not changing it too radically in any way. But you can see, . . . when he
repeats one line the second time, and the notes are a little bit different
. . . the more capable a singer is, and the more he can improvise. I mean,
it's very easy for a person to learn a song and keep repeating it, but for
one that understands music more and has the ability, why he or she . . .
has the liberty of changing it and he does it. (J. Saff, 23 October 1984)

The similarity of maqām nahāwand to the Western minor scale has no
doubt enhanced its popularity in the United States (musical example 2.1),
where the melody of "Attah El Kabbir" is considered to be "very Western-
ized" (M. Tawil, 6 November 1984). Yet the only musical change in "Attah
El Kabbir" acknowledged to have been introduced is said to have occurred
in the text. Joseph Saff noted that during his lifetime there has been a small
shift in emphasis from the syllable "ra-" in the phrase "ki rab-bim raḥa-
mekha," to the last syllable, "-bim." However, Saff also emphasized that he
still sings this phrase with the older inflection on "ra," which he recalls as the
way the song was sung "when I was a kid" (J. Saff, 23 October 1984).

After its composition, likely around the end of the nineteenth century,
the song quickly spread as Syrian Jews migrated to other locales. That the
melody of "Attah El Kabbir" was sung abroad no later than the first decade
of the twentieth century is confirmed by a transcription found in a 1913
publication by the Jewish music scholar Abraham Zvi Idelsohn (1913:23–
24). Idelsohn explains that he gathered and transcribed for this article songs
widely known among musicians of that time from Damascus, Aleppo, Jeru-
salem, and Cairo (ibid. 16). Idelsohn arrived in Jerusalem in 1905, when he
was only twenty-three years old, and evidently did not visit other Middle
Eastern centers outside Palestine. He almost certainly gathered his examples
for the maqām article in Jerusalem after 1905 but before 1913, the year he

EXAMPLE 2.2. Transcription by A. Z. Idelsohn (Idelsohn 1923:74).

went to Vienna in response to an invitation to present the results of his study
(Cohon 1984:40).

In Idelsohn's article the song in question is not identified by title but is
provided as the first example of maqām nahāwand. Comparison of Idelsohn's
transcription (reproduced in musical example 2.2) with the rendition tran-
scribed at the end of this prelude, as well as recent recordings,[1] indicates
that the later versions have a slightly expanded form that contains an addi-