

# Tarab and transtopias

A postmigrant analysis of Arab music making and teaching in southern Sweden

Josepha Wessels & Helene Hedberg

## Abstract

Together with a growing number of migrants of Arab descent, Arab music, and *tarab* culture has grown in importance in the Swedish musical landscape. What is the contribution of Arab migrant musicians, and their music practice, to changes in the musical landscape in southern Sweden from a postmigrant perspective? Postmigrant music making includes processes of building connections and relations between Arab migrant, other migrants, and Swedish non-migrant musicians. We employ the concept of transtopia (Yildiz 2019; West 2019) in the analysis of Arab migrant musicians' experiences of music-making, performing and teaching Arab music in southern Sweden, with the aim of disentangling how music-making forms spaces for innovation, translation, negotiations of representation, belonging, identity, cultural change and transformation within the context of increasing diversity in society. This study is based on participant observation, audio-visual recordings, fieldnotes and semi-structured interviews during fieldwork within the local cultural production sector in the southern Swedish province of Skåne and particularly in the city of Malmö. The interviews were conducted with Arabic-speaking musicians who sing and play classical *tarab* music in performative and educational settings. The article contributes to a renewed scholarly interest in migrants' music and to the ongoing debates on the role of migrant artists in cultural change in postmigrant societies.

**Keywords:** Arab musicians, Arab music, tarab, music making, mobility, cultural change, postmigration, transtopia, Sweden

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*When I wanted to get on the boat, I was carrying a bag for my 'ūd and I had a bag of my clothes. The smuggler decided that I couldn't go into the boat with two bags and I had to choose one. I told him, "This is not a bag, but rather it is my 'ūd." Of course, he was smiling sarcastically, he told me now to think how to save my life and then think of my 'ūd later. He asked me to throw the 'ūd into the sea. But without thinking, I threw the bag of clothes into the sea and kept the 'ūd. (Omar 2023, ūd player. Translated from Arabic/Swedish by an Arabic translator.)*

This is the story of Omar<sup>1</sup>, a Syrian 'ūd player who travelled the arduous journey from Turkey to Greece over the Mediterranean Sea fleeing oppression, war, and violence. When I asked him why he chose his musical instrument over a bag of clothes, he told me: “because I feel that it is a part of my identity, I am a musician, I love freedom, I love life, and I only belong to humanity.” He arrived in Malmö, Sweden in 2015 in the midst of the “refugee crisis.” While waiting in front of the immigration office to apply for asylum, a local journalist interviewed him and asked if he could play his 'ūd. The Swedish journalist took a video of the performance and published it online. According to Omar, there were many comments: “Who is this? What does he do for work? Can we work together? Can we help him, or can he help us? Can he be a music teacher?” This short exposure to local media, at the height of the so-called 2015 refugee crisis in Europe, kickstarted his career as an Arabic-language musician in Sweden. His first concert in the prestigious concert hall Malmö Live soon followed. Now, he runs a Malmö-based cultural institution which organises Arab music performances for a variety of audiences and provides a multimodal platform on how to play the 'ūd.

The vignette above exemplifies what can happen when migrating musicians, in this case a forced migrant from Syria, enter receiving societies with their instruments. It gives a short but important insight on how Syrian musicians started to create an impact after arrival in Sweden in 2015. This article dwells on a segment of a broader process pertaining to Arabic language and culture emerging in Sweden for over three decades. Swedish-Arab singers, actors, bloggers, and musicians have become household-names and celebrities in the country. Between 2010 and 2017, the Syrian-born population in Sweden became the largest immigrant group, playing a key role in population change including a more widespread use of Arabic language and cultural activities, such as Arab food culture, Arabic literature, storytelling, dance, and music (Aradhya & Mussino 2020). This calls for a deeper investigation on the role of Arab culture, in this case the musical culture also known as “tarab culture”, in relation to cultural change in Sweden. This article is focused on the role of Arab singers and musicians, and their musical instruments, in transforming the musical landscape in southern Sweden. Our main research question is: How do Arab *tarab* singers and musicians, and their instruments, transverse and transform local musical landscapes in different contexts in southern Sweden, particularly in and around the city of Malmö?

Recent research explores how migrants' artistic practices lead to cultural change in receiving societies, which brings several empirical and theoretical challenges in understanding the relationship between migration and cultural change (Parzer & Mijić 2024; Sievers 2024). The vignette above also demonstrates the deep passion musicians possess for their instruments and that they do not necessarily identify along ethnic boundaries per se but self-identify as part of “humanity” which supersedes ethnicity and binary us-versus-them categories. Likewise, Parzer found that Syrian artists who

1. All names of our interviewees are anonymised.

fled to Austria place themselves within cosmopolitan cultural production, and refuse both ethnic labelling and external categorization as “refugees” (Parzer 2021). This latter observation is in line with recent studies on postmigration by Povržanović Frykman et al. (2023) which circumvent notions of analytical binaries of “native” vs. “migrant” or “minority” vs. “majority”. Our study is thus placed within the ongoing scholarly discourse on postmigration, with the focus on migrant artists and their (self) representation and the societal change they bring about in postmigrant societies through their arts practice and cultural activities (Gebauer et al. 2019; Parzer 2023; Parzer & Mijić 2024; Schramm et al. 2019; Sievers 2024; Ålander 2023).

Parallel to the above debates on postmigration within migration studies, ethnomusicologists have challenged theory that couples traditional music with cultural identity and musical geographies, due to the influence of modernity, globalization, mobility, and the rise of “world music” (Rice 2010; Ronström 2014; Ronström & Lundberg 2021; Eriksson 2022). Anxiety over migration, musicians migrating, and an increasingly globalized world inspired scholars of ethnomusicology to explore transformations in musical landscapes leading to more understanding of creative shifts and mobility of music, musicians and their instruments, and of the changeability of genres and styles in musical traditions and identities (Eriksson 2022; Ronström & Lundberg 2021; Stokes 2004; Toynbee & Dueck 2011).

