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ROUNDTABLE

MUSIC, CHANTS, AND THE PERFORMANCE OF CLASS – PERSPECTIVES FROM EGYPT, PAST AND PRESENT

Zakariyya Ahmad: Authenticity in a Modernizing Period

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Zakariyya Ahmad (1896–1961) is one of the most prominent composers of modern Egypt. He is remembered today for having composed numerous songs for Um Kulthum (1904–75) and other lead Egyptian singers, and for his long collaboration with the colloquial poet and political satirist Bayram al-Tunsi (1893–1961). He also had a lasting impact on Egyptian vocal music in the early 20th century, a period defined by technological innovation and changing popular tastes. Although contemporary composers such as Muhammad ʿAbd al-Wahhab (1902–91) were considered "innovative" for blending traditional Arabic music with Western musical elements, Zakariyya Ahmad was counted as traditional: he remained loyal to the *maqām* (a system of melodic scales) while striving to preserve and develop traditional musical forms with Arabic and Egyptian *aṣāla* (authenticity). In addition to his musical contributions, Zakariyya Ahmad also played an important role in the Egyptian cinema, both as composer and actor. He was also a political activist, composing songs around national concerns.[1]

In this essay I discuss the contribution of Zakariyya Ahmad to the *dawr*, a central traditional vocal genre in urban Egyptian art music. The *dawr* is considered one of the most complex Arabic vocal genres, in both composition and performance, demanding a high quality of singing ability. This genre appeared on the Egyptian music scene in the early 19th century and reached its peak in the late 19th and early 20th centuries when it became the central part of the Egyptian *waṣla*.[2] Within this period, the *dawr* underwent a dramatic transformation, from a flexible structure with ample room for improvisation to a fully composed genre with little space for performer improvisation, until it disappeared from the Egyptian musical scene in the late 1940s. I argue that these changes were the result of technological and cultural changes in modern Egypt in the first half of the 20th century. The need to confine compositions to the time limits of 78 rpm records contributed to shortening the length of the *dawr*, and the rising popularity of new genres associated with theater and cinema, especially the *ṭaqṭūqa* (a simple strophic song), caused a change in audience taste.

[1] Abu al-Majd Sabri, *Zakariyya Ahmad* (Cairo: al-Mu'asassa al-Misriyya al-ʿAmma li-l-Ta'lif wa-l-Tarjama wa-l-Tibaʻa wa-l-Nashr, 1963); Fiktur Sahab, al-Sabʿa al-Kibar fi-l-Musiqa al-ʿArabiyya al-Muʿasira (Beirut: Dar al-'Ilm li-l-Malayin, 1987); Zayn Nassar, *Mawsuʿat al-Musiqa wa-l-Ghina' fi Misr fi-l-Qarn al-ʿAshrin, al-Juzaʾ al-Awwal* (Cairo: Dar Gharib li-l-Tibaʿa wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawziʻa, 2003); Izis Fath Allah, *Zakariyya Ahmad* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2011).

[2] *Wasla* is a set of instrumental and vocal pieces in Arab music. See Ali Jihad Racy, "The Waslah: A Compound-Form Principle in Egyptian Music," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (1983): 396–403, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41857697; and Johnny Farraj and Sami Abu Shumays, *Inside Arabic Music: Arabic Maqām Performance and Theory in the 20th Century* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019).

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Theater and cinema also created a new market that required compositions limited in length to fit the industry. Just as the recording industry contributed to shortening the length of the *dawr*, the new market caused many composers to stop composing in the genre. Despite these technical constraints, Zakariyya Ahmad tried to preserve the place of improvisation in the *dawr* by implanting short vocal improvisation known as *mawwāl* (pl. *mawāwīl*), as evidenced in the *dawr* "In Kan Fu'adi" (If My Heart). From the 1940s onward, the *dawr* ceased to be a central genre in Egyptian music as a result of changes in audiences' taste and the rise of innovative, versatile, and often Western-influenced musical forms associated with composers, including Muhammad ʿAbd al-Wahhab, Muhammad al-Qasabji (1892–1966), and others.

