



THE GIPSY MUSIC OF IRAQ

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The Iraqi folk music consists, besides its Arabic kernel, of a number of several various musical inheritances of different origin, for instance Kurdish, Turkish, and Armenian. In this manifold scene of Iraqi music a non unimportant place is occupied by the music of gipsies living in Iraq. This music is rightly considered an inseparable part of Iraqi music and is closely connected with its Arabic musical surrounding.

Iraqi gipsy music (singing) — *al-ghina al-ghajaria* — is produced by the nomadic groups of gipsies living under tents, especially in the proximity of villages and cities.

The singing and dancing is the main and virtually the unique source of their income. They perform their folk art during various festivities and feasts and the necessity to gather audience forces them to camp in the vicinity of settled places. The recompense they get for their art is scanty and their life is very poor as well.

These musical and dancing groups of Iraqi gipsies are called *kawiliya*. Such a group must include at least one player of the *rebāba* fiddle, one player of the *khashaba* drum and several lady singers and dancers. Naturally, the gipsy nomadic group does not consist only of these few persons, but also of their whole families including a large number of children. A few goats or sheep bred by the group help to improve its life conditions, while its social position is considerably low.

The Iraqi gipsy music, regarded nowadays as a part of Iraqi musical life, does not deviate, generally speaking, from the field of Iraqi Arabic music, the forms, character, and means of expression of which it adopted.

Nevertheless, in some musical spheres the gipsy music is characterized by special features, different from analogous forms of Iraqi Arabic music. In the sphere of dance the gipsies of Iraq created even their own typical form.

The same can be said about the musical instruments which are used as a rule by the *kawiliya* groups. These instruments are the one-string fiddle called *rebāba* and the hourglass drum called *khashaba*.

Rebāba Fiddle

The one-string fiddle called *rebāba* is a quite common and wide-spread instrument in Arabic musical life, not only in Iraq, but in a number of other Arabic countries as well. In addition to that under the name *rebāba* musical instruments of different shapes are used in the Arabic world. The sound-box of a normal Iraqi *rebāba* is made of simple quadrilateral frame, the upper and lower sides of which are parallel; two skins close it from the front and the back. The neck, a simple round wooden stick, projects through the upper part of the wooden frame and protrudes at the lower end as a short iron stick forming a short foot. The only string of the instrument is touched from the side without contact with the neck.

The sound-box of the *rebāba* used by Iraqi gipsy musicians, however, is made from an empty canister of oil through which the neck is projected.

It is true that the construction of a *rebāba* of a canister is cheaper and simpler than the construction of a wooden frame instrument, but the main reason for the use of a canister *rebāba* is entirely different.

The gipsy *kawiliya* groups never play the wood-wind instruments — quite normally used in the sphere of Iraqi Arabic dances — for the accompaniment of their songs and especially of their dances. The Iraqi folk dance called *dabkah*, e. g., is unimaginable without its instrument of accompaniment, the simple double clarinet called *mijwez*, and the Arabic sabre dance

called *as-sas* without the oboe called *zurna*. On the other hand the Iraqi gipsy dance called *hacha* is accompanied exclusively by *rebāba* made of a canister, and of course also by the singing. The gipsy dance called *hacha* is namely almost always performed in the open air where the demands on the volume of the sound of the instrument of accompaniment are considerable. The sound-box made of a canister gives the *rebāba* an intensive and much amplified loud sound of metal.

The Iraqi gipsy musicians used to play the same intervals on their canister *rebāba* as it is usual on the wooden frame instrument. All fingers of the left hand, including the thumb, are used.

K h a s h a b a D r u m

The *khashaba* drum is used not only in the Iraqi bedouin music but sometimes also by the traditional group of the classical Arabic music in Baghdad called Chalghi Baghdadi. Nevertheless, the use of this *khashaba* drum is characteristic especially for the Iraqi gipsy music.

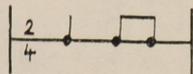
Khashaba is a waisted handle drum with a single membrane. The instrument is excavated of one piece of wood. If the player of the *khashaba* drum is sitting, he places the instrument on his left knee in such a way that he is able to use both hands for playing. If the player is standing, he carries the drum suspended on his neck and shoulders. The use of the *khashaba* drum in Iraqi gipsy music is not limited only to the simple rhythmical accompaniment but it is characteristic especially in deafening ornamental passages.

