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The Musicians' Syndicate and the contradictions of state control over music in Egypt

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Abstract

Based on 21 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Cairo with musicians who perform a musical style known as shaʿbi, *this article unravels the complex role that the state-affiliated Musicians' Syndicate plays in musicians' working lives in order to investigate the contradictions of state control over music in Egypt. Focusing on moments of encounter between musicians and Syndicate officials, I consider why my interlocutors' time was split between evading the Syndicate and its restrictions, and embracing the Syndicate by calling for it to implement harsher interventions. Doing so not only sheds light on the reality of cultural production in an authoritarian state, but also prompts a broader reconsideration of scholarly approaches to popular music censorship, requiring us to move beyond dichotomies of 'state* vs. *society,' 'censors* vs. *censored,' and 'resistors* vs. *oppressors' that have tended to dominate scholarship on music censorship.*

Introduction

In February 2020, Egypt's state-affiliated Musicians' Syndicate announced that it was banning an entire musical genre known as *mahraganat*, an electronic style that emerged in the early 2000s from Cairo's working-class neighbourhoods.[1] The decision was made when a song called '*Bint al-Giran*' ('The Neighbour's Daughter') by Hassan Shakosh and Omar Kamal went viral. The 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 was 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 make increasingly dramatic interventions in Egypt's music scene. Yet 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 committee, granting them Syndicate membership. Violating the law (i.e. by performing without the requisite membership) is punishable by 1–3 months in prison, and/or a fine of 2,000–20,000 Egyptian pounds (Ezzat *et al*. 2014, p. 45).[2] Unsurprisingly, many musicians stridently oppose the Syndicate's actions, as expressed by journalist Charles Akl (2015), who felt they were 'mutilating the lifeless corpse of [Egypt's] music scene'.

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[1] 'The Musicians' Syndicate' is a translation from the Arabic *niqabat al-musiqiyin* (more formally *niqabat al-mihan al-musiqiyya*), called *al-niqaba* for short. It is sometimes also translated into English as 'the Musicians' Union'.

However, when I began ethnographic research in Cairo with singers and musicians on the wedding and nightclub scene who perform a style known as *shaʿbi* (widely considered a kind of musical predecessor to the banned *mahraganat*), I was astonished to find that the majority of my interlocutors vociferously supported the Syndicate.[3] For example, when I asked one veteran *shaʿbi* singer, who I will call Samih,[4] about whether it was getting more difficult to put on events owing to increasingly cumbersome requirements of government permits, he laughed, before responding:

> Permits? No, no, no … everything has become open [*al-mawdu' ba'a maftuh*], and that's the problem these days. It's a disaster, because anyone can sing. Look, Sophie, if you had children, and you left them home alone and you're not watching over them [*inti mish riqba 'alayhum*], they'll break things. They'll ruin everything. It's the same with music.[5]

He paused dramatically 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.' He took a sip of tea and leaned back into his chair, seemingly contented with the idea of these imprisoned singers.

The relief Samih expressed towards the arrest of fellow performers startled me. Yet Samih's was a common sentiment among *shaʿbi* musicians, some of whom (like Samih) were proud card-carrying Syndicate members, and some of whom were not. Even non-syndicated *shaʿbi* musicians tended to actively support the Syndicate, which I found puzzling, for they were frequently negatively impacted by the restrictions imposed upon them: dozens I knew had faced fines and even occasional prison sentences for performing without the required documentation and permits. When I began working as a violinist in several *shaʿbi* bands, I saw on a day-to-day basis just how restrictive the Syndicate's laws were for these musicians, and how much time and energy they put into negotiating and evading them. Why did my interlocutors support an institution that appeared to do them harm and restrict their freedom of creative expression, and which musicians in other genres found so deeply objectionable? Why were my interlocutors' 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?

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[2] The value of the Egyptian pound varied while I was conducting fieldwork between 2017 and 2019, but it was approximately 20–24 to the British pound, so 2000 Egyptian pounds was approximately 85 British pounds.

[3] See Armbrust (1996, pp. 165–220), Puig (2006) and Grippo (2010) for more on Egyptian *shaʿbi* music, which emerged in 1970s Cairo. *Shaʿbi* literally translates as 'popular' or 'of the people'; it has typically been positioned as a vulgar music of the lower classes and understood in opposition to the state-sanctioned highbrow modernism of singers like Umm Kulthum and Mohammed Abdel Wahhab. Now, as in the 1970s, it is typically performed by working class or lower-middle class men, but is listened to across classes and genders in live and mediated forms.

[4] All names are pseudonyms. I have anonymised all interlocutors and obscured identifying details given the security situation in Egypt.

[5] All conversations were conducted in Arabic; translations into English are my own.

