

The Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East

Greece, Israel and Palestine

This large area encompasses a huge variety of musical traditions. We are going to focus on Greek folk music, as well as traditional music from Israel and Palestine.



GREECE FACT FILE

- Greece is considered to be the birthplace of European literature, philosophy, art and music.
- The official religion is Christianity; many Greeks attend the Greek Orthodox Church.
- Many Greek myths have been turned into operas by composers such as Mozart, Handel and Stravinsky.
- Modern Greek songs are strongly influenced by folk music.

Greek folk music

Folk music in Greece consists of both dances and songs. Greek folk music, particularly dances, are heard at celebrations and other social events. Folk songs might be heard in cafés, restaurants or bars across the country and its islands.



Features of Greek folk music

Instruments

The **bouzouki** is a stringed instrument that has three or four pairs of strings. These strings are either tuned to the same note, or an octave apart, to give the bouzouki its distinctive sound. It is most often used as a melody instrument, and often plays distinctive slides and **tremolos** in 3rds. Here is an example of idiomatic (typical) bouzouki playing, presented in notation and guitar tab:

tremolo chord
↓

The image shows musical notation and guitar tab for a bouzouki piece. The notation is in 4/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It shows a G major chord, a tremolo G chord, and a final G major chord. The guitar tab below shows the fretting for each chord: G (9-11, 10-12), tremolo G (9-11, 10-12), and G (12-13, 10-12, 10-12, 14-12). An orange arrow points to the tremolo chord in the notation.

Among the many percussion instruments used in Greek folk music you will find the **defi**, a hand drum with bangles attached.

Rhythm

Many Greek songs and dances use irregular rhythms and time signatures, like $\frac{5}{8}$ or $\frac{7}{8}$. They are often accented in the following ways:

$\frac{5}{8}$: 1 2 3 4 5

$\frac{7}{8}$: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Clap the rhythms with their accents. You will soon gain an understanding of Greek music's rhythmic feel.

Here is a table summarising the most important musical features of Greek folk music:

Melody	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It uses simple melodies with lots of ornamentation. Melodies move by step and cover a relatively small range. The melodies are lyrical, i.e. expressive and enjoyable to sing. The scales are similar to major and minor scales, with some chromatic alterations. Often melodies are harmonised by another part playing a 3rd higher.
Tonality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greek music uses diatonic major and minor chords. The tonic (I) and dominant (V) notes of each chord are emphasised by the bass instrument. There is some modulation to other keys (often the relative major or minor).
Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Short sections. Sections are repeated.
Timbre and articulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are lots of stringed instruments, which are either bowed or plucked. Tremolo and slides are a feature. A wide range of hand percussion instruments may be used. Several wind instruments are employed, resembling recorders and clarinets.
Texture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The melody line is prominent, with accompaniment. Off-beat chords are a feature.
Tempo, metre and rhythm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Irregular time signatures ($\frac{5}{8}$, $\frac{7}{8}$), although simple time ($\frac{2}{4}$, $\frac{3}{4}$, $\frac{4}{4}$) is also common. Often the music is created for dancing.

Greek song: 'Thalassaki Mou'

To help explain some of Greek music's distinctive features, an extract of the melody from a traditional folk tune, 'Thalassaki Mou', is shown below:

Note the following points, which are typical of Greek folk music:

- The piece is in $\frac{7}{8}$, an irregular time signature.
- The melody has a narrow range, making it easy to sing.
- The piece is in a minor key (G minor), although the harmony briefly modulates to the relative major (B \flat major) in bar 4, creating contrast.

An excellent performance of this piece can be found by looking for the version by Yannis Parios online (on YouTube, Spotify, etc.). This version contains more typical features of traditional Greek music.

Listen to the Yannis Parios recording and note the following:

- The piece begins with a traditional drum, the **doumbek**, playing a pattern in $\frac{7}{8}$.
- The piece contains the doumbek, bouzouki, violin, bass and vocals: typical instrumentation for this style.
- The vocals and violin often play in dialogue, one after the other, or at the same time. The violinist plays an improvised, decorated version of the basic tune.
- The rhythm emphasises beats 1 and 4.
- The vocalist makes use of **melisma**, singing several notes per syllable.
- There are three main sections in the song, all of which are repeated.



COMPOUND TIME SIGNATURES

In Western music, compound time signatures like $\frac{6}{8}$ or $\frac{9}{8}$ are almost always organised into groups of three quavers (1 2 3 4 5 6 or 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9).

In Mediterranean and Middle Eastern music, no such stipulation exists, and the beats can be divided up in different ways.

Here is an example of a Greek rhythm, 'Karsilama', which divides $\frac{9}{8}$ as 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9:



N.B. You won't need to know the $\frac{9}{8}$ time signature for your exam – but hopefully the rhythm above gives you an idea of how Mediterranean and Middle Eastern rhythms work.

