



FARAH DHIB

ORCID : <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-9998-2676>

Centre de Recherches Interdisciplinaires en Histoire,
Histoire de l'Art et Musicologie
L'Université de Limoges

Melismas at the Service of the Ancient Middle Eastern Libretto: An Exploration of the Opera *Kanaan* by Patrick Lama, Based on the Myth of Baal

DOI: 10.34861/aspmuz13-02_lama-op-kanaa

Introduction

Kanaan (2000), composed by Patrick Lama, stands out as the first Palestinian opera. It is notable for its libretto in Arabic, seamlessly integrated into a contemporary musical language that blends atonality, tonality and modality. This opera premiered at the opening of the Ruhr Festival in Germany, centred around the theme of 'foreign love'.

Kanaan is structured into two parts: 'The Construction of the Palace of Baal' and 'The Struggle between Baal and Mot'. However, only the first part, which was showcased at the festival, will be examined here.¹ Presented as a single act at the Recklinghausen Festival Hall, *Kanaan* draws its inspiration from the

¹ This article is based partly on an unpublished work: Farah Dhib, 'Models and Transfers of Western Paradigms in Arab Opera between 1956 and 2016', doctoral thesis (co-supervised), Université de Poitiers et Université de Tunis, Poitiers, 2022.

mythological tale of Baal, documented on tablets excavated from the archaeological site of the ancient city of Ugarit at Ras Shamra in Syria.

At its premiere, the Opera astonished the audience and puzzled some German critics who mistook its sound for Arabic music. The auditorium was engulfed in artistic confusion. It lacked any clear space-time reference points, due to the fusion of cultures, contemporary musical expressions and modern musical language. All these elements were united in a primitive dramatic structure borrowed from Middle Eastern mythology.

To musically transpose the Canaanite texts of his opera, emphasising the connection between climatic conditions, Canaanite culture and the interactions between the gods and the seasons, Patrick Lama's intellectual journey is revealed through music analysis. His work is grounded in two distinct principles. First, Lama employs the concept of similarity and contrast, which is evident in his compositional style. The orchestra and the voices, the vocal colours and orchestral timbres, as well as modal, contrapuntal and harmonic elements, adhere to this notion consistently. Secondly, Lama's work is structured around the cyclical notion of life and death, symbolised by Baal, the god of fertility and vegetation. This cyclical theme underscores the opera's narrative, reflecting the perpetual cycle of life and death inherent in Canaanite mythology. This cycle is reflected in the musical discourse through various means. These include changes in orchestral colours, the rarefaction and condensation of the orchestral palette and melodic processes, the continuous renewal of melodic-rhythmic cells, and the recurrent use of melismas.

Among the musical devices employed by Lama to blend text and music, this article focuses specifically on melismas. As a musical category the term 'melisma' is variously defined, depending on whether it refers to vocal music, particularly chant, or is universally applied. It is a form of 'vocalisation' inserted between the essential notes of a simple song. This practice, which involves singing several notes on a single syllable of a text, encompassing fast notes or a complex melody, resists absolute definition. An interesting discussion among musicologists around this term took place during a seminar on melisma and ornamentation in traditional Mediterranean music, where the following definition was formulated during the concluding session: 'melisma: [...] a significant lengthening or development of one or more phonemes or syllables, comprising several notes in a row as a passage or ornamentation, or even an entire melody'.² Melismas,

² 'Mélisme: [...] allongement ou développement significatifs portant sur un ou plusieurs phonèmes ou syllabes et comportant soit plusieurs notes de suite – à titre de passage ou d'ornementation –,

often used for embellishment, add a distinct complexity and richness to vocal performances, transcending musical genres. The way melismas are used in a musical composition depends greatly on the context, the style and the intention of the composer. In the context of opera, melisma is often stereotyped, serving as a virtuosic device to showcase the singers' talents and accentuate the most intense emotional moments of the drama.³ In *Kanaan*, however, melismas serve a different purpose beyond their conventional functions. Therefore, we will explore these musical embellishments by examining their aesthetic aspect and their dramatic roles as leitmotifs and means for expressing the various dimensions of the myth. While melismas can also be found in instrumental music, their significance in relation to syllables differs from that observed in songs.⁴ In this context, melisma in *Kanaan* transcends the boundaries between vocal and instrumental melody, going beyond mere ornamentation to emerge as a flourishing symbol.