In the following, I discuss the life and compositional style of Zakariyya Ahmad, as well as the history of the *dawr*. I then analyze the *dawr* "In Kan Fu'adi" as an example of how the composer tried to preserve the genre in a time of massive cultural and technological changes. Finally, I discuss the reasons for the gradual fading of the *dawr* from the Egyptian music scene.

The Life and Compositional Style of Zakariyya Ahmad

> Zakariyyā Aḥmad prided himself on taking musical inspiration from working-class people. He retained his many contacts with the musicians and audiences of the middle- and lower-class quarters of Cairo. . . . His music drew on the style of performance associated with the *mashāyikh* (traditional religious singers known for their mastery of Islamic vocal music, and maqam-based improvisation), the *mawwāl*, and other styles considered to be distinctively Egyptian. Zakariyyā used clothing to signify cultural affinity, appearing frequently in a *jallābiya* (djellaba) rather than the European clothing that was more common in the theater district.[3]

By associating cultural symbols like clothing with musical content, Virginia Danielson not only emphasizes Ahmad's social class but also his musical authenticity and how much his musical style was inspired by this class. Although the first decades of 20th century were a modernizing period that involved adopting foreign ideas, Zakariyya Ahmad's middle- and lower-class–inspired musical style would survive to become a site for resistance and the preservation of Egyptian cultural values. For example, wearing the *jallābiyya* signaled Ahmad's commitment to traditional values. Following Danielson's lead, I suggest that the addition of a *mawwāl* in Zakariyya Ahmad's *dawr* "In Kan Fu'adi" was an act of asserting Egyptian musical values in this modernizing period. Even as the recording industry determined the length of the *dawr* and reduced the space for improvisation, Zakariyya Ahmad insisted on adding a *mawwāl* considered to be distinctively Egyptian.

Zakariyya Ahmad was born in Cairo on January 6, 1896 to a modest religious Muslim family. His father, Ahmad Saqr, originally a bedouin from the Merziban tribe in Fayoum, was sent by his parents to study at al-Azhar and settled in the popular al-Husayn neighborhood in Cairo. Ahmad's mother was of Turkish descent. Both enjoyed music: whereas his mother loved to sing Turkish songs, his father liked to sing *ṭarab*, a style of Arab urban art music mainly developed in Egypt in the first half of the 20th century. Ahmad's parents sent him to a Qur'an school (*kuttāb*) in the al-Husayn neighborhood when he was a child. Later, he joined al-Azhar, where he studied for seven years. At an early age he participated in religious and musical events where he listened to the greatest Qur'an

[3] Virginia Danielson, *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthūm, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 103.

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reciters (*mujāwidūn*) and singers like ʿAbd al-Hayy Hilmi (1880–1912), Yusuf al-Manyalawi (1850–1911), Ahmad Sabir (1858–1927), and others. He also studied with the master of *muwashah* (poetic musical genre thought to be of andalusian origin), Darwish al-Hariri (1881–1957).[4]

After World War I, Cairo witnessed a cultural boom, and members of the city's elite began holding meetings of cultural and musical figures in their homes. Among the most famous wealthy figures was Salih Pasha Thabit, who hosted the greatest singers of the period, such as Yusuf al-Manyalawi and Abu al-ʿUla Muhammad (1884–1942). At those meetings, young Zakariyya Ahmad blossomed.[5] He then began singing with the Shaykh ʿAli Mahmud (1880–1943) ensemble; later Shaykh Mahmud taught him the basics of *tajwīd*, a system for learning Qur'anic pronunciation. Ahmad began touring the periphery of Cairo, singing at religious events, and was exposed to Egyptian folk music. This exposure gave him a broad knowledge of folk music styles, which he recruited for his compositions.