H a c h a D a n c e

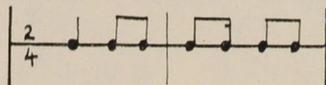
The main original contribution of the gipsy folk art to the Iraqi musical life is a dance called *hacha*. Its originality lies not only in its movements but also in the purely musical sphere, namely in the sphere of the rhythm.

The majority of Arabic countries could be musically represented, among others, by a certain sum of rhythmical patterns which form the basis of whole rhythmical riches of a certain region. One of these typical rhythmical patterns in Iraq is the rhythm of the *hacha* dance.

A famous Iraqi musician Shuaib Ibrahim quotes the following rhythm as the rhythmical pattern of the *hacha* dance:



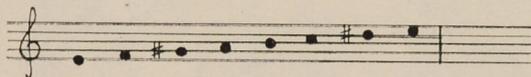
According to my own experience it is necessary to enlarge the rhythmical pattern of the *hacha* dance as follows:



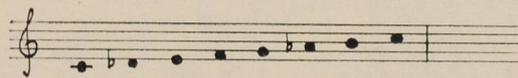
The second bar is not only a variation of the first bar but a regular component of the rhythmical pattern of the *hacha* dance that is repeated in its course.

The situation is somewhat different with the use of special intervals for the construction of a melody not only in the *hacha* dance but in the whole gipsy music in Iraq. In this field the gipsy music does not differ from the Iraqi Arabic music from which it takes over the basic range of a certain *maqām* ladder of intervals.

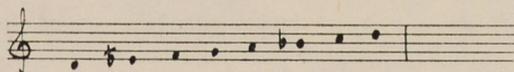
First of all it must be stressed that the gipsy music in Iraq never uses the so called gipsy scale:



Nevertheless, such a ladder with the same disposition of intervals is known in Iraq as *hidjaz-qar maqām*.

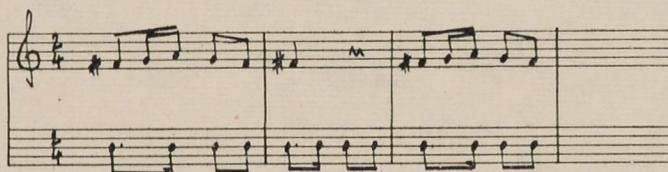


If the gipsy musicians interpret the musical forms which are wide-spread in Iraqi folk music, they use also the generally known *maqāmāt*, it means only their basic parts, as for instance the *bayātī maqām*:



The *hacha* dance is musically characterized especially by its rhythm of accompaniment. It is necessary to realize that the relation between a certain rhythmical basis and a melody based on a certain *maqām* is often very close. Some rhythmical patterns are directly connected with a certain *maqām* and sometimes certain *maqāmāt* require the use of a certain rhythm. The longer and more complicated is a rhythmical basis, the stronger is its influence on the rhythmical structure of a melody. But it is natural that the basic rhythmical pattern is only seldom played and repeated in its basic form without any change in the course of a composition. On the contrary, the players of percussions enrich and change it according to their own taste and ability.

The relation between the rhythm of the *hacha* dance and its melody can be clearly traced in the typical melodic formulae of this dance:



As to the relation to the text, it has a syllabic character, equally as many other folk forms in Iraq which are based on a fixed rhythm as for example *murabba* or *peste*, or the *chopi*, songs that accompany the *dabkah* dance. In contrast to these forms in which a short and practically the same melodic phrase is repeated and alternated with instrumental interludes or where a longer melodic phrase is repeated practically without any change in different strophes, the length of the melodic phrases of the *hacha* dance changes continuously, the melody is permanently modified and the alternation of vocal and instrumental phrases is also quite irregular. It seems that the interpreters of the *hacha* dance are much more free in the development of their musical imagination than the interpreters of analogical forms of the Arabic music. The range of the melody is limited on a fourth as it is common in the Arabic folk music in general.