Grounded in 21 months of ethnographic fieldwork with *shaʿbi* musicians in Cairo (2017–2019), including one year spent working as a violinist with several *shaʿbi* bands, this article attempts to answer these questions. It unravels the complex role that the state-affiliated Musicians' Syndicate plays in *shaʿbi* musicians' working lives in order to investigate the contradictions of censorship and state control over music in Egypt. Focusing on moments of encounter between musicians and Syndicate officials, I consider the state both as an institution that inserts itself into my interlocutors' everyday lives in tangible ways (what political scientists have called the 'state system') but also as an 'idea' that is attributed a coherence it does not truly possess (Abrams 1988; Bouchard 2011; Mitchell 2006). By examining the gaps between legislation and real-world implementation, how various arms of 'the state' work in conjunction (or not) and the ways that *shaʿbi* musicians navigate this in the workplace, I explore how this state idea is produced through the state's control of the arts. In practice, the state does not emerge as a well-oiled, unstoppable, top-down force of repression against liberal freedom-fighting artists, as is so often assumed.

In highlighting this, what follows not only sheds light on the reality of cultural production in an authoritarian state, but also prompts a broader reconsideration of scholarly approaches to popular music censorship. Popular music censorship is a topic very much in vogue, with recent collections (Hall 2018; Kirkegaard and Otterbeck 2017) building 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.

With regards to Egypt, scholars have tended to focus on two other angles when it comes to music and politics: either on state-sanctioned/pro-regime music (Danielson 1997; Abdelmoez 2020; Lohman 2011); or on the role of music in overthrowing state regimes, especially in the context of the 2011 revolution (Colla 2012; LeVine 2012; Swedenburg 2012, 2019; Valassopoulos and Mostafa 2014; Wahdan 2014). Beyond some recent policy-oriented documents (Ezzat *et al*. 2014; Fazulla 2017; Ramadan 2019) 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.

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 (see for example LeVine 2022). The 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. Yet 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 deem musically unworthy during the obligatory auditions – restrictions that my interlocutors condoned. The scholarly focus on oppositional music has also resulted in a rather dichotomous picture of 'top-down repressive state' *vs.* '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.

I begin by providing a brief overview of the Syndicate's history and remit, before turning more concretely to *shaʿbi* musicians' relationship to the Syndicate. I note various tactics that non-syndicated musicians use to *evade* the Syndicate's restrictions, before proposing several factors that explain why both syndicated and non-syndicated musicians continue to *embrace* the Syndicate. These observations prompt me to move beyond the dichotomies of 'state *vs.* society,' 'censors *vs.* censored,' and 'resistors *vs.* oppressors' that have tended to dominate scholarship on artistic censorship in the region. This, in turn, facilitates a more nuanced understanding of how the state 'idea' comes to exist as coherent and all-encompassing when it is not in practice, as well as illuminating how musicians have adapted to its sometimes-contradictory tensions.

The Musicians' Syndicate: history and mission

Egypt's Musicians' Syndicate was established in the 1940s, a time when a broader movement of professional syndicates was gaining traction in the country (Reid 1974; Frankford, forthcoming). It was never independent, having been affiliated with the state Ministry of Social Affairs since its inception. Singer Umm Kulthum was central in early efforts to establish the organisation: she was elected its first president, and re-elected on six further occasions between 1945 and 1952 (Danielson 1991, p. 307). She used her position to push for the care of musicians materially and socially, providing them with healthcare and pensions. She also insisted that the Syndicate was to be solely for Egyptians, which fit neatly into the increasingly nationalist sentiment of the times.

Egypt's three Artistic Syndicates (Musicians, Actors and Cinema workers) are governed by Law Number 35 (1978) which outlines their mission statement and remit. The stated objectives of the Musicians' Syndicate appear to centre around two themes: a duty of care to members on the one hand and preserving musical quality and taste on the other. The law also stipulates that 'no-one may work in theatre, cinema or music unless he is a member of the Syndicate'. Anyone who violates this law may be subject to monetary fines and prison sentences. Membership is gained through a simple audition: a performance of a song, a few questions to prove knowledge of the different musical modes, and a fee of 1000 Egyptian pounds. Graduates of Cairo's Music Institute do not have to audition and are offered a reduced application fee of 250 Egyptian pounds. Auditionees must select which section (*sho'ab*) they wish to audition for: singer, composer, instrumentalist or, as of 2016, DJ (Atef 2016). Only Egyptian nationals 'in good standing' who have graduated from an accredited college/academy, or who have reached the 'level of education' (*darajat min al-thaqafa*) required by the Syndicate, are eligible to apply. Foreign artists may apply for honorary membership, but the undefined and often exorbitant fees mean that it is rare for foreign artists to request membership.

It is worth briefly situating the Syndicate within broader state efforts to exert control over music, for it is just one branch of a three-pronged state apparatus (albeit the one that featured most prominently in the lives of the musicians I worked with). When musicians encounter or invoke the state (*al-dawla* or *al-hukuma*) they are sometimes referring to the Syndicate, sometimes the Office of Censorship on Artistic Production (*jihaz al-raqaba 'ala al-musannafat*) and sometimes the Security Services (*al-ajhiza al-amniyya*), which comprise a number of uncoordinated and competing bodies including General Intelligence (*al-mukhabarat*), National Security (*al-amn al-watani*, previously known as *amn al-dawla*) and Central Security (*al-amn al-markazi*). The Office of Censorship on Artistic Production falls under the purview of the Ministry of Culture and is commonly referred to by musicians simply as the *musannafat*.[6] Under Law 430 (1955) it regulates all aspects of visual and audio-visual work, including the recording, distribution and sale of film and music, as well as public performances, dissemination and content. The Security Services, on the other hand, do two things: cancel live performances for ambiguous reasons of 'security,' often attributing the cancellation to lack of the required permits; and work with the Syndicate to arrest performers who violate its rules.[7]