COMPOSING IN A GREEK STYLE

Compose a piece in $\frac{7}{8}$, in C major.

Use the following 8-bar chord progression:

C	C	F	G7
C	C	G7	C

Use the following rhythmic ideas to build your melody. Use a C major scale (C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C), but add accidentals if you think they work:



Add a bass line and chords.

EXTENSION: Add another melody a 3rd higher than your original tune, to create a harmony part.

EXTENSION: Add a second section in the relative minor (A minor). For this section, you could use the chords Am, Dm and E7.

FURTHER LISTENING

The following albums contain a huge range of Greek folk music (available via streaming services and YouTube):

- Various artists: *The Rough Guide to Greek Café* (World Music Network)
- Various artists: *Greek Folk Songs and Dances* (Music Mirror)
- Aggelos Arvanitis: *The Most Famous Songs and Dances from Greek Islands* (AERAKIS).

Israeli and Palestinian folk music

Israel and Palestine share a complex and difficult history.

Many regions in these two states have changed hands in recent history, yet they share many musical traditions.

As well as their political history, the diverse religious and cultural history of this region means that Arabic, Jewish and Christian influences have shaped its music, as well as traditions from neighbouring countries in the Middle East, the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa. We will look at instruments and musical features, then delve into specific styles that relate to these regions.

Features of Palestinian and Israeli folk music

Melody makers and drones

The Middle East has a rich history of vocal music. In Arabic music, songs are often accompanied by an **oud** – a pear-shaped stringed instrument, similar in construction to the European lute. There are many different types of oud. Typically they use 11 strings, tuned in five pairs with one ‘drone’ sounding string. The oud functions as both an accompaniment and a melody instrument, and is played with a pick.



MODES

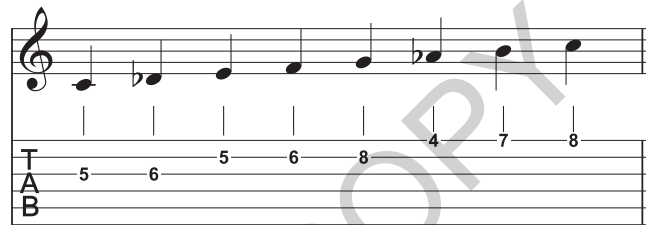
A mode is a type of scale. Traditional melodies from around the world often use modes, rather than conventional major or minor scales. 'Modal' music is sometimes accompanied by a drone.

Ouds also feature in Israeli music, although to a much lesser extent, as Israeli music has taken on many more Western musical instruments, such as the guitar and the piano.

Melody in Arabic music is often based on *maqam*. Maqam is a system of melodic **modes** or scales. It works in a similar way to raga in Indian classical music. Many Arabic scales contain microtones – notes between the semitones of Western classical music. As such, it is difficult to demonstrate these scales on Western instruments. Included below is a scale which approximates the sound of Arabic music:

The double harmonic scale, known to Western musicians as the 'Arabic scale':

Acoustic
Guitar



This scale is also commonly used in Israeli music, albeit under a different name. The famous Jewish song 'Hava Nagila' uses the double harmonic scale.

EXPERIMENT

Play a sustained C and G, and improvise using the 'Arabic scale'. The following techniques are commonly used:

- Hammer-ons and pull-offs (for guitarists and other string players).
- Slides and note bends.
- Repeated notes and short phrases.

Arabic rhythm makers

The **doumbek** (also known as a **darbuka**) is one of many goblet-shaped drums found in Arabic and Middle Eastern music. Compared with the African djembe (which is also goblet-shaped), it is played with a lighter touch and can produce an even greater range of sounds. Doumbek players often use their fingertips to create drum rolls and other percussive sounds.

There are three main sounds associated with doumbek-playing:

- **Doum (D)** A low-tone played in the centre with the right hand.
- **Tek (T)** A high-tone played on the edge with the right hand.
- **Ka (K)** A high-tone played on the edge with the left hand.

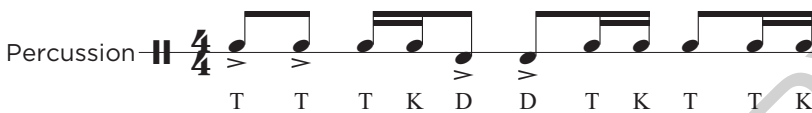
Rhythmic patterns

A rhythmic pattern in Arabic music is called a *wazn*. Similar to tala in Indian classical music, there are hundreds of them, of differing lengths and in different time signatures. Here are some basic Arabic rhythms that can be played on any hand drum:

Maqsum A basic rhythm that occurs throughout the Middle East:



Saidi An upbeat folk rhythm, here with fills included:



Try combining these rhythms with melodic ideas using the Arabic scale on the previous page. Lots of Palestinian music contains only melody and rhythm, with chords and other harmonic devices only coming into play when the music is combined with other traditions. Improvisation is an important feature and you will often hear a piece begin with an improvisation, free of tempo.

