

Circular Diagrams in Near Eastern Music Theory

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In general, Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman-Turkish (here subsumed under the problematic term of “Near Eastern” for the sake of brevity) music treatises feature a variety of different diagrams and charts. In addition to instrument schematics, demonstrations of fret positions especially on the neck of the *‘ūd* (short-necked lute) are common, as are arc diagrams of Pythagorean origin. The *abğad* letter notation, which can be used to indicate pitches precisely, also plays an important role. The writings of theoretician and composer ‘Abdalqādir al-Marāgī (d. 838/1435) are a prominent example, e.g., *Maḳāşidu'l-alḫān* (“The intentions of the melodies”).

The main focus of this paper, however, is on circular diagrams. Especially in Ottoman music theory, these occupy such an important place that treatises from this tradition are called *edvār* (“the circles”). *Edvār* is the plural of the Arabic *dawr*, meaning rotation, turn, or cycle. This type of titling dates back to the *Kitāb al-adwār* (“Book of Circles”) of Şāfi ed-Dīn al-Urmawī (d. 693/1294). Intriguingly, circle diagrams were used by authors such as Yūsuf b. Niẓāmeddīn Kırşehirī (MS dated 873/1469) or Seydī (before 910/1504) to demonstrate both rhythmic and melodic modes. They may indicate the sequence of beats in the cycle, their quality and quantity, as well as tonal relationships, the ordering of intervals within a scale, or transpositions. Moreover, the theorists of the so-called Anatolian School used circular diagrams to establish connections between melodic modes and extra-musical concepts, especially astrology and humoral medicine. “Mode” serves as an umbrella term here, since different terms were in use during the period under consideration.

Focusing on the Ottoman tradition between the 9th/15th and the 11th/17th centuries, the proposed contribution aims to trace the history and investigates the importance of the circular diagram in Near Eastern music theory. Analyzing which musical phenomena are illustrated by which geometric means, we explore the graphic technicalities as well as theoretical and practical meanings, gaining an overview over this rich tradition.

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