As will be explored below, in practice these three governmental bodies work quite separately, in parallel and without central coordination. Officials from the Syndicate *and* the Office of Censorship often appear at hotels and nightclubs to do spot checks, the Syndicate officials ensuring the musicians have valid membership and the Office of Censorship officials checking the required permits have been granted and that the content of the show doesn't contravene the above laws (i.e. that singers are not singing licentious or insulting lyrics, and the belly-dancers whom the musicians accompany are wearing the legally required under-shorts and stomach-covering). Sometimes, officials from the Office of Censorship will also check Syndicate membership cards of the musicians. Musicians often do not know which body an official is from upon first sight and refer to them most often simply as the government (*al-hukuma*), or interchangeably as the Syndicate (*al-niqaba*) or Office of Censorship (*al-musannafat*).

Since Hani Shakir became president of the Musicians' Syndicate in 2015, it has encroached on Egypt's music scene in increasingly spectacular ways. During my fieldwork, several high-profile cases made the Syndicate and Hani Shakir front-page news, sparking frequent heated debates among friends and acquaintances both inside and outside musical circles regarding the limits of artistic expression and obligations of the state in curtailing it. Shakir has punished female singers for wearing revealing clothes (Abd al-Hamid 2015) and banned heavy metal concerts for 'spreading chaos and immorality' (Shakir 2016). In an almost comical reach of his powers, he banned pop singer Sherine Abd al-Wahhab from performing after a perceived misdemeanour during a 2017 concert in the United Arab Emirates. A fan requested her song '*Mashribtish min Nilha*' ('Have you Drunk from the Nile'), a patriotic number, and she jokily replied: 'No, you'd get Schistosomiasis [a water-born parasitic disease]! Drink Evian, it's better' (Michaelson 2017). She was arrested and charged for insulting Egypt.

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[6] *Musannafat* translates literally as 'literary work', but in practice their remit is far broader.

[7] Perhaps the most prominent of these cancelled events was al-Fann Midan festival (Art is a Public Square) in 2014 (Sprengel 2019).

Most pervasively, though, musicians who are not card-carrying Syndicate members are targeted. This regulation most notoriously affects *mahraganat* performers who are not allowed to audition to become Syndicate members, allegedly because they do not fit into a suitable section (*shu'ba*) – they are not singing, because their voices are so heavily autotuned, nor are they DJs – thus there is no legal way for most *mahraganat* performers to take to the stage. The Syndicate has made exceptions for high-profile *mahraganat* artists, allowing Oka and Ortega into the DJ category, and controversially granting actor-turned-*mahraganat*-star Mohamed Ramadan a licence. The majority, however, remain unaffiliated. This has led to several high-profile conflicts between *mahraganat* artists and Hani Shakir, who are mutually opposed to one another (Ramadan 2019).

These arguments play out publicly: Shakir regularly appears on television talk-shows and interviews to defend his decisions, and my non-musician friends often hotly debate the actions of the Syndicate. The increasingly spectacular nature of the Syndicate's interventions, and the way they are coming to centre around a heavily publicised personal battle between Hani Shakir and working-class *mahraganat* artists, recalls William Mazzarella's ethnographic observations regarding state censorship of film in India. He argues that 'In the space of mass publicity [. . .] disciplinary power both confronts its own continued reliance on spectacular, affect-intensive performativity and seeks to disavow it by displacing it from the state's self-description onto the body of various subaltern others' (Mazzarella 2013, p. 24). Hani Shakir, in positioning *mahraganat* artists as the primary threat to the nation's moral and artistic taste, and seeking to punish them in public and spectacular ways, is doing just that.

However, beyond these spectacular interventions and high-profile discussions about artistic taste, the Syndicate's restrictions affected my *shaʿbi* musician interlocutors in a more quotidian manner. *Shaʿbi* musicians, whose primary performance venues are weddings and nightclubs, face problems similar to *mahraganat* artists if they are not Syndicate members: officials frequently visit venues and check musicians' memberships, doling out fines to non-members and occasionally handing musicians over to the police. Yet their battles with the Syndicate are played out in a far less public and far more contradictory way, as I will now explore.

Evading the Syndicate

The primary reason that the Syndicate featured so prominently in my fieldwork was the fact that rank-and-file musicians performing without membership found their working lives dominated by the need to evade Syndicate officials, negotiate the payment of fines and dodge the threat of a police reports and occasionally prison sentences. Many of my interlocutors were not Syndicate members. Sometimes this was because they simply had not got around to auditioning yet, did not want to pay the membership fees, or in the case of percussionists, felt that they might struggle to pass the audition. In other cases, musicians had other day-jobs which required them to be a member of a different professional Syndicate, and Egyptian law prevents people from belonging to more than one.