Coupling these two discourses in different fields – migration studies and ethnomusicology – we ask how we can operationalise the concept of postmigration in an empirical study of Arab musicians and their music practice in southern Sweden? Yildiz (2019) explains that the discourse on postmigration derives from an epistemological postcolonial shift in migration studies, against us-them dichotomies and the image of identity and culture as static and homogenous phenomena. Instead, a postmigrant perspective sees migration as a force for (dialectic) cultural change. The postmigrant perspective offers an analytical category for loci of transition and rethinking, to identify social situations of mobility and diversity, in which social and cultural transformations take place (Yildiz 2019).

Making music together, either as an act of performance or in an educational setting, can be seen as one such social situation that provides an enabling environment for cultural change and transformation. Social situations that West (2019) and Yildiz (2019) classify and define as *transtopias*, as enabling environments for transition and interlinking that liberate practice and thinking from polarization and dualism. Transtopias are postmigrant social situations, whereby “human beings have multiple modes of belonging and in which national and ethnic classifications forfeit their power of conviction, yielding to new orientations and relations” (Yildiz 2019:392). In her study on the transversal and postmigrant city, West (2019) distinguishes a transtopia as a spatial concept either real or imaginary, for improvisation, experimentation, and co-production, to challenge the mainstream migration- and integration discourse, whereby migration is considered

problematic leading to discourses focused on segregation and ghettoization (West 2019; Ålander 2023). Ålander (2023) identifies that immigrant labels put on musicians can hamper their professional development but also give opportunities. He identifies three primary discursive environments, where musicians are identified as immigrants: towards the stage, on the stage, and in changing the stage. Within these environments, or transtoppas, encounters take place: new connections, friendships, and alliances are formed that transcend ethnic, cultural, and social boundaries, while at the same time tensions and conflicts may arise, and negotiations about representation and self-identities are held. This is an ongoing process that can potentially lead to transformation and cultural change in receiving societies.

Sievers (2024) explains that questions on whether migration brings social and cultural change in receiving societies, have hitherto rarely been asked. Scholars in the humanities as well as the social sciences now regard artists and cultural performers as important agents for cultural change. This article and the findings of our study contribute to this growing body of work on understanding the role of migration in transforming a society affected by migration, into new – shared – practices and constellations of how people relate to each other.

First, a brief description of relevant literature will further address postmigration, cultural change in postmigrant societies, shifts and the role of music and migration. Next, the data and methods are introduced, followed by an account of the main findings of our study that show how migrant musicians use the instruments they brought and their role in Arab music. Then follows a section on the meaning of the *tarab* for Arab music making and the musicians' reflections on the definition of *tarab* as an important emotive aspect of Arab music that has the capacity to connect people. Thereafter we discuss potential spaces of music making, either as an act of performance or in an educational setting, as postmigrant transtoppas in southern Sweden, followed by an analysis of the specificity of music and tensions and challenges of (self)representation that can arise in these postmigrant transtoppas. Finally, our findings are concluded, including suggested further research.

## Music, migration, shifts and cultural change in post-migrant societies.

Thinking about postmigrant societies emerged in a variety of social science disciplines and humanities since the 1990s (Ring Petersen & Schramm 2017; Gaonkar et al. 2021; Schramm et al. 2019). Current research on postmigration “challenges traditional views on society, immigration and integration” and has established itself well in Germany, gradually spreading to Austria, Switzerland, Denmark, and now Sweden (Gebauer et al. 2019; Povrzanović Frykman, Narvselius & Törnquist-Plewa 2023; Schramm et al. 2019; Sievers 2024; West 2019; Yildiz 2019). Postmigration as a process

means that receiving societies are subject to change due to migration, at any given time, in any given shape or form, throughout time. The result is a postmigrant society in which, through a process of encounters and negotiation, different social and cultural traditions, food, arts, folklore, mediatic expression, performance art, and the overall cultural production affect each other, affect people, and continuously transform into something else, sometimes forming the basis of new traditions and even indigenisation.

In some cases, something has become an element of “ethnic” culture in a society without an awareness that this practice or element is the result of migration. Quintessential Swedish meatballs for example, were according to a theory originally introduced from Turkey by Swedish King Charles XII, who spent years in the Ottoman Empire. Looking at Sweden from a postmigrant perspective, we are witnessing an ongoing contemporary process of societal transformation, whereby elements of Arab culture are introduced, such as food consumption and musical practices, which could eventually become indigenised and form a part of future local identity, tradition, and culture. In Malmö, Syrian and Arab food culture played a significant role in changing the local foodscape and branding the city’s image: the city is now known as the Swedish capital of falafel, and the falafel has become a symbol of Malmö. (Kihlgren Grandi 2023).