Gradually, Ahmad left the world of religious music and moved to the more secular *ṭarab* style. He began studying with the famous composer and oud player Muhammad al-Qasabji. In his twenties, he met two people who influenced his entire musical career, composer Sayyid Darwish (1892–1923) and the legendary singer Um Kulthum. Ahmad also excelled in composing for the cinema. Beginning in the 1930s, Egyptian musical films became the main medium for composing and distributing Egyptian songs. His first film as a composer of film songs (here, for the Syrian-Egyptian singer Nadira, 1906–90) was *Unshudat al-Fu'ad* (Song of the Heart, 1932).[6] The film was directed by the Italian director Mario Volpe (1896–1968). In addition to composing the film songs, Ahmad also played the role of ʿUmar, the villain.[7] Upon his death on February 15, 1961, Zakariyya Ahmad left behind more than a thousand songs in various genres.

Ahmad's compositional style is recognized as authentically Arabic. Close examination of his compositions shows that in contrast to other composers, like Muhammad ʿAbd al-Wahhab, he never borrows or includes other musical colors. He was an Egyptian, influenced by his religious studies, mainly the art of *tajwīd.* Virginia Danielson beautifully describes his musical style: "the melodies themselves were often deceptively simple. Phrases were short, narrow in range, and free of intricate melodic motives. Zakariyya wrote in all of the genres current in his days, and his songs relied upon *maqāmāt* especially popular in Egypt [such as]: *rāst*, *bayātī*, *huzām* and *ṣabā*."[8] As other composers of his time mobilized Western rhythms, he mainly employed traditional Arabic rhythms. He composed thirty-three *adwār* (sing. *dawr*) between 1931 and 1940, almost a third of them for Um Kulthum.

The *Dawr* in Egypt

The *dawr* may be considered the most important and unique musical genre of the late 19th and the first decades of the 20th century in Egypt.[9] This genre appeared in Egypt in the early 19th century, created by Shaykh Muhammad ʿAbd al-Rahim al-Maslub.[10] Sung by a *mutrib*

[4] Sahab, *al-Sabʿa al-Kibar*, 93–95.

[5] Fath Allah, *Zakariyya Ahmad*, 87–88.

[6] Sahab, *al-Sabʿa al-Kibar*, 96–97, 105–6.

[7] For the full movie, see Mario Volpe, dir., *Unshudat al-Fu'ad*, 1932, YouTube video posted by Ahmed Ahmed, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HO-mmHjREmc&t=1275s&ab_channel=AhmedAhmed.

[8] Danielson, *Voice of Egypt*, 103–4. *Maqām* is the modal structure of Arab music and other musical cultures in north Africa and central Asia. *Rāst*, *Bayātī*, *Huzām* and *Ṣabā* are different *maqāmāt* used in Arabic music.

[9] Touma Habib, *The Music of the Arabs* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1996), 86; Faruq ʿAmmar, "Muhammad ʿUthman Ra'id al-Dawr al-Ghina'i fi Misr," in *al-Mulhin al-Kabir Muhammad ʿUthman: Dirasat Nadwat al-Ihtifal bi-Dhikrahu al-Mi'awiyya Sanat 2000*, ed. Samha al-Khuli (Cairo: al-Majlis al-Aʿla li-l-Thaqafa, 2001), 83.

[10] Kamal al-Najmi, *Turath al-Ghina' al-ʿArabi bayn al-Musili wa Zirab wa Um Kulthum wa ʿAbd al-Wahhab* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1993).

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(enchanter) and a chorus, the lyrics are usually in Egyptian dialect, and the *mutrib* is usually accompanied by the classical Arabic music ensemble (*takht*). Although initially it was both textually and melodically simple, later the *dawr* became more complex and was set to several *maqāmāt.* The final form of the genre was set by al-Maslub's two students, ʿAbduh al-Hamuli (1845–1901) and Muhammad ʿUthman (1855–1900).[11]

Initially, a *dawr* consisted of two sections, *madhhab* (refrain) and *ghuṣn* (verse); its melody was simple and usually based on one *maqām* and one rhythm.[12] However, the final form of the genre consisted of three parts, with the second and the third parts subdivided to present different musical materials. In this version, both the composer and the singer had to be very skilled musicians. In the following, I present the classical structure of the form, and then I discuss the *dawr* "In Kan Fu'adi" to explicate Zakariyya Ahmad's contribution.