Syndicate (and Office of Censorship) officials frequently do unannounced spot-checks on venues like nightclubs, cabarets and indoor wedding-halls. They enter, approach the stage, and ask the band's manager for the membership cards of all the bandmembers. If these cannot be provided, the band manager or venue owner must pay a fine in order for the musician to avoid a police report or arrest. The value of the fine is not fixed. Percussionist Adil, who spent the summers playing at street weddings and the winters working in cabarets, told me that the Syndicate official chooses an amount based on the band and the event. 'If it's somewhere like this [the C-list downtown cabaret where he worked], with musicians like us, with normal clothes… you know, you can tell we're paupers (*ghalaba*)', he said with a slight smirk, 'they'll take a couple of hundred [Egyptian] pounds. But if it was an upscale hotel with a really famous singer, they would demand much more'.

Once the Syndicate official has named his price, it is down to the manager to negotiate. For band managers, this was factored in as a necessary cost of running a band. Ahmed, who started out as a percussionist but now mainly works managing the backing bands for dancer Safinaz and *shaʿbi* singer Mahmoud al-Husseini, explained to me that 'it's standard … you just pay them three or four hundred Egyptian pounds and they leave you alone; everyone's happy'. I never heard of musicians being turned down for work in a band because they did not possess membership, but the manager was usually aware of who was and was not a member in order to deal with situations appropriately. Ahmed made it clear that the fine does not come out of the manager's pocket or that of the individual band member – it is paid by the star singer or dancer, who takes most of the profit from gigs anyway. Musicians sometimes referred to this money as a fine (*gharama*), or sometimes as a bribe (*rashwa*), as it was suggested to me that the officials sometimes took money but failed to report the incident, pocketing the money. Musicians are obliged to pay as officials often threaten to escalate the situation; the vagueness of the law allows for this.

Shaʿbi musicians without membership have various ways of negotiating these restrictions and evading detection. The simplest way is to avoid venues they know are likely to be subject to searches. Syndicate officials rarely search street weddings, largely because it would be logistically very difficult. Street weddings can happen anywhere, usually deep in informal neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Cairo, and although they are advertised publicly via Facebook, it would be difficult and time-consuming, and thus not financially beneficial, to seek out these musicians. In contrast, officials could walk down Pyramids Street, which houses dozens of cabarets, or Salah Salim Street, which houses several indoor wedding and party venues, and be guaranteed to find several musicians to fine. As such, few of the musicians and singers who work solely at street weddings bother to get the membership and they have never faced any problems. Hisham, a singer who leads a band in his local neighbourhood of al-Munib, for example, explained his situation to me:

> I could easily get the [membership] card, but I've never bothered. There's no point. I like working in the street, not in cabarets or nightclubs. It would be very difficult for the Syndicate to come to neighbourhoods like mine. They only really go to cabarets, nightclubs, event halls – these kinds of places. So why would I bother joining?

That said, I knew many musicians (especially percussionists) who did not have the membership yet still regularly worked at cabarets and nightclubs, despite the threat of being visited by Syndicate officials. They had various ways of getting around it. Percussionist Adil, for example, was not a member. He repeatedly told me that he intended to audition but had just never got around to it. Several of his colleagues subsequently told me that he would struggle in the audition; although he can play percussion well, he doesn't know the melodic modes (*maqamat*). I had got to know him as he worked at a downtown cabaret close to my house; if I had a free evening I would often go and talk to the band as they set up. They played nightly from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. but often the audience did not start arriving until around midnight, so I sometimes took my violin and played with them in the early slot.

One night I was sitting listening and at around 11 p.m., Adil and the other drummer – a chain-smoking, surly looking 16-year-old – rushed off stage at the prompting of one of the waiters and dashed into the backstage toilets. A couple of minutes later, the waiter approached the members of the band who had remained on stage, a keyboard (*org*) player and goblet drum (*tabla*) player. The waiter gestured towards two officials who had entered by the bar, and the musicians handed over their Syndicate membership cards. I did not understand what was happening at the time, but Adil later explained to me that the cabaret's doorman had suspected the two men were from the Syndicate or Office of Censorship based on their appearance and had called up to the waiters so they could alert any non-Syndicate-member musicians to get off stage in order to avoid a fine. This technique of a lookout was used extensively. Such incidents are similar to the cat-and-mouse games between employees of other professions and police who are trying to curtail work in the informal sector (Ismail 2006).

These evasion techniques were not always so successful, however. Adil told me that he had often been fined, and had even spent a few nights in prison when the venue refused to pay. Interestingly though, even when musicians faced negative repercussions for their non-membership, they did not tend to complain about the Syndicate and its restrictive laws; they instead blamed the band manager's failure to negotiate their way out of the situation. I experienced this during my time playing in the backing band of the belly-dancer Safinaz. We had been hired to perform at a baby shower held at an upscale hotel. The hosts were clearly wealthy and had hired Safinaz as one number in a jam-packed programme of entertainment. Safinaz's manager was away on tour in the Gulf with another of his acts, so his son, who was in his early twenties, was standing in for him. The son knew what to do, having accompanied and assisted his father with all band business for the past few months, but was clearly anxious to be running the show alone. As the band were waiting in the foyer before their set, several musicians snuck into the guests' buffet and started helping themselves, prompting a harsh telling-off from party host. Ahmed, the band manager (who ultimately answered to Safinaz's manager) threatened as he always did when this happened: 'I'll deduct 50 pounds from your wages! (*Makhsum minku khamsin gineh*!)'. Usually the threats were empty and Ahmed could be found with the rest of the band eating the buffet. The manager's son, on the other hand, hung back, not wanting to join in but not having the confidence to reprimand anyone.

