

MIDDLE EASTERN SCALE

I was very disillusioned not to hear this scale at all on my 3 visits to Saudi Arabia. It's the scale everyone in the West uses to create an oriental sound, so it's not a complete fraud. Maybe I named it after Pittsburg or Lowestoft. I don't know. Read on anyway.

THE MIDDLE-EASTERN/ARABIC/GYPSY/TURKISH SCALE

Everyone knows this scale, although it is given a variety of names, such as one of the above. My apologies to the people concerned. I know that your music is much more complex than this, but anyone interested in really getting to know about the genuine music should consult a world music source.

The scale which is described here is the common one that people use when they want to conjure up an exotic sound for whatever reason. The notes are as follows:

I bII III IV V bVI VII (I)

which translates into the key of C as this:

C	Db	E	F	G	Ab	B	(C)
	-----				-----		
	minor 3rd				minor 3rd		

Triads consist of these chords:

C C⁺ D^b D^bm E Em Fm G⁷⁽⁻⁵⁾ A^bΔ⁽⁺⁵⁾ D^b7 (B bass)

Note that the Ab is shown as a G# in the C⁺ and E major triad. Strictly speaking, the last chord should not be included as it is an inversion of a Db7 chord, minus the 5th.

Here are the four note chords built on this scale:

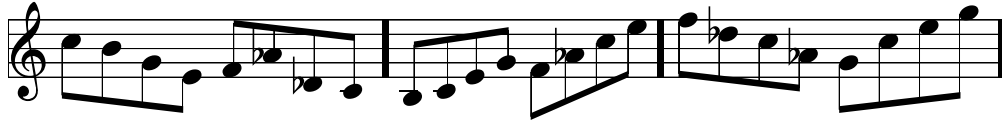
C^Δ C^{Δ(+5)} D^bΔ D^bmΔ D^b7 D^bm7

E⁶ Em⁶ Fm^Δ Fm^{Δ(+5)} G⁷⁽⁻⁵⁾ A^bΔ⁽⁺⁵⁾ A^bm^{Δ(+5)}

You could also add the inversions to the above.

Larger chords can be made, but the number is limited. For example, by adding an E to the Db7 chord you can get a Db7(#9). and by adding a G to the Fm chords you turn them into (major) 9ths.

Runs with occasional leaps characterise solos on this scale, although there is no reason why arpeggios cannot be introduced, like this:



The symbol I use for this scale is **A** as in **CA** (short for Arabic), but you can use any symbol you fancy. I would advise spelling out the notes to clarify what you mean though.

The **minor** middle-eastern scale (**mA**) consists of these notes:

I II vIII #IV V bVI VII I

Starting on C, this works out as this:

C D Eb F# G Ab B C

If you start the scale on F instead of C, you end up with this:

F G Ab B C Db E F

In other words, the minor scale is exactly the same scale as the C major version, starting on the fourth note - a perfect fourth away from the tonic. Or you could say that the major one is exactly the same as the minor one starting on the fifth note - a perfect fifth away from the tonic. (Ignore the tonic an octave up.)

Therefore you don't have to learn a whole new set of scales. You just have to find out what note to start on. For example, to get the notes of E minor Middle Eastern scale, start on the A (a perfect fourth from E) and play the A major Middle Eastern scale.

Moreover, the chords are the same for the minor as for its equivalent major scale.

The picture on the next page was painted by the Lewes artist Tom Walker. A few years ago I organised a jazz and painting concert. As my band played each tune, Tom painted what it suggested to him. This painting, which took just over 5 minutes to complete, came about as a result of us playing the tune Arabian Days (found on the Small Band section). Tom's website, which is well worth a visit, is www.tommwalker.co.uk



SUPPLEMENT

Genuine Middle Eastern music makes use of very many different modes and quarter-tones. There are lots of other websites which will enlighten you more about them. A basic introduction can be found at the Arabian Maqam page on Wikipedia. From what I can understand an Arabic scale or maqam consists of between 1 and 3 (possibly more?) sections. each is called a jins, similar to the way that a western scale can be broken down into 2 tetrachords, except that the ajnas (plural of jins) can overlap. The Middle Eastern scale I have described in this tutorial is called the Maqam Hijaz Kar if it starts on C, and has other names if it starts on other notes, for instance, G (Maqam Shadd Araban), D (Maqam Shahnaz) or A (Mazam Suzidil) - these keys suit the instruments used in the countries concerned. The scale is a combination of 2 Hijaz ajnas, C Db E F and G Ab B C (starting on the important dominant note G). More about these fascinating scales can be found at www.maqamworld.com.

For the purposes of jazz, this scale - which can be heard in the Balkans, the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent - usually serves the purpose of suggesting somewhere exotic.

There are other scales which can also sound exotic. The Dorian, Phrygian and Aeolian modes, for instance. I have heard what sounded to me like the Dorian in the call to prayers ("athaan") from a local mosque.

The harmonic minor can also be used effectively for this purpose. In fact the upper tetrachord (the highest 4 notes of the scale starting on the dominant) corresponds to the Hijaz jins found in Middle Eastern music (see the scale described in the first paragraph on this page).

Pentatonic scales (shortened versions of segments of these scales) can work well too.

To create a really exotic sound, the diminished scale takes some beating to my mind.

You could also use a composite scale, such as a mixture between the harmonic and melodic minor scales.

To be effective, the key will lie with the background. Be-bop style changes with lots of II V I's, II V's and I VI II V's will take away the atmosphere you are trying to create. Chord changes should be very sparse. Extended periods over a simple tonic or tonic and dominant pedal or just a drum backing can often be best.