The *muqaddima musīqiyya* is an instrumental opening in the main *maqām.* The main function of the *muqaddima* is to establish the basic *maqām* of the sung *dawr*; usually it is a *dulāb* (a short instrumental piece that presents a *maqām* before a song or instrumental piece).[13]

The *madhhab* usually consists of two, three, or four stanzas (*maqāti*ʿ*a*) sung by the *mutrib*, presenting three subparts. El-Shawan describes it as follows: The first musical phrase in the main *maqām*; the second musical phrase in a new *maqām*; and the third musical phrase in the same *maqām* of the second phrase or a new *maqām.*[14]

The *ghuṣn* usually consists of one or more stanzas divided into four subparts. The first phrase, sung by the main singer, repeats the first musical phrase of the *madhhab* with new text. Then the *ahāt*, the singing of the word "ah," begins a dialogue between the main singer and the chorus. The singer sings a sentence repeated by the chorus, then the main singer sings the *ahāt* once more but with new musical material, and the chorus repeats the first *ahāt*, and so on. This part ends with a final *ahāt* sung by the main singer. The *hank*, the third subpart of the *ghuṣn*, might consist of one or more stanzas in another dialogue between the main singer and the chorus, in which the main singer sings a sentence repeated by the chorus and then the main singer sings the same sentence many times with new musical material for each repetition, while the chorus repeats the first sentence of the *hank.* This part is the most important and developed part of the *dawr*, where the singer shows his musical abilities. The final part of the *ghuṣn* is the last *qafla*, a concluding sentence that consists of one stanza by the main singer in the main *maqām.*

In what follows, I analyze the *dawr* "In Kan Fu'adi" (see full transcription below) to show how Zakariyya Ahmad was committed to the classical form of the *dawr*, how the limitations of 78 rpm records forced shortening different parts of the *dawr*, and the ways in which Ahmad contributed to the development of the genre. The recording I use for this analysis is by the singer Layla Murad (1918–95).[15]

[11] Victor Sahab, *al-Anu'a wa-l-Ashkal fi al-Musiqa al-ʿArabiyya* (Beirut: Dar al-Hamra' li-l-Tubaʿa wa-l-Nashr, 1996), 86.

[12] For more on this genre, see Izis Fath Allah and Suhayr ʿAbd al-Fattah, *al-Mulhin al-Kabir Muhammad ʿUthman: Dirasat Nadwat al-Ihtifal bi-l- Thakira al-Mi'iawiyya* (Cairo: *al-Majlis al-Aʿla li-l-Thaqafa,* 2001).; Salim al-Hilu, *al-Musiqa al-Nadhriyya* (Beirut: Dar Maktabat al-Hayat, 1972); Salwa El-Shawan, "*Al-Musika al-Arabiyyah: A Category of Urban Music in Cairo, Egypt, 1927–1977*" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1980); and Sahab, *al-Sabʿa al-Kabar.*

[13] For an example of a *dulāb* opening a *dawr*, please listen to the first thirty seconds of "Yama Inta Wahishni," originally composed by Muhammad ʿUthman, sung by Sabah Fakhri (1933–2021), YouTube recording posted by Saad alla Agha Alkalaa, accessed 10 July 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o4qasS9LBwY&ab_channel=SaadallaAghaAlkalaa.

[14] El-Shawan, "al-Musika al-Arabiyyah," 268.

[15] For the recording, please see Tourath L'Maghrib, "ليلى مراد دور ان كان فؤادي شاف الهوان على 1937," YouTube recording, 26 February 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kc38cMnGF8c&ab_channel=GalaxyMT.