It is not inconceivable that Arab musical instruments ended up in the hands of Viking traders. Arabic texts written by the 10th-century Arab traveller Ibn Fadlān indicate that contacts between Scandinavia and the Arab world date as far back as the 7th and 11th century (Lunde & Stone 2012). In ‘Migrating Music’, Toynbee and Dueck (2011) identify how mimesis and copying other music and musical instruments into one’s own practice leads to translation and transformation. They draw upon Taussig’s (1993) theory on mimesis and alterity that cultures change through colonial encounters imitating, as a strategy for assimilating potentially threatening cultural differences: “through mimesis, both powerful and subordinate groups appropriate and transform aspects of one another’s difference, and in doing so attain power over that otherness” (Toynbee & Dueck 2011:10). They demonstrate this by giving a chronological overview of how the ‘ūd was first introduced to Europe through music making in Muslim Spain during the 13th Century (Willson 2019; Toynbee & Dueck 2011; Saoud 2004), then taken up by Christian conquerors in a mimetic act, leading to a transformed instrument commonly known as the “lute”, a term indeed deriving from the Arabic term ‘al ‘ūd, meaning “the wood” and finally to what we now know as a guitar, a European feature (Toynbee & Dueck 2011)<sup>2</sup>. Taussig’s (1993) theory of mimesis in a colonial encounter differs from a postmigrant perspective on alterity, which is seen as potentiality for new creation and not as a threat. However, the encounter and translation process into something new is similar. Decolonization, migration and the presence of Arabic-speaking migrants, the internet, and the rise of the world music industry facilitated the re-arrival of the Arab ūd which is now part of the fabric of social relations Europe and North America (Willson 2019:469, 462).

2. Different theories exist concerning the origin of the European guitar, see for example Thurnball & Spark 2001.

With the influx of Syrian and other Arabic-language migrants in the mid-2010s, and in particular after 2015, Arab musical instruments again became more visible in the European musical landscape and are transforming cultural production fields in Europe. Bates writes how musical instruments in contemporary culture are not only conceived as agents but even as “protagonists of stories – as actors who facilitate, prevent, or mediate social interaction among other characters” (Bates 2012). He argues for a study of the social life of musical instruments because “instruments are entangled in webs of complex relationships – between humans and objects, between humans and humans, and between objects and other objects” (Bates 2012:364).

Musical shifts due to migration of people and music were the focus of a conference in Stockholm in 2019, where fourteen Nordic ethnomusicologists came together which led to an anthology that reflects on lessons learned and theoretical, empirical, and methodological insights from earlier studies on music, migration, diversity, and multiculturalism (Ronström & Lundberg 2021).

Several studies highlight the significant role that music making (and dance) play for immigrants, both internally within the groups and externally in interactions with the community at large (Ronström & Lundberg 2021).

“The abundance of music, and dance of radically different kinds has enabled individuals as well as groups to express the finest nuances of existing social and cultural differences, and also to create differences and new social boundaries and hence create new contexts of meaning.” (Ronström 2021).

Ronström & Lundberg (2021) further describe how diversity leads to new spaces where musicians, music, and audience cross cultural borders and institutions establish multicultural policies. We consider these spaces as post-migrant *transtopias*. While the anthology discusses how these shifts and cultural categories, and assemblages of becoming developed in relation to Finnish, Balkan, Yugoslav, African, Chilean, or Kurdish mixed music and dance culture, the anthology does not give due attention to the influence and developments related to Arab music and dance culture in the Nordics. This article aims to fill part of that knowledge gap.

Some recent studies within European migration studies focus specifically on Syrian musicians and artists who arrived during the 2015 “refugee crisis”. Brunner studied the arrival and (musical) life paths of musicians from Syria who arrived in Germany and Austria and indicates that they are not a homogenous group but rather highly diverse in age, gender, class background, ethnicity, religion, level of professionalism, and the musical genres they perform (Brunner 2022). Parzer studied the arrival of Syrian migrant artists and musicians in Austria and found that Syrians artists and their social networks played a strong role in entering the field of cultural production, in which some artists found their way relatively easy, while others faced several struggles, with respect to gaining recognition and

access to social capital (Parzer 2021, 2023). Both researchers observed what Parzer calls the “double burden of representation”, Syrian musicians foremostly being labelled as refugee artists or along ethnicity or both (Brunner 2022; Parzer 2021, 2023). While indeed Arab musicians in Sweden and Europe are certainly not a homogenous group, this article focuses on Arab musicians and singers that perform classical Arab music called *tarab* and traditional genres (i.e. *muwashshaḥat* and *quḍūd*).

## Data and Methods

For this study, we conducted participant observation both at formal and informal music-making events, through attending musical gatherings, private gatherings and public concerts. Participant observation by Hedberg was further carried out by participating in a world music course in Malmö focusing on learning how to play the traditional drum, called *darbūkāh*,<sup>3</sup> in 2021. Audio-visual recordings were taken by Wessels of music and dance performances, both on private gatherings and public performances since 2018, and consistently during fieldwork in southern Sweden in 2021–23. In total eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with Arabic-speaking professional musicians and singers in southern Sweden and their non-Arab allies.<sup>4</sup> The interviews were between one and a half to two hours long, audio-recorded and conducted in Arabic, Swedish, and English without interpreters, and consequently transcribed and translated into English, where necessary.<sup>5</sup>

Sampling took place following a snowballing process which brought us into contact not only with Arabic language musicians but also their allies. A short media ethnography was carried out to assess social media and online audiovisual representations and digital recordings of performances that featured the interviewees. The study did not include audience research as this was not the focus of our study.

## Arab musicians bringing their instruments to Sweden.

When musicians migrate, so do their instruments. Many Arab musicians who fled to Sweden brought their instruments, not only as their main possession but also as emotional support on their arduous journey. Upon arrival in Sweden and while waiting for a decision concerning asylum, the Palestinian *ūd* player Mohammed decided to spend his time playing music while getting to know Swedish society.