The instrumental accompaniment of the *hacha* dance is characterized by the use of a *rebāba* made of a canister and the

khashaba drum. In addition to it the lady dancers sometimes use small metal castanets. In the accompaniment the deafening ornamental passages of the *khashaba* drum dominate. They are evident from the following example, a typical beginning of the

The musical score is arranged in six systems, each with a vocal line on top and a Khashaba drum line on the bottom. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 100. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The first system is labeled 'Singing' and 'Khashaba'. The second system is labeled 'Rebāba'. The third system is labeled 'Singing'. The fourth system is labeled 'Singing'. The fifth system is labeled 'Singing'. The sixth system is labeled 'Singing' and ends with 'etc.' on both the vocal and drum lines. The Khashaba drum part consists of a continuous, rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes, often with accents. The vocal part features a melodic line with various ornaments and rests.

hacha dance. A long introductory note occurs analogically in some Arabic folk forms as for example in the *nail* or *swahli*.

The recording of this example was made in 1965 near the Iraqi town Ramadi. The name of the lady singer was Bernau Karim and the nickname of the *rebāba* player Yusif Rashid was Yusif Hacha which shows his relation to this dance.

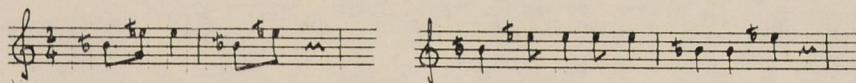
Another musical example of the *hacha* dance — again the introductory part — has all the above-mentioned characteristics with one, but very important exception. The *khashaba* drum is used as in the preceding example but the *rebāba* fiddle is replaced by the Arabic *ud* lute. It means a surprising alliance of the most classical musical instrument with the melody of a dance that is more or less on the periphery of the Iraqi musical life. This illustration is an example of the infiltration of new influences, especially from cities, into the old folk tradition. The lady soloist of this example is known under the name Bint ar-Rif in Iraq and she records and sings at the Baghdad radio and TV. The use of the *ud* lute gives somewhat of a chamber and fine character to her singing. But her performance, even when keeping all other characteristics of the folk music, is already deprived of its proper folk character.

It is interesting, nevertheless, that in this case the *ud* lute loses its typical instrumental character and becomes a sort of an instrument of accompaniment that plays the typical rhythmical figure of the *hacha* dance on the interval of the major third.

As to the rest the use itself of the major third in the accompaniment is a singularity that affects the character of the melody.

It must be emphasized, however, that also in the Arabic Iraqi music certain rhythmical-melodic figures exist that are used for instance for the accompaniment of the highest classical form of Arabic music in Iraq — for the singing improvisation of a *maqām*.

Sometimes these rhythmical-melodic figures consist only of two different tones:



These figures are sometimes completed with a small melodic movement:

The first system of musical notation consists of three staves. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 6/8 time signature. It contains a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. The middle staff is in alto clef with the same key signature and time signature, containing a similar melodic line. The bottom staff is in bass clef with the same key signature and time signature, containing a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes.

The second system of musical notation consists of three staves. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 6/8 time signature. It contains a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. The middle staff is in alto clef with the same key signature and time signature, containing a similar melodic line. The bottom staff is in bass clef with the same key signature and time signature, containing a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes.

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The fifth system of musical notation consists of three staves. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 6/8 time signature. It contains a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. The middle staff is in alto clef with the same key signature and time signature, containing a similar melodic line. The bottom staff is in bass clef with the same key signature and time signature, containing a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes. The word "etc." is written to the right of each staff in this system.

It was already said that in the field of vocal forms the Iraqi gipsy musicians did not create anything new and that they only took over the vocal forms existing already in Iraq. This process was not entirely passive. As a matter of fact, the Iraqi gipsies introduced their own characteristic elements to their performances.

To make these changes clear it is necessary first of all to say a few words about several folk vocal forms in Iraq, as for example the *atāba*, *nail*, *swahli*, *abudiya*, etc.

Virtually almost all folk vocal forms of Arabic music in Iraq have a common basic feature. They are sung on free rhythm, without any firm rhythmical accompaniment. The main instrument is the Arabic one-string fiddle called *rebāba*, on which the singer usually accompanies himself. These forms are performed as a free improvisation in which the instrumental and vocal parts alternate quite regularly and in well-balanced proportions. The melodic range of these forms is limited on a fourth or exceptionally on a fifth. Some of these forms are inseparably connected with a certain *maqām* (it means with the basis of a *maqām*) on which their melody must always be developed. In principle these forms have a syllabic character and only exceptionally use melismatic passages.