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"In Kan Fu'adi"

Zakariyya Ahmad composed this *dawr* in 1937, and it was recorded for the Lebanese label Baidaphon by Layla Murad. The lyrics, by the poet Ahmad Rami, are in Egyptian dialect and consist of two parts, the *madhhab* and the *ghuṣn*:

A: *al-Madhhab*
In kān fu'ādi shāf ilhawān widāʿfī ḥubbuh kutr al-asiyya
If my heart saw humiliation and tasted a lot of suffering in his love
ʿUmruh ma yinsā ayyām zamān ma dām shayifnī sʿaban ʿalāyyā
It will never forget the old days as long as it sees me suffering
Yā rayt yā āsī raḥamtī ḥālī fiḍilt āsī sahar al-layālī
If only, you cold-hearted man, you had some mercy on me, I continued suffering staying awake all nights
Ylūḥ khayālak uṣad ʿaynayya tinzil dumuʿī yisʿab ʿalāyyā
Your shadow sways before my eyes, my tears fall, I pity him
Miskīn yā ʿalbī bin al-khayāl wa bin bukāya 'allī garalī
Oh, my poor heart, between the imagination and my cry for what happened to me

B: *al-Ghuṣn*
Law kunt marra shuft al-wisāl mā kānsh hagrū yukhtur bibālī
If even once, he had shown me some kindness, his abandonment would never cross my mind
Yālli danit al-rūḥ ʿalimtī ʿaynī al-nūḥ
You who tired my soul, you caused my eyes to flood with tears
Wiḥtar fu'ādī mā bin widādī wa bin ʿazābī min tūl suhādī
My heart became confused between my sympathy and my suffering from all my sleeplessness
Wa khāf yā rūḥī min kutr nūḥī tikhlas dumūʿī wansaʿal-asiyya
Oh, my soul, I am scared the more I wail, I will lose my tears, and I will forget the sorrow

The main *maqām* of the *dawr* is *bayāt*, which confirms that Zakariyya Ahmad relied on *maqāmāt* that were popular in Egypt, as cited by Danielson earlier. The performance of the *dawr* includes two main modulations to *maqām rāst* and *nahāwand* (*maqām nahāwand is* equivalent to the minor scale in western music). This form of modulation stands on the *sayr* of *maqām bayāt*, and it demonstrates Ahmad's commitment to work within the classical frame of the *maqām.*[16] The composition lays on two common rhythms: the 6/8 *yurk samāʿī* and the 4/4 *wiḥda.* Ahmad also used the last line of the first part of the *madhhab* as *mawwāl* and a bridge to the *ghuṣn.* Although usually the *mawwāl* is sung before the song, here Ahmad uses it as a transition vehicle. Ahmad was the only composer who used this technique in a *dawr.*

Usually, *dawr* start with a *dulāb* or *muqaddima musīqiyya*, as in "Kadni al-Hawa" (Love Deluded Me).[17] In this *dawr*, the *muqaddima* is fifty-two seconds, but in the *dawr* "In Kan Fu'adi" the shortened *muqaddima* extends for only nine seconds (three musical bars) on the main *maqām* (Fig. 1), a result of how the *dawr* introduction was compressed to accommodate

[16] *Sayr al-maqām* is the melodic direction or the "behavior" of a *maqām.*

[17] Listen for example to the opening of the *dawr* "Kadni al-Hawa," live performance by ʿAbbas al-Bilidi (1910–96), originally composed by Muhammad ʿUthman. It begins with a *dulāb* (first 52 seconds) followed by a *layālī* (vocal improvisation on the world layl "night" in classical Arabic) and the singing of the *dawr.* YouTube video posted by Abdullah M, accessed 10 July 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HbUepxf45VI&t=281s&ab_channel=AbdullahM.

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Figure 1. Short *muqaddima* of "In Kan Fu'adi" in *maqām bayāt.* Transcription by the author.

recording limitations. Although the performance of "Kadni al-Hawa" lasts for twenty minutes, the recording of "In Kan Fu'adi" lasts for almost six minutes.