During this period, my time was divided between music, hanging out, attempting to establish relationships and friendships, and seeking to comprehend Swedish society. Deliberately, I refrained from predominantly interacting with individuals from Arab backgrounds, as my aim was to gain a deeper understanding of Swedish society (...) during this trying time, music became a lifeline. It nourished

3. The name *darbukah* derives from the Arabic verb *ḍarab* (to hit).
4. Allies are seen as those that Arabic-speaking musicians identified as non-migrant colleagues who offered most important guidance and support in their professional development and establishment as Arabic-speaking musicians in Sweden. See also Povrzanović Frykman et al. (2023).
5. NVivo was used to document and store our data consisting of audio recordings, interview transcriptions, field observation notes, social media material, images, photographs, and video recordings.

my soul, providing me with energy, strength, and self-confidence to confront the mounting pressures. I am immensely grateful for the presence of music in my life. If it were not in my life, I might have been another frustrated, depressed, and destructive person (...) Music in general, but Arab music in particular, occupies a special and cherished position for me. It possesses a unique spiritual essence, particularly when it comes to the *ūd*, an instrument that carries a Sufi spirit capable of soothing the soul. I have friends who often request to listen to the *ūd* because of its gentle and tranquil nature (...) It is a musical instrument closely associated with meditation. For me, it is a form of meditation. (Mohammed 2023, *ūd* player.

*Translated from Arabic/Swedish by an Arabic translator.*

Three of the main instruments that were brought by Arab musicians, which form essential elements for Arab music making, defining authenticity and traditional *tarab* culture in the Arab world, are the '*ūd*, the *qanūn*<sup>6</sup>, and *darbūkāh* (Habash 2021). They form the core of a classical Arab musical ensemble called *taht*, consisting of five to six instruments including a flute (*naī*), a violin (*kamanġa*), and frame drum (*dāf*), besides the '*ūd*, *darbūkāh*, and *qanūn* (Farraj & Shumays 2019; Tūmā 1996). The ensemble composition also transformed over time during the 1930s when more Western-styled instruments like the piano and violin were added, forming an orchestra. Syrian music played an important role in this "modernisation" of *tarab* music as Abed-Rabbo (2019) explains:

Music in modern Syria reflects on cultural practices that give voice to modernist feelings. Through recourse to these metonymic depictions and recreations, Syrian artists articulate a vision of modernization in which addresses the emotions and sentimentality bases of real Syrian *tarab* culture. In this manner, they offer an alternative to European ideologies of innovation that have stressed music expressions (Abed-Rabbo 2019).

Since the arrival of Syrian musicians in 2015, the '*ūd*, *qanūn*, and *darbūkāh* have spread more widely in Sweden, at concerts, cultural initiatives, and festivals. When studying post-migration through Arab musicians and their instruments, it is important to approach the instruments as agents with a social life, in relation to their owners entangled in webs of complex relationships (Bates 2012). Most of our interlocutors came to Sweden as asylum seekers and indicated that playing and listening to Arab music forms an important part of dealing with loss of home, traumas of war, and the mental stress of forced migration. The instruments therefore function as providers of emotional support and healing agents for Syrian and other Arab refugees through their music making. In his study about the social life of the Turkish *saz*, Bates describes how certain instruments make listeners cry more often than others as the music they produce creates a specific affective response (Bates 2012). Frith (2022) in his work on the lives of musicians and music-making as a social practice finds that performers' musical decisions depend on the way the music "feels" at that moment.

6. The *qanūn* has been played by musicians in Ancient Egypt, Greece, and Persia (Khajeh 2020; Poché 2001). Well-known is the development of the *kanon/qanūn* as a pedagogical instrument to show students the relationship between string lengths and notes by Euclid and Ptolemy 300 years B.C. (Sawa 2022).



A concept that is important for emotional transformation and understanding how Arab music, and in particular the genre of *muwashshaḥat*, is played is *taqsīm*. *Taqsīm* is the improvisation of the different modal scales (Wright, Poché & Shiloah 2001). Since Arab music primarily is transmitted and taught orally, *taqsīm* skills are extremely difficult to teach, but instead require listening and becoming familiar with different *maqamāt*.<sup>7</sup> The most perfected instrument for improvising these *maqamāt* so that they elicit an ecstatic state, commonly referred to as *tarab*, is the 'ūd, which is why this instrument is also called 'The Prince of Tarab' (Farraj & Shumays 2019:134–135).

## Tarab culture as a post-migrant transformative force in music making

When listening to music, the human brain gets triggered and culture-specific ways of sonorous communication induce a bodily affect based on collective memories and remembering leading to an “emotional transformation” (Volgsten & Pripp 2016). When the three instruments described above are played in a *taht*, something rises above their individual statuses to complement each other. When played well, the three instruments can lead and convey an important emotive state called *tarab*, hence the name Syrian or Arab *tarab* culture (see figure 1). *Tarab* is known as the most important aesthetical term in Arab music whereby emotionality is a central component (Shannon 2003; Racy 2004; Abed-Rabbo 2019). Shannon (2003) regards *tarab* not merely as a product of configurations of melody and rhythm, but also as an index of the social relations of musical performance. *Tarab* is a state of elevated emotionality, often translated as “ecstasy,” or “enchantment,” but can also signify despair and joy (Shannon 2003). It also refers to a genre of music and performance culture: *tarab* music. *Tarab* has a transformative role akin to what Volgsten & Pripp (2016) call a phenomenological experience in their study of music, memory and affect of Kurdish diaspora music in Stockholm.

