Tackling Cultural Biases

Frustrated by the limited apparatus available for non-western instruments, Iraqi-British musician built tools in tune with their notes

Introduction to Lemma and Apotome

Frustrated by the way this bias has shaped global perceptions of what music is, and in turn limited how many musicians think and what they can do, Alami decided to take matters into his own hands, by launching two new purpose built tools, Lemma and Apotome, named after Ancient Greek musical terms.

I think that this superscript narrative does exist, and rather than just writing some articles or doing a video essay to try and confront that narrative, I decided that creating something of my own, something new to them and anybody with a little bit of interest in music can use this tool to have a discussion on, is actually encouraging a discussion within the community to start exploring among musicians who are interested in their own or other non-western cultures,” he says.

Lemma and Apotome work in tandem. Lemma is a tool for exploring different tuning systems, and the modes and scales they use. Musicians can experiment with scales from African, Middle Eastern, Chinese, Indian, Indonesian and Turkish traditions, and also create their own. Apotome builds on these systems to generate compositions based on the user’s parameters and instructions. Given that Alami launched Lemma and Apotome to liberate musicians and composers who feel constrained by the dominance of Western music theory, both are free to use and run in a web browser, making them accessible to anyone with a laptop and the internet.

“Tuning a system by Al-Farajb 5-tone/10-Fret Oud
Subject: Juzurn on 18 11

What I realised is that all the time in my creative journey, I’ve been searching for a creative freedom that I couldn’t have when dealing with digital tools or modern musical electronic tools,” Alami says. “These are some very philosophical ideas about what it means to be free as a creative person today, in 2021, with all this technology at our disposal, all this technology at our disposal. I do not feel free, in any way, creatively.”

Young Arab and non-Western musicians who want to create music rooted in their own cultures often have to choose between studying a traditional acoustic instrument and making western classical music. For those new to the world of music, they also provide much-needed control.

Existing online tools that allow musicians to work with non-western tuning systems don’t provide information on how they are traditionally used, Alami explains, meaning that compositions made with them often sound strange or out of tune.

By building that, you get an immediate feeling for what that concept means, so you feel a sense of context. Then the system generates all these different melodies depending on the parameters that you select, which are mostly done by sliders or check boxes. The tools have helped him to realise his own approach to composing. “The word ‘modernised’ has become a bit of a buzzword and slightly lost its meaning, but in a way that’s what these tools are trying to do. It really is about identity, and about being able to represent oneself and to challenge one’s identity, and to break the rules and formalisms that are imposed on these identities by local culture and by international standards.”

Alami is hopeful that Lemma and Apotome will prove to be useful educational tools. “When you read about musicology, you read about tuning, you only ever come across numbers and mathematical ratios,” he says. “It’s very rare to have something that’s interactive. When you can actually hear the difference, I think that’s something that allows you to see the difference — I think it’s going to be making non-western music a lot easier, especially when it comes to talking about pitch and melody. I think it’s going to be incredibly simple and incredibly powerful.”