The first singing part starts on bars 4–24 (see Fig. 2, the full transcription of the *dawr*) where the composer introduces the main *maqāmāt*, *bayāt* and *rāst*, which falls in the *sayr* of *maqām bayāt.* The *mawwāl* starts its free rhythm on bar 25, and the *ghuṣn* starts at bar 29, continuing through the end of the *dawr.* This part includes the *ahāt* (bars 38–50) and the *hank* (bars 51–86). Ahmad then moves to a shortened *ahāt* (bars 87–96). The *dawr* ends with the last phrase on the main *maqām* (bars 98–103). To conclude, this brief analysis demonstrates how Zakariyya Ahmad was committed to the *maqām* behavior (*sayr)*, the classical form of the genre, and the place of improvisation (by adding the *mawwāl*), and how he tried to preserve the tradition and at the same time shorten the *dawr* to fit onto a record.

The Disappearance of the *Dawr*

Two main factors were responsible for the changes in Egypt's early 20th-century musical life: the rise of musical theater and changes in recording technology.[18] At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, musical theater emerged as a central site of entertainment for Egyptians and was responsible for a change of audience musical taste.[19] Gradually, Egyptians shifted from an intimate tradition of home concerts, primarily associated with elites and accompanied by the *takht*, to large ensembles in concert venues available to broader range of classes. At the same time, the theater became the major source of income for writers and composers, reducing the number of composers working in complicated forms like the *dawr.* Without audiences or composers, the *dawr* struggled.

Changes in technology further undermined the *dawr* as a genre. The limitations of 78 rpm records demanded shorter versions of the genre, meaning less opportunity for the improvisation that live performance enabled. Whereas a live performance of a *dawr* could last over twenty minutes, now, because each 78 rpm recording was limited to two to three minutes, each *dawr* had to be recorded on a number of record discs.[20] This led to the presentation of many *adwār* in truncated forms. Further, audiences listened to these recordings on their own phonographs instead of live performances by musicians. Without the interaction between the performer and the audience, performing the *dawr* suffered the absence of ecstatic feedback, the aesthetic foundation of Arabic music in general and of the *dawr* in particular.[21]

[18] Ali Jihad Racy, "Record Industry and Egyptian Traditional Music: 1904–1932," *Ethnomusicology* 20, no. 1 (1976): 23–48; Walter Armbrust, "The Impact of the Media on Egyptian Music," in *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, vol. 6, ed. Virginia Danielson, Scott Marcus, and Dwight Reynolds (New York: Routledge, 2002), 233–41.

[19] Danielson, *Voice of Egypt*, 45; Raphael Cormack, *Midnight in Cairo: The Divas of Egypt's Roaring '20s* (London: Saqi Books, 2021), 72–73.

[20] Listen for example to the same *dawr* "Kadni al-Hawa," recorded by Yusuf al-Manyalawi, YouTube video posted by Issa Mitri, accessed 10 July 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t7MFHfNL4wc&ab_channel=IssaMitri. Although earlier this *dawr* was performed live by ʿAbbas al-Bilidi and lasted over twenty minutes, now to make a recording that contains a full performance of the *dawr*, it was recorded over four disc sides, as mentioned in the description of the video (seconds 0.07–0.15).

[21] Armbrust, "Impact of the Media," 234.

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Figure 2. Full transcription of *dawr* in "In Kan Fu'adi." Transcription by the author.

This change of performance context caused a decline in the prestige of the long *wasla* that characterized musical life at the end of the 19th century, further undermining the popularity of genres like the *dawr.*

To conclude, the *dawr* as an authentic Egyptian genre survived until the 1940s thanks to Zakariyya Ahmad, the last major composer of the genre. Ahmad's background, associated with the world of *tajwīd* and the *mashāyikh*, gave him a solid musical base that charted his

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Figure 2. Continued.

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Figure 2. Continued.

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path. His studies with the famous musicians and *mashāyikh* of his time gave him an immense knowledge of the theory of *maqāmāt.* This skill contributed to his unique style and musical aesthetics, which were considered authentic and Egyptian. As his composition "In Kan Fu'adi" demonstrates, he attempted to preserve the authenticity of the *dawr* as an Egyptian form despite the constraints of new recording technologies and the resultant changes in audience taste.

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