A Syrian *qanūn* player in Skåne tried to define *tarab*:

Not images, thoughts yes, feeling yes, but wait a minute (...) *tarab* comes after, there are many conditions that must exist for the word to become *tarab*, that you play well, that you interpret your feelings well, you have good instruments, you have good conditions, you have a good audience, it must all be good at the same time to reach this main thing. When everything works together well, you get your tipping, that's the fine point, when the sound check is good, musicians feel good, everyone plays well, it should be all good for that you reached the top well. Then you, then that, *tarab*, as you feel 'oh, now I got it!'...the finest... (...) it must be all harmony together to achieve this [to] be good. When you reach this finest opportunity, we call that the *tarab*. It is very difficult to express this in Swedish actually... I miss the words for it, frankly. (Khaled 2021, *qanūn* player. Translated from Arabic/Swedish by Hedberg.)<sup>8</sup>

7. *Maqam*, in plural *maqamāt*, is the melodic framework of scales and modes that in Western staff notation is closely associated with the quarter tones, or so-called microtones, of Arabic music. The Arabic *maqam* tradition is part of a wider musical phenomenon existing in countries from North Africa to Central Asia (Farraj & Shumays 2019:183).

8. This interview was conducted in Swedish and Arabic.



Fig. 1. Traditional *tarab* music evening with a Syrian singer organised in Malmö, August 2023. Photo: J.I. Wessels.

*Tarab* culture is important for creating a sense of “home” to Syrians, reminding them of cities such as Aleppo, commonly called *’Umm al Tarab*, the mother of *tarab* (Habash 2021; Shannon 2003) and the songs of traditional singers Sabah Fakhri, Mohamad Khairy and Sabri Moudallal that hail from prestigious music schools in Aleppo but also Lebanese and Egyptian songs by Fayrouz and Umm Khaltoum. For example, when Wessels attended a *tarab* music evening in the small foyer of Moriskan concert hall in Malmö, she felt as if she was transported back to the old city of Aleppo, where she lived for five years. Emotions and affective ecstatic reactions were expressed by many of the Syrians in the foyer who exclaimed “this feels like Aleppo” and started dancing and waving their hands from left to right and singing along. Habash finds a similar situation in Istanbul when she studies *tarab* musicians in Istanbul: “Personal memories, while residing in the individual mind and subject to individualized experiences, are through musical expressions often made and experienced in social gatherings” (Habash 2021:1373). Inspired by José van Dijck (2006), Volgsten and Pripp (2016) describe music as informal everyday embodied practice which creates a sense of belonging to a larger community through collective memory and recognition. This applies fully to the sense of belonging created by the music on that *tarab* performance in Moriskan.

Music-making can thus be seen as a form of communication (Volgsten & Pripp 2016) and as a social situation and practice (Frith 2022) leading to a certain state of being. In Malmö, when Arab musicians and their audiences, come together to play traditional Arab music, they generate a specific enabling environment for a postmigrant *transtoppia* which, when all elements are aligned and in sync, supersedes the music-making itself.

When asked if non-Arab Swedes can learn and know what *tarab* is, our interviewees said non-Arab Swedes tend to not know, unless they have lived in an Arab country, immersed into Arab culture and experienced *tarab* for some time, but this is difficult, some of them said. However, “if non-Arab Swedes got to know and feel *tarab*, integration would succeed”, one of them joked; in the context of our research, we do not use the notion of integration but of postmigrant cross-connections. He further explained:

(...) They [the non-Arab Swedes] can enjoy it but they cannot make it. For example, if I teach the Swedes Al-Bayat playing, in which the note is divided in half, even if they learn how to play it, they will do it in a wrong way. They do not have the oriental soul, they only enjoy oriental music (...) When I go to play in a place that is all Swedish, they get curious, what is this instrument that I am playing, and what is this sound that it is coming from it? They say there is something in it that we have not listened to before, but we feel a beautiful feeling, that is oriental music. (Omar 2023, 'ūd player. *Translated from Arabic/Swedish by an Arabic translator.*)

For *tarab* to arise, the atmosphere during the performance has to be “authentic spontaneous, from the heart – to elicit the internal states associated with the experience of *tarab*” (Shannon 2003). However, Shannon (2003) also indicates that even for the most educated and best Arab musicians *tarab* sometimes eludes them and it often depends on mood, how a musician feels. Some interviewees mentioned that non-Arab Swedes do have *tarab* but in a completely different way. As one *qanūn* player explained, *tarab* does not only refer to synching in playing music, but also at the workplace, when a team works well together and in sports: “In sports, when a football team plays well, there is *tarab* between them, they play well and the ball goes from one to another to the goal directly, that is *tarab* too, it is like this, hope I could explain it a little.” This can also be extended to other post-migrant spaces of interaction and connection, or *transtoppias*.

Other interviewees stressed that music making is a way to connect all people, regardless of ethnic background. A famous Kurdish-Syrian singer in Malmö sees it as her life task to use her music to bring people together ‘in *tarab*’, which can be seen as a postmigrant potentiality.

During these events, I sang in Kurdish, Arabic, and Turkish. During an interview, someone asked me, ‘Where did you collect these cultures from?’ So, I explained that I used to live in a border area where Kurdish is my mother tongue. I was influenced by Arab singers like Umm Kulthum and Muhammad Abdo, while also being connected to Turkish culture due to our neighbors. All of this reflects how music is a universal language for me, and my love for it drives me to learn and embrace various cultures. The origin of the music doesn't matter; what matters is spreading a message of love and acceptance through music to the world. (...) Eastern music is well known, and Western music is well known as well, with only half a note separating them. Now, I would like to bridge the gap between the Arabic and Kurdish languages and the Swedish listener. I believe that music, in general,

knows no barriers; it enters hearts without permission, especially if it is beautiful and intricate (...) I met a Swedish man in his fifties who plays the tamboura and sings in Turkish and Kurdish. The beautiful thing about this encounter is the blending of cultures. (Jiyan 2023, singer. *Translated from Arabic/Swedish by an Arabic translator.*)

Reaching *tarab* thus creates interconnections and harmony between musicians, it synchronises groups and strengthens cohesion. However, it is not easy to reach *tarab* when Arab and non-migrant Swedish musicians play together, as it does not come without challenges and struggles. A Swedish folk musician we interviewed explained:

(...) In Swedish folk music, it is based much more on the individual, for example, someone should intonate the same interval a little differently, sometimes it can be high, sometimes it can be low and so little in between. It's more like a coloring that doesn't quite match, and you know exactly how it should be. And then there is also the fact that Arab music is based a lot on ensemble playing on the fact that there are many of you. In Swedish folk music, you are traditionally very soloist, it is usually someone who plays and someone who sings. There isn't really this ensemble group thing, and it probably has to do with us being such a sparsely populated country [laughs]. (Sven 2021, musician. *Translated from Swedish by Hedberg.*)

Arab musicians in southern Sweden are quite open to new styles and musical formats, whereby their instrument facilitates experimental exploration. Several initiatives leading to the potential of a musical fusion when Arab and Swedish musicians play and rehearse together. Here we find possibly another postmigrant potentiality for transformation and cultural change, whereby the musical stage serves as an enabling environment, a transtoppia.



Fig. 2. Fusion folk ensemble with Arab *qanūn* and *darbūkāh* players performing in Malmö, October 2023. Photo: J.I. Wessels.

## Postmigrant spaces of musical performance and teaching as transtopias?

Jiyan (2023) clearly indicated that she wants to achieve a better world through her music in different languages and this has an impact on local music scenes. This kind of inner drive to make music creates an opening for transformation. Eriksson (2022) describes how Swedish folk music landscapes changed and shifted in the 60s and 70s through engagement with new musical geographies, repertoires, instruments, and soundscapes, whereby musicians reacted against racism and xenophobia and expressed a wish to “create a better world together” through music.

Despite the potentiality of fusion music performances, most of the musical performances by our interviewees in southern Sweden, are traditional *tarab* concerts and gatherings in Malmö. For example, a traditional *tarab* concert could take place in either a community house for a small group of ten people or a concert hall such as Babel or Moriskan for a larger, majority Arabic-speaking audience, but could also take place in a Syrian or Arab restaurant where also be non-Arabic speaking Swedes are having dinner. The gathering of musicians for music making can be seen as a social situation where there is an interplay and complex social relations between musicians, instruments, and audiences. The musical languages used within this social situation can differ, even when the performance is not fusion. An *'ūd* player in Malmö explained that the players of the *'ūd* have “dialects” in their performance, he called it *rūh*, the soul of the play. “When I hear the piece being played, I know whether it is an Iraqi, Egyptian or Syrian musical ‘soul’ playing the song. They all have their own accents”, he explained. Despite the accents, if all musicians are Arabic-speaking, he feels that they can reach *tarab*, it just needs much more practice. In his view, *tarab* musical performance needs musicians and singers who are taught Arab music making from an early age. The challenge is to teach young generations who now grow up in Sweden. The younger generation from Syria in southern Sweden lacks memories of *tarab* culture in Syria and music functions as a communicative vehicle of collective cultural memory (Volgsten & Pripp 2016).

An *'ūd* player in Malmö was observed while teaching a young 15-year-old Syrian girl from Aleppo, who came to Sweden as a small child and now lives in Höör, Skåne, to sing specific famous Aleppian traditional songs (*qūdūd ḥalābiyya*), which creates an emotive connection with the city she left behind. Through her act of learning to sing these songs of her own culture, she continues the tradition of *tarab* music performances. She now sings *tarab* music every Saturday at a Syrian restaurant in Malmö to develop her performing skills. These performances are well attended by Arab and non-Arab visitors. Looking at nostalgia and identity and its relation to Syrian *tarab* music in Istanbul, Habash (2021) finds that “this embodiment transcends the personal in the service of the communal, symbolising an individual’s belonging to a particular cultural group”. The above example

of *tarab* performance is first and foremost an example of diasporic “care for own culture” (Morra 2019). However, from a postmigrant perspective it exemplifies how particular traditions are transferred – here to a young Syrian growing up in Sweden who may bring this element of her musical knowledge and experience into further constellations. On the other hand, it may also stay as a matter of reinforcement of ethnic boundaries and practice of her Syrian/Aleppian identity and not become an element of postmigrant exchanges and fusions.

Ronström & Lundberg (2021) describe that until the 1980s, Swedish heritage institutions only dealt with cultural heritage of the Swedish “nation” and how that changed in the 1990s, when spaces such as Mix Musik in Stockholm were promoted by Swedish institutions to enable the encounter and fusion between different musical styles, instruments, and musicians. In the past couple of years, several interesting musical collaborations intending to fuse Arab music with Nordic folk music and/or musical influences from other regions and countries have emerged in southern Sweden. In our study, we identified institutional initiatives such as Shako Mako in Malmö, but also observed collaborations in private spaces by migrant and non-migrant musicians and public initiatives that grow out of these informal encounters of musicians. The recent increased interest in Arab music in Sweden, provides creative spaces for musicians both Swedish and Arabic, where new fusion bands and collaborations are created such as the Arabic fusion band Sikalalli and the Baghdad Sessions were organised in Malmö. The Baghdad Sessions form a platform for fusion where Arab musicians perform with Afghani, Eritrean, and other African musicians. The band and the event itself is staged at Moriskan in collaboration with Re:Orient, the biggest cultural organization in Sweden to promote the advancement of music, culture, and cultural production from the Middle East, North Africa, and Balkan region.

Musical fusion, when it is formed by the combination of musical traditions from a host society with newly introduced musical traditions from migrant musicians, forms a new kind of semantic, communicative code, understood by different audiences. Gebauer, Vitting-Seerup & Wiegand (2019:138) points out:

As the potential audiences are increasingly diverse, a polylingual crowd, embracing art from a post-migrant perspective has been going on for some time and the concept is spreading. The ‘established’ cultural institutions of literature, art, cinema, and other spheres are slowly being transformed by new public interests (Gebauer, Vitting-Seerup & Wiegand 2019).