S w a h l i

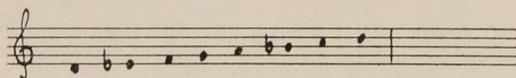
In the repertoire of the gipsy *kawiliya* groups, besides other forms, especially the Arabic vocal form *swahli* has been introduced. *Swahli* is a kind of the Iraqi folk poetry. Its basis is a distich in which the two hemistichs can have a common rhyme or can be without any rhyme at all. This was probably one of the main reasons for *kawiliya* groups to prefer this form above others.

Already in the case of the *hacha* dance the strong variability of the length of separate melodic phrases and the variability in the alternation of vocal and instrumental passages has been stressed. *Swahli*, with its structure and absence of the rhyme, complies with the tendency of gipsy musicians for the highest freedom in performing vocal improvisation.

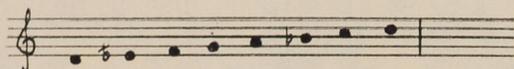
In Iraq, the *swahli* vocal form is wide-spread especially in the north of the country around Mosul. Here it is the most

favourite kind of folk singing and it is not exceptional that, on some special occasion, two singers take turns in the singing of this form hour after hour through the whole night.

Originally the *swahli* was connected with the *kurd maqām*:



After the diffusion of this form practically to the whole Iraq the *swahli* became unseparably connected with the *bayāti maqām*:



The *kawiliya* gipsy groups introduced an important and basic change to the performance of *swahli*. They sing this originally free form of improvisation with the accompaniment of the *khashaba* drum, again with its firm and expressive rhythm and with its deafening ornamental passages. The liking for the firm rhythmical expression and for the rhythm of accompaniment in general was stronger than the tendency for highest freedom in the singing of the melody. The form remains syllabic as in the Arabic folk music and at the beginning of the distich it is, as in Arabic music, introduced by long syllables *awālī* that have no sense and are sung on long notes.

$\text{♩} = 96$

Singing

Khashaba

Rebāba

Singing

The image shows three systems of musical notation. Each system consists of a vocal line (top staff) and an accompaniment line (bottom staff). The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 6/8. The notation is unusual, with the vocal line often starting on a different beat than the accompaniment. The first system has 4 measures, the second has 5 measures, and the third has 5 measures followed by 'etc.' on both staves.

This is a *swahli* in the interpretation of a simple nomadic gipsy *kawiliya* group, the same as in the first example of the *hacha* dance.

The tendency for absolute freedom in the singing of a melody accompanied by a firm rhythm creates, in some singers, an interesting polyrhythmic character. The first hearing of this kind of interpretation arouses the impression that it is a mere confusion and that the singer is not able to follow the rhythm. This impression is strengthened by the instrumental phrases of the *rebāba* fiddle that follow in their melody quite regularly the rhythm of accompaniment. That this polyrhythmic interpretation of certain phrases is neither a mistake nor poverty of musical ability of the singer is proved by the fact that this polyrhythmical interpretation is repeated in the same way without any change on different places of a *swahli*, that the melodic beginning of these phrases starts and especially ends very suitably at the beginning of a bar and that on some places the singing follows exactly the rhythm of accompaniment. The unusual musical notation used in this example tries to indicate the exact relation between the rhythm of accompaniment and the melody.