1. The composer and his work

Patrick Lama

Born in Jerusalem in 1940, Patrick Lama is a composer deeply influenced by a variety of cultures. He is the son of Augustin Lama (1902–1988), an internationally renowned organist of the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre (1919–1988) and a pioneer of contemporary Palestinian music. Patrick Lama was introduced to liturgical music from an early age. In 1961, he travelled to Paris, where he studied piano under Marcel Ciampi (1891–1980), who prepared him for admission to the École Normale de Musique. He obtained his advanced piano teaching diploma in 1964. In 1965, Patrick Lama returned to Jerusalem with the intention of settling permanently to focus on composition. He taught piano in both Jerusalem and Amman and aspired to establishing the country's first music school. Unfortunately, the project faltered due to the outbreak of the Israeli-Palestinian war in 1967. In 1967–1968, Patrick Lama composed his first works for piano.

soit une mélodie entière', Jacques Viret, 'Présentation' of the seminar 'Mélisme et ornementation dans les musiques traditionnelles méditerranéennes', held at the Centre grégorien, Abbaye de Sénanque, from 28 September to 2 October 1978, http://www.apemutam.org/instrumentsmedievaux/articles/colloque_senanque.pdf.

³ Xantoula Dakovanou, 'Quand l'âme chante. La voix mélodique et son pouvoir affectif', *Topique*, 120 (2012), 21–37.

⁴ Viret, 'Présentation'.

Subsequently, in 1968, he relocated to Paris, where his promising early compositions caught the attention of Henri Dutilleux (1916–2013), leading him to join Dutilleux's composition class at the École Normale. Additionally, he pursued studies in orchestral conducting at the same institution. After composing several works for piano, Patrick Lama ventured into writing cantatas and lieder sung in literary Arabic, drawing inspiration from contemporary Arabic poetic texts, such as *Le Fleuve et la Mort* (1988), a work for soprano and four wind instruments (piano, flute, oboe, clarinet), based on a poem by the Iraqi poet Badr Shaker Al-Sayyab (1926–1969), *Parole du Fleuve* (1994), a cantata for soprano and orchestral ensemble, inspired by a poem by Chawki Abdelamir (1949); and two lieder for soprano and piano based on poems by the renowned Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish (1941–2008): *S'envolent les colombes* (1998) and *Le lit de l'Étrangère*, as a cantata for two soloists, soprano and baritone, accompanied by an orchestral ensemble and baritone. This last piece was commissioned by the European Union office in Jerusalem in 2001. Patrick Lama's vocal works resonate with a sense of nostalgia and intimacy, evident in the simplicity of the orchestration and chamber music elements. Enjoying international acclaim, Lama has been invited to numerous countries to showcase his music. His compositions have been broadcast in various locations, including the Arab Emirates (Abu Dhabi), Germany, Finland, Jordan and Palestine, as well as on the French radio stations France Culture and France Musique. Patrick Lama performed his works in 1994 at the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony honouring Yasser Arafat, Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin in Oslo. Encouraged by his friend, the Lebanese journalist and intellectual Ghassan Abdelkhalek (1951–2004), Lama embarked on the composition of his opera *Kanaan* in 1995. This opera served as a true laboratory for experimentation, allowing him to develop his style in a contemporary and literary manner. The first part of *Kanaan*, titled 'The Construction of Baal's Palace', was first performed in October 2000 and broadcast live by Radio Berlin.

Kanaan: the context behind the opera's composing

The idea for composing *Kanaan* came from the Lebanese journalist Ghassan Abdelkhalek⁵ (1951–2004), a close friend of the composer Patrick Lama. Like many intellectuals in the Middle East, Abdelkhalek was proud of his Canaanite

⁵ Ghassan Abdelkhalek is a Lebanese journalist and film critic who has done much to promote Arabic cinema in Paris through his articles and radio work.

heritage and was very interested in this civilisation. To persuade Lama to undertake the composing of an opera, he invited him to visit his village in Lebanon. The village overlooks ancient cities of the Canaanite civilisation. During this visit, Ghassan shared with Lama the history, the gods, the myths and other aspects of this ancient civilisation. It was in 1995 that Patrick felt prepared to begin composing his opera. In his quest for Ugaritic texts, Lama selected fragments of text and sent them to Abdelkhalek to translate into Arabic. In 2000, the one-act opera *Kanaan* premiered at the Ruhr Festival in Recklinghausen, Germany, one of Europe's oldest, largest and most renowned theatre festivals.⁶ The first part of the opera, titled 'The Construction of Baal's Palace', owes much to the assistance of a festival collaborator named Gidi Boss.

