

## Samai Hijaz

### Commentary

This composition was originally conceived for solo Oud and later expanded with the inclusion of a full Western orchestra. Although based on the traditional form of Samai, this composition experiments with unorthodox approaches in melodic development, harmonisation and rhythmic cycles, trying to explore new orchestration styles for Middle-Eastern music.

Samai is a traditional form of Ottoman classical music, adopted also in the Arab world where it has become one of the most common forms for traditional compositions. It is usually organised in 4 sections (*khana*) followed with a repeating *teslim*. All sections are in a slow 10/8 meter a part for the last one, usually in a faster 6/4.

In writing this composition for orchestra, I had to face a few challenges, such as the use of quarter-tones and the modal constraints of the Maqam system. Most of all, I was concerned about the lack of variety in the strict Samai form, from rhythmic, modal and structural point of views.

Therefore I implemented various solutions which may be considered unorthodox but made musical sense to me; they are presented in this short commentary, accompanied by extracts of the score.

The full orchestral score is available on [http://musilogue.com/docs/samai\\_hijaz.pdf](http://musilogue.com/docs/samai_hijaz.pdf)

Overall the arrangement follows a contrapuntal approach, with only occasional references to harmony. The combination of multiple melodic layers tries to use a minimal instrumentation and rhythmic separation in order to keep the various lines as distinct as possible.

The orchestration has also taken into account the limited sound and sustain of the Oud, minimising the instrumentation and creating several different colours with the use of smaller ensembles. In any case, the Oud would need to be amplified in a live setting.

The Oud part does not present technically challenging passages, as the focus of this composition is on the arrangement aspect and the research of orchestration colours rather than virtuoso elements.

As indicated in its title, the piece is in the *maqam* (mode) of Hijaz, with Do as tonal centre.

In all the examples in this commentary, similarly to the orchestral score, the key signature includes 4 flats (like a Western Fa minor), as it is the closest to the accidentals used in Do Hijaz.

Due to the importance of the *teslim*, it is discussed first, while the rest of the commentary follows the linear development of the composition.

<sup>1</sup>



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The main theme of the *teslim* is shown here, together with the standard Arabic Samai rhythm. The convention used for the percussion staff is a downward stem for the hollow sound (*dum*) and an upward stem for the dry one (*tak*).

The first system shows a melodic line in 10/8 time with a key signature of three flats. The melody consists of eighth and sixteenth notes. Below it is a percussion staff with a 10/8 time signature, showing a sequence of notes with stems indicating the 'dum' (downward) and 'tak' (upward) sounds.

The second system continues the melodic line, featuring a triplet of eighth notes in the first measure. The percussion staff continues with its characteristic 'dum-tak' pattern.

The melodic movement in the first quaver recalls a pick-up phrase, landing on the second beat. In the attempt of providing a less traditional approach to the rhythmic cycle, I have shifted the theme of one quaver, anticipating it as follows.

The third system shows the melodic line shifted by one quaver. The percussion staff starts with a rest on the first beat, followed by the 'dum-tak' pattern.

The fourth system continues the melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes. The percussion staff maintains the 'dum-tak' pattern.

The result is a rhythmic cycle that vaguely resembles a Samai, with the characteristic *dum-dum-tak* shifted to an unusual position in the measure (5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> instead of 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> beats).

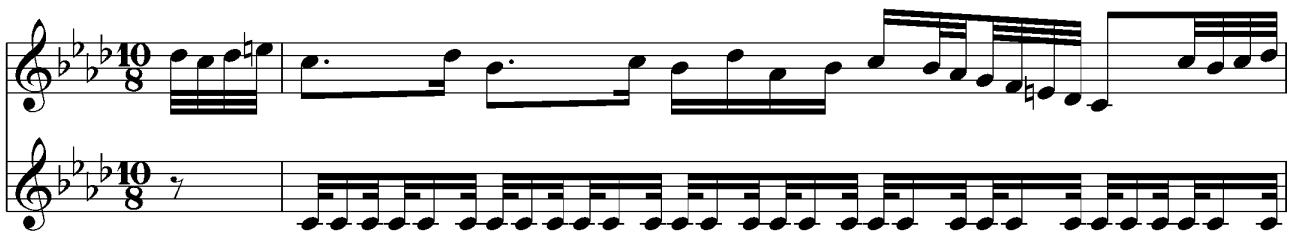
The 1<sup>st</sup> *khana* is usually in the same *maqam* of the main theme, and it serves as a preparation for the theme. In this case, I wanted the *teslim* to come with a sense of novelty, that is with a modulation, hence the first *khana* is on a different tonal centre (Si  $\flat$ ) in the mode of Nahawand. The rhythm again features the characteristic *dum-dum-tak*, shifted to a different position in the measure (7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> beats).

