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Umm Kulthum's Water Wheel

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doi:10.1017/S0020743815001518

In a scene in Michal Goldman's documentary film *Umm Kulthum: A Voice Like Egypt*, two female friends of Umm Kulthum are reminiscing about her decision in the 1930s to purchase land for a villa in Cairo's Zamalek district.[1] At the time, the women relate, Zamalek had very few buildings and was considered a remote location, far from the city center. "What were you thinking about to buy something so far away?" one of the women recalls her mother telling Umm Kulthum. At this point, the other woman, who had been distractedly knitting a scarf on her lap, suddenly brightens up and enters the conversation: "Do you remember the water wheel on the river in front of her house?" she excitedly asks her companion. "There was a waterwheel." She imitates its high-pitched whirring sound as she turns her hand to trace the circular path of the wheel itself. "People used to say she kept it to remind her of the old days."

The powerful singing voice of Umm Kulthum, perhaps the most iconic voice of 20th-century Arab history, seems an unlikely pairing with the whirring, wheezing sounds of a water wheel on the banks of the Nile. Yet I begin this essay with the story of Umm Kulthum's water wheel because of the way it concisely illuminates the role of sound—both musical and otherwise—in evocations of memory and the stories people tell about landscapes, technologies, nations, and selves. According to the story told in the film, it was not Umm Kulthum herself who declared that the water wheel reminded her of "the old days" of her childhood in the Egyptian Delta. Rather, it is a story that people tell about Umm Kulthum. This is a crucial difference, as it points to the interconnected web of stories, songs, sounds, and images that have collectively shaped Umm Kulthum's legacy as an icon of Egyptian modernity. Just as the sounds of the water wheel index the presumably vanishing soundscape of the Egyptian countryside so important to Umm Kulthum's early life, her voice evokes a deep connection to conceptions of authenticity (*aṣāla*) and what Virginia Danielson has described as "an ideology of Egyptianness."[2]

The life of Umm Kulthum is a rich example for developing a sound studies of the Middle East that takes into account the complex interconnectedness of both musical and nonmusical sounds. Contemporary accounts and scholarly studies of Umm Kulthum's life and music are full of rich detail about past soundscapes, modes of listening, and the role of recording and broadcast technology in shaping understandings and experiences of sound. Umm Kulthum's films can be studied for their representations of historical soundworlds, providing insight into how past soundscapes were imagined and related to contemporary sounds and sociabilities. As ethnomusicologists such as Virginia Danielson and Laura Lohman have argued, Umm Kulthum's voice itself has long been a discursive trope by which ideas about the Arabic language, the status of the voice in Arab and Islamic thought, and the voice as a political and social tool have been debated.[3]

Sound studies in the Middle East can both benefit from and contribute to the already extensive anthropological and ethnomusicological scholarship on musical practices in the Middle East. Recent studies of music by anthropologists and ethnomusicologists

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743815001518 Published online by Cambridge University Press

have deepened our understanding of how music shapes and challenges ideas about authenticity, modernity, listening practices, and citizenship throughout the region.[4] One of the tasks for a sound studies of the Middle East is finding ways of connecting discourses about music with discourses about sound, rather than viewing them as distinct, or even antagonistic, fields of scholarly inquiry. The challenge for developing a sound studies of the Middle East is to treat voices and music not as privileged and isolated domains of sound, but rather as "some sounds among many," as Mark M. Smith argues in his history of listening in 19th-century America.[5] Smith's call "to contextualize the heard worlds of the past" challenges us to take into account not only what people hear, but how they hear it and how they make sense of what they hear.[6] This is more than just a call to reconstruct historical soundscapes by uncovering the presence of sound in written sources. It is also a challenge to reconstruct the listening practices that have shaped how individuals perceive their auditory environment and give meaning to certain sounds and not others. By focusing attention on how individuals perceive sounds and invest them with significance, sound studies can make an important contribution to understanding the role of sensory experiences in shaping historical understandings of place, time, and memory.

