



## **Tradition: Oud**

Often considered the grandfather of the modern guitar, the oud is a fascinating musical instrument with deep historical roots. Originating from the Middle East and North Africa, it has been played for thousands of years, influencing musical traditions across many cultures. The oud has a pear-shaped body with a flat top, a short, bent back neck, and typically eleven to thirteen strings arranged in pairs except for one low-end string. Because it lacks frets (those little bars on a guitar neck that indicate notes), musicians can create smooth and expressive sounds by sliding between notes, making it a favorite in traditional and contemporary Middle Eastern music. Traditionally the lead instrument of an ensemble, the Oud often takes the melody. Oud players use a risha – a long thin pick that is handmade by each player – to pluck out the themes and variations of each song.

The oud's history can be traced back over 5,000 years to ancient Mesopotamia, in what is now Iraq. It appears in early artwork and writings, showing its importance in both music and daily life. Over time, the oud spread across the region. Along with commerce, cultural exchange, and diplomacy, the oud made its way into Europe during the Middle Ages (from the 5th to 15th centuries), where it influenced the invention of the guitar and mandolin, among other instruments that are featured in a variety of music styles today. You are likely to encounter the oud in countries such as Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Egypt or Sudan. Today, the oud remains an essential part of the cultural heritage in these and neighboring places and in communities that have emigrated from the region. Students interested in music history or learning new instruments can find inspiration in its timeless beauty and unique sound.

In recent years, the young visionary oud player Mohamed Abozekry is composing works, developing new ways to play the oud, and exploring different styles of music. In doing so, he is bringing the oud into new musical spaces – such as jazz, and different world music forms – expanding the popularity of the oud and reminding us how ancient traditions continue to shape modern sounds.

## **Artist: Mohamed Abozekry**

**Mohamed (“Moh”) Abozekry** is a Franco (French)-Egyptian musician known around the world for his incredible skill and innovation with the oud, a key instrument in Arabic music. Now in his early 30s, he first fell in love with the sound of the oud as a young boy in Cairo, inspired by his uncle who played it at family gatherings. Recognizing his passion, Moh's parents enrolled him in the prestigious Arab Oud House, a school founded by the famous Iraqi musician Naseer Shamma. Here, Mohamed studied with top musicians and quickly stood

out for his talent. While still a teenager, Mohamed became the youngest oud master teacher in the Arab world.

At age 18, Mohamed won first place at the International Oud Competition in Damascus, Syria and began performing with his teacher and other acclaimed professional musicians throughout the world. Naturally social and curious, as he traveled he loved meeting and playing with other musicians, and learning about other styles of music-making. While on tour in Lyons, France he met some local musicians at the Oud House in Lyons and became interested in learning French, so he traded oud lessons with them for French lessons! He set up a second home in Paris, France, where he continues to perform and explore new musical styles. In the same spirit of curiosity and openness that inspires him to split his time between Cairo and Paris, Moh is developing new techniques and possibilities for the oud while championing the traditional Arabic practice in which his art is rooted. Mohamed isn't only interested in the oud as a traditional lead instrument—he wants to collaborate with other musicians and explore the oud in the context of different musical styles. To do that, he needed to rethink the way the oud was usually played. So, he created his own style of playing! And he changed the strings of his oud to include two bass strings rather than one so he could play rhythm and harmony underneath other musicians' solos. This made the oud more flexible and allowed him to accompany others, not just lead. He then developed a style that allows him not only to play the melody using the traditional method with the risha, but also to incorporate strumming chords, plucking with his other fingers, and even using the funk bassist method of “slapping” on the bass strings and knocking on the body of the instrument for extra percussion.

Over the course of his career, Moh has released multiple albums, each showcasing his ability to combine traditional oud melodies with modern musical styles. His compositions often reflect his own experiences and the cultural landscapes he navigates, making his music deeply personal and emotionally resonant. In addition to performing worldwide, he is also often called upon to compose musical scores for film.

Today, Mohamed Abozekry's music is known for blending cultures and breaking new ground. His sound reflects his continuing artistic journeys in Egypt and France, creating music that connects people across the world.

## **Between Two Worlds: From Cairo to Paris**

Cairo, the capital of Egypt, is a city rich in history and culture. Home to nearly 10 million people, it is one of the largest cities in both Africa and the Middle East. Sitting along the banks of the Nile River, Cairo is known worldwide for its proximity to the Great Pyramids of Giza—one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Cairo also offers a deep connection to the past through its beautifully preserved mosques, bustling ancient markets, and world-class museums like the Egyptian Museum, which holds treasures from thousands of years of civilization.

Cairo is also a lively and modern metropolis. It is a major center for education, business, the arts, and entertainment. Egypt's television and film industry is the largest in the Arab sphere and among the largest in the world; Mohamad has scored several widely

distributed films and TV series. Shopping markets like Khan el-Khalili are alive with color, selling everything from spices to handcrafted jewelry. The sounds of daily life—honking cars, street musicians, and the voices of vendors—create a constant rhythm that defines the city’s energy. Egyptian cuisine, such as koshary (a dish of rice, pasta, and lentils) and falafel, adds to the sensory experience. Cairo’s blend of ancient traditions and modern life makes it an inspiring place for creatives like Mohamed Abozekry, who began his musical journey in this unforgettable city. With its mix of ancient landmarks and modern skyscrapers, Cairo is a place where history and modernity live side by side.

Paris, the capital of France, is equally full of life, art, and culture. Often called the “City of Light,” Paris is known for its stunning architecture, famous landmarks like the Eiffel Tower and Notre-Dame Cathedral, and its dedication to creativity in all forms. Museums like the Louvre, the abundance of lively cafés, and beautiful parks make the city feel like a living work of art. Paris is also one of the most culturally diverse cities in the world. Its neighborhoods are home to people from many backgrounds—North African, Vietnamese, Middle Eastern, and more—each adding their voice to the city’s rich identity.

This cultural diversity is reflected in Paris’s music scene, which ranges from classical concerts at the Philharmonie de Paris to underground hip-hop and lively jazz clubs in the Latin Quarter. Street musicians perform along the Seine or in tucked-away corners of Montmartre, creating a vibrant soundtrack for daily life. Paris has inspired generations of musicians and continues to welcome new voices from around the world. In Paris, Moh added not only a new home but also new musical ideas, blending the classical training he received in Cairo with the collaborative, experimental spirit of Paris. These two culturally dynamic cities inspire his unique sound.

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