We went on to play the set as usual, the guests seemingly enjoying Safinaz's dancing and our live soundtrack of *shaʿbi* hits. However, towards the end of the set, urgent whispers of 'the Syndicate!', 'The Office of Censorship!' started spreading around the band. Several musicians, including the *org* player, the singer and myself, were not Syndicate members. It was too late to leave the stage; the officials had already seen us. Anyway, if the singer and *org* player had left the stage mid-song it would have ruined the set, which for entertainers was to be avoided at all costs. As instructed by the officials, the manager's son whipped around the stage collecting Syndicate membership cards from the bandmembers who had them. We continued performing until the end of the set with an unfamiliar tension in the air, and after receiving our final round of applause, there was none of the usual chit-chat. 'Let's get out of here', the *org* player instructed. We filed out of the hotel to the band bus, Syndicate members being handed back their membership cards on the way out. The two officials were standing there with Ahmed and the manager's son. They summoned me over, presumably to reprimand me for performing without Syndicate membership. I didn't know what to do – a few members of the band urged me to ignore them and run away; others advised me to talk to them. I pretended not to hear them calling my name, exited quickly through the revolving doors of the hotel, headed around the corner from the venue with the rest of the band and breathed a sigh of relief.

The band began discussing whether the officials were from the Syndicate or the Office of Censorship. It transpired they were from the latter and had come primarily to check that the dancer's costume was appropriate, but while they were there decided to check Syndicate memberships too. 'Our set was shit' (*da shughl khara*), spat the *tabla* player. These debriefs were nothing unusual – we often ended up like this, and sometimes arguments broke out over whose '*dum*' or '*tek*' fell on the wrong beat, or who forgot their entry. The *org* player agreed with the *tabla* player: 'Yeah it *was* shit, because they were distracting us taking the 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 or Office of Censorship – complaining that their officials had interrupted the flow of their set, rather than any broader complaint. I asked what would happen now. The *tabla* player explained that it was 'no big deal, Ahmed or Safinaz's manager will have to pay some money; that's it'. However, then his brow furrowed as he took a drag on his cigarette and began to shout at me: 'Anyway, why were you so stupid? Why didn't you get off the stage and go and wait outside by the bus? You know they were saying they wanted to open a police report (*mahdar*) against you because you don't have the Syndicate card.' I said I didn't know what was happening; I didn't know what to do. They were not reprimanding me for not becoming a member; they were reprimanding me for not knowing how to play the system.

Another member of the band stepped in: 'It wasn't her fault. It was the manager's son's fault – he should have known what to do. He told her to stay on stage. If his father had been here this wouldn't have happened. It was the management's fault.' The attention shifted away from me as this point prompted a broader discussion about the bad management of the band. For example, the bus was supposed to do pickups and drop-offs in the agreed locations of Shubra and Ramsis, but the hired driver often refused to do the Ramsis drop-off because he didn't have a driving licence, and he was afraid of being stopped at the police checkpoints on that route. Instead, he insisted on dropping us off in Madinat al-Salam, an inconvenient location on the ring road (especially inconvenient at 3 a.m. when little public transport was running). On more than one occasion this had resulted in physical fights on the bus between the management, the band members and the driver. This complaining about the bad management of the band went on for some time:

'Why do they keep on hiring such cheap, bad-quality buses? Remember that time the bus broke down?', someone quipped, 'and Ahmed 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.' I slunk away onto the bus and waited there alone. A few minutes later, the *tabla* player came to apologise for shouting at me. 'I'm sorry I had to shout. But you need to learn how to deal with situations like that. You should have known to leave the stage.' The guitarist then arrived, announcing: 'Guys, let's get out of here. Ahmed and the manager's son will be here a while negotiating payments with the officials, so they said we should leave without them.' The band piled onto the bus and we left.

Band manager Ahmed called me the next day. He'd spent hours with the officials negotiating the fines, he told me. In the end, he had to pay an arbitrary amount of 300 Egyptian pounds per non-member. They had apparently insisted on a larger fine for me because I am a foreigner. 'Ten thousand pounds, Sophie…… *Ten thousand pounds*!', he dramatically announced, although everyone I've asked agrees he must have inflated the number for theatrical effect. He told me that Safinaz had to pay the fines out of her own pocket. In order to avoid any more large fines, *'inti… agaza'*, he continued; 'you … take a holiday'. 'Fine', I told him, annoyed and residually alarmed about the previous night's events. 'The management of the band is so bad I was going to quit today anyway'. Later that day I opened the band WhatsApp group to send a goodbye message, but I had already been deleted.