Director Akram Tillawi (b. 1960) adopted a subtle approach to depicting the battle between the Canaanite gods, employing an exceptionally restrained staging featuring only the palace door as a backdrop. Tillawi's stage design bears a striking resemblance to the production of *Ædipus Rex* (1927) at the Sarah Bernhardt Theatre, where the narrator and protagonists were rendered as living, immobile statues. Consequently, *Kanaan*'s staging stands out for its simplicity, opting for symbolic imagery.

As for the vocal cast, for the festival performance, under the musical direction of Hansgütner Heyme (b. 1935), he called on New York dramatic mezzo-soprano Christina Ascher for the role of Ashira, Californian soprano Katherine Arthur was chosen to play the role of Anat, while the double role of El and Baal was given to Norwegian bass-baritone Njal Sparbo and the role of narrator to the Stuttgart baritone Ekkehard Abell. The chorus comprised choristers from the German Kammer Academy in Neuss and the Cologne Choir, conducted by Volker Hempfling (b. 1944).

The libretto: The myth of Baal

The opera *Kanaan* draws inspiration from the myth of the god of vegetation, Baal,⁷ which is based on ancient clay tablets discovered in the Middle East. These

⁶ 'Legendary – The Ruhr Festival' [presentation], <https://recklinghausen-tourismus.de/fr/culture/l%C3%A9gendaire-le-festival-de-la-ruhr/>, accessed 2 Jan. 2023.

⁷ Baal, originally named Haddou (meaning 'lord', 'master' or 'owner'), embodies the shared heritage of the ancient Middle East. As a central figure in mythological poems, Baal, the god of storms and rain, the most widespread personification at the beginning of the second millennium

archaeological findings serve as the cornerstone of the opera's libretto, lending it a unique and original essence. What further distinguishes *Kanaan* is that the libretto is the result of a collaboration between the composer and a group of intellectuals led by Ghassan Abdelkhalek. This team was responsible for translating the texts derived from an archaeological exploration of cuneiform tablets into Arabic.

Patrick Lama based the libretto on the work of André Caquot and Maurice Szneycer, particularly *Textes ougaritiques Tome I, Mythes et Légendes: Introductions, Traductions*. From this material, Lama selected two poems from the six tablets discovered during the excavations. He then manipulated and assembled these texts to breathe life into a work centred on the Cycle of Baal. In developing the story of Baal, the god striving to establish his reign to bring fertility and life to the kingdom of Ugarit, Lama adopted a selective approach to the myth. Rather than starting the narrative from the beginning, depicting all the conflicts and battles fought by Baal and Anat⁸ against other gods such as Mot⁹ and Yam,¹⁰ he chose to focus on a specific episode from the myth, affording an opportunity for a deeper exploration of this Middle Eastern mythology.

The narrative of *Kanaan* depicts an ongoing struggle that remains perpetual, recounting the myth of the construction of a house for the god Baal in Arabic. It employs a straightforward narrative structure that follows the logical sequence of events in the Ugaritic myth. The opera begins as Baal celebrates his resurrection with a grand banquet on Mount Sapan. He invites his sister Anat to join the festivities, as she is being honoured following a victory over their common

among the Semites of Syria, is praised for his attributes, in particular his voice of thunder, perceived as terrifying, but actually a harbinger of beneficial rains.

⁸ Anat, daughter of the god El and sister of Baal, is a beautiful young woman who is always at Baal's side, supporting him in his battles. An avid hunter and seductive character, Anat obtains everything she desires and fights relentlessly for Baal to have his own palace, even while showing disrespect for her father El. Sharing with Baal a violent character, Anat is characterised by gratuitous and uncontrollable violence, shrouded in mystery, particularly in relation to her massacres, which are difficult to decipher. Outside Ugaritic texts, she is associated with Athena by the Greeks and described as the 'Queen of Heaven' by the Arameans of Syene, while also being the warrior goddess and protector of the Pharaohs in Egypt during the Nineteenth Dynasty, admired for her aggressive and bellicose character, despite her fertility symbolism.

⁹ The god Mot, son of El, embodies the spirit of the harvest and reigns over parched lands in the summer, ready to be sacrificed by the goddess Anat at each harvest to ensure fertility, but his death is brief to avoid interrupting his reign.

¹⁰ Yam, whose name literally translates as 'ocean', is the god and prince of the sea. He played an important role in Ugarit, a region whose economy was closely linked to maritime trade.

enemies. Baal then requests the construction of a palace for himself and seeks Anat's assistance in this endeavour. She agrees, but stipulates that she must first obtain her father El's consent. Anat's encounter with El is depicted as somewhat perplexing, as according to the mythical texts of Ugarit, El appeared to have favoured Yam, Prince of the Sea, for the construction of the palace.

