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 **Snapshot: Shaykh Yāsīn al-Tuhāmī in the Public Ḥaḍra: A Typical Layla Performance in Garland Encyclopedia of World Music Volume 6: The Middle East, [Danielson, Virginia](#) (editor); Routledge (publisher); published 01 Aug 2001; 1200 pp**

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Snapshot: Shaykh Yāsīn al-Tuhāmī in the Public Ḥaḍra: A Typical Layla Performance

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Shaykh Yāsīn al-Tuhāmī (figure 1), from Hawātka, Asyūṭ Upper Egypt, is the most famous Sufi religious singer (*munshid*) in Egypt, and widely acclaimed as the greatest. Since 1973, throughout Egypt, he has given thousands of nighttime religious

performances called *layālī* (singular, *layla*) for social as well as religious occasions, such as saints' festivals, weddings, and memorials. So great is the demand for his religious singing (*inshād*) that he is completely booked many months in advance. About thirty commercial cassette recordings of his performances are available. His innovations, artistry, fame, and financial success have inspired a large number of imitators, especially in Upper Egypt. Together they form a virtual school, the most influential of its kind. This article examines, in detail, a typical *layla* of Shaykh Yāsīn at a public *ḥaḍra*. *Ḥaḍra* is a Sufi ceremony centered on *dhikr* 'remembrance of God', often accompanied by *inshād* 'Islamic hymnody'. [See ISLAMIC HYMNODY IN EGYPT.]

At six in the evening, Shaykh Yāsīn dresses carefully in a fine *jallābiyya* 'robe', a woven *shal* 'shawl', and a '*imma* 'turban' of brilliant white—this distinctive professional attire is now imitated by most *munshidīn* from Upper Egypt—and clasps a rosary in one hand. He and his *firqa* 'musical group' travel to the site of the *layla*, a small village near Tanta in the Nile Delta, where he performs an annual memorial for Shaykh 'Umar Ṭaha, formerly a deputy in the Rifā'ī Sufi order. There Yāsīn is met by members of Shaykh 'Umar's family, who sponsor the *layla*, and by hundreds of local fans who have flocked to see him. He emerges from his car and pushes through the thick crowd, shaking hands and exchanging greetings with his admirers. Slowly he makes his way to the home of one of the sponsors, where a supper is being served for all who come.



FIGURE I Shaykh Yāsīn al-Tuhāmī performing at a public *ḥaḍra*, the *mūlid* of 'Umar ibn al-Farīd. Photo by Michael Frishkopf, 29 May 1997.

The performance space, situated near Shaykh 'Umar's tomb, is clearly marked by color and light. A canvas pavilion, brightly colored with geometric Islamic designs, encloses the space on all sides except one, which is left open to accommodate the overflowing crowd. Against the back flap is a carpeted wooden stage, on which the musicians sit or stand in a semicircle around the *munshid*. In front of the stage is a carpeted strip where *dhikr* 'remembrance of God'—in this case, rhythmic chanting of God's names together with turning or bowing movements—will be conducted. Large loudspeakers are placed on stands around the periphery of the performance

space. The pavilion and adjacent buildings are strung with thousands of tiny colored lightbulbs and illuminated with powerful floodlights.

The sponsors have raised money to pay Yāsīn and to rent equipment, but the performance is open to all without charge. In anticipation, people have been gathering all evening; eventually they number several thousand, including many children and hundreds of women who fill overlooking balconies and rooftops. All the main Sufi orders are represented, but a large proportion of those in attendance are not active members of any Sufi order, although most do subscribe informally to a Sufi system of beliefs and practices. They have come out of love and respect for Shaykh 'Umar, wanting to be together, to obtain a blessing, and to acknowledge God through *inshād* and *dhikr*. Others have come, some from a great distance, primarily to see and hear Shaykh Yāsīn. Still others wish merely to join in the celebration.