This vignette illustrates several points. First, it exemplifies how the Syndicate works in parallel with other bodies. It transpired that the officials were actually from the Office of Censorship, but in subsequent discussions about the incident, the band uniformly referred to the officials as being from the Syndicate, or simply the government (*al-hukuma*), which shows how the overlapping roles of the various state bodies give the impression of a coherent system of control when in practice it is uncoordinated. The Syndicate has taken on a kind of symbolic position, representative of all control over music. As Sharma and Gupta argue, 'analysing cultural processes through which "the state" is instantiated and experienced also enables us to see that the illusion of cohesion and unitariness created by states is always contested and fragile, and is the result of hegemonic processes that should not be taken for granted' (Sharma and Gupta 2006, p. 11).

Second, it exemplifies how the vague wording of the laws regarding the value of the fine results in arbitrary fines being imposed, and the need for a good manager or middleman who can negotiate effectively. As with many situations in Egypt, laws are heavily restrictive in theory, but applied unevenly and arbitrarily in practice. A large part of being a good manager in this industry is knowing how to negotiate: knowing when to pay a small fine (or bribe) to make a bigger problem go away (which is what the band accused the manager's son of not doing). Another characteristic of being a good manager is having personal connections (a *wasta*) in the Syndicate on whom you can call to put in a good word for you. Manager Ahmed once explained to me how he knew his *wasta*s: one was an acquaintance from his hometown of Shubra; another was a relative of his wife; another was an old colleague from his days as a drummer. Sharma and Gupta have noted the benefits of studying 'the dispersed institutional and social networks through which rule is coordinated and consolidated' (2006, p. 9), and observing how musicians endeavour to evade punishment shows how state networks are often coordinated via personal and professional networks, as opposed to within a formal bureaucratic structure.

Finally, the vignette brings into bold relief the fact that *shaʿbi* musicians do not see the Syndicate as a major impediment to their creative expression, despite it affecting them at least as much (if not more so, on a day-to-day basis) as musicians who see the Syndicate as decimating the music scene. Most held up the Syndicate as a respectable institution that should be revered, instead blaming individual musicians and managers when its constraints caused them problems. They did sometimes criticise various aspects of the Syndicate: its elections were often fraught, as musician Sayed Henkish describes, with frequent accusations of miscounted votes (Van Nieuwkerk 2019, pp. 153–4). There are also frequent accusations of money not being allocated fairly in terms of healthcare and pensions, with top members rumoured to take all the money leaving little to support the poorest members. Bribery scandals are also common: composer Hasan Ishish was expelled (and later readmitted) for soliciting sexual favours from female auditionees in exchange for Syndicate membership (Abd al-Hamid 2016). However, among the *shaʿbi* musicians I knew, criticisms never extended to more encompassing critiques of the Syndicate's value and mission. This prompts the question: why do *shaʿbi* musicians maintain such positive attachments to the Syndicate, in contrast to musicians playing other genres, and despite the difficulties it quite clearly causes them?

Embracing the Syndicate

Self-interest would be the obvious explanation for *shaʿbi* musicians' embrace of the Syndicate, because members receive certain benefits. Perks include discounted metro travel and a pension of approximately 600 Egyptian pounds a month upon retirement, and members are also entitled to hardship and medical support. However, this support is rarely forthcoming, as became apparent when *shaʿbi* singer Magdy Tal'at was hospitalised in 2017. Fellow singers had to publicly mount campaigns directed at the Syndicate in order for it to contribute to funding the treatment to which his long-term membership should have entitled him. This is normal in the way the Syndicates function after Presidents Sadat and Mubarak: membership is not an entitlement, but more of a card you can use to pressure the authorities in case you need medical care and such.

Musicians can also call on the Syndicate to defend their rights and resolve workplace disputes, for example, to help claim unpaid wages. However, again, this aid is rarely straightforward and forthcoming, as I observed during my work with Safinaz some months before I was fired. One night as we were on the bus to a booking, the *duhulla* (large goblet drum) player, Farouk, announced to the band that he was quitting. He was fed up with the aforementioned bad management of the band, and said he was being treated unprofessionally. This announcement prompted nothing more than a few smirks from the band, most of whom found him an irritating busybody. The manager Ahmed accepted his resignation and reminded him that he was required to attend three more shifts, as per the three-day notice-period stipulated by the Syndicate. He agreed. However, he failed to show up to work the following night. The manager let it go, joking with the rest of the band that the atmosphere was much more pleasant without him anyway.

However, then Ahmed received a phone call from someone at the Syndicate: Farouk had filed a case (*mahdar*) against him for failing to pay his final two paycheques (a total of 400 Egyptian pounds), and because Farouk was a Syndicate member, it was their responsibility to chase up the missing payments. Of course, he was not really entitled to these paycheques, as he had failed to show up for work. However, Farouk was a Syndicate member, and he wanted to get back at the manager of the band for his perceived maltreatment. He knew Ahmed and several members of the band were not members, so involving the Syndicate was a good way for him to flex his muscles and stir trouble. Ahmed disputed the claim, telling the Syndicate that Farouk never showed up to work, so he was actually the one at fault. The Syndicate official instructed Ahmed that to prove his innocence in the matter, he had to bring three witnesses to the Syndicate headquarters in Cairo as soon as possible. This prompted a frantic call-round to members of the band – Ahmed's reputation as a band manager was at stake – and within a couple of hours he had gathered the three he needed, two from Shubra al-Khayma, the third making the three-hour journey from his home-town Beni Suef in Upper Egypt.