Anat and Baal engage in consultation and employ subtle diplomacy to garner the assistance of Ashira,¹¹ El's wife, by presenting her with gifts. Ashira accepts the gifts and persuades El to permit Baal to build his palace. With the aid of Anat, Baal realises his dream and completes the construction of his palace. This plot unfolds across one act, comprising 16 scenes grouped into five episodes, including the denouement and final situation. The division of the scenes is directly inspired by the mythical tale.

2. Melismas in *Kanaan*

Space-time melodies: melisma as a witness to the ancient Middle East¹²

The spatial and temporal unfolding of the opera *Kanaan* commences with a lush overture, characterised by modal instability, fluidity of discourse and, most notably, the prevalence of melismas that emerge from the outset, immersing the listener in the Oriental universe. This originality is evident in the frequent use of distinctive melismas, which enrich the overture. From the opening bars, the piece begins with a polytonal chord, from which a melismatic melodic line emerges. This line, intricately woven with embellishments around C, harmoniously intertwines with the violin melody (see Example 1).

¹¹ Ashira, the goddess who fathered the gods, participated with El in the creation of his 70 sons, assuming the roles of wife and daughter to El at the same time. Her relationship with Baal is unstable, oscillating between opposition out of fear for her sons and intervention in Baal's favour during the construction of his palace, illustrating an indecisive and arrogant nature, sometimes motivated by greed.

¹² On this topic, see Raed Belhassen, 'Structures modales et ornements dans les musiques arabes: modélisations et présentation d'une bibliothèque d'objets dans csound', Journées d'Informatique Musicale 2014, May 2014, Bourges, France, <https://hal.science/hal-01664499>.

[illegible]

The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef. It contains a sequence of notes: a half note (G4), a quarter note (A4), a quarter note (B4), a half note (C5), a quarter note (D5), a quarter note (E5), and a half note (F#5). A bracket labeled 'Kurdj' spans from the first G4 to the C5. Another bracket labeled 'Hijaz' spans from the C5 to the F#5.

In *Kanaan*, the modal discourse stands out for its strong preference for melismas, which are prominently featured in this overture, imparting a distinctive and captivating dimension to the musical journey. This inclination finds its roots in the East, particularly in the Arabic tradition, where modal discourse is invariably accompanied by melismas and ornamentation. These elements are not considered as merely embellishments, but rather as indispensable performance devices. For Arab artists, ornamentation serves as the raw material from which they craft infinite forms, drawing parallels with the embellishments found in Western music, such as flourishes, mordents, trills and grupettos. Lama underscores this concept

by highlighting the significance of melismas in conjuring up a musical space that embodies elements of both the Oriental and Western traditions in its language.

Melismas as a symbol of fertility

Kanaan thus presents a diverse array of melismatic figures. These melismas, ranging from trills to embellishments around specific notes, binary or ternary cells, chromatic or diatonic scales, ascending or descending motions, enrich the composition. The strategic placement of these melismatic figures and melodic motifs creates a sort of branching structure (arborescence) within both the vocal lines and the orchestration. This pattern, cyclically evoking the germination, blossoming and eventual wilting of flowers, resonates particularly with the main characters and with the goddess of fertility, a central force throughout the opera. These melismas can be interpreted as symbolising the cycle of fertility intertwined with the Canaanite myth surrounding the god Baal. Each instrument maintains its distinct identity, and the melismas intertwine, fostering a dynamic exchange, a dialogue and an organic relationship between the melismas of the instrumentation and those of the vocal lines, once again echoing their Oriental origins.

The significance of melismas is visually manifested in *Kanaan*, where the score is highly detailed, with every ornament meticulously transcribed. An illustration of this painstaking approach can be seen in the first scene, where the composer chose to transcribe each note rather than use a *gruppetto* sign for an A (see Example 2), showcasing his dedication to the precision and richness of the melismas in his work, a symbol of abundance and opulence.

Example 2. Patrick Lama, *Kanaan*, first scene, melodic-rhythmic motif symbolising abundance, © Patrick Lama 2000.