Around 11 P.M. Shaykh Yāsīn makes his way to the pavilion, ascends the stage, tests the microphone, and supervises the precise placement of the loudspeakers. Yāsīn has established new levels of artistry in his concern for the quality and balance of the sound system; all evening he will continue to make careful adjustments to the mixer. The musicians now take their places. The group consists of *kamanja* (violin'), *ūd* (lute), *tabla* (funnel-shaped drum), and two *riqāq* (tambourines; singular, *riqq*). One of Yāsīn's major innovations was his popularization of melodic instruments in the public Sufi *ḥaḍra*. His *firqa* has thus come to resemble the *takht*, the small ensemble of older secular Arab music. Before beginning, Shaykh Yāsīn recites several Qur'ānic verses in the simple *tartīl* style, followed by Rifā'ī prayers. Although the *layla* is open to all Sufi orders, tonight Yāsīn leans toward Rifā'ī texts, in deference to Shaykh 'Umar and his family. These recitations also serve as a benediction for the *layla*, and as a prayer for the inspiration of the performer. Yāsīn finishes after twenty minutes and then takes a break.

Shaykh Yāsīn is a master of the *layla*, carefully controlling the music and *dhikr*. At his signal, the violinist and 'ūd player connect to the sound system and tune, moving imperceptibly into a nonmetric prelude in which they establish Yāsīn's chosen opening *maqām* 'melodic mode' with a short *taqsīm* 'instrumental improvisation'. Meanwhile a coordinator (*mustaftih*) begins to arrange those who wish to perform *dhikr* into long facing lines, perpendicular to the front edge of the stage. Yāsīn begins the *dhikr* with a slow rhythmic intonation: "Allah ... Allah." Following Yāsīn's beat, the coordinator sways his body and claps his hands to set a pattern for the others.

At a cue from Yāsīn, the percussionists enter, and the first *waṣla* 'section' is under way. Yāsīn begins with a fixed opening text, *Yā a'zam al-mursalīn* 'O greatest of prophets', a *madīḥ* in praise of the Prophet Muhammad. The tempo increases rapidly, building up to a madad section, in which Yāsīn asks the family of the Prophet and saints for their blessings; then come three lines of the first *qaṣīda*, closing with a melodic-poetic cadence (*qafla*).

There follows a sequence of three more such "buildups," each in roughly the same form: following a *taqsīm* at slower tempo, Yāsīn sings several lines of poetry, pausing

and repeating freely for several minutes, until the *qafla*. An instrumental interlude may follow: either a *taqsīm* or a fixed melody (*mazzika*), often borrowed from the songs of Umm Kulthūm. Sometimes Yāsīn inserts improvisatory *āḥāt*: crying melismas on the syllable "ah." Singing and instrumental interludes may alternate several times. Meanwhile, the tempo increases; the meter intensifies, shifting from *waḥda* to *maqsūm* to *bamb*; and the melodic style changes from nonmetrical to increasingly metrical and short-phrased, until the final *qafla* and culmination of the buildup in *madad*. The buildups themselves increase in length and complexity. (See below, "Notes on Meter and Structure.")

Throughout the performance, vocal melodies are improvised from a set of stock phrases and contours, both metrical and nonmetrical, suitable for the different forms and moods of the poetry. Many of these phrases, originally Yāsīn's, are now widely imitated. The same text can be set to any number of melodies; there are no songs as such. Yāsīn sings in the *maqāmāt* with authority; his intonation is superb, and he modulates skillfully to change the mood. His distinctive style of textual performance features clear, faultless pronunciation and a slow exposition of the text; lines are repeated in many musical guises. By the end of the evening, the attentive listener (even if illiterate) has inevitably memorized large amounts of poetry.

