

Music, censorship and the state: the case of Egypt's Musicians' Syndicate

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Introduction

In February 2020, Egypt's state-affiliated Musicians' Syndicate¹ announced that they were banning an entire musical genre known as *mahraganat*, an electronic style that emerged in the early 2000s from Cairo's working-class neighbourhoods. The decision was taken when a song called "Bint al-Giran" ("The Neighbour's Daughter") by Hassan Shakosh and Omar Kamal went viral. Head of the Syndicate, Hani Shakir, announced that the ban was necessary as the lyrics, which included the line "if you leave me... I'll drink alcohol and smoke hashish," were representative of the problematic genre as a whole, a genre that he saw as 'encouraging moral decline' and 'threatening public taste' (Farouk, 2020). This decision is merely the most recent in a series of incidents, from banning heavy metal concerts to arresting scantily clad female singers, which have seen the Syndicate play an increasingly censorial role within Egypt's music scene. But perhaps the most restrictive encroachment is their regulation, enshrined in law, that any musician wishing to perform must first pass an audition in front of a Syndicate committee, which grants them Syndicate membership.² Violating the law (i.e. by performing without the requisite membership) is punishable by 'at least one month and no more than three months in prison and/or a fine of at least 2,000LE [£100] and no more than 20,000LE [£1000] (Ezzat, al-Haqq and Fazulla, 2014, p. 45). Unsurprisingly, many musicians stridently oppose the Syndicate's actions, as expressed by journalist Charles Akl who feels they are 'mutilating the lifeless corpse of [Egypt's] music scene' (Akl, 2015).

However, when I began ethnographic research in Cairo with singers and musicians on the wedding and nightclub scene who perform a style known as *sha'bi* (a kind of musical predecessor to the banned *mahraganat*), I was astonished to find that the majority of my interlocutors vociferously supported the Syndicate. This seemed even more puzzling after I began working as a violinist with several of these bands, and I saw on a day-to-day basis

¹ 'The Musicians' Syndicate' is a translation from the Arabic *niqabat al-mihan al-musiqiyya*, or *al-niqaba* for short. It is sometimes also translated as 'the Musicians' Union.'

² The auditionee must perform a piece and answer some simple questions about music theory.

how restrictive the Syndicate's laws were for these musicians (some of whom didn't have membership), and how much time and energy was put into negotiating and evading their restrictions. Why did these musicians support an institution that appears to do them harm and restrict their freedom of creative expression, and which musicians in other genres found so deeply objectionable? Why were their working lives filled with, on the one hand, discussions about how to evade the Syndicate's restrictions, and on the other, constant calls for increasing their reach and complaints that they weren't doing enough?

This paper seeks to answer these questions, drawing on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork as well as conversations with Syndicate officials. I begin by reviewing literature on music and censorship, before outlining how the Syndicate's restrictions impact *sha'bi* musicians. I then propose several factors that explain their positive attachment to the Syndicate: self-interest, validation of their musicianship, and a genuine belief that restrictions are necessary in the interest of raising cultural standards. I conclude the paper by drawing on scholarship that acknowledges the 'productive' elements of censorship in order to help understand the situation in Egypt. What follows not only sheds light the reality of cultural production in contemporary Egypt, but also prompts a broader reconsideration of scholarly approaches to popular music censorship. As I outline below, existing literature has a problematic tendency to reduce the issue of censorship to a simplistic dichotomy of 'repressive top-down state' versus 'liberal freedom-fighting musician,' which does not account for my interlocutors' support of the Syndicate, thus necessitating a reconceptualisation of what we mean by censorship, as well as assumed dichotomous divisions between 'the censors' and 'the censored.'