Melismas, evoking a spiritual atmosphere

Exploring a mythological theme centred around the divinities of ancient Middle Eastern cultures inspired Patrick Lama to convey this spirituality through his music. Among the expressive tools serving this purpose that define his musical language in *Kanaan* are melismas and embellishments, characteristic elements

borrowed from both secular and religious Renaissance music and also present in Arabic music and the chants of Eastern Christianity. These elements permeate the opera, manifested as cadences or melodic motifs focused on a central note. This skilful utilisation imbues the work with a spiritual and emotional expressiveness, evoking not only the spiritual essence of Renaissance Gregorian chant but also its foundational significance for all Western music, highlighting its connection with the East. Indeed, the history of Gregorian chant can be traced back to the convergence of two cultures of Christian antiquity: Rome and the East, notably the Syro-Palestinian circles.¹³

This pursuit of spirituality extends beyond the use of ancient and medieval music; our composer demonstrates a remarkable sensitivity to the late Baroque religious choral style. In *Kanaan*, the influence of Johann Sebastian Bach is notably evident, not merely through direct transcription but as a compositional homage. Lama's reverence for religious music is shown through the frequent incorporation of choirs and chorale-inspired compositions applied to secular text. It should be noted that the chorale repertoire constitutes the heart of sacred music for Bach and many other composers of his time. The chorale form is known for its accessibility to the people, and it is precisely this character that the Church identified in song, attributing to it a stimulating and sacred function in conveying divine words. These elements attest to Patrick Lama's connection with Bach's music. He expresses his particular sensitivity by declaring: "I am very sensitive to Bach's music. I hope that when listeners hear my music, they feel this influence".¹⁴ This reflects his desire to refer to the writing of sacred choral music to give a spiritual dimension to the Canaanite gods.

In the choruses of the opera *Kanaan*, some expressive constants of Bachian style can be discerned, adapted to Lama's musical language. Scene III, 'Anat's Toilet after the Battle', echoes Bach's chorales by combining contrapuntal reminiscences with atonal chords, all adorned with melismas. An example of this blending can be found in the portrayal of Anat's depiction of the sacred space of divine presence (see Example 3).

¹³ See Dom Daniel Saulnier, 'Les racines orientales du chant grégorien', Eglise Catholique Orthodoxe de France, https://eglise-catholique-orthodoxe-de-france.fr/enseignements/etudes-liturgiques/les_racines_orientales_du_chant/, accessed 19 Jan. 2024.

¹⁴ From an email interview with Patrick Lama conducted by Farah Dhib on 19 April 2014. See Dhib 'Kanaan', 134.

Example 3. Patrick Lama, *Kanaan*, scene III, bars 340–343, © Patrick Lama 2000.

The musical score for Example 3 consists of four staves, each representing a different vocal part: Soprano, Mezzo-soprano, Tenor, and Baritone. The tempo is indicated as $\text{♩} = 69$. The lyrics for each part are: Soprano: 'ha wa 'a na mi la ha'; Mezzo-soprano: 'ha wa 'a na mi la ha'; Tenor: 'ha wa 'a na mi la ha'; Baritone: 'ha wa 'a na 5 mi la ha wa'. The Baritone part includes a fermata over the note '5'.

These recurring motifs of sustained notes and melismatic ornamentation are used by the composer to express Anat's ritual, the sacred space of her dwelling, and the eternal grace associated with this goddess. One can see parallels between the texture used by Lama and interpretations of Bach's work, such as his Fugue in E♭ major, BWV 552/2 from the Organ Mass, in which long notes are read as symbols of eternity and grace.¹⁵

Exploring an angle centred on symbolism and the notion of Bach's influence, we can delve into the symbolism of numbers, a recurring feature in Bach's sacred music.¹⁶ While Lama has not explicitly disclosed this aspect, we can infer its presence given the years he spent in a Christian environment at boarding school.

It is plausible to suggest that the recurrent utilisation of melismas in the forms of quintuplets, triplets, sextuplets and septuplets, along with sustained long notes in various scenes, may be motivated by a symbolic interpretation of numbers. This approach appears to aim at representing the cycle of fertility and the duality of life and death. For instance, the number 3, symbolising resurrection, could be embodied in the triplets, while the number 5 in the quintuplets might evoke notions of life and freedom. The number 6, signifying incompleteness and the creation of Adam, is embodied in the sextuplets in the final scene, 'The Inauguration Banquet at Baal's Palace', symbolising the culmination and genesis of a new life. Lastly, the number 7, symbolising dominion over heaven and earth

¹⁵ See Hervé Lauret, 'Les constantes expressives dans le langage musical de Jean Sébastien Bach', *Parcours dans la musique baroque*, © 2000, 2003 Jacques Fischer, Hervé Lauret, accessed 19 Dec. 2023. With reference to André Pirro, *L'esthétique de Jean-Sébastien Bach* (Paris, 1907; Geneva: Minkoff, 1984); Albert Schweitzer, *Jean-Sébastien Bach, le musicien poète* (Leipzig, 1905; Lausanne: Fœtisch, 1953).