My thoughts on the interconnectedness of musical and nonmusical sounds lead me to consider two questions that I propose for the study of sound in the Middle East. The first question touches on the very concept of sound and its meaning. How have sound and related acoustic concepts—such as noise, speech, and music—been conceptualized as perceptual phenomena and related to other forms of sensory experience? This question is crucial for any attempt to analyze the listening practices and soundworlds of the past, for it takes into account the localized cultural practices that shape perceptions of auditory phenomena. These practices could include ideas about the metaphysics of sound, its potential effects on the body through forms of sonic healing or harm, and the ability of sounds to convey understandings of geography, temporality, and sociability. Focusing on how sound is conceptualized and integrated into a broader sensory understanding of the world also allows one to consider how and why certain sounds are given special significance that sets them apart from other sounds. How has the sound of the recited Qur'an, for example, been conceptualized historically as a special kind of sound that is distinct from other forms of vocal production? How has this influenced the ways in which people have understood the role of sound in sacred experience and its relationship to secular forms of sound and music? This approach, rather than privileging vocality and music as special kinds of sounds, asks how categories and concepts of sound, noise, and music are culturally constructed and what effect this has on people's experiences of the world.

In the musical culture of *ṭarab*, for example, a distinct understanding of sound as a constitutive element of music differentiates *ṭarab* artistry from other forms of sonic and musical expression. As the ethnomusicologist Ali Jihad Racy has argued in his study of *ṭarab* music, sound is conceptualized as the medium for a transactional and reciprocal relationship between the singer (*muṭrib*, or giver of *ṭarab*) and the *sammīʿa*, those members of the listening public who are considered "to have a special talent for listening."[7] The creation of *ṭarab*, what Racy describes as "musical ecstasy," is dependent not just on the sounds created in the act of performance, but also on the particular relationship that these sounds establish between performer and listener. Sound

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743815001518 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is thus invested with an inherently social character in this particular understanding of musical practice. The understanding of sound as a form of sociability helps to explain the intense emotional connections that Umm Kulthum, a master of *ṭarab* musical practice, inspired in her listening audiences.

My second question for the study of sound in the Middle East turns our attention away from the concept of sound and toward the concept of listening. How do concepts about listening as a physiological and cultural practice shape understandings of soundworlds and musical practices? Anthropologists and ethnomusicologists have done considerable work on how listening practices can shape affective, ethical, and epistemological understandings of the world. Charles Hirschkind's *The Ethical Soundscape* stands out as a model for studying the role of listening practices in shaping subjectivities and forms of sociability. Hirschkind's attention to the density and complexity of the urban Cairene soundscape is exemplary in its ability to evoke the web of social relations both enabled and hindered by sound.[8] Forms of listening that are shaped through musical practice can also inform the ways in which other, nonmusical sounds are heard and experienced. Understanding the development of listening practices is central to considering the ways in which soundscapes are shaped and given meaning as an element of social experience. It is also crucial to explore how these listening practices have been shaped through particular technologies of sound reproduction and media circulation.

Soundscapes, as Steven Feld has argued, "are invested with significance by those whose bodies and lives resonate with them in social time and space."[9] Sound studies offers the opportunity to explore not just the ways in which soundscapes have transformed over time, but also how sounds have been given meaning by individuals and social groups. Musical practice is one form among many through which sounds can be given meaning and can help to shape the context of social relations. The study of music, and stories about music, can offer a means for understanding the broader context of sound and auditory culture. The role of music in evoking memory and nostalgia, in shaping social and political relationships, and in conveying ideas about tradition and authenticity can be productively incorporated within a broader sound studies of the Middle East. The challenge for this sound studies is to create a bridge between music and sound, rather than sharply delineating one from the other, bringing together Umm Kulthum's voice with the whirring noise of the water wheel.

NOTES

[1]Michal Goldman, director, *Umm Kulthum: A Voice Like Egypt* (Cairo: Arab Film Distribution, 2006).

[2]Virginia Danielson, *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthūm, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 2.

[3]Ibid.; Laura Lohman, *Umm Kulthūm: Artistic Agency and the Shaping of an Arab Legend, 1967–2007* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2010).

[4]Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Jonathan Holt Shannon, *Among the Jasmine Trees: Music and Modernity in Contemporary Syria* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2006); Martin Stokes, *The Republic of Love: Cultural Intimacy in Turkish Popular Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

[5]Mark M. Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 262.

[6]Ibid., 264.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743815001518 Published online by Cambridge University Press

[7]Ali Jihad Racy, *Making Music in the Arab World: The Culture and Artistry of Ṭarab* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 40.

[8]Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape.*

[9]Steven Feld, "A Rainforest Acoustemology," in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, ed. Michael Bull and Les Black (New York: Berg, 2003), 226.

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