes are repeated, but then 4 1/16th notes are played to lead back to the start of this cycle.

The two darbakas are meant to be listened to together, as the first darbaka plays a very simplistic rhythm of 1/4 notes on beats 1 and 3, while the second darbaka fills in the gaps by playing shorter subdivisions in between beats 1 and 3. These rhythms are very cyclical, as in Arabic music, they have set cyclical rhythms called *Iqa*.



**Fig 2.2. Kamanja in Saalouni el Nas. Transcribed by Wassim Njeim.**

The rhythms of the riq most prominently follow the introductory kamanja line (seen in fig 2.2) to create a more cohesive sound, adding a layer of texture which otherwise would not be there due to the lack of harmony.

sa alouni el - nass aa nak ya ha bi bi

ka ta bu elmaka tib wu a kha dha el ha wa

bi izz aalayi gha nni ya ha bi bi

la aw al marra ma min koun sa wa

*Fig 2.3. Melody for Saalouni el Nas. Transcribed by Wassim Njeim.*

15  
iltilloun rajaea \_\_\_\_\_ ou aa tl oumouni \_\_\_\_\_

17  
ghammadt ouyouni \_\_\_\_\_ khaw fi lal - nass \_\_\_\_\_

19  
yshoufouk \_\_\_\_\_ mkhabba \_\_\_\_\_ b oyouni \_\_\_\_\_

21  
w hab el hawa wu bakka ni \_\_\_\_\_ el hawa \_\_\_\_\_

23  
\_\_\_\_\_ la awwal \_\_\_\_\_ marra \_\_\_\_\_ ma min koun sa wa \_\_\_\_\_

The musical score is written on a single staff in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb) and a 7/8 time signature. It consists of five lines of music, each corresponding to a line of lyrics. The lyrics are in Arabic. The first line (measure 15) ends with a double bar line and repeat dots. The second line (measure 17) ends with a double bar line and repeat dots. The third line (measure 19) ends with a double bar line and repeat dots. The fourth line (measure 21) ends with a double bar line and repeat dots. The fifth line (measure 23) ends with a double bar line and repeat dots, and a section symbol (§) is placed above the final measure.

*Fig 4.2. Vocal melody for Saalouni el Nas. Transcribed by Wassim Njeim.*

Much like Okay, Saalouni el Nas is also centred around these cyclical rhythms, as the four two bar phrases in the chorus (fig 2.3) keep repeating with the four bar kamanja break (fig 2.2) in between. The only breaks in these cyclical rhythms are found in the ornaments used and in the *verse* sections where there is more liberty with the vocal melody and phrasing.

# Conclusion

<p><b>Summary:</b> This table outlines the similarities and differences between Lo-fi Hip Hop in the context of Okay by Cochu, and Arabic music in the context of Saalouni el Nas by Ziad Rahbani</p>		
	<p><b>Okay by Cochu</b></p>	<p><b>Saalouni el Nas by Ziad Rahbani</b></p>
<p><b>Differences</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Harmony in terms of chords</li> <li>- Microtonal harmony with diatonic bass and vocal parts</li> <li>- Fills in the bass part</li> <li>- Western music</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Deeper exploration of melody in terms of doubling of vocal line</li> <li>- Multiple rhythmic instruments used to fill out the texture in place of harmony</li> <li>- Diatonic kamanja line with a vocal part utilizing accidentals</li> <li>- Ornamentation in the vocal/kamanja parts</li> <li>- Eastern music</li> </ul>
<p><b>Similarities</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Microtones</li> <li>- Cyclical rhythms</li> <li>- Constant referral to the tonic</li> <li>- Tonic played to start phrase (usually)</li> <li>- Juxtaposition between diatonic and non-diatonic parts (harmony in Okay and melody in Saalouni el Nas)</li> <li>- Give a sense of stability (through the use of diatonic melody and bass parts in Okay and through the use of the kamanja line in Saalouni el Nas)</li> <li>- Establish a sense of <i>home</i> in microtonal music</li> </ul>	
<p>Overall, these two pieces outline how music transcends borders as both the music from the east and from the west share similar musical links, outlining how music is quite a nuanced yet universally applicable language.</p>		

Word count: 1992

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