Fusion pertaining to music styles in general, learning and trying out different rhythms and styles exemplifies the postmigrant space, or transtoppia.

As mentioned by several of our interviewees, when Arab and non-Arab musicians come together to play different music styles and genres, they do speak different languages. Cultural specificity of music, sound, and emotion

depends on the memory, background, knowledge, and experiences of both the musicians and the listeners (Juslin & Sloboda 2010). Not everyone interprets the music in the same manner. The interpretation and the way a piece is being played can be recognisable for the more informed listeners. In some cases, the musician is familiar with the music and can distinguish well between the different tones and the way a piece is played, they can feel the music. In a postmigrant context, new knowledge is gained in this process and new experiences are made. In that case, there is potential for reaching *tarab* as a way of understanding each other. On the other hand, the musical relationship is dialectical: Arab musicians are taking up their instruments to learn to play other kinds of music. *Tarab* can be interpreted as a kind of postmigrant syncing. Almost all of the Arab musicians in Skåne have started to teach Arab music after they arrived in Sweden.

As mentioned above, a Syrian girl was privately taught to connect with her roots and learn famous classical Arab songs from her hometown Aleppo, which she then has developed into public musical performances in a Syrian restaurant in Malmö. Another potential transtoppa in Sweden to observe when and how postmigrant transformation taking place, is found at music academies and music schools. The Malmö Academy of Music is one of six institutions for advanced academic studies of music in Sweden. The world music program at the Lund University music academy started in 1993. By then only traditional Swedish folk music was taught and played at the academy. In 2013, the academy extended the world music program to Malmö, and since 2016 it offers the program entirely in English to make it more accessible to migrant students in Sweden. Today the world music program consists of students with Arabic-language background that play and practice foremost the *'ūd* and *darbūkāh*. Over the past ten years, the Malmö academy of music has also offered an open-for-all-course on Arab rhythms and specifically *darbūkāh*. It is attended by students that meet the general requirements for university studies in Sweden, including people of non-Arab background. Hedberg's participant observation in 2021 brought about the insight that the participants of the *darbūkāh* course were a mix of students from different backgrounds wanting to learn how to play the drum for different reasons. One participant was motivated by never being allowed to play it while growing up, while another one wanted to understand this particular percussion better since it was being used in the band, she was in. One knew of the drum due to her Turkish background and another one wanted to mix it with his heavy metal music. Another participant simply wanted to do a practical course and get easy university credits, which in Sweden is linked to a state funded student stipend.

We observed that these courses at academies are becoming more and more popular with an increasing number of applying students for each year. From the Arab musicians' side, all our interviewees conduct teaching their craft to outsiders, whether in the private sphere or in an institutional context. Khaled (2021), a *qanūn* player, has established a *qanūn* school to teach how to play the *qanūn* to Swedish children with a non-migrant background.

He explains: “Yes, with the *qanūn*, I am the only one here in southern Sweden who plays well professionally (...) it is a super instrument and can be used as an integration tool.” He explained that he was proud how quickly this *qanun*-school made an impact.

(...) establishing the instruments, establishing *qanūn*, it is a big change in society, for example during the folk music festival day in Palladium, Malmö, there were 180 students on stage, 18 of them were *qanūn* players, that means 10% of the students were *qanūn* players, this changes a lot, it changes a lot, a lot! 10% of players on the stage played *qanūn*. Then *qanūn* means beginning to establish itself in folk music. The two things that struck me after I came to Sweden, it is folk music, Swedish folk music works well on a *qanūn*, great, not just okay, but great, great ! (...)

In his opinion the *qanūn* can be played by anyone and there is no need to play Arab music on a *qanūn*.

(...) a Swedish child does not need to play an Arab song; he wants to play ‘Twinkle, twinkle little star’ and stuff like that that has been learned in kindergarten and they start like this. (...) They must play the music like the one they know, yeah. Music, it's just, it's just, a musical instrument, it's just a material, a tool, a tool that you use for expressing your feelings and expressing your thoughts. (Khaled 2021, *qanūn* player. Translated from Swedish/Arabic by Hedberg.)

This *qanūn* player sees his instrument thus as a vehicle to connect people that can play different styles and genres. Yet, in his opinion, to reach Arab *tarab* for non-Arab musicians would be an almost unattainable goal. The main goal of Arab music education for non-Arab musicians would be to learn excellent *taqsim* skills. But in Khaled's eyes, a musician needs to have grown up with *tarab* culture, to be able to play the instrument well and to reach *tarab* eventually. Otherwise, he explained, it will always be somehow like a “broken” language.

## Transformation, tensions, negotiation, and representation

While there are new spaces and artists being promoted in Sweden in the realm of music making in performance and education, the spaces described above that could be identified as postmigrant transtoppias of innovation, co-creation, and cooperation, are not without struggles and tensions and do face obstacles of translation, musical languages but also of representation and power imbalances. Besides the difficulties of non-Arab musicians having to learn *tarab* for the spaces of innovation and co-creation to become a transtopia of postmigrant synching, there are also challenges with how Arab musicians are portrayed and labelled, either as “refugee musicians” or along specific “ethnic” categories. Parzer stresses that Syrian artists in Austria are confronted with a double burden of being not only labelled on ethnicity but also as refugee (Parzer 2021).