Scholarship on music and censorship

Popular music censorship is a topic very much in vogue. Two edited collections on the topic have recently been published (Kirkegaard *et al.*, 2017; Hall, 2018), which build on earlier volumes such as Cloonan and Drewett (2006), Korpe (2004), and Cloonan and Garofalo (2003). The chapters contained in these volumes traverse wide temporal and geographical

plains, from the European enlightenment to contemporary rock music in China. Given that the Middle East and North Africa is ‘the region with the greatest number of incidents [of music censorship]’ (Bastian and Laing, 2003, p. 47), it is the focus of surprisingly few of the chapters in the above volumes.³ With regards to Egypt, scholars have tended to focus more on how the state has used music to increase its popularity, for example in the 1950s, singer Umm Kulthum came to represent the ‘voice of Egypt’ as well as pan-Arab unity, and her close association with the Nasser regime proved mutually beneficial (Danielson, 1997; Lohman, 2011). Beyond some recent policy-oriented documents (Ezzat, al-Haqq and Fazulla, 2014; Fazulla, 2017) there is a relative lack of engagement with contemporary censorship and responses to it, a topic that seems particularly pressing as since President al-Sisi’s rise to power in 2013, the country has witnessed increasing repression and curtailed freedom of expression, arguably marking an end to any gains made during the revolutionary movements of 2011.⁴

Within literature on censorship more broadly, there is a strong focus on state or religious repression of explicitly politically ‘oppositional’ music, especially in studies of Middle Eastern music, which has historically as today been subject to severe and explicit forms of suppression. Scholars often make clear their political allegiances to their interlocutors and their fight for freedom of expression. This activist-scholarship that has come to define this academic sub-field is admirable, and has sometimes tangibly benefited musicians, for example helping raise their profile and contributing to successful asylum claims. But politically oppositional music constitutes just a small proportion of music produced in Egypt, and the above literature does not offer grounds for understanding the Syndicate’s restrictions which go far beyond politically oppositional song, extending to any musician they

³ There is a chapter each on Afghanistan, Iran, Lebanon, Palestine, Israel and Turkey in Korpe’s volume (2004); a chapter on Turkey and Egypt/Morocco in Kirkegaard’s (2017); and a chapter on Iran in Hall’s (2018). Baily’s article on Afghanistan (2001) is also worth mentioning as an important early contribution to the topic.

⁴ There is more attention paid to censorship of other artistic forms in Egypt, both in Arabic- and English-language scholarship. See for example Bayoumy (2002), Farid (2002), Walters (2016), and El Khachab (2017) on film censorship; and Jacquemond (2004) and Mehrez (2008, chaps 9–12) on literary censorship.

deem musically unworthy during the obligatory auditions; restrictions that my interlocutors condoned. As mentioned above, the scholarly focus on oppositional music has also resulted in a rather dichotomous picture of ‘top-down repressive state’ versus ‘liberal freedom-fighting musician,’ which obscures the complexities and contradictions that characterise the situation in Egypt. I seek to extend work that moves beyond this opposition, as Noriko Manabe (2016) has done by considering cases of self-censorship in Japan following the Fukushima nuclear disaster, and Cloonan (2003) and Jones (2003) have done by highlighting the increasingly censorial impact of market forces.

Evading the Syndicate

The first time I became aware of the Syndicate’s presence in my interlocutors’ lives was at a somewhat seedy cabaret in downtown Cairo in 2018. I had been interviewing percussionist Gaber about the repertoire his band performed and stayed to listen to them play the beginning of their gruelling 6pm-6am set, during which they entertained revellers and provided backing music for a belly-dancer. I was enjoying their lively performance, a mixture of *sha‘bi* hits from the 1970s to the present day and covers of more classical Arabic songs played in a *sha‘bi* style, characterised by a driving *maqsoom* beat and fast pace. Suddenly at around 11pm, Gaber rushed off stage in the middle of a song at the prompting of one of the waiters, and dashed into the backstage toilets. A couple of minutes later, the waiter approached the rest of the band who had remained on stage (a keyboard player, *tabla* player and singer) and they handed over their Syndicate membership cards, which were then presented to two officials who were waiting by the bar. I didn’t understand what was happening at the time, but Gaber later explained that the bouncer at the entrance to the cabaret had (correctly) suspected the two men were from the Syndicate based on their appearance, and had called up to the waiters to alert the musicians, giving non-Syndicated musicians to get off stage and hide out the back, in order to avoid a fine. This happened a lot—Syndicate officials frequently did spot-checks on nightclubs, cabarets and hotels, making sure that all performers were Syndicate members, and fining them if not.