¹⁶ See Lauret, 'Les constantes'.

and eternal life, is represented by the septuplets evident in scene II, ‘The Massacres of Anat’. They coincide with the chant depicting the massacre scene, particularly when the word *qatalat* (‘she killed’) is sung. This strategic use reinforces the notion of the fertility goddess’s power, illustrating her ability to triumph over the adversaries of prosperity. Furthermore, the motions of the cross, from top to bottom and vice versa, symbolically depict the authority and potency of the goddess Anat. This visual representation in Scene II embodies the harmony between heaven and earth, emphasising the significance of this deity for the cosmic equilibrium. Thus, the adept use of septuplets in this musical scene not only enhances the aesthetic appeal but also serves to reinforce the message of the artistic portrayal (see Example 4).

Example 4. Patrick Lama, *Kanaan*, scene II, bars 154–156.








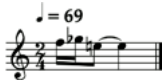

The melismas featuring cross motifs in *Kanaan* draw inspiration from rhetoric commonly found in Bach’s music. These elements are prevalent throughout the opera, appearing in both the vocal lines and the orchestration. The melodic motif of the melismas ascends and descends, creating a crossing that evocatively resembles a cross. This artistic approach seeks to forge a spiritual dimension through religious symbolism, thereby reinforcing the depth and significance of the opera’s scenes.




Melisma as leitmotiv




In *Kanaan*, Lama alternates between syllabic vocal writing and vocalised syllabic writing, also known as melismatic writing. However, it is the vocalised syllabic technique that predominates. Presented in the table below, these melismas of varying length, from triplet to ten-octave, in descending and ascending movement, are entrusted to the orchestra during passages where the vocal lines are entirely syllabic, and also during the silences between verses and the brief interludes. These melismas become leitmotifs, underlining the psychological dimension of the characters depending on the scene, as illustrated in Table 1.






Table 1. The concordance of melismas with the characters of *Kanaan*.






Scene	Character	Forces	Vocal processing
The Banquet of Baal	Narrator	Solo	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– syllabic– trills on long values– melodic patterns of melismas: 
The massacres of Anat	Choir	Tenors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– syllabic– quintuplets (disjuncts and conjuncts)– chromatic sextuplets, septuplets, triplets and quintuplets– trills on long and short notes– cells of four semiquavers– appoggiaturas– melodic motifs 
Anat's toilet after the battle	Choir	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– syllabic– four semiquavers– semiquaver triplets– trill on long note– appoggiatura on short-note quintuplet– melodic formula of melisma:  <ul style="list-style-type: none">– rhythmic variation on the same note 

Baal's message to Anat	Baal	Baritone solo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – syllabic – melodic formula:  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – four semiquavers
Baal's message to Anat	Choir	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – syllabic – trill – quintuplet linked to long values – two semiquavers and one quaver (as in the previous scene) – four semiquavers linked to long notes – two quavers tied to a crotchet – melodic formula: 
Anat's concern	Anat	Soprano solo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – syllabic – melodic formula:  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – several quintuplets

Baal has no home like the gods	Choir	Contralto voices + sopranos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – syllabic – melodic formula:  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – four semiquavers + long values, the best example of a transcription of music from an oral tradition quintuplets, triplet
Baal has no home like the gods	Baal	Baritone solo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – syllabic – melodic formulas: triplets + long values, four semiquavers + double triplets + long and short values  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – several triplets
Anat	Anat	Soprano solo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – syllabic – melodic formula: 
Anat intercedes with El on Baal's behalf	Choir	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – appoggiaturas

Dialogue between Anat and El	Anat	Soprano	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – syllabic – embroidery around a note – melodic motif: 
	El	Baritone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – syllabic
	Anat	Soprano	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – syllabic
Baal and Anat bring gifts to Ashira	Choir	Sopranos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – syllabic – trill – melodic patterns: 
Dialogue between Ashira and Anat	Ashira	Contralto	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – syllabic – melodic motif: 
	Anat	Soprano	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – syllabic
	Ashira	Contralto	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – syllabic – trill

Ashira's departure	Narrator	Baritone	<div>– syllabic</div> <div>– melodic motif:</div> <div></div>
	Choir	Sopranos + mezzo-sopranos	<div>– syllabic,</div> <div>– melodic motif:</div> <div></div>
Dialogue between El and Ashira	El	Baritone	<div>– syllabic</div> <div>– melodic motif:</div> <div></div>
	Ashira	Contralto	<div>– syllabic</div> <div>– melodic motif:</div> <div></div>
	El Ashira	Baritone Contralto	<div>– syllabic</div> <div>– syllabic</div> <div>– eight triple quavers (repeated thirds)</div> <div>– semiquavers</div> <div>– melodic motif:</div> <div></div>

The construction of Baal's palace	Choir	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – syllabic – trill – melodic motif: 
The inauguration banquet at Baal's palace	Choir	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – syllabic – quintuplets – melodic motif:   <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – for mezzo-sopranos and tenors:  

The summary table of melismas in *Kanaan* highlights how Lama has adeptly infused the work with leitmotifs, offering the listener consistent auditory cues that serve as a cohesive thread throughout the narrative. This vocally liberated rhythmical writing is enriched by numerous ornaments.