The identified transtopias thus become an enabling environment for postmigrant negotiation, clashes, and tensions, not between established residents and the newly arrived, but between those who are open to change and those who want to block it, where the real challenge is navigating between ever-shifting modes of positioning oneself in the changes between “us” and “the others” (Gebauer, Vitting-Seerup & Wiegand 2019). The struggle of representation is thus another dimension whereby ignorance and preconceived ideas about the “other” disturb and deflect how the musicians see themselves and how they would like to be represented (Yildiz 2019).

A good example of this is the representation of the most famous band hailing from Malmö to currently perform and play music in Arabic in Sweden, called Tarabband. The band’s name itself is a play on words involving *tarab* as explained above. Founded in 2008 and headed by a Malmö-based female singer of Iraqi-Egyptian descent, the band is rooted in Arab musical tradition and identifies as a cross-cultural musical experience, writing lyrics on political and social topics merged with questions around identity, survival, and love. In an act of frustration about the singer’s encounters with prejudice and misrepresentation within the cultural production field in Sweden, she published a Facebook post in 2022:

This post is mainly directed to promoters, producers, bookers, critics in music and culture (both in Sweden and abroad) whose interest is to collaborate with me or my band Tarabband (...) Here is a short list of what keeps coming up my way. If you can relate, feel free to comment:

Mentioning words like: Allah Akbar, Bin Ladin, Taliban, when making a joke of my band name Tarabband or Arab music and culture generally.

Comparing my music to camels, desert animals, dancing snakes, harem women, leather sandals and all kind of stereotypes about the Middle East

The continuous temptations (!) of bringing a camel or two close to the venue where I hold a concert!

Mentioning names and characters like Ala al Din the thief as a reference to Arabs/Arab music

Demanding me wearing only Arab/oriental dresses onstage

Pointing out I am not Arab enough/or not like “other Arabs” under the impression it’s a compliment

Twisting facts in interviews and articles to serve your own agenda in the press and grab attention (politically, religiously etc)

Making jokes and using words, hints, metaphors and comments based on look, skin color, religion, origin or GENDER IDENTITY to me or any of the band members

Have a nice day! #educateyourself

The singer claims her right to be judged as an artist foremostly rather than based on her ethnicity, presumed gender and further orientalist assumptions about her due to the fact she is from Egyptian-Iraqi background. She asserts her agency to educate the audiences publicly. This is a typical postmigrant process of dialectic negotiation about representation and trying to understand each other, but also of placing and transgressing boundaries of identity.

## Conclusions

Arab music and *tarab* culture have become more widespread in southern Sweden since the arrival of Syrian refugees in 2015. This article focused on Arab musicians and singers, their instruments, and transformations in musical performances and education in southern Sweden. This empirical study of Arab musicians in southern Sweden asked the question how Arab *tarab* singers and musicians, and their instruments, transverse and transform local musical landscapes in different contexts in southern Sweden, particularly in and around the city of Malmö.

In a postmigrant transformation process, interaction takes place through negotiations between, in this case, western-style music, Swedish folk music, and Arab music whereby musicians learn from each other and create new forms of music. This could be in the privacy of people's homes, rehearsal spaces, musical concerts, performances, both private and public or music schools and academies. Ronström & Lundberg identify these as spaces of "continuous becoming" (Ronström & Lundberg 2021). We see these environments as postmigrant transtopias, where continuous becoming and transformation happen but not without struggles. When playing music together, alliances are being formed between musicians across migrant and non-migrant background, who together compose and combine different sounds and styles. These alliances play a vital role in changing the musical landscape of Sweden. Moreover, it is through these phenomena where migration can be understood as a force that moves society and reshapes it at its contours (Yildiz 2019).

Using the concept of transtopias as an analytical tool, we identified two social situations of transformative potentiality: in performances, where musicians engage in making music together both on stage and during rehearsal and in educational environments, where music is taught to others as potential postmigrant transtopias. By merely observing what is happening and how a postmigrant situations emerge after the introduction of something "new" like Arab musical instruments, we have approached migration as foremostly an opportunity rather than a problem, notwithstanding the tensions and struggles concerning the representation of migrant musicians that are real in the field.

We identified *tarab* as a creative and emotive postmigrant force for transformation and change at the same time Arab musicians indicated the difficulties of reaching *tarab* when making music with non-Arab musicians.

Applying the lens of postmigration within the field of cultural production we revealed that it provides an alternative and applicable approach to music and migration. Transtoppas are postmigrant social situations, whereby “human beings have multiple modes of belonging and in which national and ethnic classifications forfeit their power of conviction, yielding to new orientations and relations” (Yildiz 2019:392).

We found that *tarab* culture is embedded within an existing larger Arabic-language community in Sweden who enjoy traditional Arab music such as *muwashshahat* and the *qudūd halabiyya*. These performances are done in bubbles of nostalgia and collective memory. *Tarab* culture in Sweden is also important for catharsis and creating a feeling of home for Syrian migrants and other Arabic-speaking migrants in Sweden. Making *tarab* music went from the intimacy of informal music gatherings to the public engagement with larger audiences of people with a non-migrant background. *Tarab* culture can also be a music making venue for making human connections in a postmigrant space. The space where music making happens that can be seen as a *transtopia* where ideally *tarab* and synchronization between musicians, and between audiences and musicians, can be reached. Perhaps *tarab* culture at one point in the future, in a transformed form through a process of fusion and mimesis, will be part of a Swedish identity and culture, just like its meatballs and the falafel in Malmö? However, such a development is not likely now. Despite much postmigrant potentiality in the spaces we identified in our study, Malmö is still very much a segregated city, and the challenges for representation of musicians and players speaking different musical languages suggest that we are in a moment of postmigrant struggle rather than transtopia. As one of our interviewees mentioned “we will succeed, once the Swedes know what *tarab* is.”

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