The Syndicate committee, which is made up of working musicians, believed Ahmed's account, given the witness statements. He was told he did not have to pay Farouk the 400 pounds, and his reputation as a manager remained intact. However, the saga did not end there. The spurned musician, knowing that Ahmed and several members of the band were not Syndicate members, then attempted to find out where Safinaz and the band were performing in order to tip off the Syndicate to do a spot-check, thus causing further problems for the band. The band manager implored the band not to tell Farouk where the upcoming performances were, and not to post any videos or photos of performances to Facebook for a few days, by which time the whole thing would have blown over. So musicians call on the Syndicate to settle disputes, but often in convoluted ways where members use it as a way to get back at non-members who have slighted them. Nonetheless, their reputation for mediating disputes fairly is one reason my interlocutors said they liked the organisation.

A more important reason for their positive attachment, however, relates the role the Syndicate has played in professional boundary-making in the context of state-led efforts to professionalise the field of music. Since the 1970s, the Syndicate has come to be associated primarily with non-elite *shaʿbi* musicians who make up the ranks of musicians working on the nightclub and wedding circuit, rather than Institute-trained, independent or classical musicians (Frankford, forthcoming). The 1970s were a time of great cultural upheaval in Egypt, with fierce debates occurring about who could be a cultural producer (Simon 2019). Increasingly, musicians were required to read musical notation to 'prove' their musicianship in order to gain employment in state-funded ensembles. *Shaʿbi* musicians have typically not graduated from official educational institutions and tend not to be able to read musical notation; they learn instead through informal apprenticeships and play by ear. This meant that they were excluded from many professional opportunities and looked down upon by other musicians. Syndicate membership thus offered them a means of proving their musicianship and professionalism in the face of critique.

Indeed, it is *shaʿbi* musicians who continue to be invested in and appreciative of the Syndicate, whereas Institute-educated and more upper-middle-class observers tend to be critical. This became apparent during a conversation with a colleague called Saqr, who founded a start-up which provides background music for high-class events. He only works with Institute or foreign-trained musicians and pays them around 2,000 Egyptian pounds per gig – 10 times what *shaʿbi* musicians make in a night. He is very scathing of *shaʿbi* musicians. He complained to me one day about how Syndicate membership is a requirement for the musicians with whom he works:

> The Syndicate, they don't understand . . . it's not set up to accept quality players. For example, if someone went in to audition and played jazz guitar, or sang opera, they would be rejected, even if they're amazing musicians. But they'd accept some crappy *org* player. You see, 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.

Similarly, none of the Institute-trained musicians I knew ever brought up the Syndicate, either as a source of irritation or with a sense of pride. For them, their conservatoire education trumps Syndicate membership; it is more prestigious.

This starkly contrasts the way that my *shaʿbi* interlocutors prided themselves on their Syndicate membership, considering it an important part of their identity and rite of passage to becoming a working musician. For example, an aspiring *shaʿbi* singer in his early twenties excitedly told me about his upcoming audition. He was confident that he would pass – he had grown up in a house filled with music, and his father, a respected *tabla* player who has worked with top-tier *shaʿbi* singers such as Hakim, had taught him everything he needed to know. He had been singing in nightclubs and cabarets most nights since he was 15 anyway, and he knew the tricks of the trade (as well as the people who would audition him, again pointing to the importance of personal networks). When he passed the audition, he proudly posted a photo of the membership card he was granted on Facebook and received hundreds of congratulatory responses from friends and colleagues.

Similarly, older established musicians often flaunted their cards to proudly show me their affiliation. I was once on a microbus with a friend who was carrying an oud, and a man behind him – *shaʿbi* singer Mahmoud al-Laythy's bass player, it transpired – struck up conversation, showing off his membership card as proof of their shared musicianship. Syndicate membership was also frequently invoked by my interlocutors as a means of distinguishing themselves from *mahraganat* artists, who are rejected by the Syndicate, but nonetheless increasingly overshadow *shaʿbi* bands in popularity. Returning to my introductory story about veteran *shaʿbi* singer Samih, the imprisoned artists he was so happy about were *mahraganat* stars. During that conversation, he pointedly got his membership card out of his wallet to show me that he was nothing like them at all; he was a *real* singer. For *shaʿbi* musicians, membership in the Syndicate validates them in a world where many other people look down on them. It is effectively a graduation certificate from the streets rather than the academy: it guarantees membership in the guild of musicians, as opposed to being treated like an amateur (*hawi* or *ghawi mazzika*). It is a process of professional boundary-making, in a context where there are not many evident markers of professionalism. Even if it does them harm or sometimes makes their lives difficult, it gives them a claim to being 'real musicians' in a professional sense.