TEST YOURSELF

'Nawwâr'

Le Trio Joubran: 'Nawwâr' (available on the album *The Rough Guide to the Music of Palestine*, or on YouTube, and on their album *AsFâr*).

Le Trio Joubran plays traditional Palestinian music, using the instruments, scales and rhythms described in this section.

Listen to 'Nawwâr'. Answer the following questions:

1. When the drums enter, what is the time signature: $\frac{2}{4}$, $\frac{4}{4}$ or $\frac{6}{8}$?
2. What is the name of a repeated pattern, as played by the oud in this extract?
3. What is the name of the technique heard on the oud from 2:08 onwards, where fast repeated notes are played?
4. Listen from 2:35 to 3:15. Which of the following statements are true?
 - i. The tempo decreases
 - ii. The metre changes to compound time
 - iii. The texture is polyrhythmic

See answers on page 174.

Israeli folk dances

Features of Mediterranean and Palestinian music (such as the oud and irregular time signatures) do appear in some Jewish and Israeli music.

However, Israeli music is commonly associated with the lively style of dancing that takes place at Jewish weddings and bar mitzvah ceremonies.

These dances commonly have the following features:

- A $\frac{2}{4}$ or $\frac{4}{4}$ time signature
- A bass part (normally bass guitar) playing every crotchet beat, often playing the root and 5th of the relevant chord
- A chord instrument playing chords on the off-beat
- A fast tempo
- A gradual accelerando (speeding up) throughout the performance.

In addition, Israeli folk dances have the following characteristics:

- Melodies are played on the clarinet, violin and accordion, often using grace notes and pitch bends to create a distinctive sound.
- Melodic decoration and ornamentation is prevalent.

TEST YOURSELF

‘Hora Medura’

‘Hora Medura’ is an Israeli dance, performed at weddings. Listen to the version by Effi Netzer from *Let’s Dance! Israeli Folk Dances (Vol. 2)* and answer the questions:

1. The piece begins with which two instruments?
2. How would you describe the the rhythm of the guitar part that accompanies the melody?
3. Describe the rhythm of the bass guitar part throughout the extract.
4. Which instrument plays the melody, as well as the accordion?
5. What happens to the tempo of the melody as the extract progresses?
6. Which of these is a likely time signature for this piece?

- i. $\frac{2}{4}$ ii. $\frac{3}{4}$ iii. $\frac{6}{8}$

See answers on page 174.

PERFORMANCE TASK

Let's look more closely at 'Hora Medura', and perform this traditional Israeli folk dance.

The musical score is written in 2/4 time and consists of two sections, A and B. Section A (measures 1-8) starts with a Dm chord and features a melodic line with eighth notes and a dotted quarter note. Section B (measures 9-16) starts with a Gm chord and features a similar melodic line. The score includes chord symbols (Dm, A7, Gm, D, C) and measure numbers (1, 5, 9, 13).

Produce a performance of this piece. How you construct the additional parts is up to you, but the table below will give you some ideas:

Melody	Choice of instrument? Any ornamentation/decoration? Add technical features like pitch bends, slides or tremolo?
Bass line	Use tonic and dominant of the chord (root and 5th).
Chords	Choice of instrument? Off-beat chords.
Rhythm	Use of a typical Middle Eastern style of rhythm? A more Western rock rhythm?
Structure	How many times will you repeat each section? Will you have some sections without chords, just melody and rhythm only? Will you slow down/speed up your performance?
Technology	Could you add a drum machine, samples or a synthesiser?

Use this very simple tune to produce a piece that reflects both the tradition it comes from, and you as a musician.

COMPARISON QUESTION

Extract A: André Rieu - 'Hava Nagila', live in Maastricht (search on YouTube 'Rieu Hava Nagila Maastricht') 0:00-1:00

Extract B: Effi Netzer and the Beit Rothschild Singers - 'Hava Nagila' (from the album *This is Israel - Israeli Folk Songs and Dances*) 0:00-1:00

1. What Western ensemble is used to accompany Extract A? (1)
2. Compare the use of the singers in both extracts. (4)
3. What woodwind instrument plays the melody at some points in Extract B? (1)
4. Compare the rhythm of the melody in both extracts. (2)
5. Name an instrumental technique used by the clarinet in Extract A. (1)
6. Which of these extracts is the most 'authentic'? Give two reasons. (3)

See answers on page 174.

FURTHER LISTENING

The *Rough Guide* series provides an excellent overview of the music of the Arabic world, and beyond:

- *The Rough Guide to Arabic Café*
- *The Rough Guide to the Music of Palestine*
- *The Rough Guide to Klezmer.*