

# Ghassan Sawalhi's Project

## Analysis: Traditional Microtonal Theory and Application

On the Wednesday of March 1st, 2017 Ghassan Sawalhi performed his music at the Berklee Recital Hall among fellow students. The event had a slight formality common to the recital format but with Ghassan's narration of his compositional inspirations and gratitude towards his fellow musicians the night felt pleasantly informal and it introduced a sense of play to the act of playing.

Collectively, Ghassan's seven pieces included a variety of aesthetic qualities due to the changing instrumentation and the variant mixture of contemporary fusion and traditional Middle Eastern music. There were multiple elements of microtonality employed in the compositions, especially during the improvised sections. Most pieces were built on recognizable *jins* such as *Rast*, *Hijaz* and the *Makris*. The grooves were very distinct from one another with a very effective mixture of the contemporary drum-set and traditional Middle Eastern percussion which harmonized perfectly with the boomy fretless electric base. The effect of this rich rhythm section was a very energetic sound which had no difficulty in moving the audience's bodies through the complex meters.

Most of the improvised sections happened over a repeating harmony of one or two notes which seemed to allow the improviser to move through different modes with richer expression employing effects such as drones and playful ornamentation freeing themselves from the multi harmony concerns of a typical jazz improvisation. With the exception of the last composition, the improvised sections were interpolated by a repeating theme which often included the entire ensemble.

The first piece was written in the form of the "*Longa*" which Ghassan describes as a dance like feel originated in the Middle East. The feel reminded me of gypsy music with very ornamented melody over a two feel. The horns percussively underlined the harmony in the breathing spaces of the melody sounding a lot like an accordion.

The second piece had a slower and slightly heavier groove which left me with a more complex and tense mood. The breathy flute and woomy base intertwined with each other with a smooth curvy sound creating an almost sensual aesthetic.

The fifth piece was written in a traditional Arabic style built on a *Rast*. The orchestration was smaller with only traditional instruments. The form presented a theme which is repeated four times with solos in between each repetition and at the final reiteration we are introduced a different theme which closes the piece. The solos often started with limited range and grew as the intensity evolved. The composition made microtons more prominent as well as various enchanting drones performed in the violin.

Overall the recital gracefully introduced elements of Middle Eastern music to the city of Boston while showcasing Ghassan's compositional and performance expertise. It was a touching and exciting memorable night which I'm sure will remain in the memory of all of its spectators.