But again, this does not fully explain the attachment, because even those who do not have membership voice support for it. These musicians' attachments go beyond simple self-interest and validation – they express a vociferous belief that music needs protecting, and there should be some limit to who is allowed up on stage. When I asked Adil, the percussionist who managed to evade the Syndicate earlier in this article, why the law was so restrictive to non-members like himself, he replied incredulously and 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'. Sure, he had been subjected to a few days in prison as punishment for performing without a licence, but he saw it as no different from the few days he'd spent in prison 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.[8]

Adil's assertion that someone should be controlling music is worth contextualising. There is a widespread narrative, promulgated by state media and heartily reproduced among the wider population, including many of the *shaʿbi* musicians I knew, that anyone or anything outside the dominant narrative is threatening to Egypt's stability, and increasingly harsh measures and censorship are required in the interest of protecting the country. Adil had expressed on other occasions that things were chaotic after the 2011 revolution, and should that chaos return, Egypt could descend into the destruction witnessed in Syria or Iraq. This genuine fear in effect enables the state to increase measures of control under the banner of stability, and garners public support for such control. Mazzarella's ethnographic account of film censorship in India is again prescient: he argues that 'the ideological loop of censorship typically proposes that we are in a liminal period of instability, a moment between the vanished stability of tradition and a future state of sociomoral order that always lies just beyond the horizon. Censorship is thus, in its very bones, a discourse of permanent exception' (2013, p. 28).

Shaʿbi music's reputation as a genre that was for many years banned from state media for being vulgar, a sonic representation of a Egypt's failed modernity (Armbrust 1996; Grippo 2010; Simon 2019), might lead us to assume its practitioners would be hostile to the state and express disdain for the restraints it imposes. However, in reality, it is more complex. As Walters similarly warns with regards to understanding censorship in the Egyptian film industry, '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' (2016, p. 43). My own surprise at *shaʿbi* musicians' reaction to Syndicate restrictions was perhaps an example of this assumption.

This issue comes into focus when we consider who these Syndicate officials are. Dominic Boyer (2003) has argued that the 'censor' is often imagined as the ultimate anti-creative or anti-intellectual figure. In contrast, Syndicate officials are often working musicians, active on the performance scene before they began working for the Syndicate. Amro, for example, spent his evenings working with various singers including *shaʿbi* icon Abdel Basset Hamouda, but also worked a couple of days a week at the Syndicate headquarters in Cairo. He took his role very seriously and saw his position as a musician and Syndicate representative as being entirely 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, and sometimes conducting spot-checks on venues. He was also very vocal in his support of the crack-down on artists without membership cards, especially *mahraganat* artists. This renders the 'repressed musician' and the 'repressive representative of the state' (in the traditional dichotomous view on state control of the arts) one and the same person.

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[8] Adil's acceptance at being put in prison links to a broader 'securitisation' of working-class men, and their encounters with the law (Ismail 2006; Ghannam 2013).

Boyer found a comparable situation in the context of censors in East Germany:

> For the functionaries working in the Agitation Division (ZK-Abteilung Agitation) 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)

As the Syndicate is staffed by working musicians, musicians *are* the censors, and they see their work as compatible with their own creative expression. Similarly, in the context of 17th century France, Darnton notes that the situation 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). Although we cannot assume that all employees of the Syndicate treat their work with as much care as Amro, the ones I met all considered themselves to be doing essential work, intimately connected to their evening jobs as working musicians. They certainly didn't see themselves as censors.

What is especially telling about Amro's case, though, is the fact that he did not see himself as part of the state apparatus at all. Despite his employment in the Syndicate effectively making him a state bureaucrat, he still considered the 'real state' as being situated firmly elsewhere. Upon hearing *mahraganat* music as we travelled around the city on buses, he would often mutter 'where's the state?' (*fin al-dawla?*) implying they needed to do more to stop the spread of this type of music. Other times he would vehemently criticise the state (President al-Sisi in particular) for economic policies that were having a deleterious effect on the population. 'The state' was an abstract concept, certainly not anything he was connected to. He knew the particular limitations of his own office and institutional body; he knew that the state was not all powerful. However, he spoke about it as if it was, or as he imagined it should be. This points to the complexities of censorship on the ground, and helps us understand how the state idea is maintained in contemporary Egypt. There was an implicit acknowledgement among my interlocutors of the inconsistencies in their view of the state and its remit, but a sense that one must simply work within the system. Because although the state is an 'idea', it also inserts itself into the lives of musicians in forceful ways on an everyday basis, as the previous section showed.

Conclusion

In highlighting the everyday implications of the Syndicate's actions on working musicians, this article has shed light on everyday practices of music-making in today's Cairo, and the state's place within these. As Thelen *et al.* (2018) argue, anthropologists have recently tended to overemphasise cultural constructions and discursive representations of the state (the state idea) at the expense of considering state practices, which obscures how specific state boundaries emerge and are reproduced or contested. I hope to have shown that attending to state practices and the state idea in tandem is productive in revealing how censorship is a multifaceted tool of power, its implementation and (non)acceptance tied up with broader socio-cultural positionings of those impacted. *Shaʿbi* musicians, despite their positioning as lower-middle-class men who perform a genre the state long censured, meaning that they have long been at the receiving end of state control, typically support increasing state repression and control of the arts and do not see this as incompatible with their role as artists. Paying careful attention to the processes and interactions through which this occurs enables us to see more clearly the ways in which the state is present in people's lives as both a material reality and an idea, and understand how musicians have adapted to the contradictory tensions of state control and censorship.

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 other musicians were feeling with what my interlocutors were expressing was not always easy. However, 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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