Anat's interventions in the various scenes are characterised by a melodic motif symbolised by a quintuplet cell linked to one or more sustained notes. For instance, in scene VII, titled 'Anat Goes to Baal', the orchestral interludes foreshadow the pivotal encounter between the two central characters in the narrative. The quintuplet motifs resurface as reproductions of the initial cell in the introductory phrase of the violin overture, serving as a leitmotiv for Anat, the opera's central character (see Example 5).

Example 5. Patrick Lama, *Kanaan*, scene VII, bars 1105–1106.

As for the portrayal of Baal, it is conveyed through a triplet motif paired with one or more sustained notes. Regarding the other characters, while their melodic motifs seamlessly integrate with the vocal lines, they maintain their distinctiveness by incorporating elements from the motifs of Anat and Baal, while introducing unique variations, accompanied by a motif of four semiquavers linked to one or more sustained notes.

The melismas: a means of expression and the brilliance of the Canaanite text

In the opera *Kanaan*, Patrick Lama demonstrates mastery in the art of melisma, employing this technique with finesse to delineate the characters' personalities, capture emotional moments and accentuate the key words of the text.

In Scene II, 'The Massacres of Anat', after a bloody cleansing, Anat performs further ablutions at her home. It is noteworthy that in myth, blood and water hold equal significance as organic substances. Therefore, it is not surprising that in this poem, Anat cleanses herself with blood. Additionally, in the Ugaritic conception, blood likely both symbolises Anat's violence and serves as a source of fertility, as it replaces water. Patrick Lama musically emphasises Anat's intricate duality between violence and fertility through a male chorus (tenors), accompanied by flute, violin, viola, cello and double bass, evoking Anat's martial feats. The robust voices of these men, emblematic of youth and vigour, reinforce the portrayal of the character's physical strength. The composer heightens Anat's ferocity by accentuating key words like *qatalat* ('she killed'), marked by melismas, a trill

and syncopation, followed by a sudden *forte* nuance, culminating in an abrupt ascent to the high register (see Example 6).

Example 6. Patrick Lama, *Kanaan*, scene II, bars 154–156.



These melismas, in conjunction with other techniques, convey Anat's innate power and violence. The scene, adorned with lush melismatic passages, boasts an impressive range, reaching as far as B flat in sustained notes in the tenor part. This virtuosity bestows a dramatic depth and extraordinary scope on the portrayal of her character in the opera.

In Scene XI, 'Dialogue between Anat and El', Anat's threatening manner towards El is characterised by her determination to fulfil her desires, manifested in her physical strength and ferocity. This threat is delivered with a seductive attitude as she describes her feminine assets, portrayed through the figural quality of the vocal line. Her melismatic singing, adorned with sustained notes and embellished with a melodic-rhythmic figure in semiquavers, evokes the reach of her arm on the word *thirai* ('my arm'), extending across seven bars (see Example 7).

Example 7. Patrick Lama, *Kanaan*, scene XI, bars 1321–1325.



The same approach is used in scene XIII, 'Ashira's departure', where the narrator, singing the opening bars, introduces the scene with declamatory *a cappella* writing. The narrative describes Ashira's quest to locate El, with the orchestra intervening solely during the unsung passages. Within the disjointed syllabic vocal writing, a brief melismatic passage accentuates the word *ilahata* ('the goddess'), denoting Ashira. This underscores the dominant, patriarchal and mythological figure she embodies, while simultaneously emphasising the importance of El, the god with whom she is about to reunite. Language and melody harmoniously merge to portray this image with remarkable precision (see Example 8).

Example 8. Patrick Lama, *Kanaan*, scene XIII, bars 1593–1597 (Baritone).



In part A of this scene, the storyteller dynamically depicts Ashira's departure on a donkey, followed by Anat, to meet the god El and persuade him to allow the construction of Baal's palace. The narration, which is truly breathless, aligns each verse with the action of the characters, creating a frenetic rhythm that underlines the idea of speed, symbolised by the image of the star *taqaddamaha kanajmin moudhi* ('he advanced like a shining star'). The velocity of the characters' movements is so intense that it is compared in the text to that of the most theoretically extreme light. The word *moudhii* ('shining') is musically rendered with remarkable figuration, enhancing its illustration both melodically and rhythmically.

