

# A Review of Music and Rhythm (from a belly dancer's point of view) By Roxann (Ann Sabin)

This paper is organized into two sections. The first section is a very basic introduction to music and notation, and has a general application. The second section applies the first section's vocabulary and knowledge to middle eastern rhythms heard in belly dancing music.

## Section 1: Basic Music and Notation Definitions

Definitions (from The Clark New Pocket Music Dictionary, 1979)

- Chorus:        The refrain of a song
- Measure:      The metrical unit [basic divider - a.s.] in music with regular accents.
- Note:         Sign with which music is written [to express relative time and pitch value; what to play]
- Phrase:      A unit of music...somewhat comparable to a clause or sentence in prose. [like a statement in writing]
- Rest:         Silence; pause
- Verse:        A stanza [a collection of phrases which "go together", commonly used for groupings of words]

For the most part, music can be divided into Measures. There are some styles, most usually non western, which do not rely on the structure provided by musical measures. The number of beats in a measure is called the Time Signature. It is written as a fraction, and is one of the first things seen on a piece of sheet music. Verbally, we say the names of the numbers in the fraction; we say "four four" to represent the fraction 4/4, for example. These numbers are defined as follows:

"The top number means how many beats in each measure; the bottom number means what kind of a note receives one beat." (The Clark New Pocket Music Dictionary, 1979)

The bottom number is important to musicians; for our dancing, the necessity is to be able to identify how many beats are in a measure, then how many beats are in a phrase.

In western music the most common time signature is 4/4; that is, using 4 beats for each measure (the top number). Take for example "Mary had a Little Lamb":

Ma -ry had a li-ttle lamb  
1    2    3    4    1    2    3    4

There is no word associated with the second 4, but we know that we sing "lamb" across both beats 3 and 4. In sheet music, a Note would tell us the word is sung for two beats. There can also be a Rest in music, which is when nothing is played or sung for a beat. It is simply a pause in the music.

Following 4/4 in popularity is probably 3/4, the waltz. The Tennessee Waltz, for example:

I was waltz - ing with my dar - ling  
1 + 2 3 1 + 2 3

Often, you will hear sets of measures repeated as a group. In school music classes, we learn the names verse and chorus. These sections can be broken down even further into phrases. In "Happy Birthday":

Happy Birthday to You  
Happy Birthday to You  
Happy Birthday dear Ann  
Happy Birthday to You

Singing the melody, we see that lines 1 and 2 are identical. Line 4 is very similar. Line 3 is different. Each line could be called a phrase, and as in the case of 1 and 2, phrases can (and often do) repeat.

In the 3/4 example, and phrasing example, you probably noticed that the four beats in the measure weren't the only ones used; some were split in half. This is common in all music, and the beats can be split into thirds or fourths as well. In counting aloud the beats in the first line of "Happy Birthday" we say the following:

Ha - ppy Birth - day to you  
1 + 2 3 1 2 3

and we actually say, "one and two three", remembering to hold the note (where the "+" would be) between 2 and 3. The "+" between 2 and 3 exists, it is just silent in this case. This will be common in the Middle Eastern rhythms. We will use this numeric notation later, and in the case of phrases, count out the whole phrase.

## Part 2. Middle Eastern Rhythms.

The common western patterns can also be found in Middle Eastern music. The significant difference is that western music tends to emphasize every beat or every other beat in an even fashion. Middle Eastern music, on the other hand, places emphasis in places alien to the untrained (unaware?) western ear. It also gives us the Kashlimar (9/8), as well as seta (6/8) and the taqsim (no beat). With the exception of the taqsim, we will discuss them in terms of what we hear on the dombek, or drum.

Beledi (Balady):

Beledi is a word for "village" or "country"; the beledi dance is the dance of the country folk. This rhythm is very common and can be heard in many fast paced, multi-instrumental pieces. It occurs in 4/4 time (four beats to a measure, remember), and in phrases of two measures each. The rhythm is as follows:

1 2 3 + 4 5 6 + 7

The 8th count is silent; the musician counts it in her head but does not play it. A minor variation fills in this space, and uses the 8 as a connector to the next phrase:

1 2 3 + 4 5 6 + 7 8 +

There are many other variations on the Beledi, and some of them have their own names. There are also other 4/4 rhythms which are more complex.

Chiftitelli (Ciftitelli):

Chiftitelli is also in 4/4 time and has a phrase of two measures, but is a rhythm played slowly compared to the Beledi. Along in our belly dancing music, it can be found in Turkish music as a couples dance. The rhythm is as follows:

1 2 + + 4 5 6 7

Again, the 8th count is silent. The first measure (counts 1 through 4) often has many variations, but the last measure (counts 5 through 8) almost always has the 5 6 7 beats dominant. There may be embellishments, but they are not usually strong deep sound, as the 5 6 7 are.

Kashlimar (Karshlimar, Karsilama):

The Kashlimar is a 9/8 rhythm from Turkey. The Greeks adopted it as well and have three person folk dances using it. Its phrase is one measure, in terms of drumming, but the melody may use multiple measures (as is the case with any rhythm pattern). The rhythm is as follows:

1 3 5 7 8 9

**Some people count this aloud as "1 2 3 123". A common variation is:**

1 + 2 3 + 4 5 + 6 7 8 9

Seta:

Seta is the Arabic word for six; this is a 6/8 rhythm. If you do a little math and divide 6/8 by 2/2, you get 3/4. The counting is actually the same as 3/4 if you leave out any accents. The count is straight forward:

1 2 3 4 5 6

Often the rhythm is accented on the 1st and 4th counts, more strongly on the 4th count. As a result it is sometimes counted "one and a two and a".

Taqsim (Takseem):

Elizabeth Artemis Mourat has the most straight forward definition for a taqsim that I have seen:

"A taqsim is an improvised piece of music or dance that has no rhythm. It is the musicians' solo part of a song or it may be the entire song."

A taqsim is played without rhythm instruments, and is often a solo played by one musician on one instrument. It is traditionally a slow piece of music. A taqsim doesn't have the same type of structure as other types of music, and can therefore be intimidating. No beat to follow, no backup music or singing. This is also a liberating aspect of the taqsim; you are free to do as you wish. The taqsim is an ideal place in the music to play with personal expression, and to listen to how the music asks you to move. Each dancer approaches a taqsim differently; there are just as many "right" ways as there

are dancers.

It can help your dancing to be able to pick out the rhythm and the phrases. By knowing these things, we can structure the type of moves we do, and the number of times we do something, for example. To learn to recognize the patterns, listen to any music. Try to pick out the phrases, and count out the beats. If you're listening to western music (anything from Baroque to modern), listen for the 4/4 measure. With Middle Eastern music, especially when the album was produced for belly dancing, the album cover may note which rhythm pattern is being used. It's not cheating to know beforehand what you're looking for in a particular piece; when just starting out, it's invaluable. Listen for strong notes, louder sounding notes and phrases. I think it will enhance your dancing, as well as your enjoyment of music. However much you want to delve into this is up to you. It is fun to be able to walk into a performance and recognize the music being played, AND is a great help when you're "jamming", ad-libbing. Good Luck!!

-Roxann

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