Shaykh Yāsīn draws on many sources of Sufi poetry, most notably the great 'Umar ibn al-Farīd. Normally Yāsīn's *layla*

contains one or two principal *qaṣā'id*, with shorter excerpts from other poems inserted here and there. From the outset of his career, Yāsīn distinguished himself from his predecessors by singing only classical Arabic poetry and by concentrating on the most exquisite, abstruse poems. Their densely symbolic mystical language of love, longing, and unity challenges the listener's comprehension, despite Yāsīn's clear articulation and his fidelity to the text. Tonight, drawing on an enigmatic poem attributed to Aḥmad al-Rifā'ī, a meditation on mystical union, he sings, *Fa-ṣirtu anā al-dā'ī wa-minnī 'l-ijābati ...* 'Then I became the Caller, and from me is the Answer ...' Each listener understands according to his spiritual station: few grasp the complete meaning intellectually, but everyone feels the words emotionally.

Shaykh Yāsīn points out that he must live a text in order to learn it and sing it; in performance, the words bespeak his own inner state. His richly expressive voice comes from the heart, evoking *shajan* 'Wistfulness' in his listeners, who respond with gestures, movements, and vocal cries, particularly at the *qafla*. "What comes from the heart reaches the heart," they say. Using their feedback to guide his poetic and musical choices, Yāsīn raises *ṭarab* 'musical emotion' to a peak.

As the pace accelerates, *dhikr* becomes more individualistic, movement more ecstatic. Emotional responses are freely expressed through gesture or vocalization. Mention of saints, with whom many feel a personal relationship, sends waves of enthusiasm through the crowd. Participants may enter a state of mystic rapture, *ḥāl*, whose external manifestations include wild or spasmodic movement, stillness, collapsing, unconsciousness, and *tarjama*—literally 'translation', that is, speaking in tongues.

The majority do not perform *dhikr* but simply watch and listen, swaying to the music, clapping, waving ecstatically after the *qafla*, and shouting, "Allah!" Many hold tape-recorders aloft in front of a loudspeaker in order to make the best possible recording; these tapes will later be copied and distributed to fans around Egypt.

After four buildups, the first *waṣla* is concluded, the *firqa* takes a break, and those wishing to greet Shaykh Yāsīn come onto the stage. Some consider him to possess *baraka* 'blessing', for he is an inspired *munshid* whose father was a *walī* 'saint'. Others shower him with the sort of enthusiastic love usually displayed toward famous popular singers. Part saint, part pop star, he calmly receives them all.

In the second *waṣla*, Shaykh Yāsīn sings nonmetrically, accompanied by melodic instruments only. Everyone sits quietly, concentrating on the singing of poetry. When

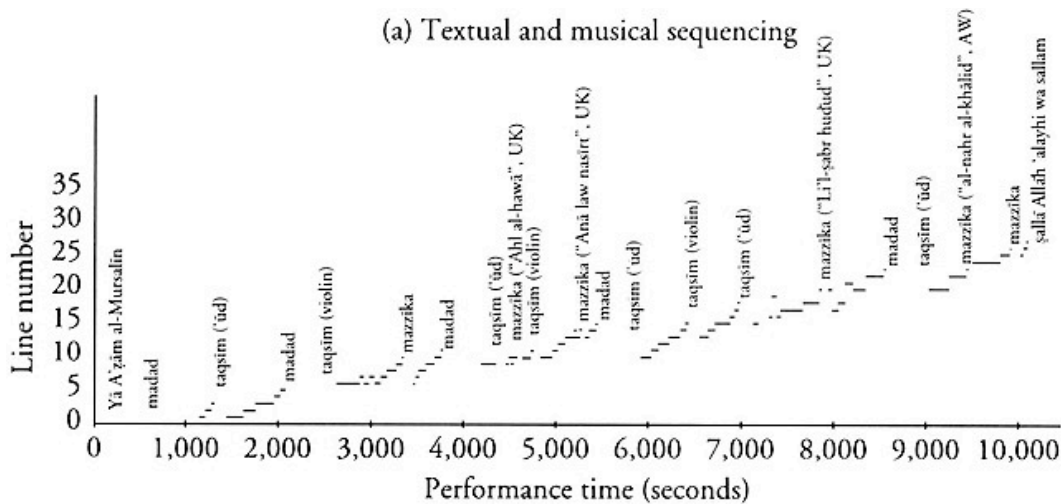
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he finishes a phrase, cries of appreciation rise from his audience. Long *taqāsīm* and *āhāt* provide release from the tension of poetry and lend a meditative cast to this *waṣla*.