Example 9. Patrick Lama, *Kanaan*, scene XIII, bars 1613–1615.



This manifests itself in a lengthening of the values and a climax on D \flat , accompanied by an ascending chromatic progression from C to D \flat .

By prolonging the syllables, the use of melismas in *Kanaan* emphasises the key expressive words of the text.

Conclusion

Patrick Lama's opera *Kanaan*, the first ever Palestinian opera, boldly merges contemporary cultures and musical expressions, featuring a libretto in Arabic based on the Canaanite myth of Baal. In the first part, 'The construction of Baal's palace', the work stands out for its innovative utilisation of melismas. An examination of this part of the opera reveals Lama's departure from the conventional role of melismas, deftly incorporating them as expressive leitmotifs. Beyond enhancing the work's aesthetics, these ornaments symbolise the dichotomy of life and death inherent to the Baal myth. Lama goes even further by skilfully

combining melismas with numerical symbols, evoking the influence of Baroque religious music. The melismas become means of expression, highlighting features of the characters, intensifying the drama and capturing emotional moments. To sum up, *Kanaan* displays Lama's adeptness in employing melismas to transcend the boundaries between musical genres, vocal and instrumental, and Eastern and Western cultures. His opera offers an immersive musical experience intricately linked to the mythology of the ancient Middle East, captivating and symbolically rich in expression.

ABSTRACT

The opera *Kanaan* (2000) by Patrick Lama, the first Palestinian opera, blends an Arabic libretto with contemporary music styles including atonality, tonality and modality. Premiered at Ruhr Festival in Recklinghausen, Germany, the opera is inspired by the Baal myth from ancient Ugaritic texts. *Kanaan* comprises two parts, but the article focuses on the first part, 'The Construction of the Palace of Baal'. Born in Jerusalem, Lama was exposed to liturgical music at an early age and is influenced by various cultures. Consequently, he developed a unique style incorporating melismas – vocal embellishments stretching syllables across multiple notes. In *Kanaan*, melismas play a critical role in evoking Middle Eastern mythology, symbolising fertility and spirituality, and acting as leitmotifs. This article explores the aesthetic and dramatic functions of those melismas, highlighting their contribution to the opera's richness and emotional depth. Lama's melismatic technique, rooted in both Arabic and Western traditions, underscores the characters' psychological dimensions and enhances the narrative's cyclical themes of life and death. The uniqueness of *Kanaan* lies in Lama's skilful integration of these musical elements, creating distinctive and profound artistic expression.

KEYWORDS: Patrick Lama, *Kanaan*, Baal myth, melismas, Arabic libretto, contemporary music, Palestinian opera.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Belhassen, Raed, 'Structures modales et ornements dans les musiques arabes: modélisations et présentation d'une bibliothèque d'objets dans csound', Journées d'Informatique Musicale 2014, May 2014, Bourges, France, HAL science ouverte HAL, <https://hal.science/hal-01664499>.

Dakovanou, Xantoula, 'Quand l'âme chante. La voix mélodique et son pouvoir affectif', *Topique*, 120 (2012), 21–37.

Dhib, Farah, 'Models and Transfers of Western Paradigms in Arab Opera between 1956 and 2016', doctoral thesis (co-supervised), Université de Poitiers et Université de Tunis, Poitiers, 2022.

Lauret, Hervé, 'Les constantes expressives dans le langage musical de Jean Sébastien Bach', *Parcours dans la musique baroque*, © 2000, 2003 Jacques Fischer, Hervé Lauret, accessed 19 Dec. 2023.

Pirro, André, *L'esthétique de Jean-Sébastien Bach* (Paris, 1907; Geneva: Minkoff, 1984).

Saulnier, Dom Daniel, 'Les racines orientales du chant grégorien', Eglise Catholique Orthodoxe de France, https://eglise-catholique-orthodoxe-de-france.fr/enseignements/etudes-liturgiques/les_racines_orientales_du_chant/, accessed 19 Jan. 2023.

Schweitzer, Albert, *Jean-Sébastien Bach, le musicien poète* (Leipzig. 1905; Lausanne: Fœtisch, 1953).

Viret, Jacques, 'Présentation' of the seminar 'Mélisme et ornementation dans les musiques traditionnelles méditerranéennes', held at the Centre grégorien, Abbaye de Sénanque, from 28 September to 2 October 1978, http://www.apemutam.org/instrumentsmedievaux/articles/colloque_senanque.pdf.