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Laura Schildbach
Chapman University, schil110@mail.chapman.edu

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Sensuality, Camels, and Islam: Disney Music and American Perception of the Middle Eastern Experience

Schildbach, Laura
Bachelor of Arts Music, Class of 2015
Hall-Musco Conservatory of Music, College of Performing Arts, Chapman University

Abstract
In a world that is constantly changing and becoming more open to diversity and equality, filmmakers are faced with the challenge of presenting films and characters that embrace the ever-evolving world around us. In particular, Disney has been presented with this challenge, as a cinema powerhouse with an audience primarily made up of children, there is a perception that Disney has a moral responsibility to present accurate and unbiased representations of all cultures. This paper analyzes how Disney musically represents the Middle East in two Disney feature films, Aladdin and Prince of Persia, and how the musical choices affect American perception of Middle Eastern culture and music. Furthermore, this paper studies how the representation changes between Aladdin, which was presented as an animated musical, and Prince of Persia, which was presented as a cinematic action film. Finally, this paper studies representation of the Middle East prior to the events of 9/11, as seen in the 1992 film Aladdin, and after the events of 9/11, as seen in the 2010 film Prince of Persia, and how the political environment of the time affected the representation of Middle Eastern music and culture.

Traditional Instruments

Traditional Middle Eastern instruments include the setar (left) which is plucked like a guitar, tombak (above), and kamancheh (below) which is similar to the violin and bowed in front of the instrument (Broughton).

Aladdin 1992

The music of Disney's Prince of Persia seamlessly moves from sounding Middle Eastern through the use of chromatic intervals, to being more cinematic with less chromaticism and bold, dramatic melodies. This seamless transition can be credited in part to the strong brass and low string section used in the background of the entire sound track, the melodies layered on top either evoking the Middle Eastern sound or a dramatic film scene. Similar to Aladdin, this film accomplishes the Middle Eastern sound through the utilization of large amounts of percussion playing unconventional rhythms and ornamentalized chromatic lines in strings and the occasional oboe. One interesting fact to be noted is that this score relies heavily on the use of strings, brass, and percussion, but does not include much in terms of woodwinds. This score also utilizes the voice singing traditional sounding Middle Eastern melodies over Western soundtrack music. Additionally, it uses traditional Middle Eastern instruments both non-diagonally in the soundtrack, and diagonally, playing traditional Middle Eastern music on traditional instruments within some of the scenes. Overall it can be said that the music in this film is used to create a fantasy world full of adventure and romance, and thus the music is highly cinematic and full of seduction—in other words, the score tends to romanticize the middle eastern sound with the use of Western film scoring techniques.

Reactions to the Films

Aladdin has been considered a controversial film since it first came to theaters in 1992. One of the largest controversies in the film was the lyrics in the opening song Arabian Nights. When the film first premiered, there was one line in this opening song that said, "where they cut off your ear if they don't like your face. It's barbaric, but hey it's home!" This created an uproar among Arab American and Muslim Americans, who believed this lyric made their culture seem violent. It wasn't until the media began to support the uproar that Disney changed the lyrics to, "where the land is immense and the heat is intense. It's barbaric, but hey it's home!" (Pinsky, 153). Other critics of Aladdin say that it, "participates in a series of cliché—often self-contradictory—narratives informing popular American assumptions about the Muslim Middle East, made recognizable through a form of western romance" (Bernstein, 185). From a musical standpoint, one can definitely agree with this statement, as composer Alan Menken used compositional techniques that romanticized traditional Middle Eastern music customs (but in no way followed them) in order to make the music sound Middle Eastern to the Western ear. The question, though, is whether or not this form of romanticization, both through music and image, is truly detrimental to Americans, especially children viewers. In the case of Aladdin, it can be said the portrayal of the Middle East has been detrimental to American children due to the timing of the release of the film, which was right after the Persian Gulf War ended, and in the middle of a tumultuous relationship between the U.S. and Iraq. Then, just nine years after the release of Aladdin, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 occurred. As a result of the portrayals of Arabs within Aladdin, Mark Pinsky states in his book The Gospel According to Disney, "it will be many years before American children will be able to watch Aladdin without connecting the characters with our image of Arab terrorists" (Pinsky, 153).

Similar to Aladdin, Prince of Persia also did not receive a warm welcome by critics. In her critique in the New York Times, titled Before the Sword Fights, Cute the Harem Girls, chief film critic Manohla Dargis vehemently criticizes Prince of Persia for its romanticized image of the Middle East combined with non-Persian actors and actresses, and characters with British accents (even though it takes place in 6th century Persia). Once again it can be said that, as a film that takes place in the Middle East, it was released during a transformational time. Ever since the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, Americans have stereotyped Middle Eastern culture, and the film, which romanticizes Persian culture with large amounts of camels and scantily clad women, only encourages these misinformed American perceptions. As mentioned before, even the music of the film romanticizes and Westernizes the Persian culture, with strong bass lines reminiscent of the soundtrack for the Batman movie. The Dark Knight, played by brass and lower strings, and sweeping melodies with a passionate chromatic Middle Eastern sound layered on top. Despite the harsh criticism, credit can be given to the composer of Prince of Persia, Harry Gregson-Williams, for incorporating traditional Middle Eastern instruments, including the setar, into the soundtrack.

Aladdin and Prince of Persia, both through music and image, is truly detrimental to American children's perception of Middle Eastern culture. It will be many years before American children will be able to watch Aladdin without connecting the characters with our image of Arab terrorists.