The melodic line is quite simple, in line with the introductory role of this section of the composition. The modulation to Do Hijaz happens with a cadence to Fa Major (dominant of Si  $\flat$ ), which produces a contrast with the first beat of the theme, in this case harmonised as Fa Minor.

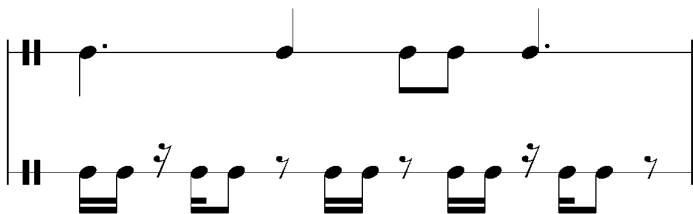
The first presentation of the *teslim* theme is given to the Oud, doubled by the clarinets, which starts on the beat, without the pick-up phrase. The theme is exposed twice, with the violins that take over in the 2<sup>nd</sup> repetition.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> *khana* modulates to a neighbouring *maqam*, Fa Nahawand. Its melodic line is structured as a call and response, which is passed through various sections of the orchestra during the two repetitions. The rhythm follows the same pattern of the *teslim*, with the *dum-dum-tak* on 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> beats.

I was keen in presenting the *teslim* in as many different ways as possible, in order to avoid a sense of repetition. The 2<sup>nd</sup> *teslim* is given to the oboes, doubled by the flutes from the 3<sup>rd</sup> bar. In addition to the quartines that were already present in the first presentation of the theme, a new rhythmic pattern is introduced by the Oud (shown below for the first measure only), with a set of descending phrases which are also reinforced by cellos and basses.



The 3<sup>rd</sup> *khana* features a drastic modulation to a distant *maqam Segah* in Si half-flat. This modulation is preceded by a few dissonant measures that serve to clear the previous tonal centre. This is the only section where the traditional Samai rhythm is present, and it is also overlapped with an unusual rhythmic pattern, assigned to the bass strings and later reinforced by the horns., and contributing to a sense of poly-rhythm (a sample measure is shown below).



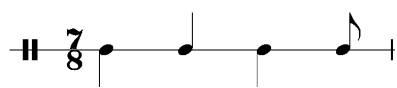
The melodic line, presented by the Oud, moves to *maqam Saba Zamzam* in Re (Saba with a flat second grade) before returning to Segah. Particular attention was needed in order to avoid tuning issues with the presence of the quarter-tone. The Si half-flat is key for this *maqam*, being its tonal centre, but can be problematic in a Western orchestra and cannot be reliably produced by some orchestral sections (winds and brass). Therefore only the viola section plays the quarter-tone with the Oud, while all other instruments underline few passages in an overall minimal arrangement.



The 3<sup>rd</sup> *teslim* features an inversion of the theme, which had already appeared in the 1<sup>st</sup> exposition, played by cello and bass sections. In this case it is brought forward by horns, oboes, violas and cellos, in a very condensed voicing of the various parts, which provides a sense of calmness in preparation for the lively 4<sup>th</sup> *khana*. Only the violins differ, sustaining high harmonics which contribute to the suspense.



The 4<sup>th</sup> *khana* is in septuple meter. This is not common, but it has already been used in notable compositions, such as the Samai Nihavent by Mesut Cemil Bey, and later by Jamil Bashir in his Samai Nahawand. The rhythmic division of the seven beats is 1-2 1-2 1-2-3.



The main theme is shown below. It presents a call and response pattern, and it is *maqam Nekriz* in Do. Given the accidentals of this *maqam*, the key signature is changed to include 3 flats (like a Western Do minor). The theme modulates to Sol Hijaz in the middle section and features various repetitions.



The section is highly contrapuntal, with the gradual addition of rhythmic parts.

After the first crescendo of the 4<sup>th</sup> *khana* theme, dynamics drop for another crescendo, which features an ascending scale overlapped with a binary rhythm, mainly played at the bottom end by double-bass and timpani, and reinforced by other sections. The resulting polyrhythm accentuates the growing tension which terminates with another drop for the final crescendo with the previous 4<sup>th</sup> *khana* theme.

The final 4<sup>th</sup> *teslim* marks the end of the piece, dying out with an expanded rhythmic cycle of 12 beats. The choice of 12 beats is due to presence of a long *fermata*, equivalent to 2 beats, at the end of each phrase. The theme is given to the oboe, and the response to the oboe d'amore, in a contrapuntal dialogue that is supported only by a very soft drone and sparse timpani hits.