Given the rich lyricism and pointed social quality of contemporary Arabic poetry, it’s no accident that politically motivated Arab music is usually vocal rather than instrumental. The close collaborations between Marcel Khalife and Mahmoud Darwish or Egyptian singer Shaykh Imam and Egyptian poet Ahmad Fu’ad Nigm offer vivid examples of politically charged connections between word and melody. The political label attached to particular vocal performers such as Fayruz, Ziad Rabbani or the Palestinian group Sabrin is further evidence: what is “political” in such political music is most often related to a text that is chiefly lyrical. In the case of these vocal performers and groups, musical instrumentation does matter, but its meaning is most often limited to how it underscores, expands and intensifies the political message of words.

Moreover, given the abstract and often nonrepresentational nature of most instrumental music, its reference to particular contexts—such as political struggles—is never obvious. The instrumental music of performers such as Mounir Bechir, Omar Bechir, George Abyad, Fawzi Sayyib and Simon Shaheen is not usually seen as expressly political. Such music, rooted in a long tradition of mathematical elaboration, is emblematic of an aesthetics that remains critically, deliberately detached from the reflective representation associated with explicitly “political” art.

While this division between representational political song and detached musical instrumentation is admittedly rough, it does shed some light on the unique work of the Iraqi oudist Naseer Shamma. Shamma is unique in that he creates instrumental pieces whose political messages are as expressive as lyrical choruses and as direct as popular slogans. His fourth CD, entitled Le lute de Bagdad, released by the Institut du Monde Arabe last year, is a compilation of live-recorded works composed by the artist between 1995 and 1999.

Born in 1963 in the Iraqi city of Kut, Shamma gained his education in the oud at the prestigious musical school run by Mounir Bechir’s brother Jamil. While Shamma trained in classical Arabic music, he began to compose imagistic pieces that, while based on classical scales, diverged radically from the tradition of improvisation. The titles of his pieces contribute greatly to their representational conceit: on Le lute de Bagdad, titles such as “Eastern Love Story,” “From Ashour to Seville” or “A Calm Night in Baghdad” help to create the images of his songs, whether they be the nervous flirtation of lovers, the travel of lutes from Mesopotamian Iraq to Gypsy Andalusia or something as quiet as the silence of a Baghdad night after Allied air strikes. As Shamma put it when I spoke with him in 1997: “What I try to do is make images appear in the minds of people. I try to make music pictures, to create visual images from nothing.” Images and narratives spring magically from his pieces in a way unmatched by other instrumentalists working in this tradition. A breezy garden appears, bombs crash or a tense romance takes place between two contrapuntal melodies. At times he plays softly with one hand, at others, he hits the strings as if he were playing an electric guitar. At still other times, particularly in his composition “Dialogue between al-Mutanabbi and al-Sayyab,” his music is more impressionistic, creating moods and shapes rather than distinct figures.

These two techniques—the impressionistic and the imagistic—come together most powerfully in “al-Amiriyya,” which refers to the bomb shelter targeted by the allies during the 1991 air campaign, where more than 400 Iraqi civilians, mostly children, died. Shamma’s piece begins with a lilting, sentimental melody that is interrupted by screeching air raid sirens—an effect generated by Shamma’s frantic picking. Amidst the confusion and panic that follow, you hear a calm determination to prepare for the coming air strike. Then, as if upon the close of the last blast door, missiles rain down, their explosions drowned out by the screams of other incoming bombs and screams of victims below. At this point, the sharply defined sound images are painted over with more impressionistic strokes—the piece slows and turns darkly reflective before ending on an optimistic note. Part of this piece’s power emanates from Shamma’s ability to convey so many distinct sounds and images on a single stringed instrument—one can only imagine the impact on listeners when Shamma first performed the piece in the ruins of al-Amiriyya on the one-year anniversary of the massacre.

Due to the difficulty of performing under the UN embargo, Shamma left Iraq in 1993. Since then, audiences across the Arab world have come to know him through his concerts which, by contrast to the usual heavy orchestration of well-known performers, are strikingly minimalist. Since leaving Iraq, Shamma taught music in Tunis from 1993–98 and since 1999 has been directing a music center in Cairo. In Shamma’s own words, his project attempts to transcend a prejudice that colors the tradition of Arabic music: “In the Arab world, we’re not used to listening to instruments. Everything in music is really about voice. When I perform my instrumental compositions, audiences enjoy them immensely, even though they are a bit out of the ordinary. My music is truthful and expressive, it tugs on audiences and makes them understand that this oud, which they’ve heard for years, can express more than just scales.”

The popular response Shamma generates in live performances confirms his self-evaluation. At the Cairo Opera House in late 1997, he appeared without any introduction and quietly began to play unaccompanied. Within moments, he had transfixed the audience despite the distraction of larger events outside. His oud, often played with the fingers of only his fret hand, calmed and then reignited hundreds of listeners angered by Netanyahu’s chauvinistic policies and anxious over renewed US threats to bomb Iraq into oblivion. There was an unspoken consensus in the audience that Shamma’s performance was an intervention in a supercharged political situation. The audience loudly expressed its consensus in a silent but visceral response: a political rally without words. Though perhaps not a substitute for seeing such a performance, Le lute de Bagdad effectively captures an image of Shamma’s politically urgent oud.

— Elliott Colla, an editor of this magazine, teaches comparative literature at Brown University.