Singing ♩ = 184

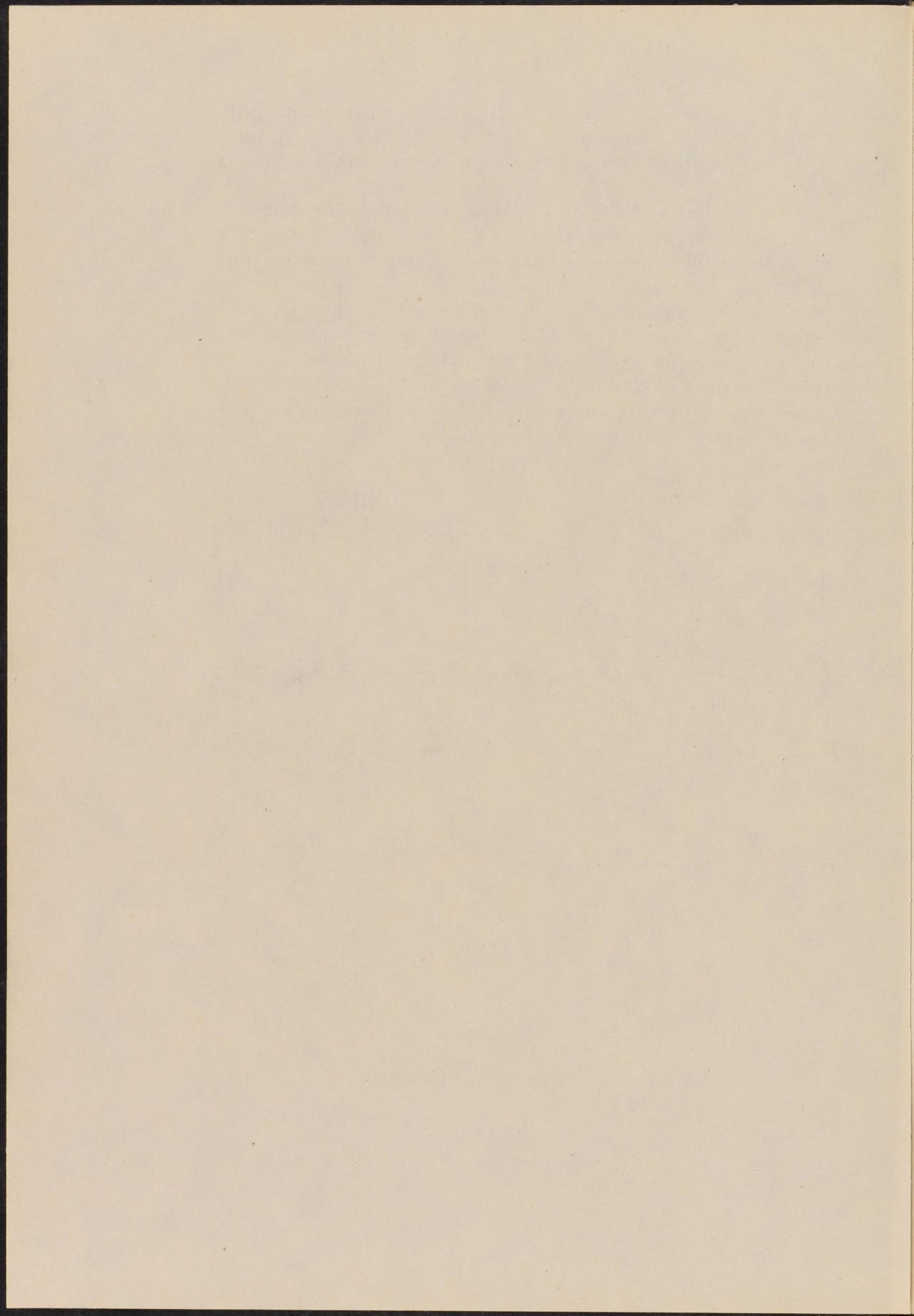
Khashaba

The musical score consists of ten systems of two staves each. The top staff of each system is in treble clef with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat) and a 4/4 time signature. The bottom staff of each system is in bass clef with the same key signature and time signature. The notation includes various rhythmic values such as quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes, as well as rests and accidentals. The piece is titled 'Khashaba' and has a tempo marking of 'Singing ♩ = 184'.

This *swahli* was sung by the Iraqi lady singer Bint ar-Rif. Using different touches the player of *khashaba* accompanied this *swahli* with two different tones in the interval of a perfect fifth.

To demonstrate that this special kind of interpretation is not a mistake but a special kind of a free interpretation of a melody and the expression of the wish to free the melody from the rhythm of accompaniment I close this report by an example of a simple song, interpreted by the same lady singer. In this song she alternatively follows in short melodic phrases the rhythm of accompaniment and alternatively frees the melody from the rhythm. Besides this, the second part is sung with a repetition in which the singer follows the same way. This example shows well the effort to reach this kind of free interpretation.

The image shows a musical score for a song. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system has two staves: the top one is labeled 'Singing' and the bottom one is labeled 'Ud lute'. Both staves are in the key of D major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. The 'Singing' staff contains a melodic line with various note values and rests, including a long note with a fermata. The 'Ud lute' staff contains a rhythmic accompaniment with eighth and sixteenth notes. The second system of staves continues the melody and accompaniment, with the 'Singing' staff showing a more complex melodic line and the 'Ud lute' staff providing a steady accompaniment. The score ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.



Player on the *rebāba* fiddle



Players on the *khashaba* drum



The singer Bernau Karim



The *hacha* dance