The third *waṣla* is a version of the first, but shorter, consisting of two buildups only. The longer final buildup leads to a blessing for the Prophet: *Ṣallā Allāh 'alayhi wa sallam ...* ('May God bless him and give him peace'). After the percussion has ceased, Shaykh Yāsīn calls for a recitation of the *Fātiḥa*—the opening chapter of the Qur'an—and the performance ends.

## NOTES ON METER AND STRUCTURE

Figure 2 shows the principal meters in the musical accompaniment to public *ḥadra*. Counting *d*'s shows that *maqṣūm* is the first harmonic of *waḥda* (twice the frequency) and *bamb* is the first harmonic of *maqṣūm*. Metrical shifts from *waḥda* to *maqṣūm* to *bamb* (and then back to *waḥda*) create a sense of sudden acceleration (or deceleration), without contradicting the original *waḥda* meter; thus *dhikr* rhythm is never disrupted discontinuously.



Legend:

Vertical labels = nonpoetic sections

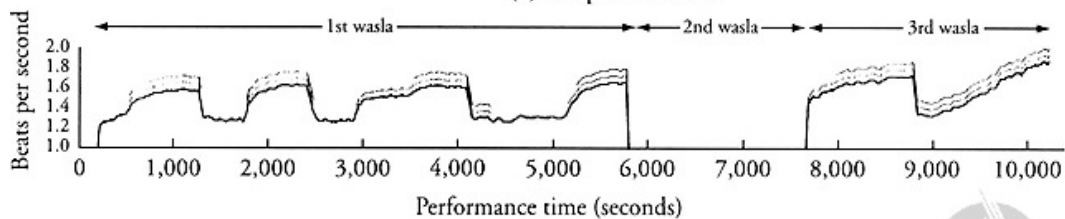
( ) = song from which *mazzika* is taken and original singer

UK = Umm Kulthūm

AW = 'Abd al-Wahhāb

FIGURE 2 Principal meters used in musical accompaniment to public *ḥaḍra*.

(b) Tempo and meter



Legend:

Single line = *waḥda*

Double line = *maqsīm*, strong metric harmonics (factor of 2)

Triple line = *bamb*, strong metric harmonics (factor of 4)

FIGURE 3 Typical structure of a *layla* as performed by Shaykh Yāsīn al-Tuhāmī and his school, (a) Textual and musical sequencing, (b) Tempo and meter.

In Figure 3 we see a typical structure of a *layla* as performed by Shaykh Yāsīn al-Tuhāmī and his school. Figure 3(a) shows the number of the poetic line being sung as a function of time, thus indicating fate and repetition of poetic material. The nonpoetic sections include interpolated segments of *madad*, *taqṣīm*, and *mazzika*. Figure 3(b) shows tempo and meter as a function of time throughout the performance.

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Tempo is defined as four times the strong stress (*dum*) rate of the underlying *waḥda* meter. During the second, nonmetric, *waṣla* no tempo line is plotted. The underlying tempo accelerates continuously within each buildup, while metrical changes provide a sensation of discontinuous tempo doubling.

Although the prevailing strong stress rate may double or quadruple with changes in meter, it is assumed that the fundamental periodicity of the basic *waḥda* meter pulse still maintains perceptual validity, an assumption supported by observations of *dhikr* movements. Faster meters emphasize metrical harmonics at two or four times the basic *waḥda* tempo (analogous to octaves in pitch). Rather than indicate these faster harmonics by doubling or quadrupling the height of the line graph, a quasi-logarithmic notation is used: double or triple lines indicate strong metric harmonics (at factors of two or four, respectively) while the height of the line is still proportional to the basic *waḥda* rate. Thus the two dimensions of tempo (fundamental rate) and meter (harmonic "overtones" of that rate) are decoupled and can be distinguished.

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