These evasion techniques were not always successful, however. Gaber had been fined quite often, and even spent a few nights in prison when the venue refused to pay his fine. He explained that the Syndicate officials changed the sum of the fine depending on the band and the event: 'if it's somewhere like this, with musicians like us, wearing normal clothes—you know, you can tell we're paupers (*ghalbanean*)—' he said with a slight smirk, 'they'll take a couple of hundred pounds... but if it was a upscale hotel with a really famous singer and everyone's wearing suits, they would demand much more.' Once the Syndicate official has named his price, it is down to the band manager to negotiate. For band managers, this was factored in as a necessary cost of running a band: Mostafa, who started out as a percussionist but now mainly works managing the bands for dancer Safinaz and *sha'bi* singer Mahmoud al-Husseini explained to me that 'it's normal... you just pay them three or four hundred pounds and they leave you alone; everyone's happy.' I wondered why Gaber didn't just do the audition and gain membership, as it would save the hassle of incidents like this. He waved off the idea, saying he intended to, but hadn't found the time. Mutual acquaintances, however, suggested that he was scared to audition—he was a percussionist, so might struggle to answer the questions about *maqamat* (Arabic melodic modes).

Interestingly though, even when musicians faced negative repercussions for their non-membership, they did not tend to complain about the Syndicate and their restrictive laws, they instead blame the band manager's failure to negotiate their way out of the situation, as I witnessed one night whilst playing violin in dancer Safinaz's band for a party at an upscale hotel. No-one noticed the arrival of two Syndicate officials, and as several members of the band didn't have membership, they were landed with a hefty fine.



Figures 1: *Dancer Safinaz shortly before the Syndicate officials arrived. Photo by author.*

After the set, as the band stood outside the hotel smoking cigarettes and debriefing on the evening's events, the org player complained that 'because they were distracting us collecting our membership cards, it messed up the set. We didn't come in with the dancer's exit music at the right time.' It surprised me that this was the extent of their annoyance at the Syndicate—merely complaining that it interrupted the flow of their performance. The keyboardist explicitly blamed the band manager, Mostafa: 'why didn't he warn us they were coming, so we could have got off stage and hidden?! It's his fault.' This prompted a broader discussion about the bad management of the band: 'remember that time the bus broke down?' someone quipped, 'and Mostafa made us get out on the motorway and push it until the engine started? We arrived at the hotel all sweaty and dusty. It's not professional at all, but they're so stingy they don't want to pay for good quality buses.' The band uniformly

blamed the manager for not knowing how to evade the system, and repeatedly told me that it's not the fault of the Syndicate—they're just trying to protect and elevate good music.

Supporting the Syndicate

Why did my interlocutors seem to have such a strong positive attachment to the Syndicate, in contrast to musicians in other genres, and in contradiction to the difficulties it quite clearly caused them? Here, I propose three reasons. The first and most obvious is self-interest, because members receive certain benefits. They receive discounted metro travel, a pension upon retirement, and are entitled to hardship and medical support. However, my interlocutors often complained that this support was rarely forthcoming, and that the pension of 600LE a month was nowhere near enough to support oneself, thus this doesn't explain their positive feelings – especially those of musicians like Gaber who aren't even members.

A second and more important reason for their affection towards the Syndicate, however, relates back to the institution's historical roots, in terms of what kind of musicians it represents. There was a prior history of musicians unionising before the establishment of the current state-affiliated organisation in 1942. Frederic Lagrange describes how the first musicians' union in Egypt was actually formed in 1920. It was independent and did not have the endorsement of King Farouk. This led the press to position it in opposition to the Institute of Music, which was established by King Farouk in 1922 (Lagrange, 1994, p. 189). Philippe Vigreux suggests that this opposition, with the king-approved Institute on the one side and the Syndicate, representing the more everyday musician on the other, was emblematic of a broader set of divisions: 'Syndicate versus Institute; common people versus *beys* and *pashas*; amateurs versus professionals; *alatiyyas* [rank-and-file players] versus *musiqiyyin* [modern professionalised musicians]; seedy venues versus morally sound ones; (Vigreux, 1992, p. 232). Although much has changed since those days, it remains true today that the Syndicate is associated with non-elite musicians who make up the ranks of players working the wedding/nightclub circuit, rather than conservatoire-trained, independent or classical musicians. It is indeed these non-elite rank-and-file musicians who are more invested and

appreciative of it, whereas conservatoire-educated musicians and middle-class observers tend to be critical.

For example, Ahmad, who ran a successful business providing jazz and classical musicians for upmarket events, complained to me about the permits he has to get, and the fact that Syndicate membership is a requirement for the musicians he employs. 'The Syndicate, they don't understand' he told me. 'It's not set up to accept quality players. For example, if someone went in to audition and played jazz guitar, or sang opera, the panel would reject them, even if they're amazing musicians. But they'd accept some crappy keyboard player. The Syndicate is set up for this type of player, the ones who work every night at shitty clubs where the audience isn't even listening, not the *real* musicians that I work with.' But for *sha'bi* musicians, it is quite the opposite - an association with (if not membership of) the Syndicate is representative of their status as '*real* musicians;' it validates them in a world where lots of other people look down on them. To them, Syndicate membership is effectively a graduation certificate from the streets rather than the academy.

Relatedly, Syndicate membership was also frequently invoked by my interlocutors as a means of distinguishing themselves from younger *mahraganat* performers. They saw *mahraganat's* increasing popularity as a threat to their older *sha'bi* style, and following the Syndicate's rejection of *mahraganat* (made official in 2020, but growing for the past several years), the musicians I worked with would often show off their membership cards in a bid to prove they were *real* artists, unlike these *mahraganat* phoneys. As they felt increasingly marginalised by a new popular style, as well as more established conservatoire-trained western-style musicians, associating with the Syndicate validated them and their music; even if it did them harm or sometimes made their lives difficult, they felt it granted them some sort of prestige.

But these musicians' attachments go beyond simple self-interest and validation – the third reason I propose is that they vociferously believe that music needs protecting, and there should be some limits to who gets up on stage. *Sha'bi* singer Sayyed Imam put it to me thus: 'Look Sophie, if you had children, if you left them home alone and you're not

watching over them (*inti mish raqaba 'aleyhom*), they'll break things. They'll ruin everything. It's the same with music.' He paused to let me digest the metaphor. 'But we've reached a stage where the Syndicate are finally starting to do something about it. They arrested eight singers the other day. They're in prison now. Thank god.' Even percussionist Gaber, who had spent a few days in prison due to his non-membership, supported the Syndicate. He told me, with no hint of irony, that 'you can't have just *anyone* getting up on stage... someone has to be responsible for maintaining the quality of music people hear.' He saw his prison time as no different from the few days he'd spent there as a penalty for unpaid bills and being accused (wrongly, he hastened to add) of stealing. It was an inconvenience, but fair enough, he thought; he got what was coming to him.

This seemingly contradictory view is possible, I suggest, because the Syndicate, although state-affiliated, is not understood by musicians as a top-down repressive force. This is in part due to the fact that its President, Hani Shakir, is himself a famous singer, known for his pop hits back in the 1990s, thus he is accepted primarily as an artist, a trustworthy cultivator of the nation's artistic taste, rather than merely a state functionary.



Figure 2: Hani Shakir in a recent concert. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B8mPhuMHcgm/>

Similarly, Syndicate officials are not faceless state bureaucrats; they are also working musicians. In fact, several *sha'bi* musicians I knew also worked for the Syndicate. Violinist Medhat, for example, spent his evenings working with various singers including *sha'bi* icon Abd al-Baset Hamouda, but also worked a couple of days a week for the Syndicate. He took his role very seriously, and certainly saw his position as a musician and Syndicate representative as being compatible. In fact, he prided himself on helping shape the music scene he loved and worked in. His job primarily consisted of helping musicians to settle disputes (for example unpaid wages), and sometimes doing spot-checks on venues. He was vocal in his support of the crack-down on artists without membership, especially *mahraganat* artists. He certainly didn't see himself as a mere state functionary or even a censor at all. This complicates the trope of the 'repressed musician' versus 'repressive representative of the state' (in the traditional dichotomous view on censorship), as they are here rendered one and the same person.

Going beyond existing understandings of music censorship

As Raminder Kaur and William Mazzerella suggest with reference to film in South-East Asia, 'it quickly becomes clear that the common understanding of censorship as the repressive action of states and state-sanctioned institutions will not get us very far' (2009, p. 4). To understand censorship 'only as a matter of silence and denial' risks obscuring what scholars have recognised as its 'productive' aspects (2009, p. 4). They outline two sides to this: first, drawing on Judith Butler (1998) and Pierre Bourdieu (1991) they make the point that 'any kind of utterance or discourse, indeed the very possibility of language, depends upon a kind of constitutive foreclosure' (ibid). This foreclosure constitutes the very possibility of agency, therefore 'censorship does not act upon a sovereign subject from "outside"; rather, it is one of the very preconditions of subjectivity itself' (ibid). Second, a Foucauldian reading produces an understanding of censorship as 'a generative technology of truth,' (Foucault, 1977), which can be read not as silencing, but rather 'a relentless proliferation of discourses on normative modes of desiring, of acting, of being in the world' (Kaur and Mazzarella, 2009,

p. 5). As such, censorship emerges as a 'productive part of the apparatus of modern governmentality,' rather than a conservative or reactionary action, as is so often assumed (ibid).

This has bearing on our understanding of Egypt's Musicians' Syndicate. Drawing on the above understandings of censorship, which highlight its 'productive' elements and its role in subject formation, my interlocutors' embrace of a seemingly repressive institution becomes more understandable. As I have shown, it plays an important role in their sense of self and how they locate themselves within the broader musical community. In particular, taking the Syndicate officials' perspective into account dispels the myth of a cruel anti-intellectual, anti-creative censor exercising his repressive power. Instead, censorship emerges as a sometimes-creative process where artist and censor collaborate. Boyer found a comparable situation in the context of censors in East Germany: 'For the functionaries working in the Agitation Division of the GDR party-state, "censorial practices" (among them, the editing, licensing, and criticism of media texts) were treated as truly vocational activities since even minute textual and lexical calibrations were believed to contribute to the greater welfare of the *Volk*' (Boyer, 2003, p. 515). Similarly, in the context of seventeenth century France, Darnton notes that censorship was 'not simply a story that pitted liberty against oppression but rather one of complicity and collaboration' – censors were often authors themselves, and attended to their work with a great deal of care, considering it artistically valuable work (Darnton, 2014, pp. 30–48).

In a different way, these 'productive' elements also become apparent when we consider that the Syndicate has become a topic of conversation far beyond circles of musicians, due to a series of recent high-profile bans and arrests. During a concert in the United Arab Emirates a fan requested Egyptian singer Sherine Abd al-Wahhab sing her hit song "*Mashribtish min Nilha*" ("Have you drunk from the Nile"), a rousing patriotic number. She jokingly responded 'no, you'd get Schistosomiasis [a water-born parasitic disease]... Drink Evian, it's better!' In an almost comical reach of his powers, Hani Shakir banned Sherine from performing in Egypt, and had her arrested and charged for insulting Egypt.

Large numbers of the public were critical, but many others were supportive, and Shakir appeared regularly on television talk shows and radio interviews justifying his decision. As such, we see music censorship has become an urgent matter of public debate, and in the midst of what can only be described as a brutal crackdown on freedom of expression in Egypt whereby the state tries to position its actions as beyond reproach, the Syndicate has become a conduit through which people are able to discuss the limits of freedom of expression, and the state's role and responsibility in relation to this.

Conclusion

Meir R. Walters notes with regards to film censorship in Egypt that 'speaking of censorship as a simple act of authoritarian constraint sometimes veers close to assuming that most artists, public intellectuals, or media figures are closeted liberal democrats' (Walters, 2016, p. 43). My own initial assumption that all musicians would find the Syndicate's actions objectionable was certainly a case of this. Thinking through the importance of the Syndicate in the lives of my interlocutors, as well as the broader shaping of Egypt's music scene, has sometimes been an uncomfortable process. Trying to square my own dismay at the increasing crackdowns on freedom of expression and the anger that many of my 'non-fieldwork' friends were feeling with what my interlocutors were expressing was not always easy. But ultimately, taking seriously my interlocutors' embrace of the Syndicate is more constructive than taking the simpler path of platforming only the voices of those outright condemning them, and as scholars we must necessarily expand our conception of what censorship means and what purposes it serves in order to make sense of such contradictory and complex situations, which are perhaps